

**‘NOTHING LESS THAN ITS ERADICATION’? IRELAND’S
HUNGER TASK FORCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF HUNGER**

Dr. Alistair Fraser

Department of Geography

National University of Ireland Maynooth

Address:

Email: Alistair.Fraser@nuim.ie

Rhetoric House

Phone: +353-1-708-6156

NUI Maynooth

Maynooth

Co. Kidare

Ireland

Abstract

A wide range of actors have intervened in the debate about the causes of hunger and what can be done to eradicate it. One example is a 2008 report by the Hunger Task Force, a group of development experts mandated by the Irish government to explain the root causes of hunger and identify ways for Ireland to play a leading role in eradicating it. In this paper, I present a critical review of what the HTF report says about the causes of hunger. I argue the report fails to live up to its aim of commemorating those who died in the Irish Famine in the 1840s because it refuses to consider the role of the corporate food regime in the production of hunger. Further, I position the report’s flaws relative to

Ireland by asking how the report balances Ireland's drive to eradicate hunger against its political and economic interests. I pay particular attention to Ireland's diplomatic proximity to the United States and to the emerging corporate foodscape within Ireland; both considerations shed light on Ireland's place within the structures and mechanisms that produce hunger in the contemporary period.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Mark Boyle, Gerry Kearns, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on drafts of this paper. Any errors are my responsibility.

‘NOTHING LESS THAN ITS ERADICATION’? IRELAND’S HUNGER TASK FORCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF HUNGER

Introduction

Issues to do with hunger and its continued prevalence are high on the development agenda at the moment. There have therefore been some recent noteworthy interventions that aim to do something about it. For example, in Africa, the continent in which hunger is most prevalent, the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) calls for African governments to invest 10 percent of their national budgets on supporting agriculture. Such investments tend to pay off – for example, in Sierra Leone, increased government spending has dramatically boosted rice production (Africa Renewal, 2011: 10) – but they are not the only changes that might be pursued to reduce hunger. One notable set of arguments is contained in the World Bank’s 2008 World Development Report, *Agriculture for Development*, which suggests that Africa should pursue ‘the new agriculture’, which can be ‘led by private entrepreneurs in extensive value chains linking producers to consumers’ (World Bank, 2007: 8) and particularly via the production of non-traditional agricultural exports (think: baby sweet corn or fresh cut flowers [Barrett et al., 1999]). Meanwhile, from the other end of political spectrum, an alternative path to reducing hunger has been laid out in the Nyeleni Declaration, an ambitious and imaginative set of arguments for food sovereignty and radical reform of the global food economy (see Patel, 2009) promoted by La Via Campesina, a transnational movement of peasants and small-scale farmers (see Desmarais, 2007).

Still another contribution to the debate about hunger and how best to tackle it is a 2008 report by the Hunger Task Force (hereafter, HTF), a group of experienced development and health experts mandated by the Irish government in 2006 to, ‘identify the additional, appropriate and effective contributions that Ireland [could] make to international efforts to reduce hunger and thus achieve the first Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger by 2015’ (HTF, 2008: 14). The HTF report, which was launched at the United Nations in 2008, sets out:

[...] a very focused programme of actions to address three priorities, which the Task Force believes can have the greatest impact in reducing, and ultimately eliminating, hunger: Increasing the productivity of smallholder, mainly women, farmers in Africa; implementing programmes focused on maternal and infant undernutrition; and ensuring real political commitment, at national and international levels, to give hunger the absolute priority it deserves’ (p.1).

It is not my intention to critique the report’s call for action. I leave it for someone else to consider fully whether development interventions regarding the first two priorities will save or improve many lives, or if the third recommendation is really the best use of Ireland’s resources. Rather, what interests me in this paper is what the report says and fails to say about *the causes of hunger*. Further, I want to consider what the report might tell us about the place in which it emerged and on which I argue it reflects: Ireland. In particular, I argue there is a need to position the report relative to some pertinent political

and economic changes in the country and Ireland's peculiar geo-history. In this regard there are two absolutely crucial points to note.

The first is that the HTF was formed at the height of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' boom; that is, at a time when the Irish political class was optimistic about how it could use the country's wealth. Among the members of the HTF, for instance, there was a sense that Ireland could try to become 'the Norway of hunger'. Thus, like Norway, which is a small, resource-abundant country proudly occupying its position as the world's foremost advocate for conflict resolution, Ireland could aim to become a third-party mediator, an initiator, indeed a leader in the fight against hunger. Why hunger? This is the second point: Ireland knows about hunger. Between 1845 and 1852 in particular, *an Gorta Mór* (in Irish, 'the Great Hunger') killed one million people and caused at least another million to emigrate (see Nally, 2008). As Chair of the HTF, Joe Walsh, noted in the Preface to the 2008 report: 'The members of the Task Force believe that Ireland, because of its history and commitment to development, can play a pivotal role in the global fight against hunger' (HTF, 2008: 1). Other members of Ireland's political class also highlighted the country's legitimacy and indeed obligation to tackle hunger. For example, one month after the HTF presented its report to the UN General Assembly in 2008, Ireland's President, Mary McAleese, said in Norway:

Last month at the United Nations General Assembly the Irish Government launched its Hunger Task Force Report. Indelibly marked as we are by the

memory of our own Great Famine, Ireland is determined to take a strong leadership role on the issue (McAleese, 2008).

