



## THE CAUSES OF FAMINE

### Introduction

The United Nations World Food Programme estimates that at present about 800 million people in the world suffer from hunger. Many more people suffer from a **chronic lack of food** rather than from an **acute lack of food** brought about by a temporary situation normally associated with famine conditions. This Factsheet is concerned primarily with looking at the causes and the consequences of acute hunger.

On average, people need at least 10.8 megajoules of food a day if they are to stay healthy [UN]. People eating less than that are considered to be **suffering from malnutrition**. There are three main ways in which people suffer:-

1. **Dietary deficiencies.** *This means there is a lack of important elements in the diet, for instance iodine, which can cause mental retardation, and vitamin A, a lack of which can cause blindness and lower resistance to disease. This is often referred to as "hidden hunger."*

2. **Secondary malnutrition.** *The relationship between diet and disease is complex. Undernourished people are prone to disease like diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses, measles and internal parasite. Most of the undernourished people die from one of these diseases rather than from undernutrition.*

3. **Undernutrition.** *This means a person is not eating sufficient calories or protein to keep healthy and active. Children do not grow normally. Mothers suffering from undernutrition tend to give birth to children who are underweight. The incidence of infant mortality is high*

### What are famine conditions?

By definition, a famine is an abnormal state of affairs. The normal pattern of food supply has broken down for one reason or another. In many instances, people are forced to move in their search for food. Families can be split up and often there is significant social disruption. If death rates rise significantly then it is generally acknowledged famine conditions exist. Rarely do these circumstances happen without some form of warning.

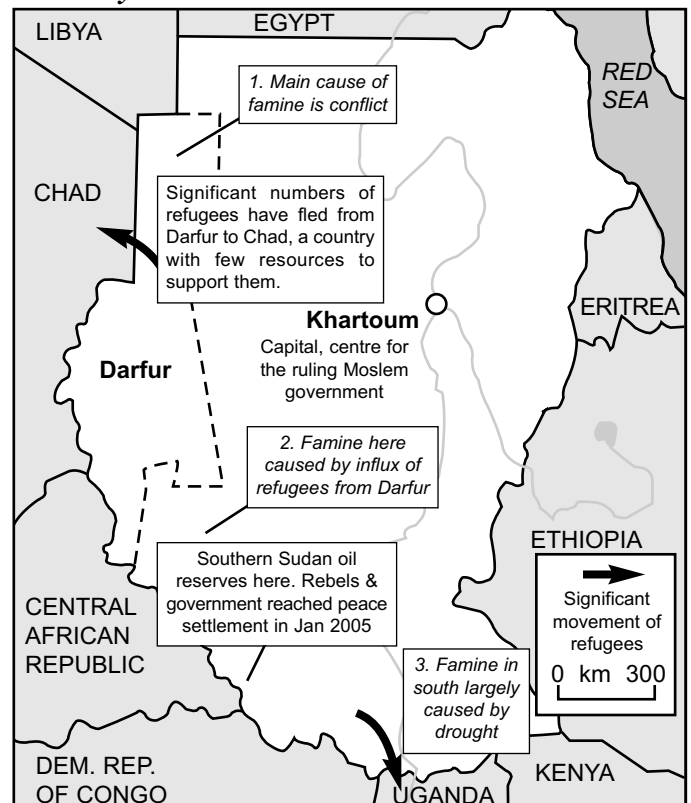
### Case study 1: Sudan

Sudan has the potential to be a prosperous country. There are large areas that can be cultivated and cotton could be an important export crop. There are gold reserves and in the South significant oil reserves. However there have been twenty one years of civil war between the Government in Khartoum and rebel forces in the Western region of Darfur and the South. The ruling party in Khartoum is Muslim while the people of the South tend to be Christian or Animist.

The United Nations estimate that between 1.5 and 2 million people have been displaced by the Civil War and more than 70,000 people have died, mostly from hunger and associated diseases. Through the activities of the government forces and the various militia groups, farmers have been displaced. A peace settlement was signed in January 2005 with the rebel groups in the South but there are still hostilities in the Darfur region. UNHCR reported in February 2005 that 200,000 refugees were living in camps in the neighbouring country of Chad with no means of providing food for themselves. On January 9<sup>th</sup> 2005, Barbara Stocking, Director of Oxfam, speaking on Radio 4, said that Oxfam was providing basic food supplies for 70,000 people in Darfur and Chad.

