

## Ethiopia Is ‘Afflicted by Avoidable Famines’

*Teodros Kiros, Ph.D., an Ethiopian-American scholar now based in Boston, discussed the current food crisis in East Africa with Alex Getachew of the La-Rouche Youth Movement in Boston, and EIR’s Marcia Merry Baker, on Aug. 6. Edited excerpts from the discussion are given below.*



*Dr. Kiros has written extensively on moral economy and philosophy, and other topics, including six books, over 100 articles, as well as many short stories. His monograph *Moral Philosophy and Development—The Human Condition in Africa* was published in 1992 (Ohio University Press, African Series, No. 61). He is currently a DuBois Fellow at Harvard University; his past teaching positions include visiting scholar at Brown University, and lecturer at Suffolk University. He is active with the Boston-based African Community Economic Development of New England (ACEDONE).*

**Baker:** In the context of decades of globalization, where we now have economic activity plunging and the financial system blowing apart, one of the worst hit places in the world for acute food shortages is East Africa: the Horn of Africa, and Ethiopia in particular. What would you say of this dire situation?

**Kiros:** As you know, famine is not foreign to the Ethiopian experience. Of course, Ethiopia need not necessarily be equated with famine, because it is the center of world civilization! Human history as we know it was begun in what is now being called Ethiopia, about 4.5 million years ago. Further, for example, our earliest human ancestor, Lucy, whom Ethiopians refer to as Dinkinish (which we translate into English as “Miraculous”), originated there.

So, we are speaking about the part of the world that, on the one hand, is the origin of the oldest, the best, and

the most productive and the most positive dimensions of human history; on the other hand, there are famines. The reasons for this are very apparent to first-rate economists—and Amartya Sen is one of them, the Nobel laureate, who has been covering the history of famines, both in India and in Ireland. He did not study Ethiopia; I did, in my first book, which I wrote when I was 28 years old, which I called, *Moral Philosophy and Development—the Human Condition in Africa*.

Ethiopia, in its recent history, has been afflicted by “avoidable famines.” Why do I say they are avoidable? Of course, there are biological, environmental reasons that cause famines, whenever and wherever they occur. But there is also what Amartya Sen identifies, and following him, I refer to, as the political dimension of famine. By this Amartya Sen essentially means the policy decisions that people in power make, that either produce famines, or that they then become stuck with, in an effort to overcome them.

And sometimes, in fact, as shocking as this may sound, when famines occur—as they do quite regularly in Ethiopia, beginning from the 1980s (in fact, you can even stretch it back to the 17th Century)—there are those who take political advantage of the disaster. In the 17th Century, Ethiopian soils and lands were being savagely afflicted by locusts. The locusts spread over the land and ate the crops.

Political decisions are made by people in power: How should food be produced? How should it be circulated? To whom should it be given? And when necessary, as much as anyone could say, policymakers decide to turn a blind eye to famines, because they would like to, for example, starve to death dissidents—people who would like to topple them, people who would like to see regime changes.

This is essentially what Amartya Sen means, when he says famine, to a greater degree, is a by-product of wrong policies.

### ‘Concerted Political Action’

**Baker:** What about those imposing globalization? In the world leadership regime imposed over recent decades of globalization, a kind of neo-British East India Company of a select few multinationals has come to control critical means of existence, from pharmaceuticals and chemicals to metals and minerals, even to seedstocks for crops. Companies like Monsanto, Cargill, AstraZeneca, Syngenta, DuPont, and others. They have used what the World Trade Organization calls “in-

FIGURE 1  
Northeast Africa



EIRNS/John Sigerson

tellectual property rights,” to extend their control over medications, high-yield seeds, and even the technology to make them! We’ve reached the end of the line. It’s not mere monopoly. It’s control over the means to life.

**Kiros:** We have to penetrate all these institutions,



UN WFP/Thierry Geenen

*The famines in East Africa are a result of policy decisions, and can be reversed by concerted political action. Here, a starving mother and child in Ethiopia, January 2008.*

and demand that they provide what they have to the victims for free. We have to fight for this. They are not going to do this, only because they are asked to do so. We will have to develop powerful social movements, as Jürgen Habermas would say, in which we appeal to the conscience, the intelligence and moral texture of human beings, to be responsible for the fate of others. It's a matter of how we present the argument; it's a matter of how we stage the social movement; it's about elegance; it's about passion; it's about responsibility.

Otherwise, citizens all over the world, if they are approached as human beings, with consciences, with moral intelligence, and with responsibility to care for the poor, I assure you, they will surprise you with the kinds of contributions that they will make. This is a matter of concerted political action.

**Baker:** I think you would verify that the immediate

need in Ethiopia is that 10 million people need tons of food before September. As well as millions of tons needed in neighboring countries. This need should be met, is what you are saying?

**Kiros:** Precisely. And in addition to doing this, I want us to develop leaders who are going to make a contract, a promise to the population not to turn a blind eye to famine ever again. Ever again.

**Getachew:** We have to look at the reality of *the intention* behind these destructive, globalized policies toward Africa.

If you take a look at National Security Study Memorandum 200, done under the auspices of Henry Kissinger in 1974, *this was an explicit policy*. Ethiopia was on the list of those 13 countries targetted in the then-classified memorandum, whose stated policy was that these countries have resources that we [Western countries] will have to have. Therefore, we have to make sure that their population growth stops, and that we reduce the number of people in this region, which you can't just do by giving out condoms—you have to increase the death rates.

This was not originally a U.S. policy. This is actually a policy that comes from the British: It comes from Julian Huxley, the first head of UNESCO, who said that Africans are not qualified to control their own resources.

