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Sen's Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-critiques

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ABSTRACT *Twenty years after* Poverty and Famines *elaborated the entitlement approach as an innovative and holistic approach to famine analysis, debates about some of its fundamental assertions remain unresolved. This paper examines four limitations acknowledged by Sen himself: starvation by choice, disease-driven rather than starvation-driven mortality, ambiguities in entitlement specification and extra-legal entitlement transfers. It concludes that Sen's approach is significantly weakened, both conceptually and empirically, by its methodological individualism and by its privileging of economic aspects of famine above sociopolitical determinants. A complementary analysis is required, one that recognizes the importance of non-market institutions in determining entitlements, famine as social process and epidemiological crisis, and violations of entitlement rules in the complex emergencies that typify most contemporary famines.*

1. Introduction

It is now 20 years since Amartya Sen published *Poverty and Famines*, and a quarter of a century since he published his first paper on the entitlement approach (Sen, 1976)—a fact that some of us who have been writing about entitlements since the 1980s might prefer to forget. Because the entitlement approach has been around for such a long time, I shall assume that a lengthy discursive exposition is unnecessary. I begin this paper, therefore, with only the briefest introduction to Sen's original formulation. I will then briefly examine its credentials as a theory of famine causation, before focusing on the main issues I want to address: the four "limitations" of the entitlement approach that Sen himself acknowledged. These four limitations I characterize as "choosing to starve", "starvation or epidemics?", "fuzzy entitlements", and "extra-entitlement transfers". I want to interrogate the entitlement approach through Sen's self-critiques, asking the question in each case: To what extent does each limitation undermine or even invalidate the entitlement approach overall?

The entitlement approach has been subjected to critical scrutiny many times before, ranging from a favourable "assessment" by Osmani (1995), to less favourable "reassessment" by de Waal (1990), "critique" by Nolan (1993), even "refutation" by Bowbrick (1986) and dismissal as a theoretical "failure" by Rangasami (1985) and Fine (1997). My intention here is partly to synthesize and comment on several strands of this literature, and partly to evaluate the extent to which Sen anticipated his critics and either dealt adequately with the problems they raise or not. Following Osmani (1995,

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p. 254), I shall not dwell on the *empirical* criticisms arising from Sen's applications of the entitlement approach to specific famines; instead I shall examine its credentials as a conceptual framework and *analytical* tool.

2. The Entitlement Approach to Famine Analysis

Entitlements have been defined by Sen (1984, p. 497) as "the set of alternative commodity bundles that a person can command in a society using the totality of rights and opportunities that he or she faces". It should be noted immediately that this is a descriptive rather than a normative concept; entitlements derive from legal rights rather than morality or human rights. Sen (1981, p. 166) concludes *Poverty and Famines* with this famous observation: "The law stands between food availability and food entitlement. Starvation deaths can reflect legality with a vengeance". There is clearly something odd—at best uncomfortable, at worst "defective"—with an analytical approach that appropriates a normative term like "entitlement" and strips it of all ethical connotations. In Sen's framework, people destituted by famine are not entitled to food; instead they are "entitled to starve" (Edkins, 1996, p. 550). Despite its normative connotation, entitlements "does not reflect in any sense a concept of the right to food" (Edkins, 1996, p. 559).[1]

A person's "entitlement set" is the full range of goods and services that he or she can acquire by converting his or her "endowments" (assets and resources, including labour power) through "exchange entitlement mappings".[2] In the context of poverty and famine, the entitlement approach aims comprehensively to describe all legal sources of food, which Sen (1981, p. 2) reduces to four categories: "production-based entitlement" (growing food), "trade-based entitlement" (buying food), "own-labour entitlement" (working for food) and "inheritance and transfer entitlement" (being given food by others).[3] Individuals face starvation if their full entitlement set does not provide them with adequate food for subsistence. Famine scales this up: occupationally or geographically related groups of people face famine if they simultaneously experience catastrophic declines in their entitlements.[4]

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the entitlement approach to famine theorizing is that it shifts the analytical focus away from a fixation on food supplies—the Malthusian logic of "too many people, too little food"—and on to the inability of groups of people to acquire food. Food insecurity affects people who cannot access adequate food (e.g. because of poverty) irrespective of food availability—a famine can occur even if food supplies are adequate and markets are functioning well. This is a crucial insight. As Sen emphasized, there is no technical reason for markets to meet subsistence needs—and no moral or legal reason why they should. An equally important insight—and one that has generated much confusion and controversy in the literature—is that famine can be caused by "exchange entitlement decline" (adverse shifts in the exchange value of endowments for food, e.g. falling wages or livestock prices, rising food prices) as well as by "direct entitlement decline" (loss of food crops to drought, for instance). The entitlement approach does not exclude the latter possibility.

It is common for Sen and his defenders to dismiss critics of the entitlement approach as "misreading", "misinterpreting", or even "misrepresenting" Sen's intentions.[5] But this begs the obvious question: How could so many academics have misunderstood what Sen was trying to say in *Poverty and Famines*—which is, after all, a brief essay written with great elegance and clarity? I suggest that the confusion is largely of Sen's own making. Although Sen is careful to emphasize that the entitlement

approach is descriptive rather than theoretical, and empiricist rather than normative—"a general framework for analysing famines rather than one particular hypothesis about their causation" (Sen, 1981, p. 162)—he chooses to set up the entitlement approach in theoretical opposition to something he labels "FAD", for food availability decline, and he invests much intellectual energy in *Poverty and Famines* in attempting to demonstrate that the four 20th-Century famines he chooses as case studies were not precipitated by significant food availability declines but instead by exchange entitlement declines.[6] The danger is that setting up 'FAD' as a hypothesis to be refuted by the entitlement approach places the latter in an equivalent status, as a theoretical proposition requiring theoretical justification and empirical verification. It does seem that Sen is trying to have it both ways, by presenting the entitlement approach as a generic framework for analysing famine processes but then deploying the approach to refute a theory of famine causation with which he profoundly disagrees.

I would suggest that the confusion has arisen because *Poverty and Famines* makes not one, but two pathbreaking contributions to the famine literature. Sen has provided both a general analytical framework for examining *all* famines (the entitlement approach) and at the same time put forward a "new" theory of causation:[7] that *certain* famines are characterized by declines in access to food for identifiable population groups irrespective of food availability at national level ("exchange entitlement failure").[8] The first achievement is subject to critical scrutiny on analytical or conceptual grounds, while the second is open to attack only on empirical grounds.[9] I shall deal only briefly with the empirical attacks on the entitlement "theory", since they are both less interesting and epistemologically flawed.

