

The massive public response to the famine in Ethiopia has embarrassed the Government, who are currently cutting back on aid. But the Left's performance in this area has been nothing to write home about.

F A M I N E

What Can the Left Give?

John Sender & Sheila Smith

THE ETHIOPIAN FAMINE, involving starvation and suffering affecting millions of people, has a variety of causes. Climatic problems have caused the drought, but although drought is a contributory factor, it cannot be regarded as the cause of the famine. The legacy of feudalism and stagnation during the Haile Selassie regime, with its archaic concentration of land ownership and a disastrous absence of sustained development in transport, industry or agriculture, health or education, has meant that Ethiopia is among the poorest countries in the world.

The current regime, the Dergue, which came to power after the 1974 revolution, inherited an extraordinarily backward economy, and has faced a variety of class and national conflicts, in particular the Eritrean independence struggle, which dates back to 1961. Although the Dergue has undertaken some progressive and popular policies, such as the Land Reform in 1975 and a mass literacy campaign, it is highly authoritarian and has placed at the forefront of its strategy the determination to maintain a united Ethiopia.

The economic and political consequences of the wars in Eritrea, the Ogaden, Tigray and Oromo have included the use of extremely scarce resources (government expenditure, foreign exchange, and labour power), for the war effort, hence diverting them from productive investment. The slow growth of wage employment, restrictions on migration, and the prevention of peasants hiring wage labour, have meant that the mass of the rural population continue to be reliant on low productivity

subsistence farming, and are therefore extremely vulnerable to adverse climatic change.

The immediate problem raised by the famine is clearly the need to mobilise emergency supplies of food aid through those agencies which are capable of effectively distributing supplies to the people affected. In the longer term, investment in agriculture, transport and industry is vital to ensure that drought in the future does not generate famine on such an appalling scale. The resources needed for this invest-

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ment must partly come from domestic sources - implying a resolution of the civil wars. However, the degree of poverty and the absence of developmental infrastructure is so severe, that even if far more impressive domestic efforts than in the past were to be made in the next few years, these would need to be substantially supplemented by foreign aid, in order to raise income levels and reduce within the foreseeable future the vulnerability of peoples' access to the means to reproduce themselves.

Political reaction in Britain

The Ethiopian famine has evoked massive public response. The scale and extent of this response reflects genuine humanitarian concerns about poverty and starvation

which are widespread in British society. These concerns have very deep cultural roots, and find their expression in an amazing variety of organisations and institutions: schools, youth clubs, the guides and scouts, churches, Womens Institutes, evening classes, TV programmes such as Blue Peter, have all, for many years, been involved in discussions and activities which reflect an awareness of, and concern for, the appalling conditions of life of large sections of the population in developing countries.

Over the last couple of months, though, this activity and concern has acquired a quite new momentum. Symbolic of this popular mood, is the fact that in these days of relatively apolitical pop, many leading pop stars have banded together to make a record in aid of the famine victims which is this Christmas' No1 hit. More directly, organisations such as War on Want, the World Development Movement, Oxfam and other voluntary agencies have been successful in mobilising sufficient resources to direct over £100 million worth of aid into short-term relief and longer-term projects in Ethiopia.

This public response has obviously embarrassed the Thatcher government. It has raised the issues of the volume and criteria for the allocation of aid to developing countries in parliament and the media in a way that has dramatically highlighted an ideological gap between the deeply held moral convictions of large numbers of people in the UK and the petty, short-sighted brutalism of the current administration. Furthermore, this response can-

not easily be dismissed as ephemeral. On the one hand, liberal, religious and humanitarian movements concerned with African conditions of life have occupied a rather prominent position in British political, social and intellectual life since at least the rise of abolitionist and emancipation organisations in the mid-19th century. On the other hand, the number of those with a committed socialist perspective, who are actively engaged in organisations such as the World Development Movement and War on Want, as well as work in primary schools and adult education, has been growing rapidly for over a decade. It may be possible to account for the relatively large scale and momentum of the public outcry in 1984, (as compared to earlier responses to food crises in South Asia or Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s), in terms of the positive achievements of such activists over a period of many years.

However, much of the Left in Britain has remained organisationally aloof from such activities and concerns. Indeed, one must suspect, for example, that the Left has organised relatively few initiatives or collections on its own account for the famine. How is it possible to explain this detachment? One explanation involves analysing a set of prejudices that are quite common amongst socialists. The ideological position of many socialists to charitable activities has frequently been based on unjustified assumptions concerning the superiority of their analysis and practice: those who engage in charity are at best politically naive, at worst conscious upholders of the status quo; charity 'papers over the cracks', and is interpreted as an attempt to plug the gaps and cater to needs which ought to be met by governments; that charity substitutes for politics; and that the 'correct' response to manifest suffering should be political activity to pressurise governments to make public provision, thereby removing the rationale for the very existence of charity; that historically, charity has allowed the haves to salve their consciences, whilst leaving untouched the mechanisms which reproduce privilege and deprivation.

