FAMINE HOUSEHOLD COPING STRATEGIES: THEIR USEFULNESS FOR UNDERSTANDING HOUSEHOLD RESPONSE TO ARMED CONFLICT

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INTRODUCTION

Households severely affected by famines have been studied to great length and a generally accepted typology seems to exist that explains what a household does in order to survive economically. Armed conflict and ethnic cleansing both conjure up images of households fleeing for their lives. Yet a dearth of information exists on how households cope when they become the targets of ethnic violence.

The literature on famine peasant household coping strategies provides a strong point of departure for understanding ethnic conflict household coping mechanisms. Both household types -- famine and ethnically cleansed -- become captive to a severely disrupted economic and social fabric.

This paper will provide a review of the literature on famine household coping strategies. Corbett's (1988) literature review represented a first attempt at drawing together findings from several different case studies on coping strategies. Nonetheless, it is incomplete: gender-specific and criminal coping strategies are not included.

The paper will begin by defining three important basic concepts -- 'household', 'coping strategies' and 'entitlements'. The literature on coping strategies will then be discussed. After a general discussion, the various types of coping strategies will be explored. The potential usefulness of household famine coping strategies to inform the discussion of household's coping response to war concludes the paper.

Defining Basic Concepts

It will be useful to define a 'household' and what is meant by 'coping strategies' before continuing. The multiple definitions of the term 'famine' itself has already been well-documented by Devereux's (1993b) excellent work. The most useful definition of famine, for the purposes of examining household coping strategies, is the one which is seen as a defined by communities themselves. While there are several major causes of famine, ranging from natural to manmade to a combination of the two, a discussion of these causes is beyond the scope of this paper. The reader is directed toward Devereux's (ibid) work for such a discussion.

The 'Household'

The concept of 'the household' is widely accepted because 'Common sense tells us that in every society there are easily identifiable groupings, 'households', within which people live, and which are recognized as society's basic building blocks...' (Crehan 1992:87). The definition usually employed by economists is that a household is a domestic unit with
autonomous decision-making regarding production and consumption (Ellis 1988; Roberts 1991). The assumption underlying this definition is that a household has an unequivocal hierarchy of authority. Additionally, the head of household having the power and exercising decision-making over the household's resources. A household then is apparently a strictly bounded entity, with a clear delineation between itself and the rest of the world.

Yet anthropologists resist such simple classification. The term domestic group, in one instance, is sometimes employed as an alternative '...partly due to the numerous difficulties encountered in attempting to define...household' (Seymour-Smith 1993:80). Such arguments are useful because (1) they challenge the misplaced ease in assuming that the theoretical make-up of a household mirrors the actual make-up; and (2) highlights the fact that the wishes and desires of household members are not necessarily the same nor carry equal weight (ibid; Evans 1991:58).

Harrell-Bond (1986) illustrates the fluctuating nature of families. In trying to ascertain the responsibility of refugee household members to one another, she found that '...while people include members of their household when asked about kinsmen, the numbers upon whom they might reasonably expect to depend is far smaller than [their] answers imply' (ibid:122). This description does not fit with our expectations of a household, where all members might reasonably be expected to depend upon one another.

This paper will therefore assume an alternative definition. That is, that a household is a 'politico-jural unit', loosely constituted from a community's principles of kinship and descent, with collective ownership of resources, and a collective responsibility for upholding legal tenets (Roberts 1991:61). The term 'loosely' is included in acknowledgement that the culturally defined household and the actual household may differ from each other. The household looks different now: the boundaries between it and the world are permeable, so that in fact, household membership fluctuates according to the situation. This definition allows us to, firstly, remain cognizant of the tension between collective and conflictive relations between the desires of individual household members; secondly, recognize that the boundaries of a household are permeable, so that household membership may fluctuate according to any given situation; and thirdly, interpret household decision-making that may otherwise remain unexplainable.