Early critiques of entitlement "theory" concentrated on the complex relationship between "food availability decline" and "exchange entitlement decline" in famine events, and specifically on Sen's assertion that several 20th-Century famines were not triggered by catastrophic declines in food production or food availability. A vigorous empirical debate followed around the analysis or interpretation of food production and availability data for specific famines. This literature has two strands: "refutation" by reinterpretation (or re-reinterpretation) of data; and "refutation" by counter-example.

- *Refutation of entitlement "theory" by reinterpretation of data*: In *Poverty and Famines*, Sen recalculated data from four famines to demonstrate: (a) adequate food availability and/or negligible decline from pre-famine food availability; (b) exchange entitlement collapse for specific population groups as a proximate cause of famine. Some critics have challenged Sen's use of food production, trade and price statistics, to claim that Sen underestimated the extent to which food availability decline was in fact an important element in these famines.[10]
- *Refutation of entitlement "theory" by counter-example:* A related strand of the critical literature attempts to demonstrate that the entitlement approach does not adequately explain some famines that were not examined by Sen in *Poverty and Famines*.[11] The argument is that Sen's preoccupation with exchange entitlement collapse (adverse shifts in food price/wage or food price/livestock price ratios) understates the significance of FAD—specifically food production failure—as a causal trigger of many famines, especially in Africa, and that if famines can be found that were not triggered by catastrophic "exchange entitlement failures", this somehow refutes entitlements' claims as a general "theory" in opposition to FAD.

Whatever the merits of the competing analyses of various famines, this strand of the debate is fatally flawed. It is predicated on the false premise that food availability

decline is a "non-nested alternative" to entitlement decline (Ravallion, 1996), whereas in fact FAD is incorporated within the entitlement framework as "direct entitlement decline" or failure of "production-based entitlement". A more significant challenge is provided by cases of famine that are characterized by radical violations of legally defined entitlement relations—such as recent famines in the Horn of Africa, where assets are transferred or destroyed not by voluntaristic exchange in markets or by natural disaster such as drought but by political conflict and war. I shall return to this issue in detail later, but suffice it to say for now that I am not convinced by this "refutation by counter-example" approach. My preferred reconciliation of this unnecessarily acrimonious debate would be to propose a taxonomic approach, identifying some famines as clearly triggered by FAD (old-style droughts or floods), others by exchange entitlement decline (where food supplies are adequate but certain groups face catastrophic collapses in their access to food) and others by political crisis (unfavourable or hostile government policies, conflict and war, failures of international response). In every case, however, identifying the trigger does not explain the famine, which requires a more complex analysis of conjunctural triggers and structural or underlying causes to be fully explained. Entitlement collapse offers a fresh perspective on the famine process, but its critics (both "friendly" and "hostile") are correct to complain that entitlements is too apolitical and ahistorical to tell us much about the structural causes of famines. However, the point remains that the entitlement approach is not a theory of famine causation in competition with other theories such as FAD or Malthusianism. It is a framework for the analysis of famine processes at the micro-level, and its claim to be a comprehensive framework is what I am focusing on here.

I want to turn now to more specific critiques of entitlements as an analytical construct.

3. Sen's Four "Limitations" of the Entitlement Approach

In *Poverty and Famines*, Sen recognized four "limitations" of the entitlement approach, each of which he mentions with little elaboration:

- "First, there can be ambiguities in the specification of entitlements" (Sen, 1981, pp. 48–49).
- "Second, while entitlement relations concentrate on rights within the given legal structure in that society, some transfers involve violations of these rights, such as looting or brigandage" (Sen, 1981, p. 49).
- "Third, people's actual food consumption may fall below their entitlements for a variety of other reasons, such as ignorance, fixed food habits, or apathy" (Sen, 1981, p. 50).
- "Finally, the entitlement approach focuses on starvation, which has to be distinguished from famine mortality, since many of the famine deaths—in some case *most* of them—are caused by epidemics" (Sen, 1981, p. 50).

I will now examine these individually, though not in the same order as listed by Sen.

Choosing to Starve

> people's actual food consumption may fall below their entitlements for a variety of other reasons, such as ignorance, fixed food habits, or apathy … Also, people sometimes choose to starve rather than sell their productive

> assets, and this can be accommodated in the entitlement approach using a relatively long-run formulation (taking note of future entitlements).
>
> (Sen, 1981, p. 50)

Entitlement analysis is predicated on the implicit assumption that a food shortage triggers an automatic behavioural response, namely the conversion of endowments into food for survival. Thus, a person's "starvation set" is defined as "those endowment bundles such that the exchange entitlement sets corresponding to them contain no bundles satisfying his minimum food requirements" (Sen, 1981, p. 47). Sen's concession that people "sometimes *choose* to starve" [emphasis added] in the short-term to enhance their future entitlements drew on findings from Indian droughts (Jodha, 1975), and anticipated research into "coping strategies" during African famines of the 1980s that would highlight consumption rationing as a strategic response to livelihood shocks.[12] However, Sen later stressed that he regards such choice behaviour as applying to "persistent hunger" rather than to "famine".

> If the focus of attention is shifted from famines as such to less acute but possibly persistent hunger, then the role of choice from the entitlement set becomes particularly important, especially in determining future entitlement. For example, a peasant may choose to go somewhat hungry now to make a productive investment for the future, enhancing the entitlement of the following years and reducing the danger of starvation then. For entitlement in a multi-period setting the initial formulation of the problem would require serious modification and extension.
>
> (Sen, 1986, pp. 9–10)

While the early literature on "coping strategies" reflected an assumption that strategic behaviour is dominated by the search for food, later research found that consumption rationing is an austerity measure that is adopted almost routinely. Evidence from many famines confirms that "coping strategies" during food crises are preoccupied with avoiding asset depletion rather than with maintaining consumption levels.[13] People facing food shortage make strategic decisions not only about how to bridge their consumption deficit, but also about how to balance this priority against its longer term economic—and social—costs. The sequence of coping strategy adoption is determined not only by each strategy's *effectiveness* in terms of bridging a food gap, but also by the *cost* and *reversibility* of each action (Watts, 1983). Strategies that incur little long-run cost are adopted first (including rationing food consumption), while those that incur higher costs and are difficult to reverse are adopted later (e.g. selling the household plough to buy food).