Likewise, in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly in 2009, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Peter Power, T.D. said:

I speak today as the representative of a country which has experienced famine and hunger and a country whose population was decimated after the Great Famine of 1847. Hunger is the result of many failings. Its eradication, and *nothing less than its eradication*, must be our goal (Power, 2009; my emphasis).

As these quotations indicate, therefore, leading members of Ireland's political class argued that Irish interventions regarding hunger were not only needed but also that Ireland had the legitimacy to speak up. It is hard to argue against this general sentiment. But as I will argue in the next section, although the HTF report invokes and seeks to build upon memories and commemorations of the Irish Famine, it does not show any signs that the group sought to learn anything about the causes of that particular hunger, nor how those general causes might still be at work today.

A critical analysis of the Hunger Task Force report

To begin, then, consider the following, which is the report's clearest statement about the causes of hunger:

This inability [to obtain the basic food intake] can arise from a number of causes including poverty, low food production, mothers' and fathers' lack of education, poor dietary diversity and hence low nutritional quality, poor water, sanitation and health facilities, and climatic shocks. This indicates the multi-dimensional nature of the hunger problem and of the solutions needed to reach the MDG. The vulnerability of hungry households is exacerbated by gender inequality, and the impact of HIV/AIDS and other major diseases. The extent and causes of hunger vary by region. War and HIV/AIDS have been hugely important factors causing undernutrition, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Asia, the low status and consequent poor education of women has affected child malnutrition and mortality. (p.17).

There should be no doubt that hunger *is* multi-dimensional. It is. Hunger will always be the result of complex combinations of forces. Nor will there be much disagreement with highlighting *connections* between hunger and poverty, low food production, poor dietary diversity, or poor water, sanitation and health facilities. Or that 'war and HIV/AIDS' have been important factors in sub-Saharan Africa. However, recognizing connections or factors is absolutely not the same as identifying them as *causes*. Poverty, for example, is an *effect* of other processes and failures (although which *precise* mix of processes and failures is not at issue in this paper). Thus, what the HTF report does in this short

statement is ascribe causality to effects. It draws on and advances a confused, incorrect logic.

In addition to displaying a poor grasp of hunger's causes, the report also ignores numerous central features of the capitalist food economy that contribute to and, we might even say, *produce* hunger. In particular, the report should have gone beyond identifying relevant related conditions affecting the incidence of hunger and instead considered a similar set of dynamics that played a part in creating Ireland's famine. As numerous contributors to the critical literature on the global food economy have noted (e.g. Akram-Lodhi, 2007; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010; Friedmann, 1987; McMichael, 2009; Nally, 2011; Weis, 2007, 2010), hunger cannot be divorced from the governance of agriculture and international agricultural trade. For McMichael (2009), these governance mechanisms give rise to a 'corporate food regime' (CFR) that draws on World Trade Organization rules, particularly around the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), to enshrine and cement the power of corporations such as Monsanto, Cargill, or Archer Daniels Midland (ADM) and their ilk. For example, a central aspect of the AoA is that it pushes for reduced trade barriers in developing countries, which helps to create a world price for agricultural commodities and 'open markets' for corporations to access and exploit, but yet also allows agricultural subsidies to continue in rich, northern countries. These arrangements enable and encourage northern agribusinesses to target 'southern markets with artificially cheapened food surplus exports' (McMichael, 2008: 209). Across Africa, such food imports, which total about \$33bn annually (Africa Renewal, 2011: 11), displace domestic production, causing many peasants to leave the land, and heightening

their vulnerabilities to food price rises. WTO restrictions on domestic supports also reduce the ‘development space’ (Wade, 2007) for governments in developing countries to support their agricultural sectors – a shift in the place of domestic food production which McMichael (2008: 209) refers to as the ‘evaporation of public support of peasant agriculture’. Many developing world governments therefore have limited scope to ensure food self-sufficiency. Thus, rather than promoting national food security, what the WTO seeks to create is a world in which food import dependency persists; a world in which food security is *privatized*. To eat, one must pay.

Perhaps the most obvious critique of the HTF report is that none of these general or specific features of hunger’s contemporary production are mentioned. This failure is especially disappointing given that Ireland’s Famine was in large part a product of similar forces. The disaster unfolding in Ireland in the 1840s was closely bound up with dominant liberal ideas in Britain about trade, state interventions relative to market forces, and personal responsibility (e.g. see Nally, 2008). Despite reports of desperate conditions in Ireland, leading British politicians rejected imposing restrictions on food exports and out of fear of disrupting ‘market forces’ (see also Bernstein, 1995), the British state refused to purchase sufficient quantities of food on the international market to extend support to the hungry. Other state interventions in Ireland – such as to feed the hungry via public works programs – were also frowned upon and limited by the British government. Further, although the British government reluctantly provided some funds for an Irish Poor Law system that fed many in county workhouses, it did so with the explicit aim of reforming the Irish character; that is, to force the Irish to take personal responsibility for

their own circumstances. Like contemporary welfare and workfare policies, the Irish Poor Law and the workhouse sought to ‘discipline and regulate’ (Nally 2008: 733); but also to balance Britain’s reluctant charitable drive against the belief that the Famine would ‘teach the Irish crucial lessons about self-reliance’ (Bernstein, 1995: 534).

