

Hidden Famine in Madagascar

Summary of published paper¹

The political economy of an urban famine in Madagascar is the subject of a recently published article. The famine occurred in the capital city, Antananarivo, between 1985-86 but remained hidden for a long time, eventually uncovered by analysing the demographic data of registered deaths in the city.

Antananarivo lies in the highlands of central Madagascar and in 1985 had a population of approximately 577,000 people. For the period 1976-95, the mortality data recorded for the city showed a typical famine in 1985-6, where mortality levels increased markedly, and life expectancy fell from 59.4 years in 1975, to 49 years in 1986. The mortality increases bore all the characteristics of a famine - a strong relative increase among children, especially 5-9 year olds, and young adults, particularly young men aged 20-34 years old. In absolute terms it was estimated that about 7,600 persons died in 1985-6 in excess of baseline mortality levels, about half of whom were children under 15 years of age, with a small excess of boys. Adults aged 15-59 years comprised onethird of excess deaths, nearly three-quarters (74%) of whom were men. The remaining deaths were amongst the elderly, again with a higher male mortality. These figures imply that 1.3% of the population died because of famine, a rate that compares with some other 'mild' famines.

However, the main evidence that this was a famine lies in the 'causes of death' profile, which is especially clear for young adults. Mortality from malnutrition (starvation) among adults hardly existed before 1984 and after 1988, whereas it showed a huge peak in 1986.

The explanation for the Antananarivo famine appears quite clear. Rapid deregulation of rice prices and rice markets, following a long period of strict state regulation, led to a rapid increase in the price of rice, the staple food of the large majority of a poor population. The poorest could not cope with the increasing cost of what constituted 80% of their food intake. Furthermore, poverty had been increasing in Madagascar over the period preceding the crisis and started to decrease only ten years later, after 1996.

Beyond market failure and institutional failure (i.e. lack of government policies to off-set the rice price inflation), several other factors may have played a role in the famine. The geographical isolation of the capital city in the highlands, together with a very poor road system, may have contributed to market segmentation, already aggravated by the lack of incentives to rice farmers during the 1972-84 period as a result of the state controlled economy. The changing economic situation during 1984-6 created a market trap with effects similar to those of a blockade - rice was available in the country or could easily be imported, but people could not access it because of a lack of entitlement. If people had commanded higher incomes or had access to credit, they would have been able to survive the crisis.

The Madagascar famine seems to have been 'hidden' from the start, probably in an attempt to hide the major failures of previous policies and not to put the changing policies at risk. Surprisingly the famine was hidden not only to the press, but also to economists working at that time on the economic reforms. It is argued in the paper that had the press been free to report the case, and had economists been properly informed of the situation, public 'coping mechanisms' could have been put in place.

Little is known of the situation in rural areas. However, the mortality increase seen among children in the capital over the 1975-86 period, with a peak in 1985-6, was also visible in the nationally representative sample of the Demographic and Health Surveys, in both urban and rural areas.

The author concludes that improved information technology, as well as more integrated markets in Madagascar, makes another famine of this nature quite unlikely in the future.



A market in Tulear, Madagascar

(c) IRD - Base Indigo. Photo by Vincent Simonneaux, 1998

¹ Garenne, M (2002). The political economy of an urban famine. IDS Bulletin, vol 33, no. 4, 2002

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