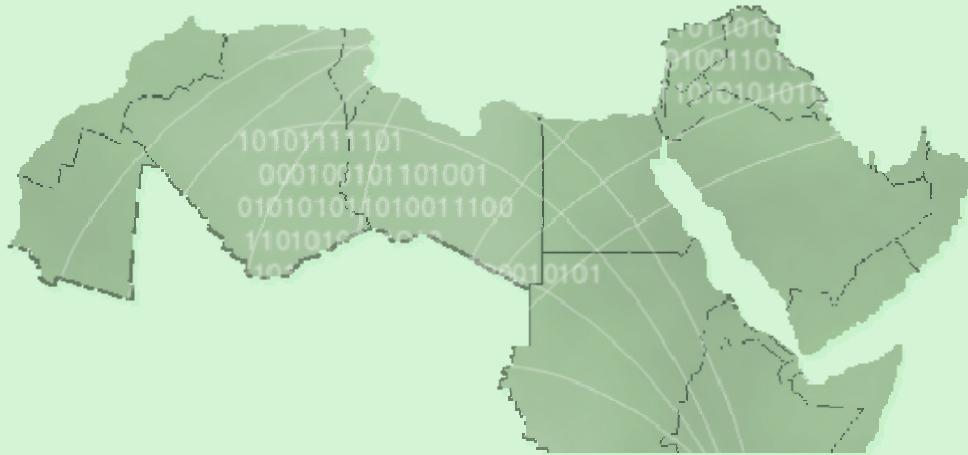


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## **Famines are an advertisement for imperialism**

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### **Abstract**

It is often thought that images of starving children bring the world together in the fight against hunger. Indeed they do for a short period when the rich expose second-hand emotions of charity, but in the absence of a strong internationalist ideology, soon after, the feelings of empathy loose momentum and transmute into a state of insecurity in which refuge is sought in more vestigial forms of identity creating more divisiveness between working people across the globe, unequivocally, putting downwards pressure on wages. When capital accumulation proceeds by dispossession and dislocation of the direct producer, there need be an ideology that reproduces these conditions and because food shortages and famines can no longer be attributed to natural disasters, their causes are often ascribed to national and cultural reasons creating thereby increased differentiation between peoples everywhere. Famines and hunger can no longer be explained on their own terms. Although it would take little to end hunger in absolute quantitative terms, nothing will be done about that because hunger is the outcome of a global accumulation policy that has long needed a show of misery to maintain a class system manifest in the international division of labour along national and ethnic lines. When the idea of rights takes hold of the imagination establishing a framework for the allocation of resources, then hunger will end for good.

**\*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author.**

The poorest countries, otherwise known as the least developed countries (LDCs) in UN parlance,<sup>1</sup> are experiencing declining food production per capita, importing food more steadily per capita and, to boot, they are adding to their debt problems by borrowing to pay for their imported foods. Under these circumstances, the targets of eliminating world hunger by 2015 as per the edict of the FAO's fiftieth summit and that of halving world poverty as per the MDG declaration are to prove ever more elusive.<sup>2</sup> Many have had their say as to why such senseless thing happens in a world of abundant labour and food provisions, and many, A. Sen in particular, faulted the market system of allocation in food resources for the tragedy. Whichever way one looks at it, the set of social relations governing the global redistribution of resources have eroded a significant part of the world's population, supplanted the small agricultural producer and exposed developing countries to greater food insecurity. However, one more morbid aspect of this has nearly gone unnoticed; namely, the policy of global food allocation eventually acts as an instrument of imperial control. Firstly, food embargos can ultimately become a weapon and; secondly, in as much as the scenes of the hungry invoke empathy in the hearts of the well to do globally, in the absence of a strong internationalist ideology, they also provoke people to take refuge in their nationalisms differentiating themselves from others. A state of solidarity soon turns into its opposite deepening the international division of labour along national lines and depressing the global wage to one degree or another. It is this particular facet of the problem that remoulds the grounds for decision making, and it is my contention that when global accumulation is driven by dispossession and by depressing wages through higher international reserves and division of labour, it becomes for this very purpose that the continuation of what only appears on the surface to be an irrational food allocation policy gets carried through time and time again. Ideology has to be continuously reproduced and is never separate from the way appropriation takes place on a global scale. The schisms in international relations need also be reproduced in proportion to the pace of violent or non-violent expropriation of the direct producers everywhere.

