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**The Ethiopian Famines, Entitlements
and Governance**

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Working Papers No. 102

February 1993

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August, 1992

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I am very grateful to Professor Amartya Sen, Dr Jean Drèze, and Dr Valentine M. Moghadam for their helpful comments. All errors are my own.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Entitlements to Food	3
3. Historical vs Contemporary Famines.....	5
3.1The Historical Famines.....	6
3.2The Contemporary Famines.....	9
3.3 The Famines as a Gradual Process	13
4.The Question of Governance.....	18
4.1 Absence of Accountability.....	19
4.2 Famines as Recurrent Features.....	26
5.The Case for Public Provisioning	39
5.1 Rural Mass-unemployment (extensive entitlement failure).....	41
5.2 Mass Unemployment in Developed Economies	46
5.3 Famines and the Social Security Safety-net	47
6.Summary and Conclusions	51
7. References	53

THE ETHIOPIAN FAMINES, ENTITLEMENTS, AND GOVERNANCE.

1. Introduction

In order to discuss objectively issues of famine prevention and properly assess the extent of vulnerability to famines which characterize the case-study country, it is essential to try to establish first the causation of the contemporary famines that have plagued the country over the last two decades. A number of theories have been forwarded as explanations of famines causation in general and some of these approaches have been applied in an attempt too explain various famines in the case study country such as the Wello famines of 1972/74 and 1982/85.¹ These competing theories can be categorized into two, following the common practice in the literature. The 'food availability decline' (FAD) approach argues that disruption by some natural calamity of food production below some *minimum requirement* causes famines. However such food centred approach has inherent weakness in that food production is only one source of food while famines, on the other hand, have been shown to occur even with no decline in aggregate food availability.² The FAD approach was probably the most widely used explanations to famine causation up until 1981 after which its prevalence as a sound explanation was contested by the second approach, labelled the 'entitlements approach' to famine analysis first elaborated by Sen in 1981.³

¹See Sen (1981) for the 1972/74 study on the Wello famine and see Baulch,B for the latter. See also Ardo (1989).

² See Sen (1981) Also see article by Devereux (1988)

³ See Sen (1981)

This latter approach to famine analysis focuses on the ability of people to command food through a variety of means such as "...production possibilities, trade opportunities, entitlements vis-a- vis the state, and other methods of acquiring food" and argues that people's ability to avoid starvations depends on their command over available food.⁴ It follows therefore that famine would be expected to set-in when a significant number of people loose the ability to command enough food. The entitlements approach has been used effectively to argue that the 1972/73 famine in Wello was not caused by food availability decline, as would have been assumed otherwise, but rather due to the low purchasing power in the region. "...A remarkable feature of the Wello famine is that food prices in general rose very little, and people were dying of starvation even when food was selling at prices not very different from pre-draught levels."⁵

The distinction between the two approaches essentially implies different policy prescriptions. Given the perception of famines as caused entirely by extreme scarcity of food, the implied direct response to overcoming such famines necessarily centres on making more food available, while the perception of famines as caused by extreme scarcity of purchasing power can suggest an intervention designed to augment the incomes of the vulnerable groups in the society. While beside its other defects, the FAD approach also neglects demand side considerations, the entitlements approach recognizes

⁴ See Sen (1981), p.45 According to the theory, a persons entitlement depends on his endowments and his exchange possibilities (i.e., exchange with others or, in the case of production exchange with nature) with endowments consisting of, for example, for the case of the peasant farmer of his land, his labour power and all other resources (draft oxen, ploughs etc.,) which make up his ownership bundle.

⁵ See Sen (1981)

that entitlements failure may be caused by various factors, including draught and other physical calamities affecting food output. The study has therefore been inspired by the entitlements approach which is believed to provides a broader conceptual framework for the analysis of famines.

Effective famine prevention, in the context of the case-study country, would therefore have to start from the clear identification of the causes for the entitlement failures which have characterized the recurrent famines over the last two decades. What are the causes for the widespread entitlement failures behind the recurrent famines in the country?

On the basis of close observation of events, as they transpired in that country over the past two decades, this paper takes the position that labelling the physical phenomenon such as drought as the primary causes of famines could tend to misrepresent the contemporary realities although that labelling might have been adequate enough for historical famines. Instead it is argued that *defective governance* appears to be the primary factor behind the entitlement failures underlying contemporary famines.⁶ I will attempt to support this hypothesis through the following analysis of events and thereby strengthen the case for public provisioning.

2. Entitlements to food.

The basic premise adopted in the study is the right to food of all individuals and the freedom from threat of death by starvation. Philosophical ramification of whether or not the haves in the society have the moral or ethical obligation to assist the disadvantaged or

⁶ Governance is here taken to mean the act of governing or the use of political power to administer a nation.

whether or not the public provisioning for the vulnerable groups will conflict with the property rights or other rights of the haves in the society, is not even a relevant consideration given the circumstances of Ethiopia, where clearly demarcated social groups in terms of an affluent minority as against other relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, has been eliminated during the seventeen years of Marxist rule. Given the disaster-prone environment and the inevitability in the recurrence of the famine conditions, as well as the extremely harsh character of such disasters when they do occur, the need to secure the right to food of all individuals becomes an imperative requiring few justifications.

It is not surprising that the right to food is an issue addressed even within the context of the United Nations. Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights also holds the State to be responsible to promote the realization of the right to food within the national boundary. It is stated that the "...fundamental obligation of each State Party is to take steps, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view of achieving progressively the full realization of the right of everyone, without discrimination, to adequate food." ⁷

Since it is maintained that the lack of proper governance is a primary contributing factor in the intensification and at times the instigation of the vital process leading to famines, I will attempt to show that the undemocratic regimes that had prevailed during the last two

⁷ See Alston (1984) pp. 37 Domestic duties and responsibilities have also been clearly spelled out regarding the obligation of governments in regard to the above Covenant. The substance of these obligations as summarised by Alston is paraphrased as follows: 1) That the right to food be accorded a degree of priority in terms of budgetary allocations 2) That special administrative or judiciary body be established as appropriate to look into issues pertaining to the violations of the right to food. 3) To ensure that the right to food is enjoyed by all without discrimination. 4) That a national food strategy be adopted 5) That regular monitoring be maintained regarding hunger and malnutrition and that remedial action be taken as required. 6) That people are not deprived from their means of sustenance.

decades have transgressed their fundamental obligations towards the drought affected population through neglect, inefficiencies and diversion of available resources away from the economic and social functions that could have eliminated or curtailed the impacts of the droughts.

3. Historical vs Contemporary Famines

Over the last two decades the world community had been constantly reminded and shocked by the grim reality, so vividly propagated by the media, that famines of biblical proportions were not only possible in the modern day world, but were also capable of inflicting extreme misery and death on the vulnerable sectors of society. This has probably been among the most distressing events in the last two decades. Beside the incidence of famines in various parts of Africa the problem had been particularly prevalent in the Horn of Africa, the region of the globe that accounts for most of the contemporary famines. Ethiopia has been and remains one of those areas that accounts for a sizeable proportion of the famine vulnerable groups. This problem has not only been recurrent but also particularly severe in the case-study country so much so that the name "Ethiopia" does not fail to conjure up images of suffering famine victims that has at various times been so dramatized by the Western media. In spite of the massive international aid to contain the famine situations however, the problem persists. This raises the question of the extent to which the disasters were perpetrated by factors other than unavoidable natural disasters. It is argued below that while historical famines may well be reckoned as manifestation of natural disasters such as drought, attributing the similar physical factors as causal factors for contemporary famines in the case-study country amounts to a gross simplification of the issue. While physical disasters could in fact play a role in triggering disaster conditions, the evidences provided indicate that they

could not have led to famines in the case study country without the aggravating effects of defective governance.

3.1 The Historical Famines

There is ample evidence to show that famines are not a new phenomenon resulting from modern day events but rather that they are rooted deep in the history of the region. Famines in the historical period however may have very little in common with contemporary famines except for their consequences of misery and suffering on the victims. This is so because, judging from present day circumstances, it would not be unfounded to form the presumption that the leaderships at the time of the historic famines would have had very little by way of options, for purposes of averting or preventing natural phenomenon like draught from developing into full blown famines.

The literature gives ample indication regarding the frequency of historical famines. According to one review of famines in Ethiopia, which cites the *Metshafe Senkesar* a medieval book, famines had occurred as early as the ninth century when because of the wickedness of the people "...God prevented the heavens from sending forth rain, with the result, it was reported, that `all our men are dying of the plague."⁸ On the basis of the same source, the review mentions other famines that took place in the twelfth century, again presumably due to the wrath of God. Pankhurst, who relies mainly upon royal chronicles written in the local language and which enable the rather precise dating of events, has established that during the period of 1540 to 1750 no less than eleven major

⁸ Relief and Rehabilitation Commission(RRC) (1984) pp 55-75

famines occurred.⁹ The famines for which the most detailed information is available occurred in the last century, with the famine of 1888-1892 described as perhaps the most terrible natural disaster still remembered in that part of Africa.¹⁰ Yet another writer, in a study on the chronology of Ethiopian droughts, concludes that on the basis of the droughts documented over the last 200 years, seven droughts per century can be expected in Ethiopia, while "... extremely destructive droughts, such as those of 1973-5, 1957, 1913, 1888-92, 1560-2 and 1543-4 average two occurrences per century based upon these incomplete statistics."¹¹ He therefore cautions that droughts are a normal component of Ethiopian life making famines inevitable unless the proper preventive measures are adopted.

