
ENDING FAMINE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

SSRU Grant R8002

Research Report

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Note: This 3,000 word report is a summary, in SSRU-specified format, of the research objectives, methodology, findings and dissemination.

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DFID RESEARCH REPORT

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: Ending Famine in the 21st Century

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LEAD RESEARCHER: Stephen Devereux

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

With up to 70 million estimated deaths, the 20th century was the worst ever in terms of famine mortality. In the 1990s alone, up to 3 million North Koreans and tens of thousands of south Sudanese and Ethiopians died in famines. The 21st century began with food crises in the Horn and southern Africa: thousands of deaths in Ethiopia and Malawi. On the other hand, the 20th century was also the historical moment when the technical (food production) and logistical (food distribution) capacity to prevent famines was first achieved, and when famine was effectively eradicated in many historically famine-prone countries: China, India, Russia, Bangladesh. Also, since World War II, the international humanitarian industry has played an important role in containing many famines in Africa, Asia and Europe. Against this background, this research project aims to contribute to the global eradication of famine at the earliest possible date, through learning the lessons of failures – and successes – of understanding and interventions in 20th century food crises.

Notwithstanding the wealth of theoretical advances and empirical evidence that now exists, observers and stakeholders have devoted little time to assembling and reflecting on this knowledge and experience, or to developing a strategic approach to famine eradication. Practitioners rarely have time to examine issues beyond their immediate professional priorities and activities, while the academic discourse has become factionalised, with different groups adopting radically different, even irreconcilable, positions. As a result, the lessons of 20th century achievements in famine management have not been adequately understood and applied to those regions – notably the Horn of Africa – where the threat of famine remains endemic.

A number of fundamental questions remain unresolved in famine theory and practice. This project addressed three broad areas of interest and concern. First, a *trend analysis* to consider significant developments affecting famine over the past century, in terms of logistics (transport networks, marketing, information technology), political developments (democratisation *versus* totalitarianism), demographic trends (including the impact of HIV/AIDS), globalisation and humanitarianism (the emergence since 1945 of a global disaster relief system).

Second, a dialogue around *causation*. Is a single theoretical framework adequate for the analysis of all famines (such as Sen's entitlement approach) or is a taxonomic or eclectic approach more appropriate – applying elements of various frameworks (market failure, neo-Malthusianism, complex emergencies) to the analysis of specific crises? Third, how to improve *technical responses*? This required examining the evolution and effectiveness of famine early warning systems; the implications of recent advances in the understanding of famine as a multi-faceted livelihoods crisis for broader-based interventions than food aid (water and sanitation, medical supplies, shelter, peacekeeping); and targeting dilemmas (administrative *versus* community *versus* self-targeting). Related emerging issues in development discourse also demanded consideration: the humanitarianism debate (national sovereignty *versus* international responsibility); implications of 'rights-based approaches' for enforcing the right to food.

Specific research questions were clustered into three broad areas of investigation.

1. Why do famines persist in the contemporary world?

- What is the relationship between alternative political regimes – totalitarianism, democracy, ‘complex political emergencies’ – and vulnerability to famine?
- What is the role of information – famine early warning systems, the media, information technology – in reducing vulnerability to famine?

2. What conditions contributed to the apparent eradication of famine from certain regions during the 20th century?

- How have countries as diverse as China, Russia, India and Bangladesh succeeded in minimising their historic vulnerability to famine?
- Is there a single theoretical framework (such as ‘entitlements’) that can explain all famines, or is a taxonomic approach more appropriate?

3. What can be done to prevent future famines?

- Can the earth feed itself during the 21st century? What opportunities and threats are presented by genetically modified crops (GMOs)?
- What is the proper role of humanitarianism in preventing famine? What implications for sovereignty are raised by enforcing the ‘right to food’?

