

Causes of the current global food crisis politics essay



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All of these factors have contributed significantly to the current crisis in different ways. The growth of income inequality is something which is frequently highlighted by many globalisation theorists, such as Stiglitz (2002), but is also acknowledged by the UN (2009). This point is also relevant to wider debates on the impact of globalisation, but it essentially means that the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. In such a situation, those who are wealthier are able to dictate how the economy operates, and as they are frequently situated in areas which are geographically separate from those who are poor, this means that demand for specific 'luxury' foods goes up (Lang 2003). This also means that farmers turn their attention to farming such goods in order to make money, rather than farming crops which would be able to feed the world (McMichael 1998 p. 102).

The second major issue which we must accept is climate change. This has caused two major effects. The first is that it means that climates are now more unpredictable than they once were and that, as a result, crops are increasingly likely to fail where they would previously have been fine (Weis 2003). The second is that the increasing influence of climate change as a factor has made transportation more expensive as many states have introduced taxes on transport. This is understandable in the wider sense, but means that many poorer nations suffer as they are unable to pay the more expensive costs.

The third key factor outlined is high energy prices. This is largely linked in with the point made above concerning the impact of climate change.

However, this does also impact on the price of certain fertilisers and

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pesticides which are frequently used by farmers. The issue of globalisation is also considered a key factor. This is a very wide-ranging subject that cannot be used as a single factor by itself. With the exception of climate change, the impact of globalisation can be said to have affected all of the other issues which we discuss here. Increasing income inequality can be considered a direct result of globalisation, certainly in the manner in which globalisation has been carried out (Stiglitz 2007 p. 45). The free market capitalism model ultimately causes all of these factors and this will therefore be expanded upon later.

The final factor which is outlined as being the key relates to the increasing issue of urbanisation. Where people live increasingly in urban centres this means that food must travel further, increasing costs, but it also means that people (particularly in poorer areas) are unable to contribute towards farming themselves. In rural areas it is common for people to grow much of their own food or certain types of food and trade this food at markets. However, in the cities this is not possible (Collier 2007 p. 68). This therefore places an even greater stress on those farms which are able to supply such areas and means that food becomes increasingly expensive.

We can therefore see how all the key factors outlined above contribute to a scenario in which the world is experiencing a global food crisis. However, perhaps the most important aspect of these points outlined is the idea of globalisation and the specific manner in which this has materialised.

Globalisation has been led by the global governance institutions which (with the exception of the WTO) are all based in America, and have pushed the idea of free market capitalism as a means of benefiting American

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corporations. It is this that can be seen as being central to the problem of the global food crisis as it is the influence of this that has caused the key factors that we have seen are responsible for the global food crisis (with the obvious exception of global warming).

Stiglitz has argued frequently that the global free market capitalist system, led by multinational corporations and global governance institutions has damaged the power of politics to respond to crises such as the global food crisis (Stiglitz 2002 and 2007). This is epitomised by the declining power of the nation state as a political institution and means that more and more financial interests take present over political interests (Stoker 2006). The result is that the market distributive mechanism has complete power to distribute resources where they can best be profited from, not where they are most needed (Stiglitz 2002).

The global food crisis can therefore be seen as an extension of this discourse, whereby food is seen as a commodity to be profited from rather than a necessity of life (Stiglitz 2002). There is therefore a flip side to the food scarcity which occurs in the world's poorer areas which is that in the world's richest areas there is too much food. Where this is the case, there is no interest in everyone being fed, or those who are fed being fed well, simply that food is being sold. As a result of this, products such as Big Macs and Coca Cola are sold frequently, resulting in a crisis of obesity in America and Europe. The sustainability and wider impact of these options is considered irrelevant also, with McDonalds famous for its 'slash and burn' tactics and its continued deforestation. There is frequently an emphasis here on the deforestation as a specific issue rather than looking at its wider

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ramifications. Both Hawkes (2006) and Lang (2004) agree that there is a pressing need for acknowledgement that free market, capitalist-led food production and distribution is ultimately the cause of the global food crisis, with each particular aspect (such as biofuels, food for oil, rising prices and decreasing harvests) being seen as symptoms of the crisis and not causes.

We can therefore see that the global food crisis can be seen as resulting from the inherent dynamism of capitalism to turn everything into money and the way in which this has been allowed (by free market globalisation) to take root in the world. This has led to the increasing urbanisation as people look for jobs, which has therefore placed a greater strain on energy prices as food has to travel further. The same dynamism or process has also led to the increasing centrality of fast food to Western diets which has meant that farms in much of the developing world are now focused more on delivering cheap meat and potatoes for export rather than a balanced array of crops. This means that what they need must then be imported, pushing costs up. Fast food is cheap food, which is unhealthy but is highly profitable, and it therefore continues to thrive and cause all of the wider problems in the world. The direct result of this inherent dynamism is that much of what could be produced which would be healthy and which would sustain many more people, is not produced, and production instead focuses on meeting the increasing demand of those ‘restaurants’ which operate globally. Low quality production causes long term damage to the environment, obesity and hunger simultaneously and is ultimately the primary cause of the global food crisis.

We can therefore see how the global food crisis has become manifest in the factors which are outlined at the start of the report. The growth in income inequality, the rising prices of energy, the rising levels of urbanisation and the problems of unpredictability brought about by climate change all mean that food is subject to increasing prices and decreasing availability. This is further compounded by the rise in the West of junk foods and low-quality foods which are produced on farms in the poorer parts of the world. This has therefore created a two tiered global food crisis. The rich are getting fatter and increasingly ill as a result, whilst the poorer parts of the world are becoming increasingly poverty stricken and hungry. This is a direct result of the power of free market capitalism and the distributive mechanisms which this manifests.