

“Poverty And Famines” Article Analysis

Posted on October 11, 2022

Commentary Post: Amartya Sen, Entitlements, and the Redistribution Debate

Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* changed the study of hunger by challenging the assumption that famine is always caused by a national shortage of food. Sen did not claim that food availability never matters. His argument was that people can starve even when aggregate food supply is stable or increasing if they lose the legal and economic means to command food. A laborer may lose employment while food prices rise; a farmer may lose a crop and lack assets or public assistance; or a community may be excluded from markets, transfers, and political protection. Sen called these failures of entitlement. The original commentary applies this idea to global poverty through Chris Hoy and Andy Sumner's research on the potential for redistribution within developing countries. That extension is useful, but it should not be simplified into the claim that equal distribution of all resources would eliminate class differences automatically. Poverty is shaped by income, assets, public services, political power, health, education, discrimination, conflict, and institutional capacity. (Hoy & Sumner, 2016)

What Sen Means by Entitlement

In Sen's framework, an entitlement is the set of commodity bundles a person can obtain through legitimate means available in a society. Those means may include producing food, selling labor, trading assets, receiving wages, using public benefits, or relying on legally recognized transfers. A person's "endowment" consists of resources such as labor power, land, tools, livestock, or ownership claims. Exchange entitlement describes what those resources can obtain under prevailing wages, prices, and rules. Starvation occurs when a person's entitlement set no longer includes enough food. This approach directs attention away from food totals alone and toward distribution, employment, prices, ownership, and state policy. It also explains why different occupational groups can experience famine differently within the same country.

Food Availability Decline and Entitlement Failure

The entitlement approach does not require analysts to choose between food supply and access in every case. Crop failure, war, transport disruption, and climate shocks can reduce availability and also destroy entitlements. The key question is how the shock reaches particular people. A decline in grain output may raise prices beyond the wages of urban laborers. A drought may reduce a pastoral

household's livestock value at the same time that grain prices increase, creating an unfavorable exchange relationship. Public distribution may protect some regions while excluding others. Sen's work is strongest when it prevents national averages from concealing the social mechanisms through which hunger is distributed.

The Bengal Famine and the Power of Distributional Analysis

Sen's analysis of the 1943 Bengal famine argued that severe mortality could not be explained simply by an exceptional collapse in total food availability. Wartime demand, inflation, speculation, administrative failure, and changing relative incomes damaged the entitlements of groups such as rural laborers, fishermen, and transport workers. Food remained available to people with sufficient purchasing power while others lost access. Historians continue to debate the precise balance among supply, wartime policy, market behavior, and distribution, but Sen's broader contribution remains decisive: famine analysis must ask who can acquire food and why, not only how much food exists nationally.

Hoy and Sumner's Extension to Global Poverty

Hoy and Sumner ask whether a similar logic applies to contemporary poverty. If many poor people now live in countries that possess substantial national income and taxable resources, poverty may increasingly reflect domestic distribution rather than an absolute absence of national capacity. Their 2016 article estimates that approximately three-quarters of [global poverty](#) at lower poverty lines could, in principle, be eliminated through redistribution of nationally available resources, including cash transfers financed by taxation or reallocation of public spending. The phrase "in principle" is essential. It describes financial capacity under model assumptions, not proof that governments can transfer resources perfectly, without political conflict, administrative cost, behavioral response, or corruption.

Why Growth Alone May Be Too Slow

Economic growth can reduce poverty when gains create employment, increase wages, improve productivity, expand tax revenue, and finance public services. However, the distribution of growth determines how quickly poor households benefit. Hoy and Sumner argue that relying on growth alone could take centuries to eliminate poverty at some thresholds. This does not mean growth is irrelevant. Redistribution without production can become fiscally fragile, while growth without inclusion can leave large groups behind. The policy challenge is to combine productive transformation with mechanisms ensuring that people gain income, services, assets, and security during the process rather than waiting indefinitely for benefits to reach them.

Redistribution Is Not Simple Equal Division

The original commentary suggests that equal distribution would remove the class system and give everyone the same quality of life. That claim is too broad. Redistribution normally means changing the distribution of income, wealth, opportunities, or public services through taxes, transfers, wages, land policy, education, healthcare, and social insurance. It does not require identical incomes or the abolition of every economic difference. Policies must also account for household size, disability, geography, care responsibilities, housing costs, and unequal needs. Equality of dignity and basic capability may require unequal levels of assistance because some people face higher costs or deeper barriers.

