

The Malawi 2002 Famine – Destitution, Democracy and Donors

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ABSTRACT

The validity of two famine theories at the political level is assessed using the Malawi 2002 famine: (i) Amartya Sen's thesis of a positive impact of democracy on famine protection and (ii) De Waal's thesis stressing the importance of anti-famine contracts. Both theses fall short of explaining the Malawi 2002 famine, as it occurred despite the existence of pluralistic institutions, a free press, and strong government attention to issues of food security. Rather, the famine appears to be caused by deteriorating donor relations just as the weak Malawi government was particularly dependent on international humanitarian aid.

Keywords: Malawi, famine, democracy, donors

INTRODUCTION

Whereas production- and market-failures used to constitute the heart of famine analysis, modern famine analysis has now moved focus to failures at the political level. The reason is that contemporary famines are inherently political because they are almost always preventable, and it thus follows that the subject of interest should not be the socio-economic shocks themselves but the failure to respond to these shocks (Devereux 2007). Accordingly, scholars increasingly turn to the political level to explain famine causation. Two such theories of famine causation at the political level have received special prominence in the famine debate: Amartya Sen's democracy thesis emphasizing the importance of a pluralistic political system for famine protection and De Waal's thesis highlighting the importance of 'anti-famine contracts' between the government and its citizens.

By taking off-set in the 2002 Malawi famine, the validity of these two propositions are assessed in this article. I conclude that evidence from the Malawi famine does not render much support for these theories. The famine unfolded in what can only be described as an electoral democracy with key liberal rights. In addition, the evidence indicates that food security featured high on the political agenda. Rather, the analysis indicates that a weak government highly dependent on international donor relations can account for the failure to respond.

This article will first briefly outline the two political famine theories. These will then subsequently be assessed in the light of the Malawi famine. The assessment will look into the extent to which Malawi could be said to constitute a democracy with a free press as well as an anti-famine contract. The article will end by pointing to an explanation for the occurrence of famine that is only indirectly related to democracy and anti-famine contracts, namely the dependence on and the characteristic of donor relations.

1. PRESENTATION OF SEN'S AND DE WAAL'S FAMINE THESES

1.1 SEN'S DEMOCRACY THESIS

While there is no talk at all about democracy and the free press in Amartya Sen's influential book on famine, *Poverty and Famine* from 1981, there is much emphasis on this aspect in his later works (Sen 1982, 1990, 1999, 2003, 2005; Drèze/Sen 1989). One year after the publication of the *Poverty and Famine* monograph, Sen addressed the question of democracy in a now famous lecture, the Coromandel 1982 lecture, where he argued (and has continued to do so ever since) that democracy appears to provide effective protection from famine. In a democracy, the government is faced with opposition parties and regular elections. An elected government is therefore forced to respond to the demands of the people because voters have the power to replace the government after the next election. What triggers government responsiveness is not linked to the benevolence of a democratic regime vis-à-vis an authoritarian regime, but to the fact that governments – in a fight for survival (re-election) – will do much to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe. This implies that a major cause of famine would be the lack of such democratic institutions. The free press is important as a mediator of information ensuring that a famine cannot be hidden from the larger public. In a democracy, the free press thus plays two important roles in famine protection: one as a mediator of information and the other as a watchdog ensuring government accountability.

Sen's causal thesis was inspired by India's success in combating major famines after the formation of a pluralistic political system following independence in 1947. In one of his most recent books, *the Argumentative Indian* (2005), Sen refers to the fact that famines 'disappeared abruptly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy in India. In contrast, China had the largest famine in recorded history in 1958-61, when nearly 30 million people, it is estimated, died' (Sen 2005:188). He then reemphasizes his own 'prominent observation that major famines do not occur in democracies, even when they are very poor' (ibid). Hence, the democracy thesis has been advanced in its current form for almost a quarter century.

1.2 DE WAAL'S ANTI-FAMINE CONTRACT

De Waal argues that more than just democracy is required to prevent famine; rather a political 'anti-famine contract' consisting of a particular set of mechanisms, processes and pressures is necessary. De Waal (1997:11) defines the political contract as 'the result of a popular movement successfully articulating a new right, and forcing a reluctant government to comply with its claims.' Devereux has also been inspired by the 'anti-famine contract'-discourse, and concludes his paper on famine in the twentieth century by arguing that 'if famine is to be eradicated completely, an 'anti-famine contract' must be established at the global level, and it must be enforced, if necessary by 'duty-bearers' from beyond the national state' (Devereux 2000:29).

