Food Systems under Stress in Africa

African–Canadian Research Cooperation

Proceedings of a Workshop held in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada 7—8 November 1993

Edited by Ronnie Vernooij and Katherine M. Kealey
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Food Crises and Transformation in East Africa:
(Re)Searching for Viable Food Security Alternatives

Nyangabyaki Bazaara, Department of Political Studies, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6

Abstract This paper discusses the recurring food shortages and famines in East Africa. The objective is to contribute to developing a research agenda on this subject by (a) demonstrating that the food situation in East Africa has been deteriorating over the years; and (b) reviewing the approaches to understanding the recurrence of famines and food shortages in East Africa with a view to deriving issues and themes for research.

Food Shortages, Famine, and Food Relief

A record of food shortages and famine highlighted in the following demonstrate the extent to which East African countries are food insecure. Beginning with Uganda, the semi-dry area of Karamoja has witnessed repeated experiences of fatal famine and food shortages. One observer noted that Karamoja has been partially surviving on food relief since 1964 (Alnwick 1985). In 1966, Karamoja, together with the districts of Acholi, Bugisu, Bukedi, and Sebei were recipients of food relief owing to the food shortages that followed the 1965/66 drought (Nyangabyaki Bazaara 1991).

In 1969/71, there occurred yet another drought that left some areas of Amuria, Karamoja, Kiryandongo, Teso, Usuk, etc., with food shortages (Seruyide and Asoka 1969). Once again famine relief had to be mobilized. The worst crisis, however, was the 1980 famine in which an estimated 30,000–40,000 people of Karamoja perished. During that year, Uganda imported a record of US$ 44 million worth of food and animal products (Royal Tropical Institute 1984, p. 14).

In 1984, there were widespread shortages of food with part of the cause being the civil war. Once again, many places survived on relief food from Oxfam and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In 1989, a famine occurred in West Nile and relief food was distributed to the starving. Given this trend, one can not but conclude that the food situation in Uganda has been insecure and will, in all probability, worsen in the years to come.

Turning to Kenya, famine and food insecurity have been a persistent feature of its northern dry and semi-dry sectors. Food relief has been of major importance in averting starvation; for example, Eliot Fratkin reports that:

The drought of 1961 attracted some 11,000 Turkana to famine relief camps. Twenty years later, following the drought of 1980, some 80,000 Turkana, nearly one-half of the District’s population of 169,400, sought famine relief as over 90% of their cattle, 40% of their camels, and 80% of their small stock died (Fratkin 1991, p. 120).

In the 1960s, expensive irrigation projects were established on rivers such as the Kerio and Turkwell. It was said then that this would tremendously increase the food security of the Turkana. The effect, however, was overcrowding, overgrazing, and further food insecurity (Hogg 1987). In 1980, there was yet another serious effort that sought to go beyond administering food relief and...
to lay a foundation for sustained food security. This effort materialized as the Turkana Rehabilitation Project funded by the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Netherlands. This project based on the "food-for-work" principal of the World Food Programme has only institutionalized food relief (Adams 1986). At least the records available indicate that up to 1985, 15,000 people were on food relief, the number having dropped from 80,000 in 1982.

Besides Turkana, there have been other areas such as Baringo, Isiolo, Kitui, Maasai, Pokomo, etc., which have continued to live with uncertainty regarding food supply. Once again, international organizations have established projects for food security; for example, the World Bank in Baringo and the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) in Isiolo (Moris 1987). Like the Turkana case, these strategies have failed to exorcise the ghost of famine. Instead, it has been alleged that politicians have been manipulating famine relief to increase the numbers supporting them (Berry, 1993; Weekly Review, October 16 and November 6 1992). Table 1 shows the amount of foreign exchange both Kenya and Tanzania spent on food imports in the 1970s (Bothomani 1984/85).

From the end of the 1960s, Tanzania increasingly experienced food deficits that were covered by imports. The crisis built up in the early 1970s and drew the attention of the World Food Conference of 1974 (George 1988, p. 30). Yash Tandon documents that in 1974/75 Tanzania imported 446,000 tons of maize, rice, and wheat and paid 783.1 million Tshs for it. Smaller quantities of food aid also came from relief organizations such as the Catholic Service (which distributed 17,389,000 lbs of food, worth some US$ 3,442,000 in 1975/76), and World Food Aid, which distributed 8,043 tons of Maize, 552 tons of maize meal, and 182 tons of oil in 1974 alone (Tandon 1978) (see Table 1). We do not have the figures for later years but at least Philip Raikes documents that in 1980/81 Tanzania imported 300,000 tons of food (Philip 1988, p. 193). The trend seems to have continued.

