

LESSONS FROM MAJOR FAMINES

Causes and Consequences

OUTLINE

- Causes of Famines
 - Natural disasters
 - Political Ideology
 - Conflict
- Consequences of Famines
 - Individual
 - Societal

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Discuss the main causes and consequences of famines.

FAMINE

- Famines are the severest form of food insecurity.
- According to the IPC, a famine can be declared “when certain measures of mortality, malnutrition, and hunger are met” (United Nations, 2011).
- That is:
 - At least 20% of households in an area face extreme food shortages with limited ability to cope
 - Acute malnutrition rates exceed 30%
 - The death rate exceeds two persons per day per 10,000 persons

A TIMELINE OF FAMINES



Source: Author's illustration based on O'Grada (2009:21) and Devereux (2000:6)

A TIMELINE OF FAMINES



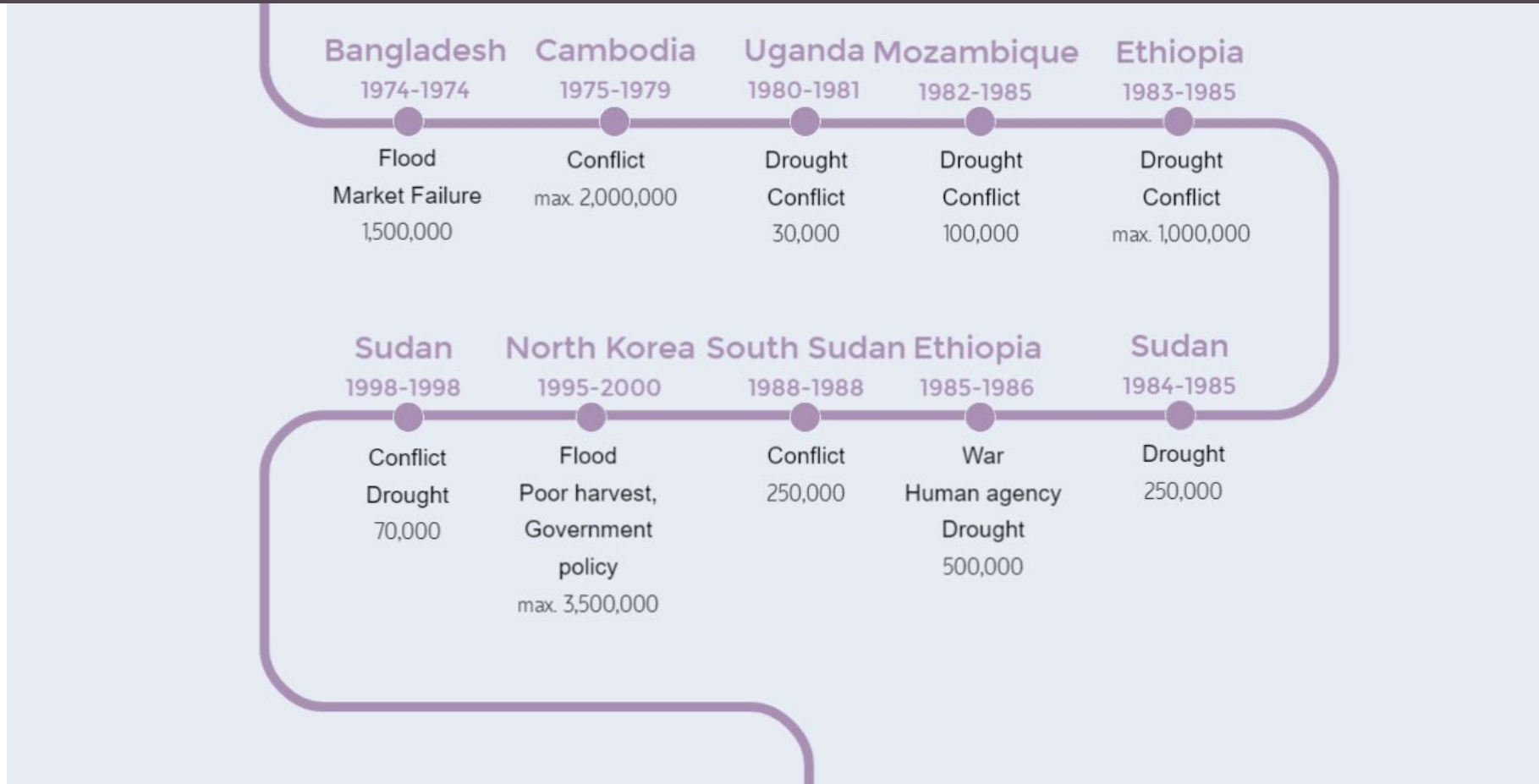
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A TIMELINE OF FAMINES



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CAUSES OF FAMINES

Looking at the timeline of famines reveals that

- Natural Disasters,
 - Political Ideology,
 - Conflict,
 - And a combination of any of the above
- are the main causes of famines.