Regarding the causations of the historical famines, records dating as far back as the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries showing the incidence of several epidemics and famines, indicate that such outbreaks, as noted earlier, were widely regarded as punishment sent by God.¹² Although the causes of famines in the medieval and later periods were expressed in such fatalistic terms, historians interested in the region have nevertheless managed to marshal sufficient evidence particularly on some of the major famines that took place in later periods, associating the causation with incidences of drought, cattle epidemics, harvest failures, and the outbreak of locusts and caterpillars.¹³

⁹ See Pankhurst (1964). The author has researched Ethiopian history extensively and produced a large number of writings on famine and pestilence in Ethiopian history which has been backed by records written in *ge'ez*, an ancient language currently used for ecclesiastic purposes. See also Pankhurst (1977; 1985;).

¹⁰ See Pankhurst (1964).

¹¹ See Wood (1977).

¹² See Pankhurst (1972 : pp.232-237); see also Pankhurst (1985).

¹³ See Pankhurst (1964; 1972; 1985;)

It is therefore quite apparent, that the physical phenomenon cited above must have triggered the circumstances that led to the entitlement failures of the victims of the historical famines. Given our presumption that the forms of governments at those particular periods in history could not have had the structure required to intervene successfully in averting the famines, the indicated physical phenomenon appear to be the most important factor in the process leading to the famines. Some well-documented historical famines in fact leave little doubt regarding the importance of such physical factors in eroding the food entitlements of the vulnerable population.

According to one well-documented account, a famine that occurred in 1828-29 and which was accompanied by an outbreak of an epidemic, the cause of the famine was attributed to the simultaneous failure of both the grain and the cotton crops, followed by the death of large numbers of cattle.¹⁴ The famine of 1888-92 was reportedly caused by "...a combination of natural calamities, a major epidemic of cattle plague or rinderpest, a harvest failure and an outbreak of locust and caterpillars."¹⁵ Although these precipitating factors have all contributed to the catastrophic famine of 1888-92, Pankhurst underscores the magnitude of the livestock mortality due to the rinderpest outbreak. " Though the original harvest failure was caused by the absence of rain it soon gave way to an even more serious dislocation of agriculture, for the rinderpest by killing off almost all the oxen, brought ploughing to a halt..."¹⁶ The author cites eyewitness account (Capucci, Skinner) to support the claim that about 90 percent of the cattle population at the time perished and that this devastation of the cattle population coincided with not only lack of

14 See Pankhurst (1964) pp.2.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid. pp.14

rain that resulted in harvest failure but also with an unusually large swarms of locusts and caterpillars.¹⁷

The evidence on the historical famines support physical phenomenon may provide adequate explanation of entitlement failures, and defective governance is not needed as an explanatory factor of the historical famines. I shall presently argue that the reverse is true in the case of contemporary famines.

3.2 The Contemporary Famines

Contemporary famines are no less grim in intensity or frequency than the large historical famines. One notable research finding seems to indicate that famines are even more endemic with a far more frequent incidence at regional levels than appears at the national level.¹⁸ This conclusion was reached on the basis of a study on famines conducted for the twenty years period spanning 1958 to 1977. Wolde Mariam concludes that "... on the average, about 20% of the country was under famine in each of the 20 years. This at once demonstrates the magnitude and seriousness of the problem of famine in rural Ethiopia."¹⁹ The study stressed that of the 102 administrative sub-regions on which the study was based, over 50% were affected by famines during the year 1960 and again during 1973-1975 and that the two best years of 1964 and 1969 had about 5% and 4% respectively of the administrative sub-regions under famine.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid. pp.13-14

¹⁸ The administrative sub-region used was the awraga of which there are 102 and these correspond to the fourteen administrative regions in which the country was subdivided until recently at which time the nation was re-classified into 25 administrative and five autonomous regions.

¹⁹ See Wolde Mariam (1984)

²⁰ Ibid., Another aspect of the famines which the author has identified an upward trend in the incidence of famines as well as the presence although tentative, of cyclical movements with "...four years of falling famines and four years of rising famine seem to follow each other; a four year cycle of famine appears to be indicated" pp149-150.

Another account puts the major famine periods in Ethiopia during the present century into four with a large number of localized droughts in different years occurring in the various regions of the country.²¹ According to this source Ethiopia together with other Sahelian countries experienced drought in the mid-1960s resulting in famine conditions in various parts of the country and "...By 1965, large numbers of refugees from Wello and Tigray began flooding into towns and cities and gathering along main roads leading north and south, where they hoped to find food, employment or other relief. An estimated 150,000 people died from starvation and related diseases in a three year period and four to six million people were living under famine conditions."²² The same source indicates improvements in the rainfall patterns during the period 1967-69 and the vulnerable population was just beginning to recover in 1970 when another drought period which lasted for about seven years set-in.

As has been indicated earlier in the discussion, there is evidence to suggest that famines have persisted in the country with varying levels of severity over the twenty year period studied (1958-1977) for which data were available.²³ The data had indicated that on each of the twenty years covered by the data, famines had persisted at one part or another of the various regions of the country. The data also has indicated that the periods of highest incidence of famines among the awrajas (administrative regions) observed were the years 1960 and 1973-1975. This tallies with the other source cited above. It would appear that the 1960 famine had been ignored by the western media as no mention is

²¹ Carlson (1982)

²² *Ibid.*, p.12

²³ See Wolde Mariam (1984)

generally made of it in the literature. The high incidence of awragas indicating famine situations in 1973-75 however overlaps with the well documented and publicized famines of 1972-1974 and which have been the subject of numerous analyses and commentaries.

The 1972-74 Famine: Although the failure of the *meher* rains (rain for the main crop) in 1971 triggered the onset of the 1972-74 famine, the root causes to the entitlements failures can be traced to the unfavourable production circumstances arising from persistent draught situations that started in 1964-65 when a famine had affected most of the regions in Wello.²⁴ The unreliable rainfall that characterized the period and which was in fact improving during the period 1967 to 1969 had pauperized the peasant farmers whose productivity even in the best of times did not ensure the build-up of an adequate stock of food to be used during lean periods.²⁵ With their stocks of food and assets gone and their seed-reserves depleted the farmers can be considered to have been at their most vulnerable state when the 1971 *meher* rains failed. State intervention to supplement their incomes either through the creation of employment opportunities or through outright hand-outs of cash would have salvaged the situation. The first evidence of government involvement - a letter by the administrator of one of the affected awragas to the provincial administrator - was dispatched in July of 1971, informing the higher authority that a famine situation had developed in the region.²⁶ The absence of action on the part

²⁴ See RRC (1984) pp 77-91.

²⁵ See Carlson (1982)

²⁶ See RRC (1984) pp. 261. As detailed in the Appendix a large number of correspondence spanning the period between July 1971 to January 1974, were exchanged between the various Government functionaries without even finding a meaning-full solution to the famine situation. It should however be noted that the data provided in the appendix while probably true in substance could have been compiled with the objective of ridiculing the previous system, as this correspondences were instrumental in the summary executions of some government officials soon after the power takeover by the military junta in

of the government whether in terms of income support or relief food-aid, inevitability aggravated the famine to a higher level.²⁷ A year later, by September 1972 it was evident that the rains had failed again and by 1973 a total of 1.9 million people were reportedly affected in the worst-hit regions of Wello, Tigrai, Northern Shewa and Gondar.²⁸ By late 1973, the world community had been made aware of the famine through the film by a British television journalist - a film which not only shocked the international community but also the Ethiopian population, from which the regime incumbent at the time had managed to hide the gruesome facts of the starvation in the various regions of the country. Partly due to the momentum created by these indignations, the imperial regime soon crumbled and a Marxist military junta (Dergue) came to power.

The 1982/85 Famine: Numerous articles have been written on the famine that occurred during 1982/85 - a famine which managed to waste the lives of probably more people than even the previous famine of 1972/74. The generally accepted truth of the 1982/85 famine is that it was the result of successive periods of low rainfall and poor harvests. Rainfall was reportedly in short supply as early as 1980 in most of the northern provinces well as some of the southern provinces of the country.²⁹ The situation was reportedly no better in 1981 and that by February 1982 shortages of food were becoming visible as a

1975. Some doubts regarding the completeness of the correspondences is therefore in order given the political motivations for their compilations.

²⁷ This inaction by the government of the time has been analysed below and underscores the extent to which defects in governance can exacerbate conditions of draught and lead to the development of widespread famine.

²⁸ Ibid.,

²⁹ Jansson, Harris, Penrose, (1987) See also Goyder, and Goyder, (1988)

result of the previous years' shortfalls.³⁰ By then the RRC was also sounding its estimates of food shortages to the international community. The 1982 rains were also a disaster, with the *belg* rains (small-rains) not appearing while the main-rains were unsatisfactory in most of the northern regions, followed by similar declines in the 1983 season.³¹ By 1984 the famine was in full swing with delayed interventions by both the government and the international communities.