Bothomani Isaac came to the conclusion that "Tanzania still has to import large quantities of foodstuffs: dairy products and eggs, cereal and cereal preparation, and miscellaneous food. Food shortages, minor or serious, occur in Tanzania more frequently than elsewhere in East and Central Africa" (Isaac 1984/85).

| Table 1. Food Imports 1969—1977 for Kenya and Tanzania (US$1,000). |
|-----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Kenya           |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|                 | 22,064  | 28,717  | 43,242  | 44,818  | 47,466  | 46,912  | 36,902  | 32,932  | 28,812  |
| Tanzania        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|                 | 20,199  | 23,849  | 24,378  | 42,840  | 37,362  | 146,020 | 13,568  | 47,681  | 62,717  |

Note: See Bathomani (1984/85); Barker (1989).
There have been attempts in the past to come to terms with famine and food shortages described in the foregoing. For us to avoid the mistakes of those attempts and to build on their insights, it is essential that we review the existing stock of knowledge on the subject. It should be noted, however, that this review is by no means exhaustive. It is hoped, however, that this attempt will serve as a foundation for a more comprehensive review of the literature.

**Surplus Theory to "Dualism" Theory**

East Africa emerged from colonialism with a "dual" agricultural sector. There was the so-called modern sector as well as the traditional. The former specialized in producing for the export market, whereas the latter specialized in the production of food, allegedly on a "subsistence" basis. The postindependence project aimed at modernizing the traditional sector, and modernization was assumed to be a unilinear, cumulative, irreversible process. Because of this assumption, the traditional sector (which mainly produced foodstuffs) would sooner or later disappear as forces of modernization took root. This affected the type of research that was mounted and the questions that were posed. The focal point was the modernization sector, and virtually no attention was given to the traditional sector. There was no attempt to analyze the dynamics of the traditional sector to see the forces that undermined it.

The assumptions of the modernization perspective, however, go way back into the history of Western theory involving conventional liberal economists and orthodox Marxists. The problem that they passed on was that any social system that was not capitalist was described in terms of what it was not, not the "modern," and the modern was capitalism. The orthodox Marxists called any system not capitalist as "natural economy," whereas the liberal economists called such a system "subsistence."

Both the Orthodox Marxist and the conventional economists shared assumptions about how the natural economy or the subsistence system worked (Nyangabyaki Bazaara 1993). First, the major activity of the subsistence or natural economy was food production for household use. Second, that economy was driven by the logic of self-sufficiency, which self-sufficiency was in turn equated to food security! Third, the subsistence system was characterized by abundant labour and land. Finally, this system was based on egalitarian access to resources.

These assumptions about the nature and functioning of the noncapitalist (or subsistence or natural) economies were recast into the "vent for surplus theory," which was concerned with providing an ideological basis for colonial-enforced export crop production without transforming the labour processes. According to the theory, land and labour were plentiful and, therefore, the introduction of export crops could not in anyway undermine the production of food crops.

All precolonial African societies were deemed to have had surplus labour and land that required a "vent" and that vent was found in the production of exports or sale of labour. Resistance to production of export commodities was seen as "laziness," or preference for leisure and not the producers reasoned assessment of the real constraints.
The main point here is that this ideology continued to give an impression that all noncapitalist societies are food secure. In turn, there was no problematic for research because food security or insecurity was not an issue.

The assumption that noncapitalist societies were food secure was incorporated into the postsecond world war dualism theories of the modernization perspective. These assumptions continue to influence much of the theorization about the food crisis in Africa with disturbing results. The best example can be gleaned from Jamal Vali's writings on Uganda. Using the very concept of subsistence, in 1988, Jamal Vali claimed that Uganda remained "food self-sufficient" in the years of economic and political breakdown, because food is produced on the basis of subsistence and the subsistence system is driven by the logic of food self-sufficiency, which in turn means food security.