Seen in this light, decisions to ration food consumption, even severely, can be understood as attempts to manage the current endowment set, including food, to maximize the individual's or household's long-term entitlements. Endowments are not always exchanged for food because consuming productive assets undermines future viability. Thus, de Waal (1989, p. 194) argues that people who suffered hunger and malnutrition in Darfur "were not 'choosing to starve', with its implications of choosing to risk death. Instead, under enormous stress, they were choosing to suffer hunger in order to try to preserve their way of life".[14]

Osmani (1995, p. 280) argues that this behaviour can easily be accommodated within an entitlement analysis in which, *pace* Sen and de Waal, choices made from the entitlement set reflect a multi-period planning horizon. People who die during famines are "*having* to starve": strategic management of their endowments leaves them no

"intertemporal entitlement set" that would allow them to avoid starvation both now and in the future. However, even this "multi-period entitlements analysis" cannot explain the coexistence of famine mortality and unrealized entitlements—household members dying while the household retains assets that it could exchange for food.

Ravallion (1987) has attempted to explain the apparent paradox in terms of risk and uncertainty. People who "choose to starve" are not choosing to die—which would make preservation of their assets and livelihoods meaningless[15]—but are accepting an increased *risk* of dying, which rises steeply as nutrition status declines but is, at the margin, uncertain (Young & Jaspars 1995). Forced to choose between selling assets to buy food (and the certainty of destitution to follow) and going hungry to preserve future livelihoods (with the unknown probability that excessive rationing will lead to death) the "rational peasant" logically chooses the latter.

In my view, these arguments are flawed because they erroneously conflate the individuals making decisions about resource allocation (asset disposal, food procurement and intrahousehold food distribution) within the household with the people who will face the consequences of these difficult choices and trade-offs (in terms of increased nutritional, morbidity and mortality risk). This error arises because of Sen's methodological individualism, which his critics and supporters, on this issue at least, all appear to share. The brutal reality is that famine mortality is a function of "social vulnerability" as much as individual "biological vulnerability". People facing subsistence crises are forced into making the cruellest of choices, and these choices might even involve "sacrificing" weaker household members. Children consume scarce resources; cattle and goats *are* scarce resources. Famine mortality statistics reveal that it is the weakest and most dependent family members—children and the elderly—who suffer disproportionately and are the first to die (Caldwell & Caldwell, 1992; Seaman, 1993). Conversely, economically active adults who earn the household income and control the household's assets are most likely to survive famines. These cohorts are the productive and reproductive core of the family unit; their survival is essential for the reproduction and future viability of the household. These cohorts—particularly adult males—also dominate the decision-making process within the majority of households. This separation between decision-making power and mortality risk within households is no coincidence.

This could be modelled—for those who have such inclinations—either as a rational decision to protect the household's core productive members by neglecting the "unproductive" consumers of its diminishing resources, or as a reflection of adult (especially male) power over disempowered age-sex cohorts. The problem for the entitlement approach is that it is silent about such apparent violations of the fundamental right to life: if a household has endowments such as livestock that can be exchanged for food, the entitlement approach predicts that this will happen. Sen later introduced the notion of "extended entitlements" (Sen, 1986; Drèze & Sen, 1989) to cover "socially legitimated" entitlements to food that were not conferred by the market mechanism. These included intrafamily allocation of food, or what has been labelled "dependency entitlement" (Bongaarts & Cain, 1982). But how can even an "extended entitlement" approach explain a household's decision to violate these intrafamily allocation rules and allow some of its members to die in order to preserve entitlements for the survivors?[16]

Here as elsewhere, Sen's focus on the household as the principal unit of analysis confounds the entitlement approach, as does its failure to engage with social relations and power inequalities, in this case at the intrahousehold level. Curiously, Sen has never drawn on his related work (e.g. on "co-operative conflict" (Sen, 1990), his

seminal contribution to the intrahousehold bargaining models literature, or on female mortality risk in South Asia) to examine how differential power within the household translates into differential mortality risk during famines.[17]

Starvation or Epidemics?

> the entitlement approach focuses on starvation, which has to be distinguished from famine mortality, since many of the famine deaths—in some cases most of them—are caused by epidemics, which have patterns of their own. The epidemics are, of course, partly induced by starvation but also by other famine characteristics, e.g. population movement, breakdown of sanitary facilities.
>
> (Sen, 1981, p. 50)

Conventional wisdom asserts that people who perish during famines die of starvation due to inadequate food consumption. In *Poverty and Famines*, Sen (1981, p. 47) writes about people being "plunged into starvation" when their entitlement to food collapses. In fact, frank starvation is rarely recorded as the cause of death in famines. More often, death is attributed to hunger-related diseases such as diarrhoea or gastro-enteritis, and is explained by heightened susceptibility as lack of food undermines biological resistance to these illnesses. This is not of course incompatible with a "food entitlement decline" theory of famine. For entitlement failure to retain explanatory power, however, requires demonstrating an association between, mortality during famines (due to whatever proximate cause) and entitlement collapse, as proxied, say, by destitution. Sen (1981) finds an association between occupation status and mortality risk during the Bengal famine of 1943 and the Bangladesh famine of 1974, with low-paid occupations such as landless labourers suffering the highest rates of destitution and death. But the evidence is less clear for African famines, and sometimes appears to contradict Sen.

A potentially serious challenge to Sen's privileging of "entitlements collapse" as the primary cause of famine mortality is presented by de Waal's research on the western Sudan famine of the mid-1980s. De Waal (1989, pp. 182–83) found that: "Indicators of poverty had no evident relation to mortality" in Darfur in 1985, and that "mortality in the very poorest households … was not significantly higher than in the others". This finding led de Waal to conclude that mortality risk was more closely associated with patterns of migration and exposure to new disease vectors than with relative wealth and access to food. It is known that most mortality in recent African famines is explained neither by starvation nor hunger-related diseases, but by epidemics of communicable diseases—such as cholera, measles or typhus—especially among displaced populations on the move or in crowded refugee camps, that are not directly related to inadequate food consumption. The key determinants of mortality during the Darfur famine, according to de Waal (1990, p. 481), were not poverty or entitlements, but "quality of water supply, sanitation and overcrowding". De Waal's "health crisis" model sees famine mortality following a very different causal pathway from the "food crisis" model (see Figure 1). In famines where mortality is triggered by epidemics, "it is not the undernutrition caused by the famine but the social disruption caused by it that is critical in causing excess deaths" (de Waal, 1990, p. 481). The conclusion is that famine mortality is a consequence of the social process of famine, rather than the economic process (entitlement collapse)—lack of food or poverty at the individual level.

