

Knowledge, Power and Need in Disasters

Information and vulnerability: how secrecy kills

Disasters affect the poor disproportionately. Their lives are, to a large extent, controlled by external events, including hazards in the environment, be these floods, drought, earthquakes or pollution. One definition of the poor's vulnerability is a lack of choice as to what strategies can be employed to reduce vulnerability. In looking at hazard-reduction measures, emphasis can be put firmly on the role that human rights, and specifically the right to information, is able to play in consolidating these efforts.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (see Section One, Focus 1) guarantees fundamental rights which were later enshrined in a legal treaty, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. One of the Articles specifically refers to the right to freedom of expression and, by implication, the free flow of and access to information. In all, 116 States have ratified the ICCPR, which confers upon them an obligation to uphold the principles it contains.

The link between freedom of expression and decreasing vulnerability to disasters is clear. Any censorship or restriction on the free flow of information precludes knowledge, debate, and informed action. Consequently, there will be both an absence of pressure on governments and others with the power to deal with vulnerability and impending disaster, and limitations on the actions people can take to reduce their own vulnerability. There are several well-documented case studies of the role that information can play in alerting people to acute food shortages and envi-

ronmental degradation, and ample evidence to suggest that restrictions on information can undoubtedly exacerbate both famine and environmental disasters.

This Part of the World Disasters Report 1994 examines the role that access to, and denial of, information has played in shaping the disaster vulnerability in four countries: Ethiopia, China, India and Mexico.

In Eritrea, where war led to a ravaging of the natural environment, the now-deposed Ethiopian regime disguised its role in fostering the effects of drought by withholding rainfall records from the public. The intention was to perpetrate the myth that drought was the cause of persistent famine whereas, in reality, army activities and agricultural policies were more often to blame.

In many industrialised countries, governments deny access to information on such highly-sensitive matters as radiation levels and the radioactivity within the environment following accidents to reactors. More often than not, this information is restricted under national security laws.

It is not only governments that may regard the free flow of information as a threat. In May 1989, the journalist Barbara D'Achille, Peru's leading writer on ecology and the environment, was stoned to death by the Shining Path guerillas. She had written frequently on the environmental effects of coca cultivation for cocaine production, which include deforestation, chemical pollution and erosion.

Most people will be aware of the murder of Chico Mendes in Brazil, but perhaps less familiar with the vio-

lence that continues against rural activists who protest the destruction of the rainforest and publicise that damage. Recent research has revealed that there is reportedly a death list drawn up by local landowners of 25 such activists, many of whom have subsequently died under unusual and suspicious circumstances.

These examples go some way to illustrate the desire governments and others with power have to withhold information about policies and actions which can create greater hazards in the environment. Those who stand to suffer most are the poor, the disenfranchised and thus those who are the most vulnerable. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the contrasting examples of threatened and actual food shortages in China and India.

In China, during Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward, a staggering 14-26 million people died of starvation between 1959 and 1961. This, the greatest famine in modern history, was triggered by an attempt to transform agriculture into non-viable rural industries, resulting in desperate attempts to fulfil unrealistic quotas. The context in which this famine occurred is a complex one, but Mao Zedong's insistence that the entire country change overnight from being a rural agricultural production society into an industrial one, with a focus on steel production, at first encouraged and then increasingly required peasants to produce steel in "backyard furnaces".

The resulting neglect of agriculture and the increasing dependence of people on a cash rather than subsistence economy created great vulnerability in an area of China unfortunately well experienced in the impact that food shortage could bring.

In 1945, for example, in Hunan province, a drought cost four million lives.

The famine itself was a direct result of the withholding of information at all levels of the Chinese bureaucracy. Moreover, the active censorship and disinformation prevented effective famine relief once the disaster had begun and certainly prolonged the effects by concealing the gravity of the problems and the lessons to be learned.

It was not so much people in the cities and larger towns that suffered but the rural poor that were decimated, village by village. At the height of the famine peasants did not dare even speak about the deaths of family members for fear of challenging the prevailing myth of economic miracle and food abundance. It is not and cannot be known whether the leaders actually believed assurances that agricultural production was about to surpass that of the previous bumper year; what was important was the myth that was perpetrated and sustained through fear. This was a wholly effective barrier to accurate information and, therefore, to any preventive or even timely relief action.