NATURAL DISASTER

THE IRISH POTATO FAMINE 1846-1852

Background

- Catholic Ireland was ruled by the mostly Protestant England
- Potatoes grew well in Ireland's damp climate and it became a major staple in Ireland
- As a result of increased food security, the Irish population grew fast
- The feudal system, however, kept farmers at the subsistence level

The Blight and the famine

- The blight destroyed three quarters of Ireland's potato crop
- Peasants were deprived of coping strategies such as the selling of any assets
- England did not lend a helping hand
- The death toll of the famine is estimated at 1.5 million people, another 1.5 million emigrated

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

MAO'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD 1959-1961

Background

- Mao envisioned a fast transition towards a modern agricultural and industrial communist state
- Since the communist party took over in 1949, most of the large landowners were already expropriated and agricultural production increasingly organized in communes
- The idea of the centralization of agriculture was to increase agricultural production and to free up labor for industrial employment
- In order to promote industrialization, Mao came to believe that steel production would be possible using small-scale furnaces; accordingly, he instructed communes to produce steel in backyard furnaces

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

MAO'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD 1959-1961

Systemic Failure and Famine

- Agricultural output dropped dramatically:
Increasing centralization of agricultural production led to an organizational chaos. Historically grown human capital that had been proven successful in traditional farming became replaced by an anonymous technocracy. It transformed farmers into agricultural workers with poor intrinsic incentives to work hard.
- Producing steel in backyard furnaces failed miserably:
The people involved in the production of steel had no relevant training and the furnaces were endowed with amateurish technology. Hence, the steel produced was of inferior quality and useless for industrial processing.
- 15 to 25 million people starved to death:
The Great Leap Forward transformed millions of formerly productive farmers into an economic system that not only failed to create economic value added but destroyed human capital and historically grown farming practices.

CONFLICT

UKRAINE'S HOLODOMOR 1932-1933

Background

- The Ukraine declared independence in 1918 amidst the turmoil of the Bolshevik Revolution
- By 1922, however, Poland forcefully annexed the western part of the Ukraine
- The Soviet Union annexed the central and eastern parts to crush the Ukraine's strive for independence
- Stalin, who rose to power in 1924, was determined to return to communism and to keep the Ukraine as a soviet republic
- During the collectivization in the Soviet Union, peasants were induced to transfer land and livestock to state-owned farms, on which they would work as day-laborers for payment
- For Stalin to move ahead with its political and economic restructuring, he needed to crush the resistance that was organized by large landholding farmers and the country's intellectual elite.

CONFLICT

UKRAINE'S HOLODOMOR 1932-1933

Food withdrawal as a means of warfare

- In 1929, Stalin launched his attack on these groups using brute military force, propaganda, show trials, deportations, killings, and the withdrawal of food.
- Ukrainian farmers simply refused to produce food for Stalin. They rather saw their harvests rot away on the fields.
- In addition, Stalin began to ship food to Russia, thus deliberately driving the Ukrainians into starvation.
- By 1933, some seven million people starved to death in the Ukraine, almost half of them children, reducing Ukraine's population by nearly 25%.

CONSEQUENCES OF FAMINES

The adverse effects of food insecurity and famines may be examined with regards to

- The individual and coping strategies
- The society and economy as a whole

COPING STRATEGIES

Dietary Change

- Substitute regular foods by less preferred, less expensive, and less safe food.

Increase Short-Term Household Food Availability

- Borrow food, or rely on help from a friend or relative; deplete stocks; purchase food on credit; gather wild food, hunt, or harvest immature crops; consume seed stock held for next season

Decrease Numbers of People

- Postpone marriage; postpone having children; give children away (abortion, adoption, prostitution); neglect health care for the elderly (in fact, the elderly may “sacrifice themselves”)

Rationing

- Limit portion size at mealtimes; restrict consumption by adults for small children to eat; feed working members of households at the expense of non-working members; reduce number of meals eaten in a day; skip entire days without eating

ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES ON SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

Migration

Overexploitation of natural resources

Trade restrictions (export bans)

Increase of social tensions

Political instability

Reduced economic productivity

Public fiscal distress

SUMMARY

- Famines can be traced back for centuries, the causes, however, remain the same.
- The main causes of famines are natural disasters, political ideology, and conflicts.
- Consequences of famines have adverse affects on the individual and the society and economy as a whole.

COMPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

- [United Nations \(2011\). When a food security crisis becomes a famine \[Online\]. Access Link here. Retrieved 12/2/2019](#)
- Donnelly, J. S. (2002). Great Irish Potato Famine. The History Press.
- Dikötter, F., & Bauckham, D. (2012). Mao's great famine. WF Howes.
- Noack, C., Janssen, L., & Comerford, V. (Eds.). (2012). Holodomor and Gorta Mór: histories, memories and representations of famine in Ukraine and Ireland. Anthem Press.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

- True or False Questions
- Multiple Choice Questions
- Cloze Questions



EXERCISE

- Conduct some research on famine demography. In doing so, cover the following topics
 - The hierarchy of suffering
 - Physiological Consequences
 - The third Army of War
 - Famine and the Social Fabric
- You may refer to *Gráda, C. Ó. (2009). Famine: a short history. Princeton University Press* to get started.

SOURCES

Donnelly, J. S. (2002). Great Irish Potato Famine. The History Press.

Dikötter, F., & Bauckham, D. (2012). Mao's great famine. WF Howes.

Gráda, C. Ó. (2009). Famine: a short history. Princeton University Press.

Maxwell, D., Watkins, B., Wheeler, R., & Collins, G. (2003). The coping strategies index: A tool for rapidly measuring food security and the impact of food aid programs in emergencies. Nairobi: CARE Eastern and Central Africa Regional Management Unit and the World Food Programme Vulnerability Assessment and Mapping Unit.

Noack, C., Janssen, L., & Comerford, V. (Eds.). (2012). Holodomor and Gorta Mór: histories, memories and representations of famine in Ukraine and Ireland. Anthem Press.

United Nations (2011). When a food security crisis becomes a famine [Online].

Link: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2011/07/382342-when-food-security-crisis-becomes-famine>.

Retrieved 12/2/2019