

## Book Review

Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Famines are caused by a sudden decline in the availability of food, usually caused by crop failure from drought, flood, or some other natural disaster. Food may be available in neighboring regions, of course, but local transportation systems are often inadequate for shipping food where it is most needed. Famines and world starvation generally can be prevented by increasing world food supply to meet population growth and by improving transportation in the Third World.

This prevalent view of famines is carefully and thoughtfully dismantled by Amartya Sen in a book that deserves wide attention by those responsible for international hunger and for international hunger relief. Sen defends an extraordinarily sensible alternative view of famine and starvation, applies it to four devastating famines of recent decades, and provides material with which policymakers can draw some sobering conclusions.

"Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there not *being* enough food to eat." With this seemingly obvious but widely overlooked distinction, Sen begins his challenge to the Food Availability Decline view of the causes of famine. Famines cannot be explained by a sudden food crisis, for famines have occurred in times of plentiful harvests and booming economic growth. Instead, famines must be explained by examining the *relationship* of people to food.

Sen calls his alternative explanation of famines "the entitlement approach." Poverty, starvation, and famine take place within the economic and legal arrangements structuring different societies, and individuals' entitlements under these arrangements determine their access to what food is available. ("Entitlements," in Sen's usage, are strictly legal—they are not invested with any normative force, and the social and political institutions that generate them are open to moral criticism.) Typically, in market societies, individuals are entitled to their own labor and what they can produce with it or trade it for; they are also entitled to whatever transfers of wealth the state provides in its social welfare programs. A person's ability to feed himself depends both on what he owns—his current bundle of entitlements—and on what he can obtain by exchanging this entitlement bundle for other collections of goods. A person starves if his entitlement bundle is not sufficient to allow him to command food.

Thus a person may starve for reasons other than a general decline in food supply. There may be a sudden rise in food prices, so that his wage earnings are insuffi-

cient to purchase food. Or some economic change may affect his employment possibilities, leaving him without purchasing power. Land-owners, sharecroppers, and wage laborers may be differently affected in times of famine according to their different relations to the modes of production in their society. For famine, on Sen's view, is not merely a crisis of food supply; it is an economic disaster as well.

Sen applies his analysis to four famines: the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, the Ethiopian famine of 1972-74, the drought and famine in the African Sahel in the early 1970s, and the 1974 famine in Bangladesh. For each case he shows the Food Availability Decline hypothesis to be incorrect or, at best, non-explanatory.

Sen's analysis reveals, for example, that crop availability was far from disastrous in Bengal in 1943. In a year of adequate rice harvests, millions starved because an inflationary war economy drastically drove up the price of rice without correspondingly spurring agricultural wages. Sharecroppers did not starve, but wage laborers did—because their wages could no longer purchase them food. Likewise, laborers starved in the Bangladesh famine, not because floods ruined the rice crop, but because floods devastated employment opportunities during the peak cultivation season. In the Ethiopian famine, drought in the Wollo province did crucially reduce food supply, but, still more importantly, it reduced that province's ability to draw in food from the rest of Ethiopia.

Sen's account has at least two important implications for policy. First, narrow concern with food availability has led to tragic mishandling of famines: Sen notes that the Bengal famine initially failed even to be recognized because of the government's focus on aggregate food availability statistics. Perhaps a clearer understanding of the mechanisms of famine can avoid such future tragedies.

Even more importantly, Sen's account undermines the belief that famines are natural disasters that no one can do very much about. By analyzing famines as economic disasters, he shows that they can be prevented or alleviated by changing the pattern of legal and economic entitlements that cause them to occur. "Droughts may not be avoidable, but their effects may be." Sen points out briefly but provocatively that the rich developed countries have avoided famines not because of their high aggregate or average wealth, but because established social welfare arrangements keep people from falling below the minimum in times of economic hardship. "With the proportion of unemployment as high as it is, say, in Britain or America today, but for the social security arrangements, there would be widespread starvation and possibly famine." It is legal and economic institutions that determine whether or not a drought or flood will cause millions to starve. "The law stands between food availability and food entitlement." It is the law that must be changed if poverty, starvation, and famine are ever to be eliminated.

—Claudia Mills