Poverty (% of population below national poverty line)	Not recorded
Infant mortality (per 1000 live births)	64
Child malnutrition (% of children under 5)	11
Life expectancy at birth	58
Annual growth of GDP in 2003	6.0%

Fig. 1 Sudan and neighbouring countries to which refugees have fled. Note the 3 different causes of food insecurity.



**Case study 1: Sudan (continued)**

These refugees have no ability at the moment to **command** food for themselves because the political situation is so unstable they cannot farm their land and have had to move to the relative security of refugee camps, either in Darfur or across the border into Chad. They are suffering from food insecurity as they have lost their **entitlement** to farm their land and they are reliant upon the ability of external agencies like Oxfam and UNHCR to deliver supplies to them. These can be interrupted because of the military situation. For instance on December 29<sup>th</sup> 2004 the BBC reported that the UN World Food Programme had ceased deliveries as the situation was considered to be too dangerous. Road closures had stopped 70 trucks with supplies for 260,000 people reaching Darfur.

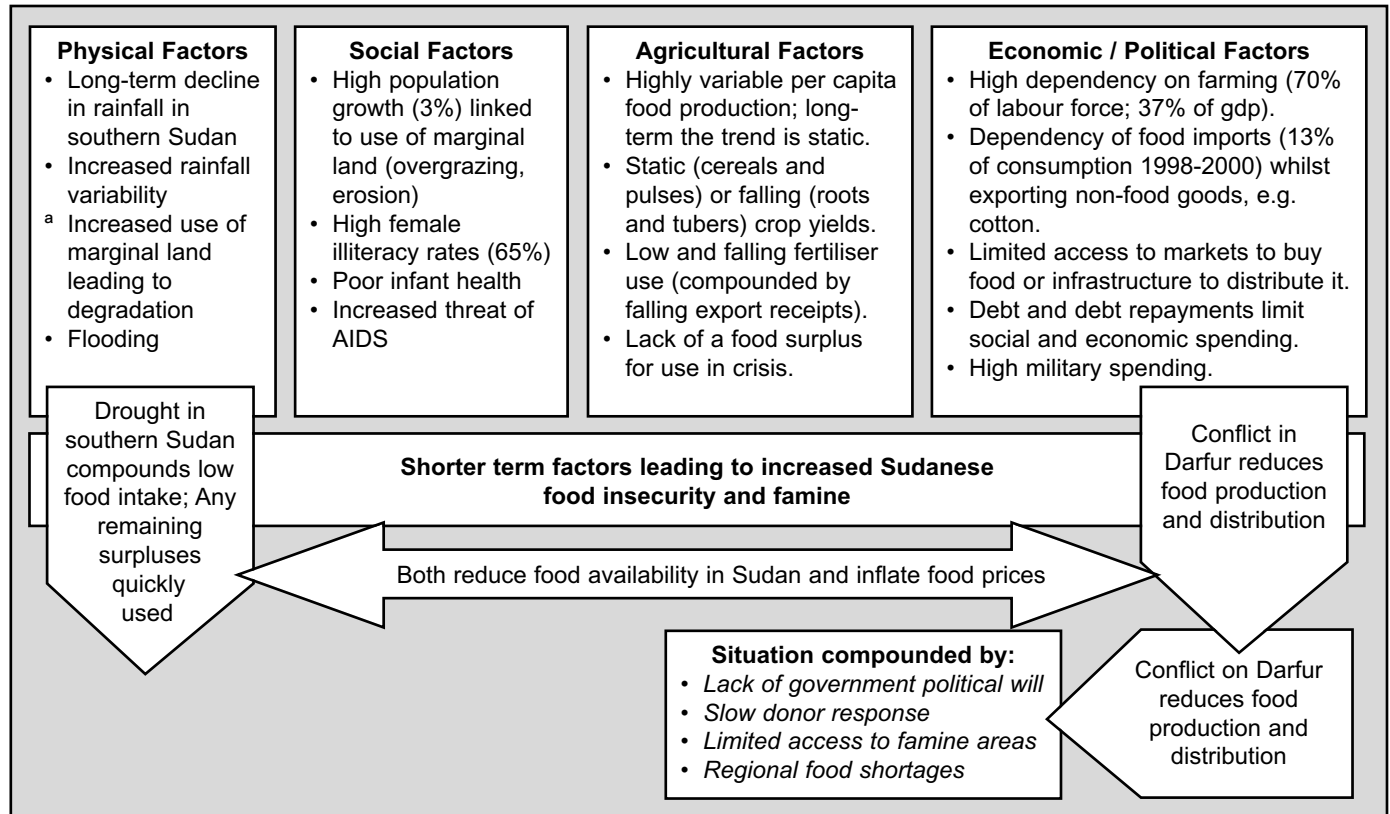
This extract from a Christian Aid document sums up the situation:

