Imperialism and Africa:
Local resistance in Malawi

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"It is yet another Civilized Power, with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot-basket and its butcher-knife in the other."

Mark Twain[1]

I would like to thank the Ireland Institute for inviting me here this evening. I must admit that when Finbar first contacted me and asked me to present something on Africa my first thought was 'imperialism and Africa' – no problem; 'resistance in Africa' – beyond the armed resistance that we hear so much about in the media – not so sure… The fact that Bernie (Dwyer) was going to be speaking about resistance and alternatives in both Cuba and Latin America more broadly in the form of ALBA in the same session led me to thinking about the vast differences in our perceptions of these two parts of the world, most especially in our awareness and understanding of levels of political activism and resistance in both.

Specifically, I found myself wondering why there appears to be no resistance to imperialism across the African continent on the scale of that encountered in different forms in Latin America. Why (with the exceptions of the independence movements in the 1950s and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa from the 1950s to the late 1980s) do we rarely talk of resistance in Africa? Why is it all but invisible? Why is it that, when thinking about Latin America, images of a political vibrancy, a dynamism, and, above all, a resistance to oppression, discrimination and marginalisation in their many forms come to mind yet, when our thoughts turn to Africa, this dynamism and energy is replaced by images of hunger, disease, poverty, civil strife, hopelessness and despair?

Pondering these questions led me on to thinking about the nature, or natures, of imperialism itself. There has been some discussion here this evening on this topic. As it is most commonly understood, imperialism refers to the creation and maintenance of unequal relationships between states wherein one state or people is subordinated to another. While often associated with the global expansion of capitalism, as Edward Said in particular has taught us[2], imperialism operates on

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[1] Mark Twain (1901) "To the Person Sitting in Darkness", *North American Review,* February 1901.
[2] Edward Said (1979) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin).

ideological and cultural levels as well as economic / financial ones. I want to talk a little this evening about this ideological / cultural level and its potency and effects across the African continent as well as closer to home as it is this dimension which I feel is critical in understanding misrepresentations and/or silencing of resistance and dissent across the continent.

What, following Said, we might call cultural imperialism involves the imposition of a particular set of beliefs, values, knowledge on diverse people and cultures. In the case of Africa, such imperialist projects have alternated at different times and in different places between those aimed at 'civilising', 'modernising' and 'saving' African states and peoples. The overall mission or justification notwithstanding, as in all imperialist projects, the African 'other' was (and continues to be) constructed by and in relation to the West. As with Said's *Orient*[3], Africa has long been represented by a set of images, narratives and characteristics that serve to demonstrate how it is both alien and inferior to the West. What we are talking about are not just differences in perceptions, values and knowledge. What we are talking about here is the superimposition of one set of values and knowledge over many other sets, rendering invisible and void the values and knowledge systems of these many 'others'.

Two specific points in the case of Africa are worth noting in this regard. First, this is not merely a historical phenomenon associated with the 'great age of imperialism' of the 1880s. It is both historic and contemporary, and the continuities with the past are very clear. Second, the hegemonic strategies employed in consolidating the imperialist project in different African states has resulted in a far more complex geo-political division between imperialists and imperialised than the West versus 'Other' models suggest. With the active support of an African elite, the imperialist discourse has become deeply embedded within African societies, imbuing social institutions, discourses and practices to the point where, in many countries and among many peoples, a sense of inferiority to and dependence on the West prevails. Moreover, the same imperialist discourse also remains deeply embedded in society here. With 'black baby' images alternating with scenes of civic violence and devastation, it is little wonder that the Irish public feels a duty to 'save' 'the less fortunate' and 'the needy' of Africa. Lacking any context to these bulletins and images, in a world of soundbytes where the contexts of 'others' are simply too complex and alien to communicate, the purposeful march of imperialism escapes under the public radar, and the resistance of those marginalised and dispossessed is either misinterpreted under the guise of 'yet another ethnic conflict' or rendered invisible altogether.

