

# **The Work of Hunger: Security, Development, and Food-for-Work in Post-crisis Jakarta<sup>1</sup>**

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*ABSTRACT* Food-for-work programs distribute food aid to recipients in exchange for labour, and are an important mode of aid delivery for both public and private aid providers. While debate continues as to whether food-for-work programs are socially just and economically sensible, governments, international institutions, and NGOs continue to tout them as a flexible and cost-effective way to deliver targeted aid and promote community development. This paper critiques the underlying logic of food-for-work, focusing on how this approach to food aid and food security promotes labour force participation by leveraging hunger against poverty, and how the ideological and practical assumptions of food-for-work become enmeshed within discourses of geopolitical security. I rely on a case study examination of a US-funded food-for-work program in Jakarta, Indonesia following the 1997 financial crisis. The crisis produced acute food insecurity and poverty in Indonesia, provoking fears of mob violence by the hungry poor and the spread of radical Islamism in the post-crisis political vacuum. Food-for-work programs were, in this context, meant to resolve the problems of both food insecurity and geopolitical insecurity by providing food to targeted populations, employment to those otherwise thrown out of work, and resituating the hungry poor in relation to broader scales of local, national, and global power.

## **Introduction**

With one billion people suffering from chronic hunger globally, food aid programs remain crucial for addressing short-term insecurity and long-term development needs. Multiple forms of food aid exist, however, and their strategic deployment needs investigation in the context of global economic and security considerations. Food-for-work (FFW) programs distribute food aid to recipients in exchange for labour, and have long been used by aid agencies to plan and deliver food aid. Governments, international institutions such as the World Food Programme (WFP), and NGOs tout them as a flexible and cost-effective way to deliver targeted aid, promote community development, and improve long-term prospects for development and food security. In the post-9/11 period, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has cited FFW programs as potentially effective deterrents to

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terrorist recruitment strategies, while development and food security more broadly have been incorporated into national security and geopolitical strategies and discourses, especially but not only in the US. Despite the ostensible advantages of exchanging food aid for labour, however, debate continues as to whether and under what conditions food-for-work programs are socially just and economically sensible. Common criticisms include the inherently exclusive character of self-targeting mechanisms that underlie FFW, the potential violations of labour rights in paying individuals in food rather than fair cash wages, and the long-term viability of nutritional and infrastructural improvements made through short-term FFW programs. In their comprehensive review of global food aid, Barrett and Maxwell (2005) conclude that because of its numerous socioeconomic drawbacks and uneven developmental and nutritional record, the food-for-work approach “is nowhere near the magic bullet suggested by some of its proponents” (p. 131).

What then accounts for food-for-work’s persistence as a model of aid delivery? I explore this question by examining the disciplinary mechanism operating within the FFW paradigm, focusing on how this approach to food security and development leverages hunger against poverty to promote participation, and how the ideological and practical assumptions of food-for-work become enmeshed within discourses and strategies of geopolitical security. Using the case study of a FFW program implemented in Jakarta, Indonesia, following the 1997 financial crisis, I argue that food-for-work’s labour requirement is meant to resolve the problems of both food insecurity and geopolitical insecurity, by providing food to targeted populations, employment to those otherwise thrown out of work, and re-situating the hungry poor in relation to broader scales of national, regional, and global power. The next section examines the rationale for and criticisms of FFW as a mode of food aid delivery. I then examine the Jakarta case study and how the disciplinary aspects of FFW mesh with neoliberal geopolitics, focusing on three themes: the geopolitical and geoeconomic context as shaped by US power in, and relations with, Indonesia, food-for-work’s self-targeting mechanism, and the influence of pre-existing networks of local power and governance.

### **Combating Hunger, Disciplining the Hungry**

Food-for-work as a mode of food aid delivery has a long history, and its labour requirement has often made it a punitive measure, with the British workhouse system established under the 1834 Poor Law among the most commonly cited (and one of the most extreme) institutionalized examples (Vernon, 2007). Davis (2001) also recounts the horrific labour requirements placed on impoverished and hungry populations in colonial India during the prolonged droughts and famines of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, forcing the hungry to work in exchange for food aid was an accepted practice of both imperial control and labour discipline, rooted in the combination of two *laissez-faire* ideologies, one liberal that brooked no intrusion on free markets, and one Malthusian that understood famine and hunger as natural punishment for the supposed moral defects of the poor. As Vernon (2007) demonstrates, the brutality of these paired ideologies, along with new scientific and technical forms of calculating individual nutritional requirements and

standardizing measurements of hunger and relative caloric need, and the politicization of hunger by revolutionary nationalists in colonial Ireland and India, allowed for the “discovery” of humanitarian intervention by the late nineteenth century, and the development of a moral politics of food aid and security. This led to new understandings of the hungry as in need of assistance, with a claim to dignity and rights to subsistence, and formed the basis for the US-dominated global food aid system following World War II. This system made food aid and the eradication of hunger a major part of Cold War developmentalism, with problems such as food shortages, low agricultural productivity, and political, economic, and social instability understood as the result of pre-modern food and agricultural systems requiring Western expertise and material inputs for their resolution.