Where does the "health crisis" model leave the entitlement approach, predicated as it is on a posited causal pathway from disrupted access to food through to death by starvation or hunger-related disease? There are two ways in which the entitlement

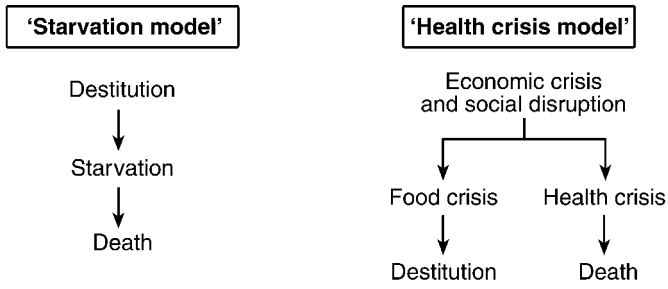

Figure 1. Famine mortality models.

Source: De Waal (1989, pp. 187–189).

approach can be salvaged on this issue. One is to attribute vulnerability even to communicable diseases to heightened susceptibility due to undernutrition (weakened biological resistance). Nutritionists such as Young & Jaspars (1995, p. 105) favour this view, arguing that de Waal underestimates "the synergism between malnutrition and morbidity" which they regard as best explaining famine mortality. The second defence is to assert that people who become exposed to communicable diseases (for instance, displaced populations in refugee camps) left their villages and migrated in search of relief precisely because they had lost their entitlements to food. Ravallion (1996, p. 9), for instance, suggests that the relationship between food shortage and morbidity or mortality outcomes reflects "behavioural synergies" (which might include increased exposure due to famine-induced distress migration) as well as "biological synergies" (increased susceptibility to infection). In terms of both explanations, exposure to disease is accepted as the proximate cause of death, but the underlying cause of death remains as "entitlement failure".

A reconciliation of this debate might be to accept the merits of both explanations.[18] Famine mortality reflects both increased *susceptibility* and increased *exposure* to diseases, some of which are hunger-related while others are not—but both reflect a common origin in disrupted access to food (epidemics that are not triggered by food scarcity are not, definitionally speaking, famines). The relative contribution to mortality of starvation, hunger-related morbidity and epidemic diseases will vary from one famine to another, but all three contributory factors are intrinsic to the famine process, and all three can arguably be accommodated within a broadly framed entitlement analysis. One feature that the "health crisis" model does highlight, though, is the recognition of famine as a social crisis rather than an economic crisis scaled up from the household to the group level. Once again, the entitlement approach proves to be unable to explain collective outcomes (in this case, disease epidemics) because of its analytical focus on the individual or household unit.

Fuzzy Entitlements[19]

> there can be ambiguities in the specification of entitlements … in pre-capitalist formations there can be a good deal of vagueness on property rights and related matters. In many cases the appropriate characterisation of entitlements may pose problems, and in some cases it may well be best characterised in the form of 'fuzzy' sets and related structures.
>
> (Sen, 1981, pp. 48–49)

In his original formulation of the entitlement approach, Sen was concerned only with legal ownership by individuals of alienable commodities. He ignored possibilities for weaker claims over resources, such as access and usufruct rights, as well as contexts where property rights are exercised institutionally, such as common property regimes, rather than individually. These two sources of "fuzziness" confound the central tool of entitlement analysis: namely the "mapping" between an individual's endowments and their entitlements.

Fuzziness with respect to units of analysis. In his elaboration of the entitlement approach, Sen (1981) chooses the individual, the household, or an "economic class" of people (sharecroppers, pastoralists) as his unit of analysis, and he shifts seamlessly between these levels of aggregation, as if they are interchangeable.[20] Osmani (1995, p. 254) justifies this blurring of individuals and groups as follows: "The basic unit of analysis is an individual person. For practical purposes, however, the analysis can also be conducted at collective levels such as household, group, or class by using the standard device of assuming a 'representative individual' ".

In any context where ownership relations between individuals or institutions and resources or commodities are multi-layered, complex and even contested by different individuals or groups of people, the "standard device" that Osmani endorses becomes difficult to justify. This is particularly the case when "fuzziness" in terms of units of analysis arises because different individuals and institutions exercise distinct claims over the same resource.[21] In such cases, agreed rules must be established for allocating rights over the resource to the various claimants. When several groups of people each hold socially legitimated rights over the same resource endowment, entitlements flowing from that resource cannot be modelled as if they accrue to a single person, and the notion of a "representative individual" simply cannot be applied.

Throughout rural Africa, natural resources are owned (*de jure*) or controlled (*de facto*) by private individuals, households, extended families or lineage groups, communities, ethnic groups or "tribes", and the state. These "resource decision units" (Bromley, 1989) overlap, since all individuals are simultaneously members of most institutional groupings as well. Conflicts and "ambiguities" can occur at or between any of these levels, because institutional ownership or control of a resource such as land does not necessarily imply equal or equitable access to that resource by each individual member of that institution.[22]

Instead, access to such resources (or to entitlements derived from these resources) is strictly governed by rules and norms that are established on the basis of "belonging" (citizenship, ethnicity), "seniority" (age, gender) and other axes of inclusion or exclusion. These filters act as rationing mechanisms, selectively allocating resources to individuals who display the preferred characteristics and marginalizing the claims of others who do not share these characteristics—which are often inherited (ascribed) attributes such as ethnicity or age that cannot be changed (or acquired). To the extent that a community or society is structured along rules or norms of inclusion and exclusion an individual's personal characteristics become a major determinant of his or her ability to access resources (i.e. to accumulate endowments and to realize entitlements). As Gasper (1993, p. 694) points out: "Beyond legal rights, effective access within institutions typically depends not only on formal rules but on particular relationships of authority and influence".

