ployee benefits rate," a surcharge applied to university salaries. Since MIT recovers only a fraction of the tuition charges from the government (through the direct cost of research salaries), Culliton argues, the present arrangement saves the government money—some \$6 million to \$10 million every year. To charge these tuition reimbursements as direct costs, he says, would change "the whole nature of MIT as a research university" by making graduate students more expensive to principal investigators than professional technicians. MIT and ONR are still negotiating the matter. But Phil Roger, executive officer of the agency that does audits for ONR, takes a hard line, and says the cost of research assistants should be charged to specific projects wherever possible.

The tuition reimbursement question is one of several major issues a joint OMB-OSTP task force aims to address over the next year, as it attempts to lay a foundation for long-term reform of the indirect cost system. "There's a recognition that something has to be done beyond [the 3 October revisions]," says one OSTP official. In particular, the task force intends to address the perennial complaints from the scientific community that the existing overhead system doesn't provide enough money for the renewal of aging research facilities and to study ways in which universities could standardize their accounting procedures for overhead costs. (A similar proposal on accounting standards has been floated by Representative Rick Boucher (D-VA), who argues that devices such as the administrative cost cap will be ineffective and unfair if some universities are able to shift administrative expenses into other cost pools.)

But the OMB-OSTP group may find its thunder stolen long before it issues its report. An HHS task force, jointly chaired by inspector general Richard Kusserow, assistant secretary for management and budget Kevin Moley, and NIH director Bernadine Healy, is hoping to produce some recommendations for reducing the cost of research in the biomedical sciences—including indirect costs—by mid-November. While officials are reluctant to specify what they're considering, task force secretary Jack Mahoney, associate director for administration at NIH, says that the group is considering a wide variety of options, including several that go beyond A-21 itself. One such proposal, advanced by University of Southern California provost Cornelius Pings, would allow universities to claim a certain fixed level of overhead expenses without further documentation, similar to the standard deduction for personal income taxes. In addition, Mahoney says, the HHS group—which includes representatives from academia and industry—has a powerful tool at its disposal: an up-to-date database of university indirect cost expenditures broken down into detailed categories. "For the first time, we have a much better capability to predict what the outcome of proposals will be for various universities," he says.

University advocates like Gobstein note that the chaos now engulfing the system will inevitably lead administrators to be more cautious—perhaps overcautious. For instance, universities could be more reluctant to enter cost-sharing agreements, such as the National Science Foundation's science and technology centers, he notes. Given the possible repercussions for research and academic bottom lines, it's clearly in everyone's best interest to settle on a system that both government and universities can live with as soon as possible.

Until then, those on the receiving end of the government's attention are going to have to learn to live with the Stanford legacy. As one university administrator puts it: "I'm sick of explaining at parties that we're not crooks." ■ DAVID P. HAMILTON

Famine: Blame Policy, Not Nature

Only one region of the world still suffers from widespread famine: Africa. Why is that? After all, many poor countries, including India and China, have staved off famine in recent decades, even though starvation was common there earlier in the century. The conventional wisdom holds that the answer is a combination of droughts, deforestation, and war. But the results of a new 4-year study released last week by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) suggest that even in the presence of those events, famine is far from inevitable. Indeed, the report concludes, the responsibility for pushing poor people over the edge into starvation lies largely with a network of social and political factors that could be corrected—but only at a cost.

"There is no excuse for famines in the 20th century," says Joachim von Braun, director of the IFPRI Food Consumption and Nutrition Division. "They are not just due to bad luck. They are an accumulation of events and policies that progressively erode the capacity of the poor to deal with short-term shocks (such as droughts)." The report, "A Policy Agenda for Famine Prevention in Africa," is based on two countries worst hit by food shortages in the 1980s: Ethiopia and Sudan (where 1.5 million people died of starvation in the mid 1980s).

The vicious downward cycles in those two countries were initially touched off by drought, apparently confirming the conventional wisdom. In addition, armed conflicts made it difficult to get food to those who were starving. But the authors of the report note that other African countries—including Botswana and Zimbabwe—have experienced even worse bouts of drought, but managed to avoid famine. And it was by comparing policy responses in those nations to the ones in Ethiopia and Sudan that the report concludes that social and political factors provide the final steps in the downward cycle toward death by famine.

Among those interlocking factors are failures on the part of the Ethiopian and Sudanese governments to give farmers hardy seeds or fertilizers intended for crops that can survive drought. That failure is exacerbated by the fact that most people in both countries are dependent on farming. What's more, because there are few roads to bring their crops to larger markets, the farmers tend to grow only a single crop and are therefore more vulnerable to any changes in the environment. To top it all off, banks in these countries are not set up to lend money to the poor, who lack collateral, and they also fail to promote savings, so farmers have no reserve funds to buy food when their own crops fail.

The bottom line, says the report, is to overhaul national policies. Botswana and Zimbabwe, for example, have avoided famine during droughts by providing rural public works projects that pay the poor in wages or food, while improving transportation and irrigation systems. Zimbabwe also aided farmers by giving them improved seeds, fertilizers, and agricultural extension services. Early drought warning systems also should be put in place, the IFPRI report concludes, so that international food aid and agricultural advice can be targeted to the most needy. "A few tricks won't do the job," says von Braun. "Famine prevention costs money." Although the report doesn't say where that money should come from, von Braun points out that Sudan is at least as rich as Botswana and should be able to mobilize its own resources, while Ethiopia will continue to need foreign aid. ■ ANN GIBBONS