In this system, the hungry were potential threats, in that their hunger could drive them toward political claims and ideologies opposed to market capitalism and liberal democracy. The history of US food aid, which has long constituted the largest portion of global food aid, is ably summarized elsewhere by Murphy and McAfee (2005) and Barrett and Maxwell (2005), but it is important to emphasize here the threatening character of hunger and the hungry within the geographic imagination of both Cold War geopolitics and contemporary neoliberal and neoconservative worldviews (Glassman, 2005a). During the Cold War, food assistance was a means to protect and extend the ideological foundations of American hegemony and the market reach of American food producers, so much so that US Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz bluntly stated in the early 1970s that “[f]ood is a tool. It is a weapon in the US negotiating kit” (quoted in Patel, 2007, p. 91). With the Cold War’s end, the context and rationale for food aid and development assistance changed. Emergency assistance and geoeconomic positioning associated with trade liberalization became crucial considerations in directing global flows of food and development aid, while food security was re-imagined as a social good to be achieved through markets (McMichael, 2003). The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent global war on terror have reasserted the geopolitical alongside the geoeconomic, and sharpened the fear of hunger as a causal condition within the complex matrix of underdevelopment, state failure, and terrorism.

Given that hunger is viewed as both a humanitarian problem and a political and economic threat, food-for-work presents a useful entry point for examining how such threats, because of their combined moral and political claims and potentially oppositional nature, are understood and managed. The FFW approach subverts, subdues, and dismantles these threats through the imposition of a labour requirement in exchange for food. This has both material and representational aspects, both of which act as disciplinary measures, a point made well by Edkins (2000) in her study of FFW programs in Eritrea during the 1990s. As Edkins (2000) argues, the labour requirement underpinning FFW disciplines participants and directs their work toward infrastructural and environmental improvement projects as designated by program managers, so that “[f]ood for work programs are the site at which the linking of Malthusian and entitlement discourses takes place” (p. 72). Food scarcity and emergency are thus corrected by the proper management and improvement of entitlement bundles, including environmental sustainability and labour market access (Sen, 1983, 1999; Watts, 2000). Within FFW, the complex relations between social, economic, and political rights (e.g., to food, land, markets) that make up entitlements, which have become central to mainstream conceptualizations and

practices of food security and aid, rest on the labour requirement imposed on the hungry poor.

Food aid programs follow a number of modalities, each reflecting a different organizing principle of humanitarian action or developmental assistance. Food aid distributed directly to those in need, as in many acute food shortages or in the wake of natural disasters, operates from the assumption that there exists a moral obligation to help those in extreme need, even those we might consider strangers and outsiders (Chatterjee, 2004). While this basic assumption is quite idealized and ignores the political character of humanitarian relief selectivity and delivery (Kleinfeld, 2007), it is nonetheless conceptually distinct from the developmental goals and assumptions that drive other food aid programs, especially those managed by the US. In practice, these often overlap, and the political economy of food aid rests on a tangled matrix of interest groups, legislation, and foreign policy considerations in donor countries, as well as a complex of non-governmental organizations that work across scales and increasingly handle the bulk of food aid delivery. Because of the multiple, sometimes competing, goals and objectives that food aid is meant to fulfill, it often works quite inefficiently, and can even exacerbate existing emergencies and structural problems in agricultural and consumer markets. Barrett and Maxwell (2005) argue that the only useful justifications for food aid today are to provide short-term humanitarian assistance in the face of market failures that undermine food security and basic human rights, to provide a long-term safety net for vulnerable populations with limited productive assets, and to build assets among such populations when other forms of aid are unavailable and food aid can do only good with no harm (p. 2).

Many food aid programs stray from such principles in actual operation, however, largely because they are designed principally to meet donors' needs rather than recipients'. US food aid programs, for example, were established following World War II to pull newly independent former colonies into the American geopolitical orbit, while also giving US agricultural producers a safety valve for surplus goods and building future export markets (Murphy & McAfee, 2005). While these objectives have changed in line with the neoliberal shift toward emphasizing trade openness and enforced connection with the flows and networks of neoliberal capitalism (Essex, 2008b; Roberts, Secor, & Sparke, 2003), food aid remains an entrenched part of the global humanitarian infrastructure, and a key tool donors use to both placate domestic interest groups and provide an entry point for advancing other geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives in recipient countries. This can be understood as a constitutive element of an emergent "disaster capitalism," which uses crisis moments to advance radical new forms of neoliberal governance and securitization (Klein, 2007). Civil society organizations, especially those with international reach and extensive aid programming and delivery experience, are enrolled both directly and indirectly in meeting these objectives, even if they run counter to stated aims of humanitarian relief and durable socially just development progress. This is an important point given the increasing reliance on non-governmental entities to program and distribute food aid. In 2000, direct bilateral government-to-government aid accounted for only 34% of global food aid flows, with the remaining 66% distributed through NGOs and multilateral channels, especially the WFP (Barrett & Maxwell, 2005, p. 14). This complicated funding and

distribution system is made more so by the US policy of food aid monetization, “the sale of food aid on local markets in developing countries to generate funds for development projects” (Murphy & McAfee, 2005, p. 29). This practice provides a major revenue stream for many NGOs and other private organizations, but is problematic because it displaces local producers from markets in recipient areas and disrupts local market pricing mechanisms, exacerbating food insecurity and undermining agricultural investment and productivity. Many NGOs are aware of the problems surrounding monetization, and have advocated local purchase of food aid and cash-based assistance, discussed in more detail below.