Yet wherever there is oppression, there will be resistance. The challenge is to uncover, explore and attempt to understand this resistance from the perspective of those resisting. I would like to talk this evening about one such example of resistance in Malawi. Before turning to the specific case of Malawi however, I would like to firstly talk about imperialism in Africa in the twenty first century more broadly as, while largely contiguous with the period before, it has recently gained considerable momentum with a second 'Scramble for Africa' now underway. This new 'Scramble' has been consolidated and securitised through the new 'failed state' discourse post 9/11 and represents a worrying new departure in the evolution of naked economic imperialism, a departure all the more alarming in that it is masked by the more benign,

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[3] idem.

indeed benevolent trappings of cultural imperialism, once again purporting to 'save Africa'.

Hearts and minds: Imperialism over the centuries

A story explaining how the Europeans conquered Africa during the first 'Scramble for Africa' tells of how, when the Europeans first arrived, they had the bible and the Africans had the land. The Africans closed their eyes to pray, and when they opened their eyes, the Europeans had the land and the Africans had the bible. The story is instructive as it illustrates not only the naked economic imperialism of the era, but also the more insidious cultural dimensions of this conquest. Colonial powers captured not just land and associated resources, but through the values and ideologies of the bible (literally and symbolically), hearts and minds also.

Africa's subjection to imperialist projects and forces goes back a long way, with the 'Scramble for Africa' of the 1800s synonymous with the 'Great' Age of Imperialism. While the colonial era represents a relatively short time in the continent's long history, its legacies – from the carving up of the continent at the Berlin Conference of 1884, to the forms of direct and indirect rule imposed by European rulers – continue to mark social, economic and political life on the continent. Ethnic groups remain divided across state borders, natural resources are unequally distributed, many countries are landlocked and, following colonial rule, a legacy of unaccountability prevails in public life with politics seen as largely synonymous with personal wealth and power[4]. On an economic and cultural front, attempts to 'modernise' the continent and its so-called 'backward' societies through the importation of the Western capitalist development model following the 'discovery' of poverty on the continent by the US post World War II[5] resulted in a crippling indebtedness in the 1980s. Once again exploited, this time as a pawn in the Cold War between imperial powers West and East, wars were spawned, economies destroyed and despots supported as African elites colluded with imperial powers in pillaging their continent and their peoples of their wealth and resources. African peoples once again suffered the arrogance and superiority of Western imperialism as the IMF's structural programmes of the 1980s, aimed at 'restructuring' economies to repay debts to Western creditors through the imposition of stringent cutbacks in health, education, social services and the public sector wreaked social and political devastation across the continent. Following the fall of the Berlin wall, the 1990s witnessed the importation of more Western models – this time on a political front under the guise of Western 'democratisation' and 'good governance', both ironically relatively rare in any substantive form in the Western societies advocating them. In short, be it the naked imperialism of the colonial era, the geo-politically driven imperialism post World War II, or the seemingly more benevolent imperialism of recent decades, African societies and peoples have been systematically exploited, oppressed and marginalised as an elite hegemony from their own countries have colluded with global powers in marginalising the continent,

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[4] See Jean-François Bayart (1993) *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (Longman, London, 1993) and Mahmoud Mamdani (1996) *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London, James Currey) for detailed analyses of the impact of colonialism on social and political life on the continent today.
[5] See Arturo Escobar (1995) *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), pp.3-4.

leading to economic devastation, a widespread distrust of political leaders, a lack of confidence in local capacities, and an undermining of indigenous cultures and values.

Saving while plundering Africa: Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century

In 2001, Tony Blair famously described Africa as '*a scar on the conscience of the world*'. It is worth looking more closely at this speech as it is illustrative of both the depth and the scope of the contemporary imperialist project in the twenty-first century.

> *"The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could <u>heal</u> it. And if we don't, it will become <u>deeper and angrier</u>."[6]*

Two things jump out from these three simple sentences. First, the idea that we can 'heal' Africa. Over a century of imperialistically driven oppression, marginalisation and exploitation on, the arrogance continues apace, the past is neatly glossed over, the West is once again healer and saviour, bearing no apparent connection to the disease. Second, and this is an important recent development, the rationale, '*…if we don't, it will become deeper and angrier*'. The angry face of marginalised Africa is now revealed. It has become important to contain this. Enter the new 'failed state' discourse of the twenty-first century, a discourse redolent of the binary '*with us or against us*' imperialism of the post 9/11 era and one employed to justify the securitisation of the second scramble currently taking place across the African continent.

