

INTERJECTION: HUNGER AND POLITICS

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We have been engaged in efforts to fight hunger and poverty in developing countries for decades. Some progress has been made, but we cannot be satisfied with the overall results to date. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO),¹ the number of people suffering from hunger around the world has declined (it is still above 800 million). But large regional differences persist. In Africa in particular, the number of those suffering from malnutrition has only been declining slowly over the last few decades, while the concentration of malnourished people is still highest in Asia. Bearing in mind the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the goal of reducing the prevalence of hunger to half its 1990 rate has at least come within reach. However, this does not mean the problem has been solved by any means.

THE FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER IN THE DEBATE ON DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Many international institutions and national governments have since begun efforts to tackle the challenge. The German Federal Government has set up programs of its own (for instance a special initiative entitled "Eine Welt ohne Hunger", A World without Hunger)² and is heavily engaged in the international debate and the further development of



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1 | Cf. FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2014*, Rome, 2014, p. 4, <http://fao.org/3/a-i4030e.pdf> (accessed 10 Dec 2014).

2 | Cf. BMZ, "100 Tage Bilanz: Eine Welt ohne Hunger", http://bmz.de/de/zentrales_downloadarchiv/Presse/100Tage/100-Tage-Bilanz-EineWelt-ohne-Hunger.pdf (accessed 8 Dec 2014).

the systematic approaches connected to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)³ of the United Nations.



Without breakthrough: Many donor agencies have declared rural development as a focus of their work. However, hunger remains widespread. In India, about 17 percent of the population is affected by chronic malnutrition. | Source: Prashant Panjiar, Gates Foundation, flickr ©①②③.

It was, in fact, over 30 years ago that the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Federal Enterprise for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) declared rural development the key task of technical cooperation. Due to a decline in food production in many developing countries since 1970, the fight against poverty and hunger had become a high-priority goal in development cooperation.⁴ The conclusions and recommendations for development projects included in a handbook published jointly by the BMZ and the GTZ⁵ were innovative for the time. One new idea involved focusing on “target groups”, whose inclusion was to be secured using novel planning tools (for instance through Goal-Oriented Project Planning, GOPP).

3 | Cf. United Nations, “Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals”, <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgsproposal> (accessed 8 Dec 2014).

4 | In 1983/1984, the BMZ set up the working group “ES 31: Armutsbekämpfung durch Selbsthilfe”. Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, “Dritter Bericht über die Armutsbekämpfung in der Dritten Welt durch Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe”, 6 Jun 2001, p. 4, <http://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/14/062/1406269.pdf> (accessed 8 Dec 2014).

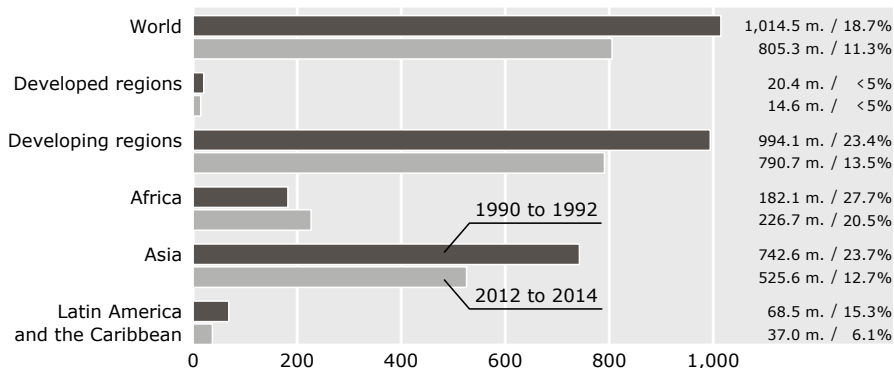
5 | Cf. BMZ and GTZ (eds.), *Handbuchreihe Ländliche Entwicklung*, 2nd edition, Eschborn, 1987.

The fact that many donor countries and donor organisations focused on rural development projects resulted in a rise in food production in many countries. However, the “breakthrough”, i.e. the eradication of poverty, still failed to materialise. Oxfam⁶ has recently responded to the question as to why there are still over 870 million people suffering from hunger by pointing out the following correlations:

- Reduction in cultivated land
- Low incomes
- Climate change
- Biofuels
- Gender inequality
- Land grabbing
- Speculation
- Soil degradation
- Rising meat consumption
- Lack of preventative action