He further argued that the political and economic crises only affected the monetary sector, which means that the peasants went back to their leisure, long recognized by the colonial officers, although some peasants could have devoted more time to producing foodstuffs. From this, the conclusion was that Uganda has always been food secure (Jamal Vali 1987, 1988)! The policy implication of Jamal's analysis was that the system of subsistence should be maintained. In terms of research, no issues could arise from his analysis because food insecurity was not the issue. But Jamal Vali is not the only one with such assumptions about African agriculture.

From "Dualism" to "Uncaptured" Peasantry

We can use another example of Goran Hyden (Hyden 1980, 1983). Hyden had certain assumptions about the African peasantry. First, they produce food on the basis of subsistence. This subsistence production continues because land is plentiful, which makes peasants "food self-sufficient" (food secure). In turn, this food security makes these peasants powerful and able to evade capture by other social classes and the state. To Hyden, the crisis of development in Africa was traceable to this self-sufficient peasantry.

Hyden differs from the modernization perspective only in as far as he recognizes and articulates the fact that this "subsistence" system is not operating in a political vacuum. But he shares the same assumptions about noncapitalist societies with "vent for surplus" or "dualism" theories. The shortcoming is that his sense of history, with its specificity, is circumscribed. How does one account for the food crisis and the chronic importation of foodstuffs in Tanzania? Critics pointed out that it was not true that peasants have been self-sufficient or food secure as he argued (Nelson 1986; Staudt 1987; Nyangabyaki Bazaara 1993).

Second, the history of villagization in Tanzania leaves his theory of a weak state, weak indeed. If the Tanzanian state was that weak, how did it manage to move millions of peasants? Finally, like the "vent for surplus" theory or "dualism" theory, Hyden could not see that the peasantry were differentiated, a fact that raises serious issues for any discourse on food security. Without a grasp of inequalities in access to resources or inequalities in control over productive resources we can not understand how food security and insecurity are reproduced.
Food security flows from the agrarian structures and it is within the dynamism of these structures where food security or insecurity is reproduced. Let us illustrate our point by examining some of the consequences of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) on the Ugandan peasantry. This program deprived the peasantry of its social income that assumed the form of subsidized medicare and education.

On the one hand, faced with a social crisis of school fees or sickness and without any other source of income, many poor peasants sold their land at distress prices. This is a loss of productive resources. On the other hand, the buyers are land speculators residing in towns whose interest is fighting inflation by keeping their cash wealth in real estate. This means that more and more land is accumulating in unproductive hands with long-term implications for the viability of agricultural production.

We should add that the peasants are forced to pay taxes, to provide free, unpaid labour (for the good of the nation). These peasants operate in commodity markets that are severely depressed; it does not matter whether the state intervenes in the markets or not. Because agriculture does not pay, the propensity is to invest all the surplus into trade. Everyone in East Africa knows that trading is more lucrative than farming. Agriculture stagnates and a simple drought deteriorates into food shortages or famine. There is inequality in access to productive resources, which should be acknowledged as a starting point of any investigation into who starves, who eats, and why. No correct policy for strengthening food security can succeed unless developed against this rural dynamic.

Thus, a peasant with a small uneconomic piece of land is vulnerable to starvation even with the simplest drought. The rich peasant or capitalist, however, may have more than enough resources to produce or procure adequate food. The world of the poor peasant is that of food insecurity, whereas that of a rich peasant or capitalist is that of food security.

The problem, however, is not simply differentiation internal to the peasantry but also that "subsistence" producers continue to lose resources to the modernizers. This process has been going on as far back as colonial days. In all the three East African countries, land tenure was modified and sometimes concentrated in only a few hands — white settlers in Kenya, plantation owners in Tanzania, or Mailoland landlords in Uganda. It is also fairly well known that a lot of land was taken over for game parks ranging from Tsavo in Kenya, through Serengeti in Tanzania, to Kidepo in Karamoja. We also know that many large-scale projects were established, such as the Masaaï wheat scheme in Kenya and the Group Ranches in Kenya (Galaty 1993). In recent years, all these countries have witnessed absentee land grabbers from towns.

