You Cannot Eat Democracy

Does a free press have a key role in the prevention of famine in a democratic climate?

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the MA degree in Development and Emergency Practice,
Oxford Brookes University

Thia Linden Agnes Ren White

January 25th 2013
# Table of Contents

Statement of Originality.................................................................................................................................i
Acknowledgement...........................................................................................................................................ii
Abstract............................................................................................................................................................iii

Introduction.................................................................................................................................................................1

Methodology...............................................................................................................................................................3

The Phenomenon of Famine...............................................................................................................................6
What is a ‘famine’?...............................................................................................................................................6
What causes a famine?.........................................................................................................................................8
Famine prevention.............................................................................................................................................9

Democracy and Governance....................................................................................................................................9
What is a ‘democracy’?......................................................................................................................................9
Media ownership................................................................................................................................................10
The issue of transparency...................................................................................................................................11
Government accountability..............................................................................................................................13

The Free Press.....................................................................................................................................................14
What is a ‘free press’?......................................................................................................................................14
The role of the free press..................................................................................................................................15

Democracy, Free Press and Famine Prevention...............................................................................................17

Case Studies.........................................................................................................................................................22
China (1958-1961)........................................................................................................................................22
Ethiopia (1982-1985).....................................................................................................................................23
Western Sudan, Darfur and Kordofan (1983-1985).....................................................................................25
The Soviet Famine (1932-1934).....................................................................................................................26
Zimbabwe (1982).............................................................................................................................................28
Botswana (1982)..............................................................................................................................................29
Maharashtra, India (1973)..............................................................................................................................31
Kenya (1983-1985)...........................................................................................................................................32
Bangladesh (1974)..........................................................................................................................................34
Bihar (1966-1967)..........................................................................................................................................36
Malawi (2002)..................................................................................................................................................37
Niger (2005).......................................................................................................................................................39

Conclusion.............................................................................................................................................................41

Appendices.............................................................................................................................................................44
Appendix 1a) Case Study Findings Table 1: Incidents of Famine.................................................................44
Appendix 1b) Case Study Findings Table 2: Incidents of Famine Prevention..............................................45
Appendix 1c) Case Study Findings Table 3: Challenging Incidents..............................................................46

Bibliography..........................................................................................................................................................48
Statement of Originality

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

Signed.................................. (candidate)  Date ..............................

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed.................................. (candidate)  Date ..............................
Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge and thank my dissertation tutor, Richard Carver, for his time, patience, and invaluable guidance throughout this research. I would also like to give thanks to the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP) lecturers and staff at Oxford Brookes University for their time and inspiration.

I would also like to acknowledge photographer Kevin Carter who’s powerful Pulitzer Prize winning photo appears on the inside cover. (http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/08/12/vulture-stalking-a-child/) The photograph depicts a vulture stalking a young emaciated Sudanese girl. Carter took the photograph in March 1993 during a visit to a village in Southern Sudan with the United Nations, who were distributing food aid. He is reported to have taken his life only a few months after this. Studying his iconic work during my undergraduate Journalism degree first roused my interest in this field, and led to some life changing decisions.
Abstract

This study critically investigates the argument put forward by many theorists that democracy and a free press prevent the occurrence of famine. It aims to test the extent to which the theory is universally applicable in all instances. The role and importance of the free press in this theory is investigated with the aim to discover if it is as integral to famine prevention as is claimed, or if there are any other factors that are of key importance. To investigate this research area an extensive literature review was undertaken, followed by a case study analysis of commonalities.

It is apparent that this area is astoundingly complex. It has many significant aspects and is multifaceted in nature. The theory, whilst appearing logical on paper does not seem to hold true in a number of instances. It is evident that associating incidents of famine prevention with a democratic climate is not sufficient to prove a causal link between the two. Existence of famine under one type of government does not logically and automatically guarantee absence under another. The free press appears to vary in levels of importance in the instances investigated, thus suggesting it does not retain a ‘key’ role in the prevention of famine. Government responsiveness, regardless of the political system, and effective early-response systems with public mobilisation seem to be imperative in successful famine prevention. This discovery suggests that further research should be done to allow a greater understanding of the elements that are potentially of great significance in famine prevention.
Introduction

This study aims to critically investigate one of the many theories surrounding the prevention of famine. The theory being referred to is most commonly linked to Amartya Sen who confidently declares: ‘It is certainly true that there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy.’ (Sen, 1999, p.178)

Sen’s theory revolves around the idea that a ‘functioning democracy’ contains ‘political incentives generated by elections, multiparty politics, and investigative journalism’ (Sen, 1999, p.178) and that this in turn prevents the occurrence of famine. Whilst the blanket term of ‘democracy’ is used to encase Sen’s theory, he also places great emphasis on the existence and role of a free press in famine prevention.

Sen’s following statement highlights the underlying principles of his theory:

‘A free press and the practice of democracy contribute greatly to bringing out information that can have an enormous impact on policies of famine prevention…The most elementary source of basic information from distant areas about a threatening famine are enterprising news media, especially when there are incentives – provided by a democratic system – for bringing out the facts that may be embarrassing to the government (facts that an authoritarian government would tend to censor out). Indeed, I would argue that a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threatened by famines can have.’

(Sen, 1999, pp.180-81)

Sen highlights the free press as an element that can only successfully operate within a democratic climate. It also appears that his theory is loosely based on the “shame” principle, ‘if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority don’t have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines.’ (Sen, 1999, p.180)

A free press would be able to report on food shortage, pending famine, and government failure. This of course would be detrimental to the ruling party and, in theory, provoke action. Democracy, and the free press as an active element would therefore ‘spread the penalty of famines to the ruling groups and political leaders as well. This gives them the political incentive to try to prevent any threatening famine’. (Sen, 1999, p.180)

It is apparent that there is evidence to support Sen’s theory in many instances and it is supported by the work of several other scholars. This study however, aims to test the strength of Sen’s theory and theories similar to this, and to discover whether they can be universally applied in all instances.
Sen has been highlighted as a key theorist; however, Frances D’Souza also maintains that ‘the only solution to famine, whether in time of peace or of war, is indeed democracy.’ (D’Souza, 1994, p.373)

This research will highlight the complexity of this area, and argue that famine prevention does not have a cut and dry solution. It will investigate if a free press actually has a key role in the prevention of famine in a democratic climate, and it will aim to identify other key elements that are significant in famine prevention.

The proceeding methodology section will outline the research processes used to gain and analyse material. The main body of this research will be broken into sections and subsections that discuss several different topics essential to the area as a whole. It will culminate with twelve case studies subjected to a comparative analysis based on four variables.

‘The Phenomenon of Famine’, will briefly explore the differing definitions of ‘famine’, its’ possible causes, and briefly introduce the free press as a way to prevent famine. ‘Democracy and Governance’, will briefly explore what is meant by the term ‘democracy’. Reference will be made to media ownership and freedoms, government transparency and accountability and possible links between the two. ‘The Free Press’, will explore what is meant by the term ‘free press’. The role, power and influence of the press will be considered, as will the “shame theory” as a technique to incite action. This will run along side a brief discussion of the importance of an active public sphere. Lastly, ‘Democracy, Free Press and Famine Prevention’, aims to draw the previous material together. It will explore and critique the relationship between democracy, free press and famine prevention.

The aim of the four sections detailed above is to provide a background to the general theory, and to highlight the current literature, but more importantly to highlight the issues and gaps in the theory.

Twelve brief case studies will follow and will draw upon the information discussed in the preceding sections. The first four cases discuss four incidents widely regarded as occurrences of famine. The proceeding four cases discuss incidents of successful famine prevention, and the last four cases are incidents that have caused controversy and disagreement among theorists in the field. All cases will be analysed using the four variables that are discussed in the methodology, and will end with a brief summation.

The conclusion will contain discussion of the findings gained from the main body of research and the comparative analysis of the individual case studies. This section will aim to try and answer the title question and to declare if there are other factors of importance in famine prevention. Any further research that could be conducted to further this work or to allow generalisation will be suggested.
Methodology

To investigate the chosen subject area two research methods were selected. The first method adopted was an extensive review of available literature surrounding the areas of famine, democracy, and the free press on an individual basis, and existing literature linking one or more of the aforementioned areas. During this review it became clear that there were gaps in this area that required exploration, and that further investigation could produce a fascinating research study.

The second method utilised involved investigation into a number of incidents of famine, and famine prevention. This research was developed in a case study format, which could subsequently be subjected to an analysis of commonalities.


In order to effectively analyse the incidents identified, the work of Ragin and Amoroso (2011) regarding Social Research was utilised. Ragin and Amoroso (2011, p.8) state that:

‘Social research is one among many ways of constructing representations of social life – of telling about society. It is the product of the efforts of an individual (or group of individuals) that address socially significant phenomena, engages directly or indirectly with ideas or social theory, incorporates large amounts of appropriate evidence that has been purposefully collected, and results from systematic analysis of this evidence.’

Elements of deductive and inductive approaches were utilised. Deductive approaches are often referred to as ‘top-down’ approaches. They begin with a pre-existing theory and incorporate methods to test this theory. Inductive approaches, or ‘bottom-up’ approaches, involve exploring an area, developing a hypothesis, testing it, and developing a theory. This research began with an existing theory. The examination of the existing literature and the aforementioned instances in a case study format aims to test the existing theory, which is deductive. In conjunction with this, new evidence will be gathered which could lead to a new or altered theory, which is inductive.

In this instance there are several aspects of society that are under investigation, the institutions of government and media, the public sphere, and the phenomenon of famine.
Ragin and Amoroso (2011, p.57) state that:

‘Social research, in simple terms, involves a dialogue between ideas and evidence. Ideas help social researchers make sense of evidence, and researchers use evidence to extend, revise, and test ideas.’

Extensive qualitative research was needed to gain insight, explore ideas and gain evidence with regards to the main areas of investigation. ‘Researchers use qualitative methods when they believe that the best way to construct a proper representation is through in-depth study of phenomena.’ (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.134) A plethora of information was gathered, much of which could be expressed in written prose. However, the information gained relating to the specific instances required further dissection, discussion, and analysis. In order to effectively do this, a case study approach was adopted.

‘The analysis of social phenomena, while important, is only part of the dialogue of ideas and evidence. The other important part involves the synthesis of evidence. Synthesis is the counterpart to analysis. Analysis involves breaking things in to parts…synthesis involves putting pieces together to make sense of them.’

(Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.58)

Ragin and Amoroso (2011, p.9) mention that ‘social research relies heavily on the language of variables and relationships among variables’. In this instance there are several variables being investigated within the case studies. Ragin and Amoroso (2011, p.51) state: ‘Qualitative researchers interested in commonalities examine many aspects or features of a relatively small number of cases in depth.’ For the purpose of this research it was important to investigate the presence, or absence of the following variables in each of the cases identified:

- An accountable democratic government
- An active free press
- International pressure or involvement
- An active public sphere

As the cases of famine or famine prevention being analysed are past instances, there is existing literature on them. Some of this literature is factual and some incorporates theory. As this is the case, a review and analysis of relevant material relating to each instance was required. During this process, the presence or absence of many of the variables above became naturally evident or could be identified.