### **National security and food security**

Up to the point of self-sufficiency, food security becomes part and parcel of national security. But when the excesses of subsidised food exports of the richer countries make the poorer countries more dependent on food imports, it could only mean that the surfeit security of the rich is to the insecurity of the poor. And although the interests of agribusiness are still being served through the present framework of patents, protection and super profits, overall however, the service rendered to global

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<sup>1</sup> Apart from the poorest war torn countries, e.g. Afghanistan, Somalia and others, these countries are also LDCs: Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina, Burundi, Cambodia, Cape V, Central A.R., Chad, Comoros, Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Kiribati, Laos, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Sao Tome, Solomon, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Vanuatu, Yemen, Zambia.

<sup>2</sup> Food consumption per capita in the least developed countries (LDCs) remained unchanged over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Problems of malnutrition, caloric intake deficiency, and hunger continued to plague the LDCs. The resulting death toll globally from hunger and hunger related diseases is anywhere between 24,000 and 35,000 persons a day depending on the source. That is, about ten Million persons a year or nearly ten percent of the world's expected growth in population perish as a direct result of world food allocation policy.

capital as a consequence of deliberately instilling food dependency in the developing world far outweighs the comparatively meagre returns of agricultural conglomerates or, for that matter, the subsidies to occidental farmers. Making the poorer countries more food insecure and controllable can bring to the amalgam of capital more profits than simply that small proportion that goes to agribusiness. By tearing apart old ways of maintaining a living and putting the life of displaced workers at the mercy of markets in the absence of minimal social support, the global trading system buttresses by power of demonstration and by the images of starving children in the third world the ideology of racism-laced nationalisms, which is a necessary corollary of capitalist dynamics. It also instils insecurity at every level of international relations by deepening working people differentiation along national lines. Put more bluntly, controlling the stomachs of the poor is more important to capital than the pitons in profits made by agribusiness.

There are also other motivations as to why this happens. When all the diplomatic, political and financial means of suppression fail, a baleful food embargo on a developing nation can prove as lethal as a nuclear weapon playing out in slow motion so as not to draw attention from an international community shied away from outright violence by its excesses of the twentieth century. Iraq was a case in point. Next to delivering weapons of mass destruction, a penultimate sanctions regime amounted to a fatal weapon that has hewn hundreds of thousands of lives over a decade and prepared the ground for an all out re-colonisation. In the Gaza strip, food shortages were alarming as a result of the siege and one anecdotal comment ironically puts it that 'a loaf of bread was delivered by fast courier service (DHL) to the hungry.' And, when politics is seldom done for honour, then one must look to the totality of the matter wherein lies a specific political relationship by which undoubtedly a developing nation gets stripped of its food and before it gets deprived of its will and control over national resources.

### **Food in Figures**

For the developing world, the past two decades represent a period of greater openness in agricultural markets and, hence, greater susceptibility to price fluctuations and food insecurity. A recent FAO commentary on the impact of this liberal economic climate on the developing agricultural markets maintains that '[as] countries reduce tariffs and bind them at low levels, they become increasingly vulnerable to external agricultural market instability and to import surges that could destroy viable, well established or nascent production activity.'<sup>3</sup>

