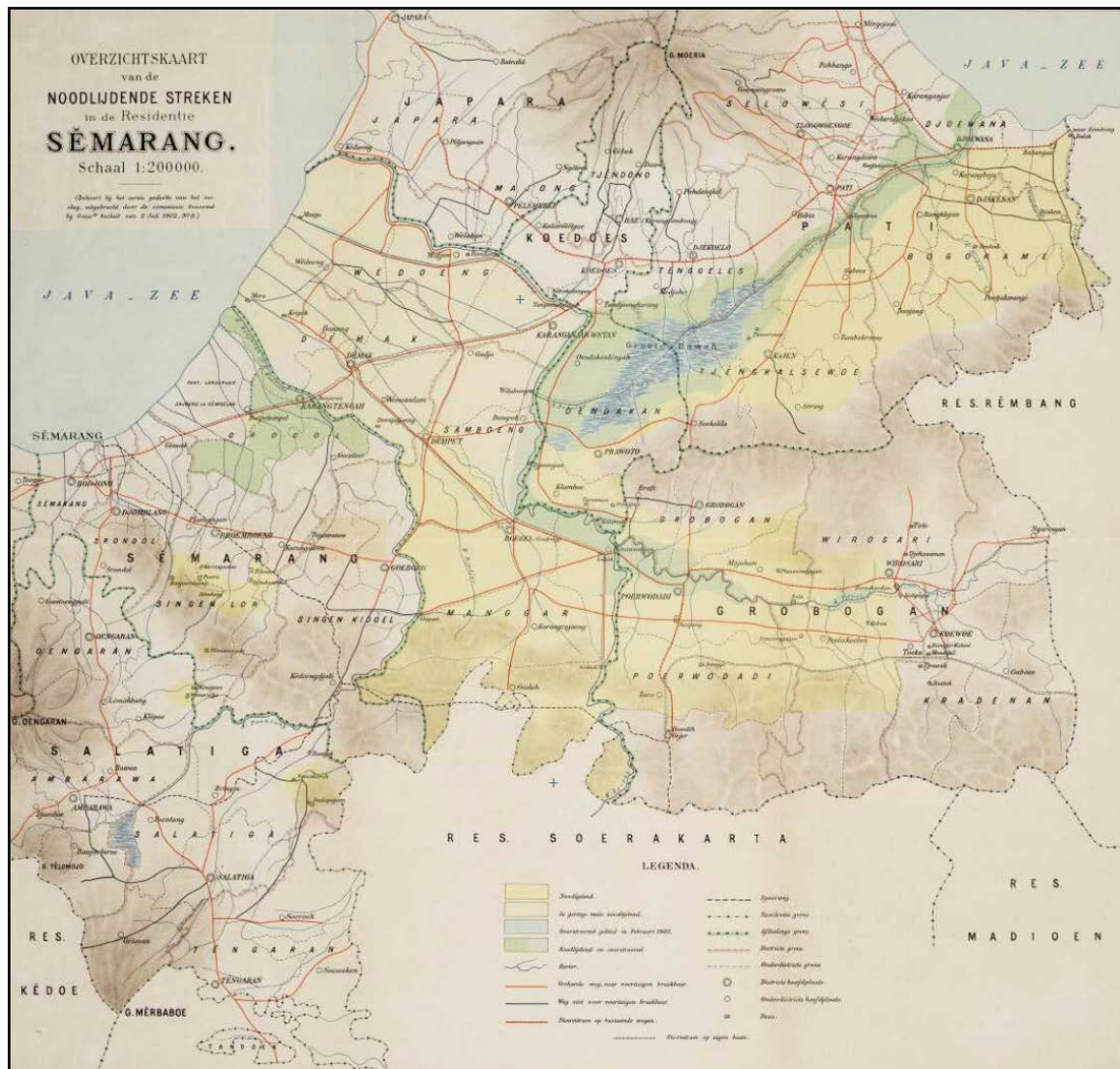


‘How they survived the evil times is a mystery to me’

## Famine in the Netherlands East Indies, c. 1900-1904



**Name:** A.E.G. (Sander) Tetteroo  
**Student ID:** 0604879  
**Degree:** Research Master History  
**Specialization:** Colonial and Global History  
**Date:** 26-02-2014  
**Email:** s.tetteroo@gmail.com

**Thesis supervisor:** Dr. Alicia Schrikker

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## Introduction

This thesis provides the first in-depth study of a famine – really a number of concurrent famines – that ravaged large parts of the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) during c. 1900-1904. To date, no one has taken up the challenge of studying this famine, despite its occurrence during a critical period in Dutch colonial history. Though death tolls cannot be given, government relief expenditures exceeded four million guilders, a massive sum for the time. Not only was the human impact great, the famine occurred during the early development of the so-termed ethical policy that was to be the flagship of colonial politics from c. 1901 onward. The famine is briefly acknowledged in various publications, but has never been analysed thoroughly. This thesis aims to fill that historiographical gap and give insight into several important aspects of Dutch colonial rule.

This thesis argues that famines and food shortages were not incidental occurrences, but a feature in NEI history. The societal and governmental responses to these famines and food shortages provide insight into the relations between the colonial government and the people it governed. Further, this study places the NEI famine in a broader perspective of famine relief paradigms by comparatively analysing the famine experiences of the British Empire in India and the French empire in Indochina. Both colonies experienced famine around the same period and responded to these famines in similar fashions. This thesis is thus an exercise in comparative and connective history, as it brings together historiographies that have so far remained separate. It aims to show that a greater understanding of the famine policies of particular empires is obtained by studying the links, differences and parallels between the various European empires.

These topics are bound together by the central themes of learning from disasters and knowledge acquisition in a colonial context. This thesis's purpose is to study both societal development leading up to the famine, as well as the learning process of the colonial government concerning the phenomenon 'famine'. It traces the economic, social and political origins of the famine, focusing on the evolution of the principles underpinning the government's relief program and its political representation of 'famine' to the outside world. Thus, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What were the immediate causes and long-term social, economic and political conditions that led to the occurrence of the famines in c. 1900-1904?
- What principles informed NEI government relief actions during the famines?

- What forms of relief were chosen? Who were eligible for aid?
- How did the famine relief principles of the colonial government evolve during the nineteenth century?
- How were the famines interpreted within the NEI government and Dutch colonial politics? Did it influence then-current
  - perceptions of NEI native people?
  - ideas on colonial governance?

*The importance of studying famine in Netherlands East Indies history*

Famine and food shortages have however not featured prominently in NEI historiography. It features prominently in David Henley's recent study of central and northern Sulawesi.<sup>1</sup> For Java, only two articles provide a long-term, though superficial perspective on what the authors W.R. Hugenholtz (1986) and Peter Boomgaard (2002) respectively termed 'famines' or 'subsistence crises'.<sup>2</sup> Case-studies of famines that received a measure of scholarly are limited to those that occurred in nineteenth-century Cirebon (1844-1846; 1883-1884), Banten (1880-1882) and Semarang (1849-1850).<sup>3</sup> The latter is famous for its political influence: it became a key argument for opponents of the Cultivation System.

This relative dearth stands in stark contrast to the historiography of British colonies, to which the study of famine has been an important contribution. What studies on famine in British colonies such as India and Ireland, as well as French colonies in Indochina, have shown is that the study of calamities provides a unique insight into the workings of colonial governments. At times of crisis, with thousands or millions of lives at stake principles are tested. Responsibilities are assumed or denied, and power might change has, as will economic opportunities. Further, it has demonstrated

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<sup>1</sup> David Henley, *Fertility, food and fever. Population, economy and environment in North and Central Sulawesi, 1600-1930* (Leiden 2005).

<sup>2</sup> W.R. Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply in Java, 1830-1914' in: C.A. Bayly and D.H.A. Kolff eds., *Two colonial empires. Comparative essays on the history of India and Indonesia in the nineteenth century* Comparative Studies in Overseas History 6 (Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster 1986) 155-188. Peter Boomgaard, 'From subsistence crises to business cycle depressions, Indonesia 1800-1940', *Itinerario* 27 nos. 3/4 (2002) 35-50.

<sup>3</sup> R.E. Elson, 'The famine in Demak and Grobogan in 1849-1850', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 19 no. 1 (1985) 39-85. M.R. Fernando, 'Famine in a land of plenty: Plight of a rice-growing community in Java, 1883-1884', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41 no. 2 (2010) 291-320; idem, 'The worst of both worlds: commercial rice production in West Indramayu, 1885-1935', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41 no. 3 (2010). Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply'. M.R. Fernando, *Famine in Cirebon residency in Java, 1844-1850: a new perspective on the cultivation system* (Melbourne 1980).

the importance of seeing colonial policies within the context of metropolitan politics. Government policies on poverty, poor relief and health in the motherland were intricately connected with colonial famine policies. Also, studying famine means studying a phenomenon that was experienced in nations and colonies all over the world. Finally, studying famine gives insight into the hotly contested issues of how the colonized were experienced, represented and governed by their colonizers. Knowledge, prejudice, racism power and policy-making have for many decades been regarded as intricately related within colonial historiography. A concrete case like famine provides an opportunity to investigate such theme's without becoming mired in blanket statements, blaming all on the evils of colonialism.

### Source selection and methodology

The research for this thesis has been based primarily on the following sources:

- The archival records of the Dutch Ministry of Colonies, kept at the National Archive in The Hague.
- The monthly reports on harvest results and rice prices published in the state newspaper *Javasche Courant* from 1900 to 1903.
- Various reports authored by government commissions:
  - The *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang* (1903) [Report on the floods and famine in the Residency Semarang; abbreviated SV].
  - The reports of the commission for the *Onderzoek naar de Mindere Welvaart op Java en Madoera* [abbreviated OMW] (compiled 1904-1905, published 1904-1920). The commission also published a 'Leidraad voor de bestrijding van "Schaarschte" en "Nood" op Java en Madoera' (1906).<sup>4</sup>
- The minutes and appendices of Dutch parliament, the latter mostly the annual colonial reports and NEI budgets.
- These sources are supplemented by contemporary newspaper and journal articles, especially from the *Semarang Courant*, *De Locomotief* and the *Tijdschrift voor Binnenlandsch Bestuur*.

It should be noted, then, that European sources, available in The Netherlands form the bulk of original research material for this thesis. Naturally, a more extensive research would include both

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<sup>4</sup> H.E. Steinmetz, 'Leidraad voor de bestrijding van "Schaarschte" en "Nood" op Java en Madoera', *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 30 (1906) 79-155.

government sources residing at the National Archives of Indonesia and source materials in Indonesian languages such as Malay and Javanese. For the present study and for answering the proposed research questions the chosen body of evidence should suffice.

The archival materials of the Ministry of Colonies cover much of the famine period (roughly 1900-1905), though materials pertain more to events from 1902 onward. The archival materials related to the famines are kept mostly in the Ministry's *openbare verballen* [public records; OV] and *geheime verballen* [secret records; GV]. The verballen were decisions of the Minister of Colonies, which were written on a folder which contained the documents relevant to the minister's decision. These were often *mailrapporten* [mail reports], monthly short reports forwarded by the Governor-General to the Minister of Colonies. Regarding the famines, the mail reports were often accompanied by (1) copies of letters received by the Governor-General from residents regarding the situation in their provinces, (2) copies of decisions by the Governor-General on the approval and allocation of relief funds.

#### Chapter descriptions

Chapter 1 has a threefold purpose. First, it shows the value of using the disaster studies concept of 'vulnerability' to analyse the development of colonial responses to famine. It thus sets up the first objective of this thesis: to place the famine relief measures used by the colonial government in the c. 1900-1904 famines in a long-term context. Further, the historiography on the development of policies of famine and poverty relief in British India, French Indochina is discussed. This section argues that in each of these empires, there was a clear link between poverty policy in the metropole and colonial famine relief policies. This same link is then established for the Netherlands East Indies. Finally, these considerations are embedded in recent insights in two fields of research: (1) learning processes related to disasters and (2) colonial government knowledge acquisition and operationalization.

The second chapter first shows, based mostly on secondary literature, the changing approaches to famine relief under the nineteenth-century colonial government. The chapter argues for a long-term view on the development of governmental and societal responses to famine, by demonstrating the pervasiveness of food shortages in NEI history. It then traces the development of government relief strategies through a number of brief case studies of nineteenth-century famines. The chapter closes by outlining the socio-economic conditions on Java during the liberal period (c. 1870-1900), focusing in particular on the residency Semarang.

Chapter 3 reconstructs the events of the c. 1900-1904 famines. The chapter is divided into sections on the Outer Islands and Java. The section on Java first briefly relates events on private lands

and native states, before moving to its case study of the residency Semarang. The case study covers direct famine causation, coping strategies, private charity and the role of the market and closes with a description of the various forms of government relief.

Finally, the fourth chapter 4 analyses the politics of famine through government-authored commission reports. Central to this chapter are the questions: what lessons did the colonial government draw from the c. 1900-1904 famines, regarding: proper famine relief principles and the role of the colonial government concerning NEI native people? The chapter will close with analysis of the politics surrounding the famine. Central to this analysis is the process of knowledge acquisition on part of the government during what is usually deemed a critical period in Dutch colonial history: the transition from liberal to ethical policy.



## Chapter 1. Famine: historiography of colonial understandings and relief policies

This thesis has several connected lines of inquiry. The goal of this chapter is to provide the historiographical background for the following chapters. First, it establishes the usefulness of using disaster studies as means to connect the topics of famine and colonial history, focusing on the concept of vulnerability. It then establishes the historical and historiographical background of famine studies within a colonial setting. The final section unites the fields of disaster/famine studies and colonial history through an evaluation of the process of learning and knowledge acquisition resulting from disaster experience. It connects this learning process to concepts introduced by Ann Laura Stoler to analyse the manner in which colonial states produced an utilized knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

### 1.1 Disaster studies and (Western) discourse on famine.

The young field of historical disaster studies aims to demonstrate the importance (even the centrality) of disasters in the development of a society, both at a social and institutional level:

Any meaningful discussion of what makes societies and populations particularly vulnerable to natural hazards and of the role of local agency in devising measures of relief that may not necessarily conform to those envisaged by technocrats, calls for recovering the multiple and varied histories of communities and their ways of coping with natural disasters in the past.<sup>6</sup>

Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen make more explicit what such ‘multiple and varied’ histories encompass and identify three factors that permeate as a consensus the work of the new generation of disaster historians:

First, the premise that disasters are not natural, but social phenomena, even if triggered by extreme natural events. (...) The second area of consensus that marks new perspectives in the study of disasters is the conviction that within societies affected by disaster the chain of causes leads back into complex economic, political and social configurations, which tend to place certain societies, or groups within a society, at higher risk than others. It is now a common practice to cluster these conditions around the term *social vulnerability*. (...) A third dimension which the investigation of disaster has begun to address in order to understand

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain. Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen, ‘Disasters and pre-industrial societies: historiographic trends and comparative perspectives’, *The Medieval History Journal* 10 nos. 1& 2 (2007) 1-31: 2.

agency in historical perspective is that of strategies to cope with disaster – its mitigation and prevention – in the past and their meaning for the present.<sup>7</sup>

Within this context, the process of learning from previous disaster experiences is emphasized. This has become central to the work of Gregg Bankoff, whose *Cultures of disaster: society and natural hazard in the Philippines* is a classic in the study of societal vulnerability to natural disasters. In this work, he argues for the necessity of viewing disasters not as exceptional situations that are incidents in a society's history, but rather as 'frequent life experiences'.<sup>8</sup> While famines are not always ranked among disasters, in the sense that they are often long-developing rather than suddenly appearing calamities, there is much to be said for the inclusion of famine. In the Netherlands East Indies, as in many contemporary parts of the world, food scarcities or even famine were a recurring experience, especially for rural communities. For much of the NEI population, a lean period when food supplies were running low and food prices rose annually required methods to supplement either food supply or income, even when crops were successful. Food scarcities or famines were often preceded by crop failures caused by the occurrence of certain hazards. These might include, but are not limited to drought, floods, storms or (crop) diseases. Societies exposed with regularity to such hazards were, in modern jargon, vulnerable, and developed coping strategies to mitigate its effects.

Disaster studies thus helpfully distinguish between two types of vulnerability: social vulnerability and biophysical vulnerability:

The category of social vulnerability encompasses all of the conditions and factors that either amplify or mitigate the effects of a nature-induced disaster. These include economic status, social condition, food entitlement, housing quality, and insurance eligibility. (...) The term biophysical vulnerability stands for the magnitude of material and nonmaterial losses resulting from the combined effect of social vulnerability and natural hazard severity.<sup>9</sup>

Vulnerability thus comprises a large number of factors, not all of which will feature in the following chapters. In fact, the above definition does not contain what is arguably the main topic of this thesis:

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<sup>7</sup> Juneja and Mauelshagen, 'Disasters and pre-industrial societies', 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of disaster: society and natural hazard in the Philippines* (London 2003); idem, 'Cultures of disaster, cultures of coping: hazard as a frequent life experience in the Philippines' in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister eds., *Natural disasters, cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history* (Lanham et al. 2009) 265-284.

<sup>9</sup> Christian Pfister, 'Learning from nature-induced disasters: theoretical considerations and case studies from Western Europe' in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister eds., *Natural disasters, cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history* (Lanham et al. 2009) 17-40: 20-21.

the relation between government and society during a famine.<sup>10</sup> Several studies on historical disasters have emphasized the role that disasters played in state formation and the development of modern societal institutions.<sup>11</sup> These studies have focused mostly on a particular national context. The present thesis deals with a disaster management situation which is complicated by a colonial context: while the disaster (famine) is experienced by the indigenous population of the Indonesian archipelago, which undoubtedly developed many local coping strategies, the administration of large-scale relief was the province of a foreign (Dutch) state, both in the Netherlands and in the NEI. Famine has featured relatively scarcely within the field of historical disaster studies. In itself though, famine has known an extensive historiography, both in historical and contemporary studies. Still, for some decades the importance of understanding historical famine interpretations and relief policies has been recognized. The policies of European colonial powers still have great influence on current relief policies, though the morals of the colonial period are not wholly applicable to present times.<sup>12</sup>

Famine definitions are numerous, as are discourses on causation and prevention and relief measures. This thesis deals with famine within a specific context: the early twentieth century Dutch colonial empire in the Indonesian archipelago. The present chapter traces conceptualizations of famine from pre-modern to modern discourse and seeks to identify the perception of famine during the period under study. Further, it specifically reconstructs the development of famine conceptualization in the French and British empires for two reasons. First, since both famine and poverty are understudied subjects in Dutch and NEI history, no thorough work has been done to identify the development of famine conceptualization in these regions. Since similar, if not identical notions of poverty and famine circulated in Europe and its colonies, contextualizing the Dutch and NEI experience through comparison with other colonial powers is essential to understanding NEI famine policy. Second, relatedly, the principles of famine aid in British India had a significant impact on the formulation of famine aid principles in the NEI after the early twentieth century famines.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This factor, is included tentatively in a recent attempt to link famine history to historical disaster studies: S. Engler, 'Developing a historically based "Famine Vulnerability Analysis Model"' – an interdisciplinary approach', *Erdkunde* 66 no. 2 (2012) 157-172.

<sup>11</sup> For instance: René Favier and Anne-Marie Granet-Abisset, 'Society and natural risks in France, 1500-2000: changing historical perspectives' in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister eds., *Natural disasters, cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history* (Lanham et al. 2009) 103-137; Franz Mauelshagen, 'Disaster and political culture in Germany since 1500' in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister eds., *Natural disasters, cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history* (Lanham et al. 2009) 41-76.

<sup>12</sup> On the continuity of colonial famine relief paradigms in post-colonial states see: Jean Drèze, 'Famine prevention in India' in: Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen eds., *The political economy of hunger. Volume 2: famine prevention* (Oxford 1990) 13-122 and Alex De Waal, *Famine crimes: politics & the disaster relief industry in Africa* (London 1997).

<sup>13</sup> See chapter 4.

From this follows that to understand the development of Dutch famine policy around 1900 it is critical to survey the development of famine theory and ideas on government responsibility with regard to famine during the nineteenth century. During this century, similar notions of these issues circulated among the western European powers and within their colonial empires. Specifically, it is important to note the continuous awareness of and interest in the occurrence of famines in British India, in the Netherlands East Indies. More precisely, the famine policy practiced by the Dutch colonial government around 1900 mirrored closely the principles of famine relief laid down in the British Indian Famine Codes, developed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To trace the history of Dutch famine relief, it is thus instructive to also trace the evolution of British famine policy.

## **1.2 Colonial counterpoints. poverty, famine in British and French territories**

### Ireland

Still deeply engraved in public memory, the Irish famine of 1846-1850 was the worst European famine of the nineteenth century. The direct cause for the famine was a new disease popularly known as potato disease, which affected much of potato-growing Europe during the mid-to-late 1840s to a greater or lesser extent. Although parts of Scandinavia, Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scotland suffered crop failures and hunger, nowhere was the crisis as protracted or mortality as high as in Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

The Irish case fits well within a deepening connection between prevailing thoughts on poverty relief both in Britain and famine relief in India. The Irish famine, at least as much as the nineteenth century Indian famines, may be seen as a paradigmatic example of excess mortality caused by wilfully insufficient intervention on part of the British government. After relatively timely and effective relief works and soup kitchens had provided some relief up to mid-1847, a reformed Irish Poor Law came into effect that was based on the policy recommendations of Charles S. Trevelyan. First, relief was based on task labour at public work sites, which may only be attended by persons owning less than a quarter acre of land. Payment on basis of task completion proved deadly, as weakened, underequipped Irish would be unable to earn enough for subsistence. Food doles or payments were likewise insufficient for survival, especially if recipients were required to perform physical labour. Although the British treasury did allocate funds for famine relief, most of the

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<sup>14</sup> For the impact of the famine in various European countries, consult the essays in O. Gráda, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute eds., *When the potato failed: causes and effects of the last European subsistence crisis, 1845-1850* Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area 9 (Turnhout 2007).

financial burden of relief was borne by those in Ireland required to pay the so-termed poor rate, in practice landlords and other moneyed elites. British stringency was based on strict laissez-faire principles combined with a prevailing belief among policymakers (and beyond) that English aid was being received by a people who had serious deficiencies of character through which they had brought on themselves their hardship and who were liable to become moochers if state aid was too generous. The language used to describe the Irish recipients of aid was nearly indistinguishable from that used for the British metropolitan poor or Indian famine victims.<sup>15</sup>

### British India

Only very recently has the Irish famine been linked to the broader topic of British colonial famine relief policy.<sup>16</sup> Famine was a recurring event throughout the British reign in India. While each famine naturally had its own dynamic, some features were common throughout the nineteenth century and across the subcontinent. First, concerning causation, famine was usually preceded by drought-induced crop failures. Second, disease played a major part in famine mortality, cholera, malaria, dysentery and fevers being prolific killers. Often, it is impossible to distinguish with available sources between deaths due to epidemics from deaths due to malnutrition.<sup>17</sup> Third, although no official famine policy existed until 1880, government response from the 1830 at least was often based upon similar principles to those that informed the 1880 Famine Codes. Yet organization was fraught with troubles because no clear regulations and prescriptions existed and private trade often late to respond due to lack of infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

Famine had been an issue since the days of Company rule. The severe famine in North India in 1837-1838 was one of the first in which, despite the lack of official famine policy, guidelines were followed in the form of the English Poor Laws on 1834. Thus, a link between poverty policy and famine relief was forged that would remain in place throughout the colonial period. We should be careful though, as in non-famine times the colonial government assumed much less responsibility for the native poor. Similar to Dutch administration in the NEI:

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<sup>15</sup> James S. Donnelly jr., *The great Irish potato famine* (Stroud 2001). Based on chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Gray, 'Famine and land in Ireland and India, 1845-1880: James Caird and the political economy of hunger', *The Historical Journal* 49 No. 1 (2006) 193-215.

<sup>17</sup> On the impact of disease on Indian demography see Ira Klein, 'Death in India, 1871-1921', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 32 no. 4 (1973) 639-659; For the impact of epidemic disease during Indian famines see Tim Dyson, 'On the demography of South Asian famines. Part I.', *Population Studies* 45.1 (1991) 5-25 and David Arnold, 'Social crisis and epidemic disease in the famines of nineteenth-century India', *Social History of Medicine* 6 no. 3 (1993) 385-404.

<sup>18</sup> Drèze, 'Famine prevention in India', 21.

While the British were committed to the maintenance of the eligible poor in England, they refused to consider this as a possibility in normal times in India, preferring to rely upon the private charitable institutions and practices of the people over whom they ruled.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, the principles underpinning the Poor Laws were in many ways similar to those underpinning the later Famine Codes. Famine, like poverty, was to be relieved principally through work-for-cash or work-for-food schemes, as the able-bodied destitute should always work for his subsistence if provided charitably by the state. Further, low wages and hard labour should deter relief-seekers from applying to state aid, unless as a last recourse. Sanjay Sharma notes that this involved a reclassification, a redefinition of people, not according to their societal status, but by physical characteristics:

Indigenous categories would indicate social rank, family or place of origin, but the classificatory process of famine relief tended to reduce a person to the status of an individual, abstracted from his or her personal background. The category of 'able-bodied' necessarily perceived a person not as a member of a household, caste, or community but as a mere labourer capable of work whose condition could be compared to that of a regular labourer in the labour market.<sup>20</sup>

Still, initiative in famine relief was left to local administration. Lacking clear central directives, these had great freedom to form their own judgment regarding proper course of action. This situation persisted until the final quarter of the nineteenth century with the establishment of the Famine Codes.

After 1838, famines continued to plague the Indian population with great regularity. Particularly severe famines were experienced in Orissa (1866) and Rajputana (1869), involving millions of deaths. The Famine Codes were established in response to particularly severe famines raging across India in the period 1876-1878, with death tolls in the millions. The high death rate of these famines contrasted sharply with the relatively low death rates during an earlier famine in Bihar in 1874. Equally stark was the contrast between the conduct of the British government during these famines. Whereas in the 1874 famine, aid was generous and government spending prevented mass mortality, the 1876-1878 aid regime was characterized by minimalist intervention, low government

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<sup>19</sup> L. Brennan, 'The Development of the Indian Famine Codes. Personalities, politics, and policies' in: Bruce Currey and Graeme Hugo eds., *Famine as a geographical phenomenon* (Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster 1984) 91-112: 92. On this topic, also see Georgina Brewis, "'Fill full the mouth of famine": voluntary action in famine relief in India 1896-1901', *Modern Asian Studies* 44 no. 4 (2010) 887-918, esp. 898.

<sup>20</sup> Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, philanthropy and the colonial state. North India in the early nineteenth century* (Oxford and New York 2001) 141.

spending and severe death tolls. The minimalist 1876-1878 government famine policies and (consequent?) high death tolls led to outrage in Britain and India.<sup>21</sup>

The famine commission established after the 1876-1878 was tasked with formulating a colony-wide famine policy both for government response to famine conditions as well as preventative measures. Its final report articulated the principles on which state aid ought to be based and contained prescriptions on what it regarded as proper course of action, as well as the types of aid deemed appropriate to alleviate and prevent famine conditions. Jean Drèze notes that the government of India saw famine not as consequence of food supply deficiency, but of widespread incapacity of purchasing foodstuffs:

The back bone of the famine relief strategy embodied in the Famine Codes was the organization of massive public works. More precisely, the first and foremost aim of this strategy was nothing less than to provide employment at subsistence wages and at a reasonable distance from their homes to all those who applied for it.<sup>22</sup>

The work-for-cash setup prescribed by the Famine Codes also implied, as Jean Drèze notes, that the British government chose a policy of minimal intervention in the private market: no large-scale sale of rice by government, no price-setting, no rationing: 'the idea of preventing famines by generating purchasing power in affected areas and letting private trade supply the food was the basic inspiration behind the Famine Codes'.<sup>23</sup> It should be noted at this point though, that the Famine Codes identified non-landowning agricultural labourers and artisans as the most vulnerable occupation groups under famine conditions.

A third fundamental aspect of aid policy was eligibility. The first and subsequent Famine Codes extensively reflect on the necessity of imposing tests on those seeking aid to weed out those who were supposedly taking advantage of government relief. State aid should be available only to those with no other means to ensure survival. Thus, strict tests were formulated with the purpose of raising the threshold for those seeking aid: long distances to work sites, residence at relief works instead of at home, cooked food and hard labour. All but the labour test were eventually rejected by famine commissions of 1898 and 1901.<sup>24</sup>

However, not all could be aided through work-programs. Although some public works might employ women and children, or allow them to reside at the work sites while receiving some benefits,

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<sup>21</sup> David Hall-Matthews, 'Historical roots of famine relief paradigms: ideas on dependency and free trade in India in the 1870s', *Disasters* 20 no. 3 (1996) 216-230.

<sup>22</sup> Drèze, 'Famine prevention in India', 26.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 29.

labour camps were supplemented with doles programs, in the form of food or cash hand-outs in the villages. Again, applicants had to prove their true destitution and incapacity to earn wages. Preferably, and unrealistically, taxation should be done by government officials at the individual level, to prevent fraud and 'demoralization'. Demoralization was said to occur as a consequence of too lenient government support, thus undermining the independence and will to work of the native population, which was always at risk of being lazy and indolent. Thus, a certain hostility toward the poor and the native population in general was inherent in the system set up by the Famine Codes: famine relief, while on the one hand a responsibility of government, was applied with great stringency, yet framed as generous charity toward an often undeserving and fraudulent population.<sup>25</sup> For some time after the Famine Codes were adopted India was spared famines of the severity of those that ravaged it during the 1870s. Around the turn of the though the Famine Codes were severely tested by successive famines in the 1896-1898 and 1899-1900 periods. Each famine led to the instalment of new famine commissions, which evaluated the effectiveness of the then-current Famine Codes, and published revised codes, which were adopted as official famine policy.<sup>26</sup>

### France and Indochina

Similar attitudes prevailed regarding the French colony of Indochina. Van Nguyen-Marshall has shown that French poverty and famine policy were characterized by two conflicting principles in both the metropole and the colony: on the one hand the Enlightenment idea that the state had a responsibility toward all its citizens' welfare, on the other hand prevalent views that framed poverty as a moral hazard, and saw the poor as people who should be aided only through harsh, character-reforming labour. In the colonies, an additional precondition for reception of aid was the extent to which the poor natives had been good (in the sense of obedient) subjects.<sup>27</sup> The French state took an even more hostile position toward its subjects, and half-hearted efforts at formulating a famine policy and instituting precautions against famine did not lead to the establishment of any Famine Codes. A famine fund was established, for which the native population was taxed, but it was most likely not used in a subsequent famine in 1915-1916. Overall, it may be deduced that the French state

famine relief practices in Indochina demonstrated that welfare provision was not a right to be expected but were "benevolent" acts doled out at the discretion of the Resident Superior of

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<sup>25</sup> Hall-Matthews, 'Historical roots', 216-229: 220.

<sup>26</sup> Drèze, 'Famine prevention in India'.

<sup>27</sup> Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority. The discourse on poverty, poor relief, and charity in French colonial Vietnam* (New York at al. 2008) 33, 41.



Tonkin. Colonial relief policies and practices did not embody any of the spirit of the Enlightenment concept of assistance (*bienfaisance*), which connoted rational, efficient, and humane relief measures. While various local French administrators might have felt the need for more humanitarian measures, the overall bureaucratic apparatus gave priority to social control and budgetary constraints.<sup>28</sup>

### The Netherlands and the East Indies

Finally, a similar, though also uneasy link between metropolitan poor relief and colonial famine relief principles existed for the Dutch colonial empire. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Dutch state formulated the legislative, administrative and institutional framework on which poor relief was to be based. Crucial was the Poor Law of 1854, formulated on the heels of a major famine in the 1840s, which was the last of the nineteenth century. It is unclear though if the famine had influence on the formulation of the 1854 Poor Law. The famine was caused by crop failures due to the arrival in Europe of a disease popularly known as potato blight. It had spread through much of northern and western Europe and had devastated Ireland (see above). Aside from crop failures, (consequent) high food prices led to widespread destitution that was often beyond the capacities of local poor relief systems. Hardship led to food riots [*broodoproer*] in several cities in 1845 and 1847 and many other disturbances.<sup>29</sup> Government initially took only indirect measures, such as the abolishment of duties on foodstuffs, intended to entice food imports and lower costs for the staple foods of the poor. Nonetheless, the government was slow to implement these measures and in fact profited greatly from the forced switch of the poor from potato to rye consumption, as the government received a small percentage for rye sales. It would later acquiesce to limited government food imports and loans from the provincial governments to municipalities. Nonetheless, aid was to be based firmly on non-intervention. Quoting from central government directives, M. Bergman quotes the government's position that it 'would think this very inadvisable especially at this juncture to give the poor the idea that they had a right to be aided and could demand it'.<sup>30</sup> Regarding poor relief it instructed city governments that:

The Dutch municipalities were not charitable, but they should see to it that special committees were set up "in order to act as intermediaries – in concurrence with the

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<sup>28</sup> Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> M. Bergman, 'The potato blight in the Netherlands and its social consequences (1845–1847)', *International Review of Social History* 12 no. 3 (1967) 390-431: 404-413.

<sup>30</sup> Bergman, 'The potato blight', 422.

municipalities – for the promotion of collections, the control of money, the distribution of the stores that had been bought and other such activities.<sup>31</sup>

Bergman also reveals that aside from the profiteering described above, the central government did not per se have the interests of the population at heart in devising its relief principles:

(...)The working class should be “kept busy” on public works and in the employment of private persons, who should be induced to collaborate. First and foremost, however, order must be maintained. “At the first sign of trouble” the militia should be called out and everywhere the services of the police and the night watchmen should be organized as effectively as was possible.<sup>32</sup>

While the municipal governments were directed to stick to laissez-faire principles and to rely on private charity, many did not comply with this view and intervened directly in the food market by purchasing foodstuffs. To the end though, the Dutch government persisted in its position, which strained local relief to or beyond breaking point.<sup>33</sup>

As mentioned above, in 1854 a new Poor Law was finally passed by Dutch parliament after much debate. The Poor Law of 1854 determined that poor relief was to be based on restraint on part of the national government. In a broader sense, as in Great Britain, poverty was linked to morality, strict preconditions of deserving and work-for-aid systems. Poverty was not, or not primarily, a matter of economic conditions or unemployment rates. Rather, poverty was a consequence of moral deficiencies of the poor. Character reform was thus an essential part of poor relief efforts, in particular toward the end of the nineteenth century. Alcohol abuse, gambling, whoring and spendthrift were identified as the main culprits.<sup>34</sup> Further, the state did not take direct responsibility for poverty relief. The tiered system established via the poor laws, placed responsibility for relief first on local communities or family. If the poor could find no aid there, poor relief was in first instance the province of charitable institutions and church programs. The next level of poor relief, the municipality, came into play only if these could not provide the necessary aid. At the municipal level, poor relief commissions determined local policy. Only in case of widespread disaster might the national government step in:

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<sup>31</sup> Bergman, ‘The potato blight’, 423.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, 426-429.

<sup>34</sup> Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, ‘The Netherlands: Dutch approaches to problems of illness and poverty between the Golden Age and the fin de siècle’ in: Ole Peter Grell, Andrew Cunningham and Robert Jütte eds., *Health care and poor relief in 18th and 19th century Northern Europe* (Aldershot 2002) 259-276: 273-276.

This was to be the official regulation of public assistance in the Netherlands after the mid-1850s: religious and private charitable organizations would be the “nursemaid” of the poor; the state would reorganize the economy in order to stimulate employment opportunities, and, according to article 21 of the 1851 law, perform a merely subsidiary function. Public authorities were expected to safeguard social order and ensure that those who were absolutely not supported by private charity would not suffer from want and deprivation and thus turn to being, stealing and rioting. “Public” assistance would play only a subservient and purely auxiliary role in the nation’s system of social welfare.<sup>35</sup>

In the Netherlands East Indies a similar system was in place during the famine years, though the situation there was complicated by the legal racial distinctions, which had consequences for poverty relief from the government. In some ways, through subsidies, the NEI government was more involved in poor relief to European poor than the Dutch government was back home.<sup>36</sup> The same principle applied though, that the poor were to be cared for by members of their own ‘community’ [*gemeenschap*]. In case of the natives, this meant either their families or their village community. Such community-level philanthropy was based on (presumed) payment of various Islamic charitable donations, most notably that of *zakat* – one of the five pillars of Islam – and *fitrah*:

Zakat was understood as a means for purification of wealth and *fitrah* was understood as a zakat of the body or poll tax; its fulfillment was obligatory. Zakat was understood to be given directly to the poor and the needy, and so was *fitrah*, of which *santri* (religious pupils) were the common beneficiaries.<sup>37</sup>

*Zakat* payments normally took the form of a percentage of crop yields or income. It was only rarely paid though. Another form of charitable donation intended for the poor, *fitrah*, was paid more often:

While *zakat* was only observed by a few devout and rich villagers, the Acehnese and Javanese exaggerated the payment of *fitrah* because even poor households who had difficulty feeding themselves were reluctant not to pay it. A government survey in Javanese residencies shows

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<sup>35</sup> Frances Gouda, *Poverty and political culture. The rhetoric of social welfare in the Netherlands and France, 1815-1854* (Amsterdam 1995) 192-193.