The interpretation of information, and indeed the theorists’ interpretation of information is important. For example, it became apparent that the definition of ‘famine’ is subject to great debate. A single instance could be seen as the occurrence of famine by one theorist and not by another. In many cases it
relates to individual opinion and interpretation of the data. Definitions of ‘democracy’ and ‘free press’
also incite disagreement. This in itself could be considered an issue. However, this discrepancy
between theorists on the key ‘definitions’ is a crucial discovery. This will be discussed in greater length
in the subsequent sections.

This method was adopted due to the notion that ‘Qualitative methods are appropriate for in-depth
examination of cases because they aid the identification of key features. Most qualitative methods
enhance data.’ (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.110) This approach also allows both commonalities and
differences to be identified through the use of the four variables.

Analysing the findings produced via the case studies in relation to the research question is vital. As
several variables were identified, the presence or absence of these in each case can be recorded and
collated in tabular format to see what commonalities and differences can be identified.

The main issue with research of this type is that the number of cases considered and analysed is
relatively small, making it difficult to generalise findings. In this instance the findings could be used to
prompt further more in depth research. There is also a lot of opposing opinion regarding events,
circumstances, and definitions, as previously mentioned. This makes it difficult to draw concrete
conclusions as the foundation of the theory can be fluid.

One of the underlying goals of this type of social research is ‘to generate knowledge with the potential
to transform society.’ (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.33) The area seems to be one of much controversy,
but of massive importance. If through an investigation of this type, any insight or information is gained
that could in turn lead directly or indirectly to the prevention of famine it would give the investigation
some relative value.
The Phenomenon of Famine

What is a ‘famine’?

‘Famine is like insanity, hard to define, but glaring enough when recognised.’

This section does not aim to define ‘famine’ or to argue which of the many definitions should and should not be used. It aims to highlight some of the more widely used definitions, and in doing this, highlight one of the main issues discovered when researching famine.

Devereux (2007, p.36) states:

‘One feature that has confounded the adoption of appropriate criteria for identifying a famine is that humanitarian crises are dynamic and constantly evolving. Famines affect the same and different areas to different degrees at different times, which makes it problematic to apply a single label to the entire phenomenon.’

When using the term ‘famine’ to describe a situation, to declare that famine is or isn’t occurring, or in developing a theory relating to famine, one would assume that the term ‘famine’ carried a universal definition. This however seems not to be the case. There is ‘tension between conflicting understandings of famine’. (De Waal, 1989, p.9)

There appear to be multiple and vastly differing ‘definitions’ of ‘famine’, but not one concise definition that is used across the board. Some definitions are broad; suggesting it is obvious to the eye when a famine is occurring. Some are based on excess mortality rates, or on calories consumed or available to consume. Some concern the number of people with a ‘less than adequate’ food supply or that are ‘starving’. The list is vast and often contains terms that are themselves loosely defined. ‘Most attempts to define famine merely describe its commonest causes and effects, and the boundaries between definition, description and explanations of famine are often blurred.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.9)

Sen is well known for his theory concerning famine prevention, however he appears to only informally define the term ‘famine’. Many of his ‘definitions’ appear to be broad, implying the use of ones judgment. The following citation from ‘Poverty and Famines’ illustrates this. Sen (1981, pp.39-40) states:

‘Famines imply starvation, but not vice versa. And Starvation implies poverty, but not vice versa…Starvation is a normal feature in many parts of the world, but this phenomenon of ‘regular’ starvation has to be distinguished from violent outbursts of famines…While there is quite a literature on how to ‘define’ famines, one can very often diagnose it – like a flood or a fire – even without being armed with a precise definition.’
This definition has an almost riddle like quality to it, which is striking as this is the basis for much of Sen’s theory relating to famine. The above passage could be inadequate in the attempt to define an incident as a famine. It could also be too expansive categorising more incidents as famines than may be realistic.

Sen is of course not the only theorist to offer a definition of famine. Rudin (2011, p.1) states: ‘Famine, understood as widespread death by starvation, is the most extreme manifestation of the existence of poverty, inequality and political apathy.’ The essence of this definition seems to be at the core of a western understanding of what ‘famine’ is.

Devereux (1993, p.9) states:

‘If asked to define ‘famine’, most people in the West would probably volunteer variations on: ‘mass death by starvation’. Famine is perceived as an abnormal event with distinctive and dramatic characteristics.’

Herein lies the issue, as De Waal (1989, p.9) states: ‘There is clearly a major problem here. What is famine?’

Devereux (1993, pp.10-16) acknowledges that there are many possible definitions of ‘famine’. There are ‘Dictionary definitions’, ‘Food shortage definitions’, ‘Famine as mass starvation’, ‘Behavioral definitions’, and ‘Insider definitions’. Devereux concludes that ‘outsider’ definitions, those of us looking in, have a fixation with three elements believed to distinguish famine from incidents of poverty or hunger. ‘These are: 1. A critical food shortage; 2. Starvation; 3. Excess mortality. Yet many recent famines fail to meet even these basic criteria.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.18) He argues that famines in Bangladesh (1974), Western Sudan (1984-1985) and Sahel (1972-1974) managed to occur without meeting these criteria.

Howe and Devereux (2004) in their article ‘Famine Intensity and Magnitude Scales: A Proposal for an Instrumental Definition of Famine’ attempt to make the definition of famine operational via the use of a famine ‘intensity scale’. This scale, with five levels of intensity, aims to determine if an incident should be classified as a famine though the use of several criteria. No detailed explanation of this scale shall be discussed here however, Rudin (2011, p.53) describes this scale as ‘one of the most successful attempts at operationalizing the concept of famine’ and it has been adopted by many institutions.

Devereux (2007, p.36) states:

‘The intensity parameter recognizes that famines do not have a uniform effect over an entire population area. A system of intensity levels can be used to identify the severity of conditions in a given area and to make comparisons with the situation in other areas, or in the same
location at other times. An intensity level can be assigned to the population area using a combination of anthropometric and mortality indicators, as well as food security descriptors.

For the purpose of this research it is not necessary to define ‘famine’. It is however vital to highlight the lack of a universal definition, as this is something that will be referred to later in the study.

What causes a famine?

Is it important to touch upon the causes of famine, even with such a wide definition of what this could actually mean. Identifying causes is vital when aiming to achieve prevention. This subsection does not aim to categorically uncover every cause. It aims to give a brief insight into several possible causes.

Curtis et al (1988, p.5) propose that the causes of famine can be grouped into three main categories, ‘Long Term’, ‘Precipitating’ and ‘Relief Failure’. ‘Long Term’ causes are described as:

‘household income loss or income instability which increase the vulnerability of poor people…environmental degradation…Social changes…occupation of the best land by the rich and consequent loss of access by the poor.’

(Curtis et al, 1988, p.5)

‘Precipitating’ causes are:

‘events which dislodge the last food security of the poor, setting off the secondary events which worsen the situation – spiraling food prices, collapsing prices of rural assets…calling in of debts, laying-off of employees…Precipitating factors include all those which actually reduce the food supply (drought, floods, war, epidemics)

(Curtis et al, 1988, p.5)

Lastly, regarding ‘Relief Failure’, it is suggested that ‘For famine to be precipitated, governmental famine- prevention administration must be inadequate, incompetent or unable to operate.’ (Curtis et al, 1988, p.5)

As is evident, there can be many causes of famine; the above is merely an insight. Cases tend to be multifaceted with a number of factors occurring simultaneously. It is this complexity that makes the definition of ‘famine’, and successful universal famine prevention a convoluted area.
Famine prevention

Famine prevention techniques vary vastly; no attempt will be made to outline every possible option. Many prevention techniques revolve around preemptive measures and reducing the impact of precipitating factors, for example crop failure or drought.

Democracy is considered by many theorists to be a ‘cure’, of sorts, for famine. Sen highlights the importance of a free press, and D’Souza theorises about independent media, free flow of information, and an end to censorship. In her paper ‘Starving in silence: A report on Famine and Censorship’ D’Souza (1990, p.1) states: ‘If censorship can be eradicated, then famine can become a preventable catastrophe’.

The free press as a possible way to prevent famine will be discussed and critiqued later in the study.

Democracy and Governance

What is a ‘democracy’?

‘Not surprisingly, there are numerous different conceptions of democracy…Collier and Levitsky (1997) carry out an extensive literature review on democratic theory in which they identify more than 550 examples.’

(Rudin, 2011, p.18)

For the purpose of this study it is important to outline the aspects of democracy commonly associated with a democratic government. It is however not necessary to define ‘democracy’. It is a complex area too involved for this section.

Dahl (1989, p.1) states:

‘From ancient times some people have conceived of a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves.’

The above is indicative of the “rule by the people” notion commonly attributed to numerous conceptualisations of democracy. It is expected that a democracy is multiparty, and that frequent multiparty public elections take place to elect parties to power. Rudin (2011, p.19) states that:

‘contemporary orthodox democracy theory is based on an understanding of democracy as a set of political institutional arrangements that as a minimum encompass free and fair elections with broad suffrage.’
Expanding on this Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003, pp.1-2) states:

‘Economic equality is important for a democracy…There are more than one political party that can be elected to power; the party/parties in power reflect(s) the political beliefs of the majority population; there are frequent elections…the party/parties in power can be re-elected or out-voted after a certain period; there exist a real freedom to organize and to form parties or unions, or other expressive units; there exist a real freedom to express different views, referred to as “the freedom of speech”’

The use of the word ‘real’ is important in the former citation as the public sphere should be free from the fear of consequence when expressing opinion.

Whilst trying to conceptualise democracy, Rudin (2011, p.19) mentions that newer theories emphasise that ‘the crucial ingredient in a functioning democracy is an active public sphere in which matters of common interest and political issues can be debated and discussed’.

It is also commonly assumed that a suitable degree of political and civil rights are present and accessible in a democratic climate, and that these rights relate to associated freedoms. For example: freedom of speech, freedom of and access to information, and a free and independent media. Citizens within a democracy can expect to maintain social norms, and to retain equal legal rights and judicial independence to ensure rule of law. In contrast, it is suggested that in non-democratic governments these elements are weak or absent altogether.

This study will focus on several of the elements commonly associated with a democratic climate: accountability of government, freedom of speech, information, and press, and an active public sphere.

**Media ownership**

Focusing on the free press, it is not to say that press freedom could not exist in a more authoritarian regime, however research suggests that a free press is more likely to operate successfully within a democratic climate.

Media ownership and control can vary vastly. Referring to the crisis in Sudan (1983-1985) D’Souza (1990, p.82) states:

‘Reporting on these food shortages was prohibited in order not to prejudice the continued inflow of Arab ‘bread basket’ money. When a message concerning the situation from the Commissioner of Bahr el Ghazal was broadcast, the police arrested the broadcasters responsible.’
There have also been instances where journalists have been prevented from reporting in areas, or on topics that are being censored by the ruling group. This was the case in Ethiopia (1982-1985); government censorship in turn produced misinformation.

Media ownership and control can vary vastly; government/state control, government/state ownership, private ownership, and public ownership, is naming just a few. All will have varying degrees of free speech and censorship. There is an argument concerning the extent to which the media can be ‘free’. Privately owned media may, for example, promote an agenda. Coronel (n.d) argues that the media in a democratic climate does not always hold true to the notion of a free press. She states:

‘They are hobbled by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership, and sometimes, the threat of brute force…Serious reporting is difficult to sustain in competitive media markets that put a premium on the shallow and sensational.’