There are two faces to imperialism in Africa in the current century. One, the more visible, benevolent, redeeming even, once again depicting Africa as a basket case, helpless, needy and lacking capacity to address its own problems, is the 'Saving Africa' face. Cultural imperialism is alive and well, providing a convincing rationale for intervention in this form. This is the face of the aid industry, the Millennium Development Goals, the Make Poverty History campaign, the Live8 concerts, the 'Year for Africa'. And who can argue with goals which aim at halving world poverty, attaining universal primary education, ending the spread of HIV/AIDS, achieving gender equality, together with many other laudable, and necessary, goals by the year 2015? It is certainly a powerful face. Yet what does it deliver?

Just five years away from the MDG targets, it is now apparent that none will be met. Why? Because the 'Saving Africa' model highlights the symptoms yet fails to tackle the fundamental roots of Africa's poverty – continued exploitation made possible by continuing to deny African people power and a voice in their own futures. UK commentator George Monbiot articulates this well.

> *The G8 leaders and the business interests that their summit promoted can absorb the Make Poverty History demands for aid, debt, even slightly fairer terms of trade, and lose nothing. They can wear our colours, speak our language, claim to support our aims, and discover in our agitation not*

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[6] From speech delivered at the Labour Party Conference, October 2nd, 2001 (emphasis my own).

> *new constraints but new opportunities for manufacturing consent. Justice, this consensus says, can be achieved without confronting power[7].*

Thus, well publicised international commitments on debt relief and fairer trade policies have delivered little in the way of concrete policy or impact. From 1970 to 2002 the West provided $530 billion in aid and loans while African countries repaid $540 billion in debt service[8]. Meanwhile, trade policies heavily weighted in favour of Western nations renders meaningless the concept of free or indeed fair trade, with heavily subsided Western exports flooding African markets undercutting African producers. Oxfam International has estimated that a one per cent increase in Africa's share of world exports would be worth five times as much as the continent's share of aid and debt relief[9].

The real problem lies not in the levels of aid, debt and trade. Nor does it lie in the appalling levels of poverty, HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, migration, gender inequality, conflict. These are just symptoms. The real problem lies in the egregious power imbalances between African people and the hegemonic alliances of their elites and the West. Until this realisation dawns, until the imperialistic discourse of a needy, incapacitated continent permeating the West is dismantled, Africa will never be saved. For the project is not to save Africa from itself, it is to save Africa from ourselves.

While political leaders, the media and public alike invest heavily in the support and promotion of the 'Save Africa' face, a second face of contemporary imperialism is quietly gaining momentum. The 'Second Scramble for Africa' reveals a far less benevolent face, a face of naked greed and exploitation as, once more, the African continent and her peoples are stripped of their resources, wealth and opportunity. The great paradox of Africa is that, although home of the highest levels of poverty and inequality in the world, the continent is one of the richest with respect to natural resources in the form of oil, natural gas, uranium, coal, gold, diamonds, coltan, cobalt, copper, chrome, tin, iron, nickel, platinum, lead, zinc, timber… the list is endless. And it to this wealth of resources – in particular, in the context of instability in the Middle East, oil and natural gas – that global powers are now turning. Africa now provides 15 per cent of US oil requirements, with this estimated to increase to 25 per cent in the next 10 years[10]. Meanwhile China, seeking to fuel its own domestic highly resource dependent growth, has become a major competitor for these reserves with over 800 projects established in the last four-five years with large investments in oil, timber and minerals in Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe and elsewhere[11]. Billions of dollars have been invested in Africa and tens of thousand of US, European and Chinese workers (among others) are on the ground in many countries.