<sup>36</sup> D.W.F. van Rees, *De staatsarmenzorg voor Europeanen in Nederlandsch-Indië. Hoofdstuk I. De beginselen der armenzorg van staatswege* (Batavia 1902) 31-33.

<sup>37</sup> Amelia Fauzia, *Faith and the state: a history of Islamic philanthropy in Indonesia* (Leiden 2013) 105.

that people regarded fitrah as a way to redeem their sins so that they could celebrate 'Id al-Fitr.'<sup>38</sup>

The zakat and fitrah were paid either to local religious leaders, the poor or religious scholars.

In case the community was unable to provide for its poor, and the poor had (on a large scale) no means for subsistence, some might turn to Christian charities and missions. These could, however, never cope with calamities on a large scale. The decision to spend state funds for such purposes resided in first instance with the Resident, who was responsible for (institutions of) philanthropy in his residency. The law stipulated that the members of the native civil service ought to be vigilant with regard to food scarcities in their districts and inform their superiors of such a situation. The district heads and regents stipulate that they should constantly monitor the state of food crops. The regent, 'in case there is fear of a disappointing harvest [*het tegenvallen van de oogst*] of foodstuffs, in particular regions or in general, immediately informs the resident or assistant-resident, also proposing which measures are required [*worden gevorderd*]'.<sup>39</sup> Similar requirements likely applied lower down the administrative level as well. In his turn, the resident was to keep himself informed of the state of food crops and to inform the Governor General of any important events in his residency, presumably including the incidence of large-scale crop failures, exceptional shortages or famine.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, there was no clear legal system of colonial state responsibility toward the poor –native, Dutch, or other–, to the extent of the Dutch Poor Laws.<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that despite significant differences between the precise organization-forms of famine relief, the famine policies of the major European colonial empires shared a number of attributes: (1) a strong link between metropolitan legislation and/or principles regarding poverty and colonial famine policies, (2) a stringent and restrained approach toward intervention on part of the colonial states, (3) famine relief based on work-for-aid schemes, based on hard physical labour in exchange for a minimal wage intended only to sustain life.

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<sup>38</sup> Fauzia, *Faith and the state*, 106. It should be pointed out here that *zakat* and *pitrah* payments differed greatly per region. The results of the Lesser Welfare Inquiry confirm that *zakat* payments were not common, but *fitrah* was.. Notably, impoverished regions such as Demak and Grobogan *zakat* and *pitrah* were barely paid. *Onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart der Inlandsche bevolking op Java en Madoera* [OMW] IX<sup>c</sup>. *Overzicht van de uitkomsten der gewestelijke onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa en daaruit gemaakte gevolgtrekkingen. Deel III: Bijlagen van 't eigenlijk overzicht (IX<sup>a</sup>)*. (Batavia 1911) appendix 20.

<sup>39</sup> 'B. Instructie der regenten op Java en Madoera, article 26'. Similar, but without requirement of suggesting measures is the 'C. Instructie der distriktshoofden op Java en Madoera, article 23' in: *Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië 1867* (Batavia 1868) no. 114.

<sup>40</sup> 'A. Instructie der residenten op Java en Madoera, articles 17 and 32'. *Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indië 1867*, no. 114.

<sup>41</sup> Van Rees, *De staatsarmenzorg voor Europeanen*, 2.

### 1.3 Knowledge acquisition: learning in a colonial context

Jenny Edkins argues that famine interpretation underwent a radical change during the eighteenth century. In pre-modern times, famines had been treated as separate and unique events, which were recorded and remembered according to the specific characteristics of each incident, with a focus on food prices rather than starvation or mortality. During the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, famine changed into a phenomenon that could be studied scientifically, its general characteristics determined, its causation theorized. Toward the end of the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, famine theory was deeply indebted to Malthusian population theory. Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) theorized that population growth would always outstrip increase in food availability, leading him to conclude that famine (along with war and disease) was a natural check on population growth.<sup>42</sup> About simultaneously, Smithian economics of free trade became the foundational principle for domestic and imperial policy for the British Empire, and for the NEI from the later nineteenth century onward. Famine policy in the British Empire, as we shall see, was based partly on the belief that the free market economy could best resolve a food scarcity, implying – interestingly, in contrast to Malthusian principles – that food availability in the market should be sufficient.<sup>43</sup>

The preceding paragraph demonstrates that the administrations of the British, French and Dutch colonies had similar ideologies related to poverty and famine. These ideologies were grounded in principle, but also grounded in what these administrations deemed sound (i.e. empirically founded) knowledge of what famines were and what solution ought to be adopted to combat famine mortality. Thus, famines were also moments of knowledge accumulation, knowledge which was put into practice as administrations sought to improve – according to their standards – the government's response to famines. The Indian famines of c. 1876-1878, and c. 1897-1898 and c. 1900-1901, the Vietnamese famine of c. 1906 and the NEI famines of c. 1900-1903 all prompted the colonial governments to form commissions to investigate the causes of these famines, to compile 'factual' information regarding these famines, to evaluate government aid effectiveness and to formulate measures that could prevent future famines or mitigate their impacts through government intervention.

Famines thus provide insights into the functioning of the colonial administrations, but also the manner in which it determined what was important about famines, what it should know about the phenomenon, and how this knowledge should translate into practice. Some research has been done recently on knowledge acquisition in relation to disaster experience. Christian Pfister argues,

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<sup>42</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger? Concepts of famine, practices of aid* (Minneapolis 2000) 22-28.

<sup>43</sup> Edkins, *Whose Hunger?*, 28-37.

using Max Miller's terminology, that there is a difference between 'cumulative learning and fundamental learning':

The first type seeks to put current knowledge into practice. (...) The second type, fundamental learning, involves fresh insights into the nature of a problem that lead to innovative solutions.<sup>44</sup>

Concerning research into the development of famine policy it is valuable to evaluate whether chosen solutions to famine events suggest a conservative approach, using only then-current practice or a novel approach, attempting to find new ways to deal with the matter. Who, then, learnt? In the same article, Pfister suggests separating "cognitive" and "behavioral" approaches to learning:

The behavioral approach contends that learning is demonstrated by changes in observable behavior, whereas the cognitive approach (advocated by Jean Piaget argues that mental processes are critical to learning. Another difference between these approaches concerns the agent to whom the learning process is attributed. Adherents of the cognitive approach claim that only individuals may be said to learn and that groups therefore learn exclusively through the contributions of individual members. Champions of the behavioral approach assert that learning can also occur by means of collective processes that may involve churches, businesses, emergency-response personnel, and political authorities.<sup>45</sup>

Part of this thesis then, will be to review whether these approaches are mutually exclusive and how and if they are applicable to learning with regard to the c. 1900 NEI famines. Ann Laura Stoler's insights on the inner workings of the colonial government's knowledge system (through its archival system) are especially relevant for this. She has emphasized the need for awareness of what it means to use colonial government archives. To her, archives are far 'objective' or 'trustworthy' sources. Rather, they consist of documents that represent uncertainties and incomplete understandings, containing not strict definitions, but 'common sense' interpretations by individuals:

Less monuments to the absence or ubiquity of knowledge than its piecemeal partiality, less documents to the force of reasoned judgment than to both the spasmodic and sustained currents of anxious labour that paper trails could not contain.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Pfister, 'Learning from nature-induced disasters', 20.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, 18.

<sup>46</sup> Stoler, *Along the archival grain*, 19.

Nonetheless, state production of knowledge represent an attempt to both understand and define what was true about colonial society, the government official being the agent that decided what knowledge was to be retained, recorded and stored. Archives are

both as a corpus of writing and as a force field that animates political energies and expertise, that pulls on some “social facts” and coverts them into qualified knowledge, that attends to some ways of knowing while repelling and refusing others.<sup>47</sup>

A favoured method of knowledge acquisition and policy formulation in nineteenth century states, colonial and metropolitan, was the commission of inquiry.<sup>48</sup> Commissions were established with great regularity toward the end of the nineteenth century by the NEI state. Social and economic subjects, pertaining both to the native, Eurasian and European populations were the impetus for these commissions. In particular, issues related to poverty were investigated around the turn of the century: on poverty among the European population, the pressure of *corvée* labour and the land taxes on the native population, state poverty relief for the European population. This thesis draws extensively on the publications of two such commissions, both as a source and object of investigation: the commission tasked in 1902 to investigate the Semarang famine, and the commission that investigated the welfare of the Javanese natives, which gathered its data during 1904-1905 and published it through the next 10 years.<sup>49</sup> The latter commission’s work was supposed to lay the foundations for the newly inaugurated ‘ethical policy’, the flag under which new development policies had been debated though only sparsely funded in the first years of the twentieth century.

Such commission reports are treasure troves of information for historians, both for understanding the social, political and economic situation of Java in the early twentieth century and for gaining insight into the workings of the colonial administration and its desired (official’s) understanding of the society it governed:

Colonial commissions reorganized knowledge, devising new ways of knowing while setting aside others. One implicit task was to reconstruct historical narratives, decreeing what past

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<sup>47</sup> Stoler, *Along the archival grain*, 22.

<sup>48</sup> For a very brief introduction to commissions of inquiry in the Netherlands Indies, see Frans Hüsken, ‘Declining welfare in Java: government and private inquiries, 1903–1914’ in: Robert Cribb ed., *The late colonial state in Indonesia* (Leiden 1994) 213-227.

<sup>49</sup> *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903). For a summary of the Lesser Welfare Inquiry see C.J. Hasselman, *Algemeen overzicht van de uitkomsten van het welvaart-onderzoek, gehouden op Java en Madoera in 1904-1905: opgemaakt ingevolge opdracht van Zijne Excellentie den Minister van Koloniën* (’s Gravenhage 1914).

events were pertinent to current issues and how they should be framed. Sometimes commissions were responses to catastrophic event and extended periods of crisis. As responses they generated increased anxiety, substantiating the reality of “crisis”, the wisdom of pre-emptive response, foreshadowing that new directives were demanded, as were the often coercive measures taken to ensure their effect. By the time most commissions had run their course, political signposts were set in place: “turning points” were identified, precedents established, causalities certified, arrows directed with vectors of blame –if not action – sharply aimed.<sup>50</sup>

Such commissions were peopled, manned really, by individuals with their own opinions and agendas. Rather than see them as just tools of their state or institution, one must recognize the importance of individual agency. There is always an interplay between the interests of the institutions represented (the state) and the individuals serving on the commissions. The state itself had many different branches, bureaucratic, technocratic, colonial or metropolitan, which might each have a say and a stake in the outcome of a commission’s inquiry.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stoler, *Along the archival grain*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Brennan., ‘The development of the Indian Famine Codes, 91-112. The OMW commission’s research and publications involved many individuals. First there was the central commissions, headed by H.E. Steinmetz, which assumed responsibility for the collection and interpretation of data. Further, commissions were formed at the department level, which were responsible for answering the commissions’ questionnaire. These results were then forwarded to the central commission, which first bundled. Inevitably then, individual opinions and interests of local administrators could, aside from local variances in recordkeeping have a major influence on the data collected. On the OMW’s (self-described) history, see OMW Xa. *De volkswelvaart op Java en Madoera: eindverhandeling van ’t onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart der inlandsche bevolking* (Batavia 1914).



## Chapter 2. Poverty and famine in The Netherlands East Indies, c. 1870-1900

The objective of this chapter is to establish that famines and food shortages were not a bug, but a feature of Netherlands East Indies history. That is, despite its reputation as a famine-free zone, the NEI did in fact experience several significant famines, while food shortages of a lesser degree were a common, often annually recurring aspect of life. In Greg Bankoff's words, such calamities were 'frequent life experiences'.<sup>52</sup> To establish this, this chapter will first demonstrate the pervasiveness of food shortages on Java and document the development of government famine policy as deduced from its responses to nineteenth-century food shortages and famines. Understanding the causation and consequences of such food shortages however, requires an in-depth look at the social, economic and political/administrative conditions in the colony. Together, these determine the degree to which societies are vulnerable to natural hazards or other calamities or setbacks. Consequently, the second part of this chapter outlines these conditions for the island of Java. Rather than attempt, though, to document them for the entire island, the second part of this chapter outlines these conditions for the residency of Semarang, in particular the departments of Demak and Grobogan, which suffered most severely of all during the c. 1900-1904 famine. To this end, I will combine a study by Djoko Suryo on nineteenth-century rural Semarang, with information from the reports of the Lesser Welfare Inquiry [OMW] on the village economy, agriculture and trade and industry in the residency.<sup>53</sup>

### 2.1 The famine history of the Netherlands East Indies

While the NEI did not experience famines on the same scale as British India, during the nineteenth century a number of famines did occur, despite the NEI's – especially Java's – reputation for being a region largely free of famine.<sup>54</sup> In this thesis, we are dealing with an area characterized by strong seasonality, which creates a dependency on crop successes, as few harvests are possible in the year. On c. 1900 Java, the monsoon patterns allowed for no more than two harvests. In rice-growing regions, the primary harvest would consist of *padi* (husked rice), while the secondary harvest would consist of (a combination of) vegetable crops or commercial crops (together known as *polowidjo*), which were consumed or sold during the lean months leading up to the rice harvest. Poor farmers in

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<sup>52</sup> Greg Bankoff, 'Cultures of disaster, cultures of coping: hazard as a frequent life experience in the Philippines' in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister eds., *Natural disasters, cultural responses. Case studies toward a global environmental history* (Lanham et al. 2009) 265-284.

<sup>53</sup> Djoko Suryo, *Social and economic life in rural Semarang under colonial rule in the later 19th century* (PhD Thesis. Monash University 1982).

<sup>54</sup> W.R. Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply in Java, 1830-1914' in: C.A. Bayly and D.H.A. Kolff eds., *Two colonial empires. Comparative essays on the history of India and Indonesia in the nineteenth century* (Comparative Studies in Overseas History 6 (Dordrecht, Boston and Lancaster 1986) 155-156.

such regions, which are 'highly dependent on an adequate quantity and favourable distribution of rain' (especially in the absence of major irrigation works), are very vulnerable to harvest failures.<sup>55</sup> The Netherlands East Indies experienced a number of exceptionally long droughts during the nineteenth century, which appear to correlate closely to El Niño – Southern Oscillation events.<sup>56</sup> A thorough study on the relations between historical ENSO events, droughts and food shortages in the Indonesian archipelago has yet to be undertaken, though a preliminary survey by Harold Brookfield expressed some scepticism regarding the linkages between ENSO and famine (see appendix A).<sup>57</sup>

Further, even in good times, periods of food scarcity were an annually recurring feature of native agriculture (called *paceklik* on Java), which were the lean months leading up to the annual main harvests):

The *paceklik* was a cyclically recurring period of relative food shortage, which was sometimes accompanied by a light degree of malnutrition. The population's own rice supplies were exhausted and, if it did not have the money to buy rice, it had to make do with other commodities until the main harvest. Maize and cassava were important subsidiary foods in these months. A famine, in contrast, was an exceptional form of extreme food shortage, which led to mass starvation. Evidently, famines often reached their culmination during the *paceklik*.<sup>58</sup>

The transition from mild shortage to famine might be understood using the analytical framework proposed by Amartya Sen. Stated in basic form, the approach argues that:

The entitlements of a person stands for the set of different alternative commodity bundles that the person can acquire through the use of the various legal channels of acquirement open to someone in his position. In a private ownership market economy, the entitlement set of a person is determined by his original bundle of ownership (what is called his 'endowment') and the various alternative bundles he can acquire starting respectively from

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<sup>55</sup> Stephen Devereux, *Theories of famine* (New York et al. 1993) 43.

<sup>56</sup> William H. Quinn et al., 'Historical trends and statistics of the Southern Oscillation, El Niño, and Indonesian droughts', *Fishery Bulletin* 76 no. 3 (1978) 663-678: 676.

<sup>57</sup> Harold Brookfield, "The failure of just one crop". Reflections on the social and environmental history of famine, with special reference to Southeastern Asia' in: H.G. Bohle et al. eds., *Coping with vulnerability and criticality. Case studies on food-insecure people and places* (Saarbrücken and Fort Lauderdale 1993) 183-202: 190. For a thorough attempt to link colonial famines to ENSO events see Mike Davis, *Late Victorian holocausts. El Niño famines and the making of the third world* (London and New York 2000).

<sup>58</sup> Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply', 161-162.

each initial endowment, through the use of trade and production (what is called 'exchange entitlement mapping').<sup>59</sup>

Two important caveats must be made immediately. First, that with the c. 1900 Netherlands East Indies, we are not dealing with a perfect market economy. The level of market participation and dependency differed significantly from region to region. Second, the emphasis on 'legal channels of acquirement' places an unnecessary and unnatural restraint on the applicability of the entitlement thesis, as will be seen in Chapter 3.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, the basic argument of the entitlement approach provides a basis for famine interpretation:

The essence of the [entitlement] approach is that people starve because (1) they have insufficient real income and wealth *and* (2) because there are no other means of acquiring food. That is, inadequate food purchasing power is only a necessary, not a sufficient, pre-condition for (non-voluntary) starvation.<sup>61</sup>

Though, as Stephen Devereux notes, Sen's theory operates on the individual level, we might assume that famine occurs when on large scale people's entitlements fail simultaneously.<sup>62</sup>

A *paceklik* period, however, did not usually lead to a famine, because a successful rice harvest would yield sufficiently for families to survive, at least until the second harvest came in. Still, as mentioned above a failed crop could easily lead to (local) food shortages. The OMW reveals that roughly 50% of all departments of Java and Madura annually suffered food shortages, which were usually compensated for by eating less or supplementing rice with maize, roots or tubers.<sup>63</sup> Further, the OMW makes clear that while not all regions suffered equally, a more severe condition – indicated as 'lack of foodstuffs' – was a fairly common occurrence on Java during the liberal period.<sup>64</sup> While full-blown famines – designated as such – may not have been common occurrences, food shortages were an integral part of life for Java's agriculturalists. For other regions, studies on famine are scarcer. For

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<sup>59</sup> Amartya Sen, 'Food, economics, and entitlements' in: Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze eds., *The political economy of hunger. Volume 1: entitlement and well-being* (Oxford 1990) 34-53.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Devereux, 'Sen's entitlement approach: critiques and counter-critiques', *Oxford Development Studies* 29 no. 3 (2001) 245-264: 251; Jenny Edkins, *Whose hunger? Concepts of famine, practices of aid* (Minneapolis 2000) 50-51.

<sup>61</sup> Devereux, *Theories of famine*, 68.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>63</sup> On roots and tubers as rice substitutes and famine foods see Peter Boomgaard, 'In the shadow of rice: roots and tubers in Indonesian history, 1500-1950', *Agricultural History* 77 No. 4 (2003) 582-610, esp. 601.

<sup>64</sup> See appendix B. OMW IX<sup>c</sup>. *Overzicht van de uitkomsten der gewestelijke onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa en daaruit gemaakte gevolgtrekkingen. Deel III: Bijlagen van 't eigenlijk overzicht (IX<sup>a</sup>)* (Batavia 1911) 25-45.

North Sulawesi, David Henley has shown that certain regions (mainly Gorontalo) suffered famine regularly in the nineteenth century. Han Knapen has emphasized in his study of Southeastern Borneo, that disasters, though not often famine, were common events in the region.<sup>65</sup> Finally, the 1890s famine on Lombok deserves mention, not only because it was a prolonged period of destitution, but because it was both exacerbated by the Dutch and also used as an excuse for the conquest of the island, wresting it from its native rulers.<sup>66</sup>

Hughenoltz identifies roughly three periods of famine relief: the Cultivation System period (c. 1830-1850), the subsequent *laissez-faire* liberal period, and an interventionist period starting from roughly 1911. During each period famine or the threat thereof prompted different kinds of government responses and assumptions of responsibility. The most well-known famine that occurred under the Cultivation System was the Semarang famine of roughly 1848-1850, which resulted in mass mortality and migration in the residencies of Demak and Grobogan. During the second period two periods of famine can be identified: the early 1880s and the early 1900s, the latter of which will be the main topic of the next two chapters. The interventionist period began, according to Hughenoltz with state interventions in the rice trade in the early 1910s, a policy that was continued at the end of the First World War. This paragraph will trace the development of government famine policy in the nineteenth century using as examples the abovementioned incidences of (near-)famine.<sup>67</sup>

#### Demak and Grobogan 1848-1850<sup>68</sup>

In the years 1849-1850 the regencies suffered a famine with death tolls estimated at c. 83.000 by R.E. Elson, which included some of the c. 100.000 who migrated to other regions to escape starvation.<sup>69</sup> Historiography and contemporary sources generally identify 'the heavy demands for forced labour, high levels of taxation, the impact of the government-sponsored forced cultivation of tobacco, and most of all, the operations of a corrupt indigenous elite' as the primary causes for the severity of the disaster that befell the regencies.<sup>70</sup> The Javanese farmers thus lacked the opportunities for economic

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<sup>65</sup> David Henley, *Fertility, food and fever. Population, economy and environment in North and Central Sulawesi, 1600-1930* (Leiden 2005) 317-363; Han Knapen, *Forests of fortune? The environmental history of Southeast Borneo, 1600-1880* (Leiden 2001) 403-412.

<sup>66</sup> Lance Brennan, Les Heathcote and Anton Lucas, 'The causation of famine: a comparative analysis of Lombok and Bengal 1891-1974', *South Asia. Journal of South Asian Studies* 7 no. 1 (1984) 1-26: 3-4.

<sup>67</sup> Hughenoltz, 'Famine and food supply', 155-188.

<sup>68</sup> It had been preceded by several years of famine Cirebon (1844-1846), which, did not garner nearly the publicity as the former. For reasons of space, this famine will not be discussed in this section. One might consult M.R. Fernando, *Famine in Cirebon residency in Java, 1844-1850: a new perspective on the cultivation system* (Melbourne 1980).

<sup>69</sup> R.E. Elson, 'The famine in Demak and Grobogan in 1849-1850', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 19 no. 1 (1985) 39-85: 56.

<sup>70</sup> Elson, 'The famine in Demak and Grobogan', 41.

improvement and lacked the resources to cope with poor harvest years. For some time, the previously prosperous regions of Demak and Grobogan, once wealthy rice-exporting regions, had become deeply impoverished by the mid-nineteenth century. While sudden, the famine thus had decades-long roots.

Such long-term causes were not recognized by the Dutch administration though. As will become clear from the next chapter, the language used to describe the native population and the causes for their poverty was remarkably similar to that used in the early twentieth century by colonial officials. Basically, the victim was blamed for its pain. As demonstrated by the words of then-former Resident Smissaert:

These unfortunate circumstances are mostly the result of the character of the people who are extremely lazy and careless, accustomed to do no more for themselves than is absolutely necessary for their upkeep. For that, they are content to work and plant their *sawah* fields once a year, and they employ no more work and care than is absolutely necessary. One thing is the consequence of the other, and so it is that the people are poor and remain so.<sup>71</sup>

Government response to the famine was abysmal: ‘the activities of European officials were generally characterized by ignorance, naiveté, myopic optimism and finally bureaucratic obfuscation’.<sup>72</sup> Measures taken by Resident A.A. Buijskens were not even close to sufficient to meaningfully relieve the population from its dire conditions. Relief was centred on (poorly accessible) food hand-outs and other gratuitous forms of relief rather than work-for-cash schemes. The Resident was finally fired in May of 1850 and succeeded by Potter, who continued his predecessors’ policy, while adding or modifying some measures. The staggering death count alone though, is evidence of the insufficiency of government intervention.<sup>73</sup>

The impact of the famine on colonial policy was ambiguous from the perspective of the native population. On the one hand, the government rejected proposals by Resident Potter for land reforms that would have diminished the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of Javanese elites. On the other hand, the famine was key in the toppling of the Cultivation System. It took central stage in the arguments of noteworthy opponents of the policy, most prominent among who was liberal parliamentarian W.R. van Hoëvell (1812-1879). Van Hoëvell founded the renowned journal *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indie* [Journal for the Netherlands Indies], which he used as a platform to argue for the abolition of the Cultivation System. As R.E. Elson notes:

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<sup>71</sup> Elson, ‘The famine in Demak and Grobogan’, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, 65.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, 65-67.

The happenings in Demak and Grobogan became something of a symbol of the damage allegedly being wrought on Java's hapless peasant population by the social and political structures upon which the Cultivation System rested.<sup>74</sup>

The famine led to the first large-scale plans for irrigation improvement in Demak, though these were executed half-heartedly and remained quite insufficient to have a meaningful impact on welfare.<sup>75</sup>

### Demak 1873

During the next documented period of severe food crisis, a new system of relief appears to have been preferred by the colonial government, with a greater emphasis of relief works rather than gratuitous relief. It is tempting to link this change, as Hugenholtz does, to the change in political ideology that marked the change from the Cultivation-System period to that of liberal policy.<sup>76</sup> Peter Boomgaard (2002) briefly summarizes government relief policy as follows:

During most of the nineteenth century, the policy of the state had been a 'liberal' one, that is liberal in the nineteenth-century sense of the word: laissez faire. It was believed that government's responsibility for the well-being of the indigenous population was limited to removing obstacles that blocked the free operation of market forces. If natural calamities occurred, government did admittedly attempt to alleviate the most obvious symptoms of suffering. Taxes were lowered, relief works organized, and corvee labour services suspended. But that was it, and it was often too late and too little. This was partly caused by two other factors, namely limited knowledge and understanding of the rice trade, and extreme reluctance of the Residents, the highest local colonial civil servants, to admit that famine conditions obtained in their resort. A Resident who had not prevented a famine, had seriously blotted his copy-book.<sup>77</sup>

The first famine after the one that helped the Cultivation System to its grave occurred in the same region that had been devastated in the 1840s: Demak. In 1873, Demak was hit by a famine the direct cause of which was crop failures in the 1872-1873 planting season. As the colonial report of 1873 (candidly) admitted: 'the degree to which the population suffered starvation, was apparent aside

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<sup>74</sup> Elson, 'The famine in Demak and Grobogan', 39.

<sup>75</sup> SV, 55. See also Wim Ravesteijn, 'Irrigatie en koloniale staat op Java: de gevolgen van de hongersnoden in Demak', *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (1999) 79-106.

<sup>76</sup> Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply in Java', 166.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Boomgaard, 'From subsistence crises to business cycle depressions, Indonesia 1800-1940', *Itinerario* 26 nos. 3/4 (2002) 35-50: 42.

from the relocations, that occurred here and there, from the fact that some bodies of natives were found on the public road.’<sup>78</sup> The government responded late with authorization of relief works and diminishing *corvée* labour obligations, due to negligence on part of the Resident of Semarang.<sup>79</sup> Government-ordered analysis by the resident of Pekalongan Kollman concluded that structural crop failures due to irregular rain patterns and lack of irrigation systems were the primary cause. As a consequence of the report, the government authorized large-scale irrigation works to be constructed, which were completed over the following decades. This provided much employment in day-labour, but was unsuccessful in structurally alleviating the poverty prevalent in the department.<sup>80</sup>

#### West-Java: Banten 1880-1882 and West-Indramayu 1883-1884

Two roughly concurrent famines occurred in the early 1880s, in Banten residency and in the region of Indramayu (Cirebon residency). They are grouped together in this paragraph because they shared a direct cause: the deadly epidemics among livestock that spread over West-Java during those years.

Several parallels between these famines and that in Semarang in the early twentieth century can be identified. First, it was preceded by severe epidemics among both cattle and people. In Banten, malaria took ten percent of the population, while cattle diseases reduced the livestock in the residency. Consequently, many fields remained unplanted, which would have reduced yields anyway. As in 1900, this dire situation was further aggravated by adverse weather conditions. As can be seen from graph 2.1 below, government aid amounted roughly fl. 830.000 in direct aid and fl. 709.000 in land rent remissions. Initially, the government attempted as much as possible to hold on to free market principles, contracted the import of large quantities of rice through the local firm *Landberg & Zoon* and B.C. de Jong, who would sell the rice at cost with the promise that the government would relieve them of whatever stocks remained in the spring of 1882. Already in January though, the government stepped in by purchasing the company’s stock, though it was unable to sell much rice even at much reduced prices.<sup>81</sup> Although purchase of rice was ultimately the greatest fiscal investment of the colonial government, the importance of relief works as an aid strategy can be discerned from graph 2.1, especially since the expenses for rice purchases were unintended. In his critical analysis of the Banten relief operations, published in 1892, former NEI engineer R.A. van Sandick notes that relief works had for some 10 years been the primary government response to

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<sup>78</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1873*, 5.

<sup>79</sup> SV, 48.

<sup>80</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1873*, 5; SV, 55; Suryo, Social and economic history, 206-210.

<sup>81</sup> Hugenholtz, ‘Famine and food supply’, 172-174.

destitution. For this, he in fact uses the English term 'relief works', suggesting a direct borrowing of 'relief works' as a famine relief concept from the British.<sup>82</sup>

Overall, the government was quite taken with its own response to the Banten famine, as can be seen from the official report on the famine that it published in the *Javasche Courant*. The report reveals that the government learned several lessons from this experience regarding aid strategies. First, the local relief works, easily reachable by the destitute were preferably to those that were organized far away (cf. Chapter 1 & 4). Second, that the usefulness of relief works should be 'understood' by the population, thus irrigation works are recommended. Further, that it is useful to add extra staff to the European administration:

The results of the thus doubled oversight were not long in coming. Headmen and population, seeing how much care Government had taken for her interests, were imbued with new life as it were, and a show of force was demonstrated, that exceeded all expectations. This had as a consequence, that an expanse of land was planted, not just much greater than in both previous years, but truly great in relation to the available workforce. (...) while in normal times, as a consequence of the rather indolent character of the Bantam man [*'Bantammer'*], the favourable time to plant is often left unused, as many first start preparing [*'bewerken'*] their *sawahs*, the fields were now planted well in time, which had as a consequence, that in many places already mid-March the harvest started, and with cooperative weather a produce was gotten, that can be called ample, especially in comparison to the diminished needs as a consequence of the shrinking of the population.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, it states that in providing aid it had cared for those with no means, who would have otherwise been a burden and for the sick, who either recovered or died a 'quiet and proper' death, instead of drifting and dying 'by the public road'.<sup>84</sup> With such a ravishing success, the report could not but conclude that:

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<sup>82</sup> The severity of the famine and the necessity of government intervention is also questioned by former NEI engineer R.A. van Sandick, who claims the population was not even close to famine. Rather, the relief measures had been pushed by officials fearful of disgrace as the region supposedly affected (Lebak) was the same as had been the topic of Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (Amsterdam 1860). R.A. van Sandick, *Lief en leed uit Bantam* (2nd ed.; Zutphen 1893) 103; 99-129.

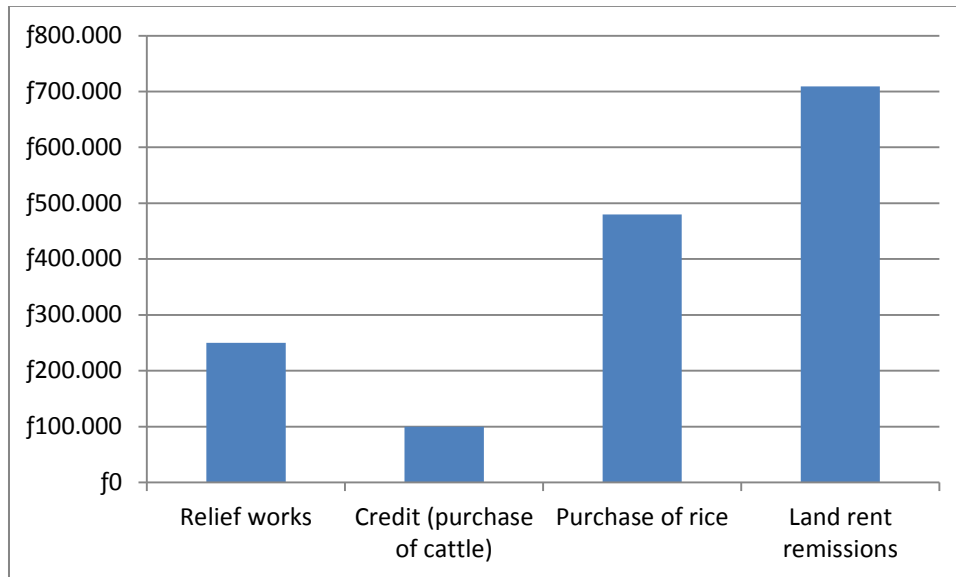
<sup>83</sup> 'Rapport houdende vermelding van al hetgeen er voorziening in den nood der bevolking van Banta is verricht, van de resultaten, welke daardoor verkregen zin, van de financieele uitkomsten, waartoe die voorzieningen hebben geleid, en van de wijze, waarop de firma *Landberg & Zoon* en de heer *B.C. de Jong* zich gekweten hebben van de taak, die zij op zich genomen hebben.' Appendix to *Javasche Courant* 21 (1883 no. 21).

<sup>84</sup> 'Rapport', Appendix to *Javasche Courant* (1883 no. 21).



The measures taken by government were altogether crowned with the most brilliant result, seeing [*getuige*] the current condition of Banten, which is as favorable as no one could have expected a couple years ago.<sup>85</sup>

**Graph 2.1.** Government aid to Banten (1880-1882).



**Source:** Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply', 187.

The second region victimized (in part) by cattle disease and crop failures in the early 1880s was West-Indramayu, part of private lands in the residency Cirebon. The unique aspect of this region was that it had been leased by the government to landholders, who forced the population to produce only rice. Under the lease agreement, the landlords collected the land rent, often at extortionate rates. The region was poor, with the population farming at subsistence level, unable to save meaningful capital from year to year. In the early 1880s, the same epidemic that killed livestock in Banten also affected West-Indramayu. The government further increased the plight of the local population by mass killing buffalos to prevent the epidemic from spreading. Combined with high tax burdens and falling income, this greatly impoverished the residents of the private domains.<sup>86</sup>

Poor harvests in 1880-1883 finally proved the last straw. It was a crisis not so much brought on by actual food scarcities though, but because prices had risen to unaffordable levels for the population. An official inquiry was performed by H.J. Heyting at the request of the Resident of Cirebon J. Paes. Heyting found much destitution as a consequence of the extractive practices on the

<sup>85</sup> Rapport', Appendix to *Javasche Courant* 21 (1883).

<sup>86</sup> M.R. Fernando, 'Famine in a land of plenty: plight of a rice-growing community in Java, 1883-84', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41 no. 2 (2010) 291-320: 306-308.

private lands and the loss of cattle. The report however, was suppressed by the Governor-General – who was sympathetic to private enterprise on Java –, and the Resident of Cirebon summarily fired.<sup>87</sup> After the famine, new government policies opened the district to the wider market economy. Similar to Demak and Grobogan in Semarang, West-Indramayu remained a region deeply dependent on rice production, and did not develop economic diversification the way many parts of Java did, through the expansion of European commercial agriculture. Instead, smallholder farmers relied on their rice crops, which provided just enough to get by on a year-to-year basis. The fragility of the native economy was brought to surface during the c. 1900-1903, which will be described in the next chapter.<sup>88</sup>

## **2.2 Prelude to famine. Economic conditions on Java, c. 1870-1900: the case of Semarang.**

During the period of liberal policy, the Indonesian economy and population expanded dramatically. Java's population grew from roughly twenty million in 1880 to thirty million in 1900.<sup>89</sup> Figures for this period, though, especially those from the colonial reports are not very reliable and prone to dramatic and, according to Widjojo Nitisastro, unrealistic oscillations in regional growth rates.<sup>90</sup> Economic expansion was primarily driven by private investments in oil production and export crop growth, aided in this by the central government. Mostly tobacco, coffee and sugar were grown either on privately owned plantations or through contracting local populations to grow these crops in their fields. In various parts of the island, the Javanese became increasingly dependent on the production of export crops for their subsistence. Further, new policies preventing government intervention into the native economy led to food crop markets becoming increasingly commercialized, thus also increasing native dependence on the market for both selling its crops and acquiring its needs. Investments in new industries came mostly from European ventures. Export crop production and profits rose significantly during the 1870s. A deep crisis affected the export crop markets during the worldwide economic downturn of the 1880s, which was partly responsible for the collapse of the sugar and coffee industries on Java, the latter industry also suffering from crop diseases. The vast majority of the native farmers both on Java and on the Outer Islands continued to be small peasants. Available evidence suggests a decline in living standards toward the end of the nineteenth century,

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<sup>87</sup> Fernando, 'Famine in a land of plenty', 306.

<sup>88</sup> M.R. Fernando, 'The worst of both worlds: commercial rice production in West Indramayu, 1885-1935', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 41 no. 3 (2010) 421-448: 421-426.

<sup>89</sup> Jan Luiten Van Zanden and Daan Marks, *An economic history of Indonesia: 1800–2010* (London 2012) 74, 113.