Within this US-dominated system of global food aid, food-for-work programs are categorized as a form of project aid, in which food aid is given to NGOs or governments and then sold on local markets to pay for other specific development projects. FFW stands out within this categorization, however, because it often operates in the form of stand-alone programs designed to meet the short-term food security and long-term infrastructural needs of a given area or population through *direct* distribution of food aid to participants. Barrett and Maxwell (2005) argue that a major danger with FFW is that such programs will “crowd out or distort private investment, thereby generating little, or even negative, net change in future productivity,” while also failing to meet the immediate needs of food insecure and vulnerable populations (p. 131). Yet because of its decentralized character and heavy reliance on NGOs for implementation, not to mention the promise of public works and food security improvements achieved by tapping into (or even creating) and putting to work contingent and often unruly labour markets, the food-for-work model appears perfectly suited as an aid delivery paradigm within a neoliberal policy environment. This is particularly so given the complications presented by geopolitical fears of networked, hard-to-predict, and difficult-to-control risks associated with terrorism, criminality, and socioeconomic demands which markets alone cannot meet.

Official and mainstream approaches treat food insecurity as both a measure of poor governance and a contributor to political instability and persistent underdevelopment (Brown, 2009; Sheeran, 2008). These are in turn addressed through food aid and development programs and national security strategies, which frame food insecurity and the vulnerability it creates as fertile ground for terrorist and criminal networks. Again, FFW’s disciplinary aspect comprises a significant element of the logic behind such programs, and the discursive treatment of hunger and the hungry as both humanitarian emergencies and geopolitical and geoeconomic threats. Selecting target populations and individuals in this context becomes a key part of the aid process, and FFW ostensibly offers a solution to the difficulties of aid selectivity and distribution. Barrett and Maxwell explain that the immediate assumed benefit of FFW is its strong “self-targeting” mechanism, which implies that participants select themselves for participation in FFW projects because of their inability to obtain adequate food or employment elsewhere, and positions the individual, as aid recipient, program participant, and labour input, as the primary object of program operation. This mechanism always operates imperfectly because of the challenge of setting appropriate wage rates. The desire to reduce administrative costs and overhead by setting wage rates that attract “only the truly poor or acutely food-insecure people” runs into problems when wage rates are either too high or too low (Barrett & Maxwell, 2005, p. 144). Wage rates that are too high

will attract those who may not need food aid, disrupting local labour markets, while those set too low to “enable the truly food-insecure to meet their food requirements” undermine the quality of work and nutritional impact of FFW, especially when entire households must depend on single individuals, usually women, to attain such employment and meet all members’ caloric needs (p. 145). Such logic recalls the infamous “Temple wage” in late nineteenth-century India, in which wage rates for famine victims set to hard labour were so low as to provide nutritional and caloric intake insufficient to sustain already weakened individuals (Davis, 2001). While modern FFW programs do not replicate this scenario, they nonetheless remain unable to solve the mystery of wage rates linked to the material experience of hunger, while self-targeting more generally is problematic because it “is predicated on the presumption of surplus labour, which the most vulnerable often do not have” (Maxwell, 2007, p. S36).

This points to a basic assumption underlying the entire FFW approach, namely that the demands of the hungry are best addressed by putting them to work, and further, that only labour on public works can resolve the conditions of underdevelopment and poverty producing hunger and vulnerability. This solves what are considered two separate but linked problems—first, that impoverished and food insecure communities are lacking in public infrastructure, which worsens poverty by compounding disconnectedness, and second, that governments and local communities are unable to provide functioning markets or investment opportunities for food, labour, infrastructure or aid on their own (Gebremedhin & Swinton, 2001; Papanek, 2004). It also makes participant individuals and communities assist in their own exclusion from the aid process, with self-targeting achieved through supposedly impartial market forces rather than the dictates of the state, donors, or implementing agencies. Following a Foucauldian critique, Edkins (2000, p. 85) identifies these aspects of FFW programs and argues that they constitute a form of disciplinary control, in which discipline is exercised through the supervised expenditure of participants’ labour, focusing not only on the selection of participants through self-targeting mechanisms, but also “the public nature of the works carried out and how this is involved with what is seen as a process of reform.” The idea that the hungry are in need of reform is central, as “[s]ome of the enthusiasm for food for work programs on the part of donors arises from the assumption that otherwise people would sit around doing nothing” (Edkins, 2000, p. 92). While FFW programs are not supposed to interfere with existing local labour markets, in order to maintain self-targeting by the very poor, they nevertheless constitute participants as unemployed, or even unemployable, in formal labour market terms, and devalue the labour of social reproduction or within the informal economy in which participants may already be engaged. The administration of FFW programs thereby creates its subjects as the marginally employed or unemployed, creating work for them as part of a reform process that ostensibly addresses both their vulnerability to hunger *and* their status as potential threats emerging from the moral or material deficiencies their vulnerability embodies.

Edkins (2000) notes that this approach also produces the need for administrative and supervisory structures and institutions, which can add up to 40% to the non-wage costs of FFW projects, and makes FFW projects “conflicting sites of power” between and within different levels of government, different systems of economic