“a country still gripped by a civil war that has been fuelled, prolonged and part-financed by oil. The two sides are currently locked in peace talks, but one of the most acrimonious issues at the heart of negotiations is the sharing of oil wealth between the government-controlled north and the south of the country, where much of the oil is located. At the same time, international companies, including two from Europe, continue to exploit Sudan's oil.”

Quote from Christian Aid paper, 2004

**Fig. 2 Summary of the multiple causes of famine in Sudan.**

Source: C. Dunn



**What are the causes of famine?**

The usual assumption is to associate famine conditions with natural disasters like those found in Ethiopia after prolonged droughts. Crops fail through lack of sufficient rain, so people who rely on these crops go hungry. However this fails to acknowledge the human factors that can deprive people of a reliable supply of food. Political and economic factors are equally as powerful influences upon food supplies as climatic disasters. In today's world food can be moved from one area to another in emergencies. However disruptions to the food supply chain occur still.

**Food security** is important. This means that people have a reliable food supply that contains sufficient nutritional elements to keep them healthy. Understandably, the United Nations has made this one of the most important of the Millennium Development goals.

It is generally agreed that people have **an entitlement to food**.

People can **command** food, either because they have the economic ability to buy it or they can produce it for themselves. In any given situation, if people's ability to command food is so poor they cannot sustain their basic need for a period, they will suffer from hunger. When this happens abnormally, through physical conditions like drought or floods, or through disruptions to the normal pattern of life caused by war, or food being withheld from some group by another who wishes to exert influence over others, then famines can and do occur.

**Africa** is probably the only continent in which famine conditions potentially exist in many countries. This contrasts with Asia which traditionally was thought of as a region susceptible to famines. Now, apart from Bangladesh, North Korea and Cambodia all countries currently have reliable food supplies even though these may not be so readily accessible to all sectors of society. Case study evidence will be used to explore why these differences exist.

**Case Study 2: Zimbabwe**

Poverty (% of population below national poverty line)	75
Infant mortality (per 1000 live births)	76
Child malnutrition (% of children under 5)	13
Life expectancy at birth – AIDS is a factor	39
Annual growth of GDP in 2003	-13.1 %

The BBC reported in November 2004 that millions were thought to be at risk of suffering from famine. For a country which until recently was the world's third largest supplier of tobacco and regarded potentially as the bread basket for much of Southern Africa this appears to be incongruous. Officially the government says the cause lies in the long running drought. However there has been a programme of land reform. Many of the productive farms which were owned and run by people of European descent have been seized by the government and subdivided. Supplies of seeds and fertilisers are erratic. Production has fallen drastically, particularly of maize, the staple food for the majority of the population.

