Ethiopia Case Study Essay, Research Paper

Case Study – Ethiopia

Nearly half of Sub Saharan Africa’s 45 independent countries encounter frequent serious food crises. Ethiopia, one of the world’s larger countries, has long been plagues with the torment of poverty, illiteracy, hunger and disease. Famine, a reduction in everyday food supply, is a widespread problem that can strike in any corner of the developing world. Although sometimes unnoticed, this shortage of food slowly leads to hunger and malnutrition. Famine in Ethiopia is not caused by natural disaster, but instead is a direct result of social, political and economic human forces. “Not only are individuals and families dying from starvation there, but whole communities are forces to endure abnormal social and economic activities in order to ensure food”. (5) Due to their lack of development planning in combating these hardships. “Ethiopia is characterized as one of the world’s least developed nations”. (4.65) This case study summarizes the existence of famine in Ethiopia as it related to its causes, both natural and political, resettlement and relief efforts and the issues involved famine in the future.

Existence of Famine – When did it begin?

People die, governments fail, economies breakdown, poverty widens and futures become dark. Famine, war, and destruction appear to have always been an integral piece of human history, at last since the beginning of substantial human population growth. Its existence in Ethiopia has led to “millions of death, especially in women and children under the age of 5″. (3.50) Although many famines have been recorded in human history. Most have occurred in areas of underlying civil conflict.

“The famine in the early 1980’s was first discovered in the West in 1984, four weeks after the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the rule of the military committee in Ethiopia”. (5) Political in the West had been in dismay when the Dergue announced the formation of the Workers Party of Ethiopia. As a result, there was opposition to the transfer of aid to famine victims there. The government of Ethiopia, for political reasons partly to do with the revolution, was unwilling to declare and emergency and were reluctant to allow access to relief organizations to the affected communities for aid. Therefore, Western relief assistance went only to restricted areas, where government controlled the structure of the military confilicts which obstructed efforts to reach those victims in need. Wars between government troops and liberation fronts in those affected areas soon became the blame for the destruction and famine. War makes it impossible to get food to the people. “The 1984-85 famine was in fact a political crisis characterized more appropriately by was than by drought”. (10.5)

Although focusing on Ethiopia, the widespread problem of famine affects nearly the entire African continent. From food trades and imports/exports to the movement of victims, each country plays a role in the effectiveness of human physical geography.

Causes – Natural or Political?

Most famine conditions in Ethiopia have been associated with crop failures due to drought, flood, war, and lack of proper government intervention and development. Various climatic factors, especially insufficient rainfall, can affect the quality of agriculture, causing immediate destruction of crops, sanitary water supply and markets to be used for future cultivation. “One of Ethiopia’s great misfortunes is that rainfall is not dependable”. (10.10)

Drought occurs when there is an insufficient amount of moisture at the right time available for crops. Because of its direct effects on agricultural production in sub Saharan Africa, the issue of lack of rainfall should not be ignored in development planning. Although nature is often blamed by man, Africa seems to experience prolonged drought as a result of man’s interference with nature.

The effects of drought and famine in Ethiopia are contributed to the lack of efficient development and planning. For development to occur, there must be proficiency in food, status, shelter and security, “along with the funds needed to reproduce failing agricultural production”.(2.28) In countries where sufficient planning occurs, people experience the self motivation to produce and prosper. However, in Ethiopia, with the approaching drought, food, and cash crops fail, animals and people die, while slowly vegetation disappears, disabling the economy.

History demonstrates that famine occurs in nations with high population growths and in areas which lack the resources necessary to guarantee food supplies or provide for public welfare. Failure of a given crop in a season should not result in famine as long as there are other resources available in the community production has been insufficient. Efforts to increase production have negatively been affected by the lack of adequate food storage facilities, inadequate transport due to poor roads and limited markets for the overflow of food.

The limitation of technological advances have also not met expectations of a society attempting to eliminate the threat of famine and hunger in their country. “Funding is not available to peasants who are seeking advanced farm equipment for agricultural production”. (9.44)

While climatic diversity and related factors have played a role in the tragedy, closer investigation reveals that widespread drought occurred after famine had begun. In many ways, government policies and war are responsible for an increasing decline in food production in Ethiopia which displayed more negative effects than the changes in climate. These policies deplete peasants of their resources, forcing them to sell their goods to the government at low fixed prices. Peasants attribute their hardships to government policies because they raise taxes and prevent them from working.

Resettlement Programs

One of the highly controversial responses by the Ethiopian government to the famine dilemma launched a resettlement program focusing on ways to improve agricultural progress and living standards. “In November, 1984, the Ethiopian government formed this program with the intent to move nearly a million people from the country’s famine affected areas in the north to the administrative regions in the south”. (8.62) Famine and war zones located in the north led the people to more administrative areas such as the capital Addis Abada, and to neighboring countries such as Sudan. Controversy between government troops and rebels against President Mengistu Haile Marian caused the most of the resettlement movement. However, in opposition of the Ethiopian government this program was proposed as the strategy for ensuring the survival of victims and for relieving the circumstances that led to famine.

