



Jean Drèze
Amartya Sen

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HUNGER *and* PUBLIC ACTION

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HUNGER AND PUBLIC ACTION

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HUNGER AND PUBLIC ACTION

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and
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FOREWORD

No social or economic problem facing the world today is more urgent than that of hunger. While this distressing state of affairs is not new, its persistence in spite of the remarkable technological and productive advances of the twentieth century is nothing short of scandalous.

The subject of world hunger therefore has the highest priority in WIDER's research programme. Since its creation in 1985, WIDER has consistently sought to promote research on contemporary development problems with a practical orientation. The focus of this book by Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, one of the first fruits of this effort, is on action—action to banish both the threat of famine and the reality of chronic hunger affecting many parts of the world.

There is no instant remedy to the scourge of persistent world hunger. The impulse to rush ahead and do something practical to relieve suffering is laudable and necessary. But good motives do not by themselves guarantee effective action. While the task of eradicating hunger in the world is too serious to be left entirely to politicians and too immediate to be left entirely to academics, it is also too complex to be left entirely to the compassionate instincts of humankind. Action has to be based on clear thinking as well as on firm dedication.

This book, I believe, represents an important step towards a better understanding of the issues involved. There is, for instance, much to learn from its appraisal of the possible roles that can be respectively played by government intervention, market mechanisms and the activism of the public at large in encountering the problem of world hunger. As the authors show, the importance of these influences is well illustrated in a number of recent experiences of famine prevention. The response of the market to the demands generated by income support programmes, the involvement of the state in food distribution to prevent collusive practices on the part of private traders, and the impact of public pressure on the timing and nature of government action, can all be crucial ingredients of an effective programme of famine prevention. Similarly, in their analysis of strategies to deal with chronic hunger and deprivation, the authors stress the interlinked contributions which participative economic growth and direct public support can make to the improvement of living conditions in poor countries.

Besides clearer thinking, it is my hope that Drèze and Sen's work will lead to greater awareness and motivation, particularly by bringing out the social and political ramifications of the problem of world hunger. As the authors argue, to confront this problem involves not only being alive to opportunities for cooperative action but also addressing the multiple conflicts (e.g. of class and gender) that pervade social living.

The subject of hunger and poverty continues to occupy a major place in WIDER's research programme. This book will be followed shortly by three volumes of papers, written by international experts (and edited by Drèze and Sen), on 'the political economy of hunger'.

As the Director of WIDER, I am happy to be able to present this book as one of the first results of our programme of 'research for action'.

Lal Jayawardena
Director, WIDER
31 July 1989

PREFACE

This is a book about hunger. Not just about the extent of it, or about the havoc it causes—debilitating and killing people, enfeebling and devastating societies. While there are important issues of assessment and evaluation in this grisly field (and we do address many of these questions in this study), nevertheless the primary focus of the book is on action, rather than on measurement.

By public action we mean not merely the activities of the state, but also social actions taken by members of the public—both ‘collaborative’ (through civic cooperation) and ‘adversarial’ (through social criticism and political opposition). The state does, of course, have a major role to play in eradicating famines and in eliminating persistent deprivation, and the various aspects of this role we have tried to discuss fairly extensively in the light of general reasoning and empirical evidence. But the reach of public action goes well beyond the doings of the state, and involves what is done *by* the public—not merely *for* the public. We also argue that the nature and effectiveness of the activities of the state can deteriorate very easily in the absence of public vigilance and activism.

In the first four chapters, constituting Part I of the book, we have presented some general analyses of the economic, social, political and medical background to the problems of starvation and undernutrition in the contemporary world. Chapters 5 to 8, constituting Part II of the book, are concerned with analysing the major strategic and tactical issues in famine prevention. The diverse problems of persistent undernutrition and endemic deprivation are examined in Part III (Chapters 9 to 12).

In the fourth and final part, consisting only of one chapter (Chapter 13), the diverse roles of public action in removing hunger are considered together, with specific comments on some of the more debatable issues. It is not meant as a ‘summary’ of the main points of the book, but there is an attempt to provide an overall view of the general approach we have adopted and used. We have particularly highlighted the features of our approach that may appear to be controversial. We have tried to take full note of other points of view. But a practical treatise on the role of public action has to be, ultimately, rather assertive, and it is fair to say that we have not been afflicted by excessive shyness regarding what we recommend and why.

On stylistic issues, we should make two brief comments. First, we have tried to make the discussion as non-technical and accessible as possible. On occasion we have had to settle for formulations that are somewhat less rigorous than would have been possible had we chosen a different—more formal—style.

Second, the issue of gender is of special significance in our study, and it is

perhaps particularly important for us to avoid the implicit 'sexism' of the standard language (e.g., referring to women as well as men generally as 'he'). On the other hand, the practice of 'inverting' the usage (e.g., by referring to all as 'she') is somewhat open to the same charge of sexism—in reverse—aside from looking rather self-consciously contrary. Also, the compound expression 'he or she', while fine in many cases, is a bit of a mouthful if used everywhere. The appropriate non-sexist practice may be to de-escalate the issue, and in particular to use 'he', 'she' and 'he or she' entirely interchangeably. That, at any rate, is what we have done.

This study is an outgrowth of our work for the project on 'Hunger and Poverty' of the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER). At every stage of our research and the writing of this book, we have received good advice, encouragement and help from Lal Jayawardena, the Director of WIDER. Others too, at WIDER, have given us all the help we could have asked for. We are most grateful for that.

A part of WIDER's research in the area of 'Hunger and Poverty' is currently in the press in the form of a three-volume book, edited by us, entitled *The Political Economy of Hunger*, to be published by Clarendon Press, Oxford. The first versions of most of these papers were written during 1985–6 and were presented at a conference on 'food strategies' in July 1986. The papers have been extensively revised since, and some new papers have been added. Aside from us, the contributors to these volumes are: Sudhir Anand, Kaushik Basu, Partha Dasgupta, Meghnad Desai, Christopher Harris, Barbara Harriss, Judith Heyer, Francis Idachaba, Ravi Kanbur, Gopu Kumar, Siddiq Osmani, Kirit Parikh, Jean-Philippe Platteau, N. Ram, Martin Ravallion, Debraj Ray, Carl Riskin, Ignacy Sachs, Rehman Sobhan, Peter Svedberg, Samuel Wangwe, and Ann Whitehead. We have greatly benefited from their collaboration.

While undertaking the research, we had the efficient assistance of Robin Burgess, Peter Lanjouw, Shailendra Mehta, Shantanu Mitra, Sanjay Reddy, Sangeeta Sethi and Madhura Swaminathan, and we are most grateful to them. We are greatly in debt to Jacky Jennings who has looked after the secretarial and administrative side of the entire project with outstanding skill. We have also been very fortunate in having the superb assistance of Anna-Marie Svedrofsky.