During the course of this research project, a livelihood crisis developed into a minor famine in Malawi and neighbouring Southern African countries. Very little was known about how people in affected villages responded to the famine, or even how severe it was – unofficial mortality estimates ranged from 200 to 15,000. Since the emergency occurred largely because of information constraints and failures of communication, there was a clear and urgent need to understand the crisis from the perspective of those affected, and to disseminate the lessons from this improved understanding to national policymakers and the international community. Accordingly, a national household survey on the Malawi food crisis was designed and implemented by Stephen Devereux and collaborators from the University of Malawi in the first half of 2003, under an extension to the project SSRU R8002 agreed with DFID. The principal research questions were:

1. **What were the impacts of the food crisis** on affected individuals, households and communities throughout Malawi? (Predicted impacts include malnutrition, mortality, disrupted agricultural production and off-farm livelihoods, social breakdown.)
2. **What risk management strategies did households adopt** to survive the crisis and protect their assets and livelihoods? (Experience suggests that households adopt ‘coping strategies’ sequentially, starting with consumption rationing, then borrowing, seeking alternative incomes, selling assets and finally migrating.)
3. **How effective were external responses** (by Government, donors and NGOs) in supporting the efforts of affected people and communities to survive the food crisis and maintain viable livelihoods? (This includes an assessment of the coverage, targeting and timeliness of interventions such as food aid and public works.)

METHODS

A number of conventional and innovative methods to achieving the research objectives were designed and applied during the course of this project. These included: an academic conference, a practitioners’ workshop, a commissioned video in Ethiopia, and a food crisis impact survey in Malawi. Specific methodologies are discussed below under each of these four headings.

Academic conference

In February 2002, a 3-day conference was held at IDS, organised by Stephen Devereux, under the title *Ending Famine in the 21st Century* (Conference Programme is annexed). The conference brought together 30 academics and practitioners concerned with famine thinking and policy, from the UK, mainland Europe, Africa, the United States, South Asia and Japan. Academic institutions represented at the conference included the University of Aberystwyth (Wales), University College (Dublin), London School of Economics, University of Oslo, and Yamaguchi University (Japan). Research institutes included ODI (London), IFPRI (Washington DC), CEPED (Paris), Nutrition Works (London) and the Food Economy Group (Oxford). Participating donors and NGOs included USAID, the World Food Programme (WFP), CARE, Justice Africa and Save the Children (UK).

Practitioners' workshop

A follow-up workshop was planned for Nairobi during May 2002, with the collaboration of CARE East Africa and FEWSNET (Famine Early Warning System Network). Titled *Ending Famine in the Horn of Africa*, the workshop had to be postponed at short notice, following the late withdrawal of key regional participants due to the emerging food crisis in the Horn of Africa. Instead, a practitioners' workshop was organised and hosted by Stephen Devereux at IDS Sussex on the topic *Operational Definitions of Famine*, on 14th March 2003. The aim of the workshop was to contribute to the development of an operational definition of famine for use by relevant international stakeholders, with the dual ambitions of improving the timeliness and effectiveness of early warning response, and of holding mandated national and international actors accountable for their failure to prevent future famines. Some of the 15 workshop participants came from academic institutions – IDS (Sussex), International Famine Centre (Dublin), University of Oslo (Norway), University of Aberystwyth (Wales), ODI (London). But many NGOs and donor agencies were also represented – Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF, Holland), DFID (Food Security Adviser), FEWSNET, Food Economy Group, World Food Programme, Emergency Nutrition Network, and Nutrition Works.

Ethiopia video

During March 2002, Stephen Devereux and a commissioned film crew travelled to Somali Region in Ethiopia to make a 20-minute documentary film on a recent famine in the region. The film, titled *Learning the Lessons? Famine in Ethiopia, 1999-2000*, helped to publicise this little-known famine, in the course of which up to 100,000 people died.

Malawi food crisis impact survey

A mixed methodology (quantitative plus qualitative) approach was developed for this research project. The main 'quantitative' instrument was a questionnaire administered to 1,200 rural households (randomly selected in a 3-stage stratified sampling procedure), while the 'qualitative' instruments included a set of participatory and anthropological methods administered at community level. The survey was conducted in rural Malawi in February and March 2003. The core sections of the questionnaire addressed the study's main research questions, namely the food crisis *impacts* (on livelihoods, consumption, assets, health and social norms), *household responses* (production adjustments, dietary adjustments, expenditure reduction, income generation, demographic adjustments, informal transfers), and *external interventions* (food aid, public works, school feeding).