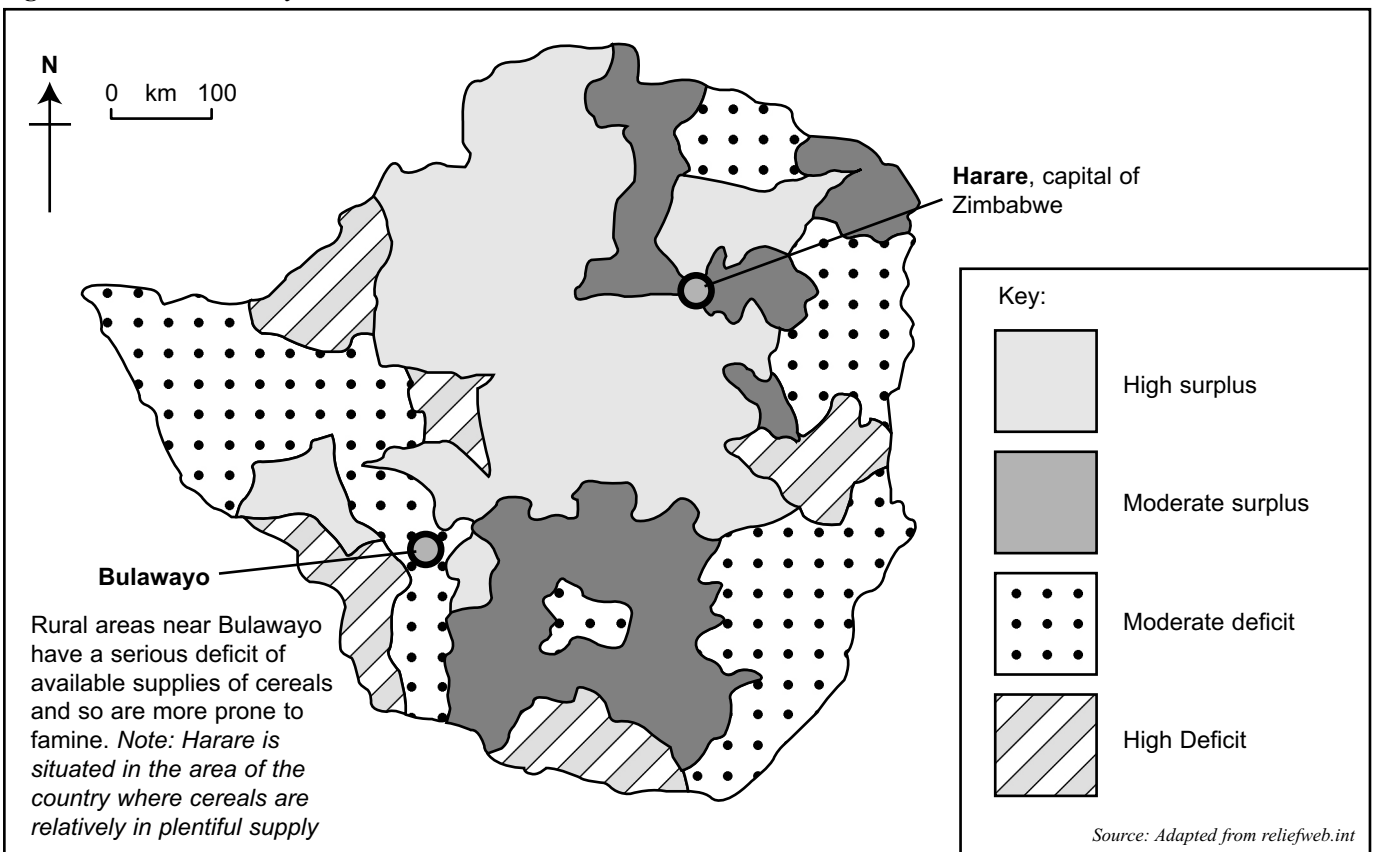
Harvests in 2002 and 2003 were poor. The situation during 2004 did not improve and the World Food Programme analyses the current situation as "highly uncertain". It is estimated that 2.3 million people living in rural areas and 2.5 million people in urban areas may not be able to find sufficient food for their basic needs during this period.

Inflation has been running at 500% and unemployment at 70% so people's ability to provide for themselves is severely curtailed. The government sets prices for staple foodstuffs like maize and wheat which is further fuelling the food shortages in many urban areas where the poor cannot afford to pay them. Another factor is the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which is seriously affecting the productive age group and leading to labour shortages on the farms.