We have benefited much from communications and discussions with several voluntary organizations, including OXFAM, Save the Children Fund, and Shramjivi Samaj, among others. In the course of our analysis we have had to be, at times, somewhat critical of particular aspects of the work of voluntary agencies, but we have in general nothing but admiration for their contributions, within their chosen spheres of action. As a small token of appreciation, the royalties from this book will go to these agencies.

We have profited greatly from suggestions and criticisms made by those who have taken an interest in this study. For detailed and enormously helpful

comments on earlier drafts and notes, we are extremely grateful to Sudhir Anand, Philippe Autier, Robin Burgess, Lincoln Chen, Marty Chen, Stephen Coate, Monica Das Gupta, Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri, Meghnad Desai, Carl Eicher, Susan George, Keith Griffin, Judith Heyer, Allan Hill, Roger Hay, Athar Hussain, Nurul Islam, Jong-il You, Robert Kates, Jocelyn Kynch, Michael Lipton, John Mellor, Siddiq Osmani, Dwight Perkins, V. K. Ramachandran, Martin Ravallion, Shlomo Reutlinger, Carl Riskin, Frances Stewart, John Shaw, Paul Streeten, Per Pinstrup-Andersen, and Joachim von Braun.

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It may seem somewhat incredible that two people can have reasons to be grateful to such a large number of commentators ('never', to alter Churchill, 'has so much been owed by so few to so many'). But this has been an exacting work and we have tried to consider and take note of as much criticism as we could manage to secure. If the work is still very imperfect, it is not for the lack of good advice.

Helsinki
25 July 1989

J.D.
A.S.

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PART I

Hunger in the Modern World

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Introduction

1.1 Past and Present

Hunger is not a new affliction. Recurrent famines as well as endemic undernourishment have been persistent features of history. Life has been short and hard in much of the world, most of the time. Deprivation of food and other necessities of living has consistently been among the causal antecedents of the brutishness and brevity of human life.

Megasthenes, the envoy of Seleukos Nikator to the court of the Indian emperor Chandragupta Maurya in the fourth century BC, wrote—perhaps to impress his gullible Greek readers—that famine was completely unknown in Maurya India.¹ But Kautilya, the Indian political economist, who was an official adviser to Chandragupta, wrote extensively on how to deal with famines (on which more presently).² Ancient chronicles not only in India, but also in Egypt, Western Asia, China, Greece, Rome, North-east Africa, and elsewhere tell us about famines that ravaged ancient civilizations in different parts of the world.³ Even when literary accounts are scarce or do not exist, archaeological data and other historical evidence tell stories of sudden depopulation and frantic migration, in addition to providing information concerning nutritional debilitation and significant stunting.⁴ Hunger is not a modern malady.

Hunger is, however, intolerable in the modern world in a way it could not have been in the past. This is not so much because it is more intense, but because widespread hunger is so unnecessary and unwarranted in the modern world. The enormous expansion of productive power that has taken place over the last few centuries has made it, perhaps for the first time, possible to guarantee adequate food for all, and it is in this context that the persistence of

¹ See the translation by McCrindle (1877: 32). See also Dutt (1900, 1904).

² See Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*, especially the 4th Book, particularly the section on 'Remedies against National Calamities'. There are various translations, e.g. Shama Sastry (1967).

³ For interesting accounts of the history of famines in different parts of the world, see Walford (1878), Wright (1882), Dutt (1900, 1901), Loveday (1914), Mallory (1926), Ghosh (1944), Swann (1950), Cépède and Lengellé (1953), Pankhurst (1961), Masefield (1963), Bhatia (1967), Aykroyd (1974), Hussein (1976), Iliffe (1987), Alamgir (1980), Dando (1980), Will (1980), Cahill (1982), McAlpin (1983a), Rotberg and Rabb (1983), Bose (1987), Vaughan (1987), D'Souza (1988), Garnsey (1988), Newman *et al.* (forthcoming), among others. See also the bibliographies provided by Currey, Ali and Kohman (1981) and Golkin (1987).

⁴ Old burial remains often provide tell-tale evidence of chronic stunting. The size of clothing, equipment, etc. also provides indirect data. It is not only that, say, the Roman soldiers and heroes, judging by such evidence, were astonishingly short (especially compared with Charlton Heston), but also that cases of clinically recognizable stunting are quite frequent. There is, of course, an interpretational issue as to whether stunting typically implies any significant impairment of human ability to function. This question and related nutritional disputes are taken up in Chapter 3.

chronic hunger and the recurrence of virulent famines must be seen as being morally outrageous and politically unacceptable. If politics is 'the art of the possible', then conquering world hunger has become a political issue in a way it could not have been in the past.

Aside from this political and ethical issue distinguishing modern hunger from past hunger, there are also a number of other important contrasts.

First, for a substantial part of humanity, the health problems connected with food consumption have ceased being the result of having too little and stem instead from having too much. While one part of humanity desperately searches for more food to eat, another part counts the calories and looks for new ways of slimming. Inequalities in the distribution of food are not a new phenomenon by any means, but while in the past affluence may have been confined to a small section of society, in the modern world the bulk of the population in many countries is now in the affluent category as far as food is concerned.

It is, of course, true that substantial pockets of hunger do survive in Europe and North America, and certainly call for serious attention in public policy.⁵ We shall have some things to say on that problem of resilient undernourishment. But the fact that the *typical* person in Europe or North America tries to reduce—rather than increase—calorie intake makes the persistence of widespread nutritional deficiency and hunger in the rest of the world a particularly contrary phenomenon. This adds to the force of seeing world hunger as an international political issue in a way it has never been in the past.

Second, the persistence of hunger in many countries in the contemporary world is related not merely to a general lack of affluence, but also to substantial—often extreme—inequalities within the society. The issue of inequality in the genesis of hunger and famines is not in itself new. In his famous treatise on politics, diplomacy, and political economy called *Arthaśāstra* (roughly translated as 'instructions on material prosperity'), Kautilya, the ancient Indian political theorist and economist to whom we have already referred, included among his famine relief policies the possibility of raiding the provisions of the rich. In fact, he wrote with some eloquence on 'the policy of thinning the rich by exacting excess revenue [*karśanam*], or causing them to vomit their accumulated wealth [*vamanam*]'.⁶

The general issue of inequality has always been important in famine analysis. But with the development of modern economic relations and of extensive interdependences even between distant parts of the economy, there are many new ways in which different sections of the population can see their economic position and their command over food shift violently and suddenly. For example, aside from the more traditional 'slump famines', in which starvation develops along with a general economic decline (e.g. a crop failure leading to

⁵ See e.g. the reports on hunger in the United States produced by the Harvard School of Public Health (1985, 1987).