Research partners in Malawi were the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, led by the Centre's Director, Dr Wycliffe Chilowa, and Deputy Director, Dr Peter Mvula, who were fully involved in designing, implementing and analysing the survey. The researchers also drew on a number of secondary sources, including the Ministry of Agriculture's retail maize prices, the Ministry of Health's 'Health Monitoring Information System', and a number of recent research studies that have explored relevant issues, including previous collaborative research studies between CSR Malawi and IDS Sussex: a 'Coping Strategies' study in 1999 and a 'Social Policy in Malawi' study in 2001.

FINDINGS

Summary findings from this project are discussed below, under three categories: major conclusions of the IDS famine conference, as presented in the IDS Bulletin, the proposal for an 'operational definition' of famine from the practitioners' workshop, and the findings of the Malawi food crisis impact survey.

The 'New Famines'

The title of this IDS Bulletin reflects a view taken by conference participants that (a) famine persists in the contemporary world, and (b) the nature of famine is changing, requiring new theoretical paradigms to explain and prevent them. Because the means to prevent famine now exists, every famine that occurs these days represents either a catastrophic failure or a malevolent exercise of political will. The causes of disrupted *access to food* may or may not be 'technical', but the causes of *famine* are always political. The persistence of old-style 'drought famines' in the Horn of Africa, long after they ought to have been eradicated, compounded by the emergence of entirely new famine threats – 'postmodern' famine in Iraq, 'hidden' famine in urban Madagascar, 'liberalisation' famine in Malawi – should motivate new thinking towards an action plan for ending famine in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, if famine is to be eradicated this requires not just technical (food production and distribution) capacity but substantially more political will, at national and international levels, than has been evident to date.

The Bulletin includes 9 case studies of recent famines, and 'averted' famines. Two papers examine the complex relationship between war, globalisation and famine – in Sudan (1998) and Bosnia (1992-95). Other papers identify slow donor response as a vulnerability factor in famines that were not prevented. The drought-triggered famine in Ethiopia (2000) was complicated by the border war with Eritrea, which coincided with the famine and contributed to a climate of mistrust that ultimately led to donor response failure. A similar deterioration in government-donor relations was partly to blame for Malawi (2002). Sometimes a famine occurs without being noticed by outsiders, due to political isolation or lack of information. A 'hidden famine' in Madagascar (1986) was only discovered through retrospective analysis of demographic data, a decade after the famine occurred. Some recent famines have occurred in unexpected places. The United Nations sanctions against Iraq during the 1990s contributed to a 'postmodern' famine – one that occurred in a relatively affluent society with strong institutions and functioning markets – as opposed to 'pre-modern' famines that occur in weakly integrated subsistence-oriented economies. The 'sanctions famine' in Iraq, which was created by the exercise of global political leverage against a pariah state, may be the first of many similar 'postmodern' famines in coming decades.

Economic liberalisation and HIV/AIDS have undermined both *public* institutions (such as marketing parastatals that were mandated to stabilise food prices and supplies), and *private* mechanisms ('informal social security systems') for pooling food security risks, creating new sources of vulnerability. The likelihood of these 'new variant famines' spreading and perhaps becoming endemic in southern Africa, the Horn and elsewhere is very real, as is the possibility that donors will react by institutionalising massive safety net programmes that fail to address the root causes of the crisis and have no exit strategy.

Operational definition of famine

In recent years, there has been considerable controversy about the application of the term 'famine' to various crises around the world, including Sudan (1998), Ethiopia (2000) and Malawi (2002). Recent attempts to develop an internationally accepted definition of famine reflect an awareness of the serious operational and political consequences of failing to resolve the ambiguities in its usage. Operationally, the lack of consensus has contributed to critical delays among governments and donors in interpreting and acting on early warning

information. Politically, the absence of an agreed definition has made it difficult to hold relevant stakeholders accountable for their actions – or inactions – during food crises.

