

# THE ECONOMICS OF FAMINE

Edited by Jean Dreze

Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd

ISBN 1-858-98-689-3

## Book review by Sally Ramage (Law Journals Editor)

*The Economics of Famine* forms part of Edward Elgar's International Library of Critical Writings in Economics, the series editor of which is Professor Emeritus Mark Blaug. The articles in all volumes in the series have been reproduced as originally published. Jean Dreze, Visiting Professor at the Centre for Development Economics, Delhi School of Economics, India, is the editor of *The Economics of Famine* and he chose nineteen very pertinent journal articles. The first ten journal articles form the first part of this book and deal with famine analysis. The remaining nine journal articles form the second part of the book and consist of relevant case studies.

The topics discussed are as follows:

1. Famines and economics.
2. Famine analysis.
3. Entitlement theory reassessed.
4. Entitlement theory assessed.
5. Failures in food-growing economics.
6. Crisis in a peasant economy.
7. Equilibrium without survival.
8. Laissez-faire during scarcities.
9. Cash versus direct food relief.
10. Famine and household coping strategies.
11. Europe: chronic malnutrition and mortality rates.
12. The Irish famine.
13. The human cost of collectivisation in the Soviet Union.
14. Food supply and starvation-Indian Sub-continent.
15. Rice markets in Bangladesh during the 1974 famine.
16. China's agricultural crisis in 1959-1961.
17. Ethiopian famines: 1973-1985.

18. Famine prevention in Africa.

19. Past and present famine analysis and family relations in 1949 in Nyasaland.

The editor Jean Dreze wrote a wonderful fifteen page introduction in which he explained that the causes and remedies of famine are not as obvious as the symptoms. He quoted Adam Smith who said that famine is caused by governments '*attempting by improper means, to remedy the inconvenience of a dearth*'.<sup>1</sup>

He notes 'the gaping hole' in the literature- the connection between famine and war and he notes the silence on this topic and criticised the paper in chapter two in which the author claimed that 'most famines have taken place without anything illegal about the processes leading to starvation. Dreze reminds the reader that many recent famines have indeed taken place in a context of armed conflict. Dreze stated:

*'Development economics, in particular, can hardly overlook the fact that war has been a major obstacle to rapid development in many countries. A better integration with the economics of war and militarism, and related strands of research, is an important part of the unfinished agenda of famine analysis'*.

Jean Dreze assisted by pointing to papers published by Joanna Macrae, Anthony Zwi, Mark R. Duffield and Hugo Slim, on hunger and war.<sup>2</sup> The way the international community has acted and should act is fast changing. This Zed publication resulted in the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia- Herzegovina on 30 November 1995.<sup>3</sup>

## **Developments: 1999 to 2012**

In 2009, 22 of 24 nations identified as having 'Low Human Development' on the United Nations' Human Development Index were located in Sub-Saharan Africa. The laws prevent people from disadvantaged groups from owning land at all. Although often these laws are ignored, and land sales to disadvantaged groups occur, legal title to the land is not assured and so rural Africans rarely

---

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith (1994) *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, Scotland: Glasgow University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Macrae, J.; Zwi, A. et al (1994) *War and Hunger: Rethinking International Responses to Complex Emergencies*, London: Zed Books Ltd.

<sup>3</sup> It was initialled by the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Croatia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The Agreement was witnessed by representatives of the Contact Group nations: the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and Russia and the European Union Special Negotiator. Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia and Yugoslavia agreed not to import arms for 90 days and not to import any heavy weapons, heavy weapons ammunition, mines, military aircraft, and helicopters for 180 days or until an arms control agreement took effect. From starvation before this time, the region has 22% obesity, according to the CIA World Factbook.

have clear title to their own land, and have to survive as farm labourers. Financial aid to poor countries have had little long term effect and between 1995 and 2005, over \$500 million (US) has been sent to African nations in the form of direct aid but this aid has had little long-term effect. Most of this financial aid has been spent on arms and some of it dissipated by government corruption. Today, more than 19 million people across West Africa are in urgent need of food aid.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/emergencies/current/west-africa-food-crisis/index.aspx?gclid=CLmm4Jmn8rACFc8KtAodpWc77g>.