Devereux (1993a:56) provides an example of the last point. In northern Ghana, a farmer complaining of hunger was asked why he didn't sell his two cows. He answered that the cows were his (dead) father's and that his (extended) family would not understand if he sold them and kept the money himself. This is clearly an example that does not fit the economic definition of household; the farmer did not have
absolute power to sell the cows, although they belonged to his immediate household.

'Coping Strategies'

The second part of the equation for this paper is coping strategies. Famine coping strategies represent a set of activities that are undertaken, in a particular sequence, by a household in response to exogenous shocks that lead to declining food availability (Davies, 1993). The objective is to guard against the economic and social demise of the household. On the other hand, adaptive strategies are a set of tactics that has evolved from a coping strategy in response to changed circumstances of the household.

This definition is meant to delineate adaptive strategies from coping strategies. The former represents a household's response to recurring crises, while the latter represents responses to unexpected, and/or unexperienced crises.

'Entitlements'

Finally, a brief word here about entitlements. As defined by Sen, entitlements represent a person's ability to command alternative commodity bundles through what they own and what they can get in exchange for what they own. Entitlements are, therefore, dependent upon the legal rights of ownership (Sen 1981).

An extension of this definition, however, provides a richer and more accurate picture of a person's, or household's, entitlements: the rights that accrue to a person because of social and cultural norms, or extended entitlements (Drèze and Sen 1989:10). For example, if a male head of household commands greater food because of his position and gender, that would be an extended entitlement. Finally, Devereux (1993a:56) has identified what he terms latent entitlements, also critical to understanding household coping strategies. In northern Ghana and Kenya, teenage girls are betrothed so that the household may benefit from all or a portion of her dowry now, although the marriage may be far in the future.
COPING STRATEGIES

Households evince fairly specific coping tactics that respond to the three stages of famine; that is, the pre-crisis, progression, and zenith of a famine. The objective of the household is to maintain its economic and social viability through the famine and beyond; this aim will guide and inform a household's decision-making. Generally households will (1) increase its access to extraordinary resources; (2) reduce its consumption; and (3) dispose of its assets. In deciding which tactics to employ, the economic and the social costs of each action are carefully weighed. The three levels of household response -- minimizing risk, absorbing risk, and taking risk -- corresponds to the increasing impact of famine and also represents increasing vulnerability to economic and social failure (Von Braun, Teklu and Webb 1993). Each level should be seen as points on a continuum, however, rather than discrete elements, with the second and third levels each affected by the previous point.

A household's coping strategies will also include female-specific expectations, so-called 'criminal' conduct, and other socially unacceptable behaviour.

Minimizing Risk

The household's initial response to impending food shortage is to attempt to hedge its economic assets. This paper is concerned with household coping strategies to famine. It is useful, however, to briefly outline some of the pre-crisis techniques used by households to mitigate potential disaster.

Four coping strategies have been identified in the literature. First, households attempt to maintain a minimum level of productivity through such activities as intercropping and the planting of risk-averse crops. In northern Nigeria during the 1973-74 famine, farmers substituted millet and beans for guineacorn (Apeldoorn 1981:59). The second coping strategy is the accumulation of assets. This includes increasing food storage, investing in valuable, disposable assets such as radios and cycles, and amassing capital.

Third, households attempt to expand their access to credit and barter, through setting up a social support network. While kinship and descent relations are critical to such a network (and illustrate the importance of seeing a household as permeable), it should not be assumed that the rules governing behaviour during normal periods will hold during crisis times such as famine, or that 'even members of a household form an interdependent support group' (Harrell-Bond 1986:131). Finally, households diversify their income base through non-farm activities: the selling of firewood and gathered foodstuffs, and providing loans to others are all examples.

Absorbing Risk
As the famine progresses, a household finds that its ability to maintain its food intake decreases. Concomitantly, farming households realize that cash will be necessary in order to maintain access to food. Additionally, households may participate in community rituals that seek to understand the cause of the crisis.

In northern Ethiopia, bartering became less desirable as peasants sought cash for their services (Rahmato 1991). During the Bangladesh famine of 1974, 'the percentage of distress asset selling households was highest among landless labourers, followed by tenant farmers, owner-cum-tenant farmers, and [finally] owner farmers' (Alamgir 1980:160).