(Coronel, n.d, p.1)

This will be looked at further in the proceeding section. It is however important to recognise that the type of ruling group in power, and the ownership of the media will have an effect on its’ ability to report.

The issue of transparency

Given the issues discussed so far, it seems fitting to briefly introduce the issue of government transparency. In arguing that government censorship of information has negative effects, and in advocating freedom of information and press, one is also appealing for government transparency.

‘The right to information is increasingly recognised as a fundamental democratic right’. (Fox, 2007, p.663) It should be noted that freedom of information is limited, for example, it does not encompass information relating to national security.

Many argue that transparency is fundamental in achieving good governance. The claim of transparency and freedom of information generates the belief that the government is not concealing vital information from the public sphere that could be of interest or importance. It promotes the idea that the ruling group is not engaged in actions that could be deemed disreputable or detrimental to the public sphere.

When considering famine, the main focus is on a ‘specific feature of transparency: access to government information, or freedom of information’. (Birkinshaw, 2006, cited in Hood and Heald, 2006, p.47) When famine threatens, in theory a transparent government should make available to the public sphere any information or instruction that could aid famine prevention, and any other information that would be vital in this context.
Arguably one of the main reasons for desiring government transparency revolves around the notion that transparency allows the public and other mediums to monitor government activities. Birkinshaw (2006, cited in Hood and Heald, 2006, p.51) suggests: ‘openness, meaning open processes, and access to information are readily acknowledged as necessary components of responsible and responsive government.’

The core of this theory appears to lie in the simple belief that if we know we are being watched, we behave in a more moral and honourable way. Fox (2007, p.663) states that the hope is ‘that transparency will empower efforts to change the behaviour of powerful institutions by holding them accountable in the glare of the public eye.’

To refer back to the Sudanese Famine (1983-1985), censorship, lack of transparency, and disinformation were used to downplay the famine with dire consequences. It is argued that publicly available ‘information about the agent’s behaviour makes the agent more accountable and more likely to work for the common good.’ (Birkinshaw, 2006, cited in Hood and Heald, 2006, p.91)

Within the argument that democracy prevents famine, transparency, free flow of information and the use of shame appear to be key components. Sen (1999, p.180) states:

‘And if there are no elections, no opposition parties, no scope for uncensored public criticism, then those in authority don’t have to suffer the political consequences of their failure to prevent famines. Democracy, on the other hand, would spread the penalty of famines to the ruling groups and political leaders as well. This gives them the political incentive to try to prevent any threatening famine…and since famines are easy to prevent…the approaching famines are firmly prevented.’

The above theory makes sense on paper. It just appears that in reality it may not be this simple. The theory also alludes to the notion that as famines can occur in an autocratic climate, they should automatically not occur in a democratic one. This conclusion is not necessarily logical. Occurrence of famine in one circumstance does not necessarily logically and automatically lead to absence in another. Explanation as to why a democratically elected government would automatically be concerned is not especially clear.

Transparency appears to be of vital importance in a functioning democratic climate. However, there is a lot being assumed by Sen and other theorists. It is assumed that the simple existence of transparency guarantees freedom of information. That said information is trickled down to the public sphere via a medium, for example a free press, that action is taken by an active public sphere and that the government responds accordingly. There are a lot of steps that rely on several elements existing and inciting action. It could be suggested that the simple existence of transparency does not guarantee the government will be accountable or hold itself accountable.
Fox (2007, p.665) argues that:

‘If the power of transparency is based on the ‘power of shame’, then its influence over the really shameless could be quite limited. It turns out that transparency is necessary but far from sufficient to produce accountability.’

**Government accountability**

Transparency alone does not guarantee accountability, but it is evident that ‘reliable information is essential for accountability.’ (Birkinshaw, 2006, cited in Hood and Heald, 2006, p.51)

The underlying theme visible in theories advocating democracy as a way to prevent famine is the idea that democratic governments are accountable, have political and moral reason to act, and that autocratic governments are not subject to the same public pressures. ‘Democracy and an uncensored press can spread the penalties of famine from the destitute to those in authority. There is no surer way of making the government responsible to the suffering of famine victims.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.10, citing Sen, 1990, p.12)

Theorists Held and Koenig-Archibugi (2005, p.87) hypothesise about accountability in a democratic climate:

‘In a democracy, governors are answerable to the governed for their actions and omissions. When democratic authorities perform well, they warrant their public’s support. However, when they err, rulers owe affected citizens apologies, explanations compensations and possible resignations. When the damage of misguided governance is particularly severe, the public in a democracy may remove the responsible persons from office or even shut down the agency in question. In this way democracy is a continual correction of mistakes.’

An automatic link between the transparency and accountability is implied by theorists such as Sen and D’Souza. However, it is not clear how this works in practice. The link between transparency, government accountability, the free press and famine prevention seems to be increasingly complex.

Rudin (2011, p.10) states:

‘The free press is important as a mediator of information and ensures that a famine cannot be concealed from the greater public. Knowledge is obviously a prerequisite for making a government accountable…In a democracy, the free press thus plays two important roles in famine protection: one as a mediator of information and the other by holding the government accountable.’
The Free Press

What is a ‘free press’?

It won’t cause surprise to highlight the fact that many theorists use the term ‘free press’, or refer to the importance of a ‘free press’ without defining what they actually mean by this. As with the terms ‘famine’ and ‘democracy’ it is once again hard to pin-point a universally applied definition of a widely used term. The ‘press’ element also remains somewhat ambiguous. It is not immediately clear if this refers to all forms of media or if it is limited.


There are common assumptions of what the term ‘free press’ encompasses. For example: freedom from government ownership, control, censorship, or influence. Press freedom is often guaranteed by governments and in constitutions, however, what this encompasses may differ country to country. Bollinger (1976, p.1) states that in the United States of America ‘Supreme Court has accorded the print media virtually complete constitutional protection from attempts by government to impose affirmative controls such as access regulation.’ In the United Kingdom the following is stated:

‘We define freedom of the press as that degree of freedom from restraint which is essential to enable proprietors, editors and journalists to advance the public interest by publishing the facts and opinions without which a democratic electorate cannot take responsive judgments.’

(Robertson and Nichol 2007, vii, citing Royal Commission on the Press, Final Report)

To address the issue of what is commonly meant by ‘press’ in the term ‘free press’, Rogers (n.d) in an article about press freedom states the term ‘free press’ ‘can be extrapolated to include all news media - TV, radio, the web, etc.’ (http://journalism.about.com/od/ethicsprofessionalism/a/firstamen.htm)

It is understood that a free press can express opinion, and reveal information or facts, even if it is detrimental to, or criticises the government or any other organisation. This is the essence of a free press and appears to be what is generally understood by the term. For the purpose of this research reference to ‘free press’ will refer to the above. When citing theorists who refer to a ‘free press’ the definition however cannot be guaranteed.

Considering the elements associated with a free press, it can be assumed that press bodies that are not ‘free’ do not enjoy the same enjoy the same freedoms.
The existence of a free press is questioned by many theorists. Publishers may have their biases, interests, agendas, possible unspoken restrictions, and allegiances. Herman and Chomsky (1994, xi) state:

‘the democratic postulate is that the media are independent and committed to discovering and reporting the truth, and that they do not merely reflect the world as powerful groups wish it to be perceived. Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria…If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to “manage” public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.’

This suggests the possibility for corruption and that a free press may not be entirely ‘free’. The competitive market place may also determine what is published and given priority in an attempt to gain sales or audience.

It should also be highlighted that freedom of expression is not unconditional. The European Convention on Human Rights, Freedom of Expression, Article 10.2 states:

‘The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.’

For the purpose of this study, investigation surrounds government ownership, control, and censorship and whether or not the press is free from this.

The role of the free press

The free press appears highly in Sen and D'Souza’s famine prevention theories. The fact that it appears to be integral implies the belief that the free press has some degree of power and influence, that it is essential for a functioning democracy, and is able to hold a government accountable. Anderson (1983, p.2) mentions that the press ‘is the primary conduit for democratic dialogue, the process by which we inform ourselves about matters of self-governance.’
There are many theorists that refer to the influence of the free press and its ability and to engage the public sphere, Cohen, Allan, and Critcher is to name a few. They do not always speak of the free press in favourable terms, or look kindly upon the sensationalist techniques used. Allan (2002, p.2) negatively remarks ‘If it bleeds it leads’, however, they do not question that influence is visible. In 1999 a media campaign against Genetically Modified (GM) Food saw the government subsequently reject the use of GM crops in the United Kingdom, despite the considerable economic cost.

The ideology of a free press incorporates the notion that journalists effectively utilise the right to freedom of information, bring details to the attention of the public, and provide an arena for public debate. ‘Democracy requires the active participation of citizens…the media should keep citizens engaged in the business of governance by informing, educating and mobilising the public.’ (Coronel, n.d, p.1) This is visible to the government in power, and the parties who are looking to gain power.

It would appear that a free press has greater power than simply airing information of concern in the interest of transparency. It looks to incite action or response from the public sphere using various techniques. To reiterate a point here made in the previous section by Rudin (2011, p.10), ‘The free press is important as a mediator of information…Knowledge is obviously a prerequisite for making a government accountable.’

Coronel (n.d), in her paper ‘The Role of the Media in Deepening Democracy’, discusses this issue of accountability at length. She States: ‘the notion of the media as watchdog, as guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between governors and the governed remains deeply ingrained.’ (Coronel, n.d, p.1)

The idea of a watchdog encompasses this idea of a “shame theory”. When your actions are public, you are more likely to behave, or respond when shamed. Coronel (n.d, p.1) states:

‘Investigative reporting, which in some cases has led to the ouster of presidents and the fall of corrupt governments, has made the media an effective and credible watchdog and boosted its credibility among the public. Investigative reporting has also helped accustom officials to an inquisitive press and helped build a culture of openness and disclosure that has made democratically elected governments more accountable.’

Sen’s theory of famine prevention rests on a functioning democracy. This reference to the term ‘functioning’ is important. It seems to imply a transparent government that can be held accountable, and the existence of an active free press to supply information, engage the public, and hold a government accountable. It appears that there is evidence to support this theory in the science, health and food sectors, but does this theory apply to famine prevention?
Democracy, Free Press and Famine Prevention

This section will bring together and critique the ideas discussed thus far with relation to the prevention of famine.

Sen (1999, p.6) states:

‘Famines are easy to prevent if there is a serious effort to do so, and a democratic government, facing elections and criticisms from opposition parties and independent newspapers, cannot help but make such an effort…while India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence…they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.’

Sen’s theory is heavily based on the Chinese Famine (1958-1961) and the drought in India (1973). The Chinese Famine (1958-1961) is used to highlight the possible negative impact of communist rule, government controlled press, misinformation, and pervasive government control of the public. The case of drought in India (1973) is used to highlight famine prevention in a multiparty democracy, with freedom of information and press, and a strong public sphere engaging in political debate.

D’Souza (1994, p.373) who also refers heavily to the aforementioned Chinese and Indian examples states: ‘the only solution to famine, whether in time of peace or of war, is indeed democracy.’ She strongly advocates that an end to censorship will prevent famine.