Weaknesses of the Left approach

The assumptions underlying this traditional response to charity are clearly problematic. A critique of these assumptions and of certain other views current on the Left may provide the beginnings of an explanation for the inadequacy of the political response, not only to poverty in Ethiopia, but also to the broader problem of defining the economic and political

content of an appropriate relationship between the UK and the developing countries. A feature of the response to recent events in Ethiopia is that a number of socialists have failed to contribute to or learn from the bewildering variety of non-governmental organisations that have been such remarkably effective channels for the concern of progressive social and political forces in Britain. The inability of some socialists decisively to draw upon and engage with these forces has left a gap which Princess Anne, Robert Maxwell and other more or less reactionary forces and institutions have failed.

Organisations such as the World Development Movement, War on Want, Oxfam and VSO represent an actual or potential context for the practice of internationalism. None of the reservations or criticisms that socialists may have concerning the policies and programmes of these non-governmental organisations (NGOs) constitute grounds for denying their potential as mobilisers of public opinion and as agents of progressive internationalism. Indeed, these criticisms of NGOs, such as they are, may well mainly be a reflection of the absence of sufficient and decisively committed Left involvement in the organisations concerned.

The view that the state, and the state alone, is the appropriate agent for redistributive and egalitarian action to compensate for the injustices of capitalist production and distribution, within and outside the UK, is severely flawed. It is a view of politics that seriously underemphasises the contribution of non-centralised, smaller scale, participatory and democratic institutions; at the same time, such a view often condemns its protagonists to wishful thinking and day-to-day irrelevance, until such time as 'genuine' socialists hold the reins of state power.

There cannot be much impetus for popular and immediate political initiatives on development issues unless the Left jettisons two traditional notions: first, that non-state agencies such as Oxfam suffer from the same defects as any other charity, merely providing a haven for naive middle-class do-gooders, or not so naive latter-day missionaries with paternalistic pretensions; and second, that state-orchestrated aid is inextricably and ultimately hopelessly bound up with international capitalist machinations - such that the institutions which are inevitably concerned with aid like the US Agency for International Development, the British Overseas Development Administration and the World Bank are inherently retrogressive, and in which



intervention is therefore pointless.

Other strands

There are other strands of thinking on the Left that have combined to justify inaction and have contributed to the inadequacy of socialist debate and political responses to the issue of poverty in Ethiopia. These strands also underly some of the defects of the debate on broader questions of UK trade and aid to developing countries. Far too frequently (and some of the literature on Ethiopia provides an excellent illustration), no explanation of poverty in developing countries is sought in terms of internal political forces, domestic policy failures, the class character of particular regimes, or the deficiencies of their econo-



Ethiopia: finding precious water.

mic strategy. The explanations offered are often much too simple: for example, that Reagan, Thatcher, the CIA and EEC bureaucrats conspired to block aid to Ethiopia and starve 900,000 people unfortunate enough to live in an identifiably Marxist state (which is not to say that there was no obstruction or procrastination); or, similarly, that the machinations of international anti-socialist forces fully account for the disastrous agricultural and balance of payments performance in Tanzania over the last five years.

The point being made here is certainly not a denial of the horrors and brutality that in many parts of the world, most notably and recently in Central America, have stemmed directly and indirectly from

US foreign policy, and from foreign military and economic subversion. Rather, the question being raised is to what extent these interventions, by themselves, can explain outcomes. In some cases, like El Salvador, these are the dominant factor, in others they are not.

An analysis that is underpinned by an excessive stress on the powerlessness of the developing countries as victims in the face of international capital leaves much too little scope for political initiatives or class struggle either within or outside the boundaries of these nations. Similarly, the practical consequences of another set of arguments, denying that any progress whatsoever may be expected in developing countries unless and until an anti-imperialist revolution has occurred, may well be political inertia. Socialists must consider at least two critical questions that have often been ignored by those who see no practical alternative to revolution:

(i) it is hard to deny that in many developing countries (*unlike* Ethiopia) the short and medium-term prospects for the overthrow of existing regimes - for revolution - are by no means favourable. In those circumstances, surely we are not to deny the possibilities of both domestic and international activity which can have favourable political and humanitarian outcomes?

