

Another Famine in the Horn of Africa: Putting Hunger in Context

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

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By 2002, five years after the World Food Summit, the [FAO reported](#) that it was not possible to meet the objective of halving the numbers of the world hungry and eliminate its more extreme manifestations in starvations and famines by 2015. In 2002, basic food prices had fallen to two-thirds the level at which they were five years earlier. That was a time when food was cheap.

In 2002, declining basic food production per capita and a higher frequency of production shortfalls in poorer food-importing countries represented the hollow reasons as to why the human-right to food was not going to be met. Accompanying the quantitative trend, rising basic food imports per capita added to an already asphyxiating Least Developing Countries debt burden. Responding to this, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO contemplated setting up a financial institution that would lend to poorer countries at concessional interest rates so that they could offset hunger or, its extreme manifestation in famine, with adequate food imports.

Whilst the subsidised agriculture of the more developed economies was being protected from the intrusion of cheaper food from the South by a so-called [WTO peace clause](#) (see note below), the alleged 'magic' of the market in the poorer economies, whose peasantry was being dislocated by a combination of cheap subsidised food from the North, neoliberal policies and unsightly forms of [primitive accumulation](#), was supposed to optimally deploy the newly freed labour from the farms into more productive activities springing from freer trade and capital accounts. Neither did the concessional lending bank materialise nor the 'magic' of the market deliver the goods. Donors were willing to pitch only four billion dollars into the concessional fund, when a minimum of sixteen billion was required, and the assumptions of textbook economics used to embellish the 'magic' of the market stood the test of formal reasoning but not that of historical facts.

[Today, food remains abundant but the price of basic foods, which were driven up by speculation, is more than twice what it used to be in 2002.](#) The hunger problem is, at least, two times bigger as well. Notwithstanding that the imperfections are the real and the market is a concocted ideal, the explanations for the persistence of hunger remain centred around the misallocation of food resources by imperfect markets. But the very concept of 'misallocation' sheds a semblance of haphazardness and innocence on the matter. The persistence of policy emitting hunger and famine, however, is anything but that. It is a purposeful and recurring activity, which, in an increasingly interdependent and integrated world, drags down the political standing of labour everywhere, strips peoples of their will and of their resources, and contributes to engaging coercively non-monetised or forcibly cheapened assets in the formation of value necessary for maintaining profit rates. In the

organic like totality, which is capital, these are not simply the pitifully small agro-business profit rates, but the global profit rates. This is the social process by which the booty of empire interlocks with the wealth of the modern Western formations to uphold the riches of global elites.

When stripped bare from falsehood, prices and the sums of profits they amount to, are brokered by a structure of power from which the poorest peoples of the world have been discarded. A hungry, dispossessed and disempowered working population cannot negotiate the condition of its survival. Food security for working people in the poorest countries has to be denied so that their national security and sovereignty are later laid open for imperial plunder. The terms of power, which underlay the terms of trade and the grabbing of resources for maintaining the rate of global accumulation are reproduced by all forms of belligerence and aggression, including, wars and the policies of starvation. Notwithstanding the enforced public-to-private transfers under neo-liberalism, wars inflicted upon the poorer countries act as the ultimate instrument of encroachment by which resources and labour are forcibly engaged in the formation of value under [capitalist accumulation](#). Global food allocation policy, which deliberately generates hunger and famine, acts as an additional instrument of imperial control.

Seen from a perspective that makes the social category an antecedent to the formation of economic phenomenon, by making the poorer countries more food and nationally insecure, immensely more profits are accrued by the amalgam of capital than the pittance spent on subsidies to northern farmers or the small share of profits that goes to agribusiness. That is exactly why despite the fact that the share of agricultural trade is so small relative to global trade, the issue of agriculture always represented the biggest hurdle to WTO negotiations. By tearing apart old ways of maintaining a living, inflating the ranks of the unemployed and driving people into abjection, the global trading system bolsters, partly by the demonstration effect and, equally, by the images of starving children in the third world, the ideology of racist-laced nationalisms, which remain to date necessary corollaries of capitalist dynamics. [Famines and hunger are necessary ideological tools for capital and an advertisement for imperialism](#).

There are also additional security-related reasons as to why the hunger and famine policy gets repeatedly actualised. When all the diplomatic, political and financial means of suppression fail, an embargo on a developing nation can prove as lethal as a nuclear weapon playing out in slow motion. [Iraq was a case in point](#). The sanctions regime amounted to a weapon that has hewn an immense number of lives over a decade and prepared the ground for all out re-colonisation of the oil rich country. [The counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere in the Arab world invoked the possibility of food shortages to deter people from participating in the demonstrations](#).

The kernel of the hunger and famine debacle lies not in the quantitative scenarios, but in the way third world resources, which are engaged in the formation of value, are cheapened to maintain the profit rate. Famines reduce the foremost commodity that lies behind the formation of value and profits, which is labour power or, the ability to labour, to something dispensable, and with it of course, human life. Thus, whilst some on the left argue that the differences in wages across the globe are related to degrees of productivity or relative surplus value, they forget that there is a criminally wasted human life in what is being produced. The formation of value is an integrated historical process, in which, all moments participate in the realisation of the commodity, and not a statistical exercise accounting for

distorted power-brokered prices. The politics of hunger, famines, and imperialist aggression come to mediate the growing rift between private gain and the redistribution of value to a complex global production structure, which, in the age of financialisation, draws its signal from a fetish incarnate in the price system. The more acute the contradictions, the more developing nations would have to be stripped of their food and national securities before they get deprived of their will and national resources.

[Commissioning the Bank, the Fund and their subordinate international organisations](#), which are governed principally by the US and its cohort, with eliminating hunger and famine is an inapposite measure. Hunger and famines are situated on the encroachment side of the [accumulation process](#), as distinct from expansion by commodity realisation in the market and, therefore, improving conditions through a reform process is not at all a possibility. In an increasingly interdependent globe, hunger, famine and the shows of misery associated therewith raise profits and drag down the power of labour everywhere.

The scene of famine is so poignant as an ideological tool, that it contributes to lowering the starting point for negotiation between capital and labour across the globe. However, in as much as the scenes of the hungry invoke empathy, in the absence of an alternative internationalist *cum* humanist ideological hold on working peoples' consciousness, they also provoke insecurity and many revert to narrower versions of nationalisms, further differentiating themselves from others. In a state of humanist defeatism or the estrangement of people from their own humanity and the scaremongering associated with alleged food scarcity, the initial state of solidarity with the skeletally starved transmutes into its opposite, deepening the divisions between working people along national and other lines and depressing the global wage by one degree or another.

It is this subtle ideological aspect of the hunger and famine issue which reinforces the ideology of capital, and which paves the ground for the continuation of what only appears on the surface to be an irrational food allocation policy but which is, at a more profound level, a calculus of mass crime. Like the reproduction of social conditions under capital to which hunger contributes, hungers and famines also buttress the ideology of capital, which has to be continuously reproduced and is never separate from the way expropriation occurs on a global scale.

That is all the more reason why, despite the abundance of food, under no circumstances shall the relief of famine amount to more than a charity fanfare by the rich classes for the rich classes. [The TV look of self-righteousness, 'politically-correct' compassion and aid lullabies serve capital more than they relieve the poor](#). The degree to which immiserisation will proceed and be manifest will be commensurate to the real and ideological crisis of capital and, by conjunction, to how close we are to the next famine or imperialist war.

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