Overall, the **food security** situation is a cause of real concern. Here, the combined effects of climatic uncertainty, after several years of erratic rain, coupled with government policies which are not providing conditions conducive to maximising productivity have led to a situation in which the majority of people are finding it difficult to command their food supplies. People's **entitlement** to food security has been jeopardised.

Elections were held on March 2005. Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, called upon the Zimbabwean government to "take the responsibility now to build a climate of confidence that will be essential for national unity and economic recovery in Zimbabwe." (Source – United Nations News service 04 April 2005). Reporting the situation inside Zimbabwe continues to be difficult because of the restrictions placed upon journalists, but all the indications are that the political situation remains the same so there is no real improvement in the **food security** of the majority of the population. Some observers even suggest that food entitlement is linked to whether people support the government or not.

**Fig. 3 Cereal availability in Zimbabwe.**



Asia traditionally has been regarded as a continent in which many people go hungry. Yet, as already stated, famine is no longer widespread. *Case studies 3 and 4* contrast the situation in North Korea, where there are serious shortages of food, and India, a country that has succeeded in providing sufficiently secure food supplies for all its population to avoid famine, even though a significant proportion of its people suffer from chronic hunger.

**Case Study 3: North Korea**

*This is still a communist state where the majority of the population has limited access to the outside world. There are severe shortages of food, caused by a series of natural disasters, droughts and floods, and economic recession. Industrial output has fallen, the country is earning less abroad, so it cannot afford to import food. The World Food Programme gives the following reason why this level of food insecurity has arisen:-*

- A series of late spring droughts
- Summer floods
- Occasional typhoons in early autumn

*These three factors are all caused by climatic conditions and will lead to decrease in agricultural yields in particular years.*

*The following four factors can be linked to the political decisions taken in the country:-*

- Deforestation and consequent silting of rivers
- Economic downturn
- Lack of agricultural input such as fertilisers
- Limited access to international supplies of capital, export markets and supplies of imported food.

**Fig. 4 How North Korea's food security has been reduced since 1994.**

Here is a brief history of the last decade which shows how the combined affects of climatic conditions and economic decisions have reduced the food security of a large sector of the country's population.

1994	Severe hail storms destroyed crops
1995 - 1996	Floods destroyed crops on 16% of the arable land
1997	A severe drought affected the fertile West coast from June through to mid-August, the main growing season
2000	There were more droughts followed by severe tropical storms in August – again affecting crops.
July 2002	A new economic adjustment policy led to increased wages but also higher prices for staple food supplies, accommodation and utility bills.

*Source World Food Programme report on North Korea*

*It is estimated that 70% of the country's population is dependent upon food distributed through the Central Public Distribution System. Rations have been reduced because there has been a series on bad harvests until in 2003 the average ration varied between 250 and 300 grams per person per day, half the minimum daily energy requirements.*

*In this case the urban population is suffering more than those in rural areas who can supplement their rations by growing a certain amount of food for themselves or by gathering edible food, for instance grasses, acorns and sea algae. So **food insecurity** is much worse in the towns, particularly the industrial centres in the north of the country where many of the factories have been idle for a long period and there are high rates of unemployment.*

*The **World Food Programme** has been given access to the country and currently is working to avoid famine conditions developing. Initially it started a programme of emergency assistance to vulnerable groups for a year, throughout 2004, but this has been extended for the whole of 2005, too.*

*An indication of the scale of the problem is that a survey carried out in 2002 found that 4% of the children were stunted in their growth, 20% were underweight and 8% were wasted. According to the World Health Organisation these facts indicated there are severe public health problems caused by malnutrition.*

*It aims to prevent food shortages becoming so acute that a large scale famine develops by:-*

- Improving food security generally
- Targeting particularly vulnerable groups, like nursing mothers, young children, the elderly and poor households in urban areas.
- Supporting the government's efforts to improve agricultural production and introducing food-for-work programmes.

