

Devi Sridhar. *The Battle against Hunger: Choice, Circumstance, and the World Bank*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 256 pp. Hardcover: \$85.00, ISBN: 9780199549962

For over four decades, there has been recognition that hunger represents a serious development problem. Since the 1970s, addressing this issue has been a major concern of the World Bank and the international development community at-large. The Bank has touted the Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Project (TINP) in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, as a program where its efforts have made a substantive and positive impact upon this issue. In *The Battle Against Hunger: Choice, Circumstance, and the World Bank*, Devi Sridhar critiques the effectiveness of this program and the underlying intellectual framework. Sridhar argues that the Bank's efforts to tout TINP as a success were over-optimistic, and, moreover, were marked by a philosophy on how to address malnutrition that did not adequately account for how social realities and context specific circumstances affect this complex problem.

The linkage between an incomplete understanding of the problem and misguided implementation on the ground form the focal point of Sridhar's argument. According to Sridhar, hunger is not merely a "biomedical condition" that must be scientifically treated. Social and economic realities, such as the lack of control women exercise over how household income is spent, are important in explaining why children do not receive adequate care and attention, including proper nutrition. Further, the TINP distribution centers also experienced problems. For example, she notes that personnel charged with administering aid devoted a large share of their time to data collection and producing evaluations for which they were inadequately trained. Sridhar's argument implies both that TINP was unsuccessful in making a significant impact, and that it should not be used as a model for subsequent anti-hunger programs.

In arguing these points, Sridhar provides extensive background information on both the rise to prominence of malnutrition as a major development issue at the World Bank and the history of hunger in Tamil Nadu and, broadly, India. This allows the reader to juxtapose formulation of policies to combat hunger at the Bank with the specific context and challenges found within Tamil Nadu and India. Readers are also able to see more clearly how unintended consequences can arise from policy that is conceived in an environment far removed from where the problem actually exists.

These arguments are persuasive, and enable us to better understand the specific context of hunger as a development issue. However, Sridhar's analysis and interpretation also raise some key questions. First, even if it is true that TINP was largely ineffective and conceptually flawed, it is difficult to imagine that the people affected by the program in Tamil Nadu would have been better off if it did not exist at all. Indeed, Sridhar does note that many children received food through the program, though many of them were not the neediest. In the program's absence, it is reasonable to assume that the total number of malnourished or undernourished children would have been larger. Second, there is hardly any criticism of either the national government of India or the state government of Tamil Nadu regarding their possible roles in not adequately addressing the problem, or, indeed, of possibly contributing to it. Thus, the role of corruption and its likely effects are ignored. Third, it is apparent from reading the book that Sridhar is critical of certain aspects of the World Bank in general and TINP in

particular. Many of these criticisms are valid. Yet, from a stylistic point of view, it is not easy to analytically frame them in a systematic manner.

In conclusion, we recommend this book for students and scholars in international relations and other related fields who wish to gain perspective on an important development issue and to better understand the World Bank. The writing style is easily absorbed, and one does not have to be an economist to understand the arguments presented.

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