⁶ *Arthaśāstra*, 4th Book. In the translation by Shama Sastry (1967), see pp. 237–8.

impoverishment), famines can and have taken place in recent years even in boom situations. In a 'boom famine', many occupation groups may improve their economic position substantially, thereby commanding a bigger share of the available food, which can lead to a decline—even an absolute decline—of food command on the part of those less favourably placed in the uneven expansion of money incomes. For instance, the Bengal famine of 1943 (in which, it is estimated, 3 million people died) had many characteristics of being such a 'boom famine'.⁷

Third, the dependence of one group's ability to command food on its relative position and comparative economic power *vis-à-vis* other groups can be especially important in a market economy. The institution of markets is, of course, an old one, but the reach and role of market transactions has substantially expanded in recent times. On the one hand, this has added new economic opportunities and new ways of achieving prosperity through specialization and exchange, and the development of extensive markets has been a major force behind the enhancement of the wealth of nations, as Adam Smith rightly foresaw.⁸ But, on the other hand, the expansion of markets has also added a new source of vulnerability for some groups. For example, pastoralist nomads can be reduced to starvation if the relative price of animal products falls in relation to that of staple food, since their subsistence depends on their ability to sell animals and animal products (including meat) to buy enough calories from *cheaper* food materials such as grain. Similarly, fishermen may go hungry if the price of fish fails to keep up with that of, say, rice.⁹

Fourth, the importance of the institution of wage labour is a particular aspect of this general problem. People who possess no means of production excepting their own labour power, which they try to sell for a wage in order to earn an adequate income to buy enough food, are particularly vulnerable to changes in labour market conditions. A decline in wages *vis-à-vis* food prices, or an increase in unemployment, can spell disaster for this class. While hiring labour has existed for a long time, its relative importance—especially in the form of wage labour—has dramatically increased with the spread of capitalism, even in developing countries. The class of landless wage labourers has indeed recurrently produced famine victims in modern times. For example, in

⁷ On this see Sen (1977a, 1981a). See also Alamgir (1980) and Greenough (1982). Ravallion (1987a) provides an extensive and far-reaching analysis of the general economic relationships between markets and famines.

⁸ Smith (1776). Smith was, however, fully aware—in a way some of his followers evidently were not—that the market may also help to spread deprivation and famines, e.g. through employment loss in a general economic crisis. Smith's analysis of famines is discussed in Sen (1986a).

⁹ Of course, meat and fish are both food themselves, but the poor pastoralist or fisherman often survives by selling these 'luxury' foods and buying cheaper calories; the meat and the fish themselves may not provide enough calories to the population dependent on herding animals or catching fish for the market. On this see Sen (1981a: chapters 6–8), and Desai (1988a). See also Hay (1975), Rivers *et al.* (1976), and Seaman, Holt and Rivers (1978) on the relative costs of animal calories and grain calories and the conditions of exchange faced by Ethiopian pastoralists. On the equilibrium of pastoral survival, including exchange, see Swift (1982), McCann (1987) and Horowitz and Little (1987), among others.

the Indian subcontinent, the majority of famine victims in this century and the last has come from this group.¹⁰

The acute vulnerability of wage labourers in a market economy is a problem which applies, in fact, also to the richer countries (including those of Western Europe and North America), since even there wage labourers have little ability to survive on their own when unemployment develops as dramatically as it did, say, in the early 1980s. People in this predicament have been spared the necessity of starvation because of the supplementation of the market mechanism by institutionalized social security, and in particular by unemployment insurance, in the absence of which there would have been, it is easy to see, acute and widespread hunger in many of these countries.

The importance of the vulnerability of wage labourers to famines can be particularly acute in that *intermediate* phase in which the class of wage labourers has become large (unlike in precapitalist formations), but a system of social security has not yet developed (unlike in the more advanced economies). This is not to say that traditional means of social security in pre-wage economies are typically adequate. Indeed, as we shall see later, they are often altogether insufficient and meagre. But the wage system has added a particular source of vulnerability which has to be specifically addressed.

Fifth, recent times have witnessed not only a rapid expansion of market exchange, but also significant developments in the conditions of 'exchange with nature', i.e. production. On the one hand, advances in agricultural technology have increased the potential for improving living conditions in rural areas. On the other hand, in many countries environmental degradation (in the form of deforestation, desertification, etc.) poses a grave threat to the livelihood of the rural population. While these processes are, once again, not new, their pace and reach are often greater than ever. So is the scope for public action to influence and reshape them.

Sixth, the state has an important role to play in combating world hunger, and in this book we shall, in fact, go into many of the policy issues that are involved in playing this role effectively. At the same time, it would be a mistake to overlook the fact that many famines in the world have actually arisen from and been sustained by inflexible government policies undermining the power of particular sections of the population to command food. The Soviet famines of the 1930s and the Kampuchean famines of the late 1970s are obvious examples of systematic undermining of the economic power of a large part of the population through state policy. It is easy to cite other terrible cases in which political dogma and the use of authoritarian political power have led to disastrous government policies, making it impossible for millions of people to earn a living.

In a sense this feature is not really new, since kings and rulers in the past have also often imposed extraordinary sacrifices on sections of the population, not

¹⁰ See Drèze (1988a).

least due to invasions and wars. But with the growth of modern politics, the importance of ideology has grown dramatically. That can, of course, be a creative force in providing political commitment for combating world hunger, and we shall have quite a bit to say on the positive role of determined state policy. But ideological state action can also include dogmatic pursuit of policies that force large sections of the population into penury and deprivation. Strongly ideological politics has become—both positively and negatively—an inescapable part of the economics of food and starvation, and this too is a feature that has to be kept in view in analysing the challenge of hunger in the modern world.

There are many other, subtler differences between hunger in the past and that in the modern world. Hunger is a common predicament, but this does not indicate the existence of one shared cause. People can fail in their ability to command food and other necessities in many different ways, and the genesis of these failures can vary greatly with the nature of the economy and the society. In this book we must pay particular attention to the special features of hunger in the modern world, in addition to investigating more traditional aspects of poverty and starvation.

1.2 Famine and Chronic Undernourishment

There are many different ways of seeing hunger. The dictionary meaning of the term, e.g. 'discomfort or painful sensation caused by want of food', takes us in a particular and extremely narrow direction. In the demand for 'ending hunger' the concern is not merely with making it possible to avoid that discomfort or pain (even though the suffering involved is often underestimated by people who have never really experienced this pain), but also to conquer food deprivation in general—seen in terms of its manifold consequences. These consequences include undernourishment, debilitation, fatigue, morbidity, and possibly mortality, with obvious effects on human well-being and productivity.

