The Real Causes of Famine
Jeffrey Sachs, TIME Magazine, October 26, 1998

A Nobel laureate blames authoritarian rulers

Amartya Sen, this year's Nobel prizewinner in economics, has helped give voice to the world's poor. And that is no small matter, for the very lives of the world's poor may depend on having their voices heard. In a lifetime of careful scholarship, Sen has repeatedly returned to a basic theme: even impoverished societies can improve the well-being of their least advantaged members. Societies that attend to the poorest of the poor can save their lives, promote their longevity and increase their opportunities through education and productive work. Societies that neglect the poor, on the other hand, may inadvertently allow millions to die of famine--even in the middle of an economic boom, as occurred during the great famine in Bengal, India, in 1943, the subject of Sen's most famous case study.

Sen demonstrated that the Bengal famine was caused by an urban economic boom that raised food prices, thereby causing millions of rural workers to starve to death when their wages did not keep up. And why didn't the government react by dispensing emergency food relief? Sen's answer was enlightening. Because colonial India was not a democracy, he said, the British rulers had little interest in listening to the poor, even in the midst of famine. This political observation gave rise to what might be called Sen's Law: shortfalls in food supply do not cause widespread deaths in a democracy because vote-seeking politicians will undertake relief efforts; but even modest food shortfalls can create deadly famines in authoritarian societies.

Sen has placed great emphasis on poor societies that have achieved high standards in health and education. Costa Rica, for example, which has an average annual income that is only about one-fourth the U.S. level, boasts a life expectancy of 76 years--almost identical to the U.S.'s. Reason: Costa Rica disbanded its army in 1949 and focused public spending on basic health and education. Brazil, by contrast, has almost the same average income as Costa Rica, but a life expectancy that is 10 years lower. Brazil has greater social inequalities, and much of the population lives in deep poverty.

Sen's observations have been taken to heart in the valuable Human Development Report issued annually by the United Nations Development Program. That document features a Human Development Index that ranks countries by a combination of three factors: average income, educational attainment and life expectancy. Thus, Costa Rica ranks 62nd from the top in average income but much better, at 39th, in the Human Development Index. These rankings convey Sen's powerful message: annual income growth is not enough to achieve development. Societies must pay attention to social goals as well, always leaning toward their most vulnerable citizens, and overcoming deep-rooted biases to invest in the health and well-being of girls as well as boys. In a world in which 1.5 billion people subsist on less than $1 a day, this Nobel Prize can be not just a celebration of a wonderful scholar but also a clarion call to attend to the urgent needs and hopes of the world's poor.