It goes without saying that these same sorts of mentalities – the visions and dreams of imposing class power even, or indeed especially, during moments of intense suffering – persist today. In the 1840s, the connection between *liberalism* and hunger was at issue; today, the issue is about *neo-liberalism* and hunger. It follows from these points that, insofar as it invoked the Famine and was supported by the Irish political class in the memory of those who suffered in the 1840s, the HTF should have been alert to the possibility that contemporary hunger might have rather similar causes to the Irish case. It might therefore have considered how the WTO’s pro-trade, anti-interventionist rules protect corporations in their pursuit of profit, even if they employ unsustainable production practices such as the use of food grains as feed for livestock, which is unsustainable ecologically (Weis, 2010: 320-321), but which also helps to set a market price for grain that many poor people simply cannot afford to pay. Or the report could have considered how the WTO enables corporations to seize intellectual property rights over seeds, which creates a market for objects that peasant producers once controlled and which therefore limits their scope to access them (Kloppenborg, 2010). Nally (2011) imaginatively conceptualizes this process as ‘accumulation by molecularisation’; like Harvey’s concept of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, Nally’s argument is that capitalists have found a new arena for accumulation in investments in micro-scale biological

processes that lead to higher-yield but also infertile crop varieties that tie producers to seed manufacturers or lock them out of the market. The effect of this accumulation strategy is to devalue the right to food (Nally, 2011: 48; Huish, 2008) and harm peasant producers and small-scale farmers.

What is all the more remarkable about the above silences in the HTF report is not only that the authors had scope to tackle these issues but also that it dealt with other, related tensions in a benign and uncritical manner. For example, the report discusses the importance of what it calls ‘governance failures’ at the international level and draws attention to the role of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, but its findings are far from critical. In a section titled ‘A call to action: What Ireland can and should do’, the report states that, ‘International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have often supported stringent fiscal constraints to maintain macroeconomic balance at the expense of expenditure on service provision’ (p.45) – which is certainly one way of putting it, but is not by any means a sufficient statement about the role of IFIs in producing hunger. On top of this, the report argues that tackling failures at national levels requires ‘substantial increases in resources to tackle key capacity constraints’ (p.41), such as ‘agricultural support structures [that were] run down through neglect and partial privatisation’ (p.41). Unfortunately, we are left in the dark as to why those structures were neglected or privatized: the report fails to explicitly consider how structural adjustment programs reduced the scope for the state to support agricultural production by dismantling or privatizing agricultural research and extension (see Holt-Gimenez and Patel, 2009: 45-49). Thus, in the contemporary period, agricultural extension (like so many of other

former public sector services) is increasingly provided *to those who can afford it* by private consultants while millions of producers enjoy little or no support. This situation is in stark contrast to Europe and North America, where the state extends numerous supports to farmers (albeit unevenly, with the largest farm units gaining the most in many places) via research monies, say, but also via subsidies that encourage overproduction and give a boost to demand for the inputs (agri-chemicals, seeds, etc.) corporations produce.

Another crucial point the report should have made is that neo-liberal logic seeks to lock in this relationship via arguing that sub-Saharan Africa need not pursue a protectionist stance, nor even invest in agricultural research and extension so long as it is cheaper to import (subsidized) food from abroad. In response to the 2008 food crisis, for example, WTO Director-General, Pascal Lamy, said, ‘we have heard calls for “food self-sufficiency”, with some portraying import-substitution as the answer to food security. What this forgets is that international trade can be exactly the sort of vehicle, or “conveyor belt” if you will, that would allow food to travel from parts of the world with a surplus to parts where there is a shortage’ (Lamy, 2009). The resonances with liberalism’s logic in producing Ireland’s famine are clear: although a ‘conveyor belt’ might move food to those who need it, the obvious danger is that many consumers will be locked out of the market if they cannot afford the world price. Such is the logic of hunger’s production.

So far I have argued that the HTF report remained silent about how the capitalist food economy contributes to the production of hunger. But whilst its silences deserve critique, some of its arguments are also highly problematic. Consider here what changes the report argues are needed to *boost* food production. One is that the state in developing countries should create an ‘enabling environment’ for the private sector to take the lead in expanding agricultural production (p.38). The report tries to qualify this statement by saying, ‘The private sector in this case is primarily comprised of millions of small producers’, which might be the case, but which cannot hide the fact that many of those in the private sector whom the state will ‘enable’ will actually be capital-intensive, commercial agri-businesses producing for export rather than domestic consumption. A point the report failed to address here is that structural adjustment helped configure a ‘neoliberal agricultural export bias’ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010: 275) in sub-Saharan Africa. One outcome is a ‘bifurcated agrarian structure’, in which capital-intensive export oriented commercial agriculture sits besides and in some contexts has begun to take precedence over a peasant sub-sector (Akram-Lodhi, 2007; also Barrett et al., 1999). Both sectors increasingly produce for the export market as ‘a means of boosting access to foreign exchange, facilitating debt repayments, increasing funds for investment, promoting technological change and boosting rural productivity’ (Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2010: 263). Just like the 2008 World Bank’s Agriculture for Development report (see Oya, 2009), the HTF report in effect calls for the state to get out of the way or, if it is to spend anything, it should ‘focus on expenditures with proven returns, for example, pro-poor agricultural research, education and advisory services’ (p. 39) (on other so-called ‘pro-poor’ initiatives, see Borras and Franco, 2010; Bakker, 2007].