valuation, and civil society (p. 97). They can also exacerbate previously existing systems and practices of domination and exclusion, particularly with respect to local class, ethnic, and gender differences, and can tie such local systems to broader networks and practices of geopolitical and geoeconomic power (Quisumbing & Yohannes, 2007; Rankin, 2004). The reliance on participation by local-level and community leaders, especially in an administrative and oversight capacity, presents a major challenge to the effectiveness and justness of FFW, especially when it reproduces existing social and economic divisions or fails to adequately address or overturn corruption and uneven networks of local patronage and access. Lappé et al. (1998) note this in the case of a rural Haitian village, where a US-funded FFW program chose a leading local family to help implement and administer the program, resulting in disproportionate benefits to this family with little or no alleviation of underlying conditions of vulnerability and poverty for the majority of village residents. As Lappé et al. (1998) state, FFW reproduced and strengthened local patronage networks and improved the lead family's lands and transport options, while taking poorer program participants "away from their lands five days a week" and cutting into their ability to improve their own plots in exchange for short-term work and food benefits (p. 136). The Jakarta case discussed below echoes this, though its situation in an urban rather than rural setting made for different development and security concerns. The threat of political mobilization and violence are heightened by the concentrated setting of urban centres, while the differential availability of cash work in urban settings alters the opportunity costs presented by labour opportunities and food resources available though FFW programs in urban areas. The point regarding the important role local networks of social leadership and patronage play stands, however, as discussed below.

In her analysis of FFW programs in Eritrea and Ethiopia, Edkins (2000, p. 101) concludes that food-for-work, and food aid more generally, "*maintains* the relations of power that exist in international politics between first and third worlds but depoliticizes them" in order to suppress political claims by the hungry that might otherwise disrupt established systems of power and control. Despite the strength of this critique, however, Edkins fails to directly address the multiscalar political economy of food-for-work, or to identify the specific ends to which the selection and control of FFW participants are directed. These issues are left to a generalized explanation of disciplinary power that lacks political economic context or sufficient engagement with the relationship between program selection, implementation, administration, and measurement at differing scales. Barrett and Maxwell's (2005) argument is instructive for highlighting these issues, as they suggest that the finite character of resource transfers involved in FFW programs "limit[s] the geographic reach of the program to a few administratively selected locations," with specific programs "often placed where the expected return on investment is great rather than where need for assistance is greatest, trading off targeting errors for investment efficacy" (p. 145).

In this sense, the idea that food aid is distributed as an investment that must produce an economic or political return for donors becomes a crucial component of FFW program design and implementation. Edkins' conclusion is therefore correct, but incomplete. Understanding and examining the political economy of FFW, and how specific programs, participants, and places are constituted by their disciplinary purpose presents a useful way forward, but must be tempered by the points about

scale, power, and the specificity of distinct political economic projects discussed above. As Larner (2000) emphasizes, the broad political and economic program of neoliberalism, while neither as complete nor all-encompassing as described in many critical treatments, hinges on “the invocation of individual choice” and the development of “forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market” (p. 12). The practical objective and effect of this shift, which is both discursive and material, is the redefinition of political subjectivity, resulting in “the citizen . . . re-specified as an active agent both able and obliged to exercise autonomous choices” (Larner, 2000, p. 13). This opens the subject to a multiplicity of choices that incorporate, produce, and reproduce new technologies of governance, institutional arrangements, and political economic projects. Larner (2000) argues as well, however, that analyses of neoliberal governmentality “[have] not paid a great deal of attention to the politics surrounding specific programmes and policies,” concentrating instead on “broad governmental themes rather than specific neo-liberal projects” (p. 14).

Focusing on how specific technologies of governance, such as those emphasizing the disciplining of the hungry poor through food-for-work programs, are articulated with wider projects associated with a US-dominated neoliberal geopolitics, usefully bridges the divide not only between the geographic scales at which such articulation occurs, but also overcomes the conceptual and empirical gap Larner identifies. Hart (2004) and Sparke (2004, 2007) highlight the complex articulation of social categories, and the forms and exercise of power that build from these, as crucial for grasping the shifting, unstable character of domination under neoliberal forms of governance. Sparke’s (2004) treatment of domination within neoliberal globalization, for example, accentuates the fact that “dominance that is sometimes coercive with consent in a particular personal sphere of social reproduction is interarticulated with dominance at other scales” (p. 780). Thus, in the context of a neoliberal geopolitics emphasizing forced connections between recalcitrant or unruly places and the continued internationalization of capital achieved through the violence of markets and military force (Roberts et al., 2003), the continued prevalence and specific operation of FFW in food aid distribution must be addressed not simply as the maintenance of unequal power relations between states, or as the imposition of localized discipline on disconnected populations. Rather, we must interrogate FFW as one means by which the scalar contradictions of neoliberal geopolitics are placed on the hungry and the forms of social reproduction available to them. The Jakarta program examined below demonstrates this in one specific but instructive case.

### **Case study: FFW in Post-crisis Jakarta**

In this section, I examine the operation of a multi-year FFW program in Jakarta, funded by US food aid and development accounts (first via Public Law 480 Title II Emergency Program funding, and then through the special Transitional Activities Program) and implemented by the US-based international NGO Mercy Corps. I rely on documents published by Mercy Corps and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as an interview with a Mercy Corps official familiar with the program. More systematic interviews with NGO staff proved difficult to

obtain, especially considering the emergency and transitional aspects of the FFW program concluded in September 2004, and the diffuse nature of the NGO's operations, with staff often on the move and located at many points around the world. Gaining access to relevant staff members at Mercy Corps was difficult in this respect. Nevertheless, access to Mercy Corps was easy compared to access granted to USAID interviewees, as approximately a dozen USAID staff members failed to respond to three separate email requests for interviews for this project. I was finally able to obtain one interview with a USAID Food for Peace official, arranged and attended by a USAID media relations officer; unfortunately, this official was unable to provide any information of relevance for discussion of the Jakarta FFW Program. Direct use of interview material is therefore used sparingly here, to fill gaps and to highlight operating conditions and programming considerations not covered in Mercy Corps' report on the FFW program. The interview material also, however, pointed to the ambivalence many NGOs have about both the FFW approach and their relationship with official funders in government.

