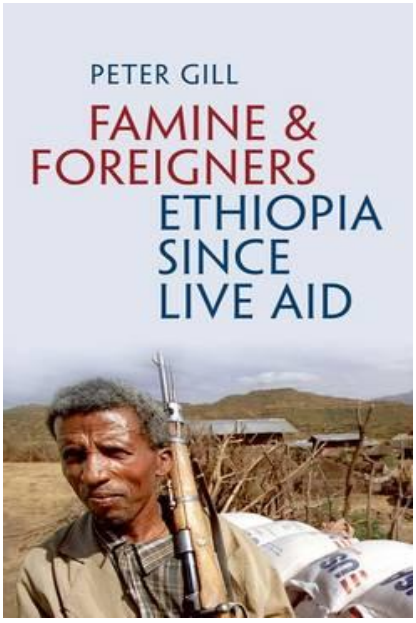
Famine and foreigners: Ethiopia since Live Aid

The terrible 1984 famine in Ethiopia focused the world's attention on the country and the issue of aid as never before. ***Peter Gill*** *was the first journalist to reach the epicentre of the famine and one of the TV reporters who brought the tragedy to light, and in this book tells what happened to Ethiopia in the 25 years following Live Aid.* ***Maria Kuecken*** *finds that Gill does great justice to this ever-pertinent issue by illuminating a complexity of confounding factors through a digestible narrative and plenty of poignant anecdotes.*

Famine and Foreigners: Ethiopia Since Live Aid. Peter Gill. Oxford University Press.



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Against a backdrop of weather shocks and volatile food prices, the word famine is continuously banded about when describing current food security crises in the Sahel and Horn of Africa. Yet the near-constant declaration of famine with requisite foreign intervention does little to put an end to these episodes. To find out why, long-time journalist Peter Gill examines the dynamic between famines and foreigners in Ethiopia. A primary target for the blame is Ethiopia's political leadership, and the foreign actors who share responsibility in supporting it: governments, journalists, NGOs.

Gill himself is a foreigner entrenched in Ethiopia's story. He retraces his steps back to the ground zero of Ethiopia's 1984 famine, Karem, juxtaposing his past experiences with present-day interviews. To the Western world, emaciated children have been the faces of Ethiopia since the inception of Live Aid, and it was more often the media, not the monitoring organizations, that rang the alarm for a food crisis. When Gill asks a young student if famine will come again, the student notes, "eighty per cent of our people live in rural areas and almost all of them depend on rain-fed agriculture to live. They only have one harvest in a year. So if the rains are bad, then there will be a problem." Indeed, Ethiopia's obstacles to a food secure future include unalterable geographic characteristics and slow-changing social norms on reproduction, qualities exhibited in many parts of the developing world. However, the real problem is political in nature.

From interviews with government officials, aid experts, economists, and, most importantly, normal Ethiopians, Gill weaves anecdotes together with historical narratives to convey his main point. As

he quickly makes clear, the true cause of Ethiopia's food woes derive from a history of autocratic regimes and the foreigners who support them are, at the very least, complicit in their activities. In the run-up to the 1984 famine, a military junta called the Derg went on a rampage against secessionists. Having claimed control of the country after ousting Haile Selassie (and, ironically, accusing him of ignoring famine), the Derg utilized their military rule to come down hard on their opposition. A government official went so far as to say that the manipulation of food supplies played a key role in their fight against dissidents. Government programs also attempted to forcibly 'volunteer' for resettlement farmers who might be sympathetic to their opponents' schemes in other regions of the country, though this did as much damage or more than food shortages themselves.

Careful to note the West's insincerity in decrying famine while doing nothing to curb the influence of the political regimes in both the past and present, Gill also highlights the government's hypocrisy in allowing "the famine-that-nearly-was in 2003" after so many promises of never again. Though current Ethiopia Prime Minister Meles Zenawi now emphasizes the humiliation of poverty as reason for its eradication and, to be fair, incurred few deaths from food insecurity in 2003, government policies continue without properly addressing food security issues. Instead, many resources have been pumped into electoral intimidation (with hefty claims of fraud), revamped resettlement schemes, and continuing conflict against neighbors Somalia and Eritrea. This autocratic bent makes it difficult for foreign actors to define their role. And, for much of Ethiopia's history, this role has been complicity. Foreign governments and aid agencies were implicated in Ethiopian affairs via dealings with the government and, thus, allowed themselves to be constrained by the government's agenda. At present, the debate for aid organizations is whether to work around the existing regime, in order to continue helping those in need, or to pull out of Ethiopia entirely to visibly demonstrate their condemnation of government actions and violations of human rights.

Gill's account best serves as descriptive, not prescriptive. In his final chapters, he introduces the Chinese as significant actors in Ethiopia, undertaking massive infrastructure projects in transportation and telecommunications. As the Chinese do not form part of the traditional "foreigner" block of major aid donors, they treat Ethiopia as "much more than the poverty-stricken basket case of Western image." He also concludes with a description of Jeffrey Sachs' hotly debated Millennium Villages Project which seeks to eradicate extreme poverty at a village level and injects large sums of money to do so. Though admittedly the MVP in Ethiopia offers a "mixed picture of the fortunate and unfortunate," these elements seem included by way of an alternative to the existing dynamic of unconditional aid and political support. While they emphasize the multi-faceted and evolving nature of food insecurity in Ethiopia, the addition of these pieces does little to present a pragmatic alternative of how Ethiopia might move forward.

Indeed, as Gill repeatedly emphasizes, the ultimate path to alleviating Ethiopia's fears of famine, in line with Amartya Sen, clearly relies on political changes. Though he could stand to be slightly more

critical of Zenawi, and, in particular, Zenawi's actions toward food security versus broad-based descriptions of autocracy, Gill paints a nuanced picture of Ethiopia's situation that demonstrates how political will (or lack thereof) exacerbates existing geographical and social roadblocks. By mixing past with present, he provides an element of path dependency that illustrates both the depth and circular nature of food security issues in Ethiopia.

Most importantly, the reader realizes that, despite aid agencies' televised pleas for food aid donations, there is no simple solution to famine. In this work, Gill does great justice to this ever-pertinent issue by illuminating a complexity of confounding factors through a digestible narrative and plenty of poignant anecdotes.

Maria Kuecken is a Ph.D. candidate in Economics at the Paris School of Economics—Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne University. Specializing in development economics, her research focuses on the determinants of educational quality in developing countries. She has blogged on a variety of development issues for the European Journalism Centre, worked on educational projects in Rwanda, and interned in the Health Division of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Read more reviews by Maria.

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