Decolonizing Humanitarianism

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Alex de Waal

Between the Treasury and the Foreign, Common and Development Office in London stands a statue of Robert Clive. Few visitors to the historic crucible of imperialism pause to consider whether a conquistador and perpetrator of mass starvation deserves to be celebrated on that spot, or at all. There's no 'Clive must fall!' campaign demanding reparations, material or symbolic, for his famine crimes.

Across the Global South, and among the BRICS club of nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), it's well known that famines are historically associated with totalitarianism—in both its imperial and domestic versions—and war crimes.

In his 1946 book, *The Geopolitics of Hunger*, the great Brazilian nutritionist and political scientist, Josué de Castro, articulated the argument that chronic hunger and vulnerability to famine were the product of colonial capitalism. Half a century later, Amartya Sen made the telling, and broadly correct, observation that famines did not occur in nations that respected freedom of expression and other civil rights. A comprehensive account of famine in the modern era allows us to go further, and make the case that mass starvation is most often politically designed and perpetrated.

India and China were all ravaged by colonial era starvation, inflicted by the explicitly inhumane methods of waging war practiced by Britain and France. The Germans perpetrated genocide by starvation on the Herero and Nama peoples of today's Namibia in 1904, and a British officer wrote a 'Handbook for Small Wars' in which he listed the benefits of using hunger against both the native Africans and the Boers in South Africa. Stalin also used starvation as a weapon in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and elsewhere to impose central control over the peasantry, especially on non-Russian nationals within the Soviet domain—a method replicated in Mao Zedong's China and Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. The Soviet Union itself was the target of the Nazi 'Hungerplan' that proposed exterminating tens of millions of people by

starvation during World War Two. In the post-war ‘High Command’ trial of the German general who enforced the siege of Leningrad, which killed a million civilians through hunger, the American judges acquitted the accused on the charge of using starvation as a weapon, noting (with regret) that such acts were permissible in the laws of war as they stood at that time. It’s unlikely that they would have ruled otherwise, as America had just recently mounted a blockade of the Japanese home islands that it candidly called ‘Operation Starvation.’ As late as the 1960s, a British counterinsurgency plan for Malaya also chose the name ‘Operation Starvation’ while a French handbook for ‘modern war’ in Algeria and Indochina advocated tactics turning places where people supported liberation movements into uninhabitable zones.

In India, Ireland and elsewhere, anti-colonial movements rallied around the issue of hunger. The famine in Bengal in 1943, for which London bore enormous responsibility, was one factor that broke any residual claims to the ostensible benefits of British rule. Such was the political salience of hunger that no independent government in India could turn a deaf ear to warnings of imminent food crisis. This disaster stands in stark comparison with India’s post-1947 record of famine prevention.

Taking power in 1991, Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi disarmed skeptical journalists who asked him about his ambition for his time in power. ‘That Ethiopians should eat three meals a day’, he responded. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva used almost identical words launching his ‘zero hunger’ policy on first being elected to power. At the very first BRIC summit in 2009—before South Africa joined—the leaders issued a joint statement on global food security. Among its themes were effective public food distribution systems and ensuring nutrition for the poorest.

But for three quarters of a century, international humanitarian action has remained the almost-exclusive preserve of western donors. The United States dominates food aid, as it has done since the aftermath of the 1940s Marshal Plan for rebuilding post-war Europe. America’s food for peace also helped farmers on America’s great

plains, buying up surplus wheat and corn with huge subsidies from the federal budget. European policies have been comparable.

The Global South has been justifiably suspicious of donor motives and as countries have developed they have kept the international aid apparatus at arms' length, focusing their cooperation on agricultural development and structural food systems transformation. Türkiye is the only non-G7 country to have a substantial programme for humanitarian relief. Wealthy Arab Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates give ad hoc donations to UN humanitarian agencies, but these are more like occasional gifts from imperious benefactors than reliable contributions to funding the system.

The political economy of emergency aid began in the Cold War, a step-child of an American global food regime that provided cheap staple food to allies to dampen social unrest and underpin industrial development in newly capitalist states. But it was only in the 1990s that the 'humanitarian international' spread its wings, establishing worldwide operations including experimenting with armed interventions to protect United Nations agencies in Somalia and Bosnia, followed after the millennium by a full spectrum of peacekeeping, humanitarian aid provision and protection of civilian operations in every continent. In 2011, spurning voices that advised against overreach, the US, Britain and France used the cover of the UN's 'responsibility to protect' Libyan civilians from risk of massacre at the hands of their own government to enact forcible regime change. As Secretary of State Hilary Clinton remarked, 'we came, we saw, he died.' An African Union diplomatic initiative, backed by Russia, seeking a negotiated settlement, was swept aside.