In trying to come to grips with the problem of hunger in the modern world, it is necessary to get a clear understanding of the different issues that constitute it. The distinction between the problem of chronic hunger (involving sustained nutritional deprivation on a persistent basis) and that of famine (involving acute starvation and a sharp increase of mortality) is particularly important. In this book we shall encounter several important contrasts in the strategic choices that arise in facing these respective problems. To take one example, in the context of famine prevention the crucial need for speedy intervention and the scarcity of resources often call for a calculated reliance on existing distributional mechanisms (e.g. the operation of private trade stimulated by cash support to famine victims) to supplement the logistic capability of relief agencies. In the context of combating chronic hunger, on the other hand, there is much greater scope for slower but none the less powerful avenues of

action such as institution building, legal reforms, asset redistribution, or provisioning in kind.

The importance of the contrast between chronic hunger and acute starvation is also reflected in the experiences of different countries. There are countries in which famines in the form of acute starvation leading to large-scale mortality have not taken place in recent years, but where chronic hunger is quite widespread. An example is India since its independence in 1947. The last major famine in India took place before independence, viz. the Bengal famine of 1943, in which about 3 million people died. Since then there have been a number of threats of severe famine (e.g. in Bihar in 1967, in Maharashtra in 1973, in West Bengal in 1979, in Gujarat in 1987), but they did not materialize, largely due to public intervention. There is, however, a great deal of regular hunger and endemic undernourishment in India, especially in rural areas. The frequency of undernutrition-related diseases also remains distressingly high.¹¹

On the other hand, it is possible for a country to deal effectively with chronic hunger as an endemic feature, and at the same time to fall prey to substantial famine as a transient phenomenon. That seems to have been the experience of China, in which the problem of regular hunger has been tackled with much success—considerably more effectively than in India—but where a famine on a gigantic scale took place during 1958–61, with an excess mortality that has to be counted in terms of tens of millions.¹² The contrast between India and China is really rather striking, especially since India's success in famine prevention seems to have done little to help it combat chronic hunger, and China's remarkable achievement in improving the nutritional well-being of its people in normal times (and in expanding the longevity of the Chinese to the high sixties) has not been accompanied by an absence of famine in the post-revolutionary period. The complex economic and political causation of this contrasting pattern—and other important features of the experience of these two giant countries—will be examined later on in this volume (Chapter 11). But, for the moment, we shall leave this issue here, using it only to illustrate the importance of the distinction between chronic hunger, on the one hand, and acute starvation involved in a famine, on the other.

As a matter of fact, famine is a much more confined phenomenon in the modern world than endemic undernutrition and persistent deprivation. Most famines in recent decades have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, with a few exceptions such as the Bangladesh famine of 1974 and the Kampuchean famine of 1979–80. In sub-Saharan Africa famines have afflicted a great many countries, and we shall be paying particular attention to that region in Part II of

¹¹ See Banerji (1982), Rao (1982), Gopalan (1987*b*), Nutrition Foundation of India (1988), Srinivasan and Bardhan (1988), and Subbarao (1989). On the role of public intervention in preventing famines in India since independence, see Drèze (1988*a*).

¹² On the basis of the recently available Chinese demographic statistics, Ashton *et al.* (1984) estimate the number of excess deaths in that famine to be 29.5 million, while Peng's (1987) estimate is 23 million. On China's success in addressing the challenge of chronic hunger, see Riskin (1986), and also Chapter 11 below.

this volume (Chapters 5–8), concerned with analysing the causation and prevention of famines.

While famines have been rare outside Africa in recent decades, the problem of endemic hunger is serious—indeed often colossal—in many other parts of the world as well, particularly South Asia. Even in Latin America, which is very much richer in terms of GNP per head than Africa or South Asia, particular sections of the population—related to class and location—are significantly affected by the persistence of hunger (see Kanbur 1986b).

Furthermore, as we shall argue presently (Chapter 3), the problem of chronic undernutrition is closely related not only to deficiency of food intake, but also to deprivations of other kinds, particularly those of education, health care, basic facilities, and social environment (including water supply, sanitary provisions, etc.). The effects of these deficiencies can be seen in such elementary failures as low longevity and high morbidity, in addition to clinical undernutrition. While life expectancy at birth is more than 75 years in many of the prosperous countries of the world, the corresponding figure is estimated to be below 60 years in most poor countries, below 50 for a great many, and even below 40 years for some. When we address problems of endemic undernutrition and deprivation in Part III of this book (Chapters 9–12), we shall have to take a broad view of poverty and indigence, and also take note of the wide geographical coverage of rudimentary deprivation.

1.3 Some Elementary Concepts

In the analysis to be presented in this book a number of elementary concepts will be frequently used, and it may be convenient to say a few words on the underlying ideas in this introductory chapter. There is nothing particularly complex, nor anything alarmingly novel, about these concepts. But the presentation of the arguments may be helped by some initial clarification.

Entitlements

What we can eat depends on what food we are able to acquire. The mere presence of food in the economy, or in the market, does not entitle a person to consume it. In each social structure, given the prevailing legal, political, and economic arrangements, a person can establish command over some alternative commodity bundles (any one bundle of which he or she can choose to consume). These bundles could be extensive, or very limited, and what a person can consume will be directly dependent on what these bundles are. The set of alternative bundles of commodities over which a person can establish such command will be referred to as this person's 'entitlements'.¹³

¹³ Entitlement is being defined here in terms of ownership rights. There are other types of rights of *use* that do not involve ownership as such, but which have the effect of guaranteeing use nevertheless. For a more comprehensive characterization of entitlements, see Sen (1981a). Some of these additional features will also be discussed later on in this book.

To illustrate, a peasant who grows his own food is entitled to what he has grown, adjusted for any obligations he may have (e.g. to money-lenders). He can sell, if he wants, a part of the product for cash to buy other goods and services, and all the alternative commodity bundles he can acquire through these means lie within his entitlement set. Similarly, a wage labourer's entitlement is given by what he can buy with his wages, if he does in fact manage to find employment.¹⁴

Endowment and Exchange

A person's entitlements depend both on what she owns initially, and what she can acquire through exchange. For example, a wage labourer owns her labour power, and by exchanging that for a wage (the exchange takes the form of employment), she acquires some money, which she can then exchange for some commodity bundle or other. Similarly, a landlord who owns some land and leases out that land for rent can use the proceeds to purchase different commodity bundles. The 'endowment' of a person is given by the initial ownership (e.g. the labourer's labour power, the landlord's holding of land), and these endowments can be used to establish entitlements in the form of holdings of alternative commodity bundles through trade (e.g. a labourer taking up employment and purchasing commodities with the wage, a landlord renting out land and purchasing commodities with the rent).