Both theories rely on democracy working in practice as it is said to in theory. The free press is operating as expected, the public are actively engaged, and that the government will desire to be re-elected and therefore will want to appease the public.

The apparent conclusion to draw from the citations above is that the existence of democracy and a free press is sufficient to prevent famines. This section does not aim to discredit the general theory. It will however suggest that the existence of democracy and a free press is not adequate to prevent famine alone.

Sen does not dispute the fact that people starve to death in multiparty democracies. His theory focuses on incidents that he considers to be ‘famines’. We have already seen that ‘famines’ are hard to define. Sen’s theory is often disputed based on instances occurring that other theorists consider to be ‘famines’ that Sen does not. Instances of famine occurring under democratic rule are often critiqued by analysing the government in power and concluding that democracy at the time was weak or not ‘functioning’ correctly.
Myrvold-Hanssen (2003) discusses Bihar (1966-1967), an incident perceived by many to be a famine occurring in democratic India, a considerable time after independence. Myrvold-Hanssen (2003, pp.2-3) states that the incident in Bihar shows ‘little support for Sen’s argument.’

The Bihar drought is controversial. On one hand theorists state that famine was prevented and use it as evidence to support the democracy prevents famine hypothesis. On the other hand theorists use it to falsify the hypothesis stating that a famine did occur therefore democracy does not prevent famine.

Myrvold-Hanssen (2003, p.3) uses Bihar (1966-1967) to challenge Sen’s theory stating ‘Famine was declared on 20 April 1967.’ Examination of calorie intake, excess mortality, and even some of the definitions of famine found in footnotes in Sen’s ‘Poverty and Famines’ were analysed.

‘There is indeed fairly good reason to treat the Bihar incident in 1966-67 as a famine. Nevertheless, Sen seems not inclined to do so. The case of Bihar weakens the claim that “potential famines have been prevented from occurring in India since independence.”’

(Myrvold-Hanssen, 2003, p.4)

However, Sen, in applying his own theory, does not consider the case of Bihar to weaken his argument.

‘The Famine in Bihar does not in general undermine the attention Sen has given to entitlements and capabilities, but can be seen as a counter example to the view that democracy and a free press in particular, two features of post independent India, will typically alleviate famines.’

(Myrvold-Hanssen, 2003, p.4)

This highlights the main difficulty found in famine prevention theory. This is not just a minor disagreement. The above outlines opposing viewpoints. It is evident that claims are often highly based on opinion, data interpretation, and on examples that are chosen to fit. De Waal (2000, p.3) states Sen has:

‘repeatedly pointed out, democratic India has conspicuously failed to overcome widespread malnutrition. What is the dividing line between this extensive chronic poverty and hunger, and the phenomenon of famine? In addition, demonstrating an empirical association between liberal democratic institutions and the absence of famine in not enough to prove the causal link.’

The theory that democracy prevents famine is not easy to analyse. This is in part due to the huge discrepancy in definitions of the core elements, ‘democracy’ and ‘famine’ and what each constitutes.
There are also cases in history that challenge the theory. De Waal (2000) highlights Bihar (1966-1967), and Bangladesh (1974).

De Waal (2000) suggests a famine by one definition occurred in Bihar, but mass death was prevented. In Bangladesh (1974) De Waal (2000, p.11) states: ‘the institutions were democratic and liberal in name only…this begs the question: what are ‘real’ democratic institutions?’ It appears that the incident in Bangladesh (1974) was allowed to develop under a democratically elected government. Some would use this to try and discredit the democracy prevents famine theory. However, others state that as the government reverted to a more authoritarian rule during the famine that this alone is not sufficient to disprove the theory.

Analysing the type of government in power at the time of the incident is integral, as is the definition of famine being used. However, these seem to differ from theorist to theorist. The issue of press freedom also needs to be carefully investigated. Consider the below passage:

‘The ‘democracy prevents famine’ argument seems to assume that just because liberal institutions can be used to protect famine vulnerable people, it automatically follows that they will. It implies that, in a free press, journalists and editors will automatically be concerned with the threat of famine and will use this concern to push for effective governmental action, and that electors will reward representatives who protect them against famine, but vote out those who fail to do so. These assumptions do not always hold true.’

(De Waal, 2000, pp.3-4)

This is a lot to assume of the press. The theory also assumes that the public sphere will know of and use their political and civil rights to speak out against famine. Human rights abuses are rife in some parts of the world. There is chronic poverty and malnutrition in democratic India. The continuing issue suggests that those affected are failing to use their basic rights to their advantage in a democratic climate that would supposedly respond. It is however assumed that incidents of famine are somehow different.

It is suggested that a free press can play an important role in famine prevention. In theory, the free press can provide information to both the public and the government. It can criticise those in power, and it could be used as a medium for public debate. The theories that focus and rely heavily on this idea of the free press do however seem to fail to go in to detail with regards to exactly how it aids famine prevention.

D’Souza (1994, p.372), with reference to India, mentions: ‘If and when food shortage threatens, food supply becomes a matter of intense public debate in the national, local and vernacular press,’ however no further detail is provided to explain how this leads to government accountability and preventative action.
Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003, p.5) states: ‘the relatively free press of Nigeria played a crucial role in helping to combat the 1973-74 famine in northern Nigeria.’ This is of interest as it was following the onset of famine and the press aided and operated under an authoritarian regime. In Kenya (1983-1985) a famine was prevented under authoritarian rule with a government owned and controlled press. This case will be considered further in the following section. This raises interesting points with regards to the theory that democracy prevents famine.

Sen’s suggestion is that a free press may be more likely to exist and operate in a democracy. However, the press may need to be considered in a wider context with regards to its possible role in famine prevention and alleviation.

One further point to mention here with regards to the free press is highlighted by Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003, p.5) who states:

‘The capacity to use a press, whether it is free or restricted, is very much limited to the various functionings a person holds. The level of literacy in a community is one of the most important determinants of the nature of the press.’

He goes on to examine the literacy rates in Kerala, India. He notes that literacy rates are high, and may go some way to explain why Kerala has not fallen victim to famine since independence, unlike Bihar. Those who are educated may be able to better interpret messages appearing in the press.

‘It is not unreasonable to state that a more educated people will have more ability to express their views and current living conditions...the news media will have more incentives for producing reliable and important news about the social and economic status of a community, since the news will certainly be read and criticized.’

(Myhrvold-Hanssen, 2003, p.6)

Literacy rates affect what is reported, understood, and will also directly affect the public sphere’s reaction and ability to react. What is reported, and the quality of information made available may be of importance.

Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003, p.7) states:

‘a free press can only serve as an instrumental factor in alleviating famines. Without an adequately educated population, there are no incentives to speak the poor man’s case...illustrated by the case of Kerala...As the cases of Bihar and Sudan suggest, neither a free press nor an electoral body is sufficient for alleviating famine’
The case studies will explore some incidents to expand on the elements discussed here. It does however appear that the free press may not have a ‘key’ role in famine prevention. Its successful use seems to depend highly on an array of factors. This alludes to there being other elements that could be ‘key’ in successful famine prevention.
Case Studies

This section will take twelve incidents and briefly analyse them in a case study format. The presence or absence of four variables is being investigated and considered with the aim to discover if the free press is integral to famine prevention, or if there are other elements that could be key.

The four variables:
- An accountable democratic government
- An active free press
- International pressure or involvement
- An active public sphere

The initial four cases will investigate incidents widely considered to be ‘famines’. The proceeding four cases are considered to be incidents where ‘famine’ was successfully prevented, and the last four cases discuss incidents causing some controversy. The results have been summarised in a simple table available in the Appendices, Appendix 1a), 1b) and 1c) respectively.

Incidents of Famine

China (1958-1961)

The context in which the famine occurred is complex. It is characterised by unfavourable weather conditions, drought, rapid government changes regarding agricultural policy, decline in food supply, and misinformation. The mortality figures are somewhat vague. Review of available literature puts the figure anywhere from 20 to 45 million. Historian Frank Dikotter, following a forensic analysis of Chinese archived documents, estimates the death toll to be ‘at least 45 million, instead of the 30 million previously generally accepted.’ (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66987/frank-dikamp195amp182tter/maos-great-famine-the-history-of-chinas-most-devastating-catastr)

It is widely known that abnormal weather was recorded during the years of 1958 -1961 including severe flooding and droughts. Many deaths were attributed directly to the weather conditions, for example drowning, or to the resulting factors. ‘Per capita grain supply fell from 307 kg/year in 1956 to 235 kg/year in 1961. Daily food energy availability fell to an estimated 1,535 calories in 1960’. (Devereux, 1993, p.143) Starvation ensued due to crop failure and a poor agricultural yield producing insufficient food supply.

D'Souza (1994, p.370) states:

‘famine was at least as much attributable to artificial conditions created by the state through its vast reorganization of agriculture, the rapid introduction of back-yard steel industries and,
above all, by the climate of misinformation, exaggeration and propaganda. The Truth in China was deliberately veiled and millions died as a result.’

At the time Chairman Mao Zedong was heading a communist government. The press was also under government control and was subject to censorship during the famine period. D’Souza (1994, p.371) powerfully states that the famine:

‘was a direct result of the withholding of information at all levels of Chinese bureaucracy…active censorship and disinformation prevented effective famine relief once the disaster had begun, and certainly prolonged the effects by concealing the gravity of the problem.’

It appears that the international community was unable to provide effective relief due to misinformation about the situation occurring. Civilians were also misinformed, thwarting any possibility of an active public sphere. D’Souza (1994, p.371) states:

‘It cannot be known whether the leaders actually believed assurances that agricultural production was about to surpass that of the previous bumper year: what was important was that the myth was perpetuated and sustained through fear and censorship. This served as a wholly effective barrier to accurate information and therefore to any relief action.’

Corruption was rife. Devereux (1993, p.145) mentions that at all levels ‘output figures were wildly exaggerated’. These ‘figures’ were then used as a basis to increase taxation.

In summation, several things can be noted. Rapid agricultural restructuring, poor government policy alteration, increased taxation, censorship and distorted information, climatic factors, and rule through strict communism and corruption all contributed to this incident and its devastating outcome.

**Ethiopia (1982-1985)**

The Ethiopian famine is usually referred to as beginning in 1984. However there are theorists that put the start date two years earlier in 1982. The immediate cause is commonly attributed to drought; despite the drought occurring after the onset of the famine.

Ethiopia is well known for its reliance on agriculture and unpredictable weather patterns. It is not difficult to see why famine is usually attributed to drought. Rainfall varies from:

‘800mm to 2,000mm per year but is unreliable in many areas. The pattern of rainfall is characterized by unpredictability and irregularity…Over 80 per cent of the population is dependant on agriculture’

(Goyder, H and C, n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, pp.75-76)
The rains that usually fall early in the year failed in 1984, and reserve crops fell victim to disease; ‘it was the total failure of the belg rains which normally come in February and March 1984 that was to transform a series of regional drought problems into a national disaster.’ (Goyder, H and C, n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, p.89)

The government at the time was communist, under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The press was controlled and censored by the government. D’Souza (1994, p.372) states:

‘The media in Ethiopia at that time were entirely state controlled. At the height of the famine in 1984 the government censored news and prevented journalists from travelling to the heart of the famine zone.’