Leach *et al.* (1997) agree that Sen's definition of entitlements as *legal* rights only is too restrictive, and they develop the concept of "environmental entitlements", which

attempts to "extend the entitlements framework to the whole range of socially sanctioned as well as formal-legal institutional mechanisms for gaining resource access and control" (Leach *et al.*, 1997, p. 16). This formulation recognizes that certain entitlements—for example usufruct rights to land or trees in communal tenure regimes—are neither conferred nor enforceable by formal legal systems, but instead are validated by community-level institutions on the basis of social membership rather than private ownership.

On the face of it, this would attempt to rescue the entitlement framework from the straitjacket of private property rights that Sen wrapped around it. After all, as Osmani (1995, p. 254) notes, Sen himself broadened his original narrowly legalistic definition of ownership to incorporate all "socially accepted" norms of ownership. But is this sufficient? Fine (1997, p. 625) thinks not: "the ambiguity in property rights is not resolved by pressing legitimacy into service as a criterion". As Leach *et al.* (1997, p. 18) point out, "resource claims are often contested, and within existing power relations some actors' claims are likely to prevail over those of others". Socially determined entitlements are more dynamic and fluid, and—crucially for entitlement analysis—less amenable to specification at the individual level than are market-determined entitlements.[23] "An extended entitlements approach therefore sees entitlements as the outcome of negotiations among social actors, involving power relationships and debates over meaning, rather than as simply the result of fixed, moral rules encoded in law" (Leach *et al.*, 1997, p. 23).

Elsewhere, in his important work on modelling intrahousehold relations, Sen (1990) recognizes that entitlements are differentially distributed between household members, and that the distribution of entitlements can be a locus of negotiation and contestation between individuals who have very different objectives and decision-making power. Sen's exposition of "co-operative conflict" within households implies a rejection of "unitary" household models in favour of "collective" models (see Kabeer, 1994; Haddad *et al.*, 1997). This paper argues for a similar rejection of unitariness with respect to all resource decision units above the level of the individual—such as the extended family, the lineage group or clan, the "community" and occupation groups or economic classes—and for the application instead of a collective or bargaining analysis. Within each of these institutions, the distribution of endowments—and of decision-making power over both endowments and entitlements—is typically extremely skewed, and is likely to be a source of tension and conflict rather than consensus.

Fuzziness with respect to property rights.

> The absence of genuine rights of private property in productive assets is a well-known feature of traditional village societies. It means that no single owner can claim exclusive property in those assets nor use them at his discretion in whatever way he likes. In particular, he is not entitled to dispose of them (to transfer them, to donate them, and so on) by an act of will: assets are not freely alienable and, therefore, they may not be 'commoditized'.
>
> (Platteau, 1991, p. 121)

The notion of entitlements is conceptually and empirically inseparable from an economic system founded on private property and the legal rights associated with exclusive ownership by individuals of assets as commodities. "Exchange entitlements" are defined by the conventions of commodity exchange in capitalist regimes, being subject to the laws of contract and occurring as an impersonal " 'exchange of alienable things

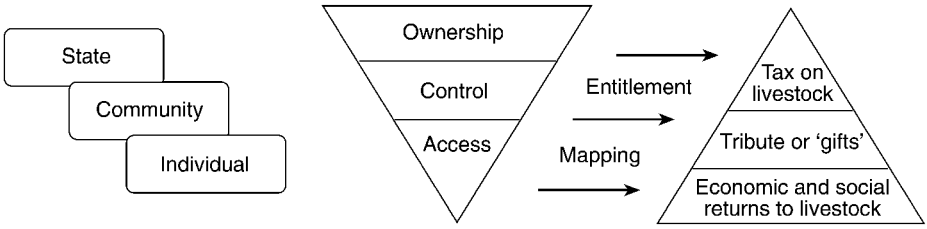

Figure 2. Entitlements to resources and entitlements to utilities derived from resources: the case of "communal" land.

Source: Devereux (1996, p. 13).

between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal independence'. By contrast, traditional precapitalist societies are the domain of non-commodity (gift) exchange defined as 'an exchange of inalienable things between transactors who are in a state of reciprocal dependence' " (Platteau, 1991, p. 119, citing Gregory, 1982, p. 12). This implies that the entitlement approach is analytically weakest in precisely those socioeconomic contexts for which it was designed, namely, famine-prone communities whose vulnerability is partly defined by their weak or unfavourable incorporation into markets, where common property and open access regimes for resources dominate private property and market-based exchange. To the extent that commodity exchanges in precapitalist communities (or poor communities that retain significant precapitalist features) occur outside the contractual rules of the market-place, the entitlement approach is effectively inapplicable.

Of the four main resource regimes—private property, state property, common property and open access (Bromley, 1989, p. 871)—entitlements are "fuzziest" with respect to common property regimes. Under private and state property regimes, entitlements are clearly defined and ownership is vested in individuals or state institutions. In open access regimes, entitlements are freely available to whoever chooses to take advantage of the resource. Under common property regimes, however, it is necessary to separate out ownership, control and access to a *resource* (endowment) from ownership, control and access to the *utilities* derived from that resource (entitlement). This introduces a critical "ambiguity" (though not necessarily, as Sen puts it, "vagueness") around the specification of ownership relations. Take the case of "communal land" which is *owned* by the state, *controlled* by community leaders (village headmen) and accessed or *utilized* by individual farmers. In return for allocating usufruct rights over land to local farmers, village headmen might extract rent for its use in the form of tribute or "gifts". The state might also extract rent, in the form of a head tax on livestock or grazing fees. There is, in this example, a structural separation between the resource *endowment* and *entitlement* to utilities derived from that resource (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 expands the conventional entitlement analytical framework, in terms of which an endowment set of resources is transformed into an entitlement set of goods and services via an entitlement mapping relationship (Osmani, 1995, p. 256). Households that do not enjoy security of tenure over the land that they farm face threats of exclusion or reduction in their entitlements on two fronts: loss of access to land if the community or state exercises its greater authority over this land to dispossess the household; or if taxes or tribute demanded for access rights become prohibitive.

The pyramid under 'Claims' is inverted to indicate that the strongest claim on the

land rests with the state which owns it. Individual households have the weakest claim—they can be required to pay taxes for its use to both community leaders and the state, and they can be forcibly removed from the land they occupy should the government decide, for example, to convert this land into a state farm, a dam or a game park.