Cash Transfers and Social Protection

Cash transfers can improve food security and allow households to choose among urgent needs. Programs may be universal, categorical, means-tested, conditional, or emergency-based. Their effectiveness depends on accurate enrollment, reliable payment systems, inflation, local market supply, and protection from exclusion. Cash alone is insufficient where schools, clinics, housing, water, or transport are unavailable. Social protection works best as a system combining income support, unemployment assistance, pensions, disability benefits, maternity protection, child benefits, food programs, and public services. Sen's entitlement logic supports these policies because state transfers can restore command over food and necessities when market-based entitlements collapse.

Employment, Wages, and Productive Inclusion

The original post correctly emphasizes employment and wages. A job provides more than income; it may provide social insurance, skills, bargaining power, and stability. Yet job creation should not be measured only by the number of positions. Work that is unsafe, irregular, underpaid, or legally unprotected may leave people poor. Minimum wages can raise earnings when effectively designed and enforced, but they should be coordinated with productivity, labor inspection, collective bargaining, social insurance, and support for small firms. Public employment programs can act as an entitlement guarantee during crises by offering paid work when private demand collapses.

Taxation and the Problem of Evasion

Progressive taxation can finance poverty reduction and reduce inequality, but tax design involves more than increasing headline rates. Governments need accurate records, administrative capacity, international cooperation, transparent expenditure, and enforcement against evasion and avoidance. Consumption taxes may raise substantial revenue but burden low-income households unless essential goods are protected or transfers compensate them. Taxes on personal income, corporate profit, property, capital gains, inheritance, natural resources, and luxury consumption have different

economic and political effects. Citizens are more likely to support taxation when they trust that revenue is used fairly and public services function.

Reallocation of Existing Public Spending

Hoy and Sumner also consider reallocating government expenditure. A country may possess resources but direct them toward regressive subsidies, inefficient procurement, prestige projects, or benefits captured by higher-income groups. Reallocation can increase spending on health, education, nutrition, sanitation, housing, and social protection without raising the same amount of new revenue. However, the phrase “poor budget planning” should not conceal political choices. Budgets reflect organized interests, security concerns, debt obligations, electoral incentives, and administrative structures. Reform requires public scrutiny and institutions capable of resisting capture.

Small Businesses and Digital Opportunity

The internet has created opportunities for small firms, remote work, mobile payments, and access to wider markets, as the original commentary notes. Digital opportunity is not automatically inclusive. Entrepreneurs may lack electricity, connectivity, credit, skills, logistics, legal identity, or protection from platform power. Government support should therefore include infrastructure, fair competition, training, financial inclusion, consumer protection, and simplified but accountable regulation. Small-business promotion is one component of poverty policy rather than a substitute for labor rights and public services.

Political Accountability and Famine Prevention

Sen later argued that functioning multiparty democracy and a free press create strong incentives to prevent visible famine because governments face criticism and electoral punishment. This does not mean democracy automatically ends chronic malnutrition or poverty. Slow, dispersed deprivation may receive less political attention than sudden mass starvation. Accountability must be supported by independent media, reliable data, civil society, local participation, and the ability of marginalized groups to organize. Entitlements are political because laws and institutions determine whose claims are recognized and enforced.

Limitations of the Entitlement Approach

Scholars have identified limits in entitlement analysis. Alex de Waal argued that famine mortality often involves disease and social breakdown, not only direct caloric deprivation, and that households may protect crucial assets even while reducing food consumption. Other critics emphasize violence, informal claims, gender relations, institutions, and illegal or coercive acquisition. Sen himself acknowledged limits to the framework. Entitlements remain a powerful starting point, but a complete

famine analysis must include public health, conflict, displacement, caregiving, intra-household distribution, disease, and political violence. (World Health Organization, 2021)

Overall Evaluation of the Commentary Article

The original commentary is persuasive in arguing that poverty cannot be explained only by national resource scarcity. It correctly connects Sen's emphasis on access with Hoy and Sumner's finding that many developing countries may have greater domestic redistributive capacity than commonly assumed. Its weakness is the tendency to treat redistribution as a technically simple equal division and to suggest that initiative alone can end poverty. Poverty reduction is politically and administratively demanding. It requires growth, employment, taxation, services, social protection, accountability, and attention to unequal needs. The central insight should nevertheless be preserved: when resources exist but people cannot command the necessities of life, deprivation reflects institutions and distribution rather than nature alone.