Fig. 1

**Prevalence of undernourishment
in absolute numbers and per cent**



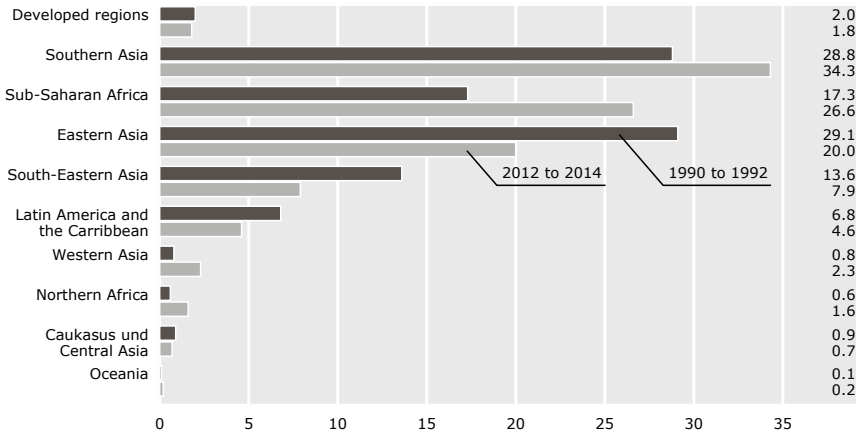
Source: FAO, n. 1, p. 8.

This attempt to examine the causes of hunger in a more comprehensive manner represents some progress compared to previous, rather one-dimensional perspectives, which, for instance, depicted hunger as a result of insufficient rainfall. It shows that there is now a greater awareness of the varied correlations involved.

6 | Cf. Oxfam Deutschland, “10 Gründe für Hunger: Warum hungern 870 Millionen Menschen auf der Welt?”, <http://oxfam.de/informieren/gruende-fuer-hunger> (accessed 8 Dec 2014).

In its report, the FAO went further and placed the issue in an even broader context. First of all, it declared that “sustained political commitment at the highest level” is a decisive prerequisite for all activities to fight hunger.⁷ To complement this statement, the FAO report included further, highly notable aspects of the correlations between the existence of hunger and the fight against it: participation and involvement of all stakeholders, democratic principles and a reliable legal framework, coherence among the different programs, better coordination and governance, improvements in information provision and communication.

Fig. 2
**Division of undernourished people by region
 (in per cent)**



Source: FAO, n. 1, p. 11.

When an organisation such as the FAO, founded some 70 years ago as an “institute for technology transfer”, now interprets the complex causes of hunger by taking social and political aspects into account, then it is a noteworthy step. Therefore, the simplistic reasons for the existence of hunger that are still being put forward should be off the table. It is simply not true that hunger is triggered or exacerbated solely by “catastrophic climate events” or “land grabbing”, by “inequitable global trade” or “poor water management”. And for quite some time, this debate

7 | Cf. FAO, n. 1, p. 39.

certainly has not been centered on the tractor that shall replace the buffalo to work the fields.

THINKING ABOUT THE CAUSES OF HUNGER MORE COMPREHENSIVELY – THREE PROPOSITIONS

1. Hunger is a consequence of poor policy-making.

One indication of this proposition having merit is probably the fact that there are states that turn from enjoying a food surplus to suffering a food deficit – virtually overnight – due to policy changes. This has usually nothing to do with climate-related, technical or similar factors or obstacles. There have been specific examples of this, for instance in Southern Africa.

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So, if the above-described realisation by the FAO were to be reflected in the future work of international institutions and major donors, would that help to overcome the problem of hunger for good? Unfortunately not, and for a very simple reason: neither the FAO nor other international institutions or the donor countries with their implementing organisations are, in fact, capable of implementing the demands they have formulated on the ground. While it is possible in most cases to elicit commitment in multilateral and bilateral agreements, local commitment at grassroots level is very difficult to enforce. That has been the crux and the tragedy of past endeavours.

2. Anti-hunger policies are not implemented at conferences but exclusively on the ground.

Policy measures aimed at combating hunger need to be designed in the villages, the small towns and in the capital – simultaneously and in a participative manner. These are also the places where the people in charge, the politicians of all parties, live. They must declare the fight against hunger one of their political goals and act accordingly.

Seen in this context of a “transmission task”, politics is, however, no longer necessarily what the FAO, the major donors or the diplomats understand by the term. Here, politics is the competition between political parties and

programs, between groups and individuals; it is simply about attaining power, gaining scope for political action. It is obvious that neither the FAO or other international institutions nor the donors or their governments wish to, can or should interfere at this juncture. But if the agents of politics (of development cooperation) fail to engage with this process or retreat, they must assume some of the blame – because they ought to know better by now.