The added value of the contract theory, in my view, is its emphasis on the need for the issue of famine to be sustained politically even when there is no famine. Famine needs to be politicized - not just in times of distress but to constantly be in play in the political arena (perhaps in combination with other issues). The extent to which famines are politicized depends in large on the historical context but one institutional condition needs to be satisfied: a famine contract can only exist in democracies. The reason is that a contract requires two parties (in this case the state and the citizens) as well as the means to keep those in charge of the contract accountable (in this case through elections). As De Waal argues: 'In conclusion, there can be anti-famine *commitments* and anti-famine *programmes* in the absence of democratic accountability, but an anti-famine *contract* requires the interested party – the people – to have some capacity to enforce the bargain' (De Waal 2000: 8). Yet it does not follow that a political system allowing freedom of information and of association is enough to ensure protection from famine (De Waal 1997:19).

The question that will be explored further is how well these two theories fare in explaining the Malawi 2002 famine.

2. ASSESSING SEN'S AND DE WAAL'S FAMINE THEORIES

2.1 THE FAMINE IN MALAWI

In February and March 2001, floods in central and southern Malawi cut maize production by around 30%. This production shock generated the large food deficit that triggered the famine in 2002 (Kerr 2005:54, Devereux 2000, 2007). Maize is the most important staple food, covering more than 60% of Malawian daily calorie intake; other staple foods such as potatoes and cassava contribute with around 10-15% of the calorie intake combined (FAO 2007). Following the production drop, a report by Save the Children (Kamowa 2002) reported of price increases of staple foods (maize increased 340% almost overnight) and livestock

price drops; premature harvesting by households who also resorted to selling their livestock; consumption of whatever food is available (boiled green bananas, adding sawdust to flour and wild roots); and migration (leaving families behind) to larger farms within Malawi or to Zambia in order to seek temporary work in the agricultural sector. The HIV/AIDS pandemic (at least 15% of Malawi's adults have contracted HIV) further exacerbated the situation. Legal and social systems also seem to have collapsed. To protect their crops many people resorted to sleeping in their field armed with knives and arrows. Individuals suspected of stealing food had hands and ears chopped off, were burned alive with kerosene or were chopped to death in the corn fields (Boston Globe 2002/04/28).

Devereux suggests that a mortality of between 1,000 and 3,000 might be an accurate estimate of famine excess deaths (Devereux 2002:18), although he promotes a more conservative estimate of an excess mortality of 300-500 in a co-authored article with Howe (Howe and Devereux 2004).

Two health assessments produced jointly by different UN-agencies (WHO, UNICEF etc.) from the peak of the famine point to even higher mortality rates. The first survey based on 1,016 households (5,055 people) in ten of the most affected districts (estimated population of 5.6 mil.) found a CMR of 1.9/10,000/day in the six month period October 2001 to March 2002 (WHO 2002a), which clearly exceeds the disaster benchmark of 1/10,000/day applied by most international organizations such as the WHO, the WFP and the MSF. The survey is not representative of the situation at large because it was purposely sampled to represent the worst communities in the worst districts. Nevertheless, just for the sampled population, the mortality rate would result in around 173 deaths during the period. With a background mortality rate of 0.6/10,000/day (WDI data 2007) this would be equivalent to an excess mortality of 118. In a follow-up survey covering the period March-September 2002, the CMR was found to remain at 1.96/10,000/day and the child CMR was reported to be 3.9/10,000/day (WHO 2002b). Of the ten districts surveyed, eight emerged with CMR that surpassed 1/10,000/day. In total, the two surveys cover a whole year from October 2001 to September 2002, and their combined mortality rates generate an excess mortality of more than 250 people just for the sampled population of a little more than five thousand people.