3.3 The Famines as a Gradual Process

How does one view the process leading to the 1972-74 famine and the famines of the 1980s in the context of the role of governance? Can the entitlement failures and subsequent famines of the vulnerable sectors of the population be legitimately attributed to the physical phenomenon that have characterized the situations when in fact the eminence of the famines were well known to the public authorities? In order to better assess the real causation of the famines, it would be helpful to identify distinctly the sequence of events in terms of the gradual pauperization of the vulnerable population. Taking the 1972-74 famine as the basis of our analysis we can divide the phases of pauperization into two stages:

Stage one: This stage is characterized by events that immediately preceded the 1972-74 famine conditions. At this stage the affected populations still felt the effects of the long famines in the mid-1960s, and due to the improvement in the rainfall conditions occurring during 1967, 1968, and 1969 were recovering in the

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 133-136

³¹ Ibid., pp. 133-136

1970s.³² During the 1971 season however most of the region in the north including Wello again suffered from drought and some of the sub-regions in Wello lost the 1971 harvests was documented in the intergovernmental correspondences at the time (e.g., Awsa awraja).³³ Given the fact that the harvest loss was restricted to specific regions at this stage there would be no reason to expect that aggregate food supply in the region as a whole would decline because of the lower production and loss of harvest in some of the regions. In other words the entitlement failure suffered by the initial victims of the famine in 1971 may only have affected their incomes and purchasing power without seriously affecting the food supply in the region. What was required at this stage was only *government intervention* of income support.

Stage Two: This stage is characterized by the spread of the famine condition over the whole distress area - in this particular case the regions of Wello, Tigray and Northern Shoa. This stage can be said to have occurred at the height of the 1973 famine, when the food output of most of the regions in Wello and the other affected areas had ceased. Even at this stage, given that the affected areas had never really been the major crop producing areas in the country, the total supply of agricultural output for the country as a whole would have very little cause to decline radically although the food supply for the affected regions can however be expected to show significant decline. This fact has been conclusively illustrated by the "entitlements analysis" conducted on the Wello famine that took place at the time. It has been shown that at the height of the Wello famine in 1973, the total food production for the nation as a whole deviated only 7% from

³² Carlson (1982)

³³ See RRC (1984)

the normal level of production - a shortfall hardly catastrophic for the country as a whole.³⁴ At this stage that capacity to use income supplementing programme in the most cost-effective way would not be available, as such measures would now have to be coupled with the life saving emergency relief measures.

The essential point that is being made here in response to the question posed above is that the famine condition had been seriously aggravated by the lack of public intervention at the right time, which as pointed out above, could have been carried out best at the level of stage one. Public intervention through income supplementing programmes such as employment generation schemes and cash support could have been implemented, at less cost and more efficiently, at an early stage in the crisis. Such an intervention could have gone a long way towards ameliorating the adverse consequences of drought. What is particularly distressing is that even at the height of the famine, there were indications that the government was disinclined to have anything to do with the plight of the people (on which more will be said presently). The hypotheses that improper governance was the primary factor in the process leading the famines is strongly supported by these events. "Proper governance" could have ensured that the draught situation that had gradually eroded the production possibilities of the vulnerable groups, did not result in the development of a famine condition.

The same conclusion can also be reached through analysing the processes leading to the famines on the 1980s. What becomes clear from a similar analysis of the 1982-84 famine is that the famine did not occur as a sudden, unanticipated natural disaster. What has in fact occurred is that the victims, the Government, as well as International Donor

³⁴ The decline in output was, of course, larger for the Wello famine itself, and the resulting decline in income and entitlements prevented the Wello population from attracting food away from the rest of Ethiopia. Indeed food prices in Dessei, the capital of Wello, were not higher than those in Addis Ababa. See Sen (1981).

Agencies, all knew about the imminence of the famine, given the incidence of the successive drought and the persistent pleas for assistance then being voiced by non-governmental relief organizations(NGOs) and the RRC.³⁵ At the level of the household the crop loss due to one season only could not have led to the devastation that has occurred. This follows from the fact that the crises point in the famine was reached in 1984 whereas the shortage of rain was reported as early as the 1979 and 1980 and the consequent declines in food availability, as reported, in 1982. This means that the household, confronted with declining incomes had resorted to various coping mechanisms including the sale of household and farm assets in order to retain some purchasing power. As has been argued above under the section on the 1972/74 famines the appropriate point of intervention by the public authorities, if the famines were to have been averted was at the stage when the vulnerable population felt the incidence in the decline of its income but still had the will and strength to engage in alternative income generation possibilities.

It is argued that state intervention would have been crucial in changing the course of events had they been taken at the proper point in time. The basic point relevant to both the recent major famines in Ethiopia, is that they can be explained as consequences of two sets of causal antecedents: (1) The loss of income opportunities and employment (loss of direct and exchange entitlements) directly or indirectly related to drought-induced reduction in production, and (2) absence of Government intervention to recreate the lost entitlements. As the entitlement failures among the population of a region spreads and more and more members of the vulnerable community are deprived on their direct and exchange entitlements, due to the prolongation and spread of the drought condition, shortage of food availability at regional level develop and aggravate the

³⁵ See RRC (1984)

famine condition. But in addition to these failures, the inefficiency of *governance* in countering famine conditions contributes to the development of an actual famine from a potential famine.

Descriptions of famines as situations where large masses of people do not have enough food to eat should be taken as statements on the advanced symptoms rather than statements about the true nature of the underlying causal problem. A clear description of those causal factors is essential for objective policy formulations. In this connection it could also be argued that such misspecifications of the problems may be one reason why famine prevention in Ethiopia has not yet been realized. Given the chronology of events preceding both the 1972/74 and 1982/85 famines, it would not be presumptuous to trace the progression in the psychological state of the vulnerable populations from that of frustrated anticipation, when the first rains fail to appear or when the first few harvests are lost, to a state of hopeless resignation when the household's assets are gradually liquidated to enhance purchasing power in a struggle to keep alive in the face of government indifference. Focussing on the problem of unemployment (loss of direct and exchange entitlements) created by the drought, and which characterizes the first two of the above psychological states, would not only be the most direct and natural way for addressing the problem, as unemployment is a most common phenomenon in the contemporary world, but is also suggestive of the nature and approach of the required remedial actions to be taken. Various aspects of defective governance, in this context, will be assessed in the following section.

4. The Question of Governance.

We have attempted to show in the preceding discussion that explanations of food availability decline arising from natural disasters are grossly inadequate for purposes of explaining the contemporary famines. It has been argued that improper governance had been the root cause to the problems inspite of the prevalence of adverse physical phenomenon which of themselves could not have precipitated the famines. We have attempted to support these arguments on the basis of a chronology of events leading to the development of the two major famines.

The number of major famine incidences over the last two decades occurred under two different types of political systems. These were an absolute monarchy (although with a constitution) up to February 1974, and a totalitarian Marxist regime which lasted up to 1991. Both forms of governments lacked the proper system of accountability to the people which a democratic process could have ensured.

For ease of analysis and on the strength of observations, we could conveniently classify the consequences of defective governance regarding famines by addressing the issue under two broad groupings. The first incorporates various manifestations of defective governance under "absence of accountability". The second addresses the consequences of defective governance to the creating the conditions of poverty and thereby enabling the recurrence of famine conditions. This part also deals with those consequences arising from the illegitimacy of the regime in power during the decade and half to 1991.³⁶

³⁶ The term illegitimacy is meant to convey the politically unacceptable and undemocratic ascendance to power of the military Junta.

4.1 Absence of Accountability

We will attempt to substantiate still further the hypothesis that defective governance is the primary causal factor in the process leading to the famines by highlighting some events regarding the ways in which the undemocratic governments, that were in power within the past two decades, had contributed to the processes leading to the famines during their respective periods.

The Pre-1974 Period: During the period of time within which the 1972/74 famines took place the feudo-monarchic system was at a stage when the uncertainties created by the issues of succession to the throne and the apparent unwillingness of the old monarch to give up his hold on power inspite of his failing capacity to administer the country, led to a situation that encouraged widespread corruptions and abuses of power among the ruling classes and the beurocracy. Neglect of the public interest and the pursuit of individual enrichment become the order of the day. Although historically people had looked up to the monarch for relief and assistance during periods of distress as it also had been the time honoured obligation of the monarch and his delegates to respond to such demands from the people, such unwritten code of conduct between the ruling and the ruled appeared to have been eroded with the ruling class feeling little responsibility for the welfare of the common people.

The above fact is vividly illustrated by events that took place during the 1972/74 famine period in Wello administrative region of the country. It had been established that during the period leading to the indicated famine much correspondence had been shuffled back and forth between the various officials of the regime with apparent inefficiency resulting in a failure to respond to the drought problem then ravaging the region. A large volume of implicating correspondence were marshalled by the succeeding Marxist regime whose

primary motivation was to gain political support through incriminating the preceding monarchic system for crimes against the people perpetrated through the neglect of distress signals and thereby the aggravation of the famine disaster.³⁷

While not endorsing the attempts of the Marxist regime to make political gain through publicising the rampant inefficiencies of the government functionaries, the fact remains that the neglect of the interests of the people does lend support to our hypothesis that issues of governance are in fact critical and decisive variables in the causation and aggravation of famine conditions. In this case a system of government - an absolutist form of "constitutional" monarchy that does not take the welfare of the people into account - was clearly implicated.