<sup>90</sup> Widjojo Nitisastro, *Population trends in Indonesia* (Jakarta 2006) 53-55.

though the measurement of living is a precarious endeavour with limited source materials for a very diverse archipelago.<sup>91</sup>

### Poverty in Semarang

This section prepares the following chapter's analysis of the famine Semarang experience around 1900, by outlining briefly the economic structure of the residency from c. 1870. Particular attention is given to the famine-prone regions of Demak and Grobogan. Surveying social and economic developments, Djoko Suryo paints a dire picture of nineteenth century rural Semarang. Suryo describes a calamity-ridden, poorly administrated region, in which smallholder farmers saw their living conditions slowly deteriorate:

The experience of 19<sup>th</sup> century rural Semarang shows that maladministration disrupted economic and social life in many villages in this Residency. Changes in the infrastructure promoted by the construction of railways opened the villages to the impact of the outside world. The economic depression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century hit local trade and industry, lowering wages and farm revenues. Periodic scarcity caused by harvest failure, flood and other natural causes and endemic disease, increased the hardships of economic and social life. All this brought declining welfare, distress, instability and unrest to the people in the villages of the Residency of Semarang in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>92</sup>

Like much of Java, up to 1900 Semarang (and Japara) had seen rapid increases in population during the later nineteenth century, though colonial officials considered large parts of the residency to not be very densely populated.<sup>93</sup>

Agriculture on Java was to a great extent dependent on the monsoon season, which allowed for two harvests each year. Semarang was no different. The first harvest in most regions of the residency consisted primarily of rice, which was harvested during the spring, from about March or April. Parts of the fields were then planted with secondary crops, c. 75% of which were either food

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<sup>91</sup> Van Zanden and Marks, *An economic history of Indonesia*, 78-94.

<sup>92</sup> Suryo, *Social and economic life*, 262.

<sup>93</sup> *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903) 110. For the rest of this chapter, this publication will be referred to as SV. Until 1901, Japara was a separate residency. From 1 January 1901, it joined with Semarang residency as part of a major administrative overhaul of Java. This section deals only with nineteenth-century Semarang, excluding Japara. For a study on nineteenth-century Japara, one might consult Frans Hüsken, *Een dorp op Java: sociale differentiatie in een boerengemeenschap, 1850-1980* (Overveen 1988). On the administrative changes on Java, see A.J. Gooszen, 'Administrative division and redivision on Java and Madura, 1880-1942', *Indonesia Circle* 13 no. 36 (1985) 23-53.

crops or cotton.<sup>94</sup> Of lesser importance were the growing of coffee, sugar and tobacco. At the end of the dry season, from roughly August/September, the second harvest would yield its crops, which were either consumed or sold to bridge the months leading up to the rice harvest.

While in most departments there was meaningful differentiation in crop plantings, in the departments of Demak and Grobogan, the population depended almost entirely on the success of its rice crops. No other crops of significance were grown for the first harvest. The second harvest consisted mostly of cassava or maize for each department respectively. An appendix to the SV, yields insights into landownership patterns in the districts. It is evident from data, and in line with statements from colonial officials, that Demak and Grobogan were regions with mostly smallholder agriculture, most landowners being in possession of or tending to communally-owned plots of between 0,375 *roe* and 2 *bouw*.<sup>95</sup> Tenancy was nearly non-existent and there was little concentration of lands into the hands of large landowners. Only a few thousand people were employed in agriculture as non-landowning labourers.<sup>96</sup>

Demak and Grobogan were deeply impoverished regions. The SV and the OMW reports both make clear that the people produced just barely enough to make ends meet in good years.<sup>97</sup> Even with successful crops, declining prices for rice led to deepening impoverishment throughout Semarang residency in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as is noted by Djoco Suryo:

As the basic product, most villagers in the Districts which grew neither coffee or sugar used rice not only for daily consumption but also for other purposes. They had to sell rice to pay their land tax, head tax (*hoofdgeld*), clothing, communal feast (*selamatan*), festivals and ceremonies, tillage cost, and other necessities. Formerly, the villagers in the coffee and/or

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<sup>94</sup> *Koloniaal verslag van 1900*, appendices MM and NN; *Koloniaal verslag van 1901*, appendices NN and OO; *Koloniaal verslag van 1902*, appendices LL and MM; *Koloniaal verslag van 1903*, appendices KK and LL; *Koloniaal verslag van 1904*, appendices LL and MM. Also see OMW V. *Samentrekking van de afdeulingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar den landbouw in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) appendix B.

<sup>95</sup> A *roe* was 14,19 m<sup>2</sup>; a *bouw* was 500 *roe* or 7.096,5 m<sup>2</sup>. *Aantekenboekje van het Koloniaal Museum te Haarlem* (Amsterdam 1905) 44.

<sup>96</sup> OMW IX. *Samentrekking van de afdeulingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa in de Residentie Semarang*. (Batavia 1907) appendix 4 See graphs 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 (appendix C).

<sup>97</sup> SV, appendix L 'Budgetten van Inlandsche huisgezinnen in de noodlijdende streken vóór en gedurende den nood'. Boomgaard has calculated that the 'average' families of the SV's appendix L obtained 76% of their income from 'own assets' and 24% from 'side-lides'. Peter Boomgaard, 'The non-agricultural side of an agricultural economy. Java, 1500-1900' in: Paul Alexander, Peter Boomgaard and Ben White eds., *In the shadow of agriculture. Non-farm activities in the Javanese economy, past and present* (Amsterdam 1991) 14-40: 36. This image of the small farmer as barely able to make ends meet is anecdotally corroborated by three case-studies of budgets of Javanese farmers from the Central-Javanese district Kemiri (Bagelen Residency). These were published in *De Indische Gids* by one Arminius. The farmers all brought in just enough rice and wages to cope. Arminius, 'Het budget van den Javaansche landbouwer', I, II, III, *De Indische Gids* 11 no. 2 (1889) 1685-1720, 1885-1917, 2149-2185.

sugar growing Districts in the Regencies of Salatiga and Kendal were able to use their crop payments for their land tax and other necessities, but when sugar and coffee entered a crisis the villagers had to fall back on their rice. For the villagers in both single and double-crop Districts, therefore, rice sales seem to have been a necessity, but the market was affected by the same sugar and coffee crisis of the 1880s and by the introduction of new currency in 1877 (see below). Consequently, the villagers had to sell their rice at low prices.<sup>98</sup>

Since rice was a basic measurement of living conditions in the villages, the low price of rice had far reaching effect. As a result there was little opportunity accumulation on the part of the peasants, as well as low purchasing power and a limited capacity to secure property. In addition to that, the low price of rice also affected the wages of labourers and artisans during the same period. Rice cultivating departments like Demak and Grobogan will have been especially vulnerable to this trend. Few other roads for acquiring income were either open to or taken by the Javanese population. Commercial crops were barely grown in the residency, especially in Demak and Grobogan.<sup>99</sup> Families often grew some crops on their private plots, such as coconuts or cassava, but these, while essential to the family budget, were of minor importance compared to the rice harvests. Neither were the Javanese involved significantly in trade.

Throughout the residency of Semarang (large scale) commercial trade, both domestic and external, had come under domination of the Chinese. Suryo identifies the introduction of railroads to the residency as the lead cause for the demise of native traders. The Chinese had more means and opportunities to handle the subsequent growing scale of trade. The native traders operated only on the local level, on a small scale and dealt mostly in items and foodstuffs essential to day-to-day life. In the departments Demak and Grobogan, native trade was negligible.<sup>100</sup> The introduction of railroads likewise had spelled disaster for the few native industries in the departments. In Demak, locals had earned some extra money by producing *djarak*-oil, weaving and making batiks. Cheap petroleum imports pushed the first out of the market, while European clothes overwhelmed the latter. In Grobogan, only geographically limited trade in salt was of importance. Although the rail connections enlivened trade in crops, by allowing swift exports from the residency, those profiting were the Chinese or European traders rather than the Javanese farmers.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Suryo, Social and economic life, 202-203.

<sup>99</sup> SV, 4-26.

<sup>100</sup> Suryo, Social and economic life, 200-201.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem, 179-180. OMW VI. *Samentrekking van de afdeulingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar handel en nijverheid in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) 35-41; 75-77. OMW IX, *Samentrekking van de afdeulingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) 80-81.

Finally, although during the liberal period there had been some expansion of European industries, especially in commercial agriculture, this was very unevenly divided within Semarang residency. Industries were present in Semarang and Pati departments, but entirely absent from Demak and Grobogan. In the latter departments, farmers earned wages in kind or cash by working at each other's farms, weaving, or crop processing. Finding the scarcely available employment during the lean season was essential to make ends meet.<sup>102</sup> In summary then, Semarang residency was characterized by widespread dependence on rice cultivation, with some regional cash cropping and opportunities at employment in European, Chinese or native industries. Several departments and districts though, were almost wholly dependent on rice monoculture, with little to no possibilities for alternative employment. Compounding economic misery were recurring epidemics of cholera and fevers among people and cattle diseases.

Was this poverty acknowledged by the Dutch administration, and if so how was poverty interpreted? Some insight on this matter is given by reports that were commissioned by the Dutch NEI government in 1888 and 1891, on the welfare of its Javanese provinces, the organization of forced labour, and on the necessity of 'extraordinary' interventions in the native economy. Overall the 1888 reports on Semarang and Japara, then still a separate residency, indicate a population that, overall, experienced poverty and some decline in welfare in the 1880s. There were no scarcities in foodstuffs though, and welfare levels, while unimpressive, did not require any extraordinary measures to be taken by government.<sup>103</sup> The 1891 report on Semarang, which was of a similar nature, states that in the previous ten years welfare had declined, primarily due 'to the raising of the land rent in 1884, the low *padi* prices, the diminished production in coffee producing regions and in the department Kendal the adversities which the sugar manufacturers there faced.'<sup>104</sup>

Nonetheless, the absence of 'capital accumulation' by the Javanese was sought in first instance in their character and habits:

1st: profound indolence and lack of interest in order; 2nd which expresses itself mostly in the giving of parties; 3rd lack of enterprise; 4th upkeep of family members; 5th opium abuse; while taxes and corvée labour should not be forgotten.<sup>105</sup>

Blame is placed on lack of good economic sense on part of the natives rather than structural issues related to Dutch administration.

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<sup>102</sup> Suryo, Social and economic life, 168-173; OMW IX. *Economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang*, 78-79.

<sup>103</sup> SV, 60-62.

<sup>104</sup> SV, 63-64. *Koloniaal Verslag van 1892*, Appendix C8, 'Samarang', 4.

<sup>105</sup> SV, 64. *Koloniaal Verslag van 1892*, Appendix C8, 'Samarang', 4.

## 2.3 Conclusions

Though it remains a tentative conclusion, it would appear that a shift in government intervention policies occurred in the 1870s or 1880s, as began to respond more assertively and with more reliance on work-for-aid schemes via relief works. It (intended to) rely on the private market for supplication of foodstuffs to the population, though in the Banten case this turned out to be fraught with difficulties. After the famines of the early 1880s, no crises on a similar scale occurred until the 1900s. Nonetheless, especially the 1890s were erratic years for many Javanese regions. In 1890, 1897 and 1898 the government authorized fl. 102.603, and fl. 80.147 and fl. 44.237 respectively for relief measures.<sup>106</sup> It would be wrong though, to take the relative decrease in government intervention merely as a sign of improved prosperity. Peter Boomgaard has noted that the early 1890s saw 'modest harvests', and relatively high mortality, though available evidence does not conclusively show a subsistence crisis.<sup>107</sup> Already during the late 1880s, poverty spread and deepened across Java, because exports in previously profitable crops like coffee and sugar tanked due to crop disease, worldwide overproduction and cheaper competing products. At least in Semarang residency, mild improvement may have occurred, but this was not nearly enough to alleviate deep and widespread poverty. Such poverty placed the Javanese increasingly in a state of vulnerability, lacking the resilience to cope with setbacks in the form of crop failures.

A famine caused by economic downturn is termed by Sen a slump famine. Economic circumstances during a slump famine might be a fall in productivity and low wages, i.e. lower yields of endowments and worsening exchange entitlement mappings. On a personal level, crop losses lead to a decrease in purchasing power:

There are two distinct ways in which such a collapse might occur: (1) endowments contract – crops fail, livestock die; and/or (2) exchange entitlements shift unfavourably – food prices rise, wages or asset prices fall, so that individuals experience a decline in their 'terms of trade' with the market for food. In the case of self-provisioning farmers, the second category only comes into effect after a failure of the first – if production is insufficient for some reason, so that normally self-sufficient farming families suddenly become market dependent for their food needs.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1891*, 201; *Koloniaal Verslag van 1898*, 142; *Koloniaal Verslag van 1899*, 172.

<sup>107</sup> Boomgaard, 'From subsistence crises', 41. Appendix B shows scarcities in this period, particularly in Madiun and some other central and eastern residencies.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*.

Stephen Devereux aptly – for Semarang – describes the road to famine that such conditions can induce. First, while not all failed harvests immediately induce famine, crop losses can induce a vicious cycle of poverty: ‘an irreversible downward movement into deeper poverty as assets are mortgaged or sold without hope of recovery’.<sup>109</sup> As a consequence, this ‘leads to a reduction in the control by the peasant family over its means of production, thus adversely affecting its ability to withstand the stress incurred in subsequent season’.<sup>110</sup> Second, grain hoarding by the wealthy and traders taking advantage of ‘low post-harvest prices and selling it back to the poor later in the year, when market supplies of food are much reduced and prices have doubled or trebled’.<sup>111</sup> To this, a third factor may be added: a cycle of indebtedness, which according to Dutch sources was a state in which many smallholders found themselves in the early twentieth century. In such a situation, famine is just around the corner, as will be evident in the following chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> Devereux, *Theories of famine*, 43.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*.



### Chapter 3. Famine in the Netherlands East Indies, c. 1900-1904

This chapter outlines the events of the famines, as well as the colonial government's response to these events. The first section of the chapter will attempt to briefly reconstruct the development of the famines. Limits of material and space do not allow for an exhaustive exposition of the various famines' events. The section will indicate briefly which parts of the Outer Islands and Java were affected. For the Outer Islands, the situation on Celebes will be outlined, while for Java the focus will be on Semarang. Brief attention will first be paid to famine causation, demographic impact, coping strategies, market response and private charity.

Finally, the chapter will review the colonial state's response to the famines, focusing on the different types of aid chosen. It will be closed by reflections on what can be determined regarding:

- (1) Who qualified for relief and on what grounds?
- (2) What relief measures were considered preferable?
- (3) How were relief efforts organized? Who was responsible?
- (4) How did relief relate to government responsibility toward the welfare of its subjects?

It relies primarily on archival sources of the Ministry of Colonies, The Semarang famine report<sup>112</sup>, colonial newspapers and the travel accounts of H.H. van Kol, a socialist parliamentarian specialized in colonial affairs. Sources from the archives of the Ministry of Colonies consist mostly of *mailrapporten* [mail reports] forwarded by the Governor-General to the ministry at The Hague, which were stored there in the *openbare verbalen* [public records] and *geheime verbalen* [secret records]. However, serial, complete updates on relief spending are present only from 1902 onward. Most thorough are the updates sent to the ministry in 1902, when political interest in the famines peaked. Though the politics of the famine will be part of Chapter 4, this fact should not go unmentioned here. Lack of information before 1902 is partially supplemented using records from the government newspaper *Javasche Courant*, which from late 1900 published monthly updates on the state of harvests, crops in the field and rice prices. Further, much information will be used from the results of the above-mentioned inquiry into the Semarang famine. Aside from the *Javasche Courant*, information from several independent newspapers is used as supplement and counterpoint.

Henri van Kol visited the NEI archipelago in 1902 and toured through various famine-stricken regions. Van Kol published an account of his travels in 1903, *Uit onze koloniën*. Van Kol, a vocal critic

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<sup>112</sup> *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903). For the remainder of this chapter, this publication will be referred to as SV.

of Dutch colonial policy and its effect on the native population, used his writings in part to promote his political views. He specifically toured impoverished and famine-stricken regions to criticize colonial policy.<sup>113</sup> His visit to Semarang was understandably not uncontroversial. Van Kol travelled through some of the main famine-stricken regions – Demak, Grobogan (Semarang), Maros (Celebes) – and related in gruesome detail the atrocious conditions which he encountered. While on Java, he published articles in the *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad*, his texts being a harsh indictment of the acts of the colonial government, central and provincial. Government was very sensitive to these publications. The Resident of Semarang P.J. Sijthoff relates that he had words with Van Kol about his methods of inquiry. He states that Van Kol was a self-declared man of first impressions, who made unauthorized use of government records, and that his ‘prejudice’ was evident from his disregard of high-ranked officials who may have informed him. Instead, he obtained much information from a *landraad* clerk, who admitted to the Resident that he misinformed Van Kol, because he had a bone to pick with Assistant-Resident Hoeke of Grobogan as a result of some past wrongdoing and wanted the man fired. Still, Van Kol's observations provide not only a counterpoint to government sources, but also reveal the sensitivity of government to bad press, which will also be part of the next chapter's section on the politics of famine.<sup>114</sup>

### 3.1 The Outer Islands

Information for the Outer Islands is much scarcer than for Java. Archival sources contain only limited descriptions of ‘on the ground’ situations. Sources from various levels of the colonial government relate only amounts of money authorized, the type and location of relief efforts, and some indication of the general state of the region or population that is to receive the aid [*nood(lijdend), schaarschte/gebrek aan voedingsmiddelen*]. A notable exception is a 1904 report by the Governor of Celebes, though this document too is focused more on cataloguing government expenditures than providing information on the state of the people and their experience of the famine.

The onset of food shortages in the Outer Islands appears to have been only in 1902, as a result of crop failures following the abnormally dry east monsoon of 1902. Some regions received aid first in 1903. Aside from the whole island of Sulawesi, where failed to mediocre harvests appear to have

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<sup>113</sup> This is evident from the introduction to his travel account: H.H. van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën* (Leiden 1903) 1-5.

<sup>114</sup> Resident of Semarang Sijthoff to Governor-General W. Rooseboom, dd. 09-05-1902. Mail report 1902: 407. Stored in Openbaar Verbaal (OV) 19-08-1903, no. 41. Nationaal Archief, Den Haag [NA]. Ministerie van Koloniën: Openbaar Verbaal, 1901-1952 [MiKo OV], entry number 2.10.36.04, inventory number 197.

been the norm, relatively small parts of the islands were affected.<sup>115</sup> On Sumatra, limited regions in the residencies Palembang, Benkulen, Palembang, Riau, Tapanuli and Sumatra's West Coast suffered. Funds for Sulawesi were split between regions of the governorship Celebes and the Residency Manado. On Borneo, the people of the districts Martapura and the *Dajaklanden* of the Southern and Eastern Department of Borneo were supported by state funds. On Ternate, an earthquake caused destitution in one town, for which a relatively small sum was reserved for providing clothing and food.

Details for Borneo, Sumatra and Manado are scant. In fact, government records forwarded to the Ministry of Colonies in The Hague via the mail reports contain no more than indications of the amount of money, a general indication of the state of the population and sometimes specificities concerning the type and location of the relief authorized. Generally the state of the population is indicated as necessitous [*noodlijgend*] or need [*nood*] is said to prevail in a certain region.<sup>116</sup>

**Table 3.1** Funds authorized for relief on the Outer Islands, 1902-1904 (in guilders), by province

Province	1902	1903	1904	Totals
Celebes and dependencies	106.846	Rice loans, no funds specified	6.800	113.646
Manado	16.300	0	0	16.300
Benkulen	0	17.603	0	17.603
Riau and dependencies	10.000 (Rice loans)	Rice loans, funded from money authorized in 1902	0	10.000
Palembang	0	16.000 (rice loans)	0	16.000
Tapanuli	0	0	5.000	5.000
Sumatra's West Coast	0	1.100	0	1.100
Southern and Eastern department of Borneo	10.500 (Rice loans)	16.108	0	26.608
Ternate and dependencies	3.600 (purchase of food and clothing)	0	0	3.600
<b>Totals</b>	147.246	50.881	11.800	209.927

<sup>115</sup> Kroesen, 'Rapport over de schaarschte van voedingsmiddelen in een gedeelte van het Gouvernement van celebes en Onderhoorigheden in de jaren 1902 en 1903' (dd. 04-03-1904). Appendix to mail report 1904: 334. Stored in OV 22-05-1905, no. 63. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 314.

<sup>116</sup> See the mail reports used for table 3.1.

**Sources:** mail reports 1902: 847, 928, 956, 982, 1030, 1135 (stored in OV 19-8-1903, no. 41); 1903: 95, 133, 142, 190, 353, 456, 465, 533, 755, 832, 908 (stored in OV 19-8-1903, no. 40 and OV 14-5-1904, no. 60); 1904: 309, 574, 810, 960 (stored in OV 22-5-1905, no. 63). NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nrs. 197, 239, 314. *Koloniaal verslag van 1903*, 98.

The dire situation in parts of Celebes is described by H.H. van Kol, who visited parts of the island during his 1902 voyages. In May 1902 Van Kol briefly travelled through the sub-department of Maros, and observed that ‘so far as the eye could see all the *padi* plantings have failed, only at the end of our voyage some *sawahs* were found that could still provide some, if probably a poor harvest’.<sup>117</sup> Van Kol directly blames the central government of Batavia, which in the early 1890s disapproved the construction of irrigation works that would, Van Kol, claims, without doubt have much improved the agriculture of the region by reducing its dependence on rainfall.<sup>118</sup> Van Kol also relates some of the native’s coping strategies he observed:

One could see the children hosing each other with water to obtain rain – the so-called “tjipanana” – it was to no avail; the rains stayed away, and this time as well the moon passed clearly up an unclouded sky. Some men “pikolled”<sup>119</sup> a tuberous plant, the “slapa”, which they had gotten from the woods to still their hunger. Women with a yellow cloth around their heads seemed to belong to a sect, spread a few short years ago by a now deceased haji, who by shaking back and forth in prayer “dikiren” put themselves into an unconscious state, and excelled at fanaticism. Yet the fields yielded no harvests, the sheds contained no foods, poverty was approaching.<sup>120</sup>

In 1904, the Governor of Celebes Kroesen wrote a report to the Governor General containing his analysis of the causes for the famines in his province, as well as an account of the manner in which the funds authorized for famine relief had been spent. The Governor identifies two strands of causation: climatological and economic. An abnormally dry East Monsoon in 1902 led to failures of both first and second crop plantings and in some places to lack of drinking water. Economically, two factors were in play: First, the population lacked the resilience [*weerstandsvormogen*] to cope with this situation, as it was unaccustomed to saving up during better times. Second, traders charged higher prices for their rice, ‘which may be disapproved from a philanthropic point of view, but is

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<sup>117</sup> Van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën*, 127.

<sup>118</sup> The disapproved irrigation works were noted by the report of Kroesen, the Governor of Celebes, though he merely mentions they were discarded due to technical issues. They were begun as a relief work in 1902. Kroesen, ‘Rapport’.

<sup>119</sup> To ‘pikol’ is to carry a burden over the shoulder using a stick. ‘Pikolen’, *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (accessed via gtb.inl.nl, 11-08-2013).

<sup>120</sup> Kroesen, ‘Rapport’.

explicable from a commercial standpoint'.<sup>121</sup> In total, areas compromising, according to the report, 180.000 people experienced 'scarcity of foodstuffs' [*schaarschte van voedingsmiddelen*].<sup>122</sup>

In March and April 1902 worsening maize (*djagun*) crop failures in Binamoe, signaled to the Resident that a 'lack of foodstuffs' was imminent. On 12 May he gave orders to the 'concerned department chief to formulate the necessary plans to aid the population [*tot tegemoetkoming der bevolking*]'.<sup>123</sup> On 26 June the central government in Batavia authorized a requested sum of fl.40.000,- and on 13 October an additional sum of fl.60.000,-. Since poor harvests across the island meant sufficient maize could not be procured internally, rice was imported from Bali and Lombok. After receiving approval for the first sum, the government of Celebes ordered 5.500 picols of rice, which were shipped at a reduced rate by the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* (KPM).<sup>124</sup> The second sum was used to purchase an additional 4.000 picols. Rains did not return until December, forcing the government of Celebes to provide rice to the population, as 'it was rightfully feared, that the men would rent themselves out as coolies and abandon their lands'.<sup>125</sup> Aside from food provisions, maize and rice seeds were also acquired from Bali and Lombok and Pasuruan (Java), though some authorities managed to acquire these locally.<sup>126</sup>

Government aid took two forms. First, provisions of rice, which were distributed either as payment for participation in relief works, as doles, or sold at low prices. The primary goal of this kind of aid was to (1) allow the population to get through the dry season, (2) to allow it to 'devote itself completely' to the construction of maize fields. Second, provision of seeds for maize and rice, to be paid back, 'either in money, or in kind' on orders of the central government – though civil servants were instructed that repayment should not be forcefully extracted from the population.<sup>127</sup>

Kroesen ends his report by volunteering some suggestions by which the vulnerability of the population could be reduced. Principally, he sought to 'economically strengthen' the population by establishing communal rice sheds, claiming that these yielded 'favourable' results in Cirebon and Semarang. His proposals met with resistance among some of the native civil servants:

When discussing this affair the regents and other district heads showed themselves taken in by the idea, however when it came to its execution, the heads of the department Takalar retreated, claiming that they could not vouch for the honesty of their subordinate heads.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Kroesen, 'Rapport'. OV 22-05-1905, no. 63. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 314

<sup>122</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>124</sup> A picol was 61,17 kg. *Aantekenboekje van het Koloniaal Museum te Haarlem* (Amsterdam 1905) 45.

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>126</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>128</sup> Ibidem.

Though the Governor confirmed their interpretation, he states that ‘principally an intended useful measure was rebutted by a lack of will [lust] to make an effort in the interest of their subjects, (...)’, as the civil servants could not possibly make this initiative work without their cooperation.<sup>129</sup>

Some themes that will recur for more thorough analysis in the third section of this chapter can be discerned. First, blame of famine causation is placed partly on the natives themselves, as they lack the economic sense to save up for lesser times. Second, there is no critical evaluation of the role of Dutch governance. While the native leaders are blamed for the failure of a protective measure, the impact of European colonial policies are not at all evaluated. Third, the report, while it does contain brief reflections on causation and preventative measures is mostly concerned with accounting for government expenditures – indicating a priority seen as well in the communication between the Netherlands and the NEI. Fourth, the proclivity of Dutch officials to favour communal storage and distribution sheds, observed as well in Semarang, Cirebon and Surabaya. The basic elements comprising the lens through which Dutch officials reported on the famines are thus in place.

### 3.2 Java

Java was the principal affected region. There were signs already before the 1900 crop failures that a food crisis was on the horizon. Shortages of rice were already anticipated by the government, though it did not foresee crop failures. Rather, it expected rice stocks of Java to be drained through exports to British India, where famine had been recurrent in the last years of the nineteenth century. In 1900 it repeated an 1897 circular to the residents of Java, warning that

Eying the prevailing scarcity of foodstuffs in British India, it is my honour to remind Your Honours by order of the Governor-General, of the measures which had been recommended by the circular of this side [the government] to guard against the onset of a lack of foodstuffs and padi seeds on Java and Madura.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>130</sup> Mail report 1900: 195. Stored in OV 10-5-1900, no. 8. NA, Ministerie van Koloniën 1850-1900, entry nr. 2.10.02, inv. nr. 5486.

Staying true to liberal economic policy, the residents were instructed in the repeated 1897 circular to encourage the Javanese to plant many food crops, as early as possible and to save some *padi* to prevent shortages.<sup>131</sup>

In all residencies, the necessitous populations were located in only limited parts, except in Semarang where the crisis was relatively more widespread. In Semarang, the entire departments of Demak, Grobogan and parts of Semarang, Pati, Djoana, Japara, Kendal and Salatiga were affected.<sup>132</sup> The first regions affected appear to have been located in Semarang residency. In January 1901 the Governor-General informed the Minister of Colonies via telegram: 'scarcity only (in) some provinces, mostly (in the residency) Semarang, for which relief works (are) authorized'.<sup>133</sup> Most other regions began receiving significant government aid from 1902.

Available sources do not record death counts, mortality rates, or a systematic overview of the number of people aided by relief. Nonetheless, statistical data from the SV and the OMW reports make it possible to make a tentative analysis of the demographic impact of the famines. First, of meaningful demographic impact on Semarang, Kedu and Madura, on the other of the relatively mild impact on population numbers in other residencies over the 5-year period covered by the census. While other residencies of Java and Madura show significant population increases of between 2.9% and 17.3%, population in Semarang, Kedu and Madura declined by 2.6%, 0.9% and 0.7% respectively over the five-year census period. With the exception of Besuki, all growth rates in the provinces where growth did occur 1900-1905, were lower than growth rates during 1895-1900.<sup>134</sup>

As table 3.2 shows, most of the government relief funds were spent on the residency Semarang, which received c. 68% of all money authorized for relief operations. In total, the NEI government spent over fl. 4.000.000 on relief for Java and Madura during six years. Some residencies (Madiun, Rembang, Surabaya) continued to receive sums through 1905.<sup>135</sup> Aside from direct support, populations in stricken regions were also aided through remittances of the land tax. Remissions in land taxes could be granted for three reasons: crop failures, exceptional circumstances and fields normally planted remaining unplanted. While the first and third reasons would normally apply to some degree even in normal years, during the famine years the dire economic circumstances were

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<sup>131</sup> 'Vervolg der geschiedenis van den Resident die niet tegen zijn verantwoordelijkheid opgewassen is', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 23-02-1901.

<sup>132</sup> For an overview of affected departments and residencies see table 3.2 below and table 3.6 in appendix D. There are some inconsistencies between the two tables. The first lists the funds that according to the Colonial Reports were authorized for famine relief during these years. It shows funds were authorized for a number of residencies (for instance Semarang) that did not suffer 'lack' of foodstuffs during that period according to the OMW results presented in 3.6.

<sup>133</sup> Telegram of the Governor-General W. Rooseboom to the Ministry of Colonies, dd. 22 January 1901. Stored in OV 11-10-1901, no. 58. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 81.

<sup>134</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1908* (accessed via [www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl](http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl), 9-8-2013) 1.

<sup>135</sup> See tables 3.2 and 3.3 and map 3.1 below for details on relief fund distributions.

considered grounds for granting extra remissions for 'exceptional circumstances', which in practice meant extraordinary poverty. The latter remissions totalled nearly fl. 240.000. As might be expected, the bulk of this sum was granted to Semarang.<sup>136</sup>

The famines occurred on an island with great regional and local diversity in agricultural, social and cultural habits, as well as varying forms of government and regionally divergent legal structures relating specifically to government responsibility toward the welfare of its people. Famines were experienced on private lands (West-Indramayu, Cirebon), native states (Surakarta) and government lands. Some regions, such as Demak, Grobogan and Indramayu, were dependent almost entirely on (commercial) rice production; others had significant commercial cropping industries – for instance Bodjonegoro where low-quality tobacco was grown.<sup>137</sup> Famine causation differed for each region, although some factors overlap - most notably abnormal monsoon weather patterns and lack of economic opportunity. Direct causes were usually irregular weather patterns and a combination of (epidemic) diseases affecting crops, cattle and people, notably a cholera epidemic.<sup>138</sup>

One of the key questions concerning a famine's causation is whether it was caused by actual lack of available foodstuffs in a region, or whether foodstuffs were present, but unobtainable by large parts of the population. No definitive answer can be given for the present case. On the one hand, government and newspaper sources speak of destitute people who had nothing to feed themselves with, as a result of crop failures.<sup>139</sup> On the other hand, in Semarang and Surabaya massive private imports of rice caused prices to diverge little from non-famine years *on average*. Further, the government's preferred method of relief was public employment at low wages, implying that food was available to be bought, but people lacked the means to. What likely happened was a famine caused by a combination of loss of resources and insufficient income rather than unavailability of foods. Deprived of their main source of both food and income due to failed harvests, many peasants became dependent on the limited possibilities they had to earn money on a day to day basis to purchase sufficient food for subsistence.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> See appendix E.

<sup>137</sup> On famine and poverty in Bojonegoro, see C.L.M. Penders, *Bojonegoro: 1900-1942: a story of endemic poverty in North-East Java* (Singapore 1984).

<sup>138</sup> This was certainly the case in Semarang. See paragraph 3.2.2.

<sup>139</sup> SV, appendix L; 'Nota over den economischen toestand van de Bengawandjero. Onderzoek te Toerie den 3en en 4en Juli 1902.', appendix to mail report 712. Stored in OV 19-8-1903, no. 41. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04; inv. nr. 197. For instance the testimony of the assistant-resident of Lamongan (Surabaya): 'I made a tour through some ailing dessa's in the district Tengahan. The vast majority (*gros*) of the population had literally not a kernel of stocks and how the people survived is a mystery to me' C.F. de Haan, 'Dessaloemboengs in Lamongan', *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 29 (1905) 333-341: 333.

<sup>140</sup> 'Nota over den economischen toestand van de Bengawandjero'. OV 19-8-1903, 41. NA, MiKo OV; entry nr. 2.10.36.04; inv. nr. 197.



Thus, it is important to note that while many regions on Java experienced a similar phenomenon (a food crisis), a host of factors led to differences in the many constituent elements of the phenomenon, such as causation, coping strategies and state aid. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to study and compare all these factors. Partly as a consequence of availability of evidence, partly due to the fact that these residencies were most severely affected, in-depth descriptions will focus mainly on the famines in Semarang. Further, rather than expand on all various factors involved in these famines, this section will focus on state aid and in a broader sense the interpretation of the famines by the colonial government. First a rough overview of events in Semarang and Surabaya will be provided. It briefly deals with direct causation, native coping strategies other than reliance on government aid, the role of private charity and the food market. After this the various types of government aid will be discussed. Finally, government interpretation of the famine and the forms of relief it deemed appropriate will be analysed. In this section, particular attention will be paid to the relationship between government interpretation of its subjects, its view on proper colonial governance and the administration of famine relief.

**Table 3.2:** Funds authorized for relief for Java and Madura (1900-1905), by residency (in guilders). For a visual representation see map 3.1 below.

Department	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	Totals
Bagelen	31.340	0	0	0	0	0	31.340
Batavia	0	8.217	27.465	65.366	0	0	101.048
Preanger Regencies	0	36.000	0	0	0	0	36.000
Cirebon	0	0	0	10.000	0	0	10.000
Pekalongan	0	7.033	400	5.500	0	0	12.933
Semarang	230.029	1.460.044	1.181.167	104.893	4.800	3.000	2.983.933
Rembang	0	0	30.032	7.260	17.000	13.500	67.792
Surabaya	0	0	351.715	84.847	37.365	13.000	486.927
Pasaruan	0	0	0	5.000	0	0	5.000
Banyumas	0	0	7.307	37.988	0	0	45.295
Kedu	0	102.054	64.479	113.566	28.380	40.807	349.286
Kediri	0	0	58.991	34.500	0	0	93.491
Madura	0	0	0	31.010	0	0	31.010
Madiun	0	0	0	0	30.300	2.700	33.000
Surakarta	0	0	10.000	0	0	0	10.000
<b>Totals</b>	<b>261.369</b>	<b>1.613.348</b>	<b>1.731.556</b>	<b>499.930</b>	<b>117.845</b>	<b>73.007</b>	<b>4.297.055</b>

**Sources:** *Koloniaal verslag van 1902-1905* (accessed via [www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl](http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl), 27-06-2013). Mail rapport 1905: 85, 298, 393, 565, 1014, 1020, 1086, 1373: stored in OV 03-04-1906, no. 43. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 369. \*: Sompoks were shelters/nursing homes for the sick.

**Table 3.3:** Funds authorized for relief on Java and Madura (1900-1905), by type of aid (in guilders).

	<b>Relief works</b>	<b>Food provision</b>	<b>Agricultural purposes</b>	<b>Ploughing cattle</b>	<b>Sompoks (in Semarang)</b>	<b>Various purposes*</b>	<b>Totals</b>
1900	240.369	0	21.000	0	0	0	261.369
1901	771.755	338.500	106.873	360.100	36.120	0	1.613.348
1902	1.120.646	71.500	237.593	232.717	69.100	0	1.731.556
1903	308.332	93.900	14.817	1.815	12.300	68.766	499.930
1904	112.745	0	300	0	4.800	0	117.845
1905	67.307	0	2700	0	3.000	0	73.007
<b>Totals</b>	2.621.154	503.900	383.283	594.632	125.320	68.766	<b>4.297.055</b>

**Sources:** see table 3.2. +: Category used only in the colonial report of 1904.

**Map 3.1:** Distribution of famine relief funds on Java and Madura (1901-1905).



**Source:** see sources for table 3.2. Map adapted by Julian Tangermann from the original map by Robert Cribb, *Digital Atlas of Indonesian History* (Copenhagen 2010) map: 'Java administrative divisions, 1901-1924' (may be consulted via [www.indonesianhistory.info](http://www.indonesianhistory.info)). Dutch spelling retained to minimize changes to the original.

### 3.2.1 Famine on private lands and natives states

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, famine occurred in three types of lands: government lands, private lands and native states. The private and native lands were similar in that direct rule over them had been leased by the colonial government to either private owners, or the native rulers, the Susuhunan of Surakarta and the Sultan of Yogyakarta. This meant that the primary responsibility toward the welfare of the Javanese inhabitants of these lands was with the private entrepreneurs or the native rulers respectively. Information on the impacts of the c.1900-1904 crop failures on these lands is limited in that both the colonial government and colonial newspapers paid far more attention to events in government-controlled lands. Nonetheless, it is evident from newspaper reports and some government documents that on both categories of land shortages and/or famine occurred.