The report also presents a flawed analysis of the place of smallholders within agrarian structures. As Pauline Peters (2004) has noted, for example, conflicts over land in sub-Saharan Africa are increasing at the same time as inequality over access to land grows. And related to this is the new ‘land grab’, via which speculators, hedge funds, sovereign wealth funds, and agri-businesses have begun acquiring African land, thereby heightening tensions over land and deepening many of the differences between Africa’s different, bifurcated agricultural worlds (e.g. see Zoomers, 2010). In some cases, there are signs that investments will re-direct African agricultural production in ways that will further undermine domestic food production, such as by growing exclusively for foreign grain reserves.¹ It is revealing, then, that the report does not consider the possibility that redistributive land reform might have a role to play in addressing smallholder productivity. Yet there is scope for agrarian reform all across sub-Saharan Africa and in Zimbabwe, at least, there is growing evidence that its ‘fast-track’ approach has begun delivering some positive results (e.g. see Cousins and Scoones, 2010). Promoting the possibilities that agrarian reform holds out would have aligned the report with many of the movements of peasant and small-scale farmers that constitute La Vía Campesina (see book review discussion on Desmarais’ (2007) book, *La Vía Campesina* in Volume two, Issue two of this journal) – but on the potential place of such movements the report was (tellingly) silent. Furthermore, although the report does at least note that inequalities in access to land matter, it awkwardly couches its statements in terms of a ‘management’

¹ Of course, this is exactly the sort of outcome that neoliberal proponents of structural adjustment promoted: as then-World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence Summers argued, Africa should capitalize on its competitive advantage, even if that means receiving western pollution; or, as has begun to occur, Africa’s land should be used not for local or national food production if the market does not allow for it, but rather for more ‘efficient’ or ‘rational’ purposes, such as growing fresh cut flowers.

issue. For example, the report says there should be an improvement at the macro-level in the ‘management of, and access to, natural resources since these provide the base for sustainable agricultural production’. It continues, ‘Unequal or insecure access to natural resources perpetuates poverty and can underlie devastating conflicts’ (p.39).

Unfortunately, the report does not tell us whether land is included in its definition of ‘natural resources’, nor what it means when it calls for improved management of natural resources? Is it calling for new, private sector, managers?

At the same time as the report seeks to enlist the private sector, it also ignores other actors with whom it could engage. For example, the report claims (rather vaguely) that the, ‘challenge is to build real political commitment to reducing hunger, to give the hungry more voice and build greater capacity at all levels of society to address hunger effectively and in a sustainable manner’ (p.41). It is not at all clear what this means. But perhaps the key word in the statement is ‘give’: what the report wants to do is give the hungry voice, not to support them acquiring that voice through struggle. It seems, therefore, that part of the challenge regarding ‘governance failures’ is to find ways to more successfully *govern* the hungry, just as the Irish Poor Law sought to change the ways of Ireland’s hungry masses (see Nally 2008).

In summary, then, the HTF report ignores central features of the capitalist food economy, such as the role of the corporate food regime, despite the resonances that exist between the production of hunger today and the production of Ireland’s Famine in the 1840s. In addition, the report promotes policies that will liberate private sector actors whilst

ignoring the scope that exists for bottom-up or even state-led interventions that might reduce inequality in access to land. These failures lead me to conclude that the HTF report is a weak and benign intervention which fails to live up to its laudable aims of addressing the causes of hunger.

The Hunger Task Force and Ireland

What might these failures say about the place in which it emerged – Ireland – and on which it reflects? There are two issues here. The first is about how the HTF fits within Irish government efforts to occupy a prominent place in the world. The second follows on from the first but brings into focus economic changes in Ireland and how the HTF connects with them.

Ireland in the world

Certainly, immediately prior to its economic collapse from 2008 onwards (but perhaps even to this day), Ireland's political class promoted a vision of the country's rightful place among the world's leading states. Its wealth was such, for example, that the least it could do was aim to meet the UN's target of overseas development assistance of 0.7% of GDP. But Ireland's aim was to become more than just a donor. Countering views of Ireland as just another recipient of structural aid and inward investment on Europe's periphery (consider that, much to the annoyance of its leading politicians, Ireland is sometimes referred to as one of the crisis-hit 'PIGS' – Portugal, Italy / Ireland, Greece and Spain), efforts such as the HTF are intended to underscore Ireland's capacity to lead and not least alongside the United States. In Ireland, therefore, it is viewed as a success

that US Secretary of State, Hilary Rodham-Clinton, has co-sponsored one outcome of the HTF report, the 1,000 Days partnership, which aims to ‘scale up’ nutrition and end child malnutrition. Indeed, as Kevin Farrell, Ireland’s Hunger Envoy, noted in a 2010 parliamentary hearing:

On reflection, when looking back on recent years, it is in the area of advocacy that Ireland has made its most significant contribution. We have done some great work in agriculture. We have also done some great work, and are doing even more, in respect of nutrition but it is in the area of advocacy that we are having a real impact. I was in New York last September to attend the launch of the 1,000 Days initiative, that is, the 1,000 Days nutrition programme that was co-hosted by [...] the Secretary of State, Ms [sic] Clinton. [...] While the meeting itself was a hugely significant event, *the important point is that Ireland is now working closely with a major player, namely, the United States*, which is actively and enthusiastically working with us on this initiative (Farrell 2010; my emphasis)

This quotation says a lot about how the work of the HTF and its report is intended to fit within Ireland’s broader diplomatic goals. Not only is the aim for Ireland to become the ‘Norway of hunger’, but Ireland’s effort to lead the (purported) fight against hunger aims to portray a particular image of the country: one that builds on the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom, which encouraged the Irish government to think about how it could occupy a new place

on the world stage. Indeed, some boom-time Irish geopolitical maneuvers entailed purposively cultivating a view that Ireland was ‘between Boston and Berlin’ (Finn, 2011) – a place that combined the ‘best’ of US and European political and economic ideas and policies (e.g. a light-touch regulatory environment from the US and a European-style welfare state). But Ireland also developed a narrative about its capacity to be a bridging state that could help the US and Europe to communicate with each other. This was a strategic stance, not least because Ireland definitely had to look to its west and to its east: inward investment from the US, for example, was a central aspect of Ireland’s boom, but so too was the flow of funds from Europe that helped educate Ireland’s workforce and improve its infrastructure (e.g. see Kitchin and Bartley, 2007).

Given this context, it makes sense to imagine that interventions such as the HTF report would seek to conform with, rather than challenge, mainstream views on hunger. What, for example, would the HTF need to avoid if it wanted to be taken seriously by foreign politicians, diplomats, and civil servants (not least by such people in the United States)? Would statements about corporate control over the global food economy have much mileage? Consider here the central role of TNCs in the production of hunger, an issue the HTF report ignored. The Irish government wanted support from the United States. Yet, as the 2009 World Investment Report documents, of the 10 largest TNCs in five sectors of the agribusiness economy, 30% of the firms are from the US (UNCTAD, 2009). A critique of TNCs, or discussing something approximate to the corporate food regime, which would implicate US trade policy (see Weis, 2007: 68-69), would not have gone down too well.

These points about Ireland's stance on hunger suggest that the pressure on states and agents mandated by them to remain diplomatic in their dealings regarding development curtails the scope for real, adequate, and critical analysis to emerge. Further, whilst there is a 'will to intervene' (Robinson, 2008) among states in the context of a world of humanitarian crises, the geopolitical imagination that drives such interventions is always tempered by other and often competing interests. In Ireland's case, the HTF failed to explain hunger as a product of (or even in any way connected to) an unfair trade system propped up by rich-world national governments to benefit their corporations, or by poor-world governments to protect their domestic elite allies. But the HTF report also fails to consider that Ireland is a major recipient of EU agricultural subsidies; subsidies that are widely recognized as a contributing factor to the difficulties facing agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. see Heinisch, 2006). Between 2000 and 2009, for example, farmers and agribusinesses in Ireland received almost €17.4bn (Pers. comm. from Central Statistics Office, 2011). By point of comparison, Ireland's development assistance during the same period totaled €5.84bn. Although these figures are not exactly comparable (ODA stems from government funds, whereas agricultural subsidies flow to private individuals and businesses), Irish agriculture nevertheless gains from the subsidy regime.

Based on the above discussion, it is hard not to conclude that the HTF report was part of a discursive process of misrepresentation and avoidance; about coordinating the illusion of doing something serious about causes, when in reality it only seeks to address effects, admirable as that may be. Like the legitimizing discourses and indeed cultural politics

that ‘constructed consent’ (Harvey, 2003: 39-63) for neoliberalization via the making of arguments about the state, say, or the way the market was represented as the solution to society’s ills (see also Frank, 2000), the HTF report legitimizes corporate control over the global food economy insofar as it defends private sector expansion in the agricultural sector, refuses to acknowledge the corporate food regime’s failings, and fails to attack trade rules. That the report spent its time and resources enrolling experts and collecting evidence, whilst receiving ‘buy-in’ from some ‘stakeholders’ (e.g. Catholic charities in Ireland’s HTF report) and excluding others (e.g. La Via Campesina, which the report ignored), but failed to acknowledge the role of corporate control over the global food economy, leads me to argue that it *misused* those resources. The outcome, then, is a ‘development smokescreen’ which hides the real forces and structures at work in the production of hunger *and* the position of Ireland within those structures.

Ireland’s emerging corporate foodscape

A second set of issues that deserves attention here is about how the HTF report connects with Ireland’s emerging corporate-dominated foodscape, which Sage (2010: 100) argues, ‘is more powerful and extensive than ever’. He notes for example that, ‘the spread of corporate food retailing, dominating the landscapes of suburban areas and towns and further exacerbating dependence upon cars, represents one of the most significant features of the “Celtic Tiger” era’ (p.95). A crucial point in this context is that corporate retailers’ power stems in part from the Irish government’s decision in 2005 to abolish the Groceries Order, thereby allowing retailers to attempt to gain market share by attracting consumers with below-cost goods, not least alcohol products. This change gave a serious

boost to the larger retailers, who now dominate the retail market. Indeed, Ireland's largest retailers, such as 'Dunnes Stores, Tesco and SuperValu account for 70% of the retail grocery market in Ireland, one of the highest levels of retail concentration in the EU' (Campbell, 2009). As is the case in other contexts (e.g. see Patel, 2007: 215-252), the retailers' buying power has knock-on effects for small-scale farmers because, '[w]ith corporate retailers competing aggressively for market share, growers have come under exceptionally intense pressure as they shoulder the consequences of special promotions and discounts such as "buy one get one free"' (Sage, 2010: 95).