A potential way to resolve these ambiguities is to make a distinction between the *intensity* and *magnitude* of a crisis. *Intensity* refers to the severity of the crisis in a given area at a specific point in time, recognising that famines do not have a uniform effect over an entire population. An ‘intensity level’ could be assigned to an affected area, using a combination of anthropometric (malnutrition and mortality) indicators and food security descriptors. The intensity scale might distinguish between five levels of food crisis:

- Level 1 Food insecurity conditions
- Level 2 Food crisis conditions
- Level 3 Famine conditions
- Level 4 Severe famine conditions
- Level 5 Extreme famine conditions

Only in retrospect can a complete assessment of the *magnitude* of the crisis be made, as measured in excess human mortality – a proxy for the suffering associated with famine. A graduated system of categories can be used to make rough estimates of the magnitude of the famine at the time of the crisis, as well as to classify famines *ex post*:

Category	Designation	Mortality range
A	Minor famine	1 – 999
B	Moderate famine	1,000 – 9,999
C	Major famine	10,000 – 99,999
D	Great famine	100,000 – 999,999
E	Catastrophic famine	1 million and over

Using these scales, it is possible to make more precise differentiations among food crises and to suggest proportionate assignments of responsibility under different circumstances. For instance, a small population area may experience ‘Level 4: Severe famine conditions’, but because it impacts on a limited population, the crisis will register as a ‘Category A: Minor famine’. Greater *accountability* would be expected for famines of greater magnitude. Using the scales together, the system will hopefully contribute to addressing the need for greater operational clarity and political accountability in famine responses.

Malawi’s food crisis of 2002

Several hundred Malawians died in early 2002, in the country’s worst famine since 1949, following a combination of production, trade, aid and information failures. The maize harvest fell by 32%, due to erratic rainfall during the agricultural season. Food imports were delayed by transport bottlenecks and competing demand from neighbouring food-deficit countries. The Strategic Grain Reserve (SGR) had been sold on IMF advice. Donors were slow to react, partly because of strained relations with the Government of Malawi at the critical time, and partly because crucial information was wrong (cassava production was overestimated), concealed (SGR sales were not transparent), or ignored (NGO warning signals were dismissed as not credible).

The ‘food crisis impact survey’ identified several underlying vulnerability factors, including: deepening rural poverty which has eroded incomes, asset buffers and informal social support systems; the demographic and economic consequences of HIV/AIDS; and an economic liberalisation trajectory since the 1980s that has systematically undermined the capacity of Malawian smallholders to construct viable livelihoods. This famine highlights the difficulties of protecting household food security in poor, liberalised economies.

DISSEMINATION

Reflecting the diverse range of activities implemented under this project, dissemination activities are discussed here under the four major headings listed in 'Methods' above. A summary of related activities that were undertaken during the project is also provided.

Academic conference outputs

1. A complete set of papers from the IDS Conference, 'Ending Famine in the 21st Century', has been posted on the Famine Project webpage on the IDS website since March 2002 [www.ids.ac.uk/ids/pvty/endfamine.html]. A report of the conference proceedings was written and circulated among conference participants and other interested parties.
2. A special issue of the IDS Bulletin (Vol. 33, No. 4), titled 'The New Famines' and edited by Stephen Devereux, was published in October 2002. The Bulletin included 15 papers, mostly revised versions of papers presented at the IDS Famine Conference, but some specially commissioned to address issues not discussed at the conference.
3. A book proposal, based on a selection of the IDS Conference and IDS Bulletin papers, will be submitted to potential academic publishers shortly.

Practitioners' workshop

1. The 'Operational Definitions of Famine' workshop was written up by the Emergency Nutrition Network in its regular publication Field Exchange, published in August 2003, which has a wide circulation in the international humanitarian community.
2. The 'Operational Definitions of Famine' Workshop Report was circulated among the participants, and posted on the Famine Project webpage on the IDS website.
3. A concept note prepared for the workshop has subsequently been expanded into a publishable paper. Titled 'Intensity and Magnitude Scales for Famine', by Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux, it will shortly be submitted to the journal Disasters.