It is evident that agricultural and military policies, taxation, and misinformation also played a role in creating the famine. The government levied heavy taxation forcing the sale of possessions to meet the payment.

‘The Ethiopian government’s efforts to censor not the existence of the famine but its causes was a significant factor in the distortion of information and the tardy relief response. The government ascribed the famine entirely to drought and soil erosion, whereas the three main precipitating factors for the famine were war, resettlement policies and agricultural policies.’

(D’Souza, 1994, p.371)

The international community did not initially respond to the famine. Government censorship of the media may have resulted in a lack of international relief during critical times. ‘Aid began to arrive in very large quantities towards the end of 1984 and continued into 1985, by which time the majority of those suffering from acute starvation had already died.’ (D’Souza, 1994, p.371)

However, it appears that the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Committee (RCC) in 1982 and 1983 appealed on more than one occasion for international support, to no avail. ‘As early as May 1981 the RCC had presented Ethiopia’s case to the UN Conference…By March 1984 the tone of the requests became more grave.’ (Goyder, H and C, n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, p.89)

In summation, once again we see a plethora of precipitating factors culminating in prolonged famine. Several things can again be noted, government policy, resettlement, taxation, climatic conditions, communist rule invoking censorship, a public restricted by policy, and lack of international support all contributed to famine.
Western Sudan, Darfur and Kordofan (1983-1985)

Similar conditions to those in Ethiopia were also developing in Darfur and Kordofan, regions in Western Sudan. ‘An estimated 200,000 people died in Darfur and Kordofan due to the famine: this number could have been far lower had there been an early response.’ (D’Souza, 1990, p.86)

President Colonel Gaafar Nimeiri headed a central government. In the 1970’s Nimeiri had been cultivating a development plan that revolved around mechanising agriculture to transform Sudan into the “breadbasket of the Arab world.” In order to do this ‘Sudan borrowed billions of dollars and turned over huge tracts of forest, pasture and small-holder plots to mechanised farming.’ (D’Souza, 1990, p.82) A huge inflow of money was needed from Arab nations to support this ambitious plan.

By 1978 the economy ran into crisis. Food supply was dwindling in several provinces. ‘Reporting on these food shortages was prohibited in order not to prejudice the continued inflow of Arab ‘bread basket’ money.’ (D’Souza, 1990, p.82)

During 1983 the economic crisis deepened and drought became prevalent in Darfur and Kordofan. D’Souza (1990, p.83) states: ‘To have called for foreign relief aid at this stage would have been tantamount to an admission of the failure of the ‘breadbasket’ plan.’ The government did not seek help, and as Sudan was widely believed to be food rich due to censorship and propaganda, no help was offered.

By mid 1984 the drought intensified and famine became a national crisis. Rains had once again failed, but this time drought affected a wider area. Famine was rife, however Nimeiri maintained that no food crisis existed. De Waal (1989, pp.115) states: ‘The years 1983 and 1984 were disastrous. In north Darfur only 18 per cent of the population’s grain needs were produced in these years’.

Despite the non-democratic climate opposition groups existed in other parts of Sudan. Nimeiri ‘was opposed in Darfur by Governor Ahmad Diraige, in the south by the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), and in Khartoum by the alliance of trades unions and professional associations,’ (D’Souza, 1990, p.83) who all made the famine public from 1984.

D’Souza (1990, p.85) states:

‘Nimeiri’s refusal to recognize the famine was culpable. It fatally delayed a response by FAQ and other UN agencies; they did not dare publicly mention the famine. However, in September 1 1984, the US government committed 80,000 tonnes of emergency food aid to Kordofan and Darfur. Shortly afterwards this was increased to 250,000 tonnes, (still without an official request from Nimeiri).’
The lack of an official request for aid hindered distribution attempts. Without formal invitation agencies were unable to distribute food. In 1985 Nimeiri admitted a food crisis existed and appealed internationally for relief.

In summation, we can see some common themes. Drastic development plans, censorship, authoritarian rule, government denial of famine, lack of appeal for international aid and climatic factors all contributed to the famine.

The Soviet Famine (1932-1934)

Historically, Russia is widely recognised as being prone to famine conditions usually explained away by reasons of climate and poverty. ‘The worst of these famines occurred in 1932-4, in which, at ‘a conservative estimate’ 5-7 million people died.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.140, citing Mace, 1983, p.34) At this time Joseph Stalin led a communist government.

Several views emerged with regards to the cause of famine. Many people argued that Stalin’s motivations had an economic nature, whilst others were ‘claiming that the famine amounted to politically motivated genocide.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.140) Most recognised that reckless government agricultural policy played an important factor.

Devereux (1993, p.141) mentions that the government opted for policies forcing mass agricultural collectivisation, ‘with disastrous effects. Agricultural output fell by 40 per cent’. D’Souza (1994, p.369) states: ‘strictly enforced collectivization caused a major famine in the Ukraine, yet Stalin continued to export the grain stocks that a less autocratic leader would have diverted to the starving at home.’

Political theory suggests that Stalin’s desire to control the peasants in rural areas may have resulted in a substantial famine. ‘This interpretation is given powerful and moving support by the accounts of Ukrainian survivors of the famine, who believe that the famine was engineered by Stalin as an instrument of racial genocide’. (Devereux, 1993, p.141)

It is reported that millions of tonnes of grain were exported, under the order of Stalin, in the years 1930 and 1932. Ukraine ‘exported 7.7 million tons of grain in 1930.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.141) ‘In 1932, Stalin again ordered the Ukraine to export 7.7m tonnes even though the ravages of collectivization had reduced the crop to two-thirds of the 1930s level.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.141, citing The Economist, 11 October 1986, p.100)

Information concerning the famine was actively suppressed by Soviet Authorities. Any discourse on the incident was considered criminal. The authorities also maintained that peasants were hiding grain and forbid them from eating their own produce.
This assumption was used as reason for the introduction, on August 7th 1932, of the ‘Decree of the Central Government of the USSR: On the Protection of the Property of State Enterprises, Collective Farms, and Cooperatives, and on the Consolidation of Public (Socialist) Property’.

(http://www.faminegenocide.com/kuryliw/corn_law.htm)

This decree allowed the government to confiscate grain, without limitation, from peasant dwellings. Any grain retained would be considered as theft of socialist property. Those responsible would be considered ‘enemies of the people’ as outlined in the decree. Punishment could include death by shooting, confiscation of the property, or a 10 year prison term including confiscation of the property. Those found protecting collective farms would be found guilty of treason, property would be forcibly destroyed and a prison term of 5 – 10 years in a concentration camp would be awarded.

Starvation induced migration from Ukraine to Russia, Devereux (1993, p.142) states:

‘According to Mace (1983, p.31), police checkpoints were set up along the Ukrainian border to prevent the starving from entering Russia and prevent anyone coming from Russia from carrying food with him into Ukraine.’

The Soviet Famine is complex and the causes are multiple. It is still uncertain as to whether or not there was motive behind it. It is interesting to note that ‘After Stalin’s death in 1953, the coercive model was abandoned, and there have been no famines since.’ (Devereux, 1993, p.142)

In summation, once again we can see that climate, censorship, radical government agricultural policy, severe restrictions placed on the public, strict authoritarian rule, and corruption all contributed to the famine.

**Incidents of Famine Prevention**

Sen (1999) argues that causes of famine are frequently attributed to natural occurrences or disasters. One glaring example in which flooding was blamed by many for the cause of famine is China (1958-1961). There are however many countries that maintain a similar or greater propensity for natural disasters that manage to avoid famine situations. Sen (1999, p.6) states:

‘Even the poorest democratic countries that have faced terrible droughts or floods or other natural disasters (such as India in 1973, or Zimbabwe or Botswana in the 1980s) have been able to feed their people without experiencing a famine.’
Zimbabwe (1982)

In the 1980’s Zimbabwe faced a prolonged drought. The circumstances were regarded as having the possibility to induce famine.

At the time Zimbabwe was recently independent, ‘The British Government formally granted independence to Zimbabwe on April 18, 1980.’
(http://africanhistory.about.com/od/zimbabwe/p/ZimbabweHist2.htm)

The elected government, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) was considered democratic in nature. It appears that at the time of the drought Zimbabwe maintained a restricted press. Mukasa (n.d) mentions it was transitional between the years 1980-1990 and states that ‘during this period the press was coerced to support the government.’ The independent press developed in the late 1980’s.


‘supplementary feeding scheme for children under five and lactating mothers, a water supply scheme, cattle protection, and input provision for peasant farmers…the main element of Zimbabwe’s 1982-1984 response was the distribution of take-home food rations to the rural adult population.’

(Munemo, 2012, p.2)

The administration of the relief program was at district and village level and called upon members of ZANU. Members were required to ‘identify districts, villages, and beneficiaries for inclusion in the food aid program for adults…ZANU party cadres were also responsible for the day-to-day distribution of rations to households.’ (Munemo, 2012, p.2)

Referring to Matabeleland specifically, the majority vote in the election was for the minority party, Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU). Carver (1993, p.75) states that during the drought:

‘food supplies were destroyed, shops closed and food confiscated from travellers. A strict curfew was imposed and curfew breakers shot. There were reports that food relief was only supplied to those who produced a ZANU(PF) party card.’

Despite the obvious human rights abuses in Matabeleland, the below statistics are said to relate to distributed relief and government spending during the drought.

‘Relief in Zimbabwe reached an average of 850,000 people a month in the first year and 1.46 million a month in the second and final year…in mid-1983, the government distributed free
food to about 2.1 million able-bodied adults, or 37 percent of the rural population...Zimbabwe spent over Z$22 million (or US$39 million in 2005 terms) in the first year and Z$42 million (US$52 million in 2005 terms) in the last year.’

(Munemo, 2012, p.3)

In summation, it appears that the ‘democratic’ government committed to averting famine by initiating early drought relief programs in some areas. It appears however, that the relief efforts were not the same in Matabeleland. This questions the nature and accountability of the government at the time. It is unclear whether or not the restricted press contributed to the relief effort. The public sphere was mobilised and responsive in certain areas. Famine was successfully averted during prolonged drought conditions without the need for international relief.

**Botswana (1982)**

‘Botswana is one of the most drought-prone countries in Africa’ (Morgan, n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, p.113), it is landlocked and has a fairly arid climate. It is not unusual for rains to fail and for periods of drought to ensue.

‘The modern government of Botswana is best described as a democratic, multiparty system with executive, legislative and judicial branches...Since Botswana's independence in 1966, a single political party has been in power - the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP)’

(http://www.unbotswana.org.bw/about_b.html)

The establishment of independence led to freedom of information and a free press. Fombad (2011, p.18) states:

‘Botswana has since independence shown a strong commitment to freedom of the mass media...It can be argued that it is widely admired clean, transparent and a democratic system of government has been sustained by its relatively free media.’

Munemo (2012, p.1) recalls that:

‘From late 1981 through 1986, Botswana endured six continuous years of inadequate and erratic rainfall. The severity and length of the drought left most rural Botswana without sufficient food.’

President Quett Ketumile Masire declared a state of drought and initiated a drought relief program between the years of 1982 and 1990.
Munemo (2012, p.1) states:

‘recovery measures in Botswana involved three key components. The first was a system of food distribution to pre-school, primary school children, pregnant and lactating mothers, TB patients and individuals defined as Destitute or Remote Area Dwellers.’