Not only have corporate retailers flexed their muscles over small-scale farmers, but Ireland's corporate sector has also managed to exert pressure on Irish governments to construct a regulatory regime that grants them considerable power. Taylor and Millar (2004) shed light on one example. They note that, in the context of 'food scares' and consumer anxiety about food safety (see also Jackson, 2010), 'the Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrat (FF/PD) coalition in 1997 opted to replace a myriad of governmental bodies responsible for food safety in Ireland with a "super agency" that would have sweeping powers' (p.595). This shift was 'undertaken in a manner fully cognizant of the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS) which ensures that measures taken to protect food safety impact as little as possible on free trade. (p.601). And reflecting the Irish state's broader willingness to work in coalition with the private sector, the new agency, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, has a consultative council on which the agri-business community has representation. According to Taylor and Millar, this arrangement 'formalizes privileged access' (p.599) to agriculture and food

sector corporations and offers them ‘invaluable access’ (p.602) to the FSAI. The FSAI also passes the burden of truly judging food safety risks onto individual consumers. It passes on scientific information but consumers must decide what they want to consume. In so doing the FSAI formalizes ‘the preference of multi-national capital that if *no risk is proven, it is not risky*’ (p.600).

I argue that the upshot of all these policy initiatives is that Irish government policy has cultivated a corporate-friendly space economy in the food sector. Large retailers are among the winners. But Irish food processors have also done well. Indeed, the foodscape has been the springboard for two Irish corporations ranking in UNCTAD’s list of the world’s 50 largest food and beverage TNCs (ranked by foreign assets): Kerry Group (at position 38) and Greencore (at 46). In contrast, only one Irish corporation, CRH (at 83), ranks in UNCTAD’s list of the largest 100 non-financial TNCs (UNCTAD, 2009). Ireland’s agri-TNCs are punching well above their weight and it is no coincidence that they originate from a state that has sought to promote their emergence.

Some aspects of Greencore’s story are especially instructive for the purposes of this paper. Greencore is the name of the former state-run sugar corporation which was privatized in 1991 and which has since then grown to become a large player in Europe’s convenience food sector. Its privatization was controversial, in part because it was botched by Irish stockbrokers (Irish Times, 1993) but also because it was the first of a wave of privatizations via which the Irish state neo-liberalized the economy. Following flotation, Greencore expanded rapidly by acquiring firms throughout Ireland, Europe, and

the world. But retrenchment occurred alongside expansion. In 2005, for example, Greencore gave indication of its intentions by closing its sugar refining plant in Carlow, a move the government defended thus:

The recent decision by Greencore Group plc — Irish Sugar Limited to close its sugar plant in Carlow and to consolidate all of its sugar manufacturing in Mallow was a commercial decision taken by the board [...] Greencore's rationalisation programme involves an investment of €20 million to €25 million which clearly demonstrates a commitment to maintaining an efficient sugar processing industry in Ireland (Coughlan, 2005).

One year later, Greencore used payments from the European Commission to close its last remaining sugar plant in Mallow, County Cork, which employed 230 workers. Sugar farmers who supplied the factory also received compensation from the EC. However, in a report on European Commission (EC) spending released in November 2010, the European Court of Auditors found that the EC had mistakenly paid Greencore and Irish sugar beet farmers a total of €131m. The payment was questionable because Greencore used 2001 production figures to justify closing the Mallow plant; yet figures from later in the decade showed that the plant would still have been profitable today. So why did Greencore want to close its factory? The key issue was the potential value of the 160 hectare site for property development (Irish Times, 2011): why operate a factory when the site could be transformed into apartments? Greencore, which was part-owned by a

prominent Irish property developer, had caught the Irish property market bug. Needless to say, in the context of Ireland's collapsed property bubble, the undeveloped factory site now holds nowhere near the sort of value Greencore expected it would. At the time of writing (June 2011), Greencore's share price has dropped almost 78% since its peak in 2007.

In many respects, the Greencore story is emblematic of Ireland's woe: misplaced faith in speculative property investments. But attention to the Greencore case and recognizing the company's prominence within Ireland's domestic capitalist class reminds us that the country's agrarian sector remains important: the boom might have helped Ireland to change positions in the international division of labor, but the agrarian sector still has a strong presence within Irish society and economy. Indeed, as the size of Kerry Group and Greencore indicates, some of domestic Irish capitalism's greatest 'successes' are in the agribusiness sector. It goes without saying that the corporate food regime empowers prominent Irish firms. Crucially, as Ireland tries to map a route towards economic recovery, it is becoming increasingly clear that government policy will try to strengthen its position here. Food exports from Ireland are already worth approximately €8bn each year. Ireland is the largest EU exporter of dairy products and the fourth largest beef exporter in the world. And although most of Ireland's food exports stay within the EU (e.g. 99% of beef exports are sold in EU states), its farming and agribusiness sector stands to gain from new EU trade deals, such as the opening of Turkey's market to EU beef exports in January 2011 (RTE, 2011). The revised Cotonou Agreement between the EU and 79 countries from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific also holds out the