Extra-entitlement transfers

> while entitlement relations concentrate on rights within the given legal structure in that society, some transfers involve violations of these rights, such as looting or brigandage. When such extra-entitlement transfers are important, the entitlement approach to famines will be defective. On the other hand, most recent famines seem to have taken place in societies with 'law and order', without anything 'illegal' about the processes leading to starvation.
>
> (Sen, 1981, p. 49)

Edkins (1996), following a deconstructivist approach, has argued persuasively that what Sen chooses to marginalize or exclude from the entitlement approach is more significant than Sen acknowledges. Two crucial exclusions are "extra-entitlement transfers" and deliberate starvation. By confining his analysis to legally enforceable property rights, Sen (1981, p. 162) explicitly favours a restrictive view of famine as an "economic disaster" and he privileges "poverty and market forces as the root of famine" (Keen, 1994, p. 4). This characterization had earlier been criticized for neglecting the determination of entitlements (Watts, 1991). It also avoids engaging with the highly politicized context within which famines invariably occur.

Contra Sen's assertion, most recent famines, particularly in the Horn of Africa, have been triggered either by political instability or civil war, or by the lethal combination of war plus drought.[24] It might be argued that the emergence of "complex emergencies" (Duffield, 1993) or "war famines", displacing drought as the dominant trigger, has occurred since the publication of *Poverty and Famines* in 1981. However, despite popular perceptions of famines as natural or economic disasters, the politicization of famines is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to African "war famines". A recent overview found that 21 out of 32 major 20th-Century famines since 1900 had adverse politics at the local, national or international level as a principal cause (Devereux, 2000, p. 6).[25] Many other famines that had "natural" or economic triggers such as drought, flood or food hoarding became politicized by failures of government or international response—sometimes involving deliberate withholding of food aid for political reasons.[26]

The entitlement approach overlooks the centrality of political processes, many of which involve gross violations of human rights, including the right to food, in precipitating or exacerbating famines.[27] Sen's characterization of famine as "entitlement failure" excludes intentionality as a possible causal trigger, and ignores the reality that famine produces beneficiaries as well as victims (Rangasami, 1985; Keen, 1994), who may play an active role in perpetuating or prolonging famine conditions.[28]

For example, the entitlement approach is unable to explain recent famines in the "asset transfer economy" (Duffield, 1993) of south Sudan, where vulnerability is associated more with wealth than poverty. During the 1980s and 1990s the livelihood systems of Dinka agro-pastoralists were systematically undermined by repeated cattle raiding from aggressive neighbouring groups—either tacitly condoned or actively sponsored by the government in Khartoum—until they were unable to resist livelihood

shocks like drought (Keen, 1994; Deng, 1999). During the 1990s over half a million people were displaced and their livestock herds were halved, and in the 1998 famine 70 000 people died (Deng, 1999). These "extra-legal transfers" occurred outside the market mechanism, which is for Sen the primary institution for commodity exchanges and transfers.

It is often asserted that the entitlement approach by definition cannot address "war famines", since "entitlement theory has no place for violence" (de Waal, 1990, p. 473). In a very general sense this is true, but the impact of war and violence needs to be unpacked before any analytical role for the entitlement approach is rejected, since one of its most powerful contributions is in examining the distributional impact of a livelihood shock, whatever its source. Clearly, conflict impinges on all sources of entitlement to food, but not all of these involve "extra-entitlement transfers".

- *Production-based entitlements:* During a war, the ratio of food producers to food consumers falls: farmers are conscripted, displaced, disabled or killed; soldiers requisition food and livestock. "Scorched earth" tactics include destruction of granaries, burning of fields of standing crops and poisoning of wells. Before the famines of the 1970s and 1980s in Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique and Cambodia, tens of thousands of hectares of farming land had been taken out of production in these countries because of landmines.
- *Employment-based entitlements:* During a war cash crop production and marketing networks collapse, employment opportunities (demand for agricultural labour, petty trading activities) contract and farmers and pastoralists are attacked for food and livestock. Internally displaced persons and refugees lose their normal livelihoods. Lacking assets, incomes and access to food, they become dependent on external assistance.
- *Trade-based entitlements:* Conflict disrupts normal trading activities in various ways, including: (1) by disrupting trade routes—roads are mined and bridges are destroyed, trucks and fuel are diverted to military uses; (2) by direct attacks on markets, e.g. the Ethiopian government bombed village markets in Tigray and Eritrea during the 1980s until markets had to be held at night; (3) by appropriating food from traders or looting food stores; and (4) by laying siege to towns or districts, thereby blockading movements of people and food. All these disruptions reduce food supplies and raise food prices in conflict zones, thus creating famine conditions.
- *Transfer entitlements:* War disrupts both "private" and "public" transfers. Conflict shatters social support networks. The 1998 famine in southern Sudan was named the "famine of breaking relationships" by local people (Deng, 1999). Transport problems and roadblocks might make it impossible for relatives to send remittances. Food aid is frequently prevented from entering conflict zones, either by government decree or because of security risks. Relief convoys and planes are attacked and food aid is seized: 80% of food aid sent to Somalia in 1986 was taken by the army or militias. During the 1980s famine the Dergue regime in Ethiopia appropriated food aid to support its forced resettlement programme, which exacerbated the famine.

These effects of war can be disaggregated into three distinct clusters. The first cluster covers the disruptive effects of conflict on local economies and livelihoods. In theory, these disruptions—such as farmers volunteering for military service, or the contraction of local markets—could be incorporated within the entitlement approach, much as the effects of drought can be modelled in so far as they affect endowments and entitlement mappings.[29]

The second cluster is Sen's illegal "extra-entitlement transfers" such as the requisi-

tioning of grain from farmers, raiding of livestock from pastoralists, or seizing of food aid from relief convoys. There is no escaping Sen's own judgement that these typical features of "war famines" render the entitlement approach "defective".[30] The third cluster of effects is equally problematic for the entitlement approach, and refers to various "unruly practices" (Gore, 1993) associated with war that do not directly transfer entitlements but create "conditions which are deliberately and socially engineered to undermine entitlement" (Fine, 1997, p. 627). Perhaps the paradigmatic case is a siege that denies access to food, in order deliberately to bring about starvation of the besieged community.[31]

4. Conclusion

This paper differs from many other critical contributions to the entitlement literature in that I have not attempted to refute Sen's empirical analysis of specific famines, nor do I dispute his insight that famines can occur because of shifts in the distribution rather than the availability of food. Instead, I have interrogated Sen's concept of "entitlement" as an analytical construct, and I have confined the investigation to four possible problems that Sen himself identified. On these four "limitations" the following conclusions can be drawn.