The Mercy Corps-managed FFW program examined here operated from 1999 to 2004, and distributed food aid in return for labour on a number of public works projects related to basic infrastructural needs, community development, and health services in poor and slum neighbourhoods in Jakarta. Because infrastructure and service needs in these communities are so great, Mercy Corps' (2005) FFW program worked on a wide variety of specific projects:

road and gutter rehabilitation and improvement; rehabilitation or construction of public bathing, washing and toilet facilities or mandi, cuci and kakus (MCKs), community centers for health posts and other activities, schools, bridges, garbage collection sites, sports courts and water towers; environmental clean up; brick making for construction and road paving projects; skill-building activities for women; and small-scale urban gardening. (p. 7)

The emergency and transitional FFW program helped plan and complete a total of 87 infrastructure projects in Jakarta, employing and distributing food to over 25,000 people (Mercy Corps, 2005, p. 8). As noted, the first five years of program funding came from USAID money dedicated to both emergency food aid funding and transitional activities to help Indonesia recover from the economic crisis. Continued USAID funding has allowed Mercy Corps' work in Jakarta and elsewhere in Indonesia to continue through 2009, and has shifted to funds provided through the Development Assistance Program (DAP), with the aim of consolidating previous development and food security gains and focusing programs on groups that remain vulnerable, especially mothers and children (TANGO International, 2004; USAID, 2004). These activities have centred on food-for-training and other uses of food aid rather than the FFW projects of the first five years, and are designed specifically to improve child and mother nutrition.

As these programs remain in operation or have only recently concluded, Mercy Corps, USAID, and other NGOs have not yet reported on their successes or failures, and so are not included in this discussion. This case study therefore remains somewhat speculative as to the impacts and future directions of FFW's deployment, though Mercy Corps' 2005 report on its Jakarta program is highly self-reflexive, and USAID has referenced it explicitly in further examination of various food aid

distribution models (FANTA-2, 2008; Lai, 2008). The observed and perceived advantages and disadvantages of different food aid modalities, including FFW, are well documented in these recent technical reports. USAID notes, for example, that FFW “tends to exclude the food insecure who are labour poor,” a category that often includes women, children, the ill, and the elderly (FANTA-2, 2008, p. 12). In addition, USAID argues that “[p]opulation density in urban areas heightens the need for security and crowd management” at aid distribution sites, and that “as in rural settings, urban food distribution programs pose the risk of sexual exploitation of beneficiaries” by others in recipient communities who command and influence access to aid programs (FANTA-2, 2008, p. 8). This highlights the security concerns surrounding urban FFW programs and the differential impact of recipients’ gender on access to such aid, as well as the increased attention by donors and implementing agencies to the difference an urban setting makes.

In analyzing the Jakarta FFW program and Mercy Corps’ role in undertaking this model of food aid and development assistance, I emphasize three themes that demonstrate the problematic nature of food-for-work for both recipients and implementing agencies: the geopolitical and geoeconomic context, the self-targeting mechanism, and pre-existing networks of local power and governance. Each highlights the central disciplinary element of FFW programs discussed above, while also underscoring concerns with scale and the relative positions of the hungry, international civil society, and official development and national security institutions in programming, delivering, and monitoring food aid. Again, this is not to argue that an NGO such as Mercy Corps is engaged in a conscious and purposeful attempt to enact a crude form of discipline on an impoverished and vulnerable population. Indeed, the FFW program examined here helped alleviate acute food insecurity in severely disadvantaged communities and set a foundation for possible long-term improvements in food security and material living conditions for these communities. Yet even an extensive and well-respected international NGO such as Mercy Corps must work with funding agencies, such as USAID, that may have different or competing objectives, and must confront a range of potential problems and injustices in the actual implementation of any program. Likewise, the material benefits of a given program must be considered against the means by which these are achieved, and the long-term consolidation of broader political and economic projects with which they may be associated.

### *Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Context*

There is a direct connection between USAID’s selection of Jakarta (and Indonesia more generally) for aid, the choice of a food-for-work model to deliver this aid, and ongoing support for engagement with the hungry poor in urban areas of the developing world. The financial crisis that buffeted Indonesia and Southeast Asia more widely in 1997-98 produced acute food insecurity and poverty, provoking fears of mob violence by the hungry and poor, and the spread of radical Islamism in the post-crisis political and economic upheaval. Jakarta was pinpointed as a flashpoint, with local and national elites and observers in official Western geopolitical circles concerned that the city could erupt in “large scale conflict” due to political

manipulation of its impoverished residents by competing political factions, especially those led by ethnic and religious extremists (Kelly, 2003). Food aid was seen as critical in dousing the threat of radicalization and avoiding further political and economic collapse, and FFW programs like those implemented by Mercy Corps were meant to resolve the double problem of food insecurity and geopolitical insecurity. By providing food and employment to vulnerable populations and re-situating the hungry in relation to broader scales and institutions of local, national, and global power, the Jakarta FFW program was touted as a successful short-term defence against humanitarian disaster, economic collapse, and political radicalism, as well as the first step on a long-term path to development and security (USAID, 2005).