The relief program differs from the measures adopted in Zimbabwe. Those who needed remuneration for lost income were able to become involved in the second element of the relief effort; ‘a labour-intensive public works program’. (Munemo, 2012, p.1) This program offered temporary employment that could last up to eight months.

In 1986 the rain began to fall, which saw the government introduce the third and final element of the relief program the:

‘Accelerated Rainfed Arable Programme (ARAP)…ARAP contained eight packages (ploughing, row planting, weeding, destumping, field fencing, fertilizer provision, seed purchasing, and water provision.), under which farmers could benefit from government support during the recovery period.’

(Munemo, 2012, p.1)

It appears that during this time the government also released funds to local authorities to use in relief efforts. During the prolonged drought the government committed to relief costing:

‘P236 million (roughly US$261 million in 2005 terms)…and an additional P166 million (US$138 million in 2005 terms) over the period of recovery. Spending by the government of Botswana accounted for over 90 percent of the total cost of relief. Thus, government-initiated and funded action protected Botswana from what could have become famine.’

(Munemo, 2012, p.2)

In summation, the democratic government committed to adopting effective measures when famine threatened. It adopted early relief at the onset of drought to prevent the situation deteriorating. Botswana at the time had a free press; it is however not clear if or how it contributed to the relief effort. The public sphere was engaged and actively involved in the relief program. International aid was provided, but as the statistics show, 90 per cent of relief was generated in country. Morgan (n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, p.116) states:

‘The drought-relief programme has won plaudits from many observers for being the most effective in Africa. Certainly, there is no evidence to suggest that starvation has occurred in any part of the country during the five years of drought since 1981’
Maharashtra, India (1973)

India is historically known to possess a vulnerability to famine. The drought that occurred in semi-arid Maharashtra, Western India in 1973, and the subsequent lack of a significant famine, is used by many scholars to support the theory that democracy and a free press prevent famine. Sen (1999, p.6) states:

‘India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence (the last famine, which I witnessed as a child, was in 1943, four years after independence), they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.’

As Sen (1999) notes, India has been deemed a democracy since independence in 1947. Public elections are held every four years. They also have:

‘a free press and honourable tradition of political debate…to deal with threatened famine
India has developed contingency plans which include major national buffer stock in staple grains and a long standing institution of public work schemes’

(D’Souza, 1994, p.372)

The prevention of famine is largely attributed to the type of administrative and political system that was in place and the actions taken when famine threatened.

D’Souza (1994, p.372) states:

‘on the issue of food shortages information is rarely withheld. At the earliest warnings of trouble, the press, the people and thereafter the politicians all appear to work together to resolve the problem’

The Famine Commission of 1880 made some important recommendations. Sen and Drèze (1989, p.123) state:

‘(1) the framing of region-specific ‘Famine Codes’ embodying ‘authoritative guidelines’ to the local administration on the measures needed to anticipate and deal with the threat of famine, and (2) a strategy of entitlement protection based on the combination of guaranteed employment at a subsistence wage and unconditional relief (so called ‘gratuitous relief) for the unemployable.’

Sen and Drèze (1989) highlight that employment in public work schemes was typically on a cash for work basis. The simple existence of ‘Famine Codes’ does not of course guarantee their application.
There was no legal obligation to declare the belief that famine threatened. It is suggested that the ‘Famine Code’ was actively ignored in the case of Bengal (1943). Following independence;

‘The vigour of political opposition has now made it impossible for the government to remain passive without major political risks...In the process of making the facts known and forcing the hands of the respective state and central governments, the press too plays a leading role.’

(Sen and Drèze, 1989, p.126)

D’Souza (1994) cited earlier, mentions the Indian tradition of public debate. Sen and Drèze (1989) also seem to agree with this notion of an active Indian public sphere and place importance on it in the famine prevention measures. ‘The affected populations themselves have a much greater ability than in the past to make their demands felt and to galvanize the authorities into action’. (Sen and Drèze, 1989, p.126)

Sen and Drèze (1989, p.133) state: ‘The drought situation was the subject of 696 questions in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly and Council in 1973 alone, and of numerous (often sharply critical) newspaper reports.’

Between the years of 1970-1973 food production in Maharashtra was declining. A substantial drought had hit a state already suffering from ‘environmental degradation, agricultural decline and threatened rural livelihoods’. (Sen and Drèze, 1989, p.128)

It is suggested that the cash for employment schemes and gratuitous relief were fundamental to the prevention of famine. ‘During the twelve months preceding July 1973 (the peak year of drought), relief works generated nearly one billion person-days of employment.’ (Sen and Drèze, 1989, p.129)

There is also reference to the fact that huge volumes of grain were also imported into Maharashtra from bordering states.

In summation, it is evident that the democratic government committed to providing relief measures when prolonged drought threatened famine. The free press and the active public sphere seem to have contributed to early detection and effectiveness of relief efforts.


Kenya fell victim to a drought spanning the years 1983-1984. Nyamwange (1995, p.38) states that: ‘The drought began with the failure of the short rains in northern and northeastern Kenya in 1983…In the following year, the long rains almost completely failed…Pastoralists reported losing up to 70% of their stock.’
At the time, the government was autocratic in nature and led by President Daniel Arap Moi. The government owned the *Kenya Times*, formerly the *Nairobi Times*. The *Standard* and the *Daily Nation*, both privately owned, also operated at this time. ‘The Daily Nation is seen as most influential of all Kenya newspapers. It has a market share of about 75%. It has a reputation of being independent and unbiased.’ (http://www.kenya-advisor.com/kenya-newspapers.html)

Nyamwange (1995, p.38) notes that ‘The government maintains at least seven systems for monitoring food security.’ She adds that all these systems were active during the food crisis.

Munemo (2012, p.3) states:

‘President Daniel arap Moi responded to the 1983-1984 drought, at the time the worst in its history, with a program that combined food aid to rural Kenyans with market controls (in the form of price controls and food movement restrictions) and government acquisition of food for the urban market.’

It appears that Moi himself directly controlled the food aid program. Nyamwange (1995, p.38) states:

‘the government established an interministry drought response coordinating committee chaired by the Chief Secretary of the Office of the President. The committee moved swiftly to assess the situation, establish a government response policy, begin commercial imports of food, negotiate with the donor community for food assistance, and establish a Task Force to manage the food import and distribution program.’

It is evident that the government effectively mobilised, Munemo (2012, p.3) reports:

‘Food aid in rural Kenya reached over 930,000 rural Kenyans each month between August 1984 and October 1985…Moi’s government spent over US$150 million to import 500,00 Mt of maize, about 77 percent of the maize imports during the relief effort.’

To add to this, ‘The President set up the National Famine Relief Fund in June 1984 which not only raised funds for relief purposes but also alerted people to the drought problem in the country.’ (Nyamwange, 1995, p.38)

In summation, autocratic Kenya opted for food aid under discretion, market controls, and government imported food supply. Famine was successfully averted. The press was a mixture of government and privately owned, but it is not clear what involvement they had during the drought. It appears that the public were not actively engaged.
Challenging Incidents

The last group of case studies contains incidents that often create controversy amongst theorists, and offer further challenges to the theory that democracy prevents famine. In the four cases of famine the variables were absent across the board. The cases of famine prevention did on a number of occasions make evident the presence of the variables. However, it was not unanimous. The last four incidents are interesting as it seems there is evidence to support the claim that famine took place in all four cases, and that they could all be deemed as democracies with a free press at the time of famine.

Bangladesh (1974)

There is much disagreement with regards to the case of Bangladesh (1974). There seems to be a general consensus that a famine took place. The issue causing much dispute is whether or not the country was under democratic rule at the time the famine developed.

Bangladesh ‘is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is flat, very densely populated, and has a long history of devastating floods.’ (Clay, n.d, cited in Curtis et al, 1988, p.131) In March 1974 Bangladesh experienced monsoon flooding followed by what has been termed a ‘food crisis’. Rudin (2011, p.56) states that the famine ‘was responsible for the death of approximately 300,000 people.’ Sen (1999) notes that a combination of flooding, poor harvest, and rural unemployment contributed to the famine.

It appears that ‘Applying the Howe and Devereux (2004) famine scales thus places the Bangladesh famine as a minimum in the category of ‘great famines’…There is a strong consensus among scholars that a serious famine has taken place.’ (Rudin 2011, p.56) With this in mind, it is the government at the time that comes under scrutiny.

De Waal (2000, p.11) boldly states: ‘Bangladesh, 1974. The liberal institutions failed to prevent this famine.’ Sen (1999) acknowledges that a famine took place in Bangladesh in 1974, but appears to consider the government at the time as unstable.

Rudin (2011) discusses this issue at length highlighting the fact that following the achievement of independence in 1971, further elections were held in 1973 that saw Sheikh Mujib elected by majority vote.

At this time it appears the economic situation in Bangladesh was poor. Flooding in early 1974 triggered a famine in July. ‘In December 1974, a state of emergency was declared and constitutional rights suspended…four weeks later, the parliament was replaced by a one-party system with an all-powerful president.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.56)
Maniruzzaman, (1976, p.119) states: ‘the radical revolutionaries become more serious by the end of 1974, Sheikh Mujib gave up the façade of parliamentary government and resorted to the device of a one-party dictatorship and totalitarian control.’

Rudin (2011) highlights that fact that the elected government made effort to provide subsidised food to the urban population, who were politically vocal, but did not provide the same assistance to the rural population. It is suggested that the slow and callous government response led to a greater level of suffering that was avoidable.

The 1974 famine in Bangladesh has been used to disprove Sen’s claim that democracy prevents famine. Rudin (2011, p.58) states:

‘The famine year was characterized as the prime year of democracy during the entire period of the Mujib regime, where growing opposition and the press were allowed to raise their voices against government mismanagement and corruption as well as the impending famine.’

According to Rudin (2011) the famine was not acknowledged by Mujib until late September 1974, and following this admission the situation was greatly downplayed.

With regards to the issue of Bangladesh’s government at the time of the famine, ‘Dan Banik argues in his book on starvation and democracy (2007) that the Bangladesh democracy was indeed unstable and unconsolidated at the time of the famine.’ (Rubin, 2011, p.59)

In summation, literature suggests that the press at the time of the famine was free and uncensored. It also suggests that pleas internationally for aid were snubbed, Rudin (2011) mentions that the US withheld shipments of food aid to Bangladesh in 1974.

The public sphere was partly engaged. The urban populace was vocal, but the rural population was overlooked. This could be a question of the urban population being more attune to their rights, although the existence of functioning civil rights at the time is also questioned by many theorists. The government also used misinformation assuring people that there was sufficient food supply.

It is evident that a famine was able to develop under a democratically elected government. It appears that the government transitioned to more authoritarian rule in December 1974 several months after the onset of famine. Despite this, there is still conjecture. Rudin (2011, p.59) notes:

‘It appears that although a famine was allowed to unfold and develop in Bangladesh under an elected government and an uncensored press, the democratic institutions were so feeble that the famine - among other factors – triggered the transition from a fragile democracy to authoritarian rule. One could therefore argue that Bangladesh, unto itself does not constitute a convincing falsification of the proposition.’
Bihar (1966-1967)

Literature states that drought, flooding and food scarcity led to a crisis in Bihar in 1966. Brass (1986, p.246) states: ‘On April 20, 1967, the state government declared the existence of famine’. Despite much evidence to uphold this declaration, there is still debate as to whether or not a famine actually occurred. Controversy also seems to stem from the fact that at the time Bihar was under democratic rule.