prospect that Ireland can capture new markets. For a small capitalist economy such as Ireland, it is no surprise that state policy is slanted towards capturing new export markets. From the perspective of the state, then, the pro-corporate transformation of Ireland's domestic foodscape and the success of corporations such as Kerry Group and Greencore is something to be celebrated. But what is striking about the HTF report is not only that it failed to consider the corporate food regime but also that it ignored Ireland's position within it. As with the report's silence on the issue of EU agricultural subsidies, Ireland is not registered as a player with a strong vested interest in the politics of food and hunger, but rather as a coordinator or referee. The HTF claimed it wanted to tackle the root causes of hunger, but the reality is that some of domestic Irish capitalism's best prospects lie in the continued survival of the same global food economy that produces hunger. Truly trying to prevent hunger – truly aiming for 'nothing less than its eradication' – would entail Ireland acknowledging its role in the subsidy regime and then seeking to move towards a radically different stance on the world stage.

Conclusion

The HTF was one realization of boom-time Ireland's new vision for itself; the sense that Ireland could act out a new role on the global stage. In trying to play out this new role, however, Ireland confronts numerous contradictions. For example, the HTF's purported drive to tackle hunger is undermined by Ireland's determination to form alliances with the U.S. and by the reality that domestic Irish capitalism is pinning its hopes on future profits from companies such as Greencore leading the economy out of its current crisis. Further, at the same time as the agrarian sector's historical and cultural meaning in

Ireland compels its political and civil society to form the HTF and take a stance on the global development stage, the agrarian sector's other side – its contemporary material meaning – relies on the reproduction of relations, networks, institutions, and structures that help create the precise condition of hunger that the HTF purports to attack. The HTF failed to deal with these contradictions. Rather, it aims to pursue agrarian changes in developing countries but without also addressing the emerging and highly problematic place of Ireland's agrarian sector. Thus, insofar as it invokes Ireland's historical experience of famine and hunger as a reason for intervening on the global development stage, the HTF and its report actually *exploits* the tragic history of Ireland's agrarian sector whilst promoting – or at the very least, not damaging – its contemporary geopolitical and economic interests. At the point at which Ireland's attempt to speak up and be heard had the chance to say something meaningful, serious, and critical about the causes of a form suffering that it had known so deeply – hunger – its representatives on the HTF bailed out.

Given the scale of its economic crisis, another sort of bail out (led by the European Central Bank and the IMF) now preoccupies Ireland. The confidence with which Ireland sought to make its mark on the world stage – the sense that Ireland was going to be, like Norway, a resource-abundant country that could tackle global problems – has been eroded. And at least in part because of the crisis, it now looks highly unlikely that Ireland's (once much-lauded) ODA will reach the United Nations 0.7% of GDP target by 2012. Nevertheless, the government's Hunger Envoy continues his work and some of the reforms called for in the HTF report are being implemented. And so there remains some

scope for post-crisis Irish governments to pursue a new stance on the production of hunger. Rather than situating its efforts within the development space of other nation-states and their diplomatic classes, perhaps Ireland might begin to position its agenda on hunger relative to some of the grassroots, bottom-up players that constitute organizations such as La Vía Campesina (Desmarais, 2007) and that argue for an agro-ecological solution to hunger (Pretty, 2009). The HTF report did not do justice to the memory of Ireland's Famine; but future efforts could begin to rectify that.

References

Akram-Lodhi, A.H. 2007. "Land, markets and neoliberal enclosure: An agrarian political economy perspective." *Third World Quarterly*. 28(8): 1437-1456.

Akram-Lodhi, A.H. and Kay, C. 2010. "Surveying the agrarian question (part 2): current debates and beyond." *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 37(2): 255-284.

Bakker, K. 2007. "Trickle Down? Private sector participation and the pro-poor water supply debate in Jakarta, Indonesia." *Geoforum*. 38(5): 855-868.

Barrett, H.R., Ilbery, B.W., Browne, A.W. and Binns, T. 1999. "Globalization and the changing networks of food supply: the importation of fresh horticultural produce from Kenya into the UK." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 24(2): 159-174.

- Bernstein, G.L. 1995. "Liberals, the Irish Famine and the role of the state." *Irish Historical Studies*. 29(116): 513-536.
- Borras, S.M. and Franco, J.C. 2010. "Contemporary Discourses and Contestations around Pro-Poor Land Policies and Land Governance." *Journal of Agrarian Change*. 10(1): 1-32.
- Boyle, M. 2000. "Euro-regionalism and struggles over scales of governance: the politics of Ireland's regionalisation approach to Structural Fund allocations 2000-2006." *Political Geography*. 19(6): 737-769.
- Campbell, S. 2009. "Production and Distribution of Farm Produce: Discussion." *House of the Oireachtas: Joint Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Food*. 24 June.
- Coughlan, M. 2005. *Dáil Eireann Debate*. Vol. 596 No. 1. Retrieved June 2011 from: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/dail/2005/01/26/00410.asp#N8>
- Cousins, B. and Scoones, I. 2010. "Contested paradigms of 'viability' in redistributive land reform: perspectives from southern Africa." *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 37(1): 31-66.
- Desmarais, A.A. 2007. *La Vía Campesina: Globalization and the Power of Peasants*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Egeraat, C. van and Breathnach, P. 2007. "The Manufacturing Sector." In *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*. Eds. R. Kitchin and B. Bartley. London: Pluto Press. 125-146.