(ii) there is a very real possibility that, in current conditions, a revolution may make things worse for the mass of working people in developing countries, Iran and Kampuchea being prime examples. These and other post-revolutionary disasters have occurred partly because, once the dust has settled, there is no guarantee that the socialists who have seized state power will indeed be the dominant political force; and partly because too often the Left has had an inadequate conception of a set of policies that would advance the construction of a socialist society in post-revolutionary circumstances. This is not an easy problem. The circumstances inherited by such governments are often extremely unfavourable, not only externally but also internally (eg, political, religious, national and tribal divisions). Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia are cases in point. In this light, the Sandinistas' project in Nicaragua must be seen as a remarkable achievement.

Aid, Trade and NGOs

The implications for socialist economic strategy of our analysis of the inadequacies of the response to the Ethiopian crisis and to the broader issues of relationships with

developing countries are far-reaching. They cannot be drawn out in any detail here, but a number of priorities can be identified. First, there is a need to assess seriously the case for a large overall increase in the volume of overseas aid. Highlighting the defects, the real political and economic costs of tied or otherwise inappropriate forms of aid, should not continue to obscure the fundamental requirement for vastly expanded concessional capital inflows. Such flows are vital not only for Ethiopia, but also for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. This region was unable to tap the pool of Eurodollar or Syndicated Bank Loans that grew so rapidly when the OPEC economies proved unable to absorb the surpluses resulting from rising oil prices in the 1970s.

Sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly reliant on *official* capital inflows to finance its balance of payments deficits, since it has not been in a position to persuade international private capital that it should be permitted to accumulate the levels of debt that were achieved by the more fortunate newly industrialising countries like Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines. One consequence, given the inadequacy of official flows, has been that a large number of sub-Saharan economies have been forced for almost a decade to reduce drastically the rate of growth of essential imports and have, therefore, experienced declining or negative rates of growth of production. Moreover, the productive base and in particular the means to produce exports to meet the current and

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future imported input requirements (that are a *sine qua non* of any accumulation process) has shrunk, and will continue to erode in the absence of import-finance on a scale that is unlikely to be met by any one of the bilateral donors, be it Britain, the US or Sweden. It follows that the Left should now be calling for support for the International Development Agency (the soft loan affiliate of the World Bank that is under severe threat from the Reagan administration), support for an expansion of *selected* (as opposed to all) World Bank and IMF programmes, both those of a longer-term nature and those which are quickly and relatively automatically distributed, support for EEC-based aid (through the European Development Fund, STABEX, etc), as well as an increase in the bilateral aid programme.

Secondly, there is considerable scope for the construction of alliances with political organisations in those European countries which have pursued progressive trade and aid policies at various times, such as the Scandinavian group and the Netherlands. Such alliances might serve to counter the most reactionary aspects of the American Republican Party's policy toward international organisations, to demand adequate replenishment for the International De-

velopment Agency, and to argue for a less absurdly short-run definition of IMF objectives in terms of annual balance of payments criteria. Within the EEC, neither the Labour Party nor the many British organisations concerned with developing countries have so far been able to publicise effectively the issues central to the Lome

continued inactivity disguised by irrelevant sloganeering

Conventions. The politics of the Common Agricultural Policy have been dominated by Thatcher's posturing; but it is important to stress that the implications of the CAP for developing countries are extremely far-reaching. The issue of, for instance, cane sugar imports versus protected European beet production, which has such profound consequences for a particularly oppressed segment of the working class in so many poor countries, is an obvious candidate for a Europe-wide socialist debate, in which the British Left should play an important role.

Finally, it is very important to recognise the potentially crucial role of NGOs. In

particular, there is a need for conscious concentration of support by the Left on specific NGOs, such as War on Want and World Development. But there is another dimension to this. A number of local authorities controlled by the Left have recently promoted programmes and initiatives in support of peace, feminist, and anti-racist movements. There is certainly scope for widening, and perhaps combining these initiatives with days of action and support for selected local groups that are concerned with the issues of aid and trade affecting poor Asian and African economies. It is even possible that the long established practice of 'twinning' could be revived on a large scale and applied to particularly impoverished areas of developing country cities.

NGOs provide the sole alternative to state-to-state flows of aid; in the context of the many valid criticisms of the nature and role of the state in both donor and recipient countries, NGOs constitute an obvious institutional framework for both humanitarian and socialist initiatives. If these opportunities are dismissed as either ineffective conscience-salving, or props to the status quo, the result will be continued inactivity disguised by irrelevant sloganeering. D

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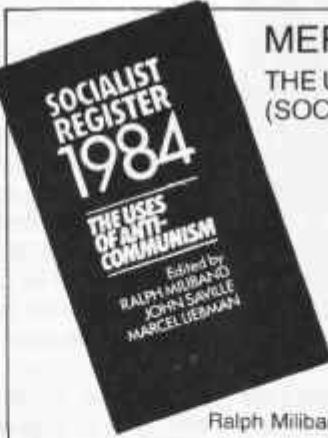
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