The point is that there has been a deliberate policy of genocide, against Africa and the developing world generally. The eugenics movement was explicit; but the environmental movement—much of which was created as kind of the metastasized form of the same eugenics movement, is explicitly the same policy. They are calling Africa “overpopulated”! One of the least densely populated areas in the world, maybe with the exception of Australia—most of which has no one in it. While in the most advanced, highly densely populated areas of the world, you have the most development, and the highest standards of living.

This brings us to the issue of the International Monetary Fund conditionalities. The record shows that the IMF conditionalities were imposed, not with the intention of giving loans to help Africa, but to enslave these countries with debt, and to impose harmful conditionalities. For example, that policy was imposed by the IMF in Sudan, where you have one of the largest land areas, and greatest agricultural potentials in all Africa.

**Kiros:** The intention of the World Bank and the IMF





*T'ef grass, an ancient grain indigenous to Ethiopia, is a very nutritious food source, but is priced out of range of most people in the country.*

seems to me, to spread what Antonio Gramsci called, “hegemonic privileges” for their population, at the expense, if necessary, of starving and killing people outside of the Western world.

There is a sense in which this thesis might seem too blatant, too cruel, too truthful; but there is also a sense in which the empirical facts about conditionalities, as you put it, Alex, seem to head in that direction.

### East African Resources

**Baker:** Picking up on your idea that “famine is avoidable,” what would you say about the physical resource base and the geography of this wonderful area of homeland of ancient civilization, as you stressed? For example, water resources. The Ethiopian highlands are considered the “water tower” of all of East Africa. If the right policy decisions were made, there would be no constraint physically, to producing plentiful food, for a growing population.

You said that “Malthus’s argument is a lie,” in a paper you wrote this May, referring to the assertion that a population will inevitably exceed its resources [“Famine, Hunger, and Public Action: Consolidated View”].

**Kiros:** Precisely. The Ethiopian case is clearly not a case in which famines are occurring there because there are no natural resources. Remember, for example, the Nile; the Blue Nile originates in Ethiopia. And there has been a classic battle going on between Egypt and Ethiopia, precisely over the sources of the Nile. There is no water shortage; there is no crop shortage; there is no labor shortage; there is no problem of laziness, sluggish-

ness, lack of resoluteness, lack of courage, and lack of intelligence, among this highly resilient, productive, and historic population.

**Baker:** Speaking of your natural resource base, there are some famous ancient crops associated with this area: the classification called *t’ef*, and other botanicals. If such things are fully developed, they are a unique legacy, and benefit. Instead, *t’ef* is being promoted in the U.S. now, as part of a multi-grain novelty mix, called “Ancient Grains,” for the titillation of the food/health trade; as well as feed for race horses.

**Kiros:** *T’ef*—correct me if I am wrong—originates and is amply available only in that part of the world. I am told that it is very full of protein, and is very nutritious for the population. Even so, in the Ethiopian case now, a quintal [100 kilograms] of it is being sold for prices that only the rich and the powerful can afford. Which means that the Ethiopians, a) who are permanently unemployed, b) are employed but insufficiently, c) are sporadically employed, and d) are never employed at all, are fated to die, precisely because they don’t have the ordinary purchasing power with which to make *t’ef* available to them.

Clearly you have a situation in which there is no shortage of natural resources; and one particular crop, *t’ef*, which is protein-rich, is available in ample amounts, and yet it is being used as a tool for extracting surplus profits at the expense of the population. The people who need it the most—about 99%—are poor and are fated to die because they have no purchasing power.

### Economics and ‘Principles of Justice’

**Baker:** In 2000, you addressed a conference of the African Union, and spoke about how economic policies must “flow from principles of justice.”

**Kiros:** Absolutely. I called them “two principles of justice.” And they apply most particularly to the alleviation of famines, hunger, and other matters in the materially underprivileged world.

The first principle simply said, all human beings, without exception, need to be entitled to food, shelter, clothing, and when appropriate, health care.

The second principle of justice, I called—following and condensing the famous tenets of the American Constitution—I simply called, “human beings are also entitled to fundamental freedoms. The freedom of speech,

freedom of thought, the freedom of assembly,” and so forth and so on.

But I do make a fundamental point there, namely this: that there will have to be a “lexical” ordering between the first principle and the second principle of justice. That is to say, that before we attend to the imperatives of the first principle of justice, [should there be a condition of famine, or position where famines occur] then the morally conscientious state, or the state that is guided by some kind of moral economy, will have to immediately attend to the removal of the causes of famine and hunger, which is another way of saying that these human beings who suffer from famine, are entitled to food, shelter, clothing, and health.

Before we satisfy that condition, I argue, in a lexicological way, we cannot move to the second principle of justice, but it is a sort of a privileged articulation of what human beings should be entitled to. Namely, freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of assembly. We have to feed them, clothe them, shelter them, and give them biologically functional bodies, and then, at the same time, invoke the second principle of justice, so that we can also allow them to speak, to think, to grow, and to flourish as human beings.

**Getachew:** Look at the crisis of AIDS. One writer for *EIR* documented that it is estimated that AIDS won’t reach its peak for another 40 years, unless there is something done to address it, and stop it.

Now, in your view, what is the economic dimension? South African President Thabo Mbeki was criticized for addressing the link between the spread of AIDS and economic conditions. That criticism is absurd. I think he is right on this.

**Kiros:** Absolutely.

**Getachew:** Do you have anything to say on this in terms of the dynamics in East Africa?

**Kiros:** If you notice, for example, the first principle of justice says that all human beings are entitled to food, shelter, clothing, and health—I added health, as a matter of fact, after AIDS fully sprouted in that part of the world .

The first principle of justice, if operational, will have to treat AIDS very much like it will have to treat food, shelter, and clothing. We will have to come up with money—God knows by what means and how—and make it an imperative for the victims of AIDS to be taken care of. Period.