In a recent 2007 article, Devereux and Tiba promote crude mortality estimates derived by extrapolating their own surveys to the national level. 59 hunger-related deaths were reported in one survey from a representative sample of 1,203 households; in another survey 122 hunger-related deaths were reported among a population of 19,752 people across 43 villages; and in a qualitative study, key informants enumerated 255 hunger-related deaths across 111 villages (Devereux & Tiba 2007:145). Scaling up these estimates produces a hunger-related mortality in Malawi ranging from 46,000-85,000. While this estimate does not express *excess* mortality it is further evidence of a substantial famine far exceeding the hitherto estimated excess mortality of a few hundred. In sum, both the quantitative and qualitative evidence overwhelmingly point to

categorizing the food crisis as a famine with an excess mortality in the thousands. What is interesting is the fact that this Malawi famine appeared to take place within a pluralist political system.

2.2 THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN MALAWI

Together with much of the rest of Africa at the beginning of the 1990s, Malawi legalized opposition parties and held competitive, multiparty elections. Diamond (2000) dubs this Sub-Saharan democratization the second wave of liberation. The first multiparty election was held in 1994 and the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Bakili Muluzi defeated the Malawi Congress Party under Malawi's long term autocratic leader Hastings Banda to form an absolute majority in parliament.

In 1995 a new constitution took effect dictating that the Malawian president, who is both chief of state and head of the government, shall be chosen through elections every five years. These elections are to be based on universal and equal suffrage held in accordance with this constitution in a manner prescribed by an Act of Parliament (Malawi Constitution para. 6). All legislative powers are vested in the parliament with the National Assembly's 193 seats up for grabs every five years (the constitution also calls for the establishment of a Senate, but that has never got off the ground in practice). The constitution provides for an independent judiciary and an ombudsman; it lists a range of liberal rights and freedoms; it commits the government to introduce measures which will guarantee accountability, transparency, personal integrity and financial probity in public institutions, which led to establishment Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in 1998; and it establishes an Electoral Commission to prepare and overlook the multiparty elections. Thus, the constitution is very much in accordance with the basic premises for a liberal democracy. A crucial question is the extent to which the constitutional paragraphs were applied in praxis.

The elections in 1999 are particularly interesting as they (together with the local elections 2000) preceded the famine of 2002. With an – by almost all election standards – astonishing participation rate of 94%, Dr. Muluzi (UDF) was re-elected with a majority of the votes (52%) over the Malawi Congress Party (45%). As the figures indicate, there was little room for other parties despite the existence of several opposition parties. The electoral process itself seems to have been carried out within the tradition of a functioning liberal democracy. In compliance with Malawi's electoral law, five international observers were invited to witness the 1999-elections. As was to be expected, the observers pointed to many problems and weaknesses in the electoral process, but almost all were related to a lack of experience and resources rather than a conscious tinkering with the results. Although few counting centres had electricity and some polling stations ran out of ballot papers, 'there was no evidence nor even allegations of multiple voting, impersonation, intimidation,

harassment or violence' (International Observers' Report 1999: 15). This made the international observers conclude that 'the conditions existed for a free expression of the will of the people of Malawi and that the results of the elections reflect their wishes' (International Observers' Report 1999: 16). Consequently, the five independent international observers concluded that the elections were substantially free and fair and acceptable.

Nevertheless, the results of the June 1999 presidential election went to the courts. Three presidential contenders sued the electoral commission, contending that Bakili Muluzi failed to win votes from more than half of the eligible electorate. In the end, the Malawi Supreme Court upheld the results of the election. Contesting election results in the wake of a borderline outcome does not constitute undemocratic behaviour; on the contrary, the contenders followed the channels laid down in the constitution and due process seems to have been followed. In his detailed account of the judiciary system in Malawi, Ng'ong'ola concludes by stating that empirical evidence could not support the allegations of bias, manipulation or fabrication of the law to suit political preferences (Englund 2002: 85). A more serious democratic threat is the personalization of the 1999 election. Both Immink et al. (2005) and Chirwa et al. (2003) note that the two major parties were built up around strong leaders who came to personalize the party at the expense of clear ideological directions. Rather than voting on issues, the Malawi election in 1999 had a strong focus on persona. Chinsinga (2003: 3) notes with respect to the political situation in 2002 that 'all the major parties are, at least in some way, beset by perennial leadership problems, destructive power struggles, unorthodox voting practices, and domination by a single leader.'