#### Native States

##### *Yogyakarta*

The situation in Yogyakarta is particularly hard to gauge. No reports encountered in newspapers or government sources refer to famine occurring in the Sultanate, though the population did suffer from high prices of rice and there was some concern over potential scarcities. Further, newspaper reports mention a 'worrying' increase in the number of foundlings.<sup>141</sup> The *Nieuws van den Dag* references efforts by a controleur Gortmans who in 1901 did good work with his efforts to stave off famine for the Sultanate.<sup>142</sup> Whether or not a famine occurred, poverty was wide-spread and need high in the first years of the new century, when cholera epidemics also took their toll. In 1903 still, the newspapers *Nieuws van den Dag* and *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* report deep poverty in the south of Yogyakarta residency, where people were willing to work for a pittance, often had no rice to eat and sold their prized possessions to survive:

Lately, the little man has had a hard time here. It is nearly as bad as Demak, he is happy, if he can get some rice, many satisfy themselves with some maize and forest tubers like waloer,

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<sup>141</sup> 'In de residentie Djocdjakarta', *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 14-05-1902; 'Hongersnood', *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 28-10-1901; 'Hongersnood op Java', *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 13-09-1901. 'Hongersnood', *De Telegraaf*, 08-01-1901. The latter article also relates the story of a man in Gunung Kidul, who was driven by hunger to eat from the fields of another farmer. The farmer stabbed him through, and the man was taken to the hospital. According to the article, he would face trial for theft if he recovered.

<sup>142</sup> 'Hongersnood', *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 28-10-1901.

sente, yes even gadoeng, which acts intoxicatingly if not prepared well. The coolie recruiters have at present an easy job, the dessa and district headmen so much heavier [a job] to clarify the many small thefts and to house the numerous beggars, prosecute street muggers and to prevent robberies.<sup>143</sup>

### *Surakarta*

The situation in Surakarta appears to have been much more dire, especially in 1901. After the rice crop failed in 1901, especially the northern parts of the Residency suffered food and water shortages. Updating the Governor-General on his actions, the Resident of Surakarta De Vogel stated that he had in first instance sought to implore the Susuhunan and private land renters to take action. According to De Vogel, both parties followed his advice of purchasing rice for their suffering populations, the former being aided by expedient action of Chinese firms and agreements to tariff reductions of the state railway company.<sup>144</sup> The Susuhunan paid for the rice shipments for his subjects, however at some point in late 1901, he was unable (or unwilling) to pay for further measures. Thus, in the spring of 1902 the Resident requested the central government to authorize fl. 10.000,- in relief funds, which were granted, and could be spent by the Resident as he saw fit.<sup>145</sup>

### Private lands: Cirebon

Information on conditions on private lands in this period is even scarcer than those in native states. One severe subsistence crisis, however, is recorded for the early twentieth century. During the years in between the crises of the 1880s and the 1900s, the Javanese farmers of West-Indramayu became increasingly dependent on commercial rice production for their upkeep, which meant that

the erratic rice production was a worrying concern for people, because it was inadequate for family consumption after payment of the rising land rent, and did not allow them to extricate themselves from spiralling debts, a state of affairs confounded by the abuses that crept into assessment and collection of the land rent. The only course of action peasants could follow

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<sup>143</sup> Willem, 'Brieven uit Djocdja', *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 16-02-1903.

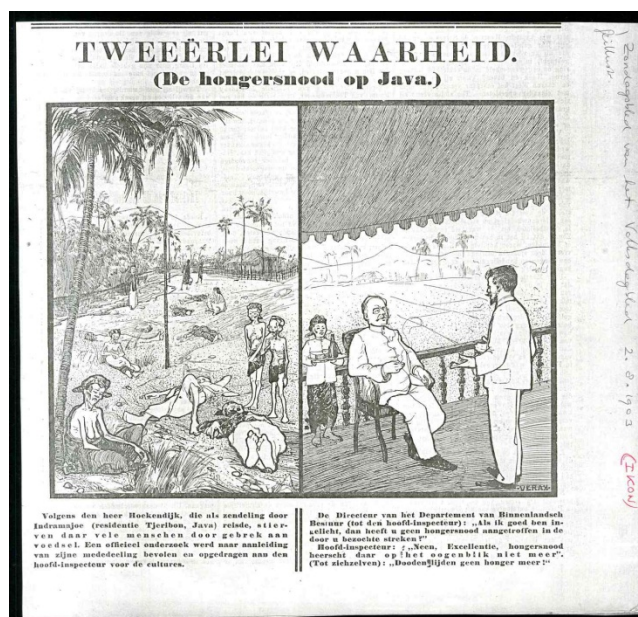
<sup>144</sup> These tariff reductions were the subject of some debate between the Resident of Surakarta, and the Department of Inland Administration on the one hand and the Nederlands-Indische Spoorweg-Maatschappij which operated the line, and eventually required the intervention of the Minister of Colonies. See Geheim Verbaal [GV] 11-02-1902, W2/no. 118. NA, Ministerie van Koloniën [MiKo]: Geheim Archief, 1901-1940 [GA], entry nr. 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 12. Also GV 05-02-1902, no. O2. NA, MiKo GA, entry nr. 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 12.

<sup>145</sup> 'Nota van den Resident van Soerakarta omtrent de bestuursmaatregelen, die getroffen zyn ten behoeve en in het belang van de noodlydende bevolking van Soerakarta, met betrekking tot de schaarschte van voedingsmiddelen in het afgelopen jaar 1901'. Stored in: OV 29-09-1902, no. 6. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 145.

was to borrow money, often on unfavourable terms, binding them to a vicious cycle of debt against the background of frequent crop failures.<sup>146</sup>

As a consequence the people in the district were highly vulnerable to famine. When consecutive crop failures diminished rice production by some 50% in 1900 and 1901, this proved a final straw. That the camel's back was broken was however, not acknowledged by either the landlords who owned the domains of West-Indramayu, or the local government. It made much effort to discredit reports by missionary C.J. Hoekendijk, who in 1903 publicly sounded the alarm through an article in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. An official enquiry by Chief Inspector of Cultivations Van Lawick van Pabst was published in the state newspaper *Javasche Courant*, and denied any famine was occurring in the region.<sup>147</sup>

**Image 3.1:** 'Twofold truth (the famine on Java)'.



Published in *Volksdagblad* (Illustrated Sunday edition), 02-08-1903 by Verax (accessed via <http://search.socialhistory.org/Record/940598>, on 19-12-2013).<sup>148</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Fernando, 'The worst of both worlds', 427.

<sup>147</sup> Ibidem, 427-430.

<sup>148</sup> Text under the picture reads: (Left): according to Mr. Hoekendijk, who travelled through Indramayu (Residency Cirebon, Java), as a missionary, many people died there from lack of food. An official inquiry was ordered in response to his statement and assigned to the Head Inspector of Cultivations. (Right): The Director of the Inland Administration (to the Head Inspector): 'if I have been correctly informed, then you have found no famine in the regions you visited?' Head Inspector: 'No, Excellency, there is no longer famine there at the moment'. (To himself): 'The dead no longer suffer from hunger!'.

It was met with much scepticism, as attested by the above cartoon. Later reports on the private estates proved that the cartoon's message was not without merit, as it was concluded that Van Pabst had only visited government lands and stayed only briefly. He did not take the effort to venture into the poorly accessible private estates. Since he observed no malnutrition where he visited, he deemed the region in good order and Hoekendijk's reports to be greatly exaggerated.<sup>149</sup> During his stay in Indramayu, Van Pabst in fact met Hoekendijk, who sent a transcript (from memory) of the meeting to his congregation, who forwarded it to the Ministry of Colonies. The transcript reveals a hostile interview, in which Van Pabst had very different views of 'famine' than Hoekendijk. Van Pabst insisted that famine only occurred when 'no person in the department had anything to eat'. Hoekendijk, though, took a very different position:

When one feeds on *tjoplok*, bran, pinang bushes, *daun bandera* (to intoxicate oneself and be able to sleep), does one not suffer hunger? If for fl. 0,50 mothers sell their children, men their wives and 270-260 armed Javanese resist police, then that is not out of want? Confronted with all these fact, I believed that, and I still believe, I was allowed [*'heb mogen'*] to conclude famine.<sup>150</sup>

Further, in a letter to his parish Hoekendijk claims that local government had been shocked by his attempts to set up a poor house in 1903, in cooperation with the landlords. Government, according to him, had sought to suppress any evidence of famine, by holding the *desa* headmen responsible for any beggars that were found and by threatening with months-long forced labour sentences for those caught begging.<sup>151</sup> Eventually, government made a 'volte face', perhaps, Fernando speculates, due to public pressure. At some point, it had negotiated with the landlords, relented and agreed to provide relief to the local population. During 1901-1903, the landlords spent roughly fl. 205.000 on relief works, loans and seeds, while also providing 2.787 tons of seed *padi* and 190 tons of rice for consumption.<sup>152</sup> This incident, however, was hardly the end of impoverishment for the people of

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<sup>149</sup> Paul W. van der Veur, *The Lion and the gadfly. Dutch colonialism and the spirit of E.F.E. Douwes Dekker* (Leiden 2006) 94-97, esp. 95.

<sup>150</sup> OV 18-09-1903, no. 17. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 201. *Tjoplok* was the name for a type of citric fruit. J.K. Hasskarl, *Aanteekeningen over het nut, door de bewoners van Java aan eenige planten van dat eiland toegeschreven, uit berichten der inlanders zamengesteld* (Amsterdam 1845) 37. *Daun* means leaf in Malay.

<sup>151</sup> Letter of C.J. Hoekendijk to the head office of the NZH, 17-03-1903. In: *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Zending en Overzeese Kerken*, volume: West Java 1858-1963, Document 137: 'De "nood van Indramajoe"', accessible via <http://www.historici.nl/retroboeken/zending> (accessed 20-12-2013).

<sup>152</sup> Fernando, 'The worst of both worlds', 428-429.

West-Indramayu, who continued living in their vicious cycle of crop failure, indebtedness and poverty in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>153</sup>

### 3.2.2 Famine in government lands: The case of Semarang<sup>154</sup>

In the district Grogol welfare had been on the decline since 1895 due to a variety of circumstances, importantly the annual floods that inundated large parts of the district. The department Demak was hit by a great variety of calamities that led up to the major crisis of 1900-1903. Crop diseases and floods led to regular harvest failures.

Further the population was plagued here repeatedly by epidemics and other disasters; for instance in 1881 there was a cholera-epidemic in 1881, floods in 1886, in 1889 first a fever, then a cholera epidemic, in 1893 and 1894 floods followed by food scarcities, in 1896 epidemics of fevers and rice scarcities in the Southern part of the department and in 1897 again a cholera epidemic. (...)Under these circumstances, after in 1897/1898 crop failures had occurred on a large scale, the population's live stock was plagued by a contagious disease that killed many *karbouws* especially in Manggar.<sup>155</sup>

Some 25% of livestock was lost. Troubles began in earnest, at least according to the SV, when the *polowidjo* (vegetable) harvests failed in the summer of 1900, leading to food scarcities in the fall, first noticed in the south of the district Manggar where people were reportedly forced to feed themselves with tubers, leaves and *sawah*-crabs.<sup>156</sup>

In the department Grobogan scarcities began in 1898. Starting the same year, severe epidemics among the residency's water buffaloes, greatly diminished the amount of land that could be ploughed and adequately prepared. Further damage was done by a fever epidemic which took relatively few lives, but affected over a quarter of the population. Finally, excessive rainfall during the east monsoon of 1900, led to *polowidjo* crop failures as in Demak. Combined with new cholera epidemics across the residency, this was too much for an already deeply impoverished population.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Fernando, 'The worst of both worlds', 434-446.

<sup>154</sup> A map of the affected areas in Semarang residency can be found in appendix I. Since this section focuses on Semarang, the inclusion of some archival materials relating to other Residencies have been excluded. These materials can be found mostly in OV 19-8-1903, 41 and OV 14-05, no. 60. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197 and 239.

<sup>155</sup> SV, 75.

<sup>156</sup> Ibidem, 76.

<sup>157</sup> Also see the missive of the Resident of Semarang to the Governor-General, 5-12-1901. Stored in: GV 14-04-1902, P5/no. 37. NA, MiKo GA, entry nr. 2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 14. Cholera also reached Semarang city, partly (according to the chief government physician there) because of the destitution outside the city. See W.Th de



During February and March 1901, rice crop outlooks, though overall still good, worsened in several departments of Semarang, as a consequence of floods and crop diseases. In April the rains stopped abnormally early, too soon for crops to succeed, while the ashes from the Kloet eruption on 23 May added to general misery. By the end of June, tens of thousands of *bouws* of rice had failed across the residency. In early 1902, rice plantings seemed promising, but again early onset of drought in April meant crops in various regions, mostly Demak and Grobogan were suddenly likely to fail again, and did. From April to June, tens of thousands of *bouws* were lost to drought, as well as crop diseases and caterpillar plagues. Overall, crops on irrigable fields appear to have done better, while those dependent on the (absent) rains suffered greatly. The first successful harvests were possible only in the spring of 1903, when the rains did not fail and crop yields were satisfactory.<sup>158</sup>

Aggravating the misery of crop failures were the epidemics, mainly of cholera that swept through the residency in 1900-1902. Reported deaths from cholera were 21.833 for 1901 and 8.391 for 1902. In the city Semarang cholera deaths of 2.480 in 1901 and 1.020 per reported (on a population between c. 92.000-104.000). Given the poor reporting on medical matters in this period, the actual figure is likely to be much higher.<sup>159</sup>

### Demographic impact

Before 1900, Semarang experienced a population increase that was characteristic of Java in the late nineteenth century. Between 1900 and 1905 though, the Residency saw a population decline of c. 2% from 2.685.015 to 2.614.923, according to the census data.<sup>160</sup> It should be remembered that the impact of the famines and epidemics was local in nature and affected various demographic groups differently. Residency-wide, a trend may be discerned that is seen more dramatically for the residencies of Demak and Grobogan: an increase in the number of families, and little change in the number of grown men and women. Children, then, likely bore the brunt of mortality.<sup>161</sup>

The local nature of the famine and epidemics is apparent from graph 3.8 (appendix G), which combines population data from the SV and the census data published in the OMW for the departments of Demak and Grobogan. The departments combined lost c. 40.000 people (or 7% of

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Vogel, 'Geneeskundig jaarverslag van Semarang over het jaar 1901'. KITLV-Leiden, 'Collectie Willem Thomas de Vogel', archive nr. H 1568, inv. nr. 5. For population figures of Semarang city see graph 3.5 in appendix G.

<sup>158</sup> This section is based on the *Maandrapporten nopens de stand der voedingsmiddelen op Java en Madoera*, which were published as appendices to the state newspaper *Javasche Courant*. See the annotation of graph 3.10 in appendix H for the relevant issue numbers. For statistics on crop failures, see appendix F.

<sup>159</sup> Hasyim Ridwan, 'Epidemi kolera dan karesidenan Semarang 1900 1920', *Lembaran Sejarah* 4 no. 2 (2002) 104-127.

<sup>160</sup> See graph 3.6 in appendix G.

<sup>161</sup> See graph 3.7 in appendix G.

the population) between 1900 and 1902. Population rebounded somewhat between 1902 and 1905. Again, children were the main victims of the famine, their number dropping by c. 10% between 1900 and 1905.<sup>162</sup> Anecdotal evidence from the SV also indicates that the famines were local at the village level: some villages were entirely deserted, while others experienced no reversal of fortune.<sup>163</sup> Available statistical sources do not include the causes for the population declines, whether by disease, starvation or migration. Since the sources also do not specify birth rates and death rates, it is impossible to determine to which extent changes in mortality and fertility played a role in population declines.<sup>164</sup>

### Human impact and coping strategies

What were the consequences of these crop failures and how did the population act in response to them? Coping strategies depended on a variety of circumstances, such as: the severity of crop failure; the degree of destitution of the family, the village and the region; the availability and prices of (staple) foods (mostly rice); possibilities to procure alternative food sources; availability of employment and wages paid; the nature of family and village-level charity. While the impact of crop failures on family resources would thus have varied greatly, the SV provides some useful insights. The commission toured various destitute *desa*'s, in multiple departments. It inspected the homes, acres and private plots of families. In many destitute villages, and some non-ailing villages, with the help of the *desa* heads they drew up lists of all the families in the villages. The village heads gave a list of the village population, specifying: average family size, livestock ownership, opium use, number of traders, and private *padi* supplies. Using these qualities, an 'average' family was selected, which was interrogated for information regarding their income (crop yields, private plantings and day-labour wages etc.) and expenditures (food consumption, taxes, costs for *sawah* tilling, clothing and maintenance of the house), as well as on possessions, recent sales of valuables, debts, number of meals per day before and during the famine. As the report itself notes, no general conclusions can be drawn from these investigation's results, though there is considerable overlap in the families' choices.<sup>165</sup>

First, while nearly all families cut back significantly on rice consumption clothing and market expenditures, other expenses were usually not greatly affected. Second, secondary income sources

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<sup>162</sup> See graph 3.9 in appendix G.

<sup>163</sup> SV, appendix L.

<sup>164</sup> OMW IX. *Samentrekking van de afdeelsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1908) 7-9.

<sup>165</sup> SV, appendix L: 'Budgetten van Inlandsche huisgezinnen in de noodlijdende streken vóór en gedurende den nood'.

(aside from crop production) generally remain unchanged as well. Usually, families supplemented their income with crop plantings in the East Monsoon season, fruit trees on their private plots, and various day-labour services. The last might include fishing, work at other's *sawahs*, selling grass and weaving. Many families were forced though to sell valuable possessions, usually earrings, sometimes the family buffalo and to eat fewer meals (less than the usual 2 rice meals per day). It should be noted again that the families selected were not the most destitute of their *desa's*, and that the average welfare in the *desa's* may have been raised by the most destitute migrating.<sup>166</sup>

More radical choices were made by those who could not support themselves, or could not be supported by their families or community. Many families were forced to eat whatever forest products and leaves they could find.<sup>167</sup> Yet others chose to migrate to find work or beg.<sup>168</sup> Emigrants from Demak mostly returned, but the majority of those from Grobogan did not. The OMW indicates that emigration from Grobogan was caused by

‘1<sup>o</sup> fear of death, caused by cholera and fevers; 2<sup>o</sup> unusual mortality of cattle in 1899 and 1900; 3<sup>o</sup> lack of foodstuffs (...)’. ‘The emigrants were married and unwed, partakers in communal lands, with their families. They were not in possession of any capital. Their *patjoel* was their only possession, with which they south to make a living elsewhere.’<sup>169</sup>

It would appear there was also significant migration to major urban centres. Going by official estimates, Semarang city's population grew from nearly 93.000 to about 104.000 from 1901 to 1902, despite the fact that the number of deaths doubles in the same period. Unless the number of births increased spectacularly in the same period, the city likely saw an influx of destitute migrants.<sup>170</sup> From 1901 widespread begging led the government to start rounding up drifters and putting them in

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<sup>166</sup> SV, appendix L. A meaningful insight into local coping strategies may also be derived from a 1902 report concerning the Surabaya sub-district Toerie. The concise, but vivid report details the impact failed harvest had on the economic position of the local population. Similar to the Semarang *desa's* described by the SV only two instead of the usual three meals are consumed per day, with smaller portions. Whereas the vegetable crops normally yielded valuable reserves and marketable crops, these had failed along with the rice crops. With no food left in storage, families were forced to earn enough for subsistence on a day-to-day basis, requiring roughly 12 cents a day. Selling or cutting of grass were options, though grass was not in high demand. Thus, workers had to travel long distances in search of employment, ‘without results’. ‘Who still owned something pawned it off, clothes and earrings being the main pawns’. ‘Nota over den economischen toestand van de Bengawandjero. Onderzoek te Toerie den 3en en 4en Juli 1902.’ Mail report 712, stored in OV 19-8-1903, no. 41. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197. Further reference is a letter of the Assident-Resident Rivière of Purkowerto to the Resident of Banyumas, dd. 14-02-1901. Mail report 1901: 241, stored in OV 19-08-1903, no. 41. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197.

<sup>167</sup> SV, 76.

<sup>168</sup> SV, 83. According to a correspondent for *De Locomotief*, some beggars ‘abused’ the situation by claiming they were from famine-stricken regions to solicit pity. ‘Potpourri’, *De Locomotief*, 10-01-1903.

<sup>169</sup> OMW IX. *Economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang*, 9. A *patjo(e)* was a type of pick-axe or shovel. ‘Patjol’, *Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (accessed via [gtb.inl.nl](http://gtb.inl.nl), 18-02-2014).

<sup>170</sup> See table 3.5 in appendix G.

lodges, who were often in need of medical care as well.<sup>171</sup> Some resorted to selling their children for a small sum (the SV mentions fl.2,50 at Kudus).<sup>172</sup> Crimes rates exploded in famine-struck regions, especially (violent) robberies and banditry.<sup>173</sup> Reported thefts more than tripled in some departments.<sup>174</sup>

In such dire circumstances, it is not unusual for individuals or communities to turn to religion and/or rebel against authority. However, the official reports make no mention of any increase in religious activity or of uprisings. While this may seem surprising, it fits the general observation by M.R. Fernando that from the late nineteenth century, uprisings involved wealthier landowners rather than poor farmers.<sup>175</sup>

### The market

How the market economy affected the famines is a complex matter, and there will have been differences between and within Semarang's departments. In a broad sense, it may be observed, that the most severely suffering regions were those almost wholly dependent on rice production, with little commercial cropping and few industries available to earn an additional income (see chapter 2). The structure of the Javanese economy was such, that its native population was greatly dependent on Chinese traders both for acquiring credit and sale of their crops. Despite this dependency, the SV concluded that the Chinese did not have an unambiguously negative effect on the economy of the famine-stricken regions.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> SV, 101.

<sup>172</sup> SV, 83; 'Hongerlijders', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 09-04-1901. Insight may be gotten into the plight of the time through a story that circulated in Dutch-language newspapers in 1902: "In a desa in the district Gemolong, where cholera and famine had run rampant hand-in-hand, a father and mother died of said disease, leaving behind 5 children of which the eldest a girl not 15 years old and the youngest a boy of a year and a half. A time of heavy trials began for the girl, since she had no family members and no one, considering the scarcities that pressed on everyone, who wanted to have mercy on her and her little brothers and sisters or relieve her of the burden of caring for one of the latter. As well as might she nonetheless cared for all their upkeep. As if her misfortune was not great enough, three months after the death of the parents the house collapsed, luckily (or unluckily?) without killing or wounding anyone. The girl had to move in with her neighbors, whose aid went no further than housing. The girl would just have to provide for herself and her family. This charge seemed in the end too heavy for the girl. One morning she brought her youngest brother to the river [*kali*] and drowned him. The little body was fished out of the water by the police, who promptly confronted the girl with it. Without hesitation she confessed her crime, saying she was unable to feed five mouths. And her brother was such a trouble. He cried day and night because he did not get enough food." 'Verlaten', *De Locomotief*, 01-02-1902.

<sup>173</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1902*, 7; *Koloniaal Verslag van 1903*, 5. Van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën*, 663.

<sup>174</sup> See graph 3.5 in appendix G. OMW VIII: *Samentrekking van de afdeelsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoeken naar het recht en de politie in de Residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907).

<sup>175</sup> See M.R. Fernando, 'The trumpet shall sound for rich peasants: Kasan Mukim's uprising in Gedangan, East Java, 1904', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26 no. 2 (1995) 242-262.

<sup>176</sup> SV, 129 and 133.

The colonial government stayed away from large-scale direct intervention in the food market, except in Djoana (Semarang) where the government sold rice at low cost. The impact of this attitude is impossible to calculate with any certainty, but some suggestions can be made. The market's influence appears not to have been wholly damaging. In 1900 reported rice imports by Chinese firms at Semarang city exploded by a factor of one hundred compared to 1899, and quadrupled again the next year (see table 3.4). Competition was intense, and profits were low.<sup>177</sup> Similarly reported imports rose at Surabaya city, where rice imports were very high throughout the crisis year. The SV, as well as the Chamber of Commerce of Semarang point out that large-scale imports led to a lowering of market prices for rice.<sup>178</sup> In Djoana the government was outcompeted by Chinese merchants pouring rice into the region. Widespread hoarding and stockpiling of rice is not recorded by the SV either, except for Djoana.<sup>179</sup> Some newspaper reports though, suggest that hoarders played a large part in denying the Javanese access to rice by driving up prices.<sup>180</sup>

Data from the OMW allow analysis of rice and *padi* prices for the famine years in nearly all affected regions in Semarang residency. Such data, while valuable, do not allow simple explanation. It is important at this point to distinguish between the Javanese as *sellers* and the Javanese as *buyers*. The Javanese peasants usually (though not always) sold their crop yields as *padi* and could either purchase *padi* or milled rice from the markets for consumption. Habits differed between regions: in Grobogan apparently, the population usually sold its whole crop yields, while in Demak families retained some of their *padi* for private use. It may be stated with some certainty that high prices benefitted sellers, while low prices were advantageous for buyers. A first implication is that the combination of high prices and crop failures can polarize society: those whose crops failed found themselves with less or no income and faced with high prices, while those whose crops succeeded could sell at high prices. Since crop failure statistics are only available at aggregate (residency-wide) level, it is impossible to clearly relate crop failures to price rises, let alone determine actual local scarcity of foodstuffs.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> *Jaarverslag van de Kamer van Koophandel te Semarang 1901* (Semarang 1902) 17-19.

<sup>178</sup> See also 'Handels-en passarberichten', *De Locomotief*, 17-7-1901; 'Verspreide Indische berichten', *De Locomotief*, 23-1-1902.

<sup>179</sup> SV, 107.

<sup>180</sup> 'Van dag tot dag', *De Locomotie: Samarangsch Handels- en Advertentieblad*, 12-1-1901. Further evidence of price speculation can be found in a letter of E. Thomas to the Resident of Banyumas, (undated, written sometime in 1901). 'There are three Chinese rice merchants here, who compete with each other. As long as all three are well provisioned with rice, they content themselves with reasonable profits and rice prices therefore remain below not too high levels. Scarcely is one of their stocks exhausted, or prices are inflated unduly so that yesterday the price of rice rose from fl. 6,50 to fl. 8.- [per picol].'" Mail report 1901: 24. Stored in: OV 19-08-1903, no. 41. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197.

<sup>181</sup> See appendix H for statistics on *padi* and rice prices in Semarang's departments during the famine years.

The *Kamer van Koophandel* [Chamber of Commerce] at Semarang lists prices of roughly fl.5 to fl.6 per picol of imported rice, which are not exceptionally high.<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, these are generalised estimates for Central Java, and will likely not reflect prices in the regions where food was scarce. Further, reductions in purchasing power due to crop failures and/or debt can well have made even the cheapest rice unattainable for the impoverished.<sup>183</sup> The abovementioned monthly reports on foodstuffs by the *Javasche Courant* also published market prices for rice, listing the highest and lowest prices for white rice and red rice found in Semarang. Prices appear to have been relatively stable throughout the crisis years for the residency as a whole. From late 1900 to late 1902, lowest and highest prices for white rice fluctuated between fl. 3 - fl. 5 and fl.7 - fl. 9 respectively, while market prices for lesser quality red rice fluctuated between c. fl.3 - fl. 4 (lowest) and fl. 5. - fl.7,50. Prices dropped significantly for all types of rice in the spring of 1903, after a good harvest. Data from the Colonial reports, however, suggest that *padi* prices also fluctuated only little in response to the crop failures. Yet, residency-wide data can be deceptive. Data from famine regions Demak and Grobogan by contrast show large fluctuations, and contrary to residency-wide figures, rising prices in 1903 compared to 1902.<sup>184</sup>

Aside from food crops, other trade and industry also suffered. At Semarang and Surabaya, non-rice trade reduced significantly, in part due to crop failures and in part due to cholera epidemics, which scared off merchants. The Chamber of Commerce of Semarang relates major decreases in exports of important commercial crops such as coffee, sugar and tobacco, which would have significant impact on the population as well.<sup>185</sup>

**Table 3.4:** Imports of rice at Semarang and Surabaya city 1898-1902 (in *picols*)

Year	Semarang	Surabaya
1899	6.600	664.800
1900	559.000	1.169.400
1901	2.427.000	1.719.600
1902	911.000	2.063.250
1903	142.000	669.600

<sup>182</sup> *Jaarverslag Kamer van Koophandel en Nijverheid te Semarang 1901* (Semarang 1902).

<sup>183</sup> This is confirmed for the private lands of West-Indramayu (Cirebon), as the aforementioned missionary C.J. Hoekendijk, who states that: 'The *goedangs* [warehouses] of the Chinese are still stocked full of rice and the rice is not expensive but if one has no money to buy this relatively cheap rice, does one not suffer hunger?'. OV 18-09-1903, no. 17. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 201.

<sup>184</sup> See appendix H.

<sup>185</sup> *Jaarverslag Kamer van Koophandel en Nijverheid te Semarang 1901*, 16-17.

**Source:** *Jaarverslag Kamer van Koophandel en Nijverheid te Semarang 1901-1903* (Semarang 1902-1904); *Verslag van de Handelsvereniging te Soerabaja 1899-1904* (Surabaya 1900-1905). Rice prices for Central Java refer only to Semarang, and are price estimates for purchase by consumers.

### Private charity and missionary activity

The famine inspired several private charitable actions, though these were late to take off. European fundraising in both the Netherlands and the NEI did not take serious form until 1902, when the crisis had already been underway for some two years.<sup>186</sup> Although government expenditures dwarfed private donations, charitable organisations nonetheless had a significant part in famine aid, mainly in Semarang.<sup>187</sup> In the colony, private donations came from both Europeans and Chinese.<sup>188</sup> Various high ranking, wealthy Chinese merchants donated hundreds to thousands of picols of rice to the government, to be used for distribution among the native population. While the SV only mentions 300 picols donated by Chinese traders and used at the government *sompoks* in Demak, newspaper reports indicate many thousands of picols were gifted by Chinese merchants of rank.<sup>189</sup>

In the Netherlands, the recently founded association *Oost en West* led fundraising efforts, through its weekly periodical *Koloniaal Weekblad*. It identified two main reasons for Dutch indifference as observed through lack of donations: a general lack of interest in the NEI and the continuous coverage for the Boers, for whom fundraising was going splendidly. The *Koloniaal Weekblad* itself attempted several ways to produce sympathy among the Dutch population for the Javanese's plight. First, by regularly placing articles from the NEI newspapers on the horrid conditions many Javanese found themselves in.<sup>190</sup> Further, it claimed government was unable to carry the full burden of relief, and that Dutch citizens should thus donate to ease the suffering of their 'brown brothers'. It appealed to those who recognized the wrongs done (past and present) to inspire them to use this opportunity to show how the nature of Dutch colonialism had changed:

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<sup>186</sup> This is evident from the donations given to the association *Oost en West*, which are recorded in its weekly periodical *Koloniaal Weekblad*, through 1901-1903.

<sup>187</sup> It is hard to give an well-founded estimate of total non-government relief fundraising and spending. One of the bigger charities, that of Pieter Brooshooft raised some fl. 55.000, which makes it very unlikely that private charity neared the volume of government expenses. E. Locher-Scholten, 'Mr. P. Brooshooft, een biografische schets in koloniaal-ethisch perspectief', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 132 no. 2/3 (1976) 306-349: 341. One might compare this to British India, where 'In 1897 and 1900 charitable funds of all kinds spent over Rs. 20 million, equivalent to more than a quarter of the sum spent by the government on direct relief'. Georgina Brewis, "'Fill full the mouth of famine": voluntary action in famine relief in India 1896-1901', *Modern Asian Studies* 44 no. 4 (2010) 887-918: 898.

<sup>188</sup> Regarding native charity, Javanese charity a brief article report in *De Locomotief* provides some clues, which it states that Javanese headmen in Sukabumi were forcing their villagers to donate for charitable purposes, repeatedly extracting payments. 'Weldadigheid op Commando', *De Locomotief*, 04-07-1902.

<sup>189</sup> SV, 101. 'Over de Indische Pers', *Koloniaal Weekblad*, 09-01-1902.

<sup>190</sup> N. van Zuijlen-Tromp, *Gedenk den noodlijdenden Javaan! Oproep aan het Nederlandsche* (1902) 10-13. Cf. Brewis, 'Voluntary action in famine relief', 912.

Was in the times, that the VOC founded her factories and expanded her influence, the welfare of the native discounted – a system that has been sustained for centuries by the white race – presently the conviction has fortunately gained ground, that the worth of the being must not be judged through skin colour and that Chinese and Japanese, Kaffirs and Negroes, Malayans and Javanese all have the same claim to prosperity and evolution. <sup>191</sup>

Finally, it attempted to guilt Dutch citizens by referring to donations made by others, especially the Chinese in the colony.<sup>192</sup> Most notable donator was the Queen of the Netherlands, Wilhelmina, who donated fl.5.000,- in October 1902.<sup>193</sup> The association forwarded the funds to various charities in the NEI.<sup>194</sup>

Aside from donations and fundraising efforts, several charitable organisations were active in Semarang that played a relatively small but significant role in providing relief: the poor colony [*armenkolonie*] of the family Van Emmerik in Salatiga, the colony of Miss. Jansz. at Pati and the *Semarangsch Comité voor zieke en behoeftige Inlanders* [Semarang Committee for the sick and needy natives], co-founded by Pieter Brooshooft, editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *De Locomotief* and staunch and vocal supporter of ethical policy.<sup>195</sup> The *Comité* used the donations it received to found a hospital in 1902.<sup>196</sup> Nonetheless, these three institutions combined cannot have taken care of more than a thousand natives at any given time, at most.<sup>197</sup>

The Van Emmerik family was originally active as part of the Salvation Army at Salatiga, but struck out on its own in 1902 to found a White Cross colony in the department. With some support from the Resident, who provided them with both lands and orphans to care for, their colony became

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<sup>191</sup> Zuijlen-Tromp, *Gedenk den noodlijdenden Javaan!*, 6-7.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibidem*, 8-9.

<sup>193</sup> 'Voor den noodlijdenden Javaan', *Koloniaal Weekblad*, 06-11-1902.

<sup>194</sup> 'Berichten en mededeelingen der Ned.-Indische Vereeniging "Oost en West"', *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 25 (1903) 289-294: 293.

<sup>195</sup> A fuller description of the origin of the Van Emmerik colony can be found in Annelieke Dirks, *For the youth: juvenile delinquency, colonial civil society and the late colonial state in the Netherlands Indies, 1872-1942* (PhD Thesis; Leiden University 2011), esp. 64-73. See also: 'Hulp aan de noodlijdende inlanders in de afdeeling Salatiga', *De Locomotief*, 01-02-1902; a piece on the Pati colony by Miss. Jansz. can be found in 'Pangoengsen. Landkolonie voor noodlijdende inlanders', *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 16-07-1903.

<sup>196</sup> A brief history of the *Comité* and its hospital may be found in S. van der Leij, 'De geschiedenis van onze medische zending te Poerwodadi (Grobogan) in: *25-jarig jubileum van het zendingshospitaal van het "Comité Pitoeloengan" te Poerwodadi-Grobogan* (n.p. 1931) 9-46.

<sup>197</sup> Other missions were also active in relief across Java. On this, see Th. Sumartana, *Mission at the crossroads: indigenous churches, European missionaries, Islamic association and socio-religious change in Java 1812-1936* (Jakarta 1994) esp. 76-78. One might consult *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Zending en Overzeese Kerken, Midden-Java 1859-1931*, documents 94 and 99, accessed via <http://www.historici.nl/retroboeken/zending/> (20-12-2013).



a crucial element of local poverty relief.<sup>198</sup> At the colony, the poor received daily meals; children received some education, while the adults laboured on the fields or in the woods.<sup>199</sup> It is interesting to note that at the Van Emmerik colony, recipients of aid were required to labour for their assistance. Thus, as in British India around the same time, 'in line with the accepted rules of organised philanthropy most voluntary relief agencies required that work was exacted in exchange for food by able-bodied recipients'.<sup>200</sup> According to H. Van Kol, the colony received some of the worst characters of Javanese society, though he blames government for their misery. A government, which had not cared or supported the Javanese in their terrible economic position, and which also did nothing to aid the White Cross colony:

Yet the government cannot let such a man stand alone in his noble attempt, and so far she has done next to nothing to support him according to his capacities. The Wedana's send to him everything that begs or wants in Salatiga, sometimes the insane, the indescribably dirty, those suffering hideous wounds, the sick and dying, who after few hours there find nothing but a quiet place to die(...)The Government though gave him nothing in return but a relatively infertile piece of soil without water, barely 50 *bouws* in size, and refused it a piece of forest, situated across from it. The miserable patch of soil, very distant from all traffic/infrastructure, had been loaned to Van Emmerik for only five years, and meanwhile hundreds of orphans and miserable people are sent to the true Christian, 'who has heart for the little man'. Such indifference is aggravating, is one of many proofs of official heartlessness.<sup>201</sup>

That undue pressure was placed upon the Van Emmerik-colony becomes evident from appeals by Van Emmerik to the government, in which he claimed that government had strained his resources by placing many beggars in his colony during the famine years. It was rejected by the Governor-General, but the appeal went all the way to the Minister of Colonies, who sympathized with Van Emmerik's plight – though he agreed with the Governor-General that the government should keep its distance from poor relief. He recommended the Governor-General to review the case again.<sup>202</sup> This episode demonstrates the ambiguous and sometimes strained relationship between the government and private efforts at poverty relief, between which we can see, in this case, an uneasy cooperation.

