



Food Crimes: Why WFP Doesn't Deserve the Nobel Peace Prize

By Rasna Warah



Those who believe that food aid does more harm than good were probably flabbergasted by the decision by the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award this year's Nobel Peace Prize to the World Food Programme (WFP) for "its efforts to combat hunger, for its contribution to bettering conditions for peace in conflict-affected areas and for acting as a driving force in efforts to prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict".

Fredrik S. Heffermehl, a Norwegian lawyer and long-time critic of the political and bureaucratic processes behind the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize, for instance, stated: "We recognise the great value of the World Food Programme, but the 2020 prize is much less ambitious than [Alfred] Nobel's idea of 'conferring the greatest benefit to humankind'."

Mukesh Kapila, a former United Nations representative to the Sudan who blew the whistle on atrocities committed by the Sudanese government in Darfur, and who is now a professor of global health and humanitarian affairs at the University of Manchester, was even more scathing. "It's a bizarre choice, and it's a complete waste of the prize, in my opinion," he [told](#) Devex. "I don't think the World Food Programme needs this money, and I really object to awarding prizes to people or organisations who are just doing their paid jobs."

Apart from the fact that WFP's *raison d'être* is to deliver food to vulnerable populations, and its staff are paid generously to deliver food aid, critics who know the food aid business have in the past pointed out that food aid is, in fact, detrimental in the long run because it suppresses local food production, making it harder for poor or conflict-ridden countries to feed themselves. In fact, [studies](#) have found that direct cash transfers are a much more efficient and effective method to alleviate hardship and improve the overall welfare of beneficiary communities.

A few years ago, none other than the European Union (EU)'s representative to Somalia, Georges-Marc André (now retired), admitted this to me when I was researching for my book [War Crimes](#), which explores how foreign aid has negatively affected Somalia. He told me that United Nations agencies such as WFP might have actually "slowed down" Somalia's recovery by focusing exclusively on food aid instead of supporting local farmers and markets. "The EU is against food aid that substitutes local food production," he said.

His views are also shared by Michael Maren, a former food aid monitor for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Somalia, whose book, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity*, chronicles how aid became a political tool in Somalia that was manipulated by both the donors and the recipient country. Maren, who lived and worked in Somalia in the 1980s, believes that food aid to Somalia may have actually prolonged the civil war in the country. "I had learned to view development aid with skepticism, a skill I had hoped to put to good use to help ensure that aid projects, at worst, didn't hurt people. But Somalia added a whole new dimension to my view of the aid business. My experience there made me see that aid could be worse than incompetent and inadvertently destructive. It could be positively evil," he wrote.

In his book, Maren quotes a former civil servant working for Somalia's National Refugee Commission during President Siad Barre's regime who told him that traditionally, Somalis never relied on food aid, even during droughts. There was a credit system; pastoralists would come to urban areas where they would take out loans that they would repay when things returned to normal. Aid essentially destroyed a centuries-old system that built resilience and sustained communities during periods of hardship.

Food aid hurts local farmers

Food aid also suppresses local food production. Many Somali farmers have reported that NGOs working with WFP are notorious for bringing in food aid just before the harvest, which brings down the price of local food. They have also complained that the food aid is imported, rather than bought locally. At the height of the famine in Somalia in 2011 (which many believe was exaggerated by the UN), for example, WFP bought food worth £50 million from Glencore, a London-listed commodities trader, despite a pledge by the UN's food agency that it would buy food from "very poor farmers who suffer because they are not connected to local markets".

Let us be clear about one thing - food aid is big business and extremely beneficial to those donating it. ("Somebody always gets rich off a famine", Maren told *Might Magazine* in 1997.) Under current United States law, for instance, almost all US food aid (worth billions of dollars) must be purchased in the US and at least half of it must be transported on US-flagged vessels.

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Most of this food aid is actually surplus food that Americans can't consume domestically. Under the US government's Food for Peace programme (formerly known as Public Law 480), the US

government is allowed to sell or donate US food surpluses in order to alleviate hunger in other countries. Famines in other countries are, therefore, very profitable to the US government and to highly subsidised American farmers, who benefit from federal government commodity price guarantees. (Interestingly, since 1992, all WFP Executive Directors have been US citizens. This could be because the US is the largest contributor to WFP, but it could also be that the Executive Director of the UN's food agency is expected to promote US policies regarding food aid.)

In a 1988 [paper](#) titled "How American Food Aid Keeps the Third World Hungry", Juliana Geran described Food for Peace as "the most harmful programs of aid to Third World countries", and urged the US government to discontinue it. She noted that US food aid often distorts local markets and disrupts agricultural activity in recipient countries.

For example, massive dumping of wheat in India in the 1950s and '60s disrupted India's agriculture. In 1982, Peru "begged" the US Department of Agriculture not to send any more rice to the country as it was feared that the rice would glut the local market and drive down food prices for farmers who were already struggling. "But the US rice lobby turned up the heat on Washington and the Peruvian government was told that it could either take the rice or receive no food at all," wrote Geran.

But what happened in Guatemala was truly catastrophic, as Geran narrates: "In 1976, an earthquake hit Guatemala, killing 23,000 people and leaving over a million homeless. Just prior to the disaster, the country had harvested one of the largest wheat crops on record, and food was plentiful. As earthquake relief, the US rushed 27,000 metric tons of wheat to Guatemala. The US gift knocked the bottom out of the local grain markets and depressed food prices so much that it was harder for villagers to recover. The Guatemalan government ultimately barred the import of more basic grains."