These forces pushed the "subsistence pastoralists or cultivators" into marginal lands, crowding them, the result of which was environmental degradation in areas such as Nakivale, Rakai, Karamoja, Northern Kenya, etc. (Hogg 1987). Alternatively, many "subsistence producers" have been transformed into squatters or tenants with serious political implications. For instance, in 1989 there was a serious political crisis in Masaka District of Uganda between absentee landowners and squatters.


**Underdevelopment/Dependency**

A serious challenge to dualist models came from the underdevelopment/dependency perspective. The argument was that the traditional/modern dichotomy was not original in reflecting the natural development of society. Both sectors were created in a single history, which brought these societies into the orbit of the world capitalist system.

Furthermore, the relationship between the "modern" and the "traditional" sectors was not harmonious, it was contradictory, and the prosperity of the modern had something to do with the crisis of the traditional sector. The recurring famine or food shortages were a product of the "traditional or subsistence" sector's loss of resources to the modern. Moreover, the participation of peasants in the world market as raw material producers led to their loss of surplus through unequal exchange. This undermined the capacity of the peasants to produce food crops.

This approach, however, suffered from a number of shortcomings. First, it emphasized international exchange to the neglect of internal exchange relations. Second, the accumulation process, i.e., the differentiation of the producers was ignored. Consequently, the power relations, the politics of agriculture, and how these reproduced the stagnation could not be captured by this approach.

**Monetarist and the Urban Bias**

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of the neoliberal, monetarist approach championed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This approach saw the food crisis as emanating from the urban bias, the unequal exchange between the rural and urban areas. This approach also concentrates on the internal factors and deemphasizes the dependency school's external focus. This means that the source of the problem is the state, which distorts the operation of the market purposely to appease the volatile urban groups. The intervention, the policy mistakes, have been the keeping of overvalued exchange rates, which made imported food stuffs cheaper than the locally produced ones. Cheap food imports hurt the farmers by reducing the market for their food crops. Furthermore, the state intervention in the market via parastatals or direct administrative action depressed returns to the producers.

The effect of these state actions is that the peasants cut back on production, or could not innovate with new technology. Therefore, the solution is to roll back the state and "put the prices right." This move has resulted in measures that have led to privatization of parastatal marketing boards and a reduced state involvement in the economy (Banugire 1989; Cheru 1989); however, there are some erroneous aspects in this perspective.

First, this perspective erroneously assumes that the market is a neutral arena governed by forces of supply and demand. It fails to see that markets are social constructs as well, or in the first place. This means that even when the state has been rolled back, there is no guarantee that the peasants will get a fair deal for their work. It is indeed utopia to think that when the state has been forced to withdraw from the market that the urban bias will then be extinguished in favour of a rural bias. This is because "free" markets are "free" only for the strong, and the strong
in East Africa are still in the urban areas. Besides, putting the prices right can only benefit those peasants with resources to produce tradeables.

As noted, the countryside has not remained stagnant; the peasantries are differentiating. Putting the price right means that only those with resources to take advantage of increased prices will reap the benefits of liberalization. The response of the producers will depend on the land, the labour, the bicycles, the stores, the oxen, the hoes, etc., available to them. Besides, price is not a good measure of whether or not a peasant is getting a fair reward for his or her work. The World Bank and IMF deny that the peasants in Africa are differentiated and that putting the price right will not lead to inequalities (food security for some and insecurity for others). The truth is that this is not so and any research agenda must recognize the unequal access to productive resources and go about finding out how producers lose resources and, in the process, undermine or strengthen their food security.

The monetarist perspective gained in the late 1970s as the world economy plunged into a recession. Almost contemporaneously, the rational choice perspective reemerged challenging some of the arguments of the monetarists view of the Third World crisis. The rational choice (mainly Bates 1981) perspective agreed with the monetarists that the intervention of the state in the economies of the Third World had distorted the market and that this had acted as a disincentive to peasant production. But it went further, to argue that state interventions in the market were not mistakes but rational actions of the politicians. What was politically rational was not necessarily so in economic terms.

To Bates, governments usually adopt policies that are politically rational to enhance their legitimacy, particularly to appease the volatile urban groups who want cheap food. This, plus the revenue imperative, explained governments' distortion of agricultural prices. Rational choice theory is certainly an advance over the "market" theories. The problem, however, is that rational choice theories remain trapped within the assumptions of neoclassical economics that inform the monetarist perspective.