2.3 MALAWIAN DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

There has also been much interest in surveying the political culture of the Malawian citizens around the 1999 election. Erdmann et al. (2004:6) argues that one of the most important ingredients of fully functioning democracy is a public 'that is informed and who has the feeling that it can influence the political process and decisions through particular channels of accepted behaviour.' Summarizing the many interesting statistics of the surveys leaves an impression of a fairly robust democratic culture in Malawi. The public awareness of democracy is higher in Malawi (88%) than in any of the other countries surveyed: Botswana, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi 2004). Erdmann et al. (2004) document a keen interest in politics (around 70% of the respondent are reported to be interested in politics) as well as an increase in political knowledge from before the election to after. Nearly 60% believe that their community exerts an influence on political representatives and more than two-thirds believe that they as voters can improve the future by choosing the right leaders (Erdmann et al. 2004:10). Interestingly,

the surveys also found that there was not a great divide between urban and rural areas with respect to both political attitude and knowledge. Thus, the democratic culture seems to thrive just as well in more remote rural areas as in urban areas, indicating that democratization is not just an urban phenomenon in Malawi.

There are also less encouraging statistics with regards the level of democratization in Malawi. More than one in five respondents agreed that “in certain situations, a non-democratic government can be preferable”, which is not only the highest rate of the countries surveyed but the rate is also nearly double that of the next country in line. In the Central region, Dr. Banda’s homeland and political base, one-third of the respondents provided this answer (Bratton, Mattes & Gyimah-Boadi 2004); this hints at some geographical (and hence ethnic) dispersion in the extent of democratic culture. Another concern is that although only 10.6% of respondents in 2000 said that they had never been informed by radio, the number rose considerably to 42.9% with respect to newspapers. This could be a democratic problem because the only existing nation-wide radio stations in Malawi are controlled by the government. Chirwa et al. (2003) found that the state-owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation has not given fair access or coverage to opposition parties.

2.4 THE MEDIA SITUATION IN MALAWI

Formally speaking, extensive press freedom is ensured in the Malawian constitution. The constitution not only contains articles for freedom of expression and for freedom of the press but also – as one of the few countries in Africa – an article with an explicit provision guaranteeing access to government-held information (Cooney 2001). Moving beyond the letter of the constitution reveals that indeed the Malawian media landscape has become fairly diverse. Newspapers flourished in the period following 1994, and the number of newspapers quickly reached more than 20.

The printed media is characterized by a mix of private and government ownership. The two largest privately owned newspapers are the *Daily Times* and the weekly *Malawi News* published by Blantyre Newspapers, which is owned by the family of Dr. Banda. Two other private newspapers with a much smaller circulation are the *Chronicle* and the *Courier* with connections to the Democratic Progressive Party. Besides the two state owned radio stations, *MBC Radio 1* and *MBC Radio 2*, covering 90 percent of the population, there are many private and communal radio stations with more modest coverage. The state-owned Malawi Television is the only free-to-air broadcaster in the country and has 70 per cent coverage; however, less than one percent of Malawians own a television set.

Despite the formal constitutional guarantees, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (2006:1) notes that no law or act of parliament has yet been passed to make sure that the formal constitutional protections are fully complied with in

practice. On the contrary, a number of laws still exist that restrict the freedom of expression, such as the Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act from 1968 (where a publication can be judged undesirable by a board of censors if the content is found to be indecent, obscene, offensive or harmful to public morals), the Official Secrets Act from 1913 (where in effect any journalist reporting on security issues runs the risk of committing an offence), and the Public Security Regulations from 1965 (where anyone can be prohibited from publishing anything that is likely to undermine the authority of, or public confidence in the government).

Unlike the widespread experience in a democratic culture, the culture of press freedom appears to face more obstacles. Many Malawians are rooted in the beliefs of their ancestors, and according to the Media Institute of Southern Africa (2006:2) this makes them unaware of what the right to freedom really entails. Their adherence to moral correctness out of a fear of contributing to cultural decadence limits press freedom – in particular in the areas of humour and satire. The consequence is the prevalence of self-censorship in much of the media. In 2000, the *Daily News* experienced first hand the consequences of breaking down dogmas: army officers raided their office in response to their article stating that AIDS percentages were higher in the army than in the civilian population (Mutangadura 2007).