Households will first divest earlier non-essential assets (such as radios and cycles) that were accumulated as part of their strategy to minimize risk. The worth of these assets to the household will be based upon the ability and speed with which it can be turned into cash (Rahmato 1991:143). The net gain to the household, however, is likely to be negative, as the absolute price of such assets drops as the market becomes flooded with many such commodities, and as the relative price of the commodities to the rising price of foodstuffs drops as well (Sen 1981; Devereux 1993a).

In addition to consumer assets, peasant households will sell livestock. Small animals (e.g., goats and chickens) are sold first, while large livestock (e.g., cows, oxen, camels) will be sold only if the situation continues to worsen, or if the size of the household’s herd is large. If the household has the option to sell its large livestock, it will do so earlier rather than later, in order to sell easier and gain a higher price while the economy is still somewhat robust (Von Braun et al. 1993:76).

Households will also attempt to increase their access to cash by calling in outstanding loans, searching for more credit, and reducing or dismissing farm wage labourers in their hire (ibid; Seavoy 1986; Arnold 1988).

Finally, to reduce consumption, the household may choose to go hungry and/or able-bodied household members will migrate to areas where seasonal employment has been found in the past (de Waal 1989a; Rahmato 1991:145). Adults will eat smaller meals initially. As things worsen, adults will miss meals and children will have smaller meals (Devereux 1993a). In northern Ethiopia, 'farmers...commented that they would make eight months' food 'last nine months' and two days' food 'last three'” (de Waal 1990:6). Wild foods, which are free, become important in stretching the little grain and other non-famine foods that are available.

de Waal’s work in western Sudan during the 1985 famine provides an excellent accounting of household food consumption decision-making. He found that in the four major towns of Darfur, ‘...there was a situation in which although the rural
population could have afforded to buy between 7 per cent and 51 per cent of their grain needs...they in fact bought only 5 per cent or less' (ibid:123). He continues, 'People were prepared to go very, very hungry for very, very long periods of time. They ate once a day, or once in two days' (ibid:132). De Waal found that money that could have been spent on grain was used to purchase other needs such as water, seeds and animal fodder.

Migration is another, more extreme method of reducing consumption. According to Rahmato (1991), two important factors affect the choice to migrate: the source of employment and the location, and the number of able-bodied household members and their ages. A distinction should be made between migration of single household members, and migration of the entire or most of the household as a single unit: only the latter should be seen as possibly increasing household food consumption. There is no evidence that a single household member sends remittances (either cash or commodities) back to his/her household.

The linkage between religion, ritual, and coping with famines has been postulated by de Waal (1990) and Arnold (1988). During the extremely rainy summer of 1315 in England, Arnold describes the 'solemn, barefoot processions' ordered by the clergy (ibid:76). During the 1948 famine in Malawi (Nyasaland), peasants prayed to their ancestors for assistance (ibid:76-77). In northern Ethiopia, de Waal identified 293 potential fasting days, although most only required abstaining from meat and dairy products. Nonetheless, he identified several that require total fasting as it is theoretically defined (de Waal 1990:6). Additionally, men gain social prestige by showing that they can overcome great adversity (Rahmato 1991). From this, de Waal hypothesizes that 'This gives us the first clue to rural people's [sic] remarkable ability to survive: not only physical hardiness but an ideology, deeply rooted in tradition...' (1990:6-7).

As a household begins to absorb the impact of the crisis, their immediate economic viability may be damaged, but their long-term viability may be relatively secure. As the famine reaches its nadir, however, long-term economic viability is damaged, as a household's ability to absorb risk is exhausted.

Risk-Taking

Before the year came to an end, misery from hunger had reduced the people to beggary, so that they sold their property for half its worth...And those who were in the city were...picking up the stalks and leaves of vegetables, all filthy with mud, and eating them...The whole city was full of them, and they began to die in the porticoes and in the streets...(Garnsey 1988:3-5)

When famine reaches its climax, peasant households find
their situation is desperate. Thus, the tactics now employed require grave social and economic risk-taking. The costs of these tactics will be felt long after the conclusion of the famine.