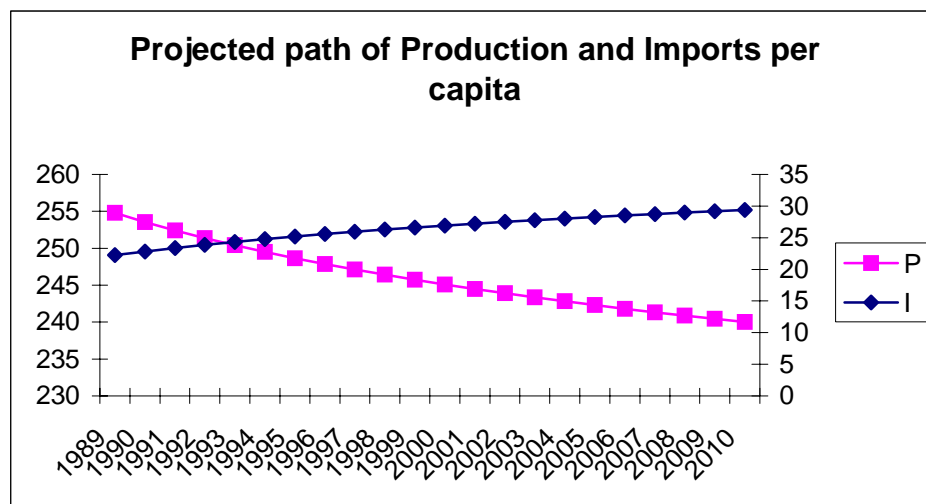
Although this may be true for all the developing countries, the case is nowhere more pressing than in the Net Food importing Developing Countries (NFIDCs) and the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Particularly in the LDCs, with nearly forty percent of the population already inflicted with problems of malnutrition, the slightest decline in the level of domestic supply runs the risk of being translated into a reduction of consumption per capita. Over the past twenty five years, average growth in consumption per capita nearly stood still. Notably as well for the same period, the production of basic foods per capita exhibited a downward trend, and the slack in the level of domestic supply was not fully covered with higher imports, meaning that an

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<sup>3</sup> From the discussion paper "A special agricultural safeguard: Buttressing the market reforms of developing countries." FAO, Rome, 2001.

already meagre food consumption per capita did not improve. Yet, it could be argued that higher market integration, lower prices and accessibility to food supplies assisted in keeping consumption per capita steady, and that under more autarchic conditions, the ever pervasive problem of malnutrition could have been worse, at least on account of population pressure. But this leaves open many questions. Principally, the question of financing continuously increasing levels of imports under dwindling income circumstances and balance of payments constraints. As things stand, average growth in real GDP per capita in most LDCs has been in the red and the current account deficit, of which food imports represent a relatively sizeable portion, has widened. The recently experienced catastrophic conditions in the southern belt of Africa are proof that a country cannot be indebted, food dependent and experience a drought. What is more sobering is that these declining trends in the basic food agriculture of the LDCs are, *of themselves*, unsustainable because food production per capita has on average declined and food imports per capita have, on average, increased but not enough to offset the decline and it could barely keep the level of food use steady as shown in Figure 1 below.<sup>4</sup>

**Fig1. Projected path of Production and Imports per capita<sup>5</sup>**



And, although linear trends can only be formally indicative of things to come under unchanging conditions, the trajectories shown in the graphic illustration foretell of growing dependency as well. At around the mid-nineties, domestic output in the LDCs represented 91 percent of total domestic supply. At the present rate of decline in output and, under constant conditions, by the year 2010 it will only represent 88 percent of supply. Maintaining the rate of consumption (food use) at the present level necessarily implies that the volume of imports will have to rise at a slightly higher rate than that experienced in the nineties. In a nutshell, if the hungry are to be fed, more food has to be imported because the rate of decline in food production is not fully countervailed by the rate of growth in food imports. And, as is shown in Table 1

<sup>4</sup> The category food is comprised of cereals, major root crops, vegetable oils, meat, and dairy excluding butter.

<sup>5</sup> Left hand axis is in Kg. of output and right hand axis is in Kg. of imports.

below, production-growth persisted in the nineties at higher negative rates while growth rates in imports edged slightly upward, meaning growing dependency.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: Growth in per capita food production and imports in LDCs.

