



# Global express

The rapid response information series for schools  
on world events in the news

TEACHERS' NOTES  
EDITION NO. 11  
OCTOBER 1998

## Famine

### Why does it happen?



What causes famine?



Can it be prevented?



How do the media affect our views?

**SUDAN'S CONTINUING CIVIL WAR,** environmental factors and its economic plight have created a famine that continues to devastate at least one region of the country. And when TV cameras leave that's not the end of the difficulties. This **Global Express** edition helps children think about what famine is, what causes it and how the media shape our understanding.

What is  
**Global express?**

*Global express* helps you teach about topical global issues and events.

## Contains

Instant photocopiable classroom activities for 8 to 14 year olds.

### Primary

- Discuss the causes of famine.
- Think about ways in which people prepare for times of scarcity.

### Secondary

- Question images of famine.
- Explore the concept of 'land' and its importance.
- Find out about Sudan and its people.

### Curriculum

- Ideas for Literacy Hour
- Geography
- RE
- Citizenship

# Why do famines happen?

**In recent months we've seen footage from Sudan of desperately thin people and dying, malnourished children.** The UN has called on governments to respond, and a number of UK aid agencies are also appealing for funds to send to Sudan.

The UN, international charities and civil institutions all report that hundreds of people are still dying daily and that a million people will be at risk of starvation for another year. Thousands have had to leave their homes to seek help. If they cannot return to their land with enough seed and tools to plant for the next harvest they will need to rely on food aid until August 1999.

The media sometimes gives the impression that famines arrive and disappear quickly. Yet famine can be foreseen - the main causes are complex but can be tracked. In Sudan the civil war between government and Southern rebel armies has been fought for 15 years and the last three years of harvests have been very poor; in some areas there has also been flooding.

Famine itself is rare but hunger and malnutrition are not. One in five people don't get enough or the right kind of food to lead fully productive lives - they are vulnerable to disease, infection and parasites and have grown up with weak bones and muscles. Malnutrition contributes to short life expectancy and for children is particularly dangerous, affecting their strength and their ability to grow, to learn and to perform complex tasks.

## Because of poverty

Poverty is the root cause of famine. People who live in poverty are always more vulnerable to natural disasters, catastrophes and war. But this does not make them passive. Most people living in poverty are extremely resilient and have many tried and tested ways of surviving and preparing for disasters which have

## Bangladesh avoids starvation...

The government believes more than 2.5 million farmers have been hit [by the floods], and it intends to give out free seeds and other necessities. It has also said it will provide food to every flood affected family before the next harvest. But with roads destroyed, many will go without.

But starvation has been averted. More than 350,000 tonnes of cereals have been bought by the government from India, Pakistan, Thailand, Burma and Vietnam. More than 1 million tonnes of international food aid has been pledged, and the private sector is trying to import 1.5 million tonnes of rice, according to the government.

Repairing damage and preventing future flooding are a priority. The prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, told a rally of flood victims this week that a 30-mile embankment would be built around Dhaka.

John Vidal, *The Guardian*, 19.9.98.

been developed over generations of bitter experience. It is only when too many problems come at the same time - or they are too huge - that normal coping strategies fail.

Food security is affected by both local conditions and government policies. Many argue that international trade policies are unfair and penalise poorer countries, many of which are caught in a debt trap which hits the poorest hardest. Also, millions of small subsistence farmers in countries like Sudan lack the investment to plan and plant for next year, often as a result of government policies which favour the production of cash crops for export.

## Because of war

Whether civil or international, war diverts valuable resources away from development. In a war-zone farmers cannot plant or tend crops, they have difficulty storing food for times of hardship, markets often close and the warring parties can prevent help reaching people. Eventually people are forced to leave and to give up trying to be self-sufficient.

Hunger can also be used as a weapon in war. In Sudan, there is evidence that both sides in the war are destroying fields and grain stores and stopping food getting to famine-hit areas.

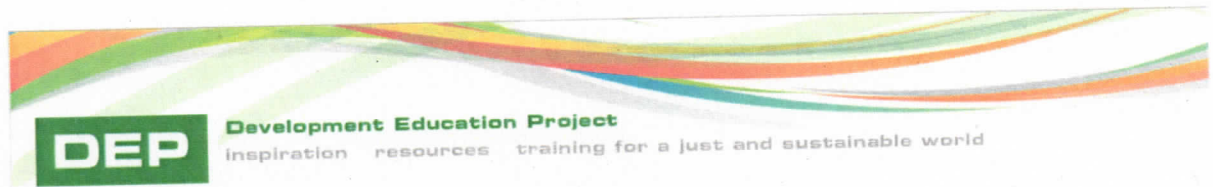
## Because of natural disaster

When floods and droughts hit wealthy countries people don't starve because they don't rely on their land for food - they often have a salary, savings, insurance and as a last resort the government has enough money and food to get emergency supplies through. But when you have little and lose even that - be it your crop or your house - there is nothing left to fall back on.

The reality of famine is complex but sometimes the media will point to a natural disaster as the only cause, rather than explain how other more complex factors play a part. Is it perhaps easier to convince people to help if the cause is apparently natural and no-one is to blame?

## Famine in the news

Mass media coverage of famines and other emergencies often lead to an outpouring of sympathy and financial support from the public and governments. Such support helps save and rebuild lives. But inevitably, the film crews and news reporters will move on to the next story - while many of the problems still remain. What is really needed is longer term action to reduce poverty and to prevent such disasters happening in the first place.



If you would like to gain access to the full version of this Global Express edition please sign up to a DEP subscription. You can find more information about DEP's subscriptions at [www.dep.org.uk/about](http://www.dep.org.uk/about) and click the Subscription section.