Rudin (2011, p.62) states:

‘To prevent a famine from unfolding in Bihar, the central Government set up approximately 20,000 fair-price shops throughout the Bihar countryside. More than 30 million people were provided with ration cards (with more than seven million people on free rations)…and provided unlimited financial support for the duration of the crisis’

Brass (1986, p.247) also states: ‘The principle measures adopted by the authorities to cope with the situation included the import of foodgrains, mostly provided by P.L. 480 wheat imports from the United States, via the central government’.

Despite the above measures being put in place there is still much evidence that a famine occurred. De Waal (2000, p.11) states: ‘Bihar, India, 1966/7. Although mass deaths were prevented, a famine in the sense of widespread hunger, destitution and social breakdown occurred.’ Scholars have used this incident to disprove the democracy prevents famine hypothesis, stating that a famine still occurred despite the efforts made by the government. Others use it in support, viewing the government’s efforts as being successful in preventing ‘large-scale’ famine and excess mortality. The definition of famine being used very much comes in to play in this incident.

Rudin (2011) highlights Singh’s (1975) belief that the government measures were successful in preventing famine, mass death from starvation and epidemics. ‘Singh described the campaign against famine as one of the best-organized and most technologically advanced in modern times.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.63)

Myhrvold-Hanssen (2003) presents evidence to support the belief that famine took place in Bihar (1966-1967) and suggests that the incident shows ‘little support for Sen’s argument.’ (Myhrvold-Hanssen, 2003, pp.2-3) Rudin (2011, p.63) also points out that; ‘Drèze (1999:115) finds ‘precious little evidence to support the self-congratulatory statements that the state prevented excess mortality.’

The media at the time was largely independent. Rudin (2011) notes that initially the state government was disinclined to publicly acknowledge the emerging situation.
However, this altered following visits by prominent ministers to some of the famine affected areas. ‘The state government openly talked about the need for food aid and to save the people of the state from starvation in September/October 1966.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.67)

Support and activation of the ‘Famine Codes’ was requested by the state government to the central government, which was initially refused due to a distrust of the reports coming from Bihar. However, ‘the free press, the citizens, the opposition parties – all had a say in defining the situation.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.69)

Rudin (2011) also mentions that both the state and central government became concerned about the potential impact that a famine would have on the pending election, especially if they were not seen to be dealing with it effectively.

In summation, with the aforementioned case of Bangladesh (1974) the existence of democracy was under question, not the presence of famine. The opposite is true here, ‘According to Sen, India could be characterized as a democracy during the Bihar famine 1966-67.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.66)

The obvious issue here is whether or not a famine took place. This case did not aim to provide an answer to this, however, it should be noted that there is much evidence to support the existence of famine. If this is to be taken as verbatim, a famine developed under democratic rule, in a country with ‘Famine Codes’, a Bihaar Famine and Flood Relief Code, a free press, international assistance and an active public sphere.

**Malawi (2002)**

‘Eight years after Malawi’s first multi-party elections in 1994, the democratic state of Malawi suffered its first ever famine.’ (Devereux and Tiba, n.d, cited in Devereux, 2007, p.143) It is stated that the Malawi Famine (2002) is a case for the ‘falsification of the hypothesis that a famine cannot occur in a democracy’. (Rudin 2011, p.74)

‘The trigger for the famine in Malawi was erratic weather during the 2000-2001 farming season, which resulted in a maize harvest 32% lower than in 2000’. (Devereux, 2009, p.26) It appears that government changes to agricultural policy and sale of grain reserve also played a part in the development of a food crisis that forced the government to import food. ‘Food aid was eventually mobilized – after the famine was effectively over’. (Devereux and Tiba, n.d, cited in Devereux, 2007, p.144)
Carver (2002, p. 4) states:

‘The maize shortfall this season is estimated at 700,000 tonnes, with approximately 3.2 million people affected. While much discussion has focused on the government’s recent sale of the strategic grain reserve – a move that has undoubtedly had a serious impact on food availability – the underlying problem is again one of access to food on the part of poorer households.’

Malawi gained independence in 1964 and an authoritarian presidency ensued until 1993. The multiparty election in 1994 saw the United Democratic Front (UDF) headed by President Bakili Muluzi come to power, and then reelected to power in 1999. A climate of liberal democracy ensued. Rudin (2011, p. 77) notes ‘there was no great divide between urban and rural areas with respect to political attitude and knowledge’ and that awareness of democracy in the public sphere is 88 per cent. This was evident in the 1999 election, which Rudin (2011) reports to have had a 94 per cent participation rate.

With regards to the press in Malawi Rubin (2011, p. 77) states:

‘Extensive press freedom is formally ensured in the Malawian constitution. The constitution not only contains articles for freedom of expression and freedom of the press but also – as one of the few countries in Africa – an article with an explicit provision guaranteeing access to government – held information.’

However, no law exists to enforce this or check that it is being honored. In fact it appears that a number of laws exist that restrict freedom of expression. These were in action preceding the famine. ‘Pressure from international donors eventually forced the government to allow greater debate of the issue.’ (Rudin, 2011, pp. 78-79) The state owned much of the media, however ‘There is no indication of censorship (direct or indirect) related to the famine reporting in 2002.’ (Rudin 2011, p. 80)

In summation, this case seems to provide some evidence to disprove the general theory that democracy, and a free press prevents famine. Rudin (2011, p. 84) states that evidence:

‘strongly suggests that a famine can be identified in Malawi 2002 based on the Devereux and Howe scales; (ii) the evidence also indicates that in 2002, Malawi had a democratically elected government, a liberal constitution, institutionalized checks and balances, a strong democratic culture among the population and a relatively free media.’
Niger (2005)

‘Niger’s food crisis in 2005 has been attributed to a locust invasion and drought that devastated crop production.’ (Devereux, 2009, p.26) It is also often attributed to chronic and unrelenting malnutrition and poverty, the premature end to the 2004 rains, elevated food prices, and taxation. Rudin (2011, p.97) states:

‘A crude mortality rate of more than 1/10,000 together with widespread malnutrition is enough to classify the food crisis in Niger as facing famine conditions according to the Howe and Devereux intensity scales.’

Niger was ruled by a variety of oppressive regimes until 1991. ‘A transition government was installed in November 1991, which not only succeeded in holding free and fair non-violent nationwide elections but also prepared key legislation in the form of a new constitution.’ (Rudin, 2011, p.93) It is evident that there is mention of food security in the constitution, which is also true in the case of Malawi.

In 2004 the elections resulted in the appointment of Mamadou Tandja as President, despite a poor voter turn out. According to Rudin (2011) the voter turn out did not exceed 50 per cent.

With regards to the press it is important to highlight the following:

‘Freedom of speech is formally ensured in the constitution, but the 2005 food crisis placed a strain on press freedom in Niger. The general media landscape in Niger can be sketched as a mix of private and state-owned newspapers, radio stations and television networks.’

(Rubin, 2011, p.94)

Despite the existence of government owned and controlled media institutions, there were still a wealth of sources that reported uncensored information. International information was available, for example by radio, in famine stricken areas.

The existence of uncensored radio stations was particularly important in Niger for two reasons. The first relating to the literacy rate and the second relating to the existence of poverty. Rudin (2011, p.94) states:

‘With an illiteracy rate of 85 per cent, the spread of the written word is severely hampered, and radio is by far the most important source for news and information in Niger. Information from the TV and the Internet – although unhindered – is generally restricted to a small minority due to the widespread poverty.’
The government still made attempts to restrict the press throughout the food crisis in 2005. The government tried to hamper the ability for fair reporting of civil protests that were occurring with relation to both food issues and taxation.

Harragin (2006, p.2) states:

‘The failure of the early-response mechanisms to untangle whether this was indeed a ‘crisis’ (and hence the failure to react to the government’s November 2004 appeal for 78,100MT of emergency food) meant a long delay in the humanitarian response and by the time they reacted, relief agencies and the government had to wait agonising weeks for imported grain to arrive as all local and regional supplies were already exhausted.’

In summation, the democratic nature of the government and the relatively free press did not prevent the development of famine in 2005. The public sphere was also less active than in Malawi, however civil protests did ensue. Illiteracy is something to consider here with reference to the reach of the free press.

Rudin (2011, p.106) boldly states:

‘Not only did a famine occur under pluralistic rule in Niger, but closer scrutiny also revealed political processes running counter to what was predicted by the democracy hypothesis. The government was unresponsive and did not admit to the severity of the situation; the watchdog function was performed by an international NGO, not by the national opposition or the media; and the call to intervene directly to prevent the famine came from international society – not the elected government.’

In the cases above, further research is needed to identify the deficiencies in the system that allowed such events to take place in what are arguably democratic climates. This could suggest that democracy and a free press as many hypothesise, is not an immediate barrier to famine, and that there are other factors of key importance in successful famine prevention.
Conclusion

‘Liberal democracy is no antidote to homelessness or widespread chronic undernutrition or the selective murder of girl babies…Why should it be an inoculation against famine? The answer is that it isn’t - at least not simply.’

(De Waal, 2000, p.10)

This study aimed to critically investigate the theory that democracy and a free press prevent famine. It aimed to test the strength of said theory and the extent to which it is universally applicable. A specific focus was on the free press. The aim being to discover if it has a key role in the prevention of famine in a democratic climate or if other factors are of importance.

The preceding sections seem to challenge the aforementioned theory and highlight that the relationship between ‘famine’, ‘democracy’ and a ‘free press’ can be fragile. It appears that famine prevention does not always have the neat solution that Sen and D’Souza advocate. It seems that simply observing an association between certain incidents of famine prevention and a democratic climate is not enough to prove a fundamental link. It can also be said that existence of famine in an autocratic climate does not logically lead to its’ automatic absence in democracy.

The principle, in theory, seems rational when based on the ideology of ‘democracy’ and a ‘free press’. In a democracy when famine looms, it seems logical to suggest that a free press would hold to its’ values and inform the public sphere. The public sphere would be active, vocal, and seek to achieve their civil rights. In turn, the government, under the pressure from the free press and public sphere, would take measures to avert famine in order to retain their elected position. It appears however, that it is not this simple in reality.

One of the main issues established during this study was the issue of definitions and applicable definitions. In the earlier sections it became apparent that ‘famine’ and ‘democracy’ and the ‘free press’ have elements that are commonly associated to them. However, universal definitions of ‘famine’ and ‘democracy’ seem to be problematic. The definition of ‘free press’ may be more widely accepted, however the practice of this seems to differ incredibly from country to country. This issue alone lends to the notion that this area is more complicated than meets the eye.

The initial four cases examined were famines in China (1958-1961), Ethiopia (1982-1985), Western Sudan (1983-1985) and The Soviet Union (1932-1934). The absence of an accountable democratic government, a free press, international involvement, and an active public sphere was immediately evident in all instances.

The proceeding cases examined were incidents of famine prevention. Based on the theory advocated by Sen and D’Souza, one would expect the exact opposite to the aforementioned instances, however this
seems not to be the case. The variables were present in the cases of Botswana (1982), and Maharashtra, India (1973), but not Zimbabwe (1982) and Kenya (1983-1985).