*So North Korea, unlike the majority of countries in Asia has not improved its food supply situation in recent years and the majority of its population is not in command of their food supplies.*

### Case Study 4: India

Poverty (% of population below national poverty line)	29
Infant mortality (per 1000 live births)	65
Child malnutrition (% of children under 5)	47
Life expectancy at birth	63
Economic data:	
Annual growth of GDP in 2003	8.3%
Exports of goods and services	7.0%

Source World Bank

At a superficial glance the statistics for India would appear to indicate that similar social conditions exist in India as in the Sudan and Zimbabwe. Life expectancy in the Sudan and India are very similar; 58 and 63 years respectively. Infant mortality rates are almost identical, 64 for every live births in the Sudan, 63 in India. More children, according to the World Bank figures, suffer from malnutrition in India than in the Sudan, 47% of those under 5 in India, only 11% in the Sudan. Yet in this century India is not regarded as a country that is liable to experience famine conditions.

This has not always been true for in the 19<sup>th</sup> century famines occurred quite frequently. Even as late as 1943 there was a major famine in Bengal. After Independence in 1947, the idea of people suffering from famine proved to be politically unacceptable. Also India has a free press, which can mobilise public opinion quickly, and an efficient civil service, a great advantage in times of crisis.

Amartya Sen put forward the thesis in 1990 that people living in countries that are liberal democracies do not tolerate famines. Certainly this is true in the case of India. One definite benefit of the Green Revolution has been to increase food supplies of key cereals. Equally, India's development into a Newly Industrialising Country (NIC) has meant India can afford to import some food supplies.

However there is still a significant percentage of India's population that suffers from chronic under nourishment and poverty. The World Food Programme estimates that around 35% of India's population, approximately 350 million people, suffer from food insecurity. Most of these people consume less than 80 % of the minimum energy requirements for a healthy life style. These poor people are concentrated in rural areas and in certain states, for instance in the south, Tamil Nadu, the state worst hit by the Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004. It is worth noting that immediately after the Tsunami India told the international community that she had sufficient resources within her own country to aid those districts which had been badly affected and that aid should be diverted to those of her neighbours who were not in a position to deal with the problems without external help.

So India is a country which is run democratically and where **food entitlement** is regarded as a right of each individual even though malnutrition and all the associated health and social issues are major problems. Economic growth is significant and brings with it potential advantages for the poor but there is still much more to be done before food insecurity for all becomes a thing of the past.

### Conclusion

**Food security** is something the majority takes for granted. Yet the conditions do exist where this can be jeopardised so easily. People who are living permanently with chronic hunger are not in a position to protect themselves from the abnormal occurrences that can lead to famine situations. Always it is the poor who suffer most severely.

The reasons why famine conditions develop can depend as much on human responses to situations as the vagaries of climatic conditions. Importantly much depends upon the attitudes of those in positions of influence, particularly in government. The role of the media in influencing and mobilising public opinion is also important. How far do they regard **food security and entitlement** as being the rights of all? Is controlling access to food supplies seen as a way of exerting influence? Can a country afford to import food and is it prepared to accept it from other nations? All these are important questions that have much to do with the maintaining an adequate and reliable supply of food for countries experiencing difficulties like North Korea, the Sudan and Zimbabwe.

As countries develop economically and politically, access to the minimum amount of food needed to maintain life is seen as an entitlement even though adequate supplies of a diet sufficient to maintain a healthy life style may yet be out of the reach of a significant proportion of the population, as in the case of India. With the growth in understanding in the problems facing many of the poorer countries of the world it is to be hoped sufficient attention can be paid to solving the political as well as the economic and environmental problems that cause hunger, whether it be acute or chronic.

### Bibliography

- *World Hunger*. Young, E. M. Routledge (1997)
- *Famine Crimes - Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*. De Waal, Alex. Curry and Indiana University Press (1997)

### Useful Websites

- [www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)
- [www.christian-aid.org.uk](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk)
- [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) - profiles of Sudan, Zimbabwe
- [www.wfp.org/country](http://www.wfp.org/country) - World Food Programme reports on its activities in countries like North Korea. Good introductory articles to the topic of famine can be found on this web site too.
- [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org) - useful economic and statistical data for individual countries.
- [www.reliefweb.int](http://www.reliefweb.int) - useful source of maps. For instance up to date information is available of relief projects in the Sudan. Also gives access to reports from other agencies like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

### Acknowledgements

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