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<sup>198</sup> NA, MiKo Openbaar, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 302. 'Een pioniers-bedelaarskolonie te Salatiga', *De Locomotief*, 12-04-1902.

<sup>199</sup> Van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën*, 759-766.

<sup>200</sup> Brewis, 'Voluntary action in famine relief', 908.

<sup>201</sup> Van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën*, 764.

<sup>202</sup> NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 302.

## Government aid

In April of 1900, the Resident of Semarang sounded the alarm on conditions in the district Grogol, which was, according to the Resident, in immediate need of government aid due to lack of food as a consequence of floods. Soon after, the Semarang-based newspaper *Samarang Courant*, began publishing articles alleging famine (*hongersnood*) conditions in Grobogan and Demak. Such reports were denied both by the other prominent Semarang newspaper *De Locomotief* and the local and central government. In May an official denial of famine conditions was published by the central government, denying the veracity of all the signs that according to the *Samarang Courant* indicated a famine.<sup>203</sup>

Nonetheless, between April and July the central government was repeatedly urged by Resident Sijthoff to allow relief works for Grogol. In September, he added Demak and Grobogan to the regions in need of immediate assistance due to near-famine conditions resulting from widespread second crop failings in the preceding months. It would, however not be until November 1900 that the Batavian government authorized the Resident to spend government money on relief for his Residency. The hold-up was caused by two different departments involved with the relief measures. The Department of Public Works first required detailed plans for the relief works to be drafted, while the Department of Inland Administration first sought advice on the situation from the Head-Inspector of Cultivations who had visited Semarang shortly before. The Inspector was not convinced of the urgency of the situation, but deemed that the resident was likely in the best position to judge the severity of the conditions in his residency.<sup>204</sup>

Thus, in early November the Resident was authorized to execute the authority bestowed on him to spend government funds without central government approval in an urgent situation where without swift action the nation [land] interests might be damaged. The wording of the approval was however, misinterpreted by the resident, who therefore believed he needed further approval from the central government. Only on November 29, then, did the Resident finally authorize relief works for Grobogan, Demak and Grogol after receiving confirmation from the central government that he had authority to spend. Subsequently, the Resident of Semarang and the Governor-General together authorized nearly fl.3.000.000 in relief spending. The following will briefly describe the various forms of relief employed by the colonial government, mainly through their interpretation by the Semarang famine commission.

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<sup>203</sup> 'De Hongersnood te Grobogan', *De Locomotief*, 19-05-1900. 'De zoogenaamde hongersnood te Grobogan', *De Locomotief*, 21-05-1900.

<sup>204</sup> 'Uit Semarang', *Sumatra-Courant*, 28-05-1900. SV, 72-73.

**Table 3.5:** Funds authorized for relief operations for Semarang, from November 1900 until June 1902 (in guilders)

Department	Relief works	Seeds	Food	Healthcare	Water	Loans	Rice sales	Total
Salatiga	2.324	1.167	0	0	0	0	0	3.491
Semarang	417.863	15.000	10.000	0	0	0	0	442.863
Demak	539.911	0	0	73.120	0	250.600	0	863.631
Grobogan	200.525	500	42.000	17.600	0	292.609	0	553.225
Kudus	64.556	4.000	20.000	0	0	6.190	0	94.746
Pati	129.945	18.458	8.000	801	0	0	52.000	219.204
Djoana	136.820	6.480	0	0	3.000	9.600	208.500	364.400
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.491.944</b>	<b>45.604,50</b>	<b>80.000</b>	<b>91.521</b>	<b>3.000</b>	<b>558.999</b>	<b>260.500</b>	<b>2.541.560</b>

**Source:** *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903) appendix B. Adding up the total spending per type of aid yields a slightly different total sum (fl. 2.531.569), a flaw which is present in the source material.

### *Relief works*

As with other colonial powers, aid was provided principally in the form of public employment for (near-) subsistence wages at so-called relief works [*ondersteuningswerken; onderstandswerken*]. As in both British India and French Indochina, public employment took the form of physical labour at worksites either close to or at some distance from famine-stricken villages (see chapter 1). These works usually consisted of building or repairing infrastructure of rivers or roads. Relief works could be new projects, but were often *corvée* labour obligations that could instead be fulfilled as ‘free labour’ for a small wage. Available sources provide only scant information on organization. Unclear is who was in charge, what staff was hired, who determined admissions, or how payment was determined. Due to the lack of any famine codes akin to those in British India, and a general lack of instructions on such matters, great local differences in organisation seem likely.<sup>205</sup>

Admission criteria likewise remain obscure. Capacity for physical labour was a necessity for participation, but how officials determined if the applicant was sufficiently destitute to qualify is unclear. The SV also reports no safety net for those turned away from public works. Van Kol in his travel account recounts meeting a man on his way to the poor colony at Salatiga, who was visibly starving but had sent away from the relief works and not been cared for in another way.<sup>206</sup> Circumstantial evidence suggests that aside from physical condition, applicants were not thoroughly reviewed before admission, as people from other departments or provinces took advantage of the

<sup>205</sup> SV, 97-100.

<sup>206</sup> Van Kol, *Uit onze koloniën*, 759.

employment at several relief works.<sup>207</sup> Further, the SV reports that turn-out at several work sites was poor. Interviewed native civil servants ascribed this to payment conditions (hard labour for minimal wages, conditional on work provided) and 'unfamiliarity with doing such work', while the (wholly European) commission blamed native indolence.<sup>208</sup>

Going by the estimates of the Toerie report, the various wages listed in the SV would not have been enough to provide much more than subsistence, for a small family at most. For relief works in Semarang, recorded daily wages varied between c. fl. 0.15 and fl. 0.30, though the latter wage was dependent on productivity at hard physical labour.<sup>209</sup> Local variations were significant, since people in Kudus preferred to work in Demak, since pay was higher there. Payment conditions varied as well. In Grogol, payment was based on labour provided, in similar fashion to French Vietnam, while at other sites in Semarang department and Demak payment seems not to have been contingent on work results. Payment should have occurred daily, but did not always 'due to lack of personnel'.<sup>210</sup>

### *Doles*

Doles of food or crop seeds were meant for people who were unable to work for pay and who were deemed unable to pay back the government if these took the form of advances, and 'the population had to be saved from starvation and had to be given the bare necessities of food'.<sup>211</sup> Providing foodstuffs, in the form of rice or maize, required determining the quota qualified people needed to receive. According to the SV, 1 *kati* per day was deemed sufficient for adults, ½ *kati* for children. Food distributions took place every five days, supervised by both European and native officials, while the civil service was dependent on village heads for information on the number of people qualified to receive doles. The SV reports only one official, who checked for and found abuses by village heads, though the criteria on which he based his decision are not recorded.<sup>212</sup>

### *Healthcare*

State care in the form of shelters for nursery and food doles took place only in Semarang. In several of the larger towns in the departments of Demak, Grobogan and Semarang *sompoks* – state hospitals

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<sup>207</sup> SV, 98.

<sup>208</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>209</sup> SV, 99. 'Nota over den economischen toestand van de Bengawandjero'. OV 19-8-1903, 41. NA, MiKo OV; entry nr. 2.10.36.04; inv. nr. 197.

<sup>210</sup> SV, 99.

<sup>211</sup> Ibidem, 100.

<sup>212</sup> Ibidem.

for the sick – were established, starting in 1901, for the housing and nursing of the unemployed among the population and of the ulcerous beggars, as well as for the abandoned orphans of those who died during the recently weathered epidemics (cholera, fevers). Dr. Vordermann, inspector of the Civil Medical Service [*Burgerlijke Geneeskundige Dienst*], relates the organisation of the *sompoks* in Demak:

All *sompoks* are managed by writers [*schrijvers*] appointed by the administration, reinforced with *mandoers* and coolies, as needed, and continually checked by the officials of the civil service, both European and Native. In each *sompok* a register has been drawn up, showing the names, place of origin and the mutations, which is updated daily. In Demak, I attended the distribution of food at 11 o'clock. The portions had been delivered in large baskets, packed in the *djati* leaves. The writer called the names, indicating their *desa* and gave every patient [*verpleegde*] their portions. Some who had difficulty moving had authorized one of their comrades to receive their portions for them.<sup>213</sup>

The patients received three meals a day, in some places regular doctor's visits, and in Demak some cloths and money for expenses upon release (fl.1,50). Expenses for nutrition in Demak averaged 14 cents per person per day, in Grobogan 10 to 11 cents (including soap and 'various' expenses).<sup>214</sup> Van Kol is highly critical of the *sompoks* in Grobogan. He does not spare his readership the gut-wrenching details:

On the *djaksa's* signal, they hobbled outside, these pitiful creatures, deformed beings, leaning on a crutch or staff. The spine was bent for many; some were blackened by deprivation; a girl had lost all her hair, an old woman had ulcers all over; a child had to continually chase off the flies from a hideous wound, which had eaten away most of her foot. Under a tree lay a woman in the hot sun, suffering from heavy fevers, and next to her sat her child staring at her dying mother. It was in one word an appalling scene, worthy of the pencil of a Veraschagin or the pen of a Zola. A fitting depiction of the horrifying scenes, outdone by reality, of the "famines" of British India, that we saw with abhorrence in English illustrations.<sup>215</sup>

He goes on to accuse the government of being cheap with rations and unwilling to pay sufficiently to properly bury the dead according to Islamic custom. Van Kol's description of the *sompoks*, which he

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<sup>213</sup> Dr. Vordermann, 'Verslag van myn jongste reis naar Semarang en Demak'. *Mailrapport* 1902: 342. Stored in: OV 04-06-1902, no. 4. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 125.

<sup>214</sup> The daily diet at the lodges in Demak consisted of rice, salt, Spanish peppers, sayur, supplemented with either tempé, salted fish or meat, 'and some sirih and tobacco'. SV, 102.

<sup>215</sup> SV, 662.

published in the daily newspaper *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* shortly after his visit, caused quite a stir within the NEI government. Corresponding on the matter with the Governor-General, The Assistant-Resident of Grobogan and Resident of Semarang claim Van Kol visited only the oldest, least ventilated, most crowded *sompoks*. The *sompoks* that Van Kol had visited had also recently received a lot of new patients, due to a redistribution of patients among the various *sompoks* ordered by the Resident. He had wanted to concentrate patients in need of regular medical attention by doctors-*djawa* at a few nearby *sompoks*, one of which Van Kol visited. This temporarily led to overcrowding, which Van Kol witnessed but in their opinion, had not attempted to seek an explanation for – he jumped to conclusions and decided on bashing the NEI government for the atrocious conditions he witnessed.<sup>216</sup>

Nonetheless, as with the relief works, what stands out is the inconsistency in the principles shaping the execution of this form of aid. The SV is aware of this:

If one's objective is to give the sick and invalids, who wander around in the necessitous regions, temporarily shelter while waiting for them to either die or recover and to give them only the barest necessary nutrition and nursing, just sufficient to extend life for some time, then one need not place high demands on the sustenance of these invalids. If, though, one's objective is to cure the sick and invalids as quickly as possible to that they can be sent back to their villages completely healed, then one will place higher demands on nutrition and nursery and make more expenses for the sustenance of the invalids than in the first instance. In Grobogan they appear, at least at first, to have taken the first, in Demak the second position.<sup>217</sup>

The SV is ambivalent regarding the extra expenses in Demak and admissions policies in general, but withholds final judgment, as (1) the expenses were no higher than those for natives in state prisons, and(2) no clear official standards for admission existed:

As long as relevant prescriptions from the Government with regard to this remain absent and as long as the question, where in such cases as intended here, State aid should start and where it should end, has not been faced principally it undoubtedly remains very difficult for the local officials to indicate correctly, which degree of invalidity gives right to a place in the

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<sup>216</sup> Mail report 1902: 456. Stored in OV 19-08-1903, no. 41; 'Report on the condition of the department Grobogan on 25 April 1902'. Stored in OV 19-08-1903, no. 41. For both see: NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197.

<sup>217</sup> SV, 101.

sick lodge [*ziekenloods*] and which degree of validity must be established for release from that institute.<sup>218</sup>

The commission abstains again from making a definitive judgment. However, a majority was against setting standards of admission too liberally, citing excessive costs to the State – stringency again popping up as a key element of state principles regarding poverty relief.<sup>219</sup>

### *Advances*

In Semarang, advances were provided to native farmers for four purposes: purchase of crop seeds, purchase of cattle, expenses for *sawah*-tilling and coconut-tree plantings. The second of these is of particular interest. During and before the famine years, much of the native's livestock had perished from epidemic diseases. According to the SV, a quarter of all buffaloes were lost between the end of December 1898 to mid-1901 in Demak, while in Grobogan c. 60% were lost. This greatly reduced the native population's capacity to prepare the soil for their crops. The Residency approved the government purchase of cattle, to be hired out to the native population under strict conditions and supervision. The commission withholds judgment regarding the effectiveness of the measure.<sup>220</sup>

The arrangement was that a native would purchase a buffalo under supervision of European and native civil servants using a government advance that was to be paid back in either five years (Demak) or eight years (Grobogan). In Demak, the intent was to have the natives repay the state with *padi*, which would be stored in recently installed communal sub-district *padi* sheds (*lumbungs*). These would then supply the *padi* to peasants as advances during the next planting season, against interest rates for 'administration etc.', so the Javanese would not need to turn to usurers. The sub-district *lumbungs* were to be supplemented by *desalumbungs*, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In September 1902 some 40.000 picols of *padi* had already been stored in the *lumbungs* throughout the residency. Also, a *Landbouwkredietbank* (a bank specifically for advances for agricultural purposes) was to be established in Demak.<sup>221</sup>

These measures were not made up 'on the fly'. For several years, in other regions of Java, government had been experimenting with both *Landbouwkredietbanken* and *lumbungs* at the sub-district and village level. The intent of these institutions was, as mentioned above, to provide an opportunity to the native to fund his business expenses without needing to resort to lending money at extortionate interest rates. Such practices, leading the native to a permanent state of debt, were

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<sup>218</sup> SV, 102.

<sup>219</sup> Ibidem, 103.

<sup>220</sup> Ibidem, 104-105.

<sup>221</sup> Ibidem, 104-106.

seen as one of the lead causes for the state of poverty, thus lack of resilience of the native to calamitous events.<sup>222</sup>

### *Government rice sales*

This form of aid was only used in the departments Djoana and Pati (Semarang residency) and in some districts on Celebes, with mixed results. The SV laments the fact that the government lost a lot of money, as it was unable to sell all the rice it bought for this purpose. The government sold rice at a price of fl. 5,21 to fl. 5,25 per picol. While at first, it had plenty of costumers, successful rice crops and large-scale imports led to lower market prices and people no longer purchased from government. It was forced to lower its prices, and remove restrictions on who could purchase the rice and a what quota. This situation was then taking advantage of by native merchants who' purchased large quantities of rice for a low price from Government and sold it in the *desa's* for higher prices', thus undercutting the government's goal of supplying rice cheaply.<sup>223</sup>

### **3.3 Conclusions**

In summary, the famines affected both Java and the Outer Islands, though Java bore the brunt of the crisis. Direct causes for the famines in the Outer Islands appear to be the 1902, possibly ENSO-related droughts. On Java, direct causes included cattle diseases, epidemics, crop diseases, floods and droughts. Although it is impossible to deduce concrete figures of death tolls and other human consequences, suffering was widespread and severe in many Javanese residencies. Private aid of significance was organized through organizations in the Netherlands and the Netherlands Indies, as well as missionaries. Their efforts were overshadowed, however, by the unprecedented size of government aid, which amounted to over fl. 4.000.000. This should not lead us to conclude, however, that state officials were generously disposed to the famished or easily accepted the presence of famine conditions on the islands.

Several principles regarding state aid can be deduced. First, government relief was aimed at maintaining subsistence, but no more. Government aid was intended only to maintain life in case a person had no other resources within their communities or private charities to appeal to. Government intervention in the then-current crisis did not imply a departure from this principle and, the native population should not be encouraged to look at government for aid as a consequence of it. This is explicitly stated by the Governor-General in a 1903 missive to the Resident of Batavia:

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<sup>222</sup> SV, 104.

<sup>223</sup> Ibidem, 107.



as long as the fellow villagers are capable of helping, state aid should in the opinion of the governor [*landvoogd*: the Governor-General] be withheld, and not just because continuous provision of aid weakens the native and paralyzes his mental strength [*geestkracht*], but also in order to keep alive his realization that not the State, but the community and the members of the community themselves are in the first instance called to aid the poor of their own *desa* in bad times.<sup>224</sup>

Second, if possible, costs to the state should be kept minimal. Only if it was certain a population would not be able to repay state expenses, should aid be free.<sup>225</sup> If advances might be repaid, advances should be used. Third, related to this, if people can work for their subsistence, they should. (Useful) labour in exchange for a small wage was considered the best way of providing relief.

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<sup>224</sup> First government secretary Paulus to the Resident of Batavia, 14-11-1903. Stored in: OV 14-5-1904, no. 60. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 239.

<sup>225</sup> For instance, Kroesen, 'Rapport'. OV 22-05-1905, no. 63. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 314.

## **Chapter 4. The (political) lessons of famine: interpretation and representation.**

After having described the events of the famines that occurred across the archipelago, the purpose of this chapter is two-fold. On the one hand, it will demonstrate the way in which the famines were interpreted by the colonial government. Thus, the first section outlines the interpretation of the Semarang famine by the commission ordered in 1902 to analyse the famine and the effectiveness of state aid. It focuses especially on how the famine events were framed:

- (1) What principles should the chosen forms and organisation of government aid be based on?
- (2) What were deemed the lead causes for the famines?
- (3) How should future famines be avoided?
- (4) How did the government inquiry into the Semarang acquire its information?
- (5) What did it deem important (not) to know and (not) to publicize?

The second section deals with the guidelines to ‘combat “scarcity” and “need”’ formulated after the famine, which was published in 1906. These interpretations are linked to similar efforts in British India and French Indochina. Here, the focus is on what famine is to the author of the guidelines and the principles it formulates for emergency relief and preventative measures. Finally, the chapter will demonstrate the political use of the famine, by demonstrating the way the famine was represented to the public by the Dutch government, and the impact that the famine had on Dutch colonial policy-making.

### **4.1 The Semarang famine inquiry**

This section deals with the investigation that was launched by the colonial government with regard to the famine in the residency Semarang. Except for a brief survey by the Head Inspector of Cultivations Van Lawick van Pabst in West-Indramayu, Cirebon, no investigations were conducted for other regions. The present section will review several aspects of the report issued by the commissioned charged with the Semarang investigation. First, the contents of the report and the topics it is concerned with will be outlined, as well as the commission’s methodology. Second, focus will be on the ‘principles of aid’ that may be derived from the report, as well as what these principles are based on, with special attention to the consistency of the reports arguments.

## Methodology

The Semarang Famine Commission (SFC) was created on 2 July 1902 by the Batavian government, and charged with two assignments. First, 'to draw up a thorough report concerning the causes, first revelation, development and current extent' of the disasters in the residency Semarang, and usefulness of the money authorized to provide relief. Second, to formulate plans for 'permanent measures [*voorzieningen*]', for those regions where 'without such preventive measures the current disaster [*nood*] would inevitably be or become chronic in nature'.<sup>226</sup> The members of the commission were P.F. Sijthoff (Resident of Semarang); J. van Breda de Haan (Herbalist at the government plantations at Buitenzorg); J.C. Heijning (Engineer 1<sup>st</sup> class at the bureaus of Water Management [*Waterstaat*] and Public Works [*Burgerlijke Openbare Werken*]; H.G. Heijting (assistant-resident of Sukabumi) and C.J. Hasselman (assistant-resident, and editor-in-chief of the *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur*).

Lance Brennan has the importance of politics and personalities in the composition of such a commission of inquiry shown for the first British Indian famine commission. Personal views and ambitions influence the content of a report and thus its potential ramifications.<sup>227</sup> It is thus worth noting as Joost Coté has, that the inclusion of the Resident of Semarang as the chair of the commission is in itself a political statement, as it allowed him a platform 'to defend his administration to official and more widespread public criticism of colonial neglect and maladministration in relation to native welfare'.<sup>228</sup> Essentially, the man responsible for decision making and administration of relief measures was allowed to be his own judge. This was, thus, not an independent commission of inquiry. It is further worthwhile to note the presence of senior civil servant C.J. Hasselman, who had previously been involved in a government inquiry on the *Binnenlands Bestuur* [Inland Administration] and was at the time working on a report regarding the village forced labour services.<sup>229</sup> A political liberal, he had little sympathy for arguments claiming colonialism as an exploitative practice and had a low opinion of native's capacities.<sup>230</sup> Finally, it

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<sup>226</sup> *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903) III. For the rest of this chapter, this publication will be referred to as SV.

<sup>227</sup> Brennan, 'The development of the Indian Famine Codes', 91-112.

<sup>228</sup> Joost Coté, 'Towards an architecture of association: H.F. Tillema, Semarang and the construction of colonial modernity' in: P.J. van Nas ed., *The Indonesian town revisited* (Singapore 2002) 319-347: 325-326.

<sup>229</sup> C.J. Hasselman, *Eindverslag over het onderzoek naar den druk der dessadiensten op Java en Madoera* (Batavia 1905); idem, *De opleiding der Europeesche ambtenaren bij het binnenlandsch bestuur in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam 1899). A brief biography can be found at H.W. van den Doel, 'Hasselman, Catharinus Johannes (1861-1944)' in: *Biografisch Woordenboek Nederland*, accessed at: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn4/hasselm> (accessed 7-2-2014).

<sup>230</sup> W. Rooseboom, *Mededelingen uit mijn leven* vol. III (unpublished manuscript). KITLV archive 'Collectie Willem Rooseboom (1843-1920). Archive nr. H 1319, inventory number 83.

should be noted that, contrary to the British commission of 1880, the SFC contained no native members. Only officials of the European administration and European technical specialists would author the content of the report.

The SFC's report does not contain a section specifying how it gathered its information or selected its sources. Nonetheless, part of its methodology can be deduced from statements scattered across its report. First, some or all members of the commission held meetings with both European and native civil servants in the famine-stricken districts. Second, the commission's members visited many ailing villages and inspected the homes, acres and private plots of its inhabitants. Further, it questioned families in each village on the impact of the crisis on their finances and food situation (see 4.2).<sup>231</sup> This disregard for privacy was not uncommon at the time. As Ann Laura Stoler has detailed, a near-concurrent investigation into European poverty was characterized by invasive questionnaires on the most private matters.<sup>232</sup>

Third, the specialist members of the commissions toured the residency to investigate and formulate proposals to improve agricultural practice, irrigation and flood control. Aside from personal observations and meetings with European and native civil servants, the commission also drew on local government records, as well as some published materials, mainly articles published in the *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië* (Journal for the Netherlands East Indies). Aside from a few published articles nearly all sources used were authored by government officials.

Clearly then, knowledge produced by European officials is granted a higher status or a greater truthfulness than information published independent of the government, let alone authored by natives rather than officials. At work here is a selection process that excludes certain types and sources of knowledge. It shows no interest in the manner in which the Javanese themselves had interpreted the famine's causation or experience, instead providing only external definitions of the phenomenon, external here meaning non-inclusive of the perspective of those who underwent the crisis.<sup>233</sup> In itself this demonstrates an observation made by Greg Bankoff, that in colonial times local coping strategies or disaster interpretations were deemed inferior to Western analyses.<sup>234</sup> The disregard however is not simple racism, as non-government sources authored by Europeans (such as newspaper articles) are not drawn on either. In the historical chapter of the SFC's report, the 'archive'

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<sup>231</sup> SV, appendix L: 'Budgetten van Inlandsche huisgezinnen in de noodlijdende streken vóór en gedurende den Nood'.

<sup>232</sup> Stoler, *Along the archival grain*, 147-178.

<sup>233</sup> On this topic see Devereux, *Theories of famine*, 16-18.

<sup>234</sup> Greg Bankoff, 'The historical geography of disaster: "vulnerability" and "local knowledge" in Western discourse' in: Greg Bankoff Georg Frerks and Dorothea Hillhorst eds., *Mapping vulnerability: disasters, development, and people* (London 2004) 25-36: 30-36.

of knowledge drawn on is primarily that of the colonial reports and some government-ordered and executed official inquiries.

The lack of regard for native understandings of famine is evident as well from the interviews the commission conducted with 'average' families in Semarang villages. First, family members were questioned separately to ensure truthfulness. Further, no particular interest is shown in how the families experienced the famine other than a survey of their financial affairs and possessions. Sources reviewed show no efforts to allow a Javanese perspective on the famine to systematically enter the report. Rather, their experience is qualified and above all quantified methodically in the manner that the colonial state had increasingly sought to attain grip on its massive self-imposed task to manage its possessions and subject population: statistics. The tendency toward statistics is evident from the many appendices to the SV. These statistics provided a means to grasp a complex subject – the village economy – and reduce it to what government officials deemed the bare necessities. This statistical knowledge was however, quite essential to policy-making.<sup>235</sup>

These statistical surveys further accentuate that for all its patronizing, neither the SFC nor the colonial government in general had much knowledge of the workings of the economy at the lower administrative levels, especially the village. The nineteenth century colonial state had only a very simplistic understanding of topics such as domestic trade and the economy at the local level. This contrasts sharply with the abundant statistics kept relating to international trade in commercial products.<sup>236</sup> A primary reason for the consequent instalment of the Lesser Welfare Inquiry was precisely the realization of the state that it lacked the information it thought necessary to formulate effective welfare policies.<sup>237</sup> Further, the colonial state did not begin to gather information on nutritional standards until quite some time into the twentieth century. The colonial reports, for instance, contain aggregate rough *estimates* of crop yields on the residency level, but there is little evidence in these and other sources that there was any detailed knowledge of food availability to the general population.<sup>238</sup> Greater intervention and involvement in the internal food market and food

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<sup>235</sup> This trend is analyzed for British India by U. Kalpagam, 'The colonial state and statistical knowledge', *History of the Human Sciences* 13 no. 2 (2000) 37-55.

<sup>236</sup> One might, for instance, see the appendices to the colonial reports, which provide ample detail on international trade and shipping, but contain barely any information on domestic trade.

<sup>237</sup> This was noted at the time by the above-mentioned C.J. Hasselman in: 'Vastlegging en bijhouding van Java's economische toestand, *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 26 (1904) 195-201.

<sup>238</sup> Pierre van der Eng, *Food consumption and the standard of living in Indonesia, 1880-1990*. Southeast Asia 93 no. 1. Economics Division Working Paper ANU (1993) 24-27. A parallel may be seen in French West-Africa, though at a later time: 'Dans l'entre-deux-guerres, deux biais permettent à l'administration d'évaluer chaque année la production vivrière dans les colonies de l'AOF: une forme statistique avec le chiffrage de la production par les services agricoles et une forme visuelle avec la surveillance de greniers de réserves par les commandants de cercle. L'une et l'autre de ces deux formes manifestent un décalage permanent entre les prétentions coloniales et les réalités locales: elles témoignent d'une forte volonté de maîtrise de la situation alimentaire mais ne donnent que peu d'enseignements sur l'alimentation réelle des populations.' Vincent

production came about only with the instalment of a Department of Agriculture in 1904, and even its efforts were marred by a major gap in understanding of the rice trade and cultural preferences for particular types of food.<sup>239</sup>

### Famine causation

The SV rejects any Malthusian explanations for the famine – though it does not dispute Malthusian logic. Rather, it deems it inapplicable as the famine regions were not considered densely populated.<sup>240</sup> Rather, it distinguishes between two types of factors of famine causation: those outside human control, and those that together determine the resilience [*weerstandsvermogen*] of the population. That is, famine may be directly caused by *force majeure* factors [‘rampen van hoogerhand’], but the impact of such factors is determined by the resilience of the population, i.e. its capacity to mitigate the impact of such calamitous events.

The degree to which this influence [of the disasters] will make itself felt, the size of the disaster caused by the abovementioned circumstances, depends principally on the resilience that a region possesses at the time that they are struck by unforeseen disasters, such as the abovementioned.<sup>241</sup>

Note that here resilience is construed as a collective trait, shared by a ‘region’, not an individual characteristic. Resilience specifically refers to the capacity of the population to prevent experience of calamitous events from leading to a state of destitution.

The report subscribes to the commonly held view in this period, that the natives lacked resilience, identifying as primary causes for this ‘slight resilience’ and lack of success on part of the government to affect positive change in this. It argues that the adverse ‘topographical and geological’ circumstances of the famine-struck regions, which resulted in both lack of water in some regions and too much water in others. Further, population had, under these circumstances, ‘become indifferent in nature, fatalistically acquiescing to what happens to it’, showing ‘little tendency to cooperate to look after its own interests’.<sup>242</sup> Elsewhere, it is stated that ‘especially in Grobogan the population,

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Bonnecase, ‘Avoir faim en Afrique occidentale française: investigations et représentations coloniales (1920-1960)’, *Revue d’Histoire des Sciences Humaines* 21 no. 2 (2009) 151-174: 154.

<sup>239</sup> Suzanne Moon, *Technology and ethical idealism. A history of development in the Netherlands East Indies*. Studies in Overseas History 9 (Leiden 2007) 44-69.

<sup>240</sup> SV, 110.

<sup>241</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>242</sup> SV, 111.

possibly as a consequence of the many disasters that has successively befallen it and the frequent use of opium, become indolent, lazy and fatalistic in nature'.<sup>243</sup>

Also, the appendix on the impact of the famine on 'average' families likewise demonstrates that families continued to attempt to find work in order to supplement income. The above-quoted generalisations regarding the population are thus contradicted by the commission's own report. Nonetheless, the final conclusions of the report regarding the native was clear: fatalistic and passive, incapable or unwilling to further his own interests. This was itself a commonly held position across imperial lines. The 1901 British Indian famine code stipulates intensive coaching of the Indians as they were so prone to demoralisation and fatalism.<sup>244</sup> Such interpretations were used by the British to strengthen the image of the native as a passive creature, as opposed to the Europeans, who were thus legitimately in control of such insufficient people:

Overlooking the possibility that they, by the very manner of their intervention and rule, might themselves have caused or contributed to others' sickness and hunger, Europeans instead saw the famines the encountered in distant parts of the world as a sign of the inferiority of the inhabitants and of their apathy in the face an adversary which Europe had long since triumphed (...)

This [the above] interpretation of famine's significance was clearly evident in India. There the stereotype of Indian inertia in the face of famine was not only commonplace in itself; it was also taken to endorse other assumptions about Indian, especially Hindu, fatalism and superstition.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> SV, 120. This should be contrasted with the chairman of the commission, Resident Sijthoff's own words to the Governor-General: 'If the people find work, they keep up their spirits. Only the exhausted, who can no longer work receive free food. One sees the *Demackers* and *Groboganders* migrating to all regions to find work.'. In fact, the SV itself concludes that turnout at various relief work sites was inadequate because prospective labourers were searching for work in nearby regions, looking for higher pay. The above-quoted generalizations are thus contradicted by the commission's own report. Resident of Semarang Sythoff to Governor-General Rooseboom, 9-5-1902. Mailrapport 407, stored in OV 19-8-1903, 41. NA, entry nr. 2.10.36.04; inv. nr. 197; SV, appendix L.

<sup>244</sup> Nor was such a characterization limited to Asian colonies: For instance, speaking of famines in the Sahel, Gerd Spittler notes similar interpretations. 'Das Fatalismusmodell wird heute im wissenschaftlichen Diskurs kaum noch zur Erklärung herangezogen, aber es muss deshalb erwähnt werden, weil es während der Kolonialzeit von 1900 bis 1960 das dominante Erklärungsmodell war. (...) Liest man die Berichte der Verwaltungsbeamten im kolonialen Französisch-Westafrika, dann werden dort die "Eingeborenen" vor allem durch Eigenschaften wie Faulheit, Apathie, Sorglosigkeit, Passivität und Fatalismus charakterisiert. Nicht nur im Alltag, sondern auch in der Krise verhalten sie sich so". Gerd Spittler, 'Handeln in einer Hungerkrise – das Beispiel der Kel Ewey Tuareg' in: Dominik Collet, Thore Lassen and Ansgar Schanbacher eds., *Handeln in Hungerkrisen: neue Perspektiven auf soziale und klimatische Vulnerabilität* (Göttingen 2012) 27-44: 28.

<sup>245</sup> David Arnold, *Famine: social crisis and historical change* (Oxford and New York 1988) 116-117, 131-132. Also see: Georgina Brewis, "'Fill full the mouth of famine": voluntary action in famine relief in India 1896-1901', *Modern Asian Studies* 44 no. 4 (2010) 887-918: 901.

This attitude was expressed by Dutch officials who experienced the NEI famines. An example is the Assistant-Resident of Grobogan, W.F. Lutter, who replaced his predecessor in the midst of crisis. Reviewing his performance, he wrote in 1905:

I found therefore here an ailing department, where the population was exhausted by consecutive fever- and cholera-epidemics and much impoverished by crop failures and cattle diseases. To make matters worse in 1902 1/3 of the entire *padi*-plantings failed namely 18450 *bouws* of the 56077 *bouws sawahs*; the population was completely discouraged by that and they and their headmen had lost all confidence. To give her back that confidence, to teach her to build on her own strengths, that I made my task; as the highest ideal I set myself to create a condition, in which no State aid had to be called upon anymore to provide foodstuffs to the common man [*de kleine man*].<sup>246</sup>

### Preventative measures

The report's recommendations are intended to increase resilience. The proposals of the commission can be divided into two types: those of an economic or technical nature, and those related to the 'character' or 'nature' of the native peoples. It should be noted here finally, that the proposals were solely intended for the benefit of the Javanese natives, not the so-called foreign easterners (primarily divided into Arabs and Chinese).

The SV argues that in such a situation, where the population does not have the capacity to improve its own resilience, due to these natural inclinations and a lack of sense of business, the government should act to force the population, temporarily, to adopt measures for that purpose. The report thus argues for a change to then-current colonial law, which explicitly forbade colonial officials the use of coercion with regard to the economic life of the colony's population. The native 'was to be viewed as someone who is capable of understanding his own interests and that the Government should not think or act for the native'.<sup>247</sup> In the face of the recently experienced crisis, the report deems that policy, the core of the liberal colonial policy, unsustainable. Instead of the then-current policy, summarized in the slogan 'encourage, lead, teach', officials were to be allowed to use 'coercion with threat of punishment'.<sup>248</sup> The role of the government must be 'fatherly', and the relationship of its officials to the population 'as that of guardian to pupil'.<sup>249</sup> Once new policies had been implemented, eventually the population's natural inclination to get stuck in a 'rut' would

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<sup>246</sup> W.F. Lutter, 'De Loemboeng-desa in de afdeeling Grobogan', *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 28 (1905) 339-356: 340-341.

<sup>247</sup> SV, 119.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibidem*, 119-120.

<sup>249</sup> SV, 120.



keep it on track in the right direction. Such coercive policies must, however, be implemented by a government represented by high quality officials. Especially those regions that are backward and require great effort to lift it up to higher standards of living required forceful action by competent officials. This, then is a forceful articulation of a paternalism that was to be a hallmark of early twentieth century colonial policy. Though, lest this seem too revolutionary, it should be noted that the same character deficiencies had been used to argue for particular types of colonial regimes for many decades.<sup>250</sup>

The second consideration of the commission, related to the first, was the competency of the civil service. Lack of resilience is not just blamed on failings on the part of the population, but also a consequence of factors regarding the colonial administration. The often lacking quality of the officials, especially those of the native civil service; the heavy load of diverse responsibilities placed on them. Due to the great regularity by which European government officials were (often voluntarily) reassigned from poor regions, even during these years of crisis, officials rarely became sufficiently acquainted with their administrative divisions to govern effectively.<sup>251</sup> The report thus argues strongly for an expansion of both the colonial administration as well as its powers, using the then-current crisis as justification. The argumentation outlined above sums up the main narrative of the report. The report paints the picture of a passive, uncaring native population, which on its own accord will not act for its own benefit.

Aside from these more general observations, the commission also evaluates options for improvement in 'the condition' of the ailing districts. These concern wide-ranging topics: irrigation, choice of crops and agricultural practice in general, European and native industry, fishery, livestock, government organization of agricultural credit, communal *padi* sheds, opium abuse, access of Chinese to the regions, government-run pawnshops, taxation, corvée labour, organization of land ownership at the village level, long-distance emigration, improvement of health and education and missionary work. An exhaustive review of all measures, as they are related to the specific districts is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, some general observations are worth documenting.<sup>252</sup>

First, the primacy of technical solutions, mainly irrigation. As noted in chapter 2, already in the latter half of the nineteenth century, famines in Demak prompted investments in irrigation schemes – with limited success.<sup>253</sup> In the SV, irrigation, if considered, is always the first preventative measure to be discussed. This fits a longer trend in NEI administration, in which the influence of

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<sup>250</sup> See for instance, Syed Hussein Alatas, *The myth of the lazy native: a study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism* (London 1977) 61-70.

<sup>251</sup> Ibidem, 113-115.

