

SCIAF factsheets

famine...

The world produces more than enough food for everyone. Famines occur because food is unequally distributed.

This is partly due to variations in the fertility of the land and weather conditions, but historical, political and economic divisions between different countries and regions also play an important part in famine.

Drought and crop failures happen all over the world. When they occur in developed countries like England or the United States, the government buys food from elsewhere and subsidises it to prevent the shortage from affecting prices too drastically.

In poorer countries, governments simply do not have money to spend on extra food. This means that the price of food rises and people have to pay more for less food. Famines occur when people can no longer afford to buy any food at all and supplies dry up completely.

Causes of Famine

Drought - when rains fails, harvests fail. When harvests fail for several years running people's self-reliance is severely eroded.

Desertification - deforestation, over-cultivation, over-grazing, and poor irrigation makes land very vulnerable to erosion and turns it quickly into desert in a process known as desertification.

Over-cultivation causes most of the desertification in Africa as people desperately try to make a living from the land.

The Sahara region (sub Saharan Africa) has seen twenty years of drought and deforestation and the Sahara desert has gradually expanded.

War - fields turn into battlegrounds, villages are overrun and harvests are left to rot when men and women go to war or get caught in the crossfire; compulsory conscription has taken thousands of Ethiopians off their farms into the army. Tens of thousands of Mozambicans, including children have, have been forced by the MNR (National Resistance Movement) to leave home and join the rebel army.

Many countries are forced to spend any surplus they generation repaying interest on loans they have received from Western banks. This prevents developing countries from using the money they earn to help their own people.

Colonial rulers introduced cash crops to the poor countries of the south to provide raw materials for European manufacturers and markets for European manufactured goods. Today, the terms of trade still work against the poorer countries since raw materials fetch lower prices on the world market than manufactured goods, and cash crops grown solely for export like coffee, tea and cotton have declined in value over the past 25 years.

Africa has the potential to feed three times its present population, yet it depends on cash crops to generate enough foreign currency with which to buy manufactured goods and land cannot be used to grow staple foods.

MYTH: People are hungry because there is not enough food.

FACT: There is more than enough food for every man, woman and child to have a proper diet. Enough grain is produced to provide everyone with ample protein and more than 3000 calories a day. The real problem is one of distribution and accessibility for the poor. In poor countries there may be enough foods for the whole population but it is exported or hoarded because the people cannot afford to pay for it.

High Risk Zones

Famine is the culmination of a crisis that develops over a long period of time and is usually caused by a combination of several different factors, including poverty, drought, war and debt.

Some countries, particularly in Africa, have suffered all these problems for years, they are weak and vulnerable: their land, their people and their economies are completely run down, they hardly recover from one crisis before the next one strikes and so famine constantly threatens. More than simply food, long-term development is vital if famine is to be prevented.

What SCIAF Is Doing

When a major disaster like famine occurs, SCIAF launches a special emergency appeal to raise money for the people most affected.

Caritas Internationalis, a network of Catholic agencies has offices throughout the Third World which means that SCIAF can channel emergency aid quickly and efficiently - through local parishes - to those who need it most.

To try to prevent crises like famine arising, SCIAF supports food production and water development programmes, literacy and adult education projects. SCIAF believes that the most important aspect of any project is that the community involved sees the need to act and decides what type of project would be most helpful in their situation.

Things To Do

1. Find newspaper reports on famine and discuss the reasons given for it.
2. Look at the labels on the food you usually eat to find out how much of it is grown in the Third World.

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