Conference policy is not enough: International meetings such as the FAO have no effect if the implementation fails at the grass-roots level because of weak governance. | Source: U.S. delegation for specialized agencies of the UN in Rome, flickr ©①①.

3. Rural development and the fight against poverty are in the remit and responsibility of politics and politicians in the respective countries.

Fighting hunger and poverty is first and foremost the responsibility of national politics, political parties, parliaments and politicians. They create the legal framework, and can hold their governments accountable. This responsibility cannot be delegated to international platforms or donors. If it is true that rural development (and therefore also the fight against hunger) is not at the very top of the priority list of many politicians in developing countries, then there are reasons for that. Food riots in the cities, for instance, present a greater risk to a country's power elite than those in rural areas, which is why they prioritise urban areas.



Good governance and political dialogue: Poverty reduction is a national political task. Politicians and citizens have to make the decisions. | Source: © KAS Senegal.

It must also be borne in mind that the sectors of development policy, agricultural policy, trade policy and financial/budgetary policy are subject to potential tensions. There may be a situation, for instance, where a country in a region threatened by famine is granted special loan conditions. Maintaining this status for as long as possible could make perfect sense from an economic point of view – even if the country's own granaries happen to be filled and its population is not suffering from hunger. There is no shortage of similar examples, for instance of hunger being politically exploited. Many development workers can tell similar and worse stories, involving aid supplies being "diverted", for example.⁸

The correlations between the above-mentioned policy areas are complex and not always transparent. In most countries, the sectors of society most affected by hunger generally do not have a sufficiently effective political lobby. The politicians simply do not take an interest in them.

8 | Cf. Rupert Neudeck, "Afrika – eine Herausforderung", Cap Anamur, press release of 6 Aug 2002, <http://cap-anamur.org/projekte/pressemitteilungen/2002-08-06/afrika-eine-herausforderung> (accessed 17 Dec 2014).

CONCLUSION: RURAL DEVELOPMENT REQUIRES POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Rural development has undoubtedly come a long way and has become richer in experience. Today, those involved in development cooperation are not only more knowledgeable, they also have a more extensive apparatus available to combat poverty and hunger. And when the BMZ addresses the fight against hunger with a special initiative, it is to be welcomed.

Hunger can only be eradicated if those ultimately carrying responsibility have declared this challenge their very own duty.

However, this initiative too is destined to fail if there is reluctance to take the last, absolutely essential step, namely acting in recognition of the fact that hunger can only be eradicated if those ultimately carrying responsibility have declared this challenge their very own duty. And this refers to the politicians at different levels of the countries affected by hunger themselves – and not the development experts of the FAO, the World Bank, the EU or the donors.

In line with these points some recommendations for (development-related) politics are presented here, which comprise a collection of goals essential for combating hunger effectively and open the floor for discussion:

1. Politicians from the countries affected by hunger have realised that they themselves bear ultimate responsibility for overcoming hunger in their countries.
2. Both the urban and rural populations have realised that their own governments bear key responsibility for the fight against poverty and hunger.
3. The topic of "hunger/food security" has been put on the countries' domestic policy agenda and is being addressed by the media, the political parties and the political figures.
4. The topic of "hunger/food security" is given adequate prominence during elections. It can become a topic that is crucial to the election outcome.
5. (Development) politics and cooperation have transformed into a political dialogue with local politicians and political parties. Combating hunger has become a topic in parliamentary debates. If development

cooperation makes no efforts to this end, it will also be held responsible.

Whether the instruments currently being used can fulfil these demands is doubtful. It is, after all, not our contribution to the fight against hunger that matters most. It is the decision by the responsible politicians in the villages, towns and capitals and, above all, in the parliaments of the countries affected by hunger to make it part of their political agenda. But as long as those engaged in development cooperation do not have access to all those bearing political responsibility, awareness of what is required⁹ cannot guarantee success either. However admirable the good intentions of the BMZ may be, progress in this area cannot be accomplished through traditional development approaches.

9 | Translated quotation "To increase agricultural output, it is not sufficient to merely provide support to the agricultural sector in the developing countries. The political will must exist to realise the human right to food and to implement comprehensive development of the rural regions. This is not possible if public administration does not work properly, laws are interpreted arbitrarily, conflicts of interest about resources are not resolved equitably and corruption is rife. The fundamental prerequisite for food security is therefore good, responsible governance [...]." BMZ, "Basiswissen: Unabdingbar: politischer Wille", http://bMZ.de/de/was_wir_machen/themen/les/ernaehrung/basiswissen/politik_als_chance/index.html (accessed 9 Dec 2014).