<sup>252</sup> Ibidem, 121-137.

<sup>253</sup> Wim Ravesteijn, 'Irrigatie en koloniale staat op Java: de gevolgen van de hongersnoden in Demak', *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (1999) 79-106.

technocrats and technical specialists increased throughout the nineteenth century. Welfare improvement for the engineering specialists lay with the modernization of agricultural and other economic infrastructures, such as roads, canals and irrigation works. They were, as they've been termed in a recent MA thesis on the subject, 'missionaries of modernity', who gained influence in NEI administrative circles at the expense of the more generically trained officials of the *Binnenlands Bestuur*.<sup>254</sup> The recommendations of this report, to invest in engineering projects, thus fits a longer-term development within the colonial state, and may have bolstered the credentials of the civil engineers.

Further, for all districts the diversification of the economy is recommended: commercial agriculture and private industries should be encouraged. As Suzanne Moon notes,

The report concluded that they had suffered not simply because of bad weather or virulent plant diseases, but because of the practice of indigenous agriculture. Famines could be avoided in the future if farmers adopted more suitable practices for the land.<sup>255</sup>

The famine-stricken regions were all dependent on the success of its food crops. Improvement of industry is thought to come mainly from establishment of European factories, though opportunities are limited (Demak) or nearly non-existent (Grobogan), rather than native initiatives due to the then-current circumstances – though in Demak the fish drying industry should be 'encouraged'.<sup>256</sup> Commercial crop growth was also recommended. Most villages grew no commercial crops to a significant extent, except in the district of Grogol (Semarang department) where cotton 'of some significance' was planted.<sup>257</sup>

Finally, the SV prescribes a number of measures intended to improve resilience by creating buffers: against lack of water, against lack of foodstuffs, against lack of crop seeds, against lack of credit. The first, by installing *wadoeks* (water reservoirs) near villages. The second, by expanding the communal grounds of villages, on which secondary (non-rice) food crops should be grown. The third and fourth objectives were to be accomplished through the erection of (*desa-*)*lumbungs* or sub-district *lumbungs*. The former were to be organised roughly as follows (there were regional differences): the population would be forced to set aside a small portion of its *padi* crop yields, which would be stored in the *desalumbungs*. The exact workings of the *lumbungs* differed per region. They might be used for saving up for lean times, seed loans or tax payments. The *desalumbung* was

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<sup>254</sup> SV, 121-137. Jan-Jacob Blussé van Oud-Ablas, *Missionaries of modernity. Technocratic ideals of colonial engineers in the Netherlands Indies and the Philippines, 1900-1920* (MA Thesis; Leiden University 2013).

<sup>255</sup> Moon, *Ethical idealism*, 22.

<sup>256</sup> SV, 127.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibidem*, 123.

intended as a not-for-profit institution, and interest payment was necessary only to cover the costs of operation. Interest rates were supposedly much lower than the rates farmers would otherwise be subjected to by moneylenders on the private market. Such extortionate interest rates, and subsequent indebtedness were widely considered within government to be a lead cause for lack of resilience to calamity. Thus the *desalumbung*, if operated fairly, would favourably influence the economic position of the natives. *Desalumbung* were erected in several departments, sometimes through use of illegal coercion, and to great success according to the SV and several colonial officials from other Javanese provinces.<sup>258</sup>

The *desalumbung* system is similar in intent to typical systems of (pre-modern) Southeast and East Asian forms of famine prevention and relief. Famine relief systems in imperial China, Choson Korea and Nguyen Vietnam had depended on a system of local granaries, in which some of the harvest produce would be stored. Recognizing the (political) instability wrought by harvest failures without adequate relief systems, and, less cynically, acknowledging a (Confucian) obligation on part of the ruler to guarantee the subsistence of his subjects, these dynasties would (theoretically) take an active role in securing food supplies in case of crop failures.<sup>259</sup> In Vietnam the French abolished the granary system, claiming it gave local native officials too much power over the peasants and led to abuses. The French 1906 famine commission considered reinstating the system, but opted not to due to the same reasons. Though claiming concerns over the power of native officials over the Vietnamese villagers, it should be considered if the French did not fear their own power-base would be undermined, argues Van Nguyen-Marhsall.<sup>260</sup>

In general, the intentions of these measures were to reduce dependence on a single type of cultivation and single product (wet rice cultivation) and rainfall, as well as providing more ‘fail-safe’ options at the communal level in case of calamities. They were to protect natives from the excesses of the market, while also forcing them to participate in it. The SV thus shows an ambivalent position regarding what might be termed the primacy of the market: the liberal principle that a well-functioning market economy is the best possible economic system, in which government involvement should be minimized. From its approval of the use of relief works as the most important form of aid, it may be deduced that allowing the native to participate in the market was considered preferable to direct intervention in the market. Also, Absence of native or European industry in the

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<sup>258</sup> For instance: C.F. de Haan, ‘Dessaloemboengs in Lamongan’, *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 29 (1905) 333-341; Lutter, ‘De Loemboeng-desa’, 339-356.

<sup>259</sup> Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority: the discourse on poverty, poor relief, and charity in French colonial Vietnam* (New York and Oxford 2009) chapter 2; Anders Karlsson, ‘Famine relief, social order, and state performance in Late Choson Korea’, *The Journal of Korean Studies* 12 no. 1 (2007) 113-141; Kathryn Eddgerton-Tarpley, ‘Tough choices: grappling with famine in Qing China, the British Empire, and beyond’, *Journal of World History* 24 no. 1 (2013) 135-176.

<sup>260</sup> Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority*, 46.

affected regions of Semarang is deemed an important factor by the SV: as a result natives have only very limited possibilities for earning extra money aside from their crop sales. On the other hand, the erection of *desalumbungs* during and after the famine demonstrates a desire for greater government regulation of and intervention in the market.

### *Interpretation*

From the above we may draw several conclusions. First, to government officials, the root causes of the famines lay with the natives, in either their cultural, social or economic habits, or simply, in their deficient character. While the direct causes for the famines lay with factors deemed outside human control, lack of resilience to these was attributable in first instance to the failure and incapacity of the natives to raise themselves up out of their poor economic state. Government analyses of the famines, while differing on the various factors at play in the generally observed lack of resilience, put the blame primarily on the native.

The major flaw of European government was seen to be that legislation and regular personnel transfers precluded the possibility of a benevolent, well-meaning civil service that could paternally the native on the right path toward economic progress. Such legislation needed to be overturned as practice (i.e. the famines) had proven that the native could not understand his own interest nor act accordingly. The European civil service, knowing what was best for the native, needed to be given the legal space to apply coercion (*prentah alus*).

While government spending was framed as generous in the colonial reports, the overall motto, especially at the central government was scepticism and stringency. Although one need not believe the words of Van Kol – related by Resident of Semarang P.F. Sijthoff – that the Governor-General ostensibly spoke – ‘I fear that with all this support the population will only become spoiled’ -, the central government certainly advocated a minimalist approach where possible, and limited expenses to the State. Perhaps it would go too far to conclude, as Van Nguyen-Marshall does for French Vietnam, that aid had a punitive character.<sup>261</sup> Yet, the central government was clearly of the position that the famines should in no way open the door to the State becoming a generous and charitable institution.

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<sup>261</sup> Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority*, 39.

## Reception

The SV was certainly not met with universal praise. As will be discussed in the following paragraph, in the Dutch parliament it gained a rather mixed reception. In press, the report attracted quite some criticism, which focused on two of its elements. First, the long delay between the Resident of Semarang sounding the alarm in early 1900 and the authorization of famine relief at the end of that year. Second, the reports recommendation to make 'soft coercion' [*prentah alus*], under certain circumstances. *Prentah alus* had existed as a concept and unofficially (perhaps: illegally) applied by European and native officials for a long time. A euphemism for forcing the peasantry, it ran directly against the notion of economic freedom officially professed by the NEI administration's liberal policy prevalent since the 1860s. Thus, the SV explicitly argued for a (limited) change in practical administration that had significant ideological implications. Should the native still be considered a person capable of understanding his/her own interests? Not always, was the SV's answer. In some circumstances, specifically when a population had proven itself incapable of elevating itself out of poverty, government should act forcefully and forcibly to make the population change its ways so that it might attain a higher level of welfare.<sup>262</sup>

This was a character judgment of the (Javanese) native that was not universally shared by prominent colonial press, officials and politicians. For instance, The Semarang report received strong criticism from the high-profile liberal journal *De Indische Gids* [The Indian Guide]. Its editor-in-chief wrote a scathing review of the SV's expressed intentions regarding government coercion. Arguing that the SV itself demonstrated that thinking an 'almighty administration' remodel a native society in a correct way was deeply fallacious. The desire expressed in the SV to apply coercion with threat and execution of punishment in case government directions were not followed would, even in the best of cases, result in treating '30 million people as less than children'.<sup>263</sup> Further, government had neither the knowledge, nor capacities to carry such a burden, as demonstrated by the inaccurately conceived and executed relief measures and the incompetence of colonial administrators. Thus, the report

makes a remarkable contribution to the knowledge that the best civil servants are powerless to keep the economic wheelwork of a native society going, when the spring of self-interest and personal initiative is broken, by bringing all private matters under the care of the state.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> SV, 120-121.

<sup>263</sup> J.E.d.M, 'Overzicht van het verslag over den waters- en voedingsnood in de residentie Semarang', *De Indische Gids* 25 no. 2 (1903) 1336-1663: 1360.

<sup>264</sup> De Meyer, 'Overzicht', 1360.

Similar criticisms were levelled against the SV by the *Koloniaal Weekblad*, which also takes the position that the Javanese natives should not be treated as the caricatures they become in the SV. Government should reflect more critically on its own regulations rather than place blame at the natives:

It appears to us, eyeing the many Javanese, that we have known in major places and with whom we have also worked in the inland, incredible, that the *dessa*-Javanese had become such a lethargic and dumb tool, that he has become unreceptive to good council and that even threat of punishment could not bring him to represent his own interests.<sup>265</sup>

To recount the whole polemic that was inspired by the SV would consume too much space. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the SV's position on coercion had plenty of supporters. C.J. Hasselman, member of the commission, and editor-in-chief of the *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* (Journal for the Inland Administration) used his journal as a platform to host debates on the issue, in which he took part, expressing strong support for the application of coercion.<sup>266</sup> Several officials took this opportunity to argue for coercion, on the grounds that the native population would not on its own initiative continue to implement suggested (even evident) improvements to their agricultural and economic practice, citing examples from their own experience. Hasselman further used his journal, to advocate his interpretation of the 'famine' issue in an article titled 'Hongersnooden in Britsch-Indië en de lessen die wij daaruit kunnen trekken' (1903).<sup>267</sup> The article echoes to a great extent the opinions of the Semarang commission's report. Hasselman argues that the recent famine in the NEI should not lead to eccentric speculations that conditions in the NEI had become as bad as in British India, where famines were still much more severe and of a chronic rather than an incidental nature. Nonetheless, lessons may be drawn from Indian experiences, regarding the 'resilience' of Javanese population. Like the SV, Hasselman regards famine as a phenomenon that is a consequence of abnormal weather combined with lack of resilience on part of the population.<sup>268</sup>

One should not however, according to Hasselman, take the (socialist) position that extraction of wealth and European competition had impoverished the native populations. Nor was taxation an issue, as taxation in the NEI was much lower than in British India. The only criticism he is willing to concede is the height of expenditures on military affairs, money that could otherwise have been

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<sup>265</sup> 'Het verslag over den waters- en voedingsnood in Semarang. II.', *Het Koloniaal Weekblad*, 13-08-1903.

<sup>266</sup> The debate is briefly noted by Wim van den Doel, *De stille macht. Het Inlandsch Bestuur op Java en Madura*, (Amsterdam 1994) 223-227.

<sup>267</sup> C.J. Hasselman, 'Hongersnooden in Britsch-Indië en de lessen die wij daaruit kunnen trekken', *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 26 (1904) 135-181. Reprinted from *De Indische Gids* 25 no. 2 (1903) 1601-1639.

<sup>268</sup> Hasselman, 'Hongersnooden', 173.

spent on developing the colonial economy. Nonetheless, for Hasselman improving the resilience of the native should be 'number one' on the colonial agenda. Three measures are required for this: (1) A generous financial policy from the Motherland, (2) the native should cooperative for his own benefit, (3) The European and Native civil service should have to be on top of things constantly and be 'on-guard'. Given the conservative and lax nature of the native, direct coercion might be applied 'where needed'. He further emphasizes the need to keep more detailed and precise records of economic conditions on Java for the formulation welfare improvement policy.<sup>269</sup>

This debate, mostly among civil servants, did not directly spill over into Dutch political policy however.<sup>270</sup> The issue of coercion cropped up somewhat in 1904 in debates on investments in native agriculture and the soon to be established Department of Agriculture for the Netherlands East Indies. With advocates on both sides.<sup>271</sup> The first director of the Department was firmly against coercion though, so it should thus be noted that the temporary impact of the famines and SV did not lead to new policy with respect to coercion. Rather, the early Department of Agriculture may be considered an extension, albeit more intrusively, of still existing lead-by-example policy. It did, however, fit neatly within an ongoing trend of which the new Department of Agriculture was a part: a new technocratic direction in Dutch colonial policy, which emphasized the transference and adaption of modern (Western) scientific practice to the colonies as a means to further its welfare. It is no coincidence that in the SV – for each department it was deemed applicable, - the first item on the list of measures to prevent future famines was irrigation. In this sense, more than coercion, the famine and its official interpretation provided a stepping stone to future government involvement in native agriculture.<sup>272</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Hasselman had few hopes for the second point of his recommendations: 'it is not encouraging to see, how little inclination the Javanese shows to make any changes in sin ancient methods concerning agriculture and horticulture(?), how averse he is of applying improvements, of which he had been able to observe the use at European entrepreneurs, what effort it takes to open him op to a simple matter like the quick planting of padi, how indifferent he is toward the future and in general how extremely little effort he makes to advance himself and through capital accumulation or otherwise, improve the position of him and his. Constant involvement of European and native civil servants, either through leading and teaching, or where required, by way of direct coercion [*pressie*], will be necessary to improve this in the long term.' Ibidem, 'Hongersnooden', 175-176. The article attracted some attention from the elitist Indisch Genootschap [*Indies Society*], which, in another sign of the impact the famine had made, in late 1903 held two sessions on 'Considerations in response to the report of the Indian Famine Commission of 1901'. 'Beschouwingen naar aanleiding van het Verslag der Indian Famine Commission van 1901', *Verslagen der vergaderingen / Indisch genootschap* (1903) nos. 4 and 6, 61-86 and 135-169.

<sup>270</sup> It is thus too much of a sweeping statement, to claim as Harro Maat does, that 'The conclusion of the commission announced the end of a liberal period'. Harro Maat, *Science cultivating practice. A history of agricultural science in the Netherlands and its colonies, 1863-1986* (Dordrecht 2001) 43.

<sup>271</sup> For instance: Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal [HTK], *Bijblad van de Nederlandsche Staats-Courant [BNSC]* (1903-1904) II, 2107-2109, 2102-2127, 2177-2179. Handelingen van de Eerste Kamer der Staten Generaal [HEK], *Bijblad van de Nederlandsche Staats-Courant [BNSC]* (1903-1904) I, 495-502, esp. 496.

<sup>272</sup> SV, 120-121; Moon, *Ethical idealism*, 25-43.

## 4.2 The 1906 guideline for ‘scarcity’ and ‘need’

The famine however did have another effect directly related to disaster management by the colonial government. The famine had catalysed the instalment of the Lesser Welfare Inquiry, which was to be the basis for concrete policy proposals for the new ethical policy.<sup>273</sup> The chairman of the OMW was ordered by the colonial government to draft a guideline [*leidraad*] to be followed by administrators in future occurrences of ‘scarcity’ or ‘need’. It was aimed at Java and Madura alone, implying that the government did not see famine or like disasters as an issue for the Outer Islands. It was published in 1906 in the *Tijdschrift voor Binnenlandsch Bestuur*, but not adopted by the government as official policy on grounds that it would place undue restraints on civil servants who worked in such a diverse region.<sup>274</sup> Nonetheless, it is an important document for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the continued impact of the early 1900s famine in the minds of the colonial administration, which realized the inadequacy of its previous crisis-response to large-scale disasters. Second, it represents the only explicit and publically available guideline for disaster prevention and mitigation for the Netherlands East Indies. We will first review its epistemological basis: what does the author of the *Leidraad* draw on to formulate its proposals? This will be followed by a brief exposition on the definitions of ‘scarcity’ and ‘need’ that the guideline employs. Finally, it will review the mitigating and preventative measures prioritized by the guideline.

Concerning documentation, the *Leidraad* primarily draws on the 1901 report of the British Indian famine commission, which offered its revisions of the 1898 and 1880 Famine Codes as a consequence of famines experienced at the turn of the century. It further uses the recommendations of the Semarang famine commission’s report of 1903. Previous experiences of famine are discounted as sources of knowledge on effective famine policy. Only the famines as result of the livestock plagues of the 1880s may have provided some guideline, the *Leidraad* states, but it has not been documented in a fashion suitable for the purpose of drawing lessons from the experience.

### *Definitions*

In its first chapter, the *Leidraad* offers its ‘practical’ definitions of the terms ‘schaarschte’ [scarcity], ‘nood’ [need], ‘hulpbehoevend’ [needy; litt. requiring aid] and ‘hulpeloos’ [helpless]. Scarcity is defined as:

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<sup>273</sup> Hüsken, ‘Declining welfare in Java’, 213-216. Also see the introductory chapter to: OMW Xa, *eindverhandeling van ’t onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart*.

<sup>274</sup> H.E. Steinmetz, ‘Leidraad voor de bestrijding van “Schaarschte” en “Nood” op Java en Madoera’, *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 30 (1906) 79-155.



When the usual foodstuffs are barely adequate or highly prices, for a longer time or to a greater degree than usual in the annual difficult times. "Need" prevails in a region, and the population there is 'necessitous' [noodlijdend], when on a large scale and during a seriously long time the opportunity, capacity or means are lacking for providing the usual subsistence [levensonderhoud].<sup>275</sup>

The choice not to refer to famine, but to need was made, because 'a population can also be necessitous as a consequence of other disasters than crop failure or harvest failures [*misgewas of oogstmiskukking*], for instance as consequence of disease (of humans or cattle), floods etc. For this reason also this guideline speaks of 'need' not of 'famine'. The ambiguous language can have either of two implications: either that famine can only exist if a situation of hunger was preceded by crop failures. The other possibility, that there are other types of disaster that could occur, as a consequence of particular events (disease, floods) which do not involve famine, but for which the guideline is nonetheless a valid instruction. Further it should be noted that, as in the SV, a distinction is drawn between the occurrence of what in current terminology may be deemed a hazard, and the potentially resulting disaster (famine, or disasters of another kind).

The distinction between the 'needy' and the 'helpless' is made out of practical considerations, eyeing the degree of government response to either condition:

'Needy' in such a (needy) region, is the adult workable individual, without means and not having the opportunity to earn subsistence for themselves or for his (or her) family. Children are needy, if they have no care-takers, but are themselves able to something. 'Helpless', are the sick, elderly, invalids; and children, who without aid would starve [*gebrek lijden*].<sup>276</sup>

This distinction provides a selection criterion: those still capable of work (the needy) should be provided with employment at relief works, while the helpless may be aided through doles. For the relief of hunger, the relief works are deemed the preferred method, 'because by this [form of] aid the resilience is weakened less or not at all.'<sup>277</sup> Relief work should furthermore be useful, as 'useless or too heavy labour' is always to be disapproved.<sup>278</sup>

The *Leidraad* splits its recommendations into roughly three chapters, for (1) preparatory measures before and at the onset of need, (2) explanation of the 'purpose and nature' of the prescribed

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<sup>275</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 88. In this respect the *Leidraad* is more specific than its 1901 British counterpart, which does not provide such strict definitions for 'scarcity' and 'famine'.

<sup>276</sup> Ibidem, 88-89.

<sup>277</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 105.

<sup>278</sup> Ibidem.

measures and (3) preventative measures, respectively. Regarding preparatory measures, the guideline places responsibility for monitoring the conditions of the people on the Javanese administrators, especially the regents. They are to be on the lookout constantly for signs of distress and to tour regularly areas from which reports of need are received.<sup>279</sup> Further, it prescribes, as recommended by the BICR, that private parties are involved at an early stage, either to aid or facilitate government relief or reach to private charity.

More expansive is the section on relief measures. The first question addressed is when to begin aid operations: how to prevent scarcity from becoming need? The answer is decidedly ambiguous: 'in general these measures will cost little. One should however not shirk from substantiated costs, if they can prevent much suffering and greater expenses later. It must be insisted on however, that one does not come to the populations aid sooner than is truly necessary'<sup>280</sup> The *Leidraad*, however, does not include clear criteria for when aid should begin. The BICR, by contrast, sets up a system of test works: if famine is suspected in a region, some relatively small-scale relief works should be authorized. If these attract much labour, this is a clear sign of distress and larger-scale relief operations can be justified.<sup>281</sup>

If need is established in a region, the *Leidraad*, as mentioned above, expresses a clear preference for relief works, that is, work-for-aid schemes, over doles, as 'when there is a suitable opportunity for earning money, only the helpless will qualify for these doles [*giften*]'<sup>282</sup> Such relief works are a natural extension of the usual habit of 'the working classes [*standen*]' to earn a little extra in hard times. Children and women should also be given an opportunity to earn. Further, the *Leidraad* warns against one-size-fits-all labour, and recommends having people to work that they have skills in<sup>283</sup>. Again aware of the British Indian experience, the *Leidraad* advises organizing such relief works nearby stricken regions, and to have the weakened perform tasks that are relatively light at their villages.<sup>284</sup> This comment is interesting, as during the Semarang famine, it would appear not much attention was paid to the state of individuals: what tasks were they still suited for. Most relief works authorized were projects requiring heavy labour from individuals. Further, the recommendation for lighter work for those incapable of hard labour also had an educational purpose:

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<sup>279</sup> They reports of their tours should, 'if there is no objection', (...) 'be made public by Government in the newspapers'. Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 95.

<sup>280</sup> Ibidem, 97.

<sup>281</sup> *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901* (Calcutta 1901) 15-19.

<sup>282</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 99.

<sup>283</sup> Ibidem, 105-106.

<sup>284</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 107-108.

That way, the population itself cooperates to mitigate the need, which cannot but raise interest for the cause and work educationally [*opvoedend*]; and probably some experience is thus gained, that can have its use for later, also with a repeat of the need.<sup>285</sup>

In this, the prescriptions found in the *Leidraad* were not original. Relief works had been part of famine relief in the NEI for several decades already. Further, hard labour for minimal wages made up the bulk of famine relief efforts in British and French colonies as well. The French regime appears to have been especially tough. By 1901 the British recognized the need to adjust the tasks required to the physical state of individuals applying.<sup>286</sup> Further, pay should, while not so high as to attract the non-destitute, be sufficient for subsistence. In French Vietnam, in 1906 the physical labour required had been unrealistically harsh, and the pay less than adequate.<sup>287</sup> Also contrary to the NEI's *Leidraad* and the British famine codes, relief works were organized far away from affected regions, making them poorly accessible to many destitute.

Government aid thus also acquires a paternalistic streak, that can be found in the debates on improves natives' resilience cited above. Finally, pay should always be prompt and daily and not be dependent on work delivered, but on the will to work shown.<sup>288</sup> Finally, The *Leidraad* further contains instructions for 'those involved in providing aid' for proper behaviour: they should be patient and caring, know the people and the region well and speak a native language and contact should be sought with experienced philanthropists.<sup>289</sup>

After these deliberations, the *Leidraad* enters what is undoubtedly its most interesting section. Under the heading 'Measures already taken or recommended', it lists various types of aid 'in the order in which they may be taken.' These are divided into two sections: (1) 'measures for temporary support' and (2) 'measures with sustained improvement as a result'. The first category of measures consists of nine forms of aid. Eight of these are termed 'aid' [*hulpverlening*],<sup>290</sup> while the last form

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<sup>285</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 109.

<sup>286</sup> *Report of the Indian Famine Commission*, 25-43 describes the proper organization of relief works according to the British famine commission of 1901.

<sup>287</sup> 'For all the hard work and difficult living conditions, the workers (referred to as "coolies" in the documents) were paid very little. In Ha Nam the workers on road repair were paid ten cents per cubic meter of earth they moved. In 1905 four cents could provide a person with one meal of rice or two meals of rice broth. (...) It is safe to conclude that those seeking relief at the work camps were expected to perform hard labor in harsh conditions for wages that were insufficient to support themselves and their families'. Nguyen-Marshall, *In search of moral authority*, 37-38.

<sup>288</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 114-116.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibidem*, 109-110.

<sup>290</sup> These are, in order (1) 'diminishing, temporary cessation in first instance of *corvée* labour [*heeren- en oneigenlijke desadiensten*], subsequently also of proper *desa* services or payment of said services'; (2) 'Provision of foods in kind or prepared to the needy and helpless'; (3) 'provision of clothing, sheets and other such needs'; (4) 'Medical treatments and provision of medicine'; (5) 'Selling of foodstuffs to the population'; (6)

is 'provision of work', the latter of which is subdivided into various forms deemed useful either to other forms of aid or for improvement of the welfare of the region or village.

The *Leidraad* then identifies the measures for sustained improvement. Much is expected of a measure mentioned in the analysis of the SV: (1) the establishment of certain communal buildings: village and/or sub district rice barns [*desalumbung*], where villagers can (be obligated to) store rice as a buffer for lean times; *bale-desa's* [town halls], as these would diminish corvée labour obligations: normally, a new *desa* headman would require villagers to expand his house so that it could be used for official ceremonies etc. A town hall would eliminate this imposition. Further recommendations pertain to the improvement of roads and waterworks such as irrigation systems. Final recommendations are to expand the *tegal* communal lands, constructing orchards, and to provide advances for the purchase of cattle and reduce 'wastefulness, opium and alcohol use' and expansion of education.<sup>291</sup> Basically, 'all that can serve to make the population more prosperous and strong [*krachtiger*].'<sup>292</sup>

At the end of this expansive section, dealt with here only superficially, the *Leidraad* issues what is arguably its most important message to civil servants: be prepared!

In regions, where once already or repeatedly need occurred to extraordinary degree, or *there*, where the economic conditions are such, that such a thing can be somewhat expected, demands a good administration, that one is constantly on guard for this, [that] one does not wait with planning of measures, until the need has announced itself.<sup>293</sup>

This state of preparedness is echoed in the BICR, which even more than the *Leidraad* expands on the necessity to have detailed, comprehensive plans of action ready to be executed if a famine is suspected. The *Leidraad* nonetheless emphasizes the need to have such a plan which outlines the 'main features' of aid, of which the local civil servants of various departments (including doctors, engineers etc.) are well-informed.<sup>294</sup>

A final, but crucial section of the *Leidraad* concerns how relief should be organized legally. It is determined that the provision used to authorize the Resident of Semarang to begin aid operations should provide the required legal precedent and thus no new legislation is required. *Staatsblad 1875* No. 25 art. 2, described in the previous chapter, should be slightly reinterpreted. '*landsbelang*' [The

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diminishing, delaying payment or remission of taxes'; (7) 'Provision of seeds, cuttings, allotments(?) etc. of one-year crops or advancing of money for purchase of these'; (8) 'Provision of advances for tilling the *sawah*, and for the planting [aanleg] of cassava- and other plantings of one-year crops.' Steinmetz, '*Leidraad*', 117-130.

<sup>291</sup> Ibidem, 146

<sup>292</sup> Ibidem, 145.

<sup>293</sup> Ibidem, 143-144.

<sup>294</sup> Ibidem, 144-145; *Report of the Indian Famine Commission 1901* (Calcutta 1901) 9-10.

nation's interest], ought to be expanded to include '*volksbelang*' [the people's interests]. Thus, in case of an emergency, the provincial governor would have the discretion to spend on behalf of the people if delays would cause undue harm to them. Costs would ultimately be paid out of the central government's funds. However, if possible, advances to the people were to be preferred over forms of aid that saw no returns to the state.<sup>295</sup>

### Change in intervention policies?

The degree to which these famine guidelines had an impact on relief practice is beyond the scope of this thesis to judge. Available evidence and literature however do not allow any conclusions on the impact of either the SV or the *Leidraad* on government relief actions after 1904. Lacking direct evidence of the implementation of the policies recommended in the documents. Between 1906 and the First World War, there was little spending on famine relief. Nonetheless, the years 1911-1913 and 1917-1920 stand out as important for NEI relief policy. First, as W.R. Hugenholtz has noted, when the government suspected the threat of major scarcities of rice in 1911, it acted in complete contrast to its previous *laissez-faire* policy of non-intervention in the rice markets:

In September 1911 the government unexpectedly issued a temporary prohibition of all exports of rice for the entire colony, on penalty of 'imprisonment or forced labour at public works for board and without wages, for the term of six days to three months'. The export contracts that had been signed before the date the regulation became operative, however, were respected and exempted from the prohibition. The regulation lasted for only four months; it became operative on 26 September 1911 and was repealed on 16 January 1912. But in July 1912, in a notice identical to the one issued in 1911, a new temporary prohibition on the export of rice was issued. The prohibition became effective on 22 July 1912 and this time lasted until 21 February 1913.<sup>296</sup>

This was, as Hugenholtz noted, 'an almost revolutionary decision'. In the c. 1900-1904 famines, intervention in the rice markets had been limited to relatively minor government purchases for Celebes and Djoana department (Semarang). It signaled a clear departure from previous policy and affirmed the trend set in some years before, which saw the colonial government become increasingly interventionist in matters of food and agriculture.

In 1918 again, government intervention was much greater than any time before in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. For the Javanese, the situation turned quite dire toward the

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<sup>295</sup> Steinmetz, 'Leidraad', 148-155.

<sup>296</sup> Hugenholtz, 'Famine and food supply', 180.

end of the war period. Worries turned to panic when Burma issued an export ban on rice in the fall of 1917. Dependent on rice imports from mainland Southeast Asia to complement insufficient supplies from domestic harvests, the colonial government took a number of measures. At first, it refused to set maximum prices for rice. Instead:

to keep the food situation under control, the export of rice from Palembang and Sumatra's West Coast to other parts of the Archipelago was forbidden on New Year's Eve of 1917. Bans for other regions and for maize and cassava products followed.<sup>297</sup>

When Dutch ships carrying rice from Rangoon were seized in early 1918, to quash the onset of panic, the government set maximum prices for rice. According to Kees van Dijk, this attempt was 'a fiasco', as merchants could easily circumvent the system or game it for their own benefit. Van Dijk relates the two very different government representations of the potential food shortage: internal and external.

Impressed by the seriousness of the situation, Van Limburg Stirum called together an emergency meeting with the Residents in Java in early April. He revealed that without imports the annual shortage of rice would amount to 400,000 tons for Java and Madura and 300,000 tons for the rest of the Netherlands Indies. There was still some stock, which meant that shortage in 1918 would be 550,000 tons of rice could no longer be imported. The situation looked 'very alarming'. The general public was told a different story. It was assured that not all was as bad as it looked. There were still sufficient stocks of food.<sup>298</sup>

Privately, at first, though, the government instructed the residents to do what they could to increase food production by the Javanese, at the expense of export crops.

#### **4.3 Playing politics with hunger: government representation of famine**

##### Dutch government representation of the famine

The most prolific official platforms through which the Dutch government portrayed the famine to the public were related to the annual *Troonrede*, the annual colonial reports and parliamentary deliberations on plans of the Dutch government for the next budget year. After a careful start in

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<sup>297</sup> Kees van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Leiden 2007) 528. On this period one might also consult Yasuo Eumura, 'The food shortage and Javanese society from the end of 1910s to 1920s', *Lembaran Sejarah* 3 no. 1 (2000) 124-162.

<sup>298</sup> Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War*, 529.

1901, the government made sure to include the dire situation in the colonies, without however using the word 'famine' and instead emphasizing the resoluteness and adequacy of government response.

Thus, the famous 1901 *Troonrede*, the first of the confessional Abraham Kuyper cabinet, which heralded the new ethical colonial policy, had the Queen Wilhelmina declare only that it was necessary

to imbue all of government policy with the realization, that the Netherlands has a moral [zedelijke] calling to fulfill toward the people of these regions. In relation to this, the lesser welfare of the native population of Java attracts My special attention. I wish to conduct an investigation into the causes of this.<sup>299</sup>

This was the first recognition of the plight of the Indonesian colonized, stated in very euphemistic terms. In 1902, the tone changed: the *Troonrede* more explicitly addressed the Javanese famine, stating that: 'crop failures in some residencies on Java made necessary a strong show of aid by the Dutch government'.<sup>300</sup> Interestingly, the Queen herself had begun to show an interest in the famines in the months previous to the *Troonrede*. Internal documents show her desire to be updated on developments in the colony, and that she was sent important updates on the famine and its relief in mid-1902.<sup>301</sup> Further Wilhelmina, as well as other members of the royal family, privately made sizable charitable donations (see chapter 3).<sup>302</sup>

Again, in 1903, Wilhelmina did not leave the still ongoing crisis unmentioned: 'The adversities, with which the people of Java had to struggle, remained, though tempered, still partly to such a degree, that repeatedly support was shown to be indispensable.'<sup>303</sup> She also found it necessary, to emphasize that 'in the colony of Curaçao the Government could provide in the scarcity of foodstuffs that was caused by prolonged drought', although no such scarcities are mentioned in the same year's Colonial Report of Curaçao.<sup>304</sup> Clearly, the government was anxious to demonstrate to the public its benevolence and competence in dealing with these crises.

Such an evolution in crisis-framing can also be observed in the colonial reports. The Colonial Report of 1901 only relates that in 1900 scarcities occurred in limited regions, which had been dealt with through relief works.<sup>305</sup> No mention is made of the long delay in implementing relief. The

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<sup>299</sup> *Troonredes, openingsredes, inhuldigingsredes 1814-1963*, E. van Raalte ed. ('s Gravenhage 1964) 193.

<sup>300</sup> *Troonredes*, Van Raalte ed., 195.

<sup>301</sup> OV 29-09-1902, no. 6 and 31-10-1902, no. 48. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nrs. 145 and 150 respectively. The first informs the Queen of the instalment of the SFC, the second informs her of conditions on Java and government relief measures through *mail reports* forwarded by the Governor General.

<sup>302</sup> 'Voor den noodlijdenden Javaan', *Koloniaal Weekblad*, 6-11-1902.

<sup>303</sup> *Troonredes*, Van Raalte ed., 196.

<sup>304</sup> *Troonredes*, Van Raalte ed., 197. *Koloniaal Verslag van 1903. III. Curaçao*.

<sup>305</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1901*, 108.

Colonial Report of 1902 strikes a markedly different tone. Elaborating fairly extensively on the conditions in Demak and Grobogan, it paints the picture of a stricken population suffering from ‘poverty unprecedented for many years’, bereft of the support of European industry, decimated and imbued with fear by cholera. The government had thus responded with generous spending for relief of various kinds.<sup>306</sup> In the Report of 1903, this generosity is again emphasized, toward a population suffering from ‘less fortunate economic conditions’. It further announces in this Report the Semarang famine investigation, and that, partly due to the current crisis, more steps will be taken to further the start of the welfare inquiry announced in 1901.<sup>307</sup> Note, again, that the government is eager to portray its benevolence while also downplaying the severity of the crisis unfolding on its territory by avoiding such highly charged words as ‘famine’.

This desire to win public opinion and avoid bad press is further evident in the archives of the Ministry of Colonies. In general, the Ministry of Colonies and the Batavia government were highly sensitive to newspaper criticism of its colonial policies. With regard to the famine, this can be observed in several ways. First, the fact that included in the *Verbalen* of the Ministry of Colonies, are often article cut-outs from Dutch or colonial that express criticism of the government or paint a dire picture of the conditions in the colony. Second, from the internal commotion within the colonial government caused by several publications of H. van Kol. During his 1902 tour of the archipelago.<sup>308</sup>

The third and fourth instances relate to private fundraising. In the spring of 1902, for the first time the Ministry of Colonies asked, via a secret communication, to be kept up-to-date by the Governor-General regarding relief expenditures. It also wished to receive an account of all expenses made up to that point, so that these could be published in the Colonial Report of that year. Consequently the Ministry received copies of the Governor-General’s authorizations of relief funds. These were stored in the *Openbare verbalen* [Public folders] of the Ministry. While the authorizations regularly spoke of ‘need’ [*nood*] and ‘ailing’ [*noodlijvende*] regions, the labels on the *verbalen* referred merely to ‘less favorable economic circumstances’, demonstrating an uncertainty on various levels of government on how to define and frame the ongoing crisis.<sup>309</sup>

The Minister was partly motivated to receive these accounts by a desire to demonstrate to the public the efficacy and generosity of government, as this would contrast with the paucity of gifts

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<sup>306</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1902*, 7-8.

<sup>307</sup> *Koloniaal Verslag van 1903*, 5-6.

<sup>308</sup> H. van Kol, ‘Uit onze Koloniën’, *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad*, 14-06-1902 (for Maros); Van Kol wrote several scathing articles for the *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* after his visit to Semarang Residency (see chapter 3) and the sub-department Maros on Sulawesi. These articles later formed the basis for parts of his publication *Uit onze koloniën*.