Farrell, K. 2010. *Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Debate*. November 3rd.

Finn, D. 2011. "Ireland on the turn." *New Left Review*. 67 (January-February): 5-39.

Frank, T. 2000. *One market under God*. New York: Doubleday.

Friedmann, H. 1987. "International Regimes of Food and Agriculture Since 1870." In *Peasants and Peasant Societies* Ed. T. Shanin. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 247-58.

Harsch, E. 2011. "Investing in Africa's farms – and its future." *United Nations Africa Renewal*. 25(1): 10-12.

Harvey, D. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* New York: Oxford University Press.

Heinisch, E.L. 2006. "West Africa versus the United States on cotton subsidies: how, why and what next?" *Journal of Modern African Studies*. 44(2): 251–274.

Holt-Gimenez, E. and Patel, R. 2009. *Food Rebellions*. Food First Books.

Huish, R. 2008. "Human security and food security in geographical study: pragmatic concepts or elusive theory?" *Geography Compass* 2: 1386-1403.

Hunger Task Force. 2008. "*Hunger Task Force: Report to the government of Ireland.*"

Retrieved November 2010 from:

http://www.irishaid.gov.ie/uploads/hunger_task_force.pdf.

Irish Times. 1993. "*Knocking down the cardboard images to glimpse real Ireland.*" May 12.

Irish Times. 2011. "*Greencore should be hauled over coals on Mallow sugar plant closure.*" January 10.

Jackson, P. 2010. Food stories: consumption in an age of anxiety. *Cultural Geographies*, 17(2), 147-165. doi:10.1177/1474474010363844

Kitchin, R. and Bartley, B. 2007. "Ireland in the Twenty First Century." In *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*. Eds. R. Kitchin and B. Bartley. London: Pluto Press. 1-26.

Kloppenborg, J. 2010. "Impeding Dispossession, Enabling Repossession: Biological Open Source and the Recovery of Seed Sovereignty." *Journal of Agrarian Change*.

10(3): 367-388.

Lamy, P. 2009. "Actions that result in stability must be pursued." *World Trade Organization Speeches*. Retrieved March 1 2011 from http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/sppl_e/sppl118_e.htm

McAleese, M. 2008. "Remarks by President McAleese at Government Lunch, Oslo, Norway, Wednesday 15th October 2008." Retrieved June 2011 from: <http://www.president.ie/index.php?section=5&speech=553&lang=...>

McMichael, P. 2009. "The World Food Crisis in Historical Perspective." *Monthly Review*. 61(3): 32-47.

Nally, D. 2008. "'That coming storm': the Irish Poor Law, colonial biopolitics, and the Great Famine." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98(3): 714-741.

Nally, D. 2011. "The Biopolitics of Food Provisioning." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 36(1): 37-53.

Oya, C. 2009. "The World Development Report 2008: inconsistencies, silences, and the myth of 'win-win' scenarios." *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 36(3): 593-601.

Patel, R. 2007. *Stuffed and Starved*. London: Portobello.

Peters, P.E. 2004. "Inequality and Social Conflict over Land in Africa." *Journal of Agrarian Change*. 4(3): 269-314.

Power, P. 2009. *Address by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs , Mr. Peter Power, T.D. to the 64th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*. Retrieved June 2011 from: <http://www.embassyofireland.org.eg/home/index.aspx?id=82898>

Pretty, J. 2009. "Can Ecological Agriculture Feed Nine Billion People?" *Monthly Review*. 61(6): 46-58.

Robinson, J. 2008. "The geopolitics of intervention: presence and power in global politics." In *Geographies of globalisation*. Eds. C. Barnett, J. Robinson, and G. Rose. London: Sage. 335-388.

RTE. 2011. "Beef deal could be reached with Turkey." Retrieved January 2011 from <http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/0107/beef.html>.

Taylor, G. and Millar, M. 2004. "The politics of food regulation and reform in Ireland." *Public Administration*. 82(3): 585-603.

UNCTAD. 2009. *World Investment Report: Transnational Corporations, Agricultural Production and Development*. Geneva: United Nations Publications.

Wade, R. 2007. "What strategies are viable for developing countries today? The World Trade Organization and the shrinking of 'development space'". In *The globalization and development reader: Perspectives on development and global change*. Eds. J. Timmons Roberts and A. Bellone Hite. Oxford: Blackwell. 277-294.

Weis, T. 2007. *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming*. London: Zed Books.

Weis, T. 2010. "The Accelerating Biophysical Contradictions of Industrial Capitalist Agriculture." *Journal of Agrarian Change*. 10(3): 315-341.

World Bank. 2007. *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Zoomers, A. 2010. "Globalisation and the foreignisation of space: seven processes driving the current global land grab." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 37(2): 429-447.