

The Global Famine Game: Toxic Aid, A Weapon of War, Perverse Economics

By Benny Dembitzer

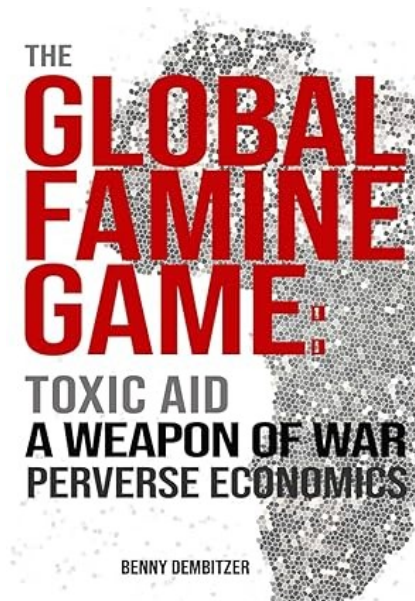
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Reviewed by TAAI Member Ralph von Kaufmann



This book is a significant record of the insights and observations of a highly thoughtful, experienced, and dedicated individual. It presents a critical view of what aid has, and more importantly, has not achieved throughout a fascinating career. The book serves as both a confession of the inadequacies of the systems within which the author worked and a cathartic autobiography. It documents why, despite his tireless efforts to alleviate starvation and poverty, the masses of impoverished people were in a worse condition upon his retirement than when he began his mission of 'Development'. Shockingly, more than 30,000 people still die from starvation every day (p.12).

Dembitzer criticizes the failures of both public and private aid donors, particularly the myriad of NGOs, which he views as inadvertently or even purposefully self-serving. Few in the aid sector escape his critique of being top-down driven and lacking an understanding of the complexities of local circumstances, cultures, and environments.

What sets this book apart from the many others written about aid and development is its broad inclusivity and the way the author captures associated global events. It provides a comprehensive account of not only the vast range of agencies involved but also the historical contexts in which they operated. International development agencies and organizations such as the IBRD, IMF, FAO, IFAD, CGIAR, and WFP all receive justified criticism. The book also addresses the impact of global events, such as those in Russia and the war that has disrupted vital food exports from both Russia and Ukraine.

The author's primary purpose is to emphasize the importance of starting small, working with—not for—the local community, and staying the course long enough to exit only when human capacity and infrastructures are ready to seamlessly take over. He has evidently embraced the African proverb, "What you do for me without me is against me." He laments the competition for influence, space, and especially funds among organizations with similar goals and advocates for collaboration and the free and willing transfer of knowledge among all parties.

Dembitzer's many insightful recommendations gain credibility through the personal experiences that shaped them. While this focus makes the book somewhat UK-centric, it does not diminish the broader validity of his observations and conclusions.

It is unfortunate that the recommendations for new directions were not available when the author and many others from what Dembitzer calls the First World set out to improve the lives of the poor in the Fourth World. Western-based NGOs and others still working in development can and should learn a great deal from this book. However, without detracting from its importance as a record and guide for breaking bad habits, it has been published at a time when the world is rapidly changing. One statement that encapsulates the dilemma is Dembitzer's recommendation to NGOs to "commit to remain involved in a particular district and community for periods of no less than twenty years" P215. While this would have been appropriate earlier, the current rapid development of some Fourth World countries, particularly in Africa, and the simultaneous decline of some First World countries, particularly in Europe, means that aid will likely feature less prominently in the national priorities of both parties.

Dembitzer has rightly focused on what he knows best, but his recommendations must be considered in the context of the rapidly strengthening agency and drive of Fourth World individuals and institutions, the rapid development of new agricultural and related technologies, and the changing economic dynamics between First and Fourth World nations. There is also no counterfactual evidence for assessing what the status of poverty and starvation would be today had there not been the huge expenditure of energy and money by so many well-meaning agencies.

In conclusion, Dembitzer has produced a must-read for anyone who claims to be an expert in the practice of international agricultural development. It refreshed and reconfirmed the memories of this reviewer, who admits that he would likely have had more impact had he had access to the knowledge imparted in this book while he was actively engaged in the pursuit of the same goals and objectives.

Ralph von Kaufmann, July 2025