Jean Ziegler
*Destruction Massive: Géopolitique de la faim*  
Translated into English and published as  
Jean Ziegler  
*Betting on Famine: Why the World Still Goes Hungary*  

The First Millennium Goals set in 2000 were to half poverty and hunger by 2015. Hunger and malnutrition are major causes of deprivation and suffering. As there has been no rapid progress in reducing hunger, other goals such as reduced child mortality and improved maternal health have not been met either. Many years of empirical evidence points to the negative impact of hunger and malnutrition on health, education, and labor productivity.

The impact of hunger has been known or some time. Jean Ziegler pays tribute to the research and action of a mutual friend, Josue de Castro, Brazilian nutritionist and world citizen. Castro had pointed out in the late 1930s that hunger in Brazil was not a fatality of nature but the result of unjust human structures. Thus things could change with enlightened action by farmers with the help of enlightened governments. He helped to organize peasant leagues and was elected to the parliament of Brazil. He undertook visits and studies in other Latin American countries. These studies convinced him of the socio-economic causes of hunger and of their wide geopolitical impact. *The Geopolitics of Hunger* is Castro's most widely-read book and serves as the subtitle of Jean Ziegler's book as hunger remains a geopolitical issue, not simply a question of locally-improved agricultural techniques.

Castro had been the independent president of the FAO Executive Council from 1952 to 1955, at which time the governments decided to abolish the post of independent president. The Executive Council has been chaired by national diplomats since. While at FAO, Castro was invited to look at agriculture in a good number of countries. He had created in 1957 an NGO − World Campaign against Hunger − ASCOFAM from its title in French. He drew on persons active in the world citizen movement such as l'Abbé Pierre, René Dumont and Max Habitch.

When I arrived in Geneva in September 1963, Castro was the Ambassador of Brazil to the United Nations in Geneva, and I went to see him shortly afterwards to discuss development issues. Then in April 1964, the military led by General Caste lo Bianco took power in Brazil. Their Right Wing and brutal dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1985. Castro was quickly replaced as Ambassador and moved to Paris to teach and work with NGOs on hunger and agricultural issues. I saw him a number of times in Paris. He died in Paris in September 1973, aged only 65, but he left a heritage of study and action on the power dynamics of hunger and agricultural policies. Jean Ziegler, a sociologist of African societies and for a good number of years a Socialist member of the Swiss parliament, was from 2000 to 2008 the UN Commission on Human Rights Special Rappoteur on the Right to Food. Much of the research for the book was carried out with his UN team but is presented in a fiery style not found in UN reports.

Increased action to improve rural life needs to be taken quickly. As the recent UN-
sponsored Millennium Ecosystem Assessment states “Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystem to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted. It is becoming ever more apparent that human society has a rapidly shrinking window of opportunity to alter its path.”

However, as Ziegler points out, it is not general 'human activity' that is causing a strain, but the human activities of the powerful, the predatory sharks and financial speculators. He stresses the dangers of the increasing use of ethanol and other biofuels, often without consideration of the impact of the production of biofuels on land use and food production. Their use should be limited at present so that the consequences of their use can be studied and biofuels developed from non-food sources. Ziegler also stresses that there needs to be a detailed analysis and then action on the role of speculation in the rise of commodity prices. Banks and hedge funds, having lost money in the real estate mortgage packages, are now investing massively in commodities. For the moment, there is little governmental regulation of this speculation. There needs to be an analysis of these financial flows and their techniques of operation – the wide use of 'offshore banks and holdings' – and their impact on the price of grains and other foods.

Ziegler also stresses relatively new dangers to a just world food system. In many developing countries, the urban elite have been buying farm land as an investment, not necessarily to increase agricultural production with improved techniques, but to resell later when prices go up. Ziegler also stresses the sale or long-term rent of agricultural lands, especially in Africa, to governments or State-related companies of the Arab Gulf States and China. Again, the land is often not used for current agricultural improvement but is held for future use or sale. Thus rather than seeing land reform, we are seeing dangerous trends of an increasing number of landless agricultural workers.

Jean Ziegler highlights the need for cooperation among the UN system of agencies, national governments, non-governmental organizations, and the millions of food producers. There is a need for swift, short-term measures to help people now suffering from lack of food and malnutrition due to high food prices, the systems of food distribution, and situations of violence. However, it is the longer-range and structural issues on which we must focus our attention. The world requires a holistic World Food Policy and a clear Plan of Action. A knowledge of the geopolitics of hunger is a necessary first step.

Rene Wadlow