Stealing food to aid militias

One of the most evident distortions caused by food aid (apart from the fact that farmers have no incentive to grow food when the market is flooded with free food) is the temptation to steal it. There have been reports of blatant theft of food aid under the not-so-watchful eyes of WFP. UN monitors have routinely reported the theft of food aid to Somalia, for example, but to no avail. In its 2010 report, for instance, the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported that local NGOs (known in development circles as "implementing partners"), WFP personnel and armed groups that controlled areas where food aid was being distributed were diverting up to half of the food. WFP vehemently denied these allegations, even though an [Associated Press report](#) the following year showed American, Japanese and Kuwaiti food aid being openly sold in Mogadishu's markets.

It is also important to remember that WFP's international staff usually do not distribute food directly in conflict or disaster zones; instead they hire local NGOs to do the work. Many of these NGOs are not vetted; in fact, in Somalia, some of them have even been linked to militias who act as "gatekeepers", deciding who gets the aid and who doesn't.

When Maren was in charge of monitoring food aid donated by the US government to refugees fleeing the Ogaden war of 1977-78, he found that about two-thirds of the food went missing. Trucks would arrive at the Mogadishu port, collect the food and disappear, never to be found again. Even when food arrived at the refugee camps, much of it would be stolen.

Aid thus became a profitable source of income for criminal elements within Somalia. And Siad Barre learned to exploit this well. In fact, Maren believes that international aid not only sustained the dictator's regime but also facilitated the unravelling of Somali society.

The looting of aid continued even after Barre was ousted in 1991. Battles between warlords were won or lost depending on how much aid each warlord had access to. However, it was not just the warlords who profited from food aid; corrupt NGO cartels also benefitted. Because many parts of Somalia were considered a no-go-zone by international humanitarian agencies, and therefore rendered inaccessible, enterprising Somalis formed NGOs that liaised with these agencies to provide humanitarian assistance and services on the ground. These businesses-cum-NGOs signed lucrative contracts with aid agencies; some controlled entire sectors of the aid industry, from transport to distribution. Others were run by warlords, who often diverted food aid, which was then sold openly in markets to fund their militias.

“By engaging with the warlords to ensure the delivery of aid, the United Nations and other actors only encouraged the spread of the conflict and the establishment of a thriving aid-based and black market economy,” wrote political scientist Kate Seaman in *Globalizing Somalia: Multilateral, International and Transactional Repercussions of Conflicts*. “In essence they became a party to the conflict, losing their neutrality and only serving to perpetuate the conflict by providing resources which were then manipulated by the multitude of armed groups operating within Somalia.”

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When an international humanitarian agency comes in to provide food to starving people, bad governments are let off the hook, and are allowed to continue with their bad policies that can lead to more famines in the future. Internationalising the responsibility of food security to UN institutions, international NGOs and foreign governments makes practically everyone across the globe a stakeholder in famine relief. “The process of internationalisation is the key to the appropriation of power by international institutions and the retreat from domestic accountability in famine-vulnerable countries,” wrote Alex de Waal in his book *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa*.

Bad management practices at WFP

If the Norwegian Nobel Committee had bothered to find out how WFP staff view the organisation they work for, it might not have been so quick to award WFP the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize. Like at many UN agencies, senior staff at WFP have been accused of abusing their authority, an allegation that has tarnished this Rome-based agency’s reputation. A confidential internal WFP survey of staff attitudes (whose findings were first leaked to the *Italian Insider*, and then to other news organisations, such as *Foreign Policy* in October last year) found that 35 per cent of the more than 8,000 WFP employees surveyed reported experiencing or witnessing some form of abuse of authority, the most typical being the granting of “preferential treatment” for recruitment to close associates.

“The senior leadership of the World Food Program - once one of the most highly regarded United Nations agencies - have abused their authority, committed or enabled harassment, discriminated against women and ethnic minorities, and retaliated against those who spoke up in protest,” [wrote](#) Colum Lynch in *Foreign Policy* on 8 October 2019.

What was evident in the survey was that WFP, like the rest of the UN, is extremely hierarchical and authoritarian. Respondents admitted that senior managers “aimed to further their own self-interest rather than the mission of WFP, and abuse their power to further themselves and their favorites”.

Moreover, 29 per cent of those surveyed said they had witnessed some form of harassment, while 23 per cent said they had encountered discrimination. Some 12 per cent of staff said they had experienced some form of retaliation for speaking up about abusive practices (which is fairly common in the UN, where protection for whistleblowers is virtually non-existent, as I have illustrated [here](#)). An even more alarming finding was that 28 of the WFP employees interviewed had experienced “rape, attempted rape or other sexual assault” while working at the agency.

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The results of the WFP survey (which was conducted by an independent management consultancy) are consistent with other UN surveys on staff attitudes and experiences. Results from a UN Staff Union [survey](#) conducted in 2018 in response to the #MeToo movement showed that sexual harassment made up about 16 per cent of all forms of harassment at the UN; 44 per cent of [those surveyed](#) said that they had experienced abuse of authority and 20 per cent felt that they had experienced retaliation after reporting misconduct. The survey also found that a large number of staff members’ complaints were never investigated.

It is, therefore, difficult to understand why the Norwegian Nobel Committee found it fit to award WFP the Nobel Peace Prize, given that the UN’s food agency has failed to adhere to almost all best practices in human resources management, and has not done enough to protect those who report internal abuse or wrongdoing. Nor has WFP improved conditions for peace in conflict-affected countries or prevented the use of hunger as a weapon of war, as I have illustrated above.

What then could have motivated the Committee to award WFP the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize - apart from some misguided notion that what the world needs most right now is food hand-outs? In a world that is being ravaged by the coronavirus pandemic, increasing xenophobia, racism and sexism, a global recession and climate change (all of which threaten peace and security), couldn’t the Committee have picked a more worthy candidate?

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