

The Complex Causes of Famine

Teacher Notes

Overview and concepts

Overview

Using class discussion, a radio story, and the interactive timeline, students will investigate the complex causes of famines, both in modern times and throughout history.

Grade level

Grades 9-12, could be adapted for middle school.

Concepts covered

famine, cause and effect, international aid, collectivization

Prior knowledge required

none

Activity notes

Time frame

- 35 – 50 minutes

Teaching Tips

- Activate students' prior knowledge and introduce the activity by asking the class, "What is famine?" Seek consensus among student answers to reach a final definition such as "an extreme scarcity of food." (Merriam-Webster definition). Then ask, "What are the causes of famine?" and collect students' answers. Keep these for the wrap-up discussion.
- Allow students to work alone, in small groups, or pairs, to complete the "Complex Causes of Hunger" activity. Students may choose famines to research, or you can assign different famines to different groups.
- Gather the group for a final discussion about the causes of famine. Allow groups to summarize what they learned about a particular famine in history. Make a chart on the board and collect data from the groups about the time, location, and causes of various famines. (A master chart of famines from the timeline is available below).
 - Post and refer to a world map to help students better understand where the famines happened.
 - Compare the chart to the students' initial thoughts about the causes of famine.
- Encourage students to discuss the similarities and differences between the different famines. Consider asking the following questions.
 - Throughout history, what seem to be the most common causes of famine?
 - Are the causes of famine in modern history (1900 – present day) different than those of the 1800s and earlier?
 - What is the role of governments in causing famine to occur? What role do they have in preventing or dealing with famine?
 - What roles do individuals have in preventing or dealing with famine?
 - Is famine preventable?

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Extensions

- Use the document-based query (DBQ) What is famine: Soviet famine of the 1930s, available at:
- A different lesson, The Causes and Effects of Malnutrition and Famine, is available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/teachers/lessonplans/world/july-dec11/famine_11-07.html.
- Have students research aid agencies and organizations that fight famine and report back to the class about how and where the organization works.

Resources

- Wikipedia list of famines (incomplete, but long): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_famines
- Food for 9 Billion at the Center for Investigative Reporting: <http://cironline.org/projects/food-for-9-billion>
- Devereux, S. (1993). Theories of Famine. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Devereux, S. (2000). Famine in the Twentieth Century. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

Acknowledgments

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Teacher Reference / Causes of Famines throughout history

note: This list includes only the famines on “Timeline: Food through the ages.” For a more extensive list of famines throughout history, please consult other sources.

Name of Famine	Years	Location	Causes	Details
The Great Famine	1350-1332	Northern Europe	Cold winters & torrential summer rains lead to crop failures, kill farm animals. Food prices rise.	Cannibalism, disease, crime and warfare.
Irish Potato Famine	1846-1847	Ireland	Late blight disease leads to potato crop failures. Potatoes are a staple crop for the large numbers of poor people. Debt and high poverty rates contribute.	Mass starvation & disease. 1 million die; 1.5 million emigrate
Soviet Famine	1932-1934	Ukraine	Stalin’s collectivization of agriculture and the transfer of millions of tons of grain from Ukraine to Russia leads to national famine.	7-8 million people die
Great Bengal Famine	1943 - 1944	eastern India	During WW II, British government took rice from India to send to British troops. Rice yields were not significantly lower than other years. People in rural India cannot afford food.	2.1 – 3 million people die
Great Chinese Famine	1958 - 1962	China	Mao Zedong’s Great Leap Forward economic program collectivizes farms, leads to sudden drop in grain production. Floods, droughts, plant diseases make problems worse.	Estimated 33 million die
Biafra Famine	1967-1970	Nigeria	Nigerian government uses blockade to crush secession movement in east, causing mass starvation.	Estimated 1 million die; international outcry and aid response.
World Food Crisis (NOT A FAMINE)	1972		Bad weather and poor harvests in Soviet Union coincide with US and Canadian decision to reduce grain reserves. World grain prices quadruple, food aid to poor countries drastically cut.	Good harvests in 1973-74 avert mass starvation.
Bangladesh Famine	1974	Bangladesh	Triggered by floods, but caused mainly by market failure and inadequate food distribution. US withholds aid for political reasons, local traders hoard food needed by poor.	1.5 million die; Landless laborers most severely affected.
Cambodia Famine	1975-1978	Cambodia	After five years of civil war, communist Khmer Rouge party takes over. Forced collective farming reduces output.	Estimated 1.5 to 2 million die from starvation, torture, and execution.
North Korean Famine	1995-1999	North Korea	Decline in food, fuel, and fertilizer shipments from China and Russia combine with flooding, drought, and poor production from state farms. International aid slow to arrive and poorly distributed.	Estimated 2.8 to 3.5 million die.
Global Food Security Crisis (NOT A FAMINE)	2007-2008	various	Spike in food prices caused by speculation in commodity markets, rise in oil and fertilizer prices, use of corn in fuel production, poor harvests in some places, and increasing demand.	Food riots in many countries.