On one hand this reasoning seems quite justifiable, and even necessary, as marginal and vulnerable people within Jakarta were in dire need of food resources, and the spread of violent forms of Islamism poses a tangible security threat within Indonesia. However, considered in light of the Indonesian state's maintenance of national order by violently crushing ethnic and religious separatist movements across the archipelago, the consequent militarization of aid in post-tsunami Aceh (Essex, 2008a), and the reinforcement of sub-imperial relations that foster both neoliberalization and connections to US-dominated security discourses and strategies (Glassman, 2005b), the FFW program appears in a different light. Indeed, it can be seen as a paradigmatic example of neoliberal geopolitics in practice, in which "a new global vision of almost infinite openness and interdependency" is set against a conceptualization of danger and risk "defined as disconnection from the global system"; in this understanding, the appropriate response becomes "to insist on *enforcing* connection" (Roberts et al., 2003, p. 888). The uniqueness of contemporary forms of such connection hinges on their mediation "through a whole repertoire of neoliberal ideas and practices," including a reliance on international civil society to manage and implement connections that serve state and private interests, in both Washington and Jakarta, focused on global economic position and securitization (Roberts et al., 2003, p. 889).

In the case of the post-crisis Jakarta FFW program, the danger posed by the hungry in Jakarta's slums was attributed paradoxically to both their vulnerability to volatile global economic forces and their disconnection from a supposedly properly functioning system of international neoliberalism. This in turn led many urban poor to an alternative form of connection, namely via the circuits of fundamentalist Islamism, wherein militant organizations handed out cash payments to the poor in return for their support (USAID, 2005, p. 14). The response was to provide both relief and development through resource transfers and community engagement, but always within the parameters of security concerns tied to anti-terror strategies outlined by the US and anti-separatist strategies undertaken by the Indonesian state. While there is no evidence of top-down micromanagement of aid programs or implementing NGOs, USAID's portrayal of the Jakarta FFW program as a fundamental component in combating terrorism, extremism, and disorder in Indonesia is a vital consideration. For USAID, the program was a successful anti-terror initiative in a vulnerable but geopolitically vital state, and addressing the underlying concern with the threat posed by hunger through the rubric of anti-terrorism stands as a major donor priority in advocating and funding such programs. As USAID (2004, p. 365) argued in its 2005 budget justification to Congress,

“Indonesia is too important to fail.” In such a context, hunger becomes a perverse asset for the hungry, bestowing them with moral and material claims to international flows of aid, while also comprising a liability, embodying weakness and vulnerability in a dangerously interdependent world. The potentially radical political threat this poses to neoliberalization more broadly arises precisely because it demonstrates the failure of neoliberal connection to provide just and sustainable human security not beholden to volatile global markets dominated by speculative finance capital.

This is not to argue that neoliberal geopolitics, neoliberalization, or securitization are complete, cohesive, or finished projects. There exists a good deal of experimentation, trial and error, and muddling through in the ongoing development of these processes in place and across scales. The reliance on civil society to implement broad strategies devised and funded from thousands of miles away is typical of the diverse, often contradictory alignment of, and articulation between, neoliberalization and other processes (Hart, 2004). The second, transitional phase of the program discussed here, including non-FFW elements implemented by other NGOs, actively encouraged “experimentation,” as “NGOs developed, adapted and piloted creative approaches and tools such as community-based disaster management and the linking of relief and development in community-based nutrition programming” (TANGO International, 2004, p. 5). As discussed, the “community-based” character of this process has definite, if shifting limits, set by networks of power and strategic decision-making stretching across multiple scales, and with differing capacity to articulate claims to entitlements, justice, and rights that may oppose the dominant market- and security-oriented foci of neoliberal governance. While I would not want to overstate the argument based on the single case study presented here, it nevertheless stands to reason that the enhanced food security, infrastructural development, and community mobilization produced by Mercy Corps’ work in Jakarta could not lead to more radically oppositional or democratic demands without upsetting the balance of geopolitical and geoeconomic forces that gave impetus to it in the first place. In this context, the responsabilization of the poor, exacted through the FFW model’s self-targeting mechanism, and the enrolment of local communities, international civil society, and existing networks of governance and power appear to resolve the scalar and political economic contradictions of neoliberal geopolitics precisely because they enforce global connection without upsetting the balance of forces identified here.

### *Self-targeting*

As noted, one of the primary benefits of food-for-work is its self-targeting mechanism, attracting only the poor and hungry and excluding those who do not need food aid or who can find other work. In post-crisis Jakarta, the choice of a FFW program to deliver food aid was tied to security concerns arising from the potential threat the urban hungry posed in the wake of political upheaval and economic collapse. FFW was understood as an effective way to provide needed food and developmental assets in the immediate post-crisis setting, and dissuade the urban poor from turning to radical or terrorist organizations for political and economic

opportunities. In addition, and echoing Edkins' (2000) argument that project visibility is central to donors' and aid workers' conceptualization of program effectiveness, the Mercy Corps official with whom I spoke noted that FFW projects in Jakarta were easy to see, and therefore provided a strong demonstration of overall aid effectiveness. While FFW remains just one among many modes of food aid delivery, and one that my interviewee indicated Mercy Corps only uses when it is neutral (i.e., food is needed, but equally good results can be achieved with other forms of aid, such as cash) or beneficial, the food-for-work model nevertheless offered a way for donors to see direct, tangible results of aid.