- *Choosing to starve:* Rationing one's own food consumption to protect assets and livelihoods beyond the immediate crisis is entirely consistent with a "multi-period entitlements analysis". "Choosing to starve *others*" within the household requires an understanding of intrahousehold power relations that cannot be captured within the entitlement framework, which is severely undermined by the reality that those household members who make decisions concerning entitlements to food, and those household members who die during famines, are two distinct groups. Choosing to starve others could presumably be incorporated within the entitlement framework by adopting an extreme utilitarian view in which "dependent" household members were modelled as "endowments" that are expendable during livelihood crises, but this would remove any claim to being a normative or ethical connotation that the word "entitlement" embodies.
- *Starvation or epidemics?* Although Sen's view of famine mortality as "death by starvation" or heightened susceptibility to hunger-related diseases is naïve, de Waal's "health crisis model" does not refute a narrative of famine causation based on direct or exchange entitlement decline. Although increased *exposure* to disease might not be hunger-related, if this exposure is due to the social disruption triggered by a food crisis, then entitlement decline remains as the underlying cause of death. Conversely, if the social disruption is not caused by a food crisis (e.g. distress migration during a war), then this is not a famine at all.
- *Fuzzy entitlements:* The existence of property regimes such as communal land tenure gives rise to two sets of "fuzziness" around entitlement relations: first, over the unit of analysis, and second, over the nature of property rights. Rights or claims over resources that are held *collectively* (by groups of people, or institutions) are incompatible with the entitlement approach, which is conceptually grounded in private property regimes, where resources are commoditized and owned by individuals. Rights can also be exercised at varying levels, from ownership (the strongest form, including rights of disposal) to access and usufruct rights (the weakest form, where ownership and use are often separated). The entitlement approach is effectively

inapplicable in contexts where the relationship between individuals and resources is mediated by (non-market) institutions.

- *Extra-entitlement transfers:* The entitlement approach can be used to analyse the "normal" disruptive effects of war on local economies and livelihoods. It can not, however, explain violations of entitlements such as requisitioning of grain, raiding of cattle and appropriation or withholding of food aid. Nor can it explain "unruly practices" such as deliberate starvation, or the use of famine as a weapon. "Complex emergencies" expose most sharply the limitations of what is essentially an economistic analytical framework: its failure to engage with famine as both a social process and a political crisis.

All four "limitations" discussed by Sen and scrutinized in this paper share two common underlying themes: first, a failure to recognize individuals as socially embedded members of households, communities and states, and second, a failure to recognize that famines are political crises as much as they are economic shocks or natural disasters. The result is an elegant analytical framework that privileges the economic aspects of famine and excludes the social and the political: the importance of institutions in determining entitlements (at intrahousehold or community level), famine as a social process (mortality due to communicable diseases) and violations of entitlement rules by others (complex emergencies). Without a complementary social and political analysis, the entitlement approach can illuminate only a small part of a very complex phenomenon.

Notes

1. The right to adequate food is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966. Little progress has been made in enforcing this "entitlement to food" to date, notwithstanding commitments made by governments and international organizations at the 1974 World Food Conference and the 1996 World Food Summit.
2. One example: a pastoralist can sell his or her cow for a 50 kg bag of millet. The cow is an endowment, the bag of millet is one entitlement (among many) that the cow can provide; the exchange entitlement mapping includes the livestock/grain price ratio (1 cow = 50 kg of millet). Since famines in rural areas are characterized by collapsing livestock prices and escalating food prices, the livestock/grain price ratio is often used as an indicator of pastoralists' "exchange entitlements" in famine early warning systems.
3. These are defined, respectively, as follows: the right to own what one produces with one's own (or hired) resources; the right to own what one acquires through exchange of commodities with willing parties; the right to self-employment or to sell one's labour power; the right to own what is willingly given by others.
4. As Fine (1997) argues, this "scaling up" from individual to mass starvation does not adequately capture the social dynamic of famine, and constitutes the first of several tensions that are explored in the present paper between Sen's "methodological individualism" (Fine, 1997, p. 618) and famine as a social process.
5. See: Sen (1986) on Bowbrick (1986); Osmani (1995, p. 274) on Kula (1988): "An extreme form of misunderstanding is revealed by Kula"; and Ravallion (1996) on Devereux (1988).
6. It is significant that one of Sen's earliest published papers on the entitlement approach is titled "Famines as failures of exchange entitlements" (Sen, 1976).
7. Early, hostile critics complained that the entitlement approach offered no original insights into famine causality and processes, but merely introduced new jargon to what had long been known (see Mitra, 1982; Rangasami, 1985).
8. In asserting that the entitlement approach does incorporate a theory of famine causation I am disputing the current conventional wisdom, which holds that "the entitlement approach is best seen as an *investigative* method rather than as providing a *causal* theory" (Fine, 1997, p. 621; see also Gasper, 1993; Osmani, 1995, p. 262). However, I am not endorsing the naïve

view that the entitlement approach is a theory which asserts "that famine is *not* caused by a 'fall in food availability' " (Rangasami, 1985, p. 1797).