It would be illustrative to cite some of the indicated correspondence to emphasis the point.³⁸ During the first week of August of 1971, the administrator of the particular sub-region in Wello notifies his superior - the provincial administrator - of the existence of famine in his area. During the same week the elders of one of the pastoral tribes in a neighbouring sub-region approach the sub-region administrator with complaints that the remains of their cattle stock, which had been decimated by drought, had been looted by neighbouring pastoral tribesmen. The report implied the intensity of the distress brought about by the drought not only to the Afar tribesmen who lodged the complaint but also to the Issa tribes-men who carried out the looting. These and other reports on the intensity of the drought situation in various districts of the administrative region prompted the

³⁷ See RRC (1984) Forty six correspondences have been cited by this publication. These are part of a large number of such documents reviewed by the tribunal set up for the public trial of the government functionaries that had been labelled as responsible for having not taken timely action to avert the disaster. By then the monarchic regime had been replaced by the Marxist regime that was to run the country for the next 17 years.

³⁸ See RRC (1985) pp.261-264.

regional administrator of Wello at the time to convey the urgent need for relief assistance in writing to the concerned official in the Ministry of Interior in the capital. The correspondence emphasised the prolonged nature of the drought - three continuous years - and the need for an immediate dispatch for 6000 quintals of grain.

The real problem of non-response to the distress calls is discernible at the centre once the information had been relayed to the to the Ministry of Interior. The bureaucratic processes set in motion by the correspondence sent to the centre by the regional administrator of Wello in mid-September 1971 underscores the fact that the system was indifferent to the distress of the people and that this indifference was manifest at all levels of the bureaucracy. The initial response to the indicated call of distress was the initiation by the Vice- Minister of a two-man committee to go and assess the situation in the distressed areas.

This action is not justified amid the repeated distress calls for assistance which required immediate measures to provide for the victims, but more disheartening was the fact that another grain deficit study committee was established subsequently, while two months after the dispatch of the first correspondence (mid-September) the requested relief grain had not been sent either to Bati or the other affected regions.³⁹ Other correspondence indicating the worsening situation, the fact that the Bati region had not yet received food and urging immediate assistance, continued to be dispatched up until April 1972 when the first consignment of relief food (500 quintals) was dispatched to the region. This is a period of almost two years since the first distress call was made and thousands of lives have needlessly perished in the process. Such gross neglect of responsibility and

³⁹ One of the severely famine affected regions.

accountability underscores the importance of the issue of governance in the process leading to famines.

What were the social perceptions on the roles of government at the time? The essence of nationhood, the duties and responsibilities of the rulers and the people, as portrayed in various chronicles on the country's history and mythology, is such that the people can expect to look up to the rulers for protection - be it aggression by neighbouring tribes or the incidence of some natural calamity. Throughout Ethiopian history there had been both popular and unpopular rulers and the popular ones are generally glorified for having provided for the people. Probably an appropriate example of the popular rulers is provided by the life history of the monarch that reigned during the turn of the century and who was credited with initiating the process of the country's modernization. This monarch, who according to the popular perception of the period was invariably considered the provider of the people, stands out as a clear example of concern and sense of duty which a monarch was expected to show towards the people.⁴⁰ It is evident that such socio-political backgrounds do, to a large extent, explain the natural impulse of people to turn to the State for assistance in times of crisis.

This underlying perception regarding the obligations of the State is clearly evident in the migratory behaviour of the distressed people as witnessed during the major famines that took place during the last two decades. It had been observed time and again that the distressed people muster their last resources and strength in order to migrate to urban centres and road-sides and if they have sufficient strength to government offices in order to make known their plight to the officials on whom they attach the ultimate responsibility for relieving their distress.

⁴⁰ The life accomplishments of the Emperor Menelik is chronicled in numerous works.

Such socio-cultural covenants between government and the people have not always held and the plight of the people in terms of social justice, peace and tranquillity have often suffered with the ruling classes often engaged in the pursuit of individual power and influence to the total disregard of their historical duties to the people. Such was the setting under which the 1972/74 famine occurred, underlining the crucial role of governance in the development of famine conditions.

The Post-1974 Period: The fact of a government obligations regarding the welfare of the people is well conveyed by the fact of the establishment of the Inquiry Commission on the Wello famines in 1976.⁴¹ This body was setup by the Marxist regime in order to investigate the actions of the functionaries of the previous government against whom was directed allegations of outrageous neglect of proper and timely action leading to an exacerbation of the conditions of the famine victims.⁴² Although the legality of such a judicial body has been questioned it nevertheless focussed on the importance of accountability of the State by taking the functionaries to task for the occurrence of the famines.⁴³

The country entered a new era of conflict when soon after its ascendance to power the provisional military government neglected democratic principles as the basis of proper governance and embarked on authoritarianism under a Marxist /Leninist ideological

⁴¹ See Addis Zemen August 27/74 34 th year, no. 491 (in Amharic)

⁴² The correspondences on the basis of which it had been attempted to show the defects of governance earlier in our discussions were in fact utilized by these commission in the course of its inquiry.

⁴³ It is believed that the rulings of the commission which condemned a large number of officials to death by firing-squads was politically motivated.

cover. This soon led to widespread political and social discontent and the proliferation of separatist and liberation movements. The stage was therefore set for a repetition, only within the span of a decade, of the devastating 1972/74 famine that had led to the toppling of the previous regime.

The 1982/84 famines took place in circumstances that were far better, in terms of the options for preventive early action, than were available a decade earlier. The build-up of adequate institutional set-up to monitor the developments that led to the famine condition included an early warning system within the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission - an organization that had already acquired years of relevant experience from its activities following earlier famines.

So why did the second major famine occur? It had become evident by 1983 that the famine was threatening to be one of the worst in the decade since the last major famine while at the same time the government was preoccupied with preparations for the 10th anniversary of the revolution. According to one authoritative source the death toll had reached about ten thousand per week in relief shelter; "... the RRC most difficult task was convincing our own leaders of the very existence of a widespread famine...but their sights were set solely of the upcoming anniversary celebrations".⁴⁴ The government preferred to push ahead with the festivities. What in fact later turned out was that the millions of funds expended for the celebrations would have saved the lives of thousands of famine victims whose plight the regime was keen to hide from the world.⁴⁵ Such total disregard of the fate of significant sections of the population, when their precarious

⁴⁴ See Giorgis (1989) pp 134 . The author had served as the Commissioner of the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission(RRC) and wrote his book in exile.

⁴⁵ See Giorgis, D. (1989)

conditions could well have justified a state of emergency, is very difficult to envisage in the context of proper governance.

In recognition of the errors committed by the previous regime which had attempted to cover-up the incidence of the drought, the Marxist regime effectively managed to avert blame at the time by undertaking a massive campaign publicising the build-up and incidence of the famine. It kept the world posted on the progress of relief measures and cooperated in every conceivable way in facilitating the activities of the international relief community and other independent relief organizations. In this manner the causation for the incidence of the famine was passively regarded as a natural catastrophe exacerbated by war, while issues of governance as the root cause were effectively undermined.

The State had however ignored this vital obligation during the 1982/84 famine although a well functioning early warning system had been providing all the required data on aspects of the impending problem. Needless to say most of the State budget and resources at that time were being committed to the futile military effort of annihilating the independence aspirations of peoples then waging wars at various corners of the country. The armed struggles that were being waged at the time, as stated earlier, was the direct result of the undemocratic manner in which the incumbent regime attempted to adhere to political power and the excess of social and economic abuses perpetrated under the guise of socialist development.

It would therefore be reasonable to sustain the conclusion that, although the causation of famines cannot be attributed to any single factor, the issue of governance has indeed been a primary factor in the development of the famine conditions both during the 1972/74 famine and even more so in the famines that developed during 1983/84.

There is strong evidence that these regimes were indeed implicated and the need for a democratic process in the formation of governments is therefore essential if the vital interests of the population are to obtain priority. Famine prevention measures in general and income supplementing programmes in particular - which are basically in the interest of the rural community - could be assured of the required support only under a popular and democratic government that would take account of the interests of the rural population which would constitute the overwhelming majority of the electorate.

4.2 Famines as Recurrent Features

That deficiencies in governance directly contributed to the development and exacerbation of the conditions leading to the major famines that had plagued the Ethiopia, have been discussed and substantiated in the preceding section. It is here argued that this lack of good governance has not only been a primary factor in the development of specific famines, but has also been an important contributing factor to the recurrence of famine conditions through its negative effects on productivity in the economy and the spread of poverty. A closer look confirms that the persistence of famine conditions is inexplicably linked, among other major factors, to the inadequacy of governances - arising from illegitimacy as well as mismanagement. Because famine recurrence in the case-study country is a phenomenon of the 1980s, our analysis will be limited to the economic circumstances pertaining to this period, making references to earlier periods only for purposes of comparison.