For Mercy Corps, this was a relatively new foray into FFW programming, as the organization has typically dealt with emergency relief distribution and civil society capacity building in the past. It is also not usual for FFW to be implemented in a distinctly urban setting, as it is more often deployed in rural areas where seasonal employment fluctuates and remoteness requires special provisions for infrastructural improvement. So why did Mercy Corps adopt a FFW approach in the Jakarta post-crisis environment? For one, this approach gave Mercy Corps the chance to quickly expand operations and inject badly needed food resources in a difficult context. FFW allows for a relatively direct and rapid means of providing food to recipients, though the planning process can be slow. The extreme nature of the post-crisis food and poverty emergency in Jakarta was a deciding factor in Mercy Corps' approach, rather than the political context, which was more important for USAID in approving the program and providing funds. The Mercy Corps official I interviewed noted that the self-targeting function of FFW was a plus in the Jakarta setting, especially as a secondary aspect of this is participants' self-valuation of their own labour. This ostensibly allows the priorities and existing resources of vulnerable communities to be set by community members themselves, and Mercy Corps (2005, 2007) concentrates on community-level planning and input in its approach, emphasizing these as key elements in long-term infrastructural and developmental sustainability.

Even with community input to help identify social and infrastructural needs and plan and implement aid projects, the self-targeting function of FFW remained the centre of Mercy Corps' rationale, as it was tied to fostering community involvement and encouraging participation by those often excluded from decision making. The Jakarta projects were understood as neutral, as similar results could likely have been achieved with cash aid rather than food aid, but food assets were deemed more badly needed in the context of post-crisis currency problems and the options offered by USAID funding structures. In Jakarta, the self-targeting mechanism transferred food resources directly to vulnerable and marginal urban populations, and had "significant impact on household debt levels and spending capacity among FFW beneficiaries," as well as positive impacts on community health through the expansion of public sanitation facilities (Mercy Corps, 2005, p. 8). This also prevented Mercy Corps or USAID from having to make difficult choices on program participation in a highly fluid economic situation, as the FFW wage rates were meant to make this choice through their market operation.

The shortened planning horizon, necessitated by the urgency of the post-crisis food insecurity and poverty situation, led to less emphasis on long-term project maintenance and more on immediate resource transfer, leading staff and participants to view the projects as distinct and discrete food-for-work activities rather than as "community mobilization" to achieve greater food security and development

progress (Mercy Corps, 2005, p. 14). This was exacerbated by the fact that “minimal resources were available for the purchase of materials in support of FFW structures,” and so many projects focused on using materials at hand and basic maintenance of existing infrastructure (Mercy Corps, 2005, p. 8). In such a context, community cohesion and vulnerable members’ full incorporation into development planning and decision-making, achieved in the short run, would likely not be sustainable in the longer term, especially if the larger community’s marginal status in the formal economy and political environment were not resolved. To reiterate Barrett and Maxwell (2005), surplus labour produced or tapped by FFW, and the ability to expend it for more than payments in staple foods, are not guaranteed. The fact that the Jakarta projects exhibit high rates of completion, community use, and sustainability is due more to Mercy Corps’ administrative approach of widespread inclusion of community members in planning and design, including household members not working directly on projects, than to the operation of FFW as a self-targeting mode of delivery dependent on participants’ rational decision-making regarding expenditure of labour time.

#### *Local Networks of Power and Governance*

Likewise, community involvement alone does not guarantee project success or sustainability, and the incorporation of the broader recipient community into programming and planning specific FFW projects can present numerous problems not easily resolved by NGOs and other non-local institutional actors involved in relief and development work. Complex local and regional networks of power and inequality must be navigated and, indeed, mitigated or overturned, if FFW is to have a lasting beneficial impact for governance and not simply reproduce or deepen vulnerability. This was especially difficult for Mercy Corps’ Jakarta program. A political culture dominated by corruption, sharply uneven access to food resources and employment opportunities, urban development pressures, and the formalization of urban planning without resident input were all factors Mercy Corps had to address.<sup>2</sup> In addition, and following standard FFW program design, Mercy Corps sought explicitly to enrol local elites (as opposed to government officials and elected leaders) within the urban communities where projects were undertaken to press the case for involvement and encourage greater rates of participation and project success. This meant potentially trading off some control over aid recipient selection within project communities in return for infrastructure needs as defined by local elites. As Mercy Corps’ (2007) guide to cash-based aid delivery suggests:

In larger communities or urban settings, it may not be appropriate or possible to hold community meetings. Instead, local leaders or elected committees may be responsible for selecting beneficiaries based on the goals of the project and any other jointly decided criteria. In this instance, the process of beneficiary selection needs to be as transparent as possible so that the entire community knows not only who was selected but how the decision was made. (p. 18)

This was the approach adopted in Jakarta, and it demonstrates a long-running difficulty in making FFW a participatory model for food and development aid delivery, namely, how to make projects meet recipient rather than donor needs without reproducing already existing social inequities and systems of control. In the Jakarta program, the power of leading local families was a potentially useful but problematic factor in assessing project success and sustainability.