The Libyan debacle was a turning point. Russia, which had never accepted the humanitarian pretexts for earlier NATO actions in Bosnia and Kosovo, now felt empowered to defy the normative order. Syria was where it drew the line, dispatching military support to the Bashar al-Asad regime, which was in America's gunsights as the next target for tyrannicide. In 2022, Russia challenged the humanitarian criticisms of its blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, pointing out that little of the exports were destined for hungry countries, and that western restrictions on its own fertilizer exports were potentially more damaging to farming systems.

These high-stakes strategic confrontations, framed around human rights and humanitarian principles, masked a deeper problem. Humanitarian aid has been moderately effective at mitigating the human and social cost of actual and threatened famines, but it cannot deal with their political causes.

During the 19th century, the world saw its last major famines caused by natural disasters, the principal cause becoming European imperialism. The order of famine in the 20th century was total war, totalitarianism and the violence of the dying colonial order and its immediate aftermath. Liberal globalization saw all these monsters vanquished. In the thirty years spanning the millennium, the incidence and lethality of famines dropped to levels never before recorded. It looked like a historic achievement. It seemed that cheap food, the green revolution, rising incomes across the developing world, open societies and the end of wars of mass extermination spelled the end of mass starvation, for good.

What lingered were crises caused by complex and protected civil wars in poor countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa, that relief workers called 'complex emergencies'. In all such cases, armed conflict reduced people to penury. Too often, government armies, proxy militia and rebel armed groups used hunger as a weapon. The definition of the war crime of starvation is depriving civilians of 'objects indispensable to their survival', including not just food but medicine, clean water, fuel and shelter. An ancillary element is stealing relief supplies or manipulating aid agencies so that they provision a belligerent's own constituencies and depriving sustenance from their adversaries.

International legal prohibition on starvation was a long time coming. The British and French had to relinquish their empires, and the Americans to abandon Vietnam, before they would agree to articles in the Additional Protocols in the Geneva Conventions to this effect, in 1977. This was also the aftermath of wars of starvation in Biafra and Bangladesh which had outraged the international conscience. But blockade and sanctions were still permitted under international humanitarian law. In 1996, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, asked to comment on a report on that tens of thousands of Iraqi children had perished because of US sanctions, let slip

that she thought it a price worth paying. Nonetheless, the international legal regime outlawing starvation crimes was slowly strengthened.

Key is UN Security Council resolution 2417 on armed conflict and hunger, adopted unanimously in 2018, at a time when liberal multilateralism was already in retreat. Consensus on this emerged partly because of genuine moral revulsion at starvation crimes perpetrated in wars, and partly because the UN's humanitarian agencies commanded sufficient respect across the board, and they faced huge problems operating in conflict zones. Frontline aid givers were constantly faced with moral quandaries over how to respond to the needs of the hungry and homeless without cooperating with—let alone legitimizing—military and political actors reducing their victims to such a condition. No document outlining humanitarian principles is of much value for a humanitarian worker trying to save the lives of children under the guns of men who don't care whether those children die—and indeed might prefer that they do. A higher-level political steer was needed. Guided by the UN's World Food Programme, UNICEF and others, consulting with governments on every continent, the Netherlands took the lead in crafting a Security Council resolution to provide such a high-level framework.

At the insistence of China, Russia and several other members of the Council, the resolution doesn't create any new law; it merely gathers together existing law. But nonetheless it is important. Among other things, resolution 2417 underlines that the use of starvation as a weapon may be a war crime, that those who impede relief efforts may be sanctioned, and that the UN Secretary General should swiftly report to the Council when armed conflict threatens to create widespread food insecurity.

During its time as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, Ireland championed the issue of preventing famine. Irish leaders have a long and honourable history on this issue, drawing on their own country's painful experience of settler colonialism, famine, and the cruelties of English charity that provided only the most parsimonious and humiliating workhouse relief. But Ireland signally failed to rally support from other Security Council members, including African countries. To the contrary, when they raised man-made famine in Tigray region of Ethiopia in 2021

and 2022, Ireland faced not only opposition but the insinuation that talking about hunger in this way was a neo-colonial exercise in interfering in national sovereignty.

Ethiopia was on the Security Council in 2018 and its ambassador voted for the resolution. He was recalled to Addis Ababa shortly afterwards, for acting too independently of the new prime minister, Abiy Ahmed. His successors have regretted that vote. So too, reportedly, have the Chinese and Russian missions to the UN. What's clear is that they would prefer to unravel the laws restraining states from using starvation.

Countries in the Global South remain distant from, or suspicious of, both the 'humanitarian international' and the incipient legal regime. This is deeply problematic.

