



# Sen - “The Economics of Life and Death”

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# The Article

**Author:** Amartya Sen

**Title:** The Economics of Life and Death

**Who they are affiliated with:** Harvard University

**Published In:** Scientific American

**Written in:** 1993

**Topic:** Economic inequality, famines, and mortality

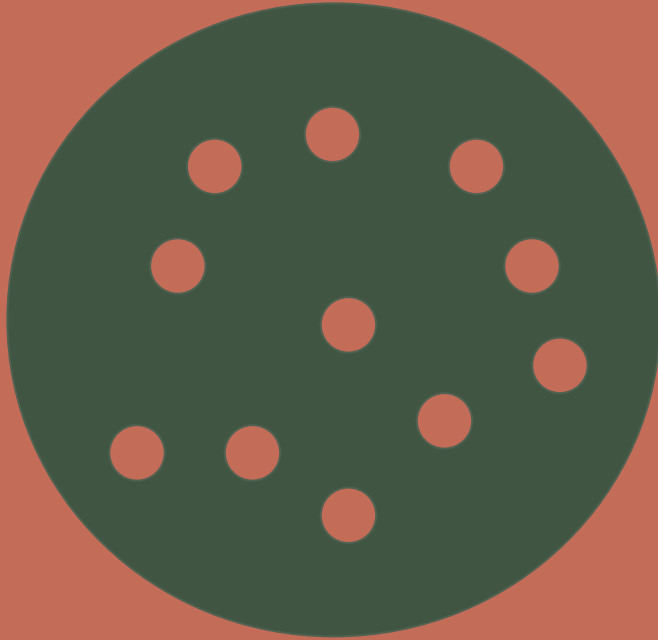
# Main Question and Thesis

**Question:** Why do famines continue to occur in areas where there is sufficient food to feed the entire population? What can be done about this?

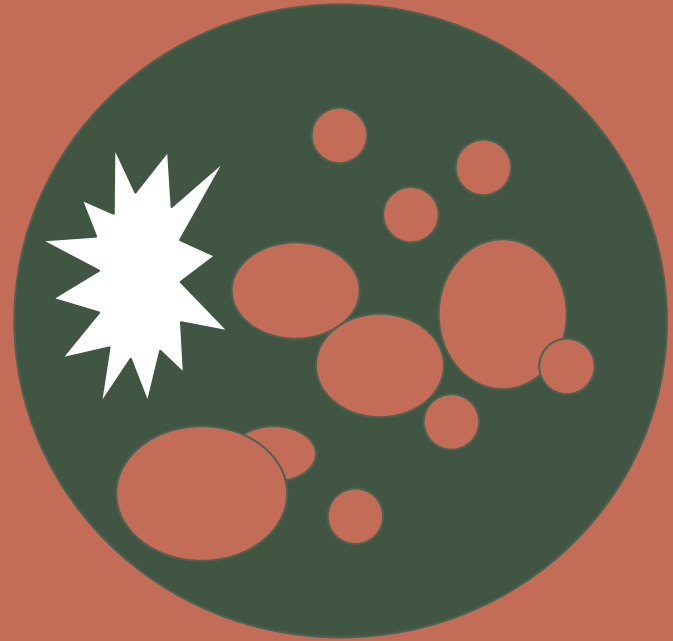
**Thesis:** This essay argues that despite prosperity in the world, famine persists because specific groups lack the means to obtain food.



# Measuring Famines



Food Aggregates



Sen's Approach



# Economic Organization

1. Many ways in which people can lose the means to obtain food
  - a. Fall in purchasing powers of wages, or a shift in exchange rates
2. Entitlement theory - food is not shared equally on the basis of availability
  - a. Rather food distribution is determined by ability to access and pay for this food

# What to do?

1. Africa and Asia could benefit from increased food production
  - a. Decrease economic precarity
  - b. Decrease food costs
2. Public works projects could be implemented
  - a. Relatively inexpensive
  - b. Better than relief camps
3. Public ownership of food stockpiles
4. Free press and democracy



# Article Strengths

1. Takes an economic approach to famines
  - a. Examines how, and why a famine occurs
2. Relies on understandings of how the international economic and aid systems work
3. Draws on examples
  - a. Includes examples from Bangladesh, and Kerala, India





# Article Weaknesses



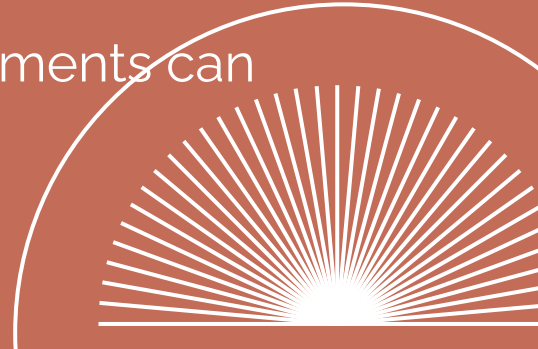
1. Not a historical paper
  - a. De Waal's critique of power can be applied here as well
2. No discussion of international involvement, or imperialism
  - a. Partially lacking in discussion of Bangladesh and Britain
  - b. Potentially disproves theory of free press and democracy
3. IR Liberal approach
  - a. Questions of being culturally relevant, or potentially paternalistic





# Comparison to Previous Readings

1. Entitlement theory - can be connected to Malthus
  - a. Comes from his ideas of supply and demand
2. Further disproves Malthus' theory of population
  - a. Famines are demonstrated to be issues of access rather than supply
3. Furthers De Waal's theory that famines are either caused, or allowed to happen
  - a. Argues that food is available, and governments can play a role in ensuring that it is attainable





# Conclusion



1. Very convincing
2. Economic perspective on recent, present, and future famines
3. Arguments are presented in a logical, and factually based manner
4. This article is valuable, and deserves to be continued to be used as an economic explanation of modern famine.

# Citations

De Waal, Alex. Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine. Cambridge: Polity, 2018.

Harvard University. "Amartya Sen Biographical Note." Department of Economics Faculty of Arts and Sciences. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/sen/biocv>.

Sen, Amartya. "The Economics of Life and Death." Scientific American 268, 5 (1993): 40-47.

