Prologue

Famine and Food Crisis Management

A crucial task in the focus of geography

Adequate nutrition has always been of the most fundamental concern ever since Life existed on Earth. This applies to all living beings, and Man is no exception. In correspondence to the general law of Nature Man has always had his own distinct place in the foodweb, which includes the entire biosphere within the frame of the geosphere. As Man has, however, in the course of his history achieved a specific superiority over many fellow-components of the biosphere he has, without scruple used his power at the expense of the inherited balance in the natural environment. This superiority is also unbalanced in itself, time-wise as well as place-wise, within the human society in general and in particular.

As the biosphere and the entire geosphere are involved when the question of the nutrition of mankind, arises this matter comes immediately into the very focus of geography — of the undivided great geography, not just of any geographical sub-discipline.

One may be surprised that, over decades, the International Geographical Union (IGU) apparently has not understood the moment of this outstanding challenge. This failure may be explained by the methodological suicide which in recent times characterizes geography probably more than other disciplines. Famine research does not only provoke the best skill of geography as a whole, it even urges profound cooperation — true networking — with neighbouring sciences ranging from climatology, hydrology, pedology, and oceanography, as far as anthropology, ethnology, medicine, economics, and politics. Nota bene: We speak explicitly of famine research. This has little, or only indirectly, to do with emergency food aid. It is also clearly distinct from development policy, which frequently deals with famine problems. Research, aid, and policy are often mixed up since they sometimes draw from the same sources, and aim at the same regions at the same time. The more, therefore, the IGU should be aware of and emphasize its being a scientific community and not a policy-maker nor a charitable society.
It is easily understood that the various regions on Earth are more or less favourable to being inhabited, and that the respective people are supposed to adapt their life-style as appropriately as possible to maintain a lasting balance between the carrying capacity and the carrying load\(^2\). Nevertheless, this simple principle is frequently violated by wrong use, overuse, exploitation or destruction. All these violations are at the expense of both the ecological health of the region and of the (nutritional) well-being of the respective population. However, the burden is usually not shared equally. Nature is generous, indeed merciful. Not only does the man-land relation tolerate wide shifting, but the composition and proportion of the environmental elements also permit remarkable change. The social structure of the human population responds with a similarly large flexibility. Consequently, the weak components of the environment, and the weak members of the society concerned suffer more than the powerful.

The case is clear: Geographers are obliged to study the individuality of regions and populations, their alternating calibre, their changing limits of tolerance, and the existing and possible interlinkages among them. On this comprehensive type of research sound recommendations could be based for proper forecasting and management of emergency situations. As a second task for geographers it appears to be justified and desirable to observe the impact of any emergency measures as well as of the development policy in general.

Both emergency aid and development policy being very popular in recent decades they are mostly motivated by attitudes prevailing outside of the emergency regions. They are, unfortunately, often paralleled by terribly insufficient knowledge of the geography of the goal region. Disappointing and badly-damaging side-effects are therefore symptomatic and lead to criticisms which again throw the baby as well as the water out of the bath in many cases. A few suggestions may be offered here to reduce the number and extent of this sort of flaw:

1. A global system of integrated geographical studies of regions (including their populations, of course) should be pursued by the IGU (with priority in line with famine-proneness as known so far) in cooperation with other member-unions of ICSU if possible.

2. These IGU studies should be carried out by small international teams including local fellow-geographers to the greatest possible extent. Adequate training of local geographers should be a welcome by-product of the effort. Training programmes might benefit from formal contracts over a period of years with university institutions and other qualified schools which might include exchange of personnel, establishing of laboratories, and selected supply to libraries. This sort of formality would more easily help donor bureaucracies to act.

3. The initiative should be understood as an applied science activity rather than a pure science exercise. The applied-science directive might be the key for further evaluation by political decision-makers. It does also refer strongly to the style of publishing and popularizing (through educational and media systems) the outcome of the research. The exit from the ivory tower must be found.