A glaring aspect that contributes to the vulnerability of the population is the fact that the slightest deviation from normal income for most households in the rural sector could

plunge them into destitution. This is a reflection of the very low percapita income of the population. According to recent statistics, Ethiopia with a per capita income of about US \$ 120, is the poorest country in Sub-Saharan Africa where the regional GNP per capita as at the middle of 1989 was US \$340.⁴⁶ This indicator of relative poverty has declined over the last decade and indicates the worsening in the impoverishment of the country. The country has not been self sufficient in food and this lack of self-sufficiency in food has gradually increased over the years. As a result increasingly larger and larger amounts of hard earned foreign currency has to be allocated for the purpose of importing food. By 1989 the volume of imports of food as compared to food imports in 1970 has increased by over 70%. This figure includes commercial imports as well as food aid. While the population during this period increased by about 2.9 to 3%, food production per head declined at about 3% per annum.⁴⁷ Such a level of poverty is clearly a manifestation of the economic mismanagement lasting over a decade and half. The deficiencies in governance to which Ethiopia had been exposed over the period is therefore easily implicated in the genesis of the famine conditions that have so shocked the rest of the world.

That the country should be unable to attain the level of production adequate enough to satisfy the food requirements of the community never fails to come as a surprise when viewed against the background of the country's potentials for agricultural production. According to the statistics only about 19% of the potentially cultivable land area has so far been brought under cultivation and according to one scholar on the case-study country "... The tragedy of contemporary Ethiopia is that it is potentially the granary of the horn of Africa. The fertile lands of much of the highlands, with proper irrigation,

⁴⁶ See World Bank, (1991)

⁴⁷ See Zekaria, Lambert, Maxwell, (1990)

fertilizer, pesticides and improved varieties of seeds, could be a major source of food production. This potential was evident immediately after the Second World War when Ethiopia, using only traditional agricultural methods, supplied food to the countries of the Middle East."⁴⁸

This raises the question of what are the causes for the low incomes and low productivity growth of the peasant sector. What are the factors for the general decline in the agricultural production and the consequent rise in the vulnerability of the rural households? That this period of economic crisis should coincide with the period during which the standard of governance had severely declined - in terms of undemocratic ascendancy to power and gross economic mismanagement - supports the hypotheses that poor governance was a primary factor in the process leading to the recurrent famine conditions in Ethiopia. Various incidences give support to this hypothesis as will be evident from the brief analysis of the activities of the regime regarding the economic setting and in particular the food sector.

What went wrong? As was to be expected the military junta that took over from the imperial regime toppled from power as a direct consequence of the 1972/74 famine had lost no time in embarking on the so called National Democratic Revolution Programme (NRDP) of 1976 which was meant to set the course for the development of the country along socialist lines. After several years of ad hoc management of the economy the ten year perspective plan of 1983/4-93/94 was drawn up in order to bring the NRDP into effect. The expressed objectives were that the "... plan will hasten the implementation of the programme by substantially raising the level of development of the nation's

⁴⁸ See Vestal (1985) pp.125-128

productive forces, by significantly improving the material and cultural well being of the people and by promoting the expansion of socialist production relations."⁴⁹

These objectives turned out to be nothing more than rhetorics, in view of the defective governance of the military junta which deflected the economy's resources on efforts to maintain its power. The deleterious effects of illegitimacy in government on the economic prospects of the nation is underscored by an observation in a World Bank publication which points out that "...History suggests that political legitimacy and consensus are a precondition for sustainable development"⁵⁰ The decline in productivity, the spread of poverty and the subsequent increase in famine vulnerability during the 1980s feature the validity of these observation and the importance of governance as an exigent factor in famine causation in the context of the case-study country. These fact will be made more evident below.

Had the right to food been accorded the required degree of priority? In posing this question in the context of the case-study country we have first to note that priority does not imply that the State should allocate the budget only to those sectors that have to do with ensuring the right to food, or that the state should go beyond its resource limitations in order to satisfy this objective. However it does mean that given the prevalence of conditions that threaten food security, the government should be bound by an obligation to ameliorate this concern through a significant increase in the budget allotment towards such objectives as a reflection of its increased commitment towards resolving the problem.

⁴⁹ See ONCCP (1984). p.17

⁵⁰ See World Bank (1989)

But is such a prioritization, in a manner that would reflect the concern to food security, evident in the allocation of the State budget? When we look at the government's current expenditure for the period 1979/80 to 1983/84, the period preceding one of the major famines in the country, we can observe that the allocation to the agricultural, transport and communications sectors, which are probably the most significant sectors in the context of the food issues, had a share of the total expenditure amounting to only 4.8 % while 58.6% went to general services of which 55.5% is mainly for defence, public order and security.⁵¹ The budget of 1990, which was the last budget issued by the regime before being ousted from power, allocated 43.8 % to administration and general services (of which expenditure on defence, public order and security accounted for 89 %) while food related functions obtained only 14.9 % of the budget.⁵² We therefore observe that the order of priority has in effect been set against the right to food rather than for it.

The disproportionately large allotment for defence and security spending reflects in yet another way the absence of proper governance. The Marxist regime that had been in power for about 17 years up until mid-1991 had been expending over half of the national budget for purposes of maintaining itself in power.⁵³

By addressing itself to issues vital to the rural masses the regime attempted to legitimize its claim on power and by creating mass organizations with mandatory membership it attempted to extend its effective control base on the grass-roots. In this regard, among the first steps taken by the Marxist-Leninist regime soon after assuming the powers of

⁵¹ The World Bank (1985)

⁵² Negarit Gazeta, September 10, 1990. 49th year - No. 30. Addis Ababa.

⁵³ See Addis Zemen March 5, 1990;

government in the mid-1970s was land reform. The reform although aimed at redistributing land from the feudal owners to the landless peasants and thereby give the control of the primary means of production to the tillers, was poorly conceived and its timing was conditioned by political imperatives at the time. Land in excess of 10 hectares was nationalized for redistribution to the peasants who were allowed user rights only. These poorly conceived land reform was later to prove not only inadequate for enhancing agricultural output but was even to retard it.⁵⁴

Concurrently with the land reform was also taken the first of a series of measures for the formation of mass organizations within the rural community. The creation of these "Kebele Farmers Associations" which are mass organizations involving the peasant population, was critical to the actual process through which the redistribution of land to the peasants was achieved. These primary organizations were organized such that one adult member of each household in the rural community had to be a member of one of these organizations, each of which had membership of about 200 to 300 households. One visible feature of the defective governance was the use to which these mass organizations were put, once the major task of the land redistribution had been achieved. These peasant associations soon turned out to be the principal political organs of the central government, in their respective regions, and their principal tasks soon became the recruitment of militia through various coercive methods. Their potential economic role was, therefore, accorded very little importance while their political function, which was geared towards keeping an illegitimate regime in power, became a preoccupation. The resultant economic ramification of these process was the inevitable decline in farm output, the increase of immiseration of the population thereby intensifying the unpopularity and isolation of the regime.

⁵⁴ See Addis Zemen March 5, 1990

The decline in the confidence of the people as regards the incumbent regime is reflected in the total failure of its often irrational economic policies. One such case is the policy designed for the reorganization of the rural population into communes. In the envisaged reorganization of the rural community the peasant associations were to be gradually replaced by service cooperatives, then converted once more into producer cooperatives and later into communes. By the mid-1980s however it had become evident that very little could materialize from the planned development of rural communes. As at 1987 the number of producer cooperatives - the necessary predecessors of communes - was less than 17 percent of the peasant associations of which there were about 20.5 thousand with the envisaged communes being non-existent.⁵⁵

These failure in the regime's drive towards collectivizing the agricultural sector was inspite of massive efforts at politicizing the rural sector with the aim of instilling the sense of communal ownership of productive resources which was a futile and costly experiment. It was futile in view of the strong traditional bias for individual holdings prevalent among rural households, and costly because the uncertainty associated with the process as well as the proclamation to establish producer cooperatives (the predecessors of communes) undermined the smallholders' security to the land they tilled and eroded their motivation to invest in the land they tilled as they could loose it to the producer cooperatives who were mandated to confiscate any land they considered fertile. Such lop-sided rights and privileges given to producer cooperatives were supposedly incentives given by the regime to encourage their formation. Poor governance in implicated for the unpopularity of such measures as well as for their poor timing, coming as they did at a time when the national food security was at stake and when all food

⁵⁵ Central Statistical Authority(CSO)(1991)

producing units, 90 percent of whom are smallholder, should have been actively encouraged.

The illegitimacy of the regime also overshadowed some of the potentially positive aspects of the land reform. The class of landless labourers that had characterized the rural area during the feudal order of the previous regime had for all practical purposes disappeared because of the provisions of the land reform which guaranteed that all those willing and able to farm would be assured of a parcel of agricultural land for their use. The existence of a large number of rural landless labouring class, which is incidentally one of the causes of poverty in the developing countries of particularly South Asia, is therefore not one of the socio-economic features characterizing poverty in Ethiopia. Ensuring the right to tillage and the subsequent elimination of the landless rural labourer did not, as was originally envisaged, result in the rapid and sustained growth of output in the small holder agricultural sector. As was indicated earlier agricultural production stagnated altogether and was unable to come up with the national abundance of food which the land reform would have been expected to facilitate.