With respect to the concrete media situation preceding the famine in 2002, the tensions between the government and the press during the year was not related to hunger but to Muluzi's attempt to amend the constitution thereby allowing for a third presidential term. In late May, Muluzi banned all public demonstrations related to the third-term bill. As the government controlled the two radio stations and the only television channel, this severely restricted the voice of anti-third-term campaigners. According to local journalists, however, pressure from international donors eventually forced the government to allow a greater debate surrounding the issue. Instances of political related violence also took place. UDF supporters abducted a junior reporter from the *Chronicle* and assaulted other *Chronicle* journalists after a critical piece in the newspaper about infighting in the UDF. Several thousand UDF supporters besieged the offices of Blantyre Newspapers and beat up a reporter after critical coverage of the president's attempt to extend the term limit (CPJ 2002).

The overall conclusion reached by the Freedom House (2003) was that freedom of speech and freedom of the press were legally guaranteed in Malawi and generally respected in practice in the year of the famine. The Media Institute of Southern Africa (2006) also supports the conclusion of a comparatively free press in Malawi through their African Media Barometer investigation. A panel of experts rated 11 countries in Southern Africa across four sectors, reflecting media quality. Malawi manages to score consistently higher than average in each of the four sectors and the total score for Malawi is 15 per cent higher than the African Barometer average, which points to the existence of relatively well-established conditions for the media in Malawi compared to the rest of Southern Africa.

2.5 MALAWI'S ANTI-FAMINE CONTRACT

Devereux & Tiba (2007:171) argue that no anti-famine political contract was 'signed' between the Malawian government and its citizen. Although I agree with their broader point about the dangers of democratic transition, I am hesitant to agree that an anti-famine contract did not exist in Malawi. On the contrary, I have found much empirical evidence that appear to support a high degree of politicization of famine.

Despite the multiple reports of corruption and nepotism within the government, little evidence exists indicating that the famine was underplayed or denied by the government. Already in August 2001, the Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation called a meeting with Malawi's donor partners to inform them of the looming food security crisis and request food assistance. In fact, the Ministry of Health working together with Save the Children conducted the first nutritional surveys in December 2001 to get an overview of the situation. By the beginning of February, Malawi's Vice President Malewezi acknowledged that the situation had reached crisis proportions although he emphasized that he did not have the statistics to support it yet. Malewezi then went on recounting eyewitness accounts of babies dying from starvation on their mother's backs while the parents were waiting in queues for hours to purchase a small amount of corn. This could be contrasted with the highly unresponsive Nigerien government during the 2005 Niger famine where the president Mamadou Tandja consistently denied that Niger was experiencing famine because, as he told some BBC reporters, 'the people of Niger look well-fed' (Rubin 2008).

Sahley et al. (2005:17) note how the question of food security in Malawi 'has appeared in the platforms of politicians, on the agendas of policy-makers, in the programs of public bureaucracies, among duties of village chiefs and on the pages of national newspapers.'

Under the 2002 famine, the former deputy agricultural minister expressed the concern that the 2004 general elections were close, and that it would be difficult for the government to convince people to give them their vote if it did not handle the crisis well (BBC NEWS 2002/05/14). The agricultural minister's line of thinking bears witness to a political climate where public opinion pressures the government to action during a famine.

At the beginning of 2001, the government and the World Bank agreed to undertake a Poverty and Social Impact Analysis (Kutengule et al. 2006) of the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC). The analysis underscored the political importance placed on food security issues in general and ADMARC in particular. It revealed that the government and civil society had expressed concerns during negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank about the existence of market failures in remote areas, noting that if these remote markets were closed on the grounds inefficiency, it would be unlikely that they would be replaced by private traders because transportation costs were high relative to the return on maize sales (Kutengule et al. 2006: 422). In

reporting from the negotiations, the government had also expressed concerns about the political implications of closing down ADMARC referring to the fact that public perception of ADMARC's importance in agricultural marketing and food security was supposedly much higher than its actual importance indicated by the available empirical data. There were concerns that closing the markets rapidly would give rise to considerable public resentment and political difficulties. As a result, some members of the government suggested that the decision to close the markets was politically untenable. Thus, the negotiations strongly suggest that the Malawian government was highly attentive to the political implications of food security issues.

