Many of the governments of Africa have placed the blame for the famine squarely on an international economic system that buys African products at low prices and sells to Africa goods and services at high prices. The past five years have been the worst in fifty for African economies, not least because of foreign exchange constraints: commodity prices continued to fall, interest on debt soared and international aid declined. Faced with this price-cost squeeze, governments across Africa drastically cut imports, with devastating effects on the availability of foodstuffs, fuel, spare parts and other essentials. Julius Nyerere, former Chairman of the OAU, has asked: "Should we really let our people starve so that we can pay our debts?"

Many governments around the world place the blame for the famine squarely on the policies and performance of African governments. A root cause of famine has been the systematic neglect and exploitation of the farmers — the peasants — of Africa. The voices heard by African governments have been the voices of the city, of the civil service, of the military — but rarely of the people who actually grow the food. An African aid worker has defined the politics of food in this way: "Starve the city dwellers and they riot; starve the peasants and they die. If you were a politician which would you choose?"

Given these very different perceptions of the causes of famine, the world might have settled into a long period of debate and recrimination. That has not been the case. Instead, driven by the magnitude of the disaster and by the fervour of public opinion, the governments of Africa and the international community are moving towards a consensus on the need to prevent famine.

A city street, Nairobi, Kenya