The exchange can also be with 'nature', and this is one way of seeing production, as opposed to trade. For example, a peasant farmer can exchange the use of his land and his labour power (along with a few other inputs such as seeds) for a crop. This exchange with nature in the form of production may, of course, be followed by trade in the form of selling a part (or indeed the whole) of the output and buying other commodities with the proceeds. The alternative bundles of commodities a person can acquire through exchange (i.e. production and trade) for each particular endowment are the person's 'exchange entitlement' for that level of endowment.

Extended Entitlements

While the concept of entitlement focuses on a person's *legal* rights of ownership, there are some social relations that take the broader form of accepted *legitimacy* rather than legal rights enforceable in a court. For example, if, by a well-established convention, the male head of a household receives more favourable treatment in the division of the family's total consumption (e.g. having the first claim on, say, the meat or the fish in the family's diet, or receiving greater medical attention in case of illness), that person can be seen as having a claim the legitimacy of which is accepted and is thus effective, even though it is not a claim that can be upheld in a court or enforced by the power of the state.

¹⁴ The 'budget set' of elementary consumer theory is a simple example of an entitlement set.

Despite their legally weaker form, such socially sanctioned rights may be extremely important in determining the amount of food or health care or other commodities that different members of a family get, and this too will play a part in our analysis of hunger. 'Extended entitlements' is the concept of entitlements extended to include the results of more informal types of rights sanctioned by accepted notions of legitimacy. This notion is particularly relevant in analysing intrafamily divisions, but it has other uses in social analysis as well.

Cooperative Conflicts

In the social relations that *inter alia* determine the entitlements enjoyed by different people, there tends to be a coexistence of conflict *and* congruence of interests. There are, in most situations, clear advantages to be gained by different people through cooperation with each other, and yet there are also elements of conflict reflecting the partly divergent interests of the same people. 'Cooperative conflicts' refer to this coexistence of congruence and conflict of interests, providing grounds for cooperation as well as for disputes and battles.

Cooperative conflicts may be illustrated from many different fields of social relations. Consider the relation between workers and industrialists in a particular industry. If production is disrupted, both the industrialists and the workers may lose, so that it is in the interest of both to cooperate with each other in the process of production. But the division of benefits obtained from production may also involve an extensive tussle between the industrialists and the workers. It may be in the interest of the capitalists to get a larger share of the output produced, and in the interest of the workers to obtain higher wages and better working conditions and resist 'exploitation'. In the context of productive activities of other kinds, the relations between, say, a share-cropper and a landlord, or between the members of a production team, or between the different parties in a cartel, also involve obvious situations of cooperative conflict.

To take another example, it is typically in the interest of all the members of a family to cooperate in living together. But at the same time there is also the issue of *intrafamily* division, and it may be in the interest of, say, the husband to secure a higher share of benefits and a lower share of household chores *vis-à-vis* his wife. The conflicts involved in gender division may, thus, arise against a background of generally cooperative behaviour. Indeed, given the importance of cooperation in family living, the elements of conflict may be kept very well hidden, so that a serious awareness of the elements of conflict may be suppressed by the use of conventional norms. The questioning of these norms may even appear to be aberrant and deviant behaviour. The issue of perception can, thus, be a very important aspect of the problem of gender-based inequality.¹⁵

¹⁵ The role of cooperative conflicts in gender relations and in intrafamily divisions, and the part played in all this by perception problems, are discussed in Sen (1985c, 1987c).

Analysing cooperative conflicts is particularly important for a better understanding of the causes and remedies of hunger. In addition to the problems involved in production relations and in intrafamily divisions, even at the more aggregative level there tends to be coexistence of a good deal of congruence and conflict of interests. For example, there may be great gains for everyone in cooperation for the preservation of the environment, for the prevention of droughts, for improving agricultural technology and infrastructure, for reducing industrial wastage, or for eliminating epidemics. And yet there may also be extensive battles between different groups for, say, a bigger share of the total food available in the economy. Sometimes even a famine may be principally associated with one group losing out in a 'food battle' of this kind.

Capability and Living Standards

In any economic analysis it is important to distinguish between the ends and the means. At the very beginning of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had noted, while discussing the role of economics, the need to be aware that 'wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of something else'.¹⁶ Aristotle saw 'the good of human beings' in terms of the richness of 'life in the sense of activity', and thus argued for taking human functionings as the objects of value.¹⁷

In a similar line of reasoning, with more specific concentration on the quality of life, the object of public action can be seen to be the enhancement of the capability of people to undertake valuable and valued 'doings and beings'.¹⁸ This can extend from such elementary capabilities as the ability to avoid undernourishment and related morbidity and mortality, to more sophisticated social capabilities such as taking part in the life of the community and achieving self-respect.

Capability is a broad concept, and it incorporates the concerns that are associated with what is often called the 'standard of living', but goes beyond it. Living standards relate specifically to the richness of the person's own life, whereas a person may value his or her capability also to be socially useful and influential (going well beyond the pursuit of his or her own living standards). The distinction between the broader notion of capability and the narrower concept of living standard can be relevant in many contexts.¹⁹ Concern with

¹⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, section 5; in the translation by Ross (1980: 7).

¹⁷ Book I, section 7; Ross (1980: 12–15). Marx followed this line of reasoning and argued for a reorientation of economic preoccupations: 'It will be seen how in place of the wealth and poverty of political economy come the rich human being and rich human need. The rich human being is simultaneously in need of a totality of human life-activities' (Marx, 1844).

¹⁸ There are interesting and important problems in the characterization and analysis of capabilities, on which see Sen (1985a, 1985b). Formally, a person's capability is a set of functioning bundles, representing the various alternative 'beings and doings' that a person can achieve with his or her economic, social, and personal characteristics.

¹⁹ For an analysis of this and related distinctions, see Sen (1977b, 1987a, 1987b). On related matters see Hart (1987), Hawthorn (1987), Kanbur (1987), Muellbauer (1987), B. Williams (1987), Griffin and Knight (1988, 1989).

the lives of others is clearly a crucial ingredient of public action. Without acknowledging this basic human motivation, it would be impossible to understand the part that political parties, social leaders, journalists, relief agencies and grass-roots activists can play in encountering famines and chronic deprivation. However, in the context of defining the *objectives* to be pursued in the battle against hunger, the finer distinction between capability and living standard may not be of central importance. The important thing at this stage (and in much of this book) is to note the general concern with 'doings' and 'beings' and the corresponding capabilities, rather than just with incomes or wealth or utilities.