A further indication of the attention given to food related issues is found in the policies contained in Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. The Malawian PRSP was published in April 2002 with most of the preparation taking place prior to 2002 famine, and the report constitutes a testament of the importance placed on food security. The government acknowledges (2002:10) that 'food security is a serious threat to better life' and presents a wide set of food security related policies in the PRSP's policy matrix. The government aims to (i) promote good nutrition by improving infant and young children feeding, diversifying and modifying diets, and strengthening institutional capacity (with the establishment of a Food and Nutrition Council); (ii) improve disaster management by providing food and non-food items as basic necessities to disaster victims and designing disaster preparedness and mitigation programmes; (iii) reduce malnutrition of the malnourished under-five children, lactating and pregnant mothers by providing food supplements and therapeutic feeding; and (iv) pursue pro-poor growth by increasing agricultural incomes and ensuring food security.

From a food security perspective it is also worth noting that the Malawi constitution has an explicit paragraph that holds the state responsible for providing enough food to survive. Paragraph 30 section 2 dictates that 'the State shall take all necessary measures for the realization of the right to development. Such measures shall include, amongst other things, equality of opportunity for all in their access to basic resources, education, health services, food, shelter, employment and infrastructure. '

The politicization of food security is also backed by mechanisms of accountability (imperfect as they might be). The ACB, for instance, investigated and brought to justice the perpetrators involved in the Malawian grain reserve scandal that will be described in more detail below. As soon as the scandal surfaced, the President replaced the politically responsible Minister of Agriculture. Malawi's ACB launched a series of investigations that revealed 'serious conflicts of interest in contracting arrangements, possible evidence of personal enrichment, access by officials to National Grain Reserves (NGR) grain through unreimbursed loans, among other irregularities' (Sahley et al. 2005:48). The ACB also more broadly named the National Food Reserve Agency and ADMARC as culprits in mismanagement relating to the procurement and sale of the country's maize stocks.

2.6 SUMMING UP

In sum, the empirical evidence shows that in the year of the famine Malawi could be characterized as a liberal democracy - albeit a poor democracy in monetary terms. Most democratic problems were related to a lack of resources rather than manipulation, coercion and violence. The electoral process was fair, citizens were enjoying the basic civil liberties and the political culture in Malawi seemed to thrive comparably well relative to other countries in the region. This also holds true with respect to media freedom which enjoyed a high degree of constitutional protection, and the press has been given room to diversify by a government that in general has kept an arm's length. There is no indication of censorship (direct or indirect) related to the famine reporting in 2002. State ownership of much of the popular media is a cause for concern, however. As is the existence populist and personalized parties without a clear ideological direction. The UDF, for instance, did not hold a single convention up to the 1999 election (Chinsinga 2003: 5). A lack of institutional capacity and parliamentary pressure might also hinder the judiciary branch to provide high-quality control of the executive power (Khembo 2004).

Scholars do not appear to regard these problems serious enough to disqualify Malawi as a democracy. Most conclude that Malawi is indeed a liberal democracy – and one of the few democratic successes in Africa (Wiseman 1995, van de Walle 2001; Devereux 2002, Devereux & Tiba 2007). Diamond argues that the rare combination of civil society coalitions and external pressure has indeed succeeded in generating a transition to democracy in Benin, Mali and Malawi (Diamond 2000: 6).

Famine and food security issues also appear to have been highly politicized. Many factors point towards a strong state commitment to the prevention of famine: (i) the rhetoric used by high-level officials and the timely acknowledgement of the famine by the administration; (ii) the government's attention to the political implication of the ADMARC negotiations; (iii) the constitutional anchoring of food security; (iv) and the concrete food security policies outlined in the PRSP. The problem is rather that the Malawian state was weak with limited authority over famine interventions. In the following, I will focus on an alternative explanation to the lack of famine protection despite democratic institutions and an anti-famine contract.