The reasons for these stagnation and lack of progress in the agricultural sector can be found in the poor policies being implemented by the provisional military regime that had declared a socialist order. The inappropriate policies followed during the subsequent years included outlawing the use of hired labour on farms in that such practices amounted to the exploitation of man by man and to be avoided at all costs; the fixing of the official farm prices at very low levels; the high cost of fertilizers and improved inputs (although subsidized); and the forced requisition of parts of the farmers output by the government in terms of the quota sales to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC). Needless to say, in its obsession with maintaining itself in power the regime even failed to make good on some of the positive aspects of its measures.

The price policies coupled with the system of quota requisitioning significantly contributed to the decline in the productivity of the food sector. In accordance to the principles of central planning, most prices of essential commodities of both agricultural and industrial have been subjected to price control. Specialized government agencies with a network of wholesale and retail centres were set up for the domestic distribution of goods. Agricultural products mainly staples have ceiling prices which are far below their market values. The Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) purchased these crops at these fixed prices but since these prices were far below the market prices a system of forced requisitioning had to be devised and put into effect. The mechanism by which the AMC was to procure its supplies from the peasant farmers was put into effect through the use of the peasant associations - mass organizations organized by proclamation during the land reform (mentioned above). The peasant associations would receive quotas on the quantity of crop it was expected to sell to the AMC from the provincial authorities. It then sets up committees for allocating the quota among individual households on the basis of crop stand before harvest as well as on the total size of the households production. If the household has any marketable surplus over and above the quota allocation then it had the option of selling it on the local markets at free market prices which often meant a price level twice that offered them by the AMC. This disparity between the official prices and the free market prices and the fact that the farmers had to forcibly submit most of their surplus to the government naturally created a great deal of resentment among the farmers. In particular the fact that the quota setting exercise was made during harvest time and on the basis of farm output with no consideration to the cost aspects of the output often meant that an enterprising and industrious peasant would be allotted a bigger quota whereas a less motivated peasant given the same quality of land, would have a lower level of output and a lower quota allotment. The system therefore had an inherent disincentive effect on productivity.

The undemocratic nature in which the regime maintained its power meant that it had to break diplomatic contact with the Western world with which the country had close contact during the previous regime. This development inevitably led to the termination of economic aid by the major western donors particularly the United States with unfavourable consequences to the economic prospects of the country. Such development including the ideological alignment with the Eastern bloc countries could well be interpreted in terms of defective governance arising from the regime's illegitimacy, in view of the fact that the best interests of the population could not have been reflected in the ideological realignments. These events have greatly exacerbated the vulnerability of the nation to recurrence in famine conditions.

By the late 1980s, the regime did not find it easy to sustain its communist orientation given the transformation that was taking place within the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The regime announced its New Economic Policy in March 1990. This was a package of reforms geared towards changing economic management from a centrally-controlled system to one with an increased role for market forces in accordance with trends in the eastern-bloc countries. In spite of the proclaimed reforms however the regime had still attempted not to compromise the ideological stand of the ruling party (WPE) through attaching the blame for the disappointing record of economic management and performance on factors other than the poor policies and practices of the leadership.⁵⁶ The development of events in the country however clearly point to the root cause as being the improper governance by a regime that spared no means at its disposal in order to extend its existence.

⁵⁶ See Addis Zemen March 5, 1990;

It is also recognized that a number of policies had been directed at stemming the recurrence in the famine conditions but have failed to be effective. It is further argued that factors such as the erosion of the public confidence in the government, the resource diversions caused by armed conflict, and international hostility had stalled the efficacy of even well devised projects meant to reduce vulnerability and thereby have created suitable conditions for famine recurrence.

Among the first measures adopted soon after the 1972/74 famine, by the Provisional Military Government was the establishment of the RRC (The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission) and the subsequent strengthening of its logistical and transport capability, storage and overall organizational capacity as well as the creation of an early warning system in order to enhance its state of readiness in combating famines.

In recognition of the importance of taking early actions to avert famine disasters of the type that have occurred in 1972/74, the RRC incorporated an Early Warning System in its organizational set-up in the mid-1970s. The main functions of the system were the collection analysis and dissemination of data on the status of food production in all the regions of the country. These functions necessarily entailed the monitoring of crop production variables like the rainfall patterns, and incidence of crop damage due to natural calamities like frost, diseases and pests as well as population displacements. On the basis of the information so gathered the EWS was expected to assist the RRC in determining the vulnerable populations - their size and location - in order to establish the extent of the assistance required and thereby initiate the proper actions. According to an evaluation team that conducted a study in early 1984 the EWS's tasks of identifying the deficit and surplus production areas and specifying the extent of relief assistance for a given period of time was regarded to have been rendered very difficult by the large physical size of the country, the large variety of ecological zones and the resultant local

differences in food economies.⁵⁷ Furthermore according to the team's assessment "...the efforts which has gone into the work since the mid 1970s is probably unique in Africa, and reflects both the will of the government to alleviate disaster-induced distress, and the interest of external funding agencies in helping to improve disaster response."⁵⁸

On the basis of information obtained through the EWS, the RRC was to make the required public statements in order to mobilize assistance from the international community when the magnitude of the required resource threatened to be beyond the means of the Government. The RRC had been in fact very vocal in its warnings regarding the increasing incidence of food shortages, in an attempt to rally international support before the 1982/85 famine developed into a crisis. However evidence is available that the regime, in its effort to legitimize its hold on power, had suppressed the magnitude of the 1984 famine which was reportedly more severe and widespread than the 1972/74 famine.⁵⁹

Another famine prevention measure attempted and probably the most promising in terms of longer term solutions to the problem of the more chronically affected famine-prone regions of the country, was the resettlement scheme attempted by the regime. The Government had launched its resettlement scheme - a programme that was subjected to a great deal of controversies - with the declared objective of moving about two and half million inhabitants from the famine-prone areas of the northern provinces to the fertile and sparsely populated areas in the south, south-west and west of the country. The areas earmarked for resettlement included the highland areas of Wello, Tigray and Northern

⁵⁷ See Holt and Cutler (1984) .

⁵⁸ Ibid.,

⁵⁹ See Giorgis (1989)

Shewa, which were the areas that had been most devastated by the 1972/74 famine. However because of the poor logistical and organizational capability at the disapproval of the regime at the time, in view of the heavy military commitments in controlling internal strife, it proved to be ill prepared to properly undertake the task which involved the massive movements of families to new regions that were often infested with malaria. The programme required the construction of homesteads, the provision of food for a season until the settlers were able to harvest the next season's crops, the provision of medical care and various other basic services none of which were properly provided. Intent on implementing the programme in the shortest possible time, the regime had attempted to involve mass participation including the participation of all college students and various civil servants as well as peasant associations living in the vicinities near which people were to be resettled. The high mortality rate among the settler, the allegation that the scheme was a politically motivated depopulation of war affected regions, and the consequent international uproar that ensued resulted in the programme being aborted prematurely.⁶⁰

Alongside the attempt of the government to resettle the people, attempts were being made to reduce the risks of famine through opening up the region through a network of rural roads particularly with the objectives of enabling access to the remotest areas of the famine prone regions. Beside the above direct measures for the prevention of famines the government had adopted the practice of food importation in order to supplement supply shortages.

In spite of all the policies adopted and activities carried out in connection with reducing the vulnerability of the population to famine and in spite of the early warning system,

⁶⁰ See Negarit Gazeta Feb. 4 1977 (Tirr 26/68)

famine struck again in the 1982/85 with an equal if not greater level of causality. That a second devastating famine should occur within a span of a decade and the fact that famine has become a perennial feature of life in the country tends to undermine the relevance of whatever policy actions were taken for purposes of anticipating and containing the threat of famines.

5.The case for public provisioning

The following sections will discuss these issues and highlight the view that famines in Ethiopia could legitimately be seen as manifestations first of the unemployment (exchange entitlement failure and loss of self-employment) precipitated by drought, and only later of food availability decline. In this regard it is therefore argued that income supplementing programmes, through either employment generation or cash transfers, which follows directly from the entitlements analysis, could provide the proper set of strategies for the prevention of famines.

The maintenance of entitlements through government provisioning is, however, more easily said than done. The massive cost implications of such a strategy -particularly in terms of the implied financial commitments, logistical requirements and administrative capacity - can be the more daunting the more poor the country is. When a country is as debt- ridden and poor as the case study country is, then the problems of undertaking a social provisioning strategy for purposes of famine prevention becomes even more formidable. But given that public provisioning for the protection of entitlements is an

absolute necessity and a matter of basic rights, in view of impending starvation, such difficulties must be taken as posing a challenge rather than a deterrence.⁶¹

Another important justification for income supplementing programmes through public provisioning for employment generation, food-for-work and cash payments is however the growing disillusionment with the famine prevention strategies to date. These strategies, which have invariably concentrated on food supply considerations mainly through emergency relief programmes, can be considered to have questionable records of achievements both in rendering timely and unhampered relief and in averting the recurrence of famine conditions. It is therefore considered that the income supplementing strategy through employment generation or cash relief, which can be considered as an alternative to the customary practice of direct delivery of food to the vulnerable population, could hold the solution to the eventual resolution of the endemic famine condition in the country.

