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The Hazards Of Doing Good

From Live Aid in the mid-1980s to today, Western attempts to help famine-plagued Ethiopia have had little effect. Peter Gill explains why in "Famine and Foreigners." William Easterly reviews.

By [WILLIAM EASTERLY](#)

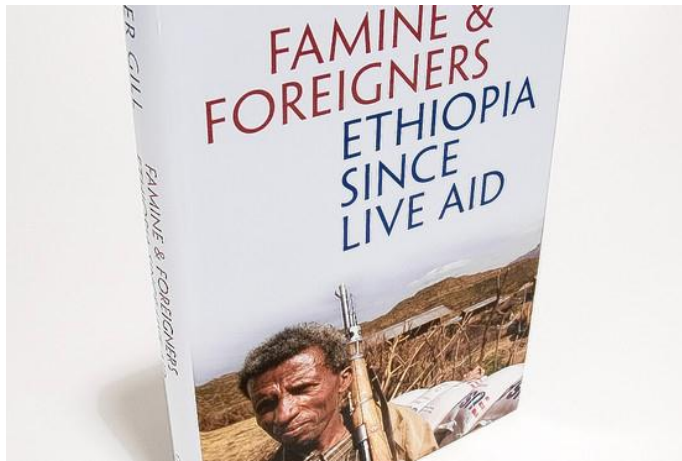
If it were possible to sum up in one sentence Ethiopia's struggles with famine over the past quarter-century, I'd suggest this: It's not the rains, it's the rulers. As Peter Gill makes clear in "Famines and Foreigners," his well-turned account of the country's miseries since the 1984-85 famine and the Live Aid concert meant to relieve it, drought has not been as devastating to Ethiopians as their own autocratic governments.

Ethiopia is a classic example of Amartya Sen's dictum that famines don't occur in democracies, only under tyrannies. The "foreigners" in Mr. Gill's story either didn't know about this sad fact of life or chose to ignore it. In any case, the celebrities and humanitarians who rushed to the aid of starving Ethiopians in the mid-1980s unwittingly supported the very people most responsible for those grim days.

The Derg, the brutal Marxist junta running Ethiopia at the time, contributed to the 1984 famine by forcing farmers to sell crops to the state at low prices. Many farmers instead consumed much of what they grew. The tradition of Ethiopians in areas with surplus food selling it to those in famine-stricken areas was thus disrupted.

The Derg, who had come to power in the mid-1970s after a famine discredited Emperor Haile Selassie, further exacerbated the country's hunger problems with a military campaign—against rebels from the Tigrayan region in the north—that deliberately targeted food production and trade. A government official said at the time: "Food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists."

And then the Derg forced people to resettle in the southern lowlands from the parched northern highlands, partly in an effort to undermine the recruiting efforts of the Tigrayan rebels. One instrument of coercion: the relief supplies sent by well-meaning foreigners. The Derg denied food and medicine to anyone who refused to resettle. The refugees arriving in the lowlands found unfamiliar diseases and unsanitary conditions. The veteran aid writer Alex de Waal, assessing this era in Ethiopia, concluded: "Resettlement certainly killed people at a faster rate than the famine." The aid also allowed the government to reduce its own spending on the domestic emergency and instead buy imported arms, which amounted to billions of dollars at the height of the famine. It took until 1991 for the guerrilla alliance to finally oust the regime.



Famine and Foreigners

By Peter Gill

(Oxford, 280 pages, \$27.95)

Fast-forward to the present: Although Stalinist Marxism is done, not much else has changed. The former Tigrayan rebels, led by Meles Zenawi, now rule Ethiopia. The country's agriculture remains in what Mr. Gill calls "a state of almost permanent crisis." A famine in the south in 2000 escaped much international notice while the government was busy prosecuting a war against neighboring Eritrea. In 2008, the Ethiopian army conducted a counterinsurgency campaign in the south, attempting to put down a rebellion in its Somali region amid a food crisis there. Human Rights Watch accused Mr. Meles's forces of "demonstration killings," torture, torching villages—in sum, "war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Mr. Gill captures the brutality of the Meles regime, but he does not say as much as he might about the government's failure to address Ethiopia's perpetual food shortages. He supportively describes Mr. Meles's decision to continue the Derg's policy of government ownership of all land. One searches in vain for a suggestion that letting farmers own their land might be a good idea, giving them incentives to prevent erosion and invest in soil fertility.

Mr. Meles's authoritarian stripes make life awkward for Westerners who want to aid Ethiopians. Mr. Gill quotes Mr. Meles's writings on the "developmental state," which conveniently for the ruler "will have to be undemocratic in order to stay in power long enough to carry out successful development." Elections in 2005 were almost certainly rigged, and critics were jailed in the aftermath. Public protests were suppressed, with hundreds killed. Mr. Gill speaks to a source "surprisingly close to government" who tells him that security forces opened fire "deliberately to show who was in charge."

The timing could not have been worse. In 2005, Mr. Meles was also serving on British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission on Africa, a high-profile panel whose report called for increased aid to Africa. The G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July 2005 was focused on Africa—particularly in response to the Blair commission's report. The Live 8 concerts held at that time were an homage to the Live Aid concert two decades earlier and aimed at mobilizing public pressure for the G8 to indeed increase African aid.

Yet few reporters covering the G8 summit, and surely few members of the Live 8 concert audiences around the world, seemed to grasp the key role played by Mr. Meles, an autocrat who

had just rigged an election, killed demonstrators and imprisoned opponents. It was the political cluelessness of Live Aid all over again.

In recent years donors have steered aid away from Ethiopia's central government and toward local governments. Such efforts have had little effect, though, since the former controls the latter. If anything, the Meles regime has become harsher still. In "Famines and Foreigners," Mr. Gill shows us the nexus of politics and aid at the core of Ethiopia's famines. Surely little good can come of Westerners offering their help to Ethiopia in ignorance of the cruel way the country is governed.

Mr. Easterly, a professor of economics at New York University, is the author of "The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good."