

Preface

He heard a soft, high-pitched whimpering and saw a tiny girl trying to make her way to the feeding center. As he crouched to photograph her, a vulture landed in view. Careful not to disturb the bird, he positioned himself for the best possible image. He would later say he waited about 20 min, hoping the vulture would spread its wings. It did not, and after he took his photographs, he chased the bird away and watched as the little girl resumed her struggle.

Kevin Carter, a freelance war photographer, found himself in the village of Ayod during the 1993 famine in Southern Sudan. While the photographs landed him the Pulitzer Prize, the gruesome experience would haunt him until his suicide only one year later. The now famous photo is freely available on the Internet (see, for example <https://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/2009/08/12/vulture-stalking-a-child/>) but the description of how Kevin Carter took the photo is almost as powerful as the photo itself. The sterile description of how the photo actually came about illustrates the emotional detachment between the spectators and the victims of famines in a chillingly forceful way.

This Brief about famine analysis might share some traits of the vulture—devouring the misfortune of others and transforming it into an academic contribution. The Brief most surely shares Carter’s instrumental and somewhat detached approach to the suffering of famine. Regardless of whether one looks at famines through the lens of a camera or through the lens of an analytical framework, the filters that have been put in place generate an ever-present disconnect with the true nature of the suffering. I have witnessed suffering and extreme starvation in both Africa and India but always within a few hours’ drive of my next meal. However, this Brief, in addition to containing the vulture’s predatory characteristics and Carter’s sterile depictions, also strives to make headway in the understanding of famine. The Brief, hopefully, will not merely provide an academic snapshot of hopelessness but will move forward the understanding and hence prevention of famine.

The topic of famine is not new to me. Throughout the last few years, I have published quite extensively on the topic. It started with a discussion of a particular

famine framework in the *Journal of Development Studies* (2009), followed by an article on the political dimension of contemporary famine in the *European Journal of Development Research* (2009). I have also published two pieces on specific famines: the 2002 Malawi famine in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, and the Niger 2005 famine in the *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. In 2010, Routledge published my monograph on democracy and famine where I argued for the need to extend beyond a focus on political systems in famine analysis. I stopped short, however, of actually proposing a framework that does so. In 2011, I published an article on starvation deaths in West Bengal, India in *Journal of South Asian Development*. Recently, the *Disasters* journal has published my article on famine operationalization (2014). This Brief will of course draw on some of the research that fed into these publications. More importantly, it will go beyond. I have yet to publish a coherent work on famine analysis, discussing the different approaches, and forwarding my own thoughts on how to construct a fruitful framework for famine analysis. As will become apparent in the course of this Brief, I believe such contribution to famine analysis is long overdue.

The Brief makes no claim of being exhaustive. It will not contain a literature review of all works of famine that exist, and it will not propose a taxonomy of famine theory; rather it will focus on the key dimensions of famine analysis that I deem relevant for pushing the discipline forward. Neither does the Brief lay claim to great originality. I am highly indebted to the many scholars who have made influential contributions to famine analysis. Standing on their shoulders enables me to look even further down the path of famine analysis, and it is through contrasting and discussing their work that I hope to move the discipline forward. My own approach to contemporary famine analysis is highly inspired by the works of several renowned scholars whom will be duly acknowledged in the relevant chapters. I would like here, however, to acknowledge the great number of colleagues, anonymous referees and friends that throughout the years have provided many constructive comments and suggestions for my famine research. While too numerous to mention by name, allow me to extend my heartfelt appreciation collectively. I would also like to thank the Danish Research Council; their funding has allowed me the luxury of putting everything else aside for a full six months while compiling this Brief.

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