In order to make the proper case for public provisioning for famine prevention in the context of the case study country, the following discussions will first focus of the overall concept of mass-unemployment (extensive entitlements failure) through relating these concepts as they pertain to famine ridden underdeveloped economies to that of mass unemployment as they pertain to developed economies. Such an approach will give the perennial problem of recurrent famines a conventional dimensions.

⁶¹ The various implications of a massive programme of public provisioning for purposes of famine prevention in the subject matter of subsequent chapters in the research programme within which this study is one chapter.

5.1 Rural Mass-unemployment (extensive entitlement failure)

The concepts of employment refer to the application of human effort to some resource with the view of producing some socially useful goods or services. Employment is more generally referred to as occupation, work, or gainful activity and involves the participation of the economically active segment of a society. But there are however not only definitional problems regarding the economically active segment of any society in terms of age limits, the gender composition of the labour force, the role of women etc., but also the fact that one finds, in attempting to discuss problems of employment/unemployment in the context of the developed and underdeveloped economies, one finds that the ordinary economic usage of the terms employment and unemployment are not as readily applicable to the less developed agrarian economies dominated by subsistence agriculture, as they are to the advanced industrialized countries. In Ethiopia as in other developing countries where a sizeable share of the national income is derived from the subsistence agricultural sectors, defining the economically active "labour force" in the society can be very misleading because as stated in Durand "...in such countries, where much of the work of income production is done in family enterprises, the distinction between breadwinners and others is generally less clear-cut than it is in industrialized countries, where most of the bread-winners work for wages outside the domain of the family."⁶²

Something should first be said about the normal level of unemployment prevailing in the rural areas under normal circumstances. The economically active population found in the rural areas can be expected, in normal years, to be characterized by disguised unemployment rather than unemployment of the type prevalent in the urban centres. This assertion has a firm socioeconomic basis in that it follows from the fact that all

⁶² See Durand (1975)

residents of the rural areas are regarded as members of peasant associations. Since peasant associations have as their main task the role of ensuring that farm land is allocated among its members on the basis of criteria like family size, the economically active members of the rural communities have the basic means (land) to participate in agricultural production given normal weather conditions. Relatives or dependents of the household heads are expected to assist in the production activities of the household farms as unpaid farmhands, as they jointly rely on the proceeds of the farm for their livelihood.

It does not however follow that all the members of the rural labour force are productively utilized throughout the year. The seasonal nature of the production activities on farms imply different labour requirements. The labour requirements of a farm during ploughing season may not be as demanding as that needed for weeding and cultivation or harvesting depending on the type of crop being grown in the region. This means that the rural labour force is more fully utilized during the peak activity periods and depending on the level of off-season productive activity being undertaken within a rural community (such as land reclamation, voluntary reforestation etc.,) the level of disguised unemployment can be expected to be more intense during slack seasons. It can therefore be concluded that under normal circumstances (adequate rainfall, etc.,) the rural labour force is characterized more by disguised-unemployment rather than the unemployment as it prevails in urban centres. It should however be noted that withdrawal of these disguised-unemployed could in fact result in serious labour shortages during peak activity periods.

What then is the likely consequences of drought on the level of unemployment in rural areas? On the basis of field observations the following scenarios can be constructed regarding the progress of events under different patterns of rain shortage. It should be emphasised that the cultural practices followed in field crop production vary not only

between regions but also between crops and each of the following scenarios has been simplified in order to obtain as much generality as possible. As is generally the case, alternative employment opportunities are regarded not to be readily available.

Case 1: Rains come normally but discontinue at about planting time.

Under this scenario, the farmer would be expected to have been busy with the usual post-harvest activities like marketing his produce, mending fences, clearing the farm land from last season's residuals and engaging in various social activities, while at the same time waiting for the rains to begin in order to start ploughing and seed-bed preparation for the next season. As soon as the rains appear he begins ploughing for, in most parts of the country, the initial shower is essential in order to soften the earth and make it more workable for the plow-shears. In areas where the soil is naturally loose, ploughing can start earlier before the rains come although final ploughing will be still required after the rains have appeared. Again depending on the region and on the type of crop anticipated, ploughing on the same parcel of land can be done repeatedly over a number of months. At about the optimal planting period which can range somewhere between April to July the farmer would plant his seed. Now should the rain discontinue, the farmer would be suspended idly not knowing whether not to re-plow his land and try for a late crop variety. It would turn out under this scenario, that the farmer would be rendered inactive with the seedling in the field already withering and the balance of the optimal planting season not adequate to enable another round of activity. And even if there were just sufficient time for another round of activity, the uncertainty associated with the stoppage would discourage further efforts. Under such circumstances not only has the farmer lost his crop for the season, but is also subjected to unemployment for the rest of the season having been rendered unable to utilize the means of production available to him due to the shortage of rain. If this season happens to be the first season of rain shortage to the

farmer, he may still have sufficient resources (assets, savings, food stock, etc.) to patiently tide his period of idleness and hardship and go through the same routine come the next season. Should the rains fail again, we would have the classic case of destitution of a farmer able and willing but unable to work. The decline in entitlements arising from his lengthy and involuntary idleness would soon translate itself into a famine condition requiring emergency relief food assistance.

Case 2 : The rains fail to appear

This scenario differs from case 1 in that the seasonal rains fail to come altogether. Under such circumstances the farmer is subjected to lengthy periods of suspense and waiting. He cannot start ploughing as he requires the first showers in order to be able to work the land. Even if he manages to plow the land in hopeful anticipation of the rains coming late, he would still find his hopes frustrated as the rains would not come and he cannot proceed to planting the fields he had ploughed. What distinguishes this farmer from the farmer in case 1 is that this farmer is subjected to a lengthier period of involuntary idleness spanning the complete crop season. Should he survive it, he could recover during the next crop season assuming the rains proceed according to the normal seasonal patterns. However should the rains fail again his case would be the same as for the farmer in case 1.

What filters out from the above scenarios is that a farmer with the full complement of productive resources such as his labour, land, and capital and able and willing to work, but rendered unable to work because of drought, represents first and foremost a case of unemployment and only later an object for food relief. The appropriate policy implied is therefore an intervention to uphold the income of the farmer through preferably the provision of alternative employment opportunities and if need be through an outright

income transfer. Should these policy measures not be attempted or fail to be effective then the inevitable consequence would be an emergency famine relief operation.

The simplifications of the above scenarios which are necessary in order to make the point clear, should however be taken note of. Peasant farmer, even those considered at the lowest level of well-being, do not generally die of starvation as a result of a single crop failure because of the various social and cultural coping arrangements in the society.⁶³ These coping arrangements range from borrowing of money or grain from money lenders, friends and relatives; selling valuable assets and farm animals, as well as surviving on handouts and assistance offered by close relatives within an extended family system. However since access of the affected farmers to any of these coping arrangements varies, and since such coping arrangements when they exist are essentially temporary in nature, it is felt that for purposes of the analysis, nothing would be lost by assuming that destitution and famine follows in the absence of government intervention to support the incomes of the affected farmers.⁶⁴

At this juncture we now turn to the historical experience of the developed economies when faced with mass-unemployment.

⁶³ Rahmato (1987)

⁶⁴ A further simplification that should be noted is that the peasant farmer is taken to be an agriculturalist when in fact close to 10% of the population are pastoralists. Further more even among the rural households distinctions could be made regarding the level of poverty as between subsistence farmers who can provide well for their families ■ under good wether conditions, the rural landless class who may barley survive even under good climatic conditions, and a third group of unemployable consisting of the aged and the disabled. However and inspite of such distinctions the typical rural household, which is the subsistence farmer who can well provide for his family under good weather conditions, has been adopted as the focus of the above analysis. The reasons beside the need for simplification, are the small proportion of the pastoralists as compared to the agriculturalists, the insignificant sectors of the rural community which are actually landless due to the particular feature of the land reform in the country. On distinctions between the poor see Bigman (1982)

5.2 Mass Unemployment in Developed Economies

The economic history of the industrialized nations has a number of lessons to provide regarding the large scale loss of employment and incomes and the subsequent need for public provisioning of alternative employment schemes in order to restore the incomes and food entitlements of the rural population. The economic recessions that took place in most of the Western nations during the late 1920's and early 1930's are typical cases in point. The periods of war in the past have witnessed massive interventions by western governments in order to maintain the food entitlements of the people.⁶⁵ Due to various factors that reflected the enhanced role of the State during the war period of 1914-18, the standard of life of a substantial part of the working class population was "...not only maintained, but also rose relative to the pre-war period."⁶⁶ Among the set of factors leading to such conditions, according to Winter, was that due to mainly overtime pay, piece rate payments, and the eradication of unemployment, earnings managed to outstrip wages in the war time, and also that the "...levelling up of low wages and a considerable rise in the pay levels of most groups of workers..⁶⁷ gave the majority of the working population the means to overcome the spiralling food prices. In an account of the history of the Second World War as it relates to the problems of social policy in the United Kingdom, Titmus underscores the fact that one important development that transpired from the war period was to be found in the government's changed perception on the provisioning of social services which, as he puts it "... meant that for five years of war the pressure for a higher standard of welfare and a deeper comprehension of social justice steadily gained in strength. And during this period, despite all the handicap of limited resources in men and materials, a big expansion took place in the responsibilities

