



An exercise to get you thinking!

Below is a newspaper article by Trócaire's Trade Policy Officer Michael O' Brien, which was published in June 2008 during the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation's summit that was held in Rome to tackle the issue of the World Food Crisis.

This article can be used as a stimulus for a class discussion on the World Food Crisis.

Read the article and answer the questions which follow:

Food prices have been grabbing the headlines in recent months. As prices rise, the competition between food retailers intensifies, with ads screaming '100% Extra Free!' and '3-for-2!' to gain our custom.

Despite the offers, more and more people have to think carefully about where to shop and which brand to pick as the cost of filling our trolleys soars. The recent sharp rise in prices is affecting people everywhere: the impact on poor people being the greatest.

Before the recent spike in the cost of food, the world had been home to 800 million people who on a daily basis have been living in hunger. These are the 'poorest of the poor'. But the recent rises, which are being talked about all around the world, has ignited street riots in at least fourteen developing nations and highlights the need for addressing the causes of hunger once and for all.

The causes are many, and whilst some are well known others are not. Alongside poverty and the neglect of agriculture in many developing countries over several decades, there is rising demand for food as the global population increases and, as incomes grow, tastes change. More people can now afford meat and a wider and larger variety of foods.

Then consider increased costs to farmers due to high fuel and fertiliser prices, competition for land from 'eco-friendly' biofuels and lower crop yields caused by droughts and unpredictable climatic conditions.

Even more factors are the decline of the dollar – the currency in which many foods are priced on global markets – and speculation in food commodity markets.

Trócaire welcomes this week's summit in Rome at which the world's governments will commit to establishing a food fund. Immediate food aid is certainly needed to prevent immediate hunger and fight increased poverty, but addressing the multiple causes of this problem demands careful analysis if appropriate responses are to be found. What combination of policies will be effective over the medium and longer term is the critical question.

Although many poor people require urgent assistance now, in the longer term higher food prices present an opportunity for many of the world's poorest people. Ireland's historic understanding of hunger and poverty encouraged the Government to establish

an Irish Hunger Task Force. The report of the Hunger Task Force is expected to emphasise the need for greater investment in agriculture, targeting poor farmers, many of them women.

In the development of biofuels we need to avoid displacing food crops for our energy needs. Trócaire partners in some semi-arid areas of East Africa are exploring the benefits some biofuels present in generating income and reducing soil degradation.

For developing countries to be able to invest in agriculture and for small producers to really benefit from their labours, international trade rules which ensure fair returns are critical. Even though food prices are rising, are the small producers reaping the returns? Too often trade rules benefit large multinational companies at the expense of local producers.

Just as Irish farmers are concerned about the outcome of the current World Trade Organisation talks, the decisions made in these negotiations are critical to the small producers in the developing world.

It is self-evident that our current model of distributing and trading in food is unjust. In a liberal market system where food is purchased only by those who can afford it, we deny many a basic human right. For this reason, the food crisis is not just an issue of trade, agriculture or markets: but an issue of justice.

Why not discuss the following questions in class or try and answer them yourself!

1. In the first paragraph, the author gives two examples of advertising by food retailers. Can you think of two other examples of this style of advertising?

- (a) _____
- (b) _____

2. (a) In paragraph three, the author uses the term 'developing nations'. What countries do you think he's referring to?

(b) Can you give three examples of 'developing nations'?



3. (a) The author mentions many causes for the World Food Crisis. Can you list four of these causes.



(b) Now try to think hard about one of these causes. How do you think this cause could affect global food levels?

4. In paragraph four the author states, “and, as income grows, tastes change”. Do you think that Irish people’s tastes have changed in the last few years since we have become richer? If so, how?

5. What so you think was the importance of the summit in Rome?

6. The author mentions that higher food prices can assist poor people in the long term. Explain what the author might mean by this statement.



7. Biofuels have been cited as a cause of the World Fuel Crisis. What are biofuels and how, do you think, would they affect world food prices?

8. Why, do you think, fairer trade rules are essential to poor farmers?



9. In the last line the author says it’s, ‘an issue of justice’. Why, do you think, does he say this?

10. Now, imagine that you are a government minister in Ireland. Can you make one suggestion of what the Irish people could do to tackle global hunger?