It appears that both Zimbabwe (1982) and Kenya (1983-1985) managed to avert famine with the absence of an accountable democratic government, a free press and an active public sphere. In Zimbabwe (1982) the government was democratically elected via public vote, however due to the human rights abuses occurring at the time, its democratic nature is questionable. The government in Kenya (1983-1985) was autocratic. Despite this, both governments effectively mobilised to avert famine. This offers challenge to the main theory. Perhaps it is not democracy that guarantees famine prevention; perhaps a responsive government is of key importance.

The last four cases, Bangladesh (1974), Bihar (1966-1967), Malawi (2002) and Niger (2005) all seem to cause controversy. Bangladesh (1974) and Niger (2005) are widely accepted as being incidents of famine, but the elected governments at the time comes under scrutiny. Bihar (1966-1967) and Malawi (2002) are seen to be democratic but the occurrence of famine is questioned.

Research suggests that the democratic government of Bangladesh (1974) may have transitioned to more authoritarian rule some months after the onset of famine. Niger (2005) is considered by many theorists to have been under pluralistic rule at the time. This suggests that famine was allowed to develop under the rule of a democratic government with a free press. Many argue that famine occurred in democratic Bihar (1966-1967) and Malawi (2002) as discussed in the case studies. The governments in these two cases were not effectively responsive. This suggests that famine once again developed under democratic rule with a free press.

The brief summary of findings above outlines the controversial nature of this area. It seems to suggest that famine prevention relies on something more than the simple existence of democracy and a free press. It is evident that famine can occur in an autocracy, and that it can be averted in a democracy. However, as we have seen, this does not prove a causal link between democracy and the absence of famine. Several of the cases appear to provide evidence to disprove this general hypothesis.

To be able to generalise the findings, further research would need to be undertaken. The quantity of case studies and the brief nature of analysis is not sufficient to provide a concrete conclusion that can be universally applied. Further investigation is needed, for example in the cases of Bihar (1966-1967) and Malawi (2002) to see how a ‘famine’ by one definition developed under democratic rule. This research can however suggest that the theory that democracy and a free press prevent famine is not infallible. It can also suggest that elements other than the existence of democracy and a free press could be of key importance in famine prevention.

To briefly address bias, the researcher does broadly agree with the theories of Sen and D’Souza in principle, however, believes that democracy does not offer a ‘cure’ to famine and that the area is
incredibly intricate. This belief has not interfered with the ability to impartially examine existing literature or the cases discussed.

In summation, the case study findings suggest that the free press is not as ‘key’ to famine prevention as Sen and D’Souza advocate. It may however aid the alleviation of famine once it is underway. Its’ ability to operate successfully and provide quality information differs greatly in various circumstances, and can be affected by unspoken restrictions, literacy rates and poverty. It may prove invaluable in one circumstance, and offer little in another. This suggests it could be significant but not ‘key.’ The simple existence of a free press does not guarantee it will be interested in or report on a pending famine. Theory on democracy suggests it should be, but this may not be the case in a climate of sensationalism and entertainment.

Government responsiveness, democratic or autocratic, and effective early-response systems with public mobilisation seem to be elements that could be of ‘key’ importance when famine threatens. Democratic governments by their nature tend to be responsive; however there are circumstances where they are not, Niger (2005) and Malawi (2002) are examples of this. There are also incidents where non-democratic governments are responsive as highlighted in the case of Kenya (1983-1985) and arguably Zimbabwe (1982).

The term ‘accountability’ is often used in discussions of democracy. Government accountability is seen as a core element of a functioning democratic climate. A government that is ‘accountable’ should by definition be responsive, however, in Kenya (1983-1985) and Zimbabwe (1982) due to the lack of a functioning democratic climate, the governments were not ‘accountable’ in the sense that is commonly understood. Despite this, the governments in both cases demonstrated that they were answerable by effectively mobilising relief measures at the sign of pending famine. This area requires further attention and research.

It seems evident that the solution to famine is not cut and dry. It could be inferred that famine prevention cannot be linked to a specific political system. This study suggests that the simple existence of a democratic government and a free press is not sufficient to prevent famine in all instances. Perhaps we need to further understand the key elements and dynamics involved before famine prevention can be universally achieved.
## Appendix 1a) Case Study Findings Table 1: Incidents of Famine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents of Famine</th>
<th>Accountable Democratic Government?</th>
<th>Active Free Press?</th>
<th>International Pressure or Involvement?</th>
<th>Active Public Sphere?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China (1958-1961)</td>
<td>No – Communist Government Chairman Mao Zedong</td>
<td>No – Government Controlled and Censored</td>
<td>No – Misinformation Prevented Effective Relief</td>
<td>No – Pervasive state control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 1b) Case Study Findings Table 2: Incidents of Famine Prevention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents of Famine Prevention</th>
<th>Accountable Democratic Government?</th>
<th>Active Free Press?</th>
<th>International Pressure or Involvement?</th>
<th>Active Public Sphere?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Drought</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Botswana (1982)</strong></td>
<td>Yes – Democratic Government President Quett Ketumile Masire</td>
<td>Yes – Free Press and Freedom of Information</td>
<td>Yes – Foreign aid, 90% of Relief was in Country</td>
<td>Yes – Food Distribution, Food for Work Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Drought</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maharashtra, India (1973)</strong></td>
<td>Yes – Democratic Government Prime Minister Indira Priyadarshini Nehru (a.k.a Indira Nehru Gandhi)</td>
<td>Yes – Free Press and Freedom of Information</td>
<td>Yes – Foodgrains Imported from Neighboring States</td>
<td>Yes – Strong Public Sphere, Political Debate. Food for Work Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Drought</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <strong>Drought</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 1c) Case Study Findings Table 3: Challenging Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenging Incidents</th>
<th>Accountable Democratic Government?</th>
<th>Active Free Press?</th>
<th>International Pressure or Involvement?</th>
<th>Active Public Sphere?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh (1974)</td>
<td>No – Pluralist Democracy Transitioned to One-Party Dictatorship (5 months after famine was underway) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (a.k.a Sheikh Mujib)</td>
<td>Yes – Free Press – Not Censored</td>
<td>No – Aid in 1972 was Poorly Managed due to Corruption, therefore US Withheld Food Shipments in 1974</td>
<td>No – Government Misinformation, Questionable as to Whether Functioning Civil Rights Existed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Famine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Democratic?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Famine?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Democratic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Famine?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Democratic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Famine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Democratic?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sources Used in Compiling the Summary Table: (an expansive list can be found in the Bibliography)

Barkan, J, D (1993)
Brass (1986)
Carver (1993)
Curtis et al (1988)
Devereux (1993)
D’Souza (1990)
D’Souza (1994)
Fombad (2011)
Goyder, H and C (n.d)
Haugen (2006)
Martin, D, and Johnson, P (1981)
Munemo (2012)
Harragin (2006)
Nyamwange (1995)
Rangarajan (2009)
Rudin (2011)
Sen and Drèze (1989)
Sen (1999)

Websites

http://www.unbotswana.org.bw/about_b.html
http://www.faminegenocide.com/kuryliw/corn_law.htm
Bibliography

Books


Book Chapters


E-Books


Siebert, F, S, Peterson, T and Schramm, W, (1963) Four Theories of the Press. US: The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

Published Papers and Reports


Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3d9ae94e4.html
Accessed 5th January 2013

The Double Burden of Malnutrition: Case Studies from Six Developing Countries, (2006) Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy: UN
Journal Articles


Online Papers and Articles

http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2a9.htm
URL: http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2a9.htm
Accessed 19th January 2013

*Starving in Silence; A Report on Famine and Censorship*. Frances D’Souza, (1990), Article 19, Censorship Reports
Accessed 24th June 2012

http://www.as.wvu.edu/history/Faculty/Tauger/Bengal%20enlarged.pdf
Accessed 2nd December 2012

*Professor Amartya Sen and the 1974 Bangladesh Famine*, Akhtar Hossain, (n.d), International Economist, IMF-Singapore Regional Training Institute, Singapore, Senior Lecturer in Economics, The University of Newcastle, Australia
Accessed 9th December 2012

http://bowbrick.org.uk/Publications/The%20Causes%20of%20Famine%201986.pdf
*The Causes of Famine - A Refutation of Professor Sen’s Theory*, Peter Bowbrick (n.d)
Accessed 2nd December 2012

http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/English/Issues/Accountability.html
*Accountability, Transparency and Corruption in Decentralized Governance*. Contributor: World Bank, Author: Decentralization Thematic Team, Contact: Jennie Litvack,
Accessed 21st November 2011

http://www.conservationandsociety.org/article.asp?issn=0972-4923;year=2009;volume=7;issue=4;spage=299;epage=312;aulast=Rangarajan
Accessed 12th January 2013

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1039&context=droughtnetnews
India Musokotwane Environment Resource Centre for Southern Africa (IMERCSA), Zimbabwe
Accessed 9th December 2012

http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/webpages/DC/renov82.10/renov82.10.pdf
Accessed 12th January 2013

Accessed 9th January 2013


Accessed 5th January 2013


University of Copenhagen, Denmark
Accessed 9th December 2012


Famine Intensity and Magnitude Scales: A Proposal for an Instrumental Definition of Famine
Howe, Paul; Devereux, Stephen (2004), Source: Disasters, Vol.28, No.4, (December 2004), pp. 353-372(20)
Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell
Accessed 3rd January 2013


Accessed 23rd December 2012


Cambridge University Press, Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-278X%28198806%2926%3A2%3C337%3AAIPWAF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7
Accessed 23rd December 2012

http://srmo.sagepub.com/view/doing-research/n7.xml

Doing Research, Daniel Druckman, (2005), Sage Research Methods
Online ISBN: 978141293969
Accessed 23rd June 2012


Accessed 12th September 2012


The Role of the Media in Deepening Democracy, Sheila.S.Coronel, (n.d)
Accessed 12th September 2012

http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/jbalkin/articles/media01.htm

Accessed 21st November 2011
Websites

http://africanhistory.about.com/od/zimbabwe/p/ZimbabweHist2.htm
Accessed 31st December 2012

http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i2a9.htm
Accessed 19th January 2013

http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/N_0148.HTM
Accessed 2nd December 2012

http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/H_0197.HTM
Accessed 2nd December 2012

Accessed 2nd December 2012

http://www.faminegenocide.com/kuryliw/corn_law.htm
Accessed 30th December 2012

Accessed 30th December 2012

http://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/08/12/vulture-stalking-a-child/
Accessed 4th November 2012

http://journalism.about.com/od/ethicsprofessionalism/a/firstamen.htm
Accessed 4th January 2013

http://www.kenya-advisor.com/kenya-newspapers.html
Accessed 5th January 2013

http://www.nawabbari.com/bios/nazimuddin.html
Accessed 2nd December 2012

http://radhikaranjanmarxist.blogspot.co.uk/2009/08/bangladesh-khwaja-najimuddin.html
Accessed 2nd December 2012

Accessed 29th December 2012

http://www.unbotswana.org.bw/about_b.html
Accessed 31st December 2012

http://www.virtualbangladesh.com/commentary/jinnah.html
Accessed 2nd December 2012