The basic principles governing the resettlement efforts included the provision of site, services, and sufficient food in order to prevent local market shortages and price differentials. The choice of sites was based on the selection of a surplus-producing area and where local peasants would be more apt to accept new groups. However, these resettlement programs often did not incorporate such short and long term opportunities as earning income and storing food. There is no doubt that once migration has begun as a result of food shortages, people become more vulnerable to death by starvation and psychological weakness. Therefore, any attempt to alleviate moving would be a successful one. “Negative impacts from resettlement programs in Ethiopia include heavy taxes, mandatory sale of products at unfavorable prices by the government and forced living arrangements”. (6) This type of program often leads to improper budgeting of funds from the government, resulting in lack of hope and security by all victims involved.

Relief Measures

People in famine stricken Ethiopian communities advert to local authorities for assistance relief based upon the idea that their government is to protect them. Famine intervention generally falls into three categories: direct, local measures inlcuding distribution of food, clothing, cash, shelter, and medical care; indirect measures such as public employment and advancement of tools for agricultural restoration; and long term programs containing improvements for irrigation, transportation and health care. Institutional organizations proving this relief include governing bodies of agencies such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Development Assistance Committee of the Organizations for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These organizations conclude that disasters are not remote incidents, but problems which require long term responses and pre-disaster planning. Appeals by Ethiopian government agencies to forgien ones do not necessarily result in famine conditions because they are in fear of being held accountable. The following are reasons why the U.S. economic aid failed in the 1980’s, as each relate to the circumstances in Ethiopia:

- U.S. economic assistance is highly concentrated on few governments, with little focus on poverty. Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in Africa, is not recieving enough aid assistance to improve famine conditions. (4.66)

- Distribution of food aid is not related to need. The aid is instead used to reinforce politically allied governments, not only in Ethiopia, but in other countries as well. (4.67)

- Food aid can prevent agricultural development that could alleviate hunger. Food aid in Ethiopia had been a direct disincentive to production, forcing local producers to cut priced to stay in business. (2.35)

- Economic aid is concentrated on governments which are against reforms for the poor. Was between rebels and the President of Ethiopia have presented controversy over reform issues. (1.247)

- Government uses the discontinuance of aid as punishment. Peasants in Ethiopia have been forced to close agricultural markets and pay high prices for similar products as a result of aid misdirection. (3.115)

- Most development aid fails to reach the poor and hungry. Government policies in Ethiopia reject aid for famine victims and instead use funds for larger projects. (10.24)

Famine in the Future – Will it continue?

The issues surrounding famine intervention, rehabilitation, and prevention remain among the most difficult to resolve. Although availability of food by no means prevents famine, sudden changes in access to food can create famine, especially in the absence of external assistance. Rehabilitation cannot simply be achieved by ensuring food availability. The immediate impact of errors in the system , the accumulated capacity of agencies working with relief, will depend on what cash and food reserves are being held. Failure of a given crop in a season should not result in famine as long as there are other resources available in the community.

Although the Ethiopian government has made strides to alleviate the starvation problem, they have fallen short of the country’s needs. Prevention must be stretched beyond the rapid provision of food early stages of famine. The aim must focus on direct development of the people to ensure satisfaction. Increased awareness and more knowledge of famine can help to promote a more timely response to the problem. In order to solve the problem of famine in Ethiopia, an understanding of what causes famine, what prompts starvation and what characterizes the beginning of massive hunger need to be addressed. “The fact that famine in Ethiopia remains unpreventable is due to a lack of information of indicators and proper planning of relief mechanisms”. (1.383) The obstacles of famine prevention and relief difficulties in obtaining information, design of food aid and lack of transportation sources. Although information exists, it is rarely used by governments because they feel it is too scarce, and it is costly to set up monitoring systems. Famine aid is often designed to satisfy political aspects prior to reliving victims of starvation, regardless of where it is most needed. Lastly, the lack of transportation sources such as trucks, fuel, and parts prohibits relief workers from travelling to shelters and refugee camps.

Because there is a period of warning before mass starvation occurs, famine is preventable. However, the likeliness of this problem being solved in the near future is rare. As long as the population in Ethiopia continues to grow without new advances in developmental planning, there will always be the potential for conflicts and shortages.

Famine in Ethiopia continues because their authorities lack proper relief mechanisms. This results from the social, political and economic human forced which exist in a nation where development is essential. Lack of government intervention and war have certainly played a key role in the failure of this country’s ability to resolve the famine problem. “Drought, although at times is an important issue of Ethiopia and its climate, is not a direct concern for people dying from hunger”. (8.19) Essentially, war has become the main cause of hunger in Ethiopia with the most people facing starvation. Governments distort priorities and without proper planning for this country, it will take much assistance to place Ethiopia away from being one of the most underdeveloped nations in the world.