<sup>309</sup> OV 19-8-1903, nos. 40 and 41; OV 14-5-1904, no. 60; OV 22-5-1905, no. 63; OV 03-04-1906, no. 43. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nrs. 197; 239; 314; 369 respectively. Yet other *verbalen* from the same years refer to ‘scarcities’ or ‘need’. For instance: OV 31-10-1902, no. 48. NA MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr 150.



collected by private charities (see chapter 3).<sup>310</sup> On the one hand this demonstrates the ambiguous relation of the government with private charity, as the latter was on the one hand to be encouraged, even relied on in normal times. In this case though, government sought to boost its own image at charity's expense. This is even more evident in another 1902 incident recorded in the Ministry of Colonies archives. In 1902 – still at the height of crisis – the mayor of Arnhem requested permission from the Minister of Colonies to authorize a private fundraiser in his city for the Javanese famished. He was, however, informed officially

that at the Ministry of Colonies it has so far not appeared, that the need on Java would be on such a scale, that the Indies Government, which is extending aid on a very large scale where it proved to be necessary would be incapable to remedy it.<sup>311</sup>

In other words, the government clearly placed its own perceived interests over that of the starving Javanese, to avoid being seen as incompetent.

### Politics in parliament

As noted in Chapter 2, the Semarang famine of the late 1840s was a 'battering ram' against the Cultivation System.<sup>312</sup> It would go too far to state that the famine of the early twentieth century had such an impact on Dutch colonial politics. Nonetheless, as the crisis unfolded, it began to leave a significant imprint on the deliberations on the NEI in Dutch parliament. Major issues were arguments over the nature of the crisis in the NEI, the consequences the famine ought to have on Dutch policy in the colony. Specifically, the famine was used as proof that investments under the new 'ethical policy' were critical, as the famine proved that the Indonesians lacked resilience to cope with major crises. In other words, the famine became a tool for politicians to achieve their ends. It should be noted though, that the famine was discussed only within the context of the annual determination of the NEI budget. This meant that the famines were discussed publically less than ten days in the year.

It has been noted in Chapter 3, that by far the most vocal critic of Dutch colonial policy had been the socialist H.H. van Kol. Van Kol had been a member of parliament since 1897, after first serving in the NEI Binnenlands Bestuur as an engineer from at several postings on Java. In parliament he involved himself most ardently with colonial affairs. Throughout the crisis years, Van Kol debated with fellow

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<sup>310</sup> GV 11-04-1902, P5/no.37. NA, MiKo GA, entry nr.2.10.36.51, inv. nr. 14.

<sup>311</sup> OV 02-05-1902, no. 45. NA, MiKo OV, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 176.

<sup>312</sup> Elson, 'The famine in Demak and Grobogan in 1849-1850', 39.

parliamentarians with two purposes: to get the government to acknowledge the severity of the famine, and to act accordingly, which meant large-scale investment in development projects that would benefit the native population.

The first instance that the crisis was debated in parliament was in 1901, in debates on the above-quoted the Troonrede spoken by Queen Wilhelmina. In his response to the Troonrede, Van Kol seized on this phrasing to argue that the government's inclusion of the phrase meant that surely the government must be aware that 'lesser welfare' was an inadequate term: 'famine' [hongersnood] was the only proper designation according to Van Kol, who extensively quoted anecdotes of suffering from Dutch newspapers to make his point.<sup>313</sup> The newly elected Prime Minister, Abraham Kuyper, firmly rejected such a typology, stating that nowhere in his previous statements had he mentioned famine, or even 'misery' [ellende].<sup>314</sup> An admittance of the severity of the situation on Java only came a year later.

Debate on the famine was more substantial in late 1902. Recently returned from travelling the archipelago, H. van Kol brought the Indonesian famines into parliamentary debates on the 1903 budget. In a memorandum added to the usual parliamentary report on the government's budget plans, Van Kol declared that

The mass of natives on Java has become so poor, that insufficient food makes them susceptible to epidemics; that a single crop failure causes deep misery; that the continual scarcities are threatening to degenerate into famine; and that the British Indian "famines" have entered the once so rich and fertile Java.<sup>315</sup>

In no uncertain terms he blames Dutch governance for this:

And meanwhile, the bleeding of this very poor [*bloedarme*] people continues, that has to suffer so bitterly because of Dutch mismanagement. Millions and millions leave the country, as dividends of capitalist enterprises; as pensions and salaries of European civil servants; as profits for Dutch suppliers of the government; as benefits gathered from pilgrims to Mecca; as usurious interests of the Chinese and Arabians.<sup>316</sup>

The memorandum sparked quite some controversy in the subsequent parliamentary debates. Although none agreed with the severity of Van Kol accusations, and some were offended by them.

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<sup>313</sup> Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal [HTK], *Bijblad van de Nederlandsche Staats-Courant* [BNSC] (1901-1902) II, 64.

<sup>314</sup> HTK, BNSC (1901-1902) II, 64.

<sup>315</sup> H. van Kol, 'Nota' in: 'Voorlopig Verslag', *kamerstuk 4, ondernummer 32*(1902-1903) 20.

<sup>316</sup> Van Kol, 'Nota', 20.

Nonetheless, it was widely acknowledged by this time, both by the Minister of Colonies and by parliamentarians that there was (1) a famine (or to some, near-famine) ongoing on Java, (2) that there existed a chronic state of impoverishment on Java that required alleviation in some form.

In broad outlines, some consensus can be discerned as well regarding the measures that ought to be taken to improve Javanese prosperity. Some were technological improvements: investments in infrastructure and especially irrigation. Another the supplication of government credit for agricultural purposes [*landbouwkrediet*] to the Javanese. Overall, a greater government involvement in the economic life of the Javanese was advocated, in particular to enable the colony to make the transition from that of an agricultural to an industrial society. Minister Idenburg for instance, expressed significant reservations that industrial development was possible, as

behind this matter [of industrialization] lies the deeper question if the peoples of the Malayan race are susceptible to a strong industrial life and to a strong industrial development. Experience has not yet provided an answer. Referring to British India cannot, it seems to me, teach us much in this regard, because that population is of another race.<sup>317</sup>

The quote demonstrates the thinking of the time, in racial categories and stages of development. A parenting metaphor is apt: the Indonesians were to be treated like children, raised by well-intentioned parents, but who were still too young to be sure they have the potential to grow into mature adults. Idenburg was not the only high-profile politician to express hesitation. Some parliamentarians took a passive position, inclined to wait for results before formulating new policies. Others, such as Van Kol, used the spectre of famine and impoverishment to argue for swift action.<sup>318</sup>

Pressure on the Dutch government increased in 1903 though. Drawing on the recently published report of the Semarang famine commission, several parliamentarians voiced their discontent with the slow reaction of the colonial government at the onset of the Semarang famine (see chapter 3). When Minister Idenburg defended the time it took the colonial government to respond to the urgent crisis by stating that, this did not go down well with parliamentarian and former Governor-General Dirk Fock. Fock blasted the Minister for defending a nine-month delay in responding to a crisis that required immediate attention.<sup>319</sup> Nonetheless, Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper argued forcefully in response to renewed accusations by Van Kol, that government was in full control of relief operations. He brushed aside accusations that the colonial and Dutch governments

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<sup>317</sup> HTK, *BNSC* (1902-1903) II, 148.

<sup>318</sup> HTK, *BNSC* (1902-1903) II, 135-154.

<sup>319</sup> HTK, *BNSC* (1903-1904) II, 376.

lacked sufficient information to adequately respond to the crisis, citing at length reports on food stocks and crop plantings on Java forwarded to him by the Governor-General.<sup>320</sup>

Overall, it can be observed that the threat of famine is increasingly used by parliamentarians to push for welfare investments. Still, one should not exaggerate the extent to which the NEI famines affected parliamentary debate. While a topic of significance, it did not spark the controversy that the earlier Semarang famine of the 1840s had. Two other topics sparked controversy and received at least as much attention during the colonial debates. First, the relation between Church and State under the confessional cabinet, especially between the State, Christian missions and native convert. Second, the expansionist plans of the cabinet, which invested heavily in military expeditions in Djambi, Korinthe and Aceh.<sup>321</sup>

Thus, although there was some debate on the usefulness, and sloth in implementation, of some recommendations of the Semarang commission, overall the impact of the famine on Dutch politics seems to have been one of catalysing already existing debates rather than inspiring a wholly new one centred on the famines themselves. Primarily, it was used by parliamentarians, the Dutch and the colonial government to establish the colonial state as the primary caretaker for a people who would not be able to lift themselves up out of poverty to a higher state of development.

Success for such a policy of welfare improvement was not guaranteed though. As mentioned previously, the Minister of Colonies was not the only prominent figure to be sceptical. Governor-General Rooseboom expressed his deep concern with the potential benefits of these plans. Not because the plans themselves were faulty, but because their supposed beneficiaries had proved in the recent famine that they did not possess the qualities required to realize any investment's benefits:

I will not deny in any way that such a sum can be well spent, but to expect of it a *sufficient* economic improvement, seems inappropriate to me, and such in particular because making this sacrifice does not take away the root cause of the less fortunate economic condition, a root cause, that in my opinion lies in the character, the carelessness, the indolence, the idleness, the fatalism of the majority of the Javanese people.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> HTK, *BNSC* (1903-1904) II, 46-49.

<sup>321</sup> See for instance the provisional reports [*Voorlopig Verslag*] of the Second Chamber of the States General on the colonial budgets of 1902 and 1903: HTK (1902-1903), *kamerstuknummer 4 ondernummer 32*; HTK (1903-1904) *kamerstuknummer 4 ondernummer 37*.

<sup>322</sup> 'Gouverneur-generaal (Rooseboom) aan minister van koloniën (Idenburg), 23 mei 1904' in: P. Creutzberg ed., *Het economisch beleid in Nederlandsch Indië I* (Groningen 1972) 210. Such an opinion was not new in 1904. See the opinion of ex-Resident of Semarang Smissaerts in Chapter 2. Another key example is provided by the Assistant-Resident of Grobogan. In his 'report on the condition of the department Grobogan on 25 April 1902', the Assistant-Resident, after elaborating the extent of crop failures in his department, identifies the laziness and indolence of the people as a lead cause for the poverty in the district. He argues that the population needs

This quote again, is interesting on multiple levels. First, the Javanese themselves are blamed for their own poverty. They lack the qualities needed to enrich themselves, to improve their lot. This inadequacy, Rooseboom argues, came to light in the famine years of 1901 and 1902, when it was evident that ‘the population lacked resilience in unfavorable times’.<sup>323</sup> Second, then, the Governor-General frames the issue in the same way as the Semarang famine commission did, demonstrating that both the character assessment of the Javanese and the way the disaster was interpreted were shared at various levels of colonial government. Further, indolence made it unreceptive to government aid:

When in Semarang residency in the years 1901 and 1902 need was at its highest, and government had to take all sorts of extraordinary measures to meet the need, businesses at a distance of 9 to 10 *paal* from the capital could find labourers only with difficulty.<sup>324</sup>

To remedy these character faults, it was imperative that the Javanese acquired frugality, a quality they did not yet possess. It had been in Dutch and colonial political and administrative spheres long been a well-established, rarely contested fact that the Javanese saved little or no money, lived from day to day. Any savings were quickly spent on what were considered the people’s vices: opium, gambling, feasts and polygamy. Rooseboom advised re-educating and replacing native headmen in the civil service, to improve their quality and to set up a program that allowed them to alleviate their own debts through government loans. The people would then follow their natural leaders in attempting to rid themselves of their debt and thus become more frugal, which would in turn lead to greater prosperity.<sup>325</sup> Notwithstanding these reservations by the Governor-General, after extended debate the new investments were legislated in 1904 and would be the first stepping stone for the practical implementation of the ethical policy that had been announced three years previous.

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constant, even forceful guidance to plant sufficient polowidjo crops: ‘In first instance, especially in this department, the Native by lack of trade and industry, and thus unaccustomed to exert energy – already lazy by nature, and indolent to a high degree. Further, this indolence, as already mentioned above, is rooted even deeper in their character by the lukewarm administration of the previous Regent. But finally, what is a main cause of this poor character trait, is the amazingly strong opium use in this department’. Mail report 1902: 407. Stored in Openbaar Verbaal 19-08-1903, No 41. NA, MiKo Openbaar, entry nr. 2.10.36.04, inv. nr. 197.

<sup>323</sup> ‘Gouverneur-generaal (Rooseboom) aan minister van koloniën (Idenburg), 23 mei 1904’ in: Creutzberg ed., *Het economisch beleid*, 210.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibidem*, 211. A fuller account by Rooseboom can be found in his autobiography. Willem Rooseboom, ‘Mededelingen uit mijn leven’, vol. III. KITLV : ‘Collectie Willem Rooseboom (1843-1920). Archive nr. H 1319, inventory number 83.

<sup>325</sup> ‘Gouverneur-generaal (Rooseboom) aan minister van koloniën (Idenburg), 23 mei 1904’ in: Creutzberg ed., *Het economisch beleid*, 211-213.

#### 4.4 Conclusions: on knowing and understanding famine

What then does the above tell us about how famine was interpreted by the colonial and Dutch government, and how it handled knowledge on the subject? The foremost conclusion is that government sought, if not full control, then at least supremacy in the public fight over the interpretation the famine, especially its causation and the adequacy of its relief efforts.

*What* then, does it want to know? One might expect: what famine is. From the various sources used in this thesis it is apparent that there were implicit distinctions made between ‘common sense’ terms such as ‘lack’, ‘scarcity’, ‘need’ and ‘famine’, but these were not official and thus left almost wholly to what individual administrators would deem applicable (or politically or personally viable) labels for certain situations. Combined with an unclear hierarchy regarding the matter (who has the final word on this in administration?), this ambiguity led too much sparring within government in 1900 on the necessity of beginning relief operations (see chapter 3.). But, the SV makes no effort to define the phenomenon ‘famine’ itself. For all its bluster on so many other topics, it sidesteps this issue entirely. This issue was only partially resolved by the *Leidraad*, since it did provide definitions for these terms, but was not officially adopted as policy.

Second, who or what is to blame for causing the famine. Through the SV, it seeks the primary cause outside its own policies, but rather in the character of the people suffering the famine and their incompetent native officials. Still, it does not itself view this as a simplistic interpretation of the situation. In fact, it emphasized that European official should have thorough knowledge of the locality they governed – its geography, but also its people’s cultural and economic habits. Officials did not have this knowledge ready when they were assigned a region: their education only gave them a very generic academic education on Indonesian matters. Overall, though, internally there was no doubt about the capacity of (European) government to be the leading agent in affecting positive change in Indonesian society.<sup>326</sup>

Finally, then, regarding the acquisitions and circulations of knowledge on these matters, it can be discerned that government established particular forms of self-authored knowledge on the matter and guarded these nervously: the government-ordered, authored and published reports (above all the SFC’s report, the Colonial Reports). These were based first and foremost on government officials’ writings, testimony and eyewitness-reports, but presented implicitly as truthful and certainly as authoritative knowledge on the matter. These were to be the final word and paramount statements on the c. 1900 famines. Henri van Kol and other critics were perceived as dangerous to government because they (1) used means outside government control to

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<sup>326</sup> ‘Gouverneur-generaal (Rooseboom) aan minister van koloniën (Idenburg), 23 mei 1904’ in: Creutzberg ed., *Het ekonomisch beleid*, 210-212.

publicize their views on the matter, (2) drew on non-government approved sources for their critiques. Van Kol did not talk to government officials alone, but went to see conditions in the *sompoks* himself (see chapter 3). Thus the fierce response by Abraham Kuyper when Van Kol accuses the colonial government of not *knowing* sufficiently about the crisis to effectively administrate relief. Such critiques threatened to undermine the perception desired by government as being in control of the situation. Thus we see statements that either play down the severity of the crisis (it's not as bad as in British India; it's not so bad that people have nothing to eat) or emphasize government's ability to handle it (it's not so bad that we cannot cope with relief efforts; it's up to government to improve the situation). The only half-hearted self-criticism on part of the European officials was that while it *wanted* to alleviate poverty it could not because it did not have the legal means to, or transfers made sustained efforts difficult.

This chapter thus shows the need to refine the notions of learning and knowledge accumulation related to disasters presented by Christian Pfister. There is no irreconcilable difference between the behavioural (learning through institutions) and the cognitive (learning through individuals) approaches he argues for (presented in chapter 1). It is possible, necessary even, to recognize that knowledge is always (re)produced by individuals. In the case of this thesis, the role of individuals can be recognized within the context of the colonial government as an entity that (through acts of individuals) gathers, determines, stores, adapts and operationalizes knowledge, and modifies its behaviour regarding particular phenomena. Pfister's framework can thus be usefully combined with studies on what may be termed the epistemology of colonial governments.

Further, while useful, Pfister's framing of a learning process views learning as progress. That is, progress toward more effective disaster prevention or mitigation, in the sense of reducing a natural hazard's damage to life and property. However, progress can only be made according to an entity or individual's success at achieving or approaching particular standards or goals. As shown above, there was significant difference between perspectives on this between several Dutch parliamentarians and Dutch cabinet. What the goals regarding disaster management *should* be, which Pfister treats as unproblematic, is determined by (individuals within) organizations and governments etc. Since knowledge acquisition on disasters by colonial governments tends to be utilitarian (according to their standards), it is important to investigate (as this thesis has done) the methods of knowledge acquisition of the government and how and through which principles this knowledge was operationalized. This chapter has shown that official knowledge of what famines *were* and how they could be *known* evolved at an institutional level (officially legislated or gathered famine knowledge or policy sanctioned by the highest levels of government), as well as through the actions and knowledge accumulation on part of individual officials. It is further clear, that this was

done building primarily, nearly exclusively on Western (Dutch) conceptions of famine, distrusting or disregarding local constructions of and knowledge on the phenomenon.

While it does not claim neutrality in its investigation, it is implicit that the Semarang Famine Commission presents its findings as truth. It does not, contra Ann Stoler, attempt to obfuscate that these truths are government-authored. She emphasizes in her definition of commissions of inquiry (quoted in Chapter 1) that legitimation through use of outside, seemingly unaffiliated experts, is an integral feature of such commissions. This is entirely absent in the SFC. None of its members worked outside government, one being in fact the Resident and thus the person locally responsible official for relief administration. There was no attempt here to make it seem like an independent inquiry. Interestingly, there are no references in parliamentary records to this being an issue with policy-makers.<sup>327</sup> In other respects Stoler's work, provides many applicable insights on the operations of colonial commissions, as the SV did indeed seek to rewrite history, direct 'vectors of blame' away from itself and provide political legitimation to its own performance during the famine years. The uncertainty and conflict the colonial and Dutch governments showed in portraying the famines to the outside world aptly demonstrate what she terms the 'epistemic anxiety' of government and the dissonance between its purported goals to alleviate suffering and its attempts to maintain a positive public image. Finally, its ambiguous endorsement of the famine response prescriptions of the *Leidraad* demonstrates a reluctance to allow formal definitions of complicated subjects, choosing instead to explicitly continue to rely on the interpretations individual administrators in (not) responding what they deem to be phenomenon 'famine'.

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<sup>327</sup> In this the Lesser Welfare Inquiry fits Stoler's description much better, being stocked with people from a more diverse background occupationally and ethnically, though under the ultimate supervision of a Dutch colonial official, H.E. Steinmetz.



## Conclusions

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the importance of studying famines as part of Netherlands East Indies history. The study of famines and food both sheds light on social and economic conditions and development in the colony and lays bare the ideological basis of Dutch colonial enterprise. Famines may have a long or a brief onset. But as recent studies on historical disasters have shown, there is always a long-term history involved determining a society's capacity to deal with such calamitous setbacks. The influence of disaster goes much further, however. As discussed in Chapter 1, Greg Bankoff has shown the necessity of viewing disasters not as exceptional events that deviate from the status quo, but rather as 'frequent life experiences' – a part of everyday life. While Bankoff studied rapid-onset disasters such as typhoons, it is equally possible – necessary even – to recognize that the (often) slow-on disasters famine and food shortages were an integral feature of NEI history.

As shown in Chapter 2, to understand the long-term impact of famine, it is necessary to study both a society's social, economic and political conditions, and its development of disaster coping strategies, societal or governmental – though focus has been on the latter. Chapter 2 both traced the root causes for the endemic poverty that predisposed the NEI, Semarang in particular, to the suffering of famine around the turn of the twentieth century and showed the development over time of the colonial government's relief strategy concerning famines and food shortages. Indebtedness, erosion of economic opportunity and dependence on erratic crop successes reduced the resilience of the Semarang population, especially in Demak and Grobogan. Meanwhile, government relief policy moved from practically non-interventionist during the 1849-1850 Semarang famine, to a more elaborate – though not officially legislated or articulated – response policy, in which work-for-aid was the mantra. Unsurprisingly then, these forms of aid were to be cornerstones of relief operations during the early 1900s famines.

The significance of these famines is clear from Chapter 3. In various terms they were unprecedented in NEI history. Geographically, the stricken regions were spread over most of Java and various parts of the Outer Islands: Central Java, Southeastern Borneo, Southeast and North Sulawesi and limited parts of Sumatra. Human suffering was widespread and severe. Previous expenditures on famine relief are dwarfed by the over fl. 4.000.000 in authorized funds, for the various relief works, doles and loans. The famines also expose some of the key weaknesses of the colonial state. Sluggish responses to aid requests led to a delay of nearly a year before relief operations were begun. The bureaucratic mill of the government thus prevented aid to the suffering. Quite possibly, this is part of the reason why the *Leidraad* described in Chapter 4 was authored: to prevent future misunderstandings about the procedural steps to be taken in (famine) relief.

From this *Leidraad* and the Semarang famine report, Chapter 4 derived the lessons that the colonial government drew from the famines. Understanding how the colonial government acted in response to famines requires one to ask the deceptively simple question of what famine was to the colonial government. Far from a simple matter, it had strong political implication which raised questions on the relation between the government and the people it governed. Government sought to understand famine, prepare for its occurrence and simultaneously to justify its responses to the c. 1900 famines. The Semarang famine report (re)wrote the history, while establishing the legitimacy of the Dutch governance of the colony. It and the *Leidraad* sought to codify existing principles on famine relief, while the SV advocated a major expansion of both the size, power and of government and its involvement in the economic life of the colonies. In the Netherlands, the famine made a clear, but modest contribution to already ongoing debates on the improvement of the welfare of the colony's native inhabitants. While it brought few new items to the parliamentary agenda, it nonetheless acted as a catalyst, fuelling the flames of debate. The Dutch government was caught between attempting to frame its response as benevolent, the crisis firmly under control, while acknowledging grudgingly the reality that famine occurred under its rule.

### Implications

This thesis stands at the crossroads of several fields of research. On the one hand, it fits within a long-standing tradition of studying the economics and politics of the Netherlands East Indies. Further, it investigated an episode in famine and disaster history, specifically in a colonial context. On a theoretical level, it is worth noting that the way 'famine' and its causation are framed by colonial officials, is very recognizable for modern researchers of the same phenomenon. The Semarang famine commissions makes a distinction between the occurrence of particular natural events (akin to the modern concept of 'hazards') and the occurrence of a disaster, the occurrence and severity of which is determined by the degree of resilience of the population experiencing the hazard. Key components of resilience are then identified. Many of these – indebtedness, monoculture vs. economic diversification, commercialization, market primacy vs. state interference, even laziness— are no strangers to modern discourse on poverty, famine and disasters. Tentatively, this shows the value of investigating the potential roots of modern understandings of famine and relief in colonial times.

Historiographies on colonial famines have seen limited attempts at comparison across national or colonial lines. Although to a large extent focused on the Netherlands East Indies, this study shows the need to recognize similarities (and differences) in the various colonial administrations' responses to the phenomenon famine. Some key resemblances can be identified

across imperial borders: a link between metropolitan poverty policies and colonial famine relief, reliance on relief works as the core of relief policy and a denigrating view of aid-seekers, who were always at risk of being deemed abusers. Finally, a cross-imperial tradition of reports and inquiries, which though producing different outcomes, point to a shared preferred practice of knowledge-acquisition forms. One of the implications of this research then is that, as with many subjects in colonial history, a comparative and connective perspective is valuable for understanding policy in specific locales.

Aside from these broader connections to colonial history, this thesis fills a historiographical gap in NEI history by investigating an episode in Dutch colonial history which had so far been given only meagre attention. This is in itself a meaningful enterprise, as it harshly affected the lives of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, and likely caused the deaths of many thousands. Part of this thesis has simply been a first exploration of the events of this famine, and the causes for it. It might be said, certainly for Semarang residency, that the famine period was an apotheosis of the decades-long process of impoverishment established by Djoko Suryo in his thesis on the residency. It shows how a vulnerable economy can collapse from a few cumulative setbacks (disease, crop failures, floods), and lead too much personal hardship.

More than that however, the famine years correspond with what is traditionally characterized as a radical transitory period in Dutch colonial history: from a liberal to an ethical period of colonial administration. It is a period often portrayed as a new era of attempted welfare improvement – if still guided by racial prejudices and European economic and political interests. The first years of ethical policy are often less thoroughly explored – partly because the first major welfare investments were legislated only in 1904. Yet this famine occurred during and after Queen Wilhelmina's famous 1901 announcement of colonial policy change.

Thus, crucial questions are: did the famine impact this period? Did it change views on colonial administration or native subjects? In some ways, the famine – especially 'its' report – appears to confirm this as a period of change. From the famine is derived – by the Semarang famine investigation's commissioners – the lesson that Dutch administration ought to radically change its core policies. (Theoretical) non-interference in economic life should be done away with. Rather, the government should be given the power to at least temporarily obligate the Javanese to act according to the wishes of (local) administrators. In other respects however, the report is much less radical politically, if still immodest in the scope of its recommendations. Part of a longer development within the colonial administration, another characteristic of the liberal-to-ethical transition is present in the report. Namely, the primacy of technical solutions such as irrigation, and the call for trained specialists rather than 'general' officials of the Inland Administration to supervise native agriculture.

Several years later, this development set in further by the establishment of a Department of Agriculture and an expansion of the Department of Public Works.

The famine did not, however, just bring the technocrats out of the woodworks. It firmly coloured the opinions of the Inland Administrations officials, who placed blame for the famine or the impossibility of effective prevention squarely at the feet of the people who suffered the famines. The importance of the famine or the political weight attached to it should, however not be exaggerated. These accusations were no novelties in colonial discourse. As noted in Chapter 2, previous famines had produced similar comments on the deficiencies of the Javanese people. In this sense, the famine hardly produced novelties. In a broader sense, another continuity in form rather than content is the use of famine to argue for policy change. Further, one of the key arguments of this thesis has been to demonstrate the long-term impact of famines on colonial society and administration. In this sense, the c. 1900 was just one event in a continuum. While a long-term view does not automatically imply continuities, it should be noted that colonial policy regarding famine, and more broadly, welfare, underwent a nineteenth-century evolution, rather than a revolution. Nor did colonial policy change radically as a consequence of the famine itself. It fuelled political debate and possibly acted as a catalyst to further-ranging inquiry and policy-making, but soon after its occurrence it fell out of use as a policy-making argument in Dutch parliament.

Finally, this thesis has provided a critical background to several rich sources for NEI history by analysing both its content and how this content came to be. The Semarang famine inquiry's report has been used by several scholars as a source of information on Dutch colonial policy and its economic and social history. These sources are on the one hand rich sources for historians seeking to better understand the Netherlands East Indies around c. 1900. A wealth of information is retained in them on matters ranging from geology, agricultural practices and administration. On the other hand, it is shown that these reports are riddled with presumptions and biases, reflecting not just an 'objective' catalogue of information, but a deeply subjective and utilitarian form of knowing and understanding. As shown in Chapter 4, the Semarang Famine Commission exemplifies that commissions of inquiry involved many individuals, each with their own worldviews, experiences and ambitions.

Several aspects of the c. 1900-1904 famines are worth further study. Partly due to source material restrictions, the perspective of the government rather than that of the people suffering has received most attention in this thesis. It would be worth exploring how the people of Java, Sulawesi, Borneo and Sumatra constructed the famine by using sourced not authored by the Dutch. Traditions of indigenous (Islamic) philanthropy feature scarcely in the studied sources. The interplay between religions, private charity and the relation between philanthropy and government is another topic

worth more space. Both have the potential to give further insights to the relation between the colonial government and the people it governed.

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## Appendix A.

**Table 2.1** El Niño correlation with droughts and famines in the Netherlands Indies. The famines occurred on Java unless otherwise noted.

Year	El Niño events	Drought	Famine
1844	X	X	X
1845	X	X	X
1846	X		X
1849			X
1850	X	X	X
1852	X		
1855	X	X	X (Bali)
1857	X	X	
1864	X	X	
1868	X		
1871	X		
1873	X	X	X
1875	X	X	X
1877	X	X	
1878	X		
1880	X		
1881		X	X
1882			X
1883	X		
1884	X	X	
1885	X	X	
1887	X		
1888	X	X	
1889	X		
1891	X	X	
1896	X	X	
1899	X		
1900	X		X
1901			X
1902	X	X	X

**Sources:** William H. Quinn et al., 'Historical Trends and statistics of the Southern Oscillation, El Niño, and Indonesian Droughts', *Fishery Bulletin* 76 no. 3 (1978) 663-678; Harold Brookfield, "The failure of just one crop". Reflections on the social and environmental history of famine, with special reference to Southeastern Asia' in: H.G. Bohle et al. eds., *Coping with vulnerability and criticality. Case studies on food-insecure people and places* (Saarbrücken and Fort Lauderdale 1993) 183-202.



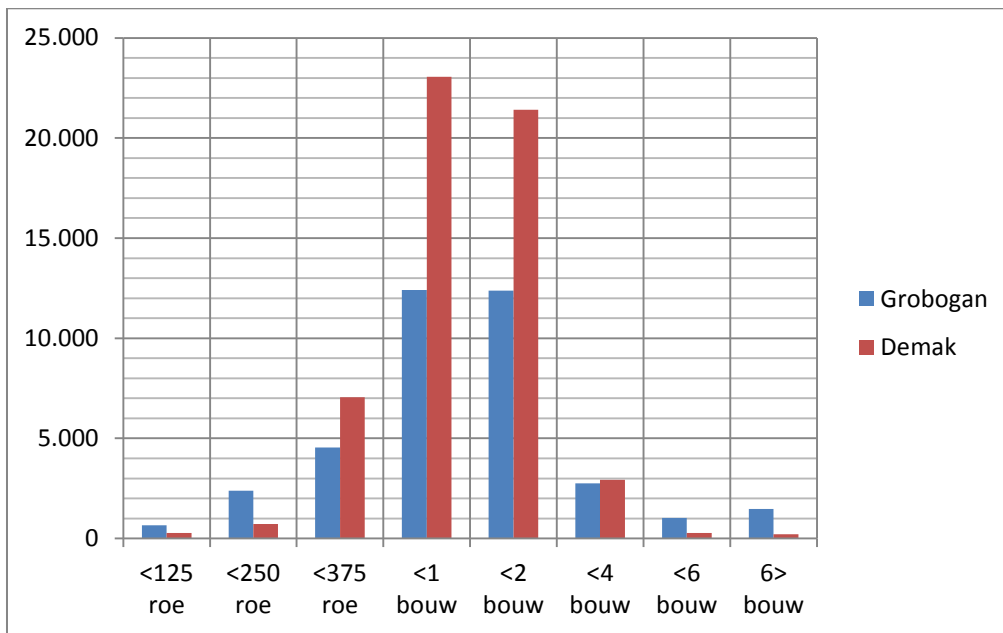
**Appendix B. Table 2.2.** Occurrences of ‘years of want’ [*jaren van gebrek*] on Java and Madura, by residency (1873-1904).

	Banten	Batavia	Preanger	Cirebon	Banyumas	Pekalongan	Semarang	Kedu	Madiun	Rembang	Surabaya	Madura	Kediri	Pasuruan	Besuki
1873		x													
1874					x			x							
1875															
1876		x													
1877															
1878	x		x	x									x		
1879	x		x	x	x								x		
1880	x	x	x										x		
1881	x	x	x												
1882	x		x	x											
1883	x														
1884		x													x
1885															
1886															
1887															
1888								x							
1889		x				x			x						
1890		x	x				x		x		x				
1891									x	x	x		x		
1892									x						
1893									x						
1894															
1895															
1896										x	x				
1897		x			x	x									
1898		x					x								
1899							x	x				x			
1900			x				x	x	x				x		
1901		x		x	x		x	x	x						x
1902		x		x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x		x
1903		x		x	x		x				x	x		x	
1904					x	x									

**Source:** OMW IX<sup>c</sup>. *Overzicht van de uitkomsten der gewestelijke onderzoeken naar de economie van de desa en daaruit gemaakte gevolgtrekkingen. Deel III: Bijlagen van 't eigenlijk overzicht (IX<sup>a</sup>)*. (Batavia 1911) 25-45. Years were marked if at least one department in the Residency experienced want in the corresponding year. Noteworthy absentee is Semarang (Demak) 1873 (see SV, 46-47). Only government lands are included private lands and native states were not part of the OMW surveys.

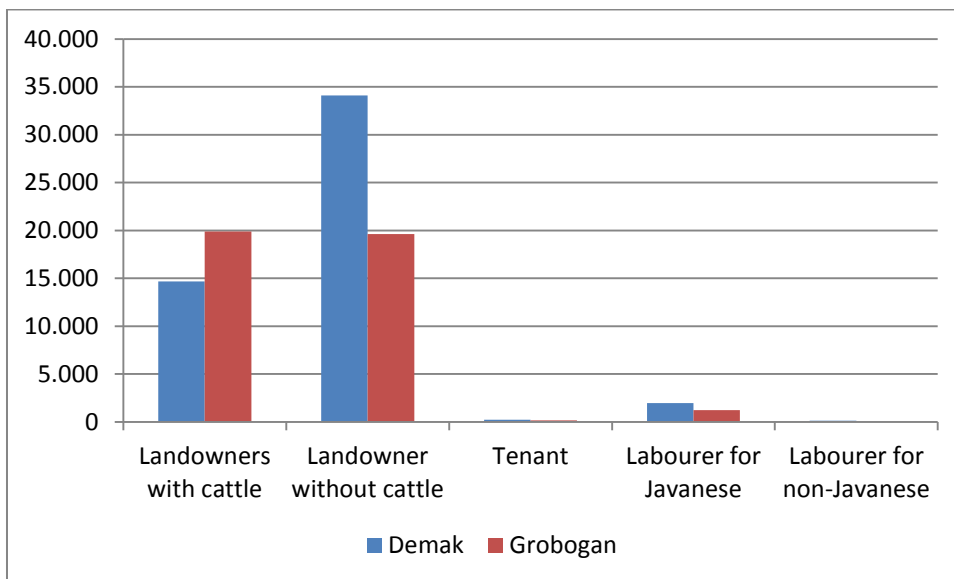
**Appendix C.** Employment statistics for Demak and Grobogan.

**Graph 2.2.** Number of landowners, per size of lands owned, (in 1904-1905)



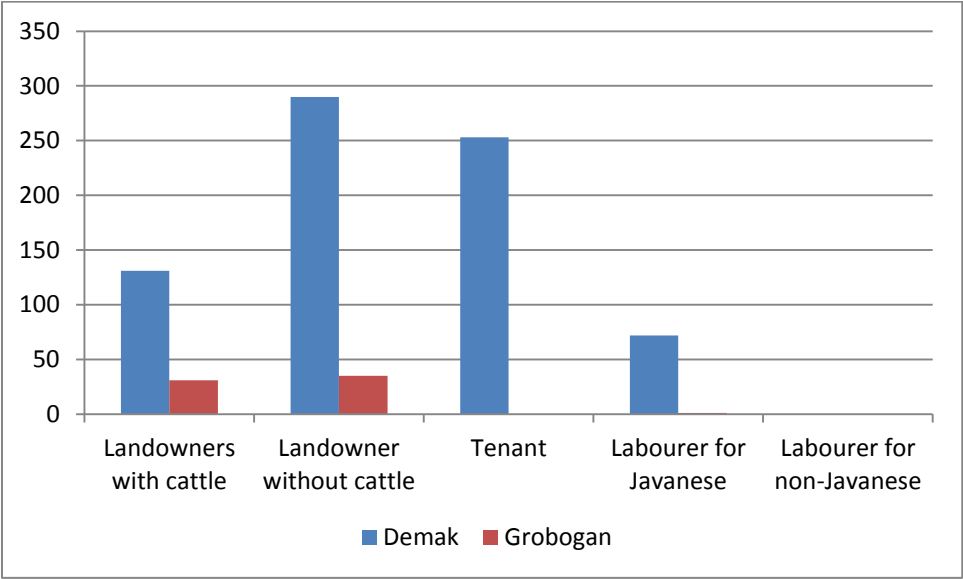
**Source:** OMW IX. *Samentrekking van de afdelingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa in de Residentie Semarang.* (Batavia 1907) appendix 4.