3. TWO ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL EXPLANATIONS

3.1 STRAIGHTJACKET MALAWI GOVERNMENT

Malawi is a poor and highly indebted developing country with both a population and a government short on cash: 65% of the population survives on less than a dollar a day and more than 40% of Malawi's budget (83% of Malawi's

development budget) is dependent on international aid. This has two implications. The first is that a large proportion of the population will have no other option than to rely on public transfers during a crisis situation, and the second is that the government too will have to turn to external funding to provide the needed public transfers. In such a context, donors have substantial influence over policy decisions – especially policy decisions in the field of poverty alleviation and food security. Thus, mistakes on the donor side could have direct negative impacts on the ground irrespectively of whether or not the government was proactive and responsive. Two donor decisions seemed in particular to have undermined the link between a pluralistic political system and effective famine protection: the advice to reduce Malawi's grain reserves and an underestimation of the scale and type of food security problem.

One of the most frequently cited reasons for the Malawian famine was the depletion of the country's grain reserves. Key international donor agencies (World Bank, IMF and EU) urged the government to sell some of the national grain reserves to repay the debt (of around 13 million USD) held by Malawi's National Food Reserve Agency. What is more, the storing of excessive grain was expensive and much of the maize – bought in 1999 – was beginning to turn old and needed to be replenished. The donor agencies proposed reducing the grain reserves from 175,000 tons of maize in July 2001 to around 60,000 tons of maize, which was estimated to be sufficient to feed the population for two months in case of a short-term emergency. The maize was to be exported so as to not distort the local market and create perverse producer incentives. A small amount (35,000 tons) was exported but most seems to have been sold domestically through some dubious transactions. In addition, no grain was replenished during the bumper harvest of 2000, so by the summer of 2001 the Malawian grain reserves were completely depleted.

Add to that the process of privatization of both the ADMARC and the NGR. Sahley et al. (2005:14) cite that Malawi has been subject to more than 20 structural adjustment programs and eight structural loan arrangements with the World Bank and IMF respectively. The programs emphasized export-led agricultural growth (mainly in tobacco, tea and sugar production) combined with policies of deregulation and fertilizer schemes. In addition the government removed ADMARC's monopoly on maize (and other agricultural produce) trading in 1987 and allowed the liberalization of agricultural marketing to private traders as recommended by the World Bank and the IMF. Notwithstanding the positive benefits of such liberalization, every liberalization process produces winners as well as losers. The losers were people living in remote rural areas where private markets were less developed and alternatives to ADMARC less likely to exist (Kutengule et al. 2006). Those remote areas, characterized by high dependence on ADMARC institutions, were particularly vulnerable in the wake of ADMARC's retraction.

By claiming that inflexible Malawian eating habits perpetuated the food crisis in 2002, the donors not only seemed to underestimate the seriousness of the food crisis but in effect they blamed the most vulnerable parts of the

population for the famine. As late as January 2002, The USAID Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET 2002) argued that although Malawi had an overall food surplus in 2001/2002, the shortfall in maize might be significant due to Malawians preference to consume maize as their main staple. Both the prediction of a food surplus and the inference about the Malawians inflexible eating habits proved to be mistaken: the food surplus turned into a food deficit and the Malawian 'inflexible' eating habits soon proved to encompass cassava, potatoes, sugar canes, sawdust, leaves, pig food and lily tubers. Decades of government promotion of maize production have certainly had an impact on both production and consumption patters; yet, in times of distress the Malawian people displayed willingness to consume a wide range of alternative foods. The severity of the food situation was underestimated by many donors due to problems with approximating the availability of alternative staple crop substitutes in particular cassava and sweet potatoes that were hugely overestimated.

The failure to respond to the crisis in time was not only due to technical estimation problems but also due to a politicizing of data reporting. Devereux & Tiba point to the fact (2007:152) that President Banda, supported by USAID, had pursued a policy of crop-diversification from the mid 1990s away from a reliance on maize towards other substitute crops (most noticeably cassava). This created a shared incentive from both the government and the donor side to see rapid increases in cassava production. Accordingly, the Ministry of Agriculture reported overly optimistic cassava production figures, which FEWS NET uncritically embraced despite ample empirical evidence refuting these over-estimates (Devereux & Tiba 2007:157). The prices for cassava, for instance, closely tracked the escalation of maize prices during the crisis period – an indication of similar shortages for both staples. An additional factor responsible for a belated response was the donor's concern with government mismanagement of their grants and loans. As will be discussed below, mistrust was pervasive, and donors were preoccupied with finding out what had happened to the strategic grain reserve that seemed to have evaporated before they were ready to release more aid. Apparently, the USAID even followed a policy dictating that if the recipient government had exported food, then the U.S. has prohibitions on bringing emergency food in the same year (Devereux 2002: 15).