	Production	Imports
1980- 1989	-0.2%	1.5%
1990-2002	-0.4%	1.8%

It is all too self-evident that the reasons for low productivity in LDC agriculture are historically based, particularly so, in so far as the majority of LDCs emerged outside the embryo of an industrial revolution and persisted in a path of dependent development. Underdevelopment comes as a package of which population pressure, vulnerability to natural disaster, pests and droughts, and institutional underperformance, especially in the areas of research, extension and financial system always exert considerable pressure on the production of basic commodities.<sup>7</sup> But what this analytical line of reasoning overlooks is that increasing food imports and declining food output has to grapple with issues related to their causality and interrelatedness. Imports of cheaper food do displace local producers. Already over the decades of the eighties and nineties, the number of production shortfalls exceeds import surges, meaning that food shortages may have characterised the status quo.<sup>8</sup> Before the start of civil war in Darfur, subsidised European milk, which was also re-subsidised by oil rich Libya, was putting downward pressure on the prices and incomes of locally produced milk by the herding community further widening the communal divide.<sup>9</sup> Whereas growing market openness is supposed to release resources from low productivity sectors and sharpen the comparative-advantage edge of better performing economic undertakings, LDCs are still far from reaping the full benefits of trade and the combined impact of declining overall economic performance and balance of payments constraints imply a quasi-permanent dislocation of a good section of domestic labour and resources. Labour released from uncompetitive sectors, in particular subsistence agriculture, finds itself adding to problems of urban unemployment and poverty. A phenomenon all too well known in the developing world, but which takes on a whole new dimension in the extreme poverty of the LDCs. Undoubtedly, it is no coincidence that variations in imports are driving down output levels in the sector of basic food production at a higher rate than that preset by the objective course of modernisation in a growingly globalized world.

Would it take much to raise per capita consumption and alleviate malnutrition under the existing structural framework? It should not because; *after the fact*, the hand-out amount is really small. In actuality however, the promised aid package is

<sup>6</sup> Food use per capita over the past two decades remained nearly constant.

<sup>7</sup> For a summary of reasons for low productivity see T. Reardon et Al, 1994, Determinants of Agricultural Productivity, Michigan State University.

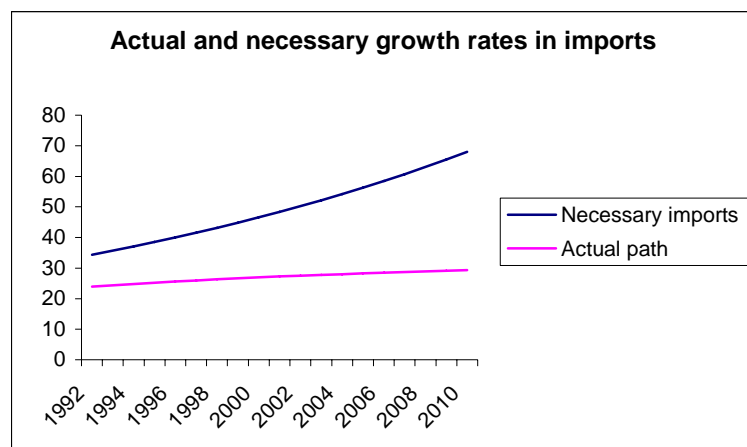
<sup>8</sup> The number of production shortfalls exceeds that of import surges by about 10, at 102 and 93 respectively, FAO statistics, various years.

<sup>9</sup> Conversation with UNDP economist who visited Darfur before the start of the civil war.

either late or not forthcoming altogether. Still, the case may still be hypothetically argued that higher LDC economic growth and income represent the policy choice par excellence, in that, no matter what the costs of maintaining food security and raising caloric intake are, a rise in income commensurate with the rising costs of food imports provides enough leeway to render any anti-malnutrition policy successful. The food dependent but rich oil exporting Gulf States can do just that. But where there is no oil as in much of the LDCs, this scenario requires a speedy rise in national income, which, beforehand, requires an unlikely quick reversal of development policy and poor macroeconomic performance. Under more realistic projections, even if LDCs experience moderate to high rates of growth without balancing and redistributing the growth across economic sectors and social strata, with particular attention paid to the expansion of the basic necessities sector, this will not offset the rate of decline in the domestic food sector and the need for more imports. It may be relevant to note that under structural adjustment, economic growth was based on more unbalanced sectoral performance and more inequitable distribution of income. Hence, the present structure of these economies is now even more conducive to food dependency because it tends to favour primary sector export or cash crops that come at the expense of the basic food sector.