Discussion Post: School Mask Protests as a Journalism and Public-Policy Case

The second part of the original assignment responds to Lexi McMenamin's 2021 Teen Vogue article about confrontations at school-board meetings over mask requirements during the Delta wave of COVID-19. This discussion should be preserved as a historical media analysis rather than rewritten as current pandemic guidance. The article reported disruptions, arrests, partisan divisions, misinformation, and disputes over local authority. At that time, public-health bodies recommended layered prevention measures in schools, including ventilation, staying home when ill, hygiene, vaccination where available, and age-appropriate mask use based on transmission and local conditions. The policy environment later changed as immunity, variants, treatments, evidence, and disease severity changed. A responsible review evaluates the article within its August 2021 context. (McMenamin, n.d.)

What the Article Does Effectively

McMenamin's report makes the intensity of school-board conflict visible by describing meetings that were interrupted, ended early, or required police involvement. It connects local disputes with national political polarization and shows that school officials were making decisions amid pressure from parents, state governments, educators, and health authorities. The article also captures how debates about masks became linked with broader cultural conflicts, including arguments about race, curriculum, and government authority. This connection is journalistically important because public meetings were not debating a narrow technical question in isolation; they had become arenas for competing political identities.

Evidence and Context

The original discussion criticizes the article for offering statistics without a solution. News reporting is not always required to propose policy, particularly when its purpose is to document conflict. However, the article could be evaluated for the quality and context of its evidence. Polling percentages should identify the organization, question wording, date, and sample because attitudes depend on how mandates and voluntary recommendations are framed. Anecdotes from several states demonstrate that disruption occurred but do not establish the prevalence of every position nationwide. Readers need distinction among opposition to all masking, opposition to mandates, concern about specific ages or disabilities, and broader distrust of institutions.

Public Health Was More Complex Than a Binary Debate

In 2021, masks were recommended as one component of a broader strategy rather than a complete solution. The World Health Organization emphasized age, transmission intensity, distancing, ventilation, supervision, and the child's developmental needs. This nuance was often lost in political debate, where one side could describe masks as harmless and universally sufficient while the other described them as entirely useless or dangerous. Journalism should explain uncertainty and trade-offs without creating false equivalence between evidence-based guidance and unsupported claims. It should also acknowledge legitimate implementation questions concerning disability accommodation, communication, mask quality, enforcement, and access. (World Health Organization, 2021)

Race, Politics, and School-Board Conflict

The article links mask disputes with racial tension and conflicts over critical race theory. That connection needs explanation rather than implication. Organized political networks used school-board meetings to mobilize voters around several issues, but participants did not all share the same motives. Some parents focused on health autonomy, others on partisan identity, and others on opposition to discussions of structural racism. Journalists should identify organizations, funding, messaging networks, and local histories when evidence supports those links. They should avoid describing every concerned parent as part of one movement while also refusing to ignore intimidation or racialized rhetoric.

Should the Article Have Offered a Solution?

A reported article may legitimately end by clarifying the problem rather than prescribing one answer. Still, solution-oriented journalism could have strengthened the piece. It might have examined how school boards can maintain safe meetings, communicate evidence, provide accessible comment procedures, separate scientific guidance from political slogans, and update policy through transparent criteria. It could also have compared districts where disagreement remained civil with districts where

meetings collapsed. Solutions would not require the author to resolve the scientific and constitutional debate personally; they would show readers how institutions can deliberate under pressure.

Overall Evaluation of the Discussion Article

The Teen Vogue article is best understood as a political and cultural report documenting the disruption of local governance during a public-health emergency. Its strongest feature is the collection of examples showing that school-board conflict had become national and sometimes threatening. Its limitations include compressed treatment of evidence, insufficient differentiation among types of opposition, and limited attention to constructive governance. Calling it merely sensational would be too dismissive because the disruptions themselves were newsworthy. A fair critique should distinguish vivid reporting from sensationalism and ask whether the article provides enough context for readers to evaluate the claims and policy stakes.

Conclusion

The two parts of this assignment examine different forms of access and public responsibility. Sen's entitlement approach shows that people can suffer deprivation even when resources exist, because wages, prices, ownership, law, or public policy deny effective command over necessities. Hoy and Sumner extend that insight by asking whether domestic redistribution could eliminate much extreme poverty more quickly than growth alone. The mask-policy discussion examines another context in which institutions must translate evidence and resources into legitimate public action. In both cases, the central problem is not simply the existence of food, money, masks, or scientific information. It is whether social systems distribute resources, authority, protection, and voice effectively. Careful analysis must therefore move beyond moral slogans toward institutions, evidence, implementation, and accountability.

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