65 See Titmus (1950), See also: Winter (1986)

66 See Winter(1986). p. 214

67 Ibid., pp. 214-215

accepted by the State for those in need."⁶⁸ It can be gathered from his writing that the role of Government which once recognized the need to intervene only in the case of the poor and those disadvantaged members of the society who were unable to pay for various services, was being, during and after the war years, redirected towards the provisioning of those social services to the whole population without discrimination between social groups. It was, in the words of the author "...increasingly regarded as a proper function or even obligation of Government to ward off distress and strain among not only the poor but almost all classes of society."⁶⁹

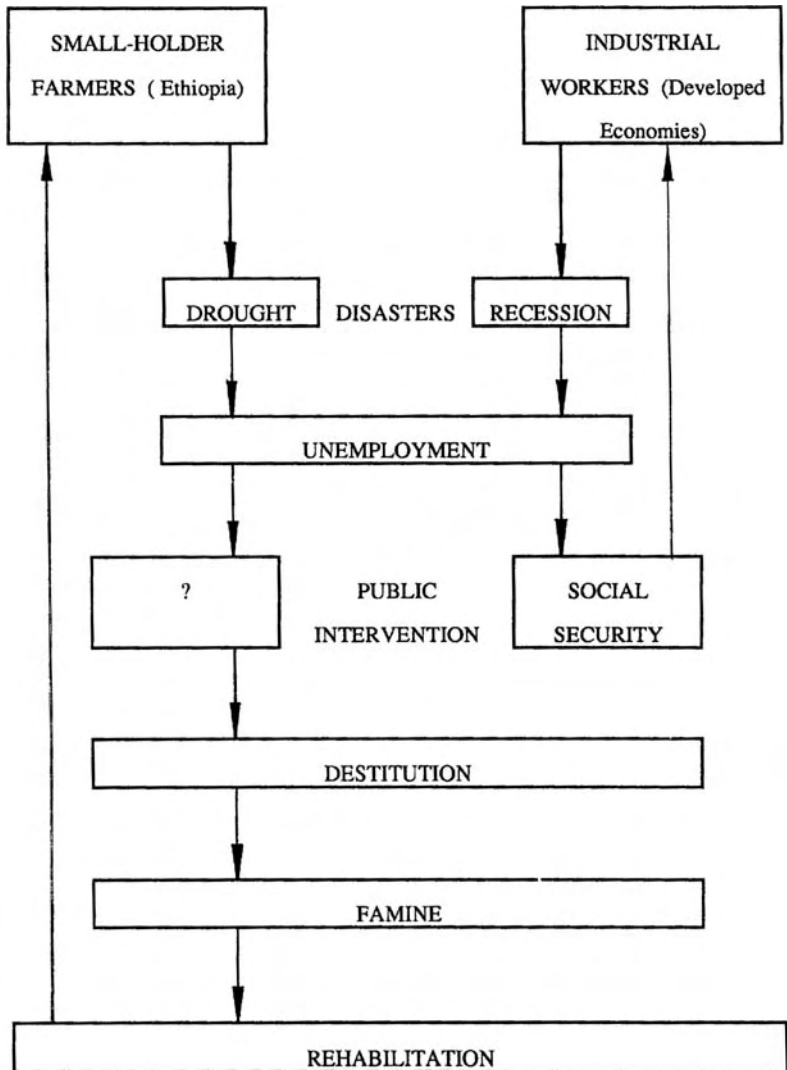
The developed countries' experience in provisioning, on a large scale, employment opportunities to its citizens during such times of recession, has strong parallels with the predicaments facing the case-study country, when a sizeable portion of the population becomes unemployed and suffers income collapse and subsequent famine due to drought or other natural calamities. Given that agriculture is the biggest source of employment and incomes in the case-study country, any event that leads to a drastic reduction in this activity will inevitably have severe and adverse economic and social consequences. Public action particularly in the area of job creation in order to restore lost entitlements would appear to be the inevitable solution under the circumstances.

5.3 Famines and the Social Security Safety-net

The above discussion of the extensive entitlements failure can best be illustrated by the following diagram which seeks to highlight the parallels regarding the phenomenon of unemployment between industrial workers in developed economies and the peasant farmers in the case-study country.

68 See Titmus (1950), pp.507-508.

69 Ibid.,p.506



As is evident from the diagram, the industrial worker of the developed world is vulnerable to mass-unemployment arising from economic phenomenon like recessions not unlike the vulnerability of the peasant farmer to natural phenomenon like drought. When the catastrophe happens in both circumstances the essential features of what transpires, assuming that all human beings behave in much the same way when confronted with a threat to their livelihood, can be expected to be identical in its physical and psychological attributes (search for alternative employment, feelings of anxiety and of insecurity, etc.,) and the intensity of the job-search or the level of anxiety suffered can be expected to be inversely related to the level of savings of the job-seeker or the existence of social arrangements which can be relied upon through the hard times. As is evident from the diagram, the absence of meaningful public intervention at an early stage of rural unemployment as is the situation in the case-study country, eventually leads to destitution and ultimately to a dependence on famine relief in order to survive. The passage from destitution through famine relief and rehabilitation to subsequent independent productive engagement is uncertain often littered with emotional and physical sufferings, deaths of family members, and the recurrence of the same type of catastrophe that led to the initial destitution. The existence of well functioning social security system in the developed economies however ensures that destitution does not follow the unemployment crises suffered by the industrial worker so that in due course the worker stabilizes his circumstances through re-employment with very limited trauma in the process. In the absence of such a social security system to help maintain entitlements, it is not difficult to conceive of a situation where even the industrial worker would be faced with a fate not dissimilar to that suffered by his rural counterpart in the impoverished agrarian economy.

The ready availability of alternative employment opportunities does ease the load of the social security system in the developed economies, as many of those made redundant by the recession conceivably recover an alternative job in a short duration. The absence of alternative employment opportunities however aggravates not only the situation of the vulnerable population but could also pose an administrative and financial hurdle to the income supplementing scheme. A number of studies can be cited which depict the suffering of the households in the face of oncoming famine and in the absence of alternative employment opportunities. It is cited in the literature that the response to the drought in highland Ethiopia had been the distress sale of livestock and other cattle assets, as the options open to the peasants are limited by poor communications and intense competition for access to additional and alternative sources of employment and income. Beside distress sales of farm assets, the options open to a household faced with a short fall of production over subsistence requirements would also include the search for wild food to supplement food supplies; search for off-farm employment opportunities by adults, through migrating to neighbouring regions and towns and for the women and children to migrate to towns in search of charity. It can therefore be stated that the absence of alternative employment opportunities coupled with the absence of an early enough intervention to restore lost entitlements can explain the famine disaster in the region.

The point has been made that rural mass-unemployment (or extensive entitlements failure) can be the primary consequence of factors like draught or other natural calamities but could only lead to famines if timely action is not taken for public provisioning aimed at enhancing the incomes of the vulnerable groups through employment generation programmes. It follows therefore that the absence in the timely intervention by the government in the face of the massive unemployment conditions arising from disabled productive activities has been the primary factor behind the wide-spread famines that

have plagued the case-study country during the past two decades. This basic fact seems to have been systematically undermined by famine relief organizations and donor governments, as is all evident from the overriding commitment and preoccupation with the provision of food for famine relief, when the root cause of the problem could have been resolved by focussing attention on the need for early intervention through a variety of income supplementing programmes.

6. Summary and Conclusions

Drought has been associated with all the major famines that occurred in Ethiopia during the last two decades. The chronology of events surrounding both the major famines of 1972/74 and 1982/85 indicates that the famines happened not as sudden occurrences but rather as end products of the distress induced by drought over a number of crisis seasons. It has been shown that this process involved the gradual pauperization of the vulnerable community who, in the first instance, lose their direct entitlement to food due to the drought-induced marginalization of their cultivable landholdings, and subsequently are also faced with the lack of employment opportunities which further limits their capacity to exchange their labour for sustenance.

While the loss of income opportunities and employment (loss of direct and exchange entitlements) arising, directly and indirectly, from the drought-induced declines in production was one major antecedent of the recent Ethiopian famines, the other was the absence of adequate government intervention to recreate these lost entitlements. It has therefore been argued that although physical phenomenon could explain the entitlement failures, such failures, which could have been prevented by government intervention, do not fully explain the development of the actual famines. The development of the actual

famines, it has been argued, was a *governance failure* as well. The failure to pursue the appropriate social and economic functions that could have reduced or curtailed the disabling effects of recurrent famines - a phenomenon of the last decade - has also been strongly linked to the defective governance during the period.

That the process leading to famines is typically a gradual one broadens the scope for effective government intervention which, as has been stressed, should start early enough in the development of famine conditions. It is however recognized that public provisioning at the level required to maintain an adequate level of income support, implies a heavy burden on public resources. This could well mean undesirable trade-offs between the goals of food security and the objectives of overall economic growth.

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