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[7] George Monbiot, 'Hello Friends', *The Guardian Weekly,* July 15th-21st, 2005.
[8] Pekka. Hirvonen (2005) 'Stingy Samaritans: Why Recent Increases in Development Aid Fail to Help the Poor', Global Policy Forum, available at http://www.globalpolicy.org/home/240/45056.html.
[9] Cited in *The Economist,* December 18th, 2004.
[10] Margaret C. Lee (2006) 'The 21st Century Scramble for Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies,* 24(3), pp. 303-330.
[11] Raphael Kaplinsky and Mike Morris (2009) 'Chinese FDI in Sub-Saharan Africa: Engaging with Large Dragons', *European Journal of Development Research*, 21(4), pp. 551–569.

A significant development in this second Scramble has been the securitisation of access to these natural resources following the events of 9/11. With US Foreign Secretary Condoleeza Rice announcing in October 2001 that 'Africa is critical to our war on terrorism', there has been a significant increase in US military presence in Africa. The links with oil and natural resources are clear, with many commentators noting that US strategy in Africa is now focused on military securing of transportation channels of raw materials to the US[12]. These actions are further justified by the new global 'failed state' discourse which, focusing exclusively on internal unrest while ignoring the role played by international powers in fostering this, is now put forward as justification for a new imperialism. Thus, according to the US National Security Strategy of 2002, '*America is now threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones*'. According to US *Foreign Policy* magazine's 'failed state index', in 2009, 11 out of the world's top 20 so-called 'failed states' were in Africa[13]. The UK too has adopted this discourse with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in 2002 devoting an entire speech to the topic of 'Failed and Failing States'[14]. In a discourse bearing more than a passing resemblance to Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', Straw ominously warned British citizens of the dangers of failed states to their own security… '*we need to remind ourselves that turning a blind eye to the breakdown of order in any part of the world, however distant, invites direct threats to our national security and well-being*'[15]. Nor is the Irish state immune to this discourse. As Irish Aid's White Paper illustrates, security issues also now represent a priority within our own aid programme.

> *Security, development and human rights are mutually reinforcing: advances in one area require and reinforce progress in the others. Threats to security and threats to development do not respect national borders. Supporting development, security and the realisation of rights for people in developing countries ultimately has global benefits, including in Ireland.*[16]

Two issues in relation to these developments in Western discourse on Africa need to be highlighted. First, swaying ambiguously between Rudyard's 'White Man's Burden' and Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' and once more conjuring images of a world where, in a neat censoring of history where the role of imperialist powers are effaced from the narrative, the efficient, developed, stable and well-governed export assistance, democracy, liberty and stability to the needy, unstable, poor and vulnerable, it is apparent that imperialism is alive and well in the Western world. But that's not all. Bolstered by images of war-ravaged 'failed states', where resistance is simplistically portrayed and grossly misinterpreted as being rooted in local barbarism, greed, and ethnic and religious intolerance, imperialism is now globally justified as the 'Securitising Africa' face of contemporary imperialism reveals itself. This has significant repercussions for a) how we interpret and react to the policy and actions of our own political leaders and their allies, and b) how we perceive and interact with

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[12] See, for example, Abramovic (2004) 'United States: The New Scramble for Africa', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 8-9, Paris; Barnes (2005) 'Global Flows: Terror, Oil and Strategic Philanthropy', *Review of African Political Economy,* 32(104/5), pp.235-252.

[13] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4350

[14] Cited in Rita Abrahamsen (2004) 'A Breeding Ground for Terrorists? Africa and Britain's "War on Terrorism"', *Review of African Political Economy,* 31(102), pp. 677-684.

[15] idem.

[16] Government of Ireland, (2006) *White Paper on Irish Aid* (Dublin: Government Publications), p. 22.

our African neighbours and friends in Ireland, together with how we analyse and interpret their actions at home.

Second, it is important to be aware that, given the interests and requirements of imperialist powers, development and security strategies are aimed at the containment of discontent and unrest rather than the transformation of the exploitative systems and structures that give rise to them. Thus, following the World Bank's 2006 *World Development Report* which advocates social safety nets as a parallel to mainstream policies marginalising the poor (trade in particular is cited), aid efforts largely constitute apolitical interventions aimed at assisting the poor survive the fallout of wider political interventions[17]. And, in relation to imperialism's new 'Securitising Africa' face, as Rita Abrahamsen notes '*It is important to recognise that securitisation is entirely compatible with the relatively feeble international response to the brutal and prolonged conflict in the DRC, or in Darfur. Rather than direct military action, the securitisation of Africa is more likely to give rise to policies of containment, or policing.*'[18]. Yet exploitation and oppression can never be contained. The marginalised will resist, and by paying attention to, rather than misinterpreting or ignoring this resistance, we learn a more of the nature of contemporary domination and imperialism.