LDCs already exhibit a weak starting point, in the sense that, they are importing food just to keep the malnutrition rate at the level at which it is, and even by this they are still further exacerbating their balance of payments position. If, for example, they wanted to raise the level of domestic supply to a level of 300 Kg per capita, i.e., raising the caloric intake to an approximate adequate level, then they would have to more than double their imports as time goes by. A graphic illustration below shows the projected actual path of imports and the path that needs to be adopted in case LDCs make combating malnutrition their foremost priority. The steeper line represents the path of imports necessary to raise the level of domestic supply to a level that raises food intake to a satisfactory level and, by implication, one may easily infer how much more extra foreign cash LDCs will need to cover the costs of the additional imports.

**Fig2. Imports would have to more than double if LDCs combat malnutrition.**



### **Situating the ‘commercial advertisement’ in light of the facts**

Under the “peace clause” in the WTO agriculture agreement, which prohibits action against subsidies, there was an effort by the FAO to lend to the poorest countries at concessional rates in case of production shortfalls in order to avert hunger and famines in LDCs and other more vulnerable developing food dependent countries. The total cost or disbursement amount needed to set up this ‘bank to feed the hungry’ would have been less than 4 billion US\$ for LDCs and, if all went well, the fund will start reaping profits as a result of interest repayments in less than decade. But little of the funds were committed by the donors and the project never really took shape. What is more, the idea of protecting and enhancing the performance of LDC agricultural necessities sector had also never been on the table in any of the strategic development frameworks. The damage to the traditional basic foods sectors as a result of over two decades of neglect and eviction is such that restoring old know-how and improving upon it is now too costly. Not only will LDC food producing sectors not respond to external demand quickly if trade scenarios were to favour third world agriculture, but they will also be sluggish in meeting internal consumption. When the economic conditions of maintaining life change from rural to urban, so do the social habits and mores and much of the damage to traditional agriculture is permanent.

Famine and hunger phenomena of this magnitude do not come about by mere coincidence and many developing nations were manoeuvred into a position of import dependency and food insecurity.<sup>10</sup> The policy of depriving people of the independence that comes from self-sufficiency in food production was and still is central to U.S. and other Western Nations foreign policy. As militarism becomes increasingly akin to the crisis of capital, the need to promote a *raison d'être* for aggression under the guise of nationalism is also increasing in importance. Here is where famine and hunger in the developing world have the aforementioned twofold role to play: raising profits and war bound nationalisms. Accumulation in the monopoly age comes with a twist, in the sense that, when rents or profits adjust downwards, developed formation crises become more acute because of the degree of cartelization and the need for control of cheaper inputs to boost profits.<sup>11</sup> Euphemistically, the bigger they are the harder they fall. The idea that capitalism expands simply by peacefully expanding the market for commodities implies that crises could be dodged by an appropriate global fiscal policy. That is a matter of grand design that could not factor in the multitude of extra-economic parameters that lie beneath a ferocious competition process. The voracity of capital accumulation continuously shifts forms of ‘primitive accumulation’ to the developing world where the acquisition of cheap sources of raw material gives that extra edge of profits and

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<sup>10</sup> Ramsey Clark Interview, The Sun Magazine, 2001,  
<http://www.racematters.org/ramseyclarkinterview.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Monopolies hold prices at a level that allows them to earn extra profits and cover the costs of investment. However, when new technology lowers prices, the ensuing revalorization and disengagement of non-performing capital tends to accentuate the depth of the fall in capital accumulation.

control. Capital in the monopoly age expands more by aggressive encroachment, including military aggression, than by the simple realisation of commodity in expanding markets and for that monopolies wed themselves closely with the state.<sup>12</sup> So why undo famines and hunger that are a premise of accumulation when in addition to profits, the images of the starving and hungry strike fear in the heart of developed formation's workers making them revert everywhere to their nationalisms or often the point of departure of modern warfare.