The focus on capability helps to clarify the purpose of public action in different fields, including that of combating hunger. The object, in this view, is not so much to provide a particular amount of food for each. Indeed, the relationship between food intake and nutritional achievement can vary greatly depending not only on features such as age, sex, pregnancy, metabolic rates, climatic conditions, and activities, but also on access to complementary inputs such as health care, drinking water and so on. A more reasoned goal would be to make it possible for all to have the capability to avoid undernourishment and escape deprivations associated with hunger. The focus here is on human life as it can be led, rather than on commodities as such, which are means to human life, and are contingently related to need fulfilment rather than being valued for themselves.²⁰ The focus on entitlements, which is concerned with the command over *commodities*, has to be seen as only instrumentally important, and the concentration has to be, ultimately, on basic human capabilities.²¹

The implications of focusing on capabilities in the analysis of public action in combating hunger will become clearer as we go along. One particular consequence relates to the need to broaden our attention from the command over food to other influences, including the command over other commodities that have a substantial impact on nutrition and health. A person's capability to avoid undernourishment may depend not merely on his or her intake of food, but also on the person's access to health care, medical facilities, elementary education, drinking water, and sanitary facilities. Similarly, the prevalence of epidemics and disease in a particular region may also be a factor influencing the extent of undernutrition. In so far as we concentrate on entitlements, the case

²⁰ Marx (1887) discussed the problems associated with what he called 'commodity fetishism' (ch. 1). There is a good case for defining 'basic needs' in terms of capabilities as such rather than in terms of commodities, as they are usually defined. On this, see Sen (1984a), Streeten (1984), and F. Stewart (1988). See also Streeten *et al.* (1981).

²¹ While the *entitlement* of a person is a set of alternative *commodity* bundles, the *capability* of a person is a set of alternative *functioning* bundles. Larger entitlements contribute to wider capabilities, but the relationship is not the same for different persons. For example, a pregnant woman has greater nutritional requirements and also special needs for medical attention, and hence having the same command over food and health care as another—non-pregnant—person may not give her the same capability to be well nourished and healthy. Public action has to be based on an adequately discriminating analysis, and this calls for causal investigations of capabilities and of variations in the relation between entitlements and capabilities.

for broadening the coverage from food as such to all the commodities relevant to nutritional capabilities and good health is strong. This has a direct and far-reaching bearing on the nature of public action for combating hunger and deprivation.

Undernourishment and Undernutrition

A capability is 'nutrition-related' if and only if it can be enhanced by greater or better food intake. Two clarifications are due. First, while many capabilities are 'nutrition-related' in this sense, some (e.g. the ability to survive) are clearly more important than others (e.g. fitness to hop, skip and jump). Our primary concern is with those nutrition-related capabilities that are crucial to human well-being. Second, while the boundaries of the concept of 'nutrition-related capability' are defined with reference to the relevance or otherwise of improved food intake, most capabilities of this kind also depend on many other factors. The importance of epidemiological protection, health care, basic education, sanitation, etc., for nutritional well-being will be one of the recurrent themes of this book.

A distinction is sometimes made—typically implicitly—between 'under-nutrition' and 'undernourishment'. The former is usually seen in terms of a *shortage of food intake*, while the latter is taken to be an *unsatisfactory state of being*. In this contrast, undernutrition is connected with *commodities* (specifically food—someone having less food, or less variety of food, than some specified nutritional standard would demand), while undernourishment is connected with the state of *human beings* (specifically, a person being somehow inadequate in energy or strength or some other feature associated with nutritional sufficiency).

While there is a distinction here, it is arguable that it is not perhaps as much of a dividing line as might first appear. This is the case *if* 'undernutrition' is defined taking full note of personal characteristics. That is, undernutrition has to be seen in terms of a person not getting as much as he or she would need for reaching some specified nutritional standards. What those standards should be is, of course, a subject of considerable interest as well as great controversy (as we shall see in Chapter 3), but at this stage all that is immediately relevant is that the standards in question are related to the nutritional states of *people*, rather than being defined in terms of *given* amounts of food or nutrients, specified *irrespective* of personal characteristics (such as body size, metabolic rate, sex, pregnancy, age, etc.). A sensible identification of 'undernutrition' already brings in the *state of the person's being*—specifically the person being in some sense 'undernourished'. Given that connection between 'undernutrition' and 'undernourishment', the two must be seen as tied concepts.

Deprivation and Poverty

There are different ways of seeing the deprivations in human life with which public action has to be concerned. From what has been said already it should be

clear that deprivation may be fruitfully seen in terms of the failure of certain human capabilities that are important to a person's well-being. If a person does not have the capability of avoiding preventable mortality, unnecessary morbidity, or escapable undernourishment, then it would almost certainly be agreed that the person is deprived in a significant way. There may be other—more subtle—types of deprivation on which too there could be general agreement, such as the inability to appear in public without shame because of one's evident penury.²²

It is, in fact, possible to see 'poverty' itself as a severe failure of basic capabilities. That approach has much to commend, since it relates poverty to the failure of the ability to achieve precisely those things that are ultimately important.²³ On the other hand, the more common definition of poverty is in terms of inadequacy of incomes (e.g. a person's income level falling below the 'poverty line'). It is perhaps fruitless to spend much time arguing about which definition of poverty is superior. Undoubtedly, the failure of basic capabilities must ultimately be the central concern in the context of this analysis. Also, we have to take note of the fact that capabilities are influenced not merely by personal incomes but also by social facilities (such as public health). Whether poverty is seen as the failure of basic capabilities itself (e.g. 'a person is poor if she has to lead a very deprived life'), or as a causal antecedent of that failure (e.g. 'a person is poor if she has too low an income'), may not really make much difference *provided* we gear our analysis, ultimately, to matters of intrinsic concern and examine all causal influences on those matters. It is the need to avoid deprivation of basic capabilities on which we have to concentrate in the analysis of public action. This priority holds no matter whether 'poverty' is identified with that deprivation itself, or defined as the lack of economic means to escape that deprivation.

Social Security

Hunger is a many-headed monster. The undernutrition that haunts a large part of humanity relates to a wide range of deprivations. The connections between different types of deprivation are not only biological (e.g. between illness and undernutrition) but also economic and social (e.g. between unemployment and illness).

The idea of 'social security' is that of using social means to prevent deprivation and vulnerability. Social means can be of various types. Perhaps the most immediate is to provide direct support to the ability of the vulnerable to acquire the means to basic capabilities. Providing free food or cash to potential famine victims is an obvious example of this. On a more regular basis,

²² The last is, in fact, a capability failure on which Adam Smith had a good deal to say; see Smith (1776), vol. I, Book V, Section II, in the edition by Campbell and Skinner (1976: 869–72).