9. Critics who challenge Sen on empirical grounds often confuse the two, believing that by demonstrating that specific famines were triggered by food availability decline they have "refuted" the entitlement "theory" of famine (see especially Bowbrick, 1986). In fact, the best they can hope to do is refute the "exchange entitlement decline" hypothesis for individual famines, since the entitlement approach incorporates the possibility of food availability decline as "direct entitlement" failure.
10. See: Bowbrick (1986) on the 1943 Bengal famine; and Cutler (1984) and Devereux (1988) on the 1970s Ethiopian famine.
11. See: Kula (1988) and Nolan (1993) on the Chinese Great Leap Forward famine; Baulch (1987) on the 1980s famine in northern Ethiopia; and de Waal (1990) on the 1985 famine in western Sudan.
12. Corbett (1988) synthesized the 1980s "coping strategies" literature. The term was subsequently criticized for embodying unrealistic optimism, most pithily by Seaman (1993, p. 14): "In contemporary development jargon, Africans do not starve, they 'cope' ". A more neutral term might be "risk management behaviour" (Siegel & Alwang, 1999).
13. See, *inter alia*: Wolde Mariam (1986) and Dessalegn Rahmato (1987) for evidence from Ethiopia; Watts (1983) on northern Nigeria; de Waal (1989) on western Sudan; also (in non-emergency contexts) Davies (1996) on Mali; Campbell & Trechter (1982) on northern Cameroon; and Devereux (1993b) on northern Ghana.
14. See also Gasper (1993, p. 685): "Even during real but 'moderate' starvation, people may not use all of their food entitlements, but instead balance their own increased risk (due to malnutrition) of morbidity and mortality, against their wish and need to maintain assets such as livestock".
15. As Fine (1997, pp. 619–620) puts it, given the fact that the entitlement approach is grounded in neoclassical individualism, "it would appear to be impossible to explain how famines occur since no one maximising utility would choose death (and negative infinite expected utility) even with a low risk".
16. How, for that matter, can the entitlement approach explain systematic deprivation of girl children in parts of the world such as south Asia, and the resulting "100 million missing women" that Sen himself has written about (Drèze & Sen, 1989, pp. 51–53)?
17. Reviewing Sen's extensive work on poverty, food insecurity and famine, it is striking not only how diverse this body of work is (see Devereux & Singer, 1999), but also how rarely Sen attempts to unify various strands of thinking where the potential and rationale for synthesis seem powerful.
18. See Watkins & Menken (1985, p. 650): "Some of the increase in infectious disease may be due to increased susceptibility that is thought to accompany malnutrition and some may be due to the peculiar conditions that accompany scarcity, for example, a breakdown of systems of water supply and waste disposal, an increase in the number of vagrants, or the crowding and dismal conditions of refugee camps".
19. This section draws on arguments elaborated in Devereux (1996) and Devereux & Seely (1996).
20. To take just one example: "It is, in fact, possible for a group to suffer both direct entitlement failure and trade entitlement failure, since the group may produce a commodity that is both directly consumed and exchanged for some other food. For example, the Ethiopian pastoral nomad both eats the animal products directly and also sells animals to buy foodgrains (thereby making a net gain in calories), on which he is habitually dependent" (Sen, 1981, p. 51).
21. This is by no means atypical. As Woldemeskel (1990, p. 493) observes: "There are no good *a priori* reasons to prefer possession-based entitlement accounts to institutionally-based entitlement accounts. On the contrary, we have reason to believe that the latter will have more explanatory power, and be more comprehensive, than the former".
22. In Namibia, for example, restitution of ancestral land is currently a source of confrontation between the state and various ethnic groups or communities who were dispossessed by the South African colonial administration. Within rural Namibian communities, a crisis is developing over the "illegal" fencing of communal rangelands, a phenomenon which can be explained as an attempt by livestock farmers to "privatize" access to grazing lands that remain communally controlled but state owned. Within Namibian households, a married woman's access to land is secured through her husband, under both civil and customary law,

and if she is widowed she is at risk of being dispossessed of her residential and farming land by her late husband's relatives. (Devereux (1996) elaborates on these three case studies.)

23. Of course, when resources become privatized and commodified, socially dictated rules of "endowment" allocation and "entitlement" determination become superseded by market-based rules (or "exchange entitlement mappings"), and the market is famously blind with respect to the personal characteristics of transactors.
24. Von Braun *et al.* (1998, p. 3) list 21 famines world-wide since 1970. All but two—Bangladesh in 1974 and North Korea in the late 1990s—occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, and 15 of the 21 had war or counter-insurgency as a trigger, either in combination with drought (as in Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan) or alone (as in Angola, Liberia or Zaire).
25. These include several famines in China, the USSR (notably "Stalin's famine" in the 1930s, during which 7–8 million Ukrainians died), Biafra, Cambodia and elsewhere, which can be directly attributed to war and/or the malevolent exercise of state power (Devereux 1993a).
26. Well-documented examples include Bangladesh (1974), Ethiopia (1984) and Sudan (1990). In each case the USA delayed relief deliveries because it had difficulties with the regime in power at the time. The literature has not examined the question of precisely when a transfer-based entitlement such as food aid enters an individual's "entitlement set". I suggest that this occurs not at the time of delivery, but at the moment when the state or donor makes a commitment to deliver aid and establishes eligibility criteria. If the donor then fatally delays its delivery of food such that eligible people die, then in terms of the entitlement approach these deaths were caused by violations of "transfer entitlements".
27. Elsewhere, Sen has drawn attention to political factors in other writings on famine. Specifically, he has highlighted the importance of democratic institutions—a vigilant press to disseminate information about food crises, free elections to ensure state accountability to its citizens—in preventing famines, notably in post-independence India (Drèze & Sen, 1989, p. 212). Here again, there would appear to be great potential for drawing synergistic connections between entitlements as an economistic construct and entitlement to food and freedom from famine as a political or moral imperative.
28. This technocratic bias extends to Sen's policy prescriptions for redressing hunger and famine, which privilege top-down "public action" (Drèze & Sen, 1989), such as food or cash distribution and public works projects, over "political action", such as measures to empower the poor and reduce their structural vulnerability. Sen's package of interventions—essentially welfarist transfers to targeted individuals or households—follows logically from the methodological individualism of the entitlement approach, which fails to recognize that a famine "is plainly social in character, something other than a number of individuals facing starvation" (Fine, 1997, p. 624).
29. One of Sen's case studies in *Poverty and Famines*, the Bengal famine of 1943, was triggered by wartime food price inflation due to disrupted food supplies, which Sen (1981, Chapter 6) analyses convincingly in terms of exchange entitlement failure for market-dependent groups such as wage labourers.
30. "There is, of course, a very *general* hypothesis underlying the approach, which is subject to empirical testing. It will be violated if starvation in famines is shown to arise not from entitlement failures but either from choice characteristics … or from non-entitlement transfers (e.g. looting)" (Sen, 1981, p. 162–4). Sen (1981, p. 164) recognizes that "non-entitlement transfers have played a part in some famines of the past", and he cites the 1925 famine in Szechwan, China, which followed the requisitioning of local grain reserves and livestock by troops.
31. Examples include Leningrad and parts of the Netherlands during World War II, and the town of Juba in southern Sudan, which was besieged for several years during the 1980s and early 1990s.

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