3.2 STRAINED EXTERNAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

Government corruption seems to have played a very direct role in perpetuating the Malawian food crisis into a famine. Politically connected persons allegedly sold some 168,000 tons of corn from the Strategic Grain Reserve for huge profits during the food crisis (Boston Globe). According to Devereux (2002:11), the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace released a list of names that

contained a number of prominent people who benefited from purchasing maize cheaply from the reserve and selling it after the price hike. Although many prominent persons have subsequently been prosecuted, their actions withdrew food from the market, drove prices up further and created an artificial shortfall in the short term.

Such irregularities within the Malawi government together with its limited capacity had a negative impact on relations between the government and donors. In a country highly dependent on foreign exchange inflows and budgetary support, strained relationships characterized by mistrust and disrespect could be critical in an emergency situation. Kydd, Dorward & Vaughan (2002:3) argue that this 'was a major factor in delayed recognition of and response to emerging evidence of a famine crisis.' The IMF withheld 47 million USD that had been promised to the Malawian government due to government overspending. By the end of 2001, the EU not only suspended 13 million USD in aid but it also reclaimed seven million USD that had been given to Malawi due to what the EU delegation tactfully termed as 'anomalies' while carrying out an audit; the US also diverted six million USD that was meant for Malawi to another country; and Denmark suspended 87 million USD earmarked aid over a four year period citing a weak administration and a misuse of donor money. The government was well aware of the potential disastrous consequences of this withholding of funds and lack of foreign currency. Having known of the problems with withheld donor aid at least since September 2001 (according to a leaked presidential memo), Malawi's Finance Minister recommended in November that the cabinet should be informed on the development to discuss other ways of raising the needed money to import sufficient maize to avert the food crisis (BBC NEWS 2001/11/19).

Contrasting the 2001/02 situation with a quite similar situation in 1991/92 further underlines the important role played by the international donors. In 1991/92 the situation in Malawi looked bleak. A harvest failure resulted in a drop in maize production of around 60% from the previous year. In fact, the production was merely 40% of the production in the famine years of 2001/02. Yet, no famine occurred under the Banda regime in 1992 while a smaller production shock some ten years later led directly to famine. Why was a famine allowed to evolve in the relative democratic Malawi 2002 when it was prevented back in 1992 under a regime with much fewer pluralistic traits?

The depletion of grain reserves (both due to bad international donor advice and government corruption) surely played a contributing factor to the 2001/02 famine, but interestingly the famine in 1991/92 was averted despite insufficient grain reserves after a poor harvest year in 1990 (Stevens, Devereux & Kennan 2002). The main difference in outcome between 1992 and 2002, then, should not be found in the 2002 depletion of grain reserves. Instead, aggregate statistics reveals that imports and donor food aid reached much higher levels in 1992. FAO (FAO database 2007) statistics estimates maize imports of 347,000 tons in 1992 compared to 10,000 tons in 2002 and cereal food aid of 234,000 tons in 1992 compared to 48,000 tons in 2002. In 1992 the western donors were quick

to ship 400,000 tons of food aid of to Malawi, and although some of it did not arrive until 1993 (where the cereal food aid was a staggering 561,000 tons), Malawi still had almost five time as much food aid at their disposal in the peak year of the 1992 crisis compared to 2002. Therefore, while the government was also heavy reliant on external donors in 1992, and while the grain reserves were also depleted in 1992 (albeit not due to corruption), the donor response was more timely and massive and timely than in 2002.

4. CONCLUSION

The situation in Malawi during 2002 seems to be a case in point for the Malawian saying:

Sungadye demokalase, which loosely translated means that you cannot eat democracy. Democratic institutions, a free media and a strong political interest in food security were not enough to prevent the 2002 famine. The famine was the result of a straightjacketed government that was plagued by corruption and poor donor relations. The government's dependence on international donors, not directly accountable to the Malawian citizens, hampered any positive democratic effects on famine protection and undermined the government's capacity to enforce anti-famine contracts. The strained relationship between international donors and the Malawi government led to famine responses that were belated and inadequate.

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