African countries stood, with arms folded, while the Ethiopian government inflicted a starvation siege on Tigray region, and they have done nothing to respond to the world's largest humanitarian crisis, unfolding in Sudan today. Middle Eastern countries have done little to ameliorate the deepening hunger emergencies in Syria and Yemen. Russia's attacks on Ukraine's agricultural infrastructure and its starvation sieges in cities such as Mariupol have elicited at most muted criticism from the Global South.

Despite occasionally straying into neo-colonial territory, the international relief system has saved lives, developed professional skills and ethical codes of conduct, and its practitioners are sensitive to the charge that their industry is driven by a white saviour complex. Persistently, aid professionals have endeavoured to re-centre their business in the Global South. Host country professionals take many more leadership positions and push for agendas including diversifying donors and localizing control. At the end of the day, these efforts are hampered because the practice of aid-giving is accountable to its donors, not its recipients, and the money comes from the North-West.

The distortion is particularly evident when there's a budget crunch, as there is today. Humanitarian funds are massively squeezed, at a time when costs are going up

(food and transport are more expensive) and needs are expanding. Ten years ago, the UN made annual appeals for emergency aid for 125 million people, and predominantly North-Western donors funded them to the tune of 60-65 percent. In 2023, the appeal was for upwards of 300 million people, and the target was only 30 percent met. This year, the lines all point in the wrong direction: needs up, costs up, funds down. The biggest donors, the US and Europe, choose where to send their money based on political priority not objective need. Ukraine gets most, and others hang on their coat-tails. Whether and how to aid Gaza is deeply contentious.

Israel's war on the Palestinians of Gaza has changed the global game. Rarely if ever before has a belligerent—in this case Israel—reduced a population to starvation with the resolve, speed and consequences that we have seen over the last five months. The population of Gaza before the war faced a precarious food security situation, utterly dependent as it was on Israel's regulation of the supply of essential commodities and services. But child malnutrition rates were low. After a relentless campaign of creating conditions under which human life is impossible (describing the crime against humanity of extermination), along with impeding humanitarian relief, the people of Gaza are facing mass starvation. This lies at the centre of South Africa's charge that Israel is perpetrating genocide.

In March, the Famine Review Committee of the Integrated food security Phase Classification system, a kind of high court of humanitarian crisis assessment, found that most of Gaza's population was either in 'emergency' or 'catastrophe' and that the worst degree of food crisis—famine—would unfold rapidly unless immediate action were taken. The 'famine' designation is an arbitrary threshold, and the Committee made it clear that conditions were already so bad that there was a high risk of children dying from starvation and outbreaks of infectious diseases. A month on, Israel has done nothing that suggests it is serious about preventing famine. Day by day, not only are Gazans dying of hunger and disease, but the social fabric is breaking down.

The forced starvation of Gaza has global political significance. It inescapably shows the double standards of the US and other western powers. North-Western leaders have not only tolerated but endorsed Israel's campaign of starvation.

But rather than using this as an opportunity for tearing down the international humanitarian edifice, it should be the opening for a post-colonial agenda for restoring its foundations in universalism.

South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice is more than a challenge to the North-West, it is the seed of exactly this agenda. Irrespective of the merits of the case—and genocidal intent is remarkably hard to prove—South Africa is showing that international law exists to protect the victims. If Israel continues to defy the court, and its North-Western allies stand beside it in doing so, it reveals their hypocrisy and not that the cause is vain or the principles void.

The same holds for the norm of preventing man-made famine—which means all contemporary famine. The normative regime prohibiting starvation crimes and stigmatizing policies that cause hunger is a cause for the poor and vulnerable, and the victims of historical injustices. That the recent champions and funders of humanitarianism may be in the North-West and may often be morally compromised should merely be a challenge to the Global South to take forward the case.

The current UN-centred humanitarian system is deeply flawed, but it is the only one we have right now. So, it should be propped up by donors from the Global South, even while new, emancipatory modalities for emergency aid are developed.

There's an agenda waiting to be articulated and championed. The return of Lula to Brazil's presidency could put a progressive agenda of eliminating hunger back on the table. South Africa has shown that accountability for starvation crimes can be pursued in international institutions. It shouldn't stop there. Others in the Global South can lead too. Ending the callous recklessness with which populations are reduced to starvation should be a comprehensive progressive agenda. Clive must fall.

About the Author:

Alex de Waal is the Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation and Research Professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He is one of the foremost experts on famines, Sudan and the Horn of Africa. His research and practice has also probed humanitarian crisis and response, human rights, HIV/AIDS and governance in Africa, and conflict and peace-building. He has worked with several international agencies and his scholarly works have been often quoted by numerous governmental and non-governmental organisations. He was on the list of Foreign Policy's 100 most influential public intellectuals in 2008 and Atlantic Monthly's 27 "brave thinkers" in 2009.