A variety of extreme responses can also occur during the nadir of a famine, attesting to the strain of famine on the social fabric of a household. Some evidence shows that in extreme cases, out of frustration and anguish, children were abandoned or suffocated by their mothers (or traditional midwives, as was the case in Malawi) (Alamgir 1980:128; Arnold 1988:90-91; Kane 1988:22; Vaughan 1987:117). Additionally, marriages -- the core of the household in many instances -- can become very fragile under famine-induced stress, leading to greater levels of divorce (McCann 1987).

Before undertaking such drastic measures, however, food consumption of household members is now drastically reduced. Both adults and children are missing most meals everyday. Along with wild foods, 'famine foods' become the staple. This includes leaves, roots, rodents, seed stock, foods collected from rodent and insect nests. Eating such famine foods, while free, carries a high social cost. Famines in India in the late 19th and the 20th century saw many women '...break barriers of status and role' to gather these foods for their families (Ali 1984:119-120). In the case of the Brahmans, a caste in India, 'the Brahman's wife found it easier to cross caste barriers to earn food...' (ibid). In addition to the more prevalent famine foods, Kane states that during the Russian famine of 1921-22, '...cannibalism was not unknown' (Kane 1988:22).

Concommitant to reducing consumption and eating famine foods, the household will sell any remaining productive assets, such as agricultural tools, remaining livestock, and, in the final instance, land. Other latent entitlements may also be used. For example, households may betroth their pubescent daughters for the dowry they bring (ibid), children may be sold into slavery (Keen 1993:22), and women and young girls may provide cash to their households through engaging in prostitution (Harrell-Bond 1981:328; Kane 1988:22). It should be noted, however, that households are well aware of the potentially high social cost of these strategies and therefore should be seen as a measure of their desperation.

Such desperation will result in the distress migration of most or all household members: women and children may go to relief camps or urban centres, while men search for work in urban centres either with their families or separately elsewhere. Extremely vulnerable members may be left behind, as occurred in some households in the highlands of Ethiopia during the 1984-85 famine (author's personal notes).

The procurement of food is not limited to the purchase of foodstuffs in the urban centres: anecdotal data from Russia, Bangladesh, Sudan, and Somalia, for example, shows that crime associated with famines can be prevalent, largely in urban
centres. In Russia officials threatened to have people shot by special guards if caught stealing vegetables from communal plots, but this had little affect (Kane 1988). Criminal activity in Bangladesh (1974 famine) -- food rioting, looting of railway cars carrying grain, shops and markets -- was reported in the newspapers (Alamgir 1980:137-38).

During Harrell-Bond's field research into the plight of Ugandan refugees, she had them describe 'how they behaved when they had been deprived of food for a prolonged time' (Harrell-Bond 1986:327). One refugee wrote that 'the constant starvation led to theft, which I thought by that time was a good activity, but it is not' (ibid:328). Unfortunately, no reliable figures seem to exist in the literature that tie these coping strategies firmly to any particular period of a famine. Finally, although studies documenting the famine in Somalia are not yet readily available, an interview with a Somali bandit already highlights the conscious choice by some Somalis to engage in widespread violence and looting as a coping strategy (Washington Post 1993).

CONCLUSION: THE WAY FORWARD

The literature on famine household coping strategies provides a wealth of information on the plethora of activities household use to maintain their lives and livelihood: Migration, for example, is clearly a shared response. Might there, then, be other similar coping patterns to a situation that severely disrupts the economic and social fabric of the lives of these households?

Limitations must be expected, however, in the literature's ability to explain household coping mechanisms in response to ethnic violence, especially when it is directed specifically at particular households based upon their identity. For example, de Waal (1989a) documents contingency planning by many farmers: they did not consume their seeds until the stress became too great. One cannot expect that ethnically cleansed households would have the ability to forward plan to any appreciable extent. Nevertheless, the peasant household coping strategies seem to point further research in the correct direction.
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