²³ For a discussion of the rationale underlying this view of poverty, see Sen (1980, 1983*b*). See also Townsend (1985), Sen (1985*d*) and Seidl (1988).

providing unemployment insurance, free health services and basic education, etc., are other examples of such direct support.

The social means could also be indirect. For example, creating the social conditions of economic growth may make a substantial—and lasting—contribution to eliminating deprivation, if growth involves widespread participation of the population in the process of economic expansion. Later on in this book we shall study the different social means that may be used to reduce or eliminate failures of basic capabilities. We shall also have to study the interconnections between alternative approaches to social security.

We should stress that 'social security' as we see it here is a much broader and far-reaching notion than the technical sense in which the term is sometimes used in the professional literature on social administration in the richer countries. Debates on social security issues in the more prosperous countries have tended, perhaps for good logistic reasons, to focus on a number of specific forms of intervention such as unemployment benefits, medical insurance or old age pensions. Often the very definition of 'social security' is associated with these specific programmes (see e.g. the publications of the International Social Security Association). There is some debate as to the part that these programmes can play in removing deprivation in developing countries.²⁴ But no matter what position we take on this issue, there is some obvious advantage in considering all the relevant forms of intervention in a common framework. We see 'social security' essentially as an *objective* pursued through *public means* rather than as a narrowly defined set of particular strategies, and it is important to take a broad view of the public means that are relevant to the attainment of this objective.²⁵

It is useful to distinguish between two different aspects of social security, viz *protection* and *promotion*. The former is concerned with the task of preventing a decline in living standards as might occur in, say, an economic recession, or—more drastically—in a famine. The latter refers to the enhancement of general living standards and to the expansion of basic capabilities of the population, and will have to be seen primarily as a long-run challenge. In this book we shall be concerned with both aspects of social security.

It must be emphasized that while the terms 'promotion' and 'protection' both have a somewhat paternalistic ring, these terms refer to the objectives of the exercise rather than to the agency that may pursue these objectives. As we shall argue in the next section, public action for social security is neither just a matter of state activity, nor an issue of charity, nor even one of kindly

²⁴ On this see Mouton (1975), Gilbert (1976, 1981), Mesa-Lago (1978, 1983a, 1985c, 1986), Cockburn (1980), Mallet (1980), Guhan (1981, 1988), International Social Security Association (1982), Midgley (1984a, 1984b), Abel-Smith (1986), Atkinson and Hills (1988), and various contributions in Ahmad, Drèze, Hills and Sen (1991).

²⁵ The social security measures that have been historically associated with the pursuit of social security objectives in the richer countries, and which are now formalized in the conventional usage of the term (e.g. in ILO publications), are best seen as contingently relevant for social security in the broader sense.

redistribution. The activism of the public, the unity and solidarity of the concerned population, and the participation of all those who are involved are important features of public action for social security.

1.4 Public Action for Social Security

It would be hard to deny that there is a straightforward public-interest issue involved in the elimination of starvation and of nutritional deprivation. The challenge of confronting in an effective manner the scourge that chastises and haunts a substantial part of humanity inescapably calls for diverse forms of public action. The provision of social security cannot exclusively rely either on the operation of market forces, or on some paternalistic initiative on the part of the state, or on some other social institution such as the family.

The *need* for public action does not, however, in itself point to the *nature* of the action to be undertaken. There are different areas of action, different strategies to pursue, different agents for undertaking action. The decision problems implicit in the choices involved are both complex and momentous. The issues include political and social phenomena as well as economic ones. The strategy of public action can be as difficult as it is urgent.

The various facets of the challenge of public action for the elimination of famines and endemic hunger will receive close attention in different parts of this book, but a few elementary considerations deserve immediate mention. First, the orientation of public action must clearly depend on the feasibilities of different courses of action. These feasibilities relate not merely to the causal factors that lead to deprivation and hunger, but also to the nature and power of the agencies involved. In particular, the character of the state, and the nature of the government undertaking state actions, can be crucial. The questions raised include not merely the administrative capabilities of governments, but also the political commitments and loyalties as well as the power bases of the holders of political power.

The countries with which we shall be concerned in this book have enormously divergent political systems and social balances of power, and the forms that public action can take will undoubtedly depend on these political and social parameters. For example, whether the Chinese success in subduing chronic hunger can be repeated, say, in India, or whether Indian achievements in the elimination of famines can be emulated in sub-Saharan Africa, or whether the sub-Saharan African record of lower gender inequalities in nutritional well-being can be duplicated in India or China or the Middle East, are all important and complex questions that call for careful scrutiny of the backgrounds against which these experiences have taken place.

Second, the public is not a homogeneous entity, and there are divisions related to class, ownership, occupation, and also gender, community and culture. While public action for social security is in some sense beneficial for all groups, the division of the benefits involved cannot escape differential pulls

coming from divergent interest groups. The art of public action has to take note of these cooperative conflicts. To think of public action as action for the benefit of a homogeneous public is to miss a crucial aspect of the challenge.

Third, state action for the elimination of hunger can take enormously divergent forms. It need not involve only food production or food distribution. It can take the form of income or employment creation on a regular basis to combat endemic undernourishment. It can also involve famine relief operations in the form of employment for wages in cash or in kind to regenerate the purchasing power of hard-hit occupation groups. It can include the provision of health care and epidemic control, which may be important not merely as basic ingredients of the general well-being of the population, but also in preventing undernourishment, which is often associated with parasitic ailments and other forms of morbidity. State action can also take the form of enhancing economic development, in general, and the growth of incomes and other means of subsistence, in particular, through the expansion of productive activities. The discipline of public action may be widely different in these various fields, and the strategy of public action for social security has to be alive to the respective issues involved. The complementarities and tradeoffs between different avenues of action also have to be firmly faced in developing an overall effective public programme for eliminating hunger in all its forms.

Fourth, some public institutions, in particular the market, have often been seen as being an alternative to state action. To some extent this is right, since market mechanisms determine certain allocations and distributions, and state actions can alter or even take over many of these functions. While the conflicts between the reliance on markets and that on state action have to be fully acknowledged, it is also important not to see these two avenues as being in constant combat with each other. A purist philosophy can be awfully short of logistic means.²⁶

The need to consider a plurality of levers and a heterogeneity of mechanisms is hard to escape in the strategy of public action for social security. The internal diversities involved in an effective public action programme can be quite extensive. For example, several countries have achieved some success in preventing famines by combining cash transfers to vulnerable groups in the form of wages for public employment with reliance on the private sector for moving food to affected regions, along with public participation in food distribution to prevent the emergence of collusive manipulations by private traders. These combined strategies illustrate the fruitfulness of taking an integrated and pluralist view of public action.