After providing reasons why governments make policies that are economically irrational, the solution remains the same: "encourage market forces." Besides rational choice perspective ignores the actual historical process through which food is produced and distributed. Such an approach can not help us to understand concretely how other factors conditioned choices and, in the process, undermined food production or promoted it. As Bates himself has recently admitted "the critics are right. 'Rational Choice theory' has largely ignored the role of history" (Bates 1993).

**Research Questions and Themes**

The foregoing should have indicated the methodological and conceptual problems that need to be overcome to understand the food crises in East Africa and how to transform production processes to achieve food security. The capacities to produce food have been changing as a result of external factors, such as the state programs, commodity prices, as well as internal differentiation. This differential access to productive resources in turn can not simply be assumed but must be grasped through concrete research. Besides, different areas were subjected to different pressures
and history so this diversity of experience need not be buried under blanket concepts such as subsistence. No durable food strategy will be found without researching into this diversity and concretely finding out what it is that make particular regions or social groups vulnerable to famine or food shortages. The questions that arise, therefore, are:

- What forces have been responsible for food crises or their absence in East Africa and how can these forces be reshaped to create new capacities to reproduce food security?
- Who will be the agent of social change: agrarian capitalists, middle peasantry, the state or the market?
- What technological and organizational forms will this entail and what crops will be grown?

East Africa is characterized by varying ecological and farming systems. It is, therefore, important to focus on the major farming systems in East Africa.

- *Pastoralism and agropastoralism:* An examination of changes in the manner in which the pastoralists access productive resources, the changing character of their access and control, the manner and extent to which these resources are being taken by agriculturalists/private capitalists and how these processes affect food security, and the quality of the natural resources base.

- *Agricultural food crop production:* Changes in the farming systems, in access to resources (land, labour, market, etc.) and how this feeds into famine and food scarcity.

**Evaluating Past Food Strategies**

One area that needs attention is the assessment of the past strategies designed by East African governments to achieve food security. Virtually every country in East Africa has been talking about policies designed to enhance food security.

In 1981, Kenya came up with Sessional Paper No. 4 on National Food Policy (Mwangi et al. 1987). In Uganda, every year the budget documents reassert that "government policy for agricultural development continues to focus on the increase of food production for self sufficiency and diversification of the agricultural exports" (Republic of Uganda, Recovery Programme 1982–84 and Background to the Budget 1988–89, 1989–90). In fact, the Government of Uganda invited a team of international consultants to design a food strategy! In its 1984 report it noted that "discussions with the food strategy team, and notably with the European Economic Community (EEC) and the World Bank on principal policy and institutional issues have been positive. General agreement exists on strengthening the system of incentives, food and agricultural producer prices" (Towards a National Food Strategy 1984).
A number of projects could be cited as having been justified as "food security projects." For example, the ranches in Uganda were justified as a crucial step in ensuring self-sufficiency in livestock products. In Kenya, for instance, there are a number of projects, such as the Masaa Wheat Scheme, the Turkana Project, etc., which were justified as projects aimed at strengthening the food security of the country. In Tanzania, after the 1974/5 food crisis, the Tanzanian government, together with the World Bank, initiated a "National Maize Project" for food security in Tanzania. There have been other projects such as the NAFCO Wheat Project (Lane 1992). The point is that evaluating past strategies may reveal theoretical, conceptual, and empirical shortcomings from which lessons can be derived. The questions are what strategies have these countries adopted to ensure long-term food security? Which strategy worked and which ones failed? Did these strategies undermine food production and distribution or strengthen them. What was the impact of these strategies on, for instance, the environment? What lessons can be drawn from that experience?

Since the 1980, East African governments have come under severe pressure from IMF and the World Bank to undertake reforms believed to stimulate food production via price incentives, appropriate exchange rates, etc. It is now more than 10 years since this decisive program began. What has its impact been on the food security of the people? Who has become more vulnerable and how?

Food aid or relief has been used extensively by NGOs during all these past food crises. There has been talk that food aid can indeed be used to strengthen the food security of the vulnerable through food for work. For example, it has been argued by FAO that "Food donors are re-orienting their approach so as to help African countries lay the foundation for long-term food security through both producer price support and consumer price stabilization." What has been the impact of food aid say on the Turkana (Demery and Addison 1987)?

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