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Student Worksheet

What is famine and why does it happen? Is famine simply caused by drought, a long period with low precipitation? Or is there more to famine?

Your task is to investigate the different reasons that famines, or extreme shortages of food, happen. You will listen to a radio report and then use an interactive timeline to learn more about famines throughout history.



Part 1: Listen, Think, and Learn

Go to <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/sustainability/food-9-billion-complexities-famine> to listen to a report, "The Complexities of Famine," on the radio program *Marketplace*.

Listen to the radio report and look at the pictures available. The text of the story is also available. As you listen, answer the questions below.

1. The radio story, dated 11/15/2011, is examining famine in what two countries? What continent are they on?
2. In which country have the people been much more affected by famine? What have many of those people done to try to escape the famine?
3. According to the report, what are the causes of the famine and death from malnutrition in Somalia?
4. What is the impact of international food aid on local movements or authorities?
5. In the 1980s, people in Ethiopia suffered a drought and famine similar to Somalia in 2011. However, even though the 2011 drought impacts Ethiopia, but the people are not suffering from famine. Why not?

Part 2: Famines over time

Famines aren't unique to Africa. They have happened all over the world at different points in human history. Let's take a look at why different famines have happened. Load the timeline at <http://cironline.org/reports/timeline-food-through-ages>. Note that the timeline follows five strands over time: Agriculture (green row), Demographics (red row), Health and Nutrition (blue row), Hunger (black row) and Politics (brown row). See that black bar with dates at the bottom? The bright green rectangle indicates the period of time that is shown on the 5 rows at the top.

Scroll through the timeline and find the two famines that have been assigned to you. Learn more about the famines by clicking on "More" on the box that appears on the timeline. Be prepared to share your information with the class.

Name of Famine	Years	Location	Causes	Details

6. Summarize what you have learned about the causes of the two famines you researched.

Return to the large group and share what you have learned. Listen to what your classmates offer.

7. Based upon what you have learned in this activity, is famine preventable? Why or why not?

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1. The radio story, dated 11/15/2011, is examining famine in what two countries? What continent are they on?

Ethiopia and Somalia are both countries in eastern Africa.

2. In which country have the people been much more affected by famine? What have many of those people done in order to try to escape the famine?

People in Somalia have been severely affected by famine. Many of them have walked to refugee camps in Kenya.

3. According to the report, what are the causes of the famine and death from malnutrition in Somalia?

There is a drought. (There are extreme droughts in other countries too). But there are also "political complications," specifically no central government, "meddling" from outside countries, and an extremist group that blocks food aid from foreign countries and takes food from the people.

4. What is the impact of international food aid on local movements or authorities?

International food aid can sometimes undermine the authority or reduce the popularity of local movements. For example, Al Qaeda's popularity decreased in Pakistan after the US provided food to earthquake victims.

5. In the 1980s, people in Ethiopia suffered a drought and famine much like what is going on in 2011 in Somalia. However, even though the 2011 drought impacts Ethiopia, but the people are not suffering from famine. Why not?

Ethiopia has built a safety net or "shock absorbers" for droughts. These include storing water and grain for

emergencies, providing better seeds to farmers, providing crop insurance for when crops fail, and building roads to help get products to market. They also try to increase individuals' incomes.

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6. Summarize what you have learned about the causes of the two famines you researched.

Student answers will vary.

Return to the large group and share what you have learned. Listen to what your classmates offer.

7. Based upon what you have learned in this activity, is famine preventable? Why or why not?

Student answers will vary, but should include political / economic reasons in addition to extreme weather conditions / natural disasters/ crop diseases.