Ethiopia video

The documentary film commissioned from Rockhopper Productions in London by this project – 'Learning the Lessons? Famine in Ethiopia, 1999-2000' – has been screened and discussed in several venues in Ethiopia, Malawi, and at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex. Versions of the film were televised on BBC4 News and BBC World, in response to which the World Food Programme (which was criticised in the video for its failure to intervene to prevent the famine) wrote a formal letter of complaint to the BBC. The BBC effectively rebutted this complaint, as did Stephen Devereux in a radio debate with WFP on the BBC World Service. These reactions illustrate the interest generated by this film among key policy-makers, and point to a significant likely policy impact. For instance, on a visit to Ethiopia in April 2003, Stephen Devereux was asked by WFP and USAID for advice on containing the emerging food crisis, both agencies mentioning their fear of another film being made criticising their failure to intervene to prevent a famine.

Malawi food crisis impact survey

The main report from the 'Malawi Food Crisis Impact Survey', titled 'A Research Report on the Impacts, Coping Behaviours and Formal Responses to the Food Crisis in Malawi of 2001/2', was drafted in April - May 2003 by the research team – Stephen Devereux (IDS Sussex), Wycliffe Chilowa, John Kadzandira, Peter Mvula and Maxton Tsoka (Centre for Social Research, University of Malawi). The report is currently in preparation for publication as an IDS Research Report.

Secondary activities

The IDS Famine Project generated several spin-off activities, including the following:

- In May 2002, Stephen Devereux was asked by ActionAid Malawi to write a paper on the food crisis of January to April 2002. The paper was based mainly on interviews conducted with officials from the Government of Malawi, donors and NGOs in Lilongwe. Published in the UK as *The Malawi Famine of 2002: Causes, Consequences and Policy Lessons*, and in the USA as *State of Disaster*, this paper has attracted a great deal of attention. A version was included in the IDS Bulletin 33(4), *The 'New Famines'*. The paper was presented at workshops in Malawi (Lilongwe), London (Overseas Development Institute; ActionAid UK), and Brighton (IDS Sussex seminar; presentation to IDS Governing Body).
- From October 2002 to March 2003, Stephen Devereux served as Special Advisor to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into the Humanitarian Crisis in Southern Africa*, which was set up by the International Development Committee of the House of Commons. Apart from giving evidence and contributing to drafting questions posed to witnesses (Secretary of State Clare Short gave evidence to the Inquiry on 23 January 2003), Stephen Devereux also co-authored the report, which was tabled on 11 March 2003.

List of Publications

The major academic publication out of the IDS Famine Project to date is an IDS Bulletin, (Volume 33, Number 4), published in October 2002. Titled 'The New Famines' and edited by Stephen Devereux, the Bulletin includes 15 papers (as listed below) and forms the core of a book proposal that will be submitted to potential publishers in August 2003.

1. *Stephen Devereux, Paul Howe & Luka Deng* ~ Introduction
2. *Jenny Edkins* ~ Mass Starvations and the Limitations of Famine Theorising
3. *Paul Howe* ~ Reconsidering 'Famine'
4. *Luka Deng* ~ The Sudan Famine of 1998: Unfolding of the Global Dimension
5. *Fiona Watson* ~ Why Are There No Longer 'War Famines' in Contemporary Europe? The Case of the Besieged Areas of Bosnia 1992-1995
6. *Haris Gazdar* ~ Pre-Modern, Modern and Postmodern Famine In Iraq
7. *Daniel Maxwell* ~ Why do Famines Persist? A Brief Review of Ethiopia 1999-2000
8. *Michel Garenne* ~ The Political Economy of an Urban Famine: Antananarivo 1985-86
9. *Hanna Siurua & Jeremy Swift* ~ Drought and Zud but No Famine (Yet) in the Mongolian Herding Economy
10. *Stephen Devereux* ~ The Malawi Famine of 2002
11. *Christopher Eldridge* ~ Why Was There No Famine Following the 1992 Southern African Drought?
12. *Carlo del Ninno, Paul A. Dorosh & Nurul Islam* ~ Reducing Vulnerability to Natural Disasters: Lessons from the 1998 Floods in Bangladesh
13. *Ian Scoones* ~ Can Agricultural Biotechnology be Pro-Poor? A Sceptical Look at the Emerging 'Consensus'
14. *Tim Dyson and Cormac Ó Gráda* ~ Demography, Food Production and Famine Risks in the 21st Century
15. *Alex de Waal* ~ 'AIDS-Related National Crises' in Africa: Food Security, Governance and Development Partnerships

