



**AgEcon** SEARCH  
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

*The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library*

**This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.**

**Help ensure our sustainability.**

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

[aesearch@umn.edu](mailto:aesearch@umn.edu)

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

# An Equation for Starvation

---

**Markets and Famines** By Martin Ravallion Oxford, England Clarendon Press, 1987, 203 pp, 22 10s

Reviewed by Carl C. Mabbs-Zeno

Ravallion takes sides early in this book on the debate over whether to focus on food availability or on food distribution in analyzing famine. For him, the entitlement approach, as expressed in the language of A. K. Sen, with its attention to distribution of inputs and products, is the more useful, although this volume avoids some of the more controversial theoretical distinctions associated with this approach. Landlessness is mentioned, but most parameters are modeled with little attention to potential for political or class analysis. The role of markets in causing famine depends, in this analysis, on the allocation of food consumption among individuals who differ essentially in initial resource endowment.

The title, *Markets and Famines*, overstates the coverage of this volume because nearly all its analysis relies on data from Bangladesh and British India. Since markets are probably more important in allocating food in the Indian subcontinent than in any other area that has suffered famine since World War II, this is a productive site for observing market effects, but a poor model for famine-prone economies in general. There is much to recommend, however, in relation to the more modest goal of measuring market effects that contributed to the 1974 famine in Bangladesh.

Ravallion uses several econometric investigations to test hypotheses about how markets affect an area's

vulnerability to famine. The most interesting hypothesis relates increased price instability to increased mortality. Two case studies showed that price instability accounted for about a third of mortality due to famine. Another innovative test related expectations about future food availability, as revealed in current newspaper reports, to current food prices. It found that expectations were important and that they underestimated food production in 1974, thereby retaining prices and reducing consumption beneath the optimal level.

Ravallion avoids speaking about "optimal policy" even though the objective function in his normative equations is among the least controversial economic objectives, namely, to minimize famine mortality. His formal style, which rejects such loose terminology, is unusual in the field of famine research where data are generally poor and emotions generally run high. Ravallion pays considerable attention to the theoretical manipulation of propositions that are widely accepted by academics and policymakers working on famine, for example, greater inequality in food consumption raises famine mortality. His style results in an admirably rigorous presentation of other, nontrivial points, that are accessible, however, only to academics.

The coverage of government policy options for coping with famine is incomplete both with respect to the range of policies considered and the range of possible policy effects. Significant contributions to famine theory are offered for policies of price control and food stocking. The discussion on expectations about future harvest offers some important insights, but Ravallion's suggestion of periodically surveying private traders seems a disingenuous empirical foundation for policy. The narrow focus of the book may limit its interest for general readers, but not for specialists on famine, market failure, or Bangladesh.

---

The reviewer is an agricultural economist with the Agriculture and Trade Analysis Division, ERS.