The complex and rigid levels of bureaucracy governed by Mao Zedong at the pinnacle, and ruled by corruption and terror, encouraged the cadres at the commune and county level to exaggerate agricultural production because they were asked to do so by the next level of bureaucracy, the district cadres and so on, right up to the top. Peasants at the communal level were obliged to exaggerate wildly the harvest estimate through fear of punishment and these wild estimates were exaggerated at each

During the great China famine, the government claims for production and consumption of food far exceeded the reality. The lack of free flowing information greatly restricted the ability of local authorities and international bodies to respond to crisis

Source: *Starving in Silence. A Report of Famine and Censorship*. Article 19. 1990

Myths and reality of food availability					
Year	Grain & soya bean output, million tonnes			Grain ration, kg per head	
	Predicted	Claimed	Actual	Predicted	Actual
1958	350	375.00	200.0	625	198.0
1959	525	281.55	170.0	1,050	186.5
1960	307	N/A	143.5	N/A	163.5

level of bureaucracy, resulting in a grossly-distorted figure which precluded any accurate information or knowledge about the dearth of grain at the rural level.

Meanwhile, the authorities, using these inflated figures, increased both the taxes upon peasants as well as the percentage of grain to be donated to the State. The result of this massive exaggeration, distortion and censorship was millions of deaths from starvation. The facts of the famine are only today beginning to emerge as the present government takes a more critical view of the country's recent history.

India shares with China a historical vulnerability to famine. However, India has at least three crucial freedoms. First, it is a democracy in which the government is called to account every few years through elections. Second, it has a free press and an honourable tradition of political debate. Third, India has developed contingency plans to deal with threatened famine which include major national buffer stocks in staple grains and a long-standing institution of public-work schemes, which are expanded to offer employment to the poorest in times of special hardship.

These factors almost guarantee that India, vulnerable as it remains to drought and food shortages, will probably never suffer widespread famine again. If and when food shortage threatens, food supply becomes a matter of intense public debate in the national, local and vernacular press. It is in the interests of the local politicians to address the problem since their political futures may depend upon it. There is, too, the very real advantage that there are mechanisms in place to be able to alleviate such threatened food shortages because of strategically-placed buffer stocks. There is no advantage to the local bureaucracy to either conceal or distort the real dimensions of any food shortage. Quite the reverse, it is in their obvious interests to deal with it as openly and speedily as possible.

There is in India the acknowledgement of some right of access to information and, indeed, on the issue of food shortages this information is

rarely withheld. At the earliest warnings of trouble, the press, the people and thereafter the politicians all appear to work together to resolve the problem rather than pretend it is not there.

The economist Amartya Sen suggested that famines cannot occur in a democracy or, more specifically, that because censorship is so implicitly involved in the cause of famine that famine cannot occur in a country with a free press. One can equally apply the argument to a number of other disasters which occur in hazardous regions of the world where people have neither the resources nor the information to deal with the problems or to insist that their government do so.

Mexico City is one of the most polluted cities in the world as a result of vast urbanisation and a lack of the resources to deal with even the most basic sanitation, let alone industrial waste. Recent studies have shown levels of lead in agricultural produce which are twice as high as the maximum allowed by the US Environmental Protection Agency. The waste water pipes from Mexico City fertilise the previously-dry valley of Mezquital, which in turn supplies a large proportion of the agricultural products sold in the capital city. However, the water contains untreated human sewage, industrial by-products including heavy metals and other highly-toxic substances, all of which give rise to highly-contaminated agricultural produce.

Information about the level of contamination, the potential health risks and what measures might be taken to avoid exposure was either not available, not published, or published in a form which did not make it readily accessible to the victims or potential victims of such pollution. In March 1991, the leader of the Mexican Green Party filed a complaint with the newly created National Human Rights Commission, claiming that the failure to inform was a human rights violation. In November of that year, the Commission found in his favour and issued a recommendation that the authorities should use the mass media to inform citizens in a timely manner



Technology brings in its wake new disaster threats. The sudden-impact disasters of a chemical leak at Bhopal and a radiation accident at Chernobyl - left whole populations affected by hazards for which they were unable to prepare. They highlight the need for information to be made freely available on the risks faced by people living near technological developments, and on the effects of technological disasters.
India, 1984 Raghu Rai/Magnum