Fifth, public action should not be confused with state action only. Various

²⁶ The either-this-or-that 'exclusive' view often attributed to leaders of classical political economy was by no means universally endorsed. The effectiveness of the market mechanism in achieving certain types of efficiency was clearly seen by that great critic of capitalism, Karl Marx, and the fact that 'want, famine and mortality' can arise from unemployment in a market economy was explicitly noted by that great defender of the efficiency of markets, Adam Smith.

social and political organizations have typically played a part in actions that go beyond atomistic individual initiatives, and the domain of public action does include many non-state activities. Indeed, in many traditional societies, individual security has tended to depend greatly on support from groups such as the extended family or the community.²⁷ The active role of the state in the modern world should not be seen as replacement of what these non-governmental groups and institutions can achieve.

Finally, even as far as state action is concerned, there is a close relationship between public understanding and awareness, on the one hand, and the nature, forms and vigour of state action in pursuit of public goals, on the other. Political pressure plays a major part in determining actions undertaken by governments, and even fairly authoritarian political leaders have, to a great extent, to accept the discipline of public criticism and social opposition. Public enlightenment may, thus, have the role both of drawing attention to problems that may otherwise be neglected, and of precipitating remedial action on the part of governments faced with critical pressure. For example, the role of newspapers and public discussions, which can be extremely crucial in identifying famine threats (an energetic press may be the best 'early warning system' for famine that a country can devise), can also help to keep the government on its toes so that famine relief and preventive measures take place rapidly and effectively.

The question of public enlightenment and awareness involves both institutional features and the nature of social and political movements in the country. Since these are not immutable factors, the role of public action must be examined not merely in terms of consolidation of past achievements, but also with a view to possible departures in new directions. It is important to see the public as an agent and not merely as a passive patient.

²⁷ The profound concern of traditional societies for social security, and the variety of institutions they have evolved in pursuit of that objective, have been explored by Jean-Philippe Platteau (1988*b*). See also Chapter 5.

Entitlement and Deprivation¹

2.1 *Deprivation and the Law*

When millions of people die in a famine, it is hard to avoid the thought that something terribly criminal is going on. The law, which defines and protects our rights as citizens, must somehow be compromised by these dreadful events. Unfortunately, the gap between law and ethics can be a big one. The economic system that yields a famine may be foul and the political system that tolerates it perfectly revolting, but nevertheless there may be no violation of our lawfully recognized rights in the failure of large sections of the population to acquire enough food to survive.

The point is not so much that there is no law against dying of hunger. That is, of course, true and obvious. It is more that the legally guaranteed rights of ownership, exchange and transaction delineate economic systems that can go hand in hand with some people failing to acquire enough food for survival. In a private ownership economy, command over food can be established by either growing food oneself and having property rights over what is grown, or selling other commodities and buying food with the proceeds. There is no guarantee that either process would yield enough for the survival of any particular person or a family in a particular social and economic situation. The third alternative, other than relying on private charity, is to receive free food or supplementary income from the state. These transfers rarely have the status of legal rights, and furthermore they are also, as things stand now, rather rare and limited.

For a large part of humanity, about the only substantial asset that a person owns is his or her ability to work, i.e. labour power. If a person fails to secure employment, then that means of acquiring food (e.g. by getting a job, earning a wage, and buying food with this income) fails. If, in addition to that, the laws of the land do not provide any social security arrangements, e.g. unemployment insurance, the person will, under these circumstances, fail to secure the means of subsistence.² And that can result in serious deprivation—possibly even starvation death. In seeking a remedy to this problem of terrible vulnerability, it is natural to turn towards a reform of the legal system, so that rights of social security can be made to stand as guarantees of minimal protection and survival.

¹ This chapter draws substantially on *Poverty and Famines* (Sen 1981a), and those familiar with the arguments presented there may wish to shun it.

² It is, of course, still possible for the person to survive on the basis of charity, but this is not a matter of right. If those who own more than they need are not willing to help this person adequately, the person will have to starve and perish.

We shall indeed explore this line of reasoning in this book, but at this stage we are primarily concerned with diagnostics rather than with cure.

It should also be added that even a person who is engaged in growing food and who succeeds in growing more (even, much more) than enough food for survival may not necessarily survive on this basis, and may not even have the legal right to do so. As we discussed in the last chapter, in many famines the majority of the victims come from the class of agricultural labourers. They are often primarily engaged in growing food. However, the legal nature of their contract, which is often informal, basically involves a wage payment in exchange for employment. The contract typically includes no right to the output grown by the person's own labour—no entitlement to the food output which could be the basis of survival for that person and his or her dependents.

Even if a person is lucky enough to find employment and is paid a certain sum of money for it as a wage, he or she has to convert that into food by purchase in the market. How much that wage commands would, of course, depend on the price of food. If food prices rise very rapidly, without money wages rising correspondingly, the labourers who have grown the food themselves may fail to acquire the food they need to survive.³ The food grown belongs to the employer (typically the owner of the land), and the wage payment is the end of the grower's right to the produce, even if that wage does not yield enough to survive.

Similarly, a person who acquires food by producing some other commodity and selling it in the market has to depend on the actual ability to sell that product and also on the relative price of that product *vis-à-vis* food. If either the sale fails to materialize, or the relative price of that product falls sharply *vis-à-vis* food, the person may again have no option but to starve.

It is also important to realize that uncertainty and vulnerability can be features of subsistence production (involving 'exchange with nature') as well as of market exchange. This precariousness is particularly visible in African famines, where a substantial proportion of the victims often come from the ranks of small farmers who are hit *inter alia* by a collapse of their 'direct entitlement' to the food they normally grow. It would be a misleading simplification to regard self-provisioning as synonymous with security. The peasant farmer, like the landless labourer, has no guaranteed entitlement to the necessities of life.

It is, of course, also the case that laws may be disrupted during a famine. But there is no necessity for that to happen in order for a famine to occur. Indeed, as it happens, quite a few famines have taken place without much violation of law and order. Even in the disastrous Irish famines of the 1840s (in which about an

³ The exchange rate between labour and food (i.e. the ratio of money wage and food prices) may dramatically fall as a result of economic changes brought about by factors beyond the control of the labourer. On some examples of dramatic changes in labour–food exchange rates in the Bengal famine of 1943 and the Bangladesh famine of 1974, see Alamgir (1980), Sen (1981*a*), and Ravallion (1987*a*).