**Graph 2.3.** Agricultural employment (men, 1905)



**Source:** OMW IX. *Economie van de desa in de Residentie Semarang.* (Batavia 1907) appendix 3.

**Graph 2.4.** Agricultural employment (women, 1905).



**Source:** see source for table 2.3.

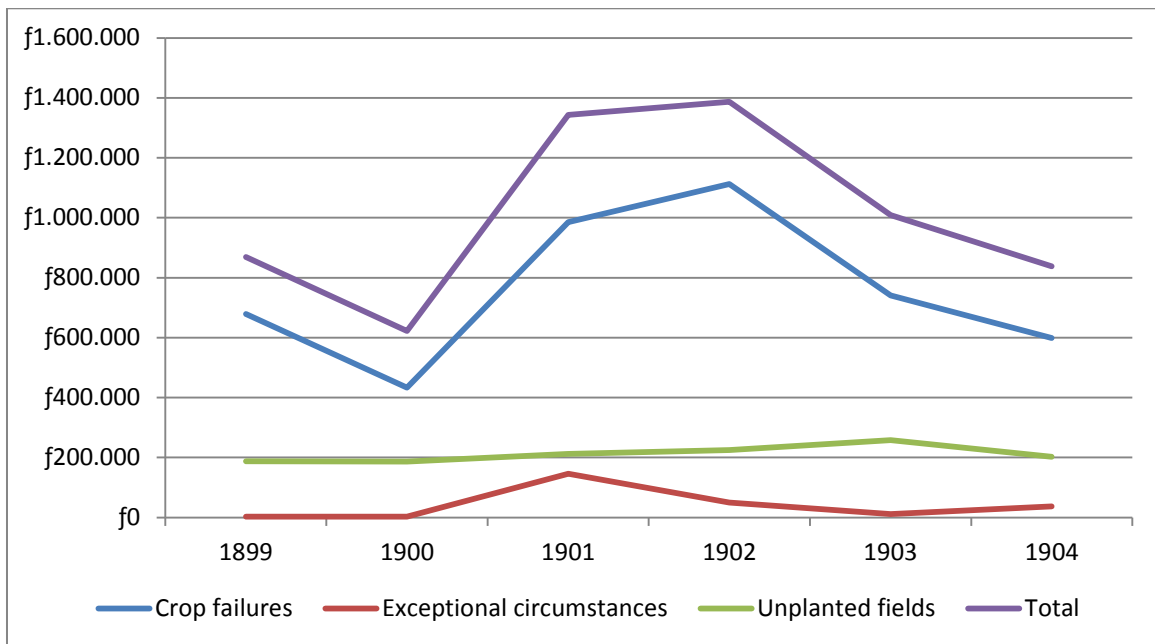
**Appendix D. Table 3.6** Government lands affected by the c. 1900-1904 famines on Java and Madura, by department.

Residency	Batavia	Preanger	Cirebon		Banyumas				Pekalongan	Madiun
Department	Krawang	Sukabumi	Indramayu	Majalengka	Banyumas	Purbolinggo	Banjanegara	Cilacap	Brebes	Magetan
1898	x									
1899										
1900		x								
1901	x			x	x	x				x
1902	x			x				x		x
1903	x		x	x			x			
1904							x		x	
Residency	Semarang						Kedu			
Department	Semarang	Salatiga	Demak	Grobogan	Pati	Kudus	Magelang	Purworejo	Kebumen	Wonosobo
1898			x	x						
1899			x	x						x
1900	x		x	x			x	x		x
1901	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1902		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
1903						x				
1904										
Residency	Rembang	Surabaya		Madura		Kediri		Pasuruan	Besuki	
Department	Bojonegoro	Grisee	Lamongan	Sampang	Bangkalan	Trenggalek	Berbek	Kraksaan	Jember	Panaroekan
1898										
1899					x					
1900						x				
1901									x	x
1902	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	
1903		x		x				x		
1904										

**Source:** OMW IX<sup>c</sup>. *Overzicht van de uitkomsten der gewestelijke onderzoeken naar de economie van de desa en daaruit gemaakte gevolgtrekkingen. Deel III: Bijlagen van 't eigenlijk overzicht (IX<sup>d</sup>)*. (Batavia 1911) 25-45. This table should be viewed with the reservation that some of these residencies received relief funds in years that are not indicated by the OMW. For instance, in 1904 Madiun, Kedu and Surabaya received significant relief funds (see table 3.2).

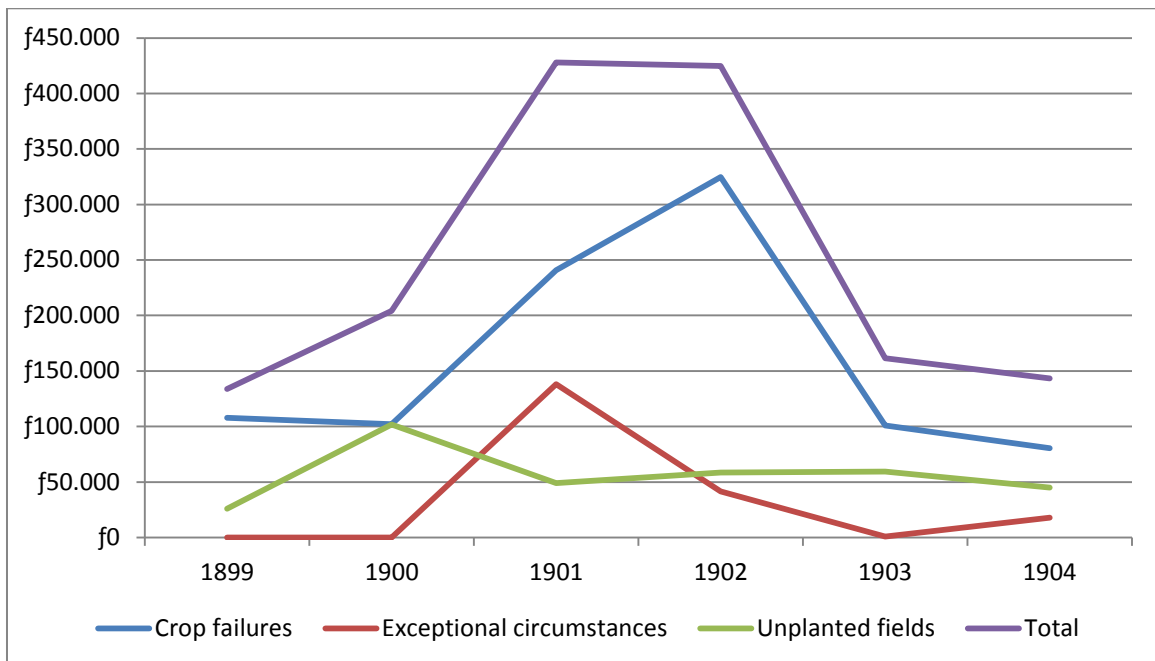
**Appendix E. Land tax remissions (1899-1904).**

**Graph 3.1** Land tax remissions granted for Java and Madura (1899-1904).



**Sources:** *Koloniaal verslag van 1900*, appendix M; *Koloniaal verslag van 1901*, appendix L; *Koloniaal verslag van 1902*, appendix L; *Koloniaal verslag van 1903*, appendix K; *Koloniaal verslag van 1904*, appendix K; *Koloniaal verslag van 1905*, appendix J.

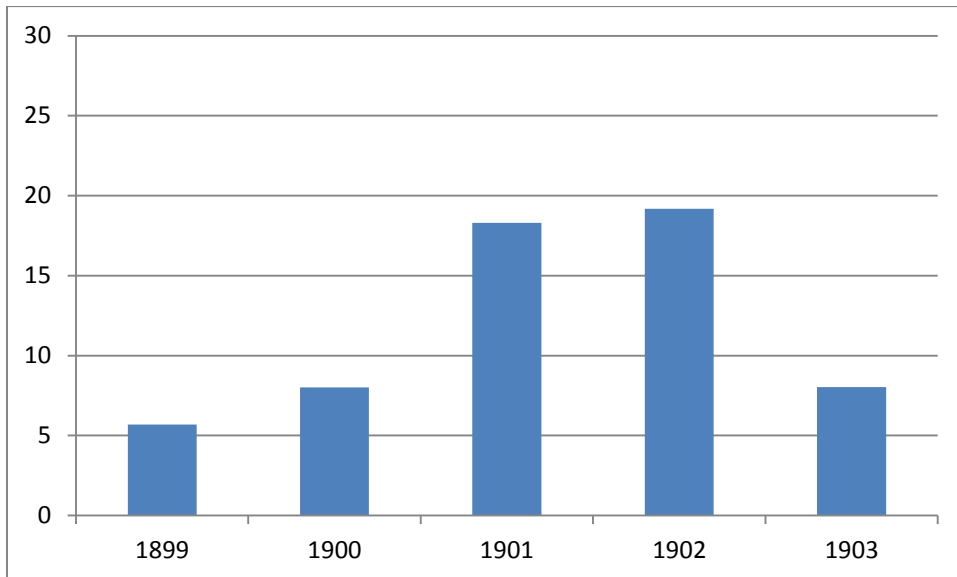
**Graph 3.2** Land tax remissions granted for Semarang (1899-1904)



**Sources:** see graph 3.1.

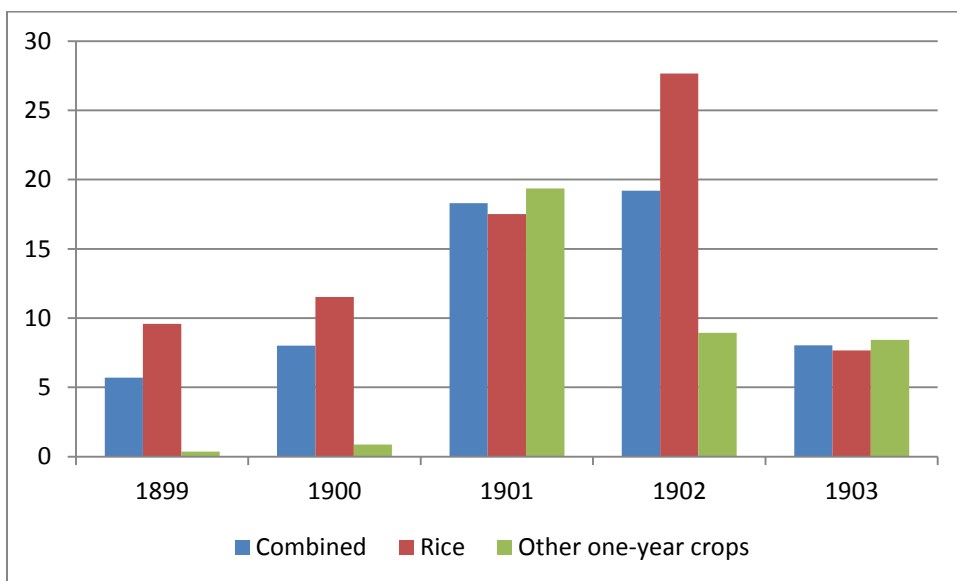
**Appendix F. Crop failures in Semarang (1899-1903).**

**Graph 3.3:** percentage of crop failures in Semarang residency, all one-year crops combined (1899-1903).



**Sources:** *Koloniaal verslag van 1900*, appendices MM and NN; *Koloniaal verslag van 1901*, appendices NN and OO; *Koloniaal verslag van 1902*, appendices LL and MM; *Koloniaal verslag van 1903*, appendices KK and LL; *Koloniaal verslag van 1904*, appendices LL and MM. For 1899 and 1900 the crop failure percentages of Semarang and Japara were averaged.

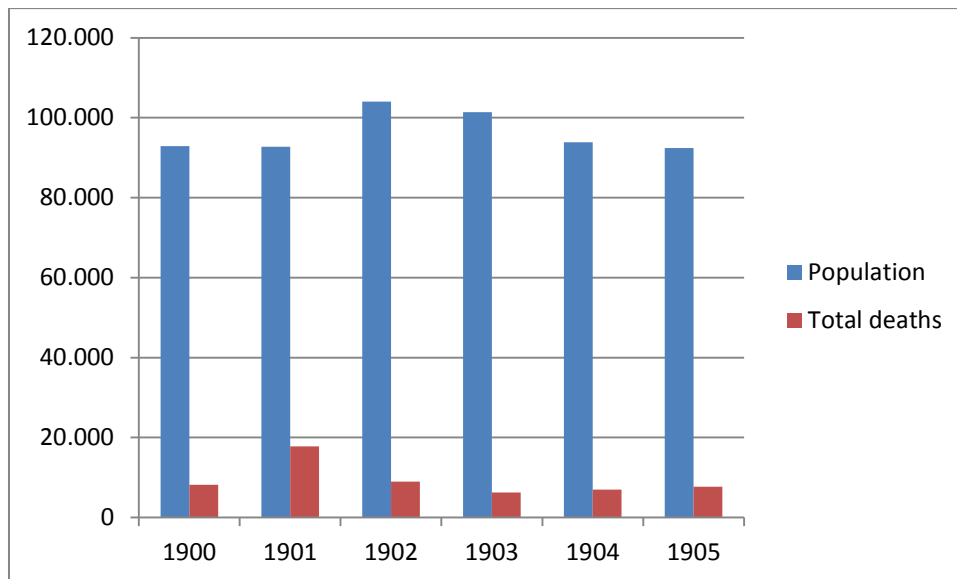
**Graph 3.4:** percentage of crop failures in Semarang residency, rice and other one-year crops separate (1899-1903).



**Sources:** see graph 3.3.

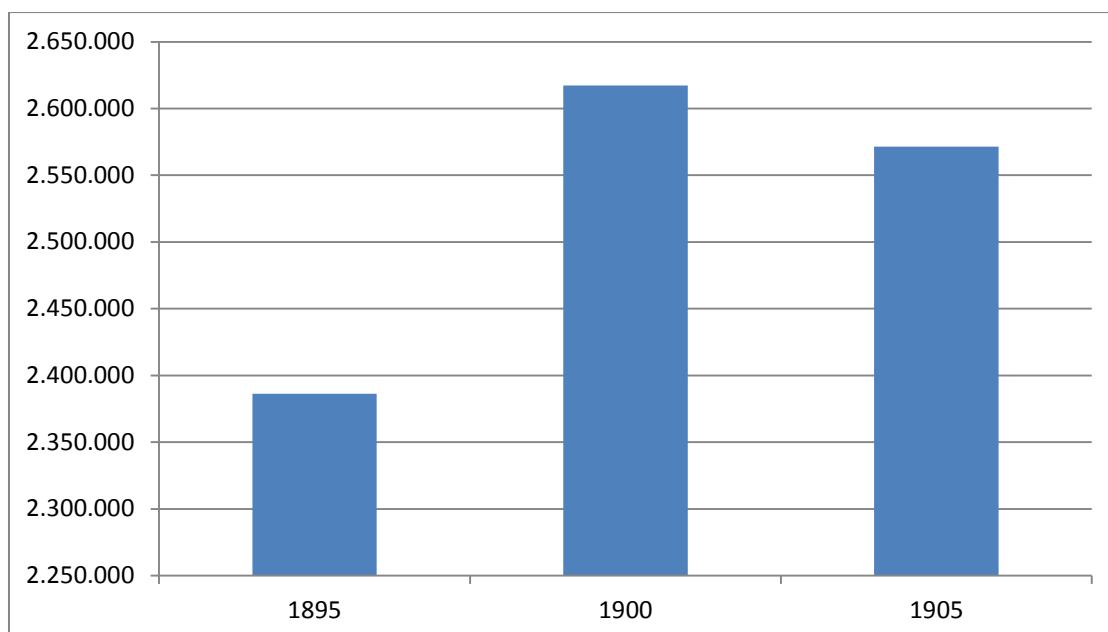
**Appendix G.** Demography of Semarang (1895-1905).

**Graph 3.5** Population and number of deaths in Semarang city, 1900-1905.



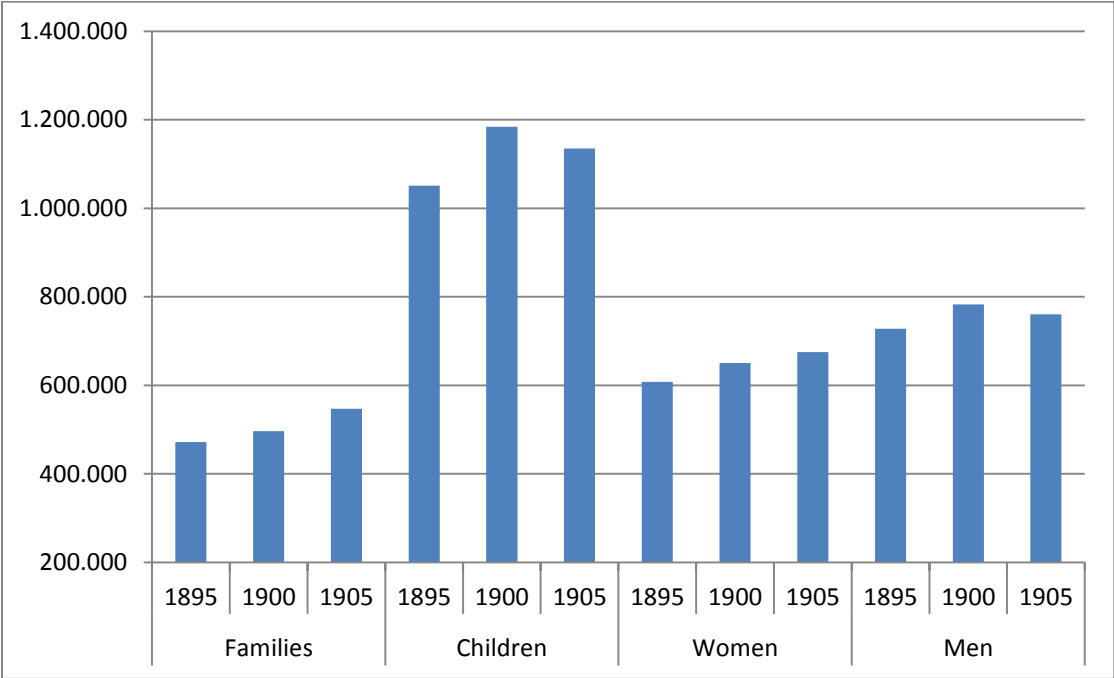
**Source:** Hasyim, 'Epidemi kolera dan karesidenan Semarang 1900 1920', *Lembaran Sejarah* 4 no. 2 (2002) 104-127: 116.

**Graph 3.6** Population of Semarang Residency, 1895-1905.



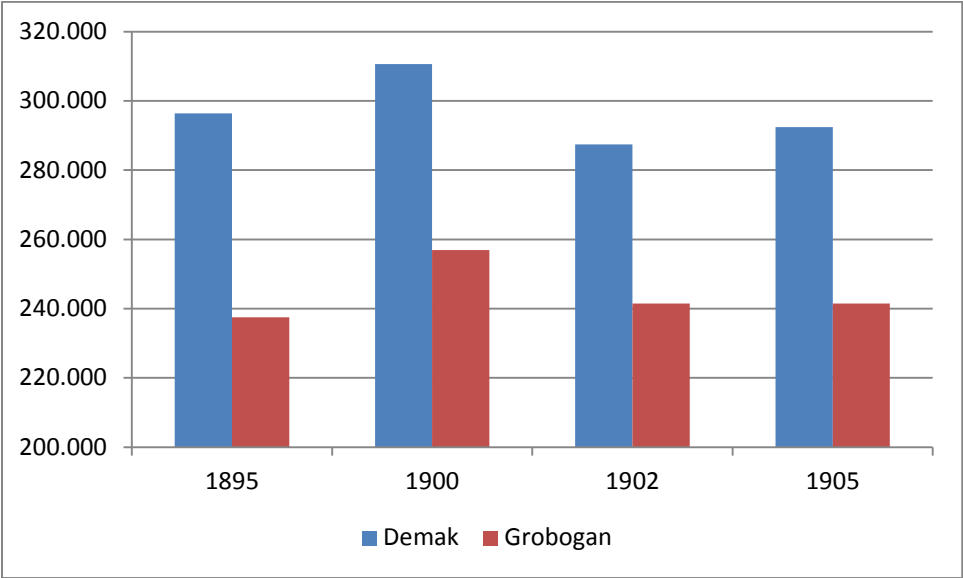
**Source:** OMW IX. *Samentrekking van de afdeelvingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar de economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) appendix 1.

**Graph 3.7** Demography of Semarang Residency, 1895-1905.



**Source:** see graph 3.6.

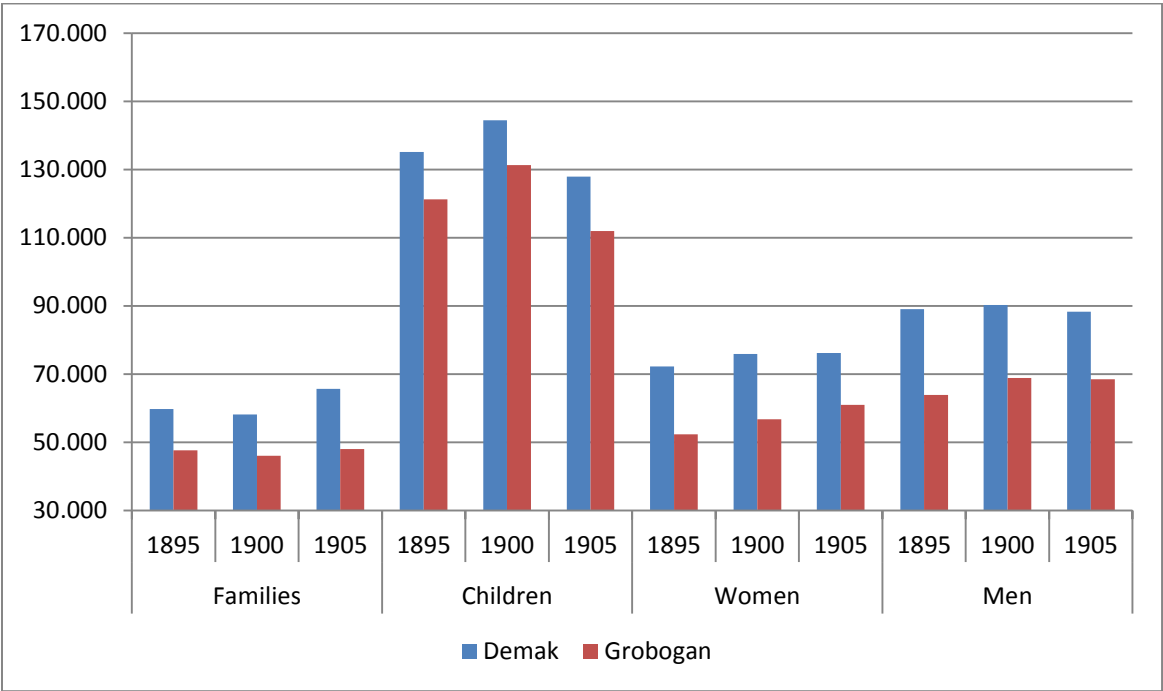
**Graph 3.8** Population of Demak and Grobogan (1895-1905).



**Source:** OMW IX. *Economie van de desa in de residentie Semarang*, appendix 1. SV, appendix B.



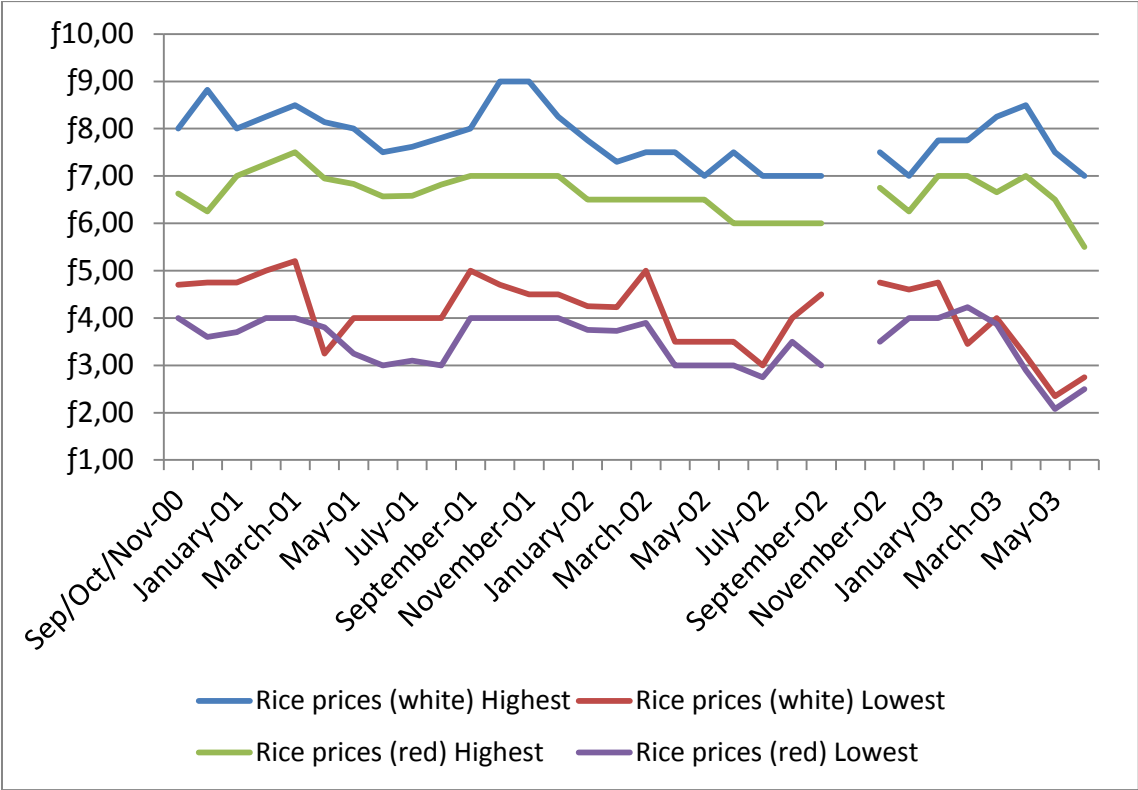
**Graph 3.9** Demography of Demak and Grobogan (1895-1905).



**Source:** see graph 3.8.

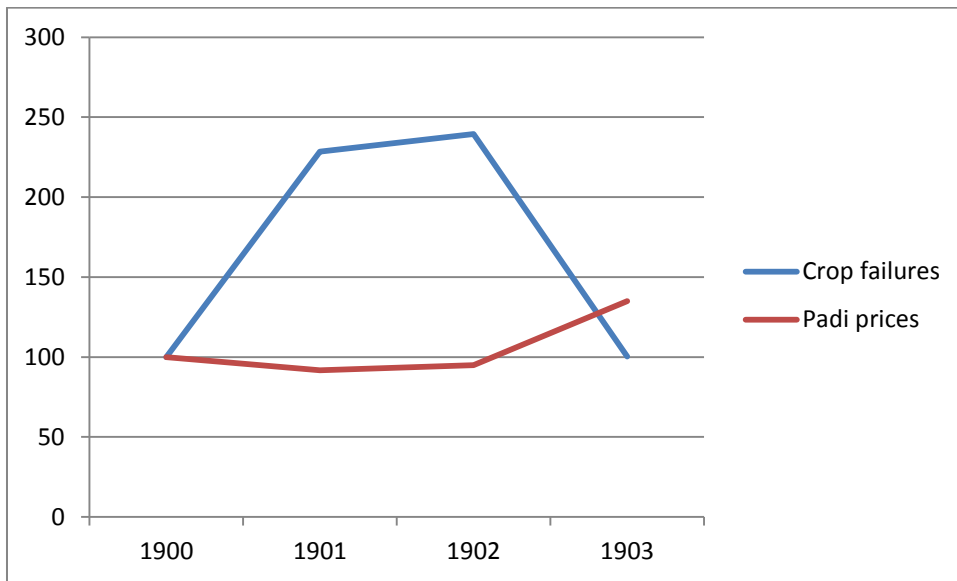
**Appendix H.** Rice prices in Semarang residency (1898-1903).

**Graph 3.10** Rice prices in Semarang residency, 1900-1903 (per picol).



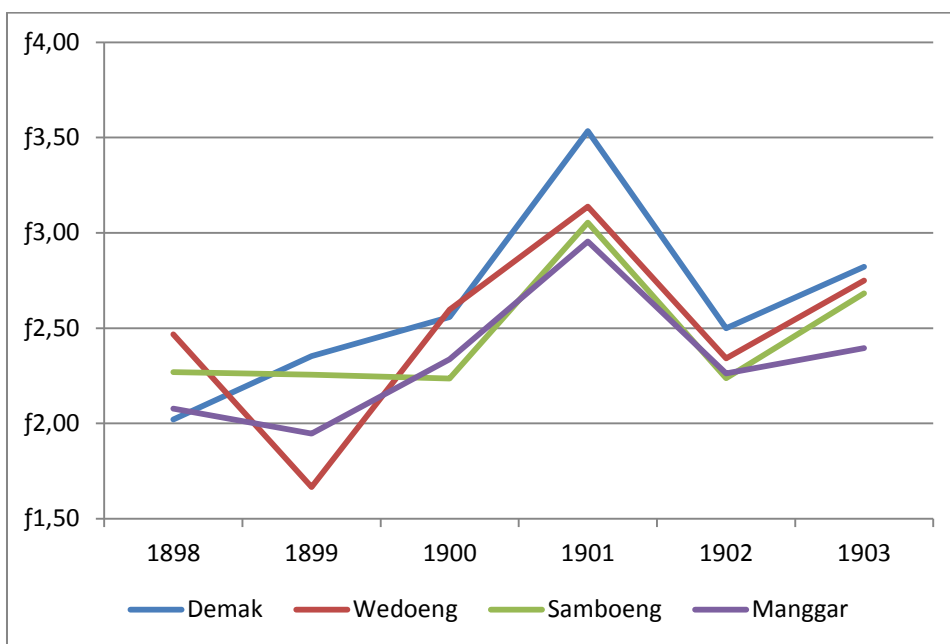
**Sources:** *Javasche Courant*. 1901: 14, 17, 25, 34, 45, 53, 61, 71,77, 80, 89;  
 1902: 6, 9, 14, 20, 33, 42, 50, 58, 73, 74, 83, 94; 1903: 3, 15, 21, 29, 41, 50, 61, 69, 76.

**Graph 3.11** *Padi* prices and crop failures in Semarang residency (1900 = 100)



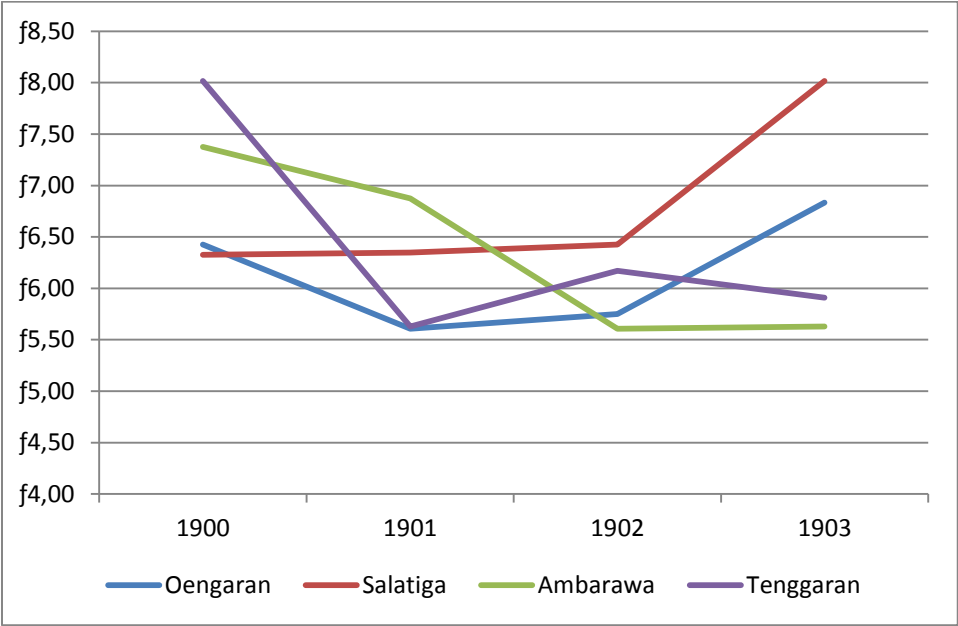
Sources: *Koloniaal verslag van 1901*, appendices L, NN and OO; *Koloniaal verslag van 1902*, appendices L, LL and MM; *Koloniaal verslag van 1903*, appendices K, KK and LL; *Koloniaal verslag van 1904*, appendices K, LL and MM.

**Graph 3.12** Annual average *padi* prices in Demak, per district (1898-1903).



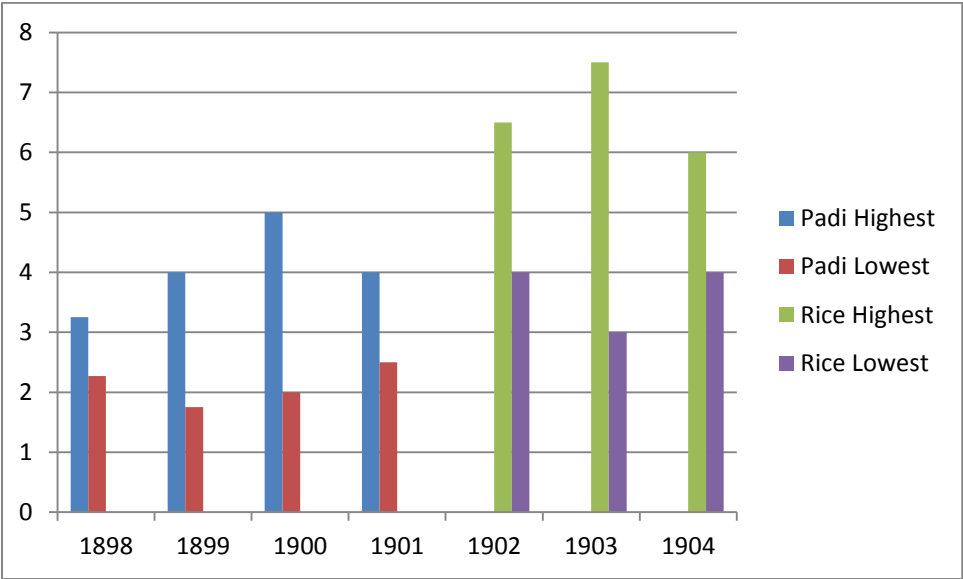
**Source:** OMW V. *Samentrekking van de afdelingsverslagen over de uitkomsten der onderzoekingen naar den landbouw in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) appendix 3, p. 86-87.

**Graph 3.13** Annual average rice prices in Salatiga, per district (1900-1903).



Source: OMW V. *Den landbouw in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) 28.

**Graph 3.14** padi and rice prices in Grobogan, (1898-1904)



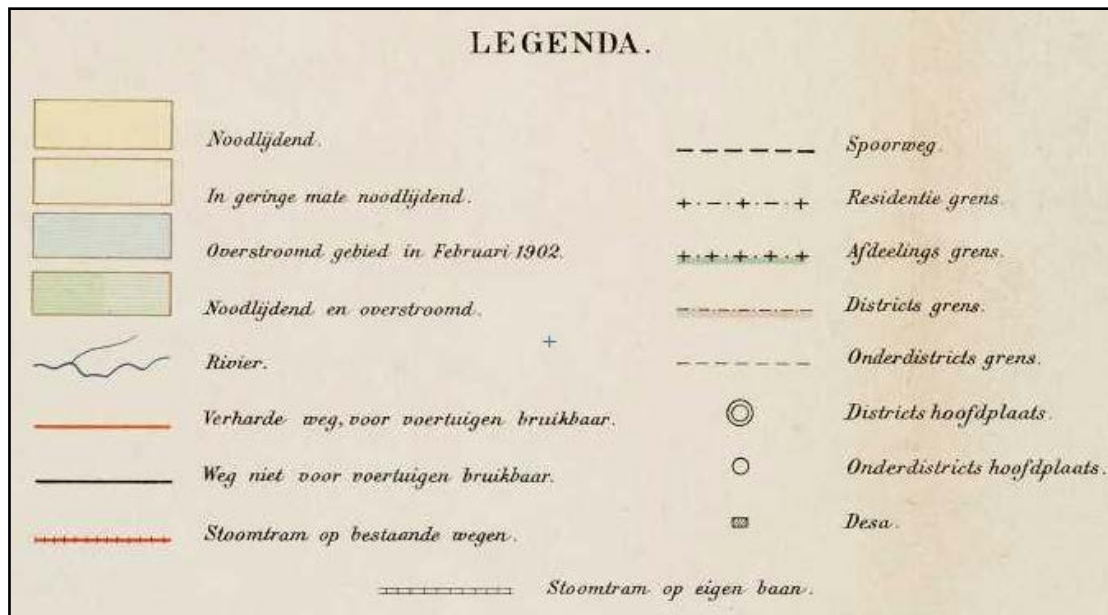
Source: OMW V. *Den landbouw in de residentie Semarang* (Batavia 1907) 29.

## Appendix I.

Map 3.2: 'Overview of the necessitous regions in the residency Semarang'.



Source: *Verslag over de waters- en voedingsnood in de Residentie Semarang uitgebracht door de Commissie, ingesteld bij Gouvernements Besluit dd. 2 Juli 1902 No. 8* (Buitenzorg 1903) appendix A. Accessed from <http://maps.library.leiden.edu/> (22-02-2014).



Source: see above.