On the face of it, the share of basic food imports of the LDCs in addition to that of the net food importing developing countries (NFIDCs) never exceeded a quarter of a percentage from total world exports, five percent of total food exports, and nine percent of total basic food exports. But one cannot argue against hunger simply by the cheapness of food. That may after all prove to be less than a solid argument, in the sense that it engenders on an ethical side, and therefore it misses out on the rigour required from 'positive science' and/or the sanctity of prices that arrived at the level at which they are at because the food market has to clear. But these food prices in particular were subsidised to help the poor farmers of the north, which is all too well on ethical grounds, but why should they hurt the farmers of the south. Lest it be forgotten, the capital that subsidised the farmer of the north did it purposely to hurt the farmer of the south in the 'lose some win some' strategy for a capital in crisis that seems to be enjoying a holiday in the absence of an ideology international worker solidarity. Food is not cheap, but cheapened for some and made dear for others. Prices do not make themselves someone makes them. Those who did so did it on the grounds of a survival or lifeboat ethic, wherein, if the north takes the poor on board they will all sink. An ethic that assumes that death and dying for sometimes worthless reasons to be entwined with human existence. Yet in the present historical period of mass-food overproduction, immediacy of information, and the "globalized" planet, the matter of famines and under-nourishment stands out as a complete aberration. It could be averted in a 'pre-emptive' effort, yet it is not. The matter of hunger and famine therefore does not stand on its own; it makes sense only insofar as it fits wholly in process global accumulation as a spigot of labour and a means of imperial control. The latter simultaneously serving to erode the sovereignty of third world nationals over their resources and to instil insecurity and divisiveness in the ranks of working people across the globe.

### **Parting comment**

It is often asserted that "hunger is man made." This begs the question: which man concretely made it and for what purpose. As to which man, the finger pointed to big agribusiness conglomerates, and as to what purpose, super agribusiness profits are often identified as the cause. But that is only one minor and un-determining aspect of the story. Even if one adds the increased commodification of world agriculture, the patents on genetically produced seeding, and the increased dependency of the small subsistence farmer on the market, still these would still miss the point that food policy is major instrument of imperial control. In a comment on the death of half a million

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<sup>12</sup> The role of financial capital and privatization is one that facilitates the conversion national public assets into private ones.



Iraqi children under U.S. sanctions, former secretary of state, Mrs. Madeline Albright, replied that “it was worth it.” The real grounds behind this phenomenon must be related to the accumulation process of the totality of capital, which necessitates the creation of a global reserve army of labour whose image of destitute strikes fear, despondency and seclusion into hearts of many workers everywhere.

Dependency on food imports is rising throughout the developing world and not only for misguided national policy or weather effected reasons, but more importantly for reasons related to the dynamics of the world capitalist system, which, at one extreme, must and does displace billions into conditions of poverty. Structural adjustment cum liberalised agricultural trade introduced since the early eighties meant an intensification of a process of proletarianisation that was already underway in developing formations. Yet, instead of shifting resources from uncompetitive third world farming into areas of comparative advantage, protected, highly productive, and subsidized agricultural markets in the north, shifted a good part of third world farmers into oblivion. But those subsidies were not out of mercy onto the northern farmers, but more so to divide people and to oil the big machine of capital, which has already in the North eroded nature and, in the South, literally devoured man. Every allocation of resources is efficient to some and inefficient to others depending on the value system espoused. The present allocation of resources is efficient for capital and not for labour.

At this point in time, many are living in the long term of the eighties and are still alive to see that the Washington consensus policies were not innocuous, but a very criminal strategic policy plan aimed at the poorest to say the least. That is all the reason why under no circumstances shall the relief of famine amount to more than charity fanfare for the rich. The degree to which misery will set in must be proportional to the degree of the ideological crisis of capital and, by conjunction, to how close the US empire is to conducting its next war.