Mercy Corps' (2005) own assessment noted an example of this difficulty in dealing with additional contributions to FFW project resources by local elites:

One health post received significant material and labor contributions from the local leader and the family of a local health volunteer during construction. However, the structure was later co-opted by the local leader for his office whenever the once-per-month health services were not being provided. (p. 17)

Another example stemmed from participant and resident perception of ownership of completed projects, and local elites' role in planning and managing project infrastructure, as well as the influence of geographic proximity in infrastructure construction and use:

The local neighborhood leader initiated the rehabilitation of the first *MCK* [public toilet] that was very close to one family's home. The [assessment team] observed very little use and ownership by the wider community who perceived the *MCK* as belonging to the family nearby. (Mercy Corps, 2005, p. 16)

The Mercy Corps official with whom I spoke added that the urban setting in which the FFW program was carried out presented numerous challenges to community members' input. Many residents in recipient neighbourhoods were young migrants who had recently moved to Jakarta, and so community cohesion was quite weak, lacking the extended family structure and institutional knowledge that might otherwise contribute to household and community food security. The cramped, unsanitary, and unplanned character of the recipient communities also meant that land tenure was tenuous at best, shaped by corruption, the influence of local and municipal officials, and the demands of an urban land market seeking to expand formal development (FANTA-2, 2008; Lai, 2008). Residents' ability to deal with these pressures, let alone those of an NGO with relatively little experience in managing urban food aid programs, made the pre-existing local networks of power a formidable obstacle to useful community input in project planning, implementation, and assessment.

This made reliance on, or at least incorporation of, local elites with knowledge and influence a necessity for program success, insofar as community mobilization was a project objective and a baseline for long-term sustainability and progress. To avoid local elites' co-option of process and infrastructure, however, Mercy Corps (2005) argues it is also necessary "that various levels of government are consulted and feel ownership of the project," as efforts "to build linkages between community and government can help to deter government leaders from dominating control of communal facilities or instigating policy that may lead to its destruction" (p. 18). In learning from its FFW projects to develop cash-for-work programs, Mercy Corps

(2007) suggests that in the absence of local non-governmental leadership structures or committees, “it may be necessary to establish one for the purposes of the program, with the vision that this group could continue into recovery and development programming” (p. 15). In this sense, the FFW program becomes a coordinating effort, an intervention in local networks of power and governance designed to facilitate the formalization of community mobilization and incorporate participants into existing structures of decision-making. Of course, any single relief or development program can achieve only incremental change in the face of broader entrenched systems of exclusion and power, such as those tied to larger projects of securitization and neoliberalization. Mercy Corps’ (2005) major success on this front was in “engaging a once reluctant and even prohibitive national level Ministry of Health in the nutrition component of the program”; the ministry “is now seeking training in the approach for their own replication” (p. 18), even as Mercy Corps moves away from FFW in project communities. Whether national institutions will engage FFW programs in a way that enhances and emphasizes the mobilization and political voice of the urban poor and food insecure, rather than using FFW as a disciplinary measure or a means of co-opting local elites, remains to be seen.

## **Conclusion**

There is ample evidence that in the right context and with appropriate context-specific planning and implementation, food-for-work can be an effective means for ameliorating short-term food insecurity crises and building capacity for long-term development. It can also be a means for expanding and adapting neoliberal governance and geopolitics, disciplining the hungry and enforcing their connection to broader networks of capital, security, and knowledge. In this web of interdependency, the hungry, especially in urban areas, pose a threat, embodying the failures of both liberalized markets and coercive force to promote development and human security. The disciplinary logic and decentred administrative structure underpinning the food-for-work model fits well within this formulation, providing a double answer to the threat of the hungry—it provides food resources by putting the ostensibly unemployed to work, while engaging local communities, or at least local elites, in the development process. This appears to answer recipient needs while remaining within the parameters set by donors, and allows implementing agencies to handle on-the-ground challenges without donor micromanagement. FFW programs like the one Mercy Corps implemented in Jakarta can provide much needed food resources and a footing for further material improvement in the lives of impoverished, marginal, and vulnerable populations. Such programs, or any other form of aid, can never, however, fully escape the logic and demands of the broader systems of power, knowledge, and funding that set them in motion, and they are always in the end caught between the competing and contradictory demands of recipients and donors.

It is partly for this reason that the NGO community has become divided over the future of food aid, with CARE and, to a lesser extent, Mercy Corps working increasingly in cash rather than food commodities and strongly critiquing the food aid industry, particularly the policy of monetization. CARE has been most vocal on

this front and will phase out its use of monetized food aid by September 2009 (CARE, 2006), while other NGOs, such as World Vision, and major international organizations like the WFP continue to use monetized and other forms of tied food aid. This signifies a deep ambivalence about the global food aid system within the institutional networks charged with programming and delivering aid, and bodes an uncertain future for such aid amid deepening economic crisis and persistent security concerns. The fit food-for-work demonstrates with neoliberal geopolitics, however, indicates that it may remain an important mode of aid delivery for the foreseeable future, in no small part because it represents a less extreme version of what Sparke (2007) identifies as “a form of highly coercive and forced imposition of neoliberal idealism, an imposition of geoeconomic hopes . . . underpinned by geopolitical fears” (p. 346). Even as food-for-work programs offer some measure of success in combating hunger, then, NGOs and recipient communities continue to struggle with the challenges they pose for social justice, food security, and development progress.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the organizers and attendees of the Security and Exclusion Workshop, held in October 2008 in Windsor, Ontario, as well as two anonymous reviewers for commenting on previous drafts of this paper. This research was supported by a University of Windsor SSHRC 4A Grant. All mistakes and oversights remain those of the author.
- <sup>2</sup> Mercy Corps (2005, p. 14) notes that “Indonesia is currently ranked among the ten most corrupt countries in the world,” and that corruption within political systems was often accepted as the norm by community members surveyed in FFW project locations. Vickers (2005) provides a comprehensive history of recent Indonesian politics, and highlights the extensive presence of corruption under Suharto and his successors.

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