Documents and dissemination materials appended to this Report include:

- IDS Bulletin 33(4), *The 'New Famines'*
- IDS commissioned video, *Learning the Lessons? Famine in Ethiopia, 1999-2000*
- Text of article on 'Operational Definitions of Famine Workshop', *Field Exchange*, August 2003.

Annex 1

Conference Programme: Ending Famine in the 21st Century IDS Sussex: *Wednesday 27th February – Friday 1st March 2002*

Wednesday 27th February: WHY DO FAMINES PERSIST IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD?

Introductory Remarks	Stephen Devereux	09:00-09:15
<i>Panel 1: Definitions and Concepts of Famine</i>		09:15-10:30
Academic perspective:	Jenny Edkins	09:15-09:45
Agency perspective:	Robin Jackson	
Case Study:	Southern Sudan -- Paul Howe	
Plenary Discussion		09:45-10:30
<i>Panel 2: Theoretical Frameworks for Famine Analysis</i>		11:00-17:00
<u>Complex Political Emergencies (CPEs)</u>		11:00-12:00
Overview:	Alex de Waal	
Case Studies:	Southern Sudan – Luka Deng Bosnia – Fiona Watson Somalia – Alex de Waal	
Plenary Discussion		12:00-13:00
<u>Entitlements</u>		14:00-14:30
Overview:	Stephen Devereux	
Operational Perspective:	Julius Holt	
<u>Neo-Malthusianism</u>	Tim Dyson	14:30-14:45
Plenary Discussion		14:45-15:15
<i>Group Work:</i>	<i>Is there a single theory that explains all famines, or is a taxonomic approach more appropriate?</i>	15:30-16:30
Plenary Report Back		16:30-17:00

Thursday 28th February: WHY DO FAMINES PERSIST IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD?

<i>Panel 3: Livelihoods, Poverty, and Famine</i>		09:00-12:30
Overview:	Stephen Devereux	09:00-10:00
Case Studies:	Madagascar – Michel Garenne Bangladesh – Carlo del Ninno Europe – Cormac O'Grada	
Emerging Issue:	GMOs – Ian Scoones	
Plenary Discussion		10:00-10:30
<i>Group Work:</i>	<i>Does economic development reduce vulnerability to famine?</i>	10:45-11:45
Plenary Report Back		11:45-12:30
<i>Panel 4: National Politics and the Social Contract</i>		13:30-17:00
Overview:	Girum Zeleke	13:30-14:30
Case Studies:	North Korea – [Andrew Natsios] Mongolia -- Jeremy Swift India - Dan Banik	
Plenary Discussion		14:30-15:00

Group Work:	<i>Does democracy reduce vulnerability to famine?</i>	15:15-16:15
Plenary Report Back		16:15-17:00

Friday 1st March: HOW DO WE PREVENT FUTURE FAMINES?

Panel 5: The Role of the International Community		09:00-13:30
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Overview:	Tony Vaux	09:00-10:00
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Case Studies:	Ethiopia – Dan Maxwell Iraq – Haris Gasdar	
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Emerging issue:	The Right to food -- Celestine Nyamu	
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Plenary Discussion		10:00-10:45
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Group Work:	<i>Action Plans for Ending Famine</i>	11:00-12:30
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Plenary Report Back:	Presentation and synthesis of action plans	12:30-13:30
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Working Lunch:	<i>The Way Forward</i>	13:30-14:30
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Closing Remarks	Stephen Devereux	14:30-15:00
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