The dominant images and narratives of African social and political life tend to leave us with a binary impression of a people either violent and brutal in their resistance or powerless and subdued in their oppression. However, life is never so simple, nor are people's actions as they weigh up their strategies in their bid to survive. Falling between these popular binaries, and less visible for that reason, lie a range of covert strategies of resistance of the marginalised which constitute expressions of ongoing and profound ideological challenge to the projects and plans of the powerful. I would now like to turn to an example of such peaceful, yet determined resistance in Malawi.

Resistance from below: Resisting the imperial capitalist project in Malawi[19]

Malawi is a small (twice the size of Ireland) landlocked country in Southern Africa and is home to approximately 14 million people. Although not endowed with many natural resources, Malawi has, through the 'Saving Africa' face of development, a long history of international intervention. This has supported the emergence of a national capitalist elite which has adopted and promoted the imperialist discourse of a poor, uneducated, illiterate population requiring 'saving', while benefiting greatly themselves in the process. Malawi is notable both for its levels of inequality – it was reported as the third most unequal country in the world in the mid-1990s[20] - and

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[17] *Equity and Development: World Development Report 2006* (Washington: World Bank), p.10. See also Ankie Hoogvelt (2001) *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

[18] Rita Abrahamsen (2004) 'A Breeding Ground for Terrorists? Africa and Britain's "War on Terrorism"', *Review of African Political Economy,* 31(102), pp. 677-684.

[19] For a fuller account of this story, see Niamh Gaynor (2010) 'The global development project contested: The local politics of the PRSP process in Malawi', *Globalizations,*

[20] Mkandawire, Thandika (2003) 'Freedom and Empowerment; in Bodo Immink, Samson Lembani, Martin Ott and Christian Peters-Berries (editors), *From Freedom to Empowerment: Ten Years of Democratisation in Malawi* (Lilongwe: Forum for Dialogue and Peace, Konrad Adenauer Foundation,

corruption. The result has been a widespread distrust of political leaders and other elites matched by a closed, non-transparent political system.

In common with the fate of many other African states which embraced the imperialist capitalist project of the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s Malawi was dealing with a crippling debt burden. A small group of activists came together to form a Jubilee campaign which, linking with similar campaigns globally, lobbied for debt relief. Global campaigns finally yielded some success and, in 1999, the World Bank and IMF agreed to a level of relief as well as announcing that their widely criticised structural adjustment programmes would hereafter take their lead from national development plans. These national development plans, called poverty reduction strategy programmes (PRSPs), were to be formulated in-country with the participation of a wide range of civic groups and actors. With a poverty reduction ethos at their core, in theory they offered the potential to substantially transform Western-dominated capitalist development models to those more suited to and addressing local needs and challenges. As we will see however, in practice, with Western donors dominating the processes, this unfortunately did not happen.

But back to events in Malawi. On hearing of these developments, in 2000, activists within the Jubilee campaign organised meetings with a range of other civic groups (NGOs, trade unions, religious groups, academics) and resolved to form an activist network, thereafter known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN) to lobby for inclusion in the PRSP process. Their aim was to bring the neglected voices of the poor to the policy table and push for a more equitable national development model. They were initially regarded as successful in this quest, securing places for their members in 17 of the 21 different working groups and extending the timeframe of the process to allow for consultation with their wider network. They also engaged in a high level of activism at a local level, translating the resultant strategy document into a simplified format in a number of local languages, as well as raising popular awareness of and pressure for the poverty focus of future policy. However, as time evolved, people became aware that the resultant strategy differed little from the structural adjustment programmes of the past that had brought little economic respite and widespread social damage to the populace at large[21]. Moreover, it soon became apparent that MEJN leaders had become effectively co-opted into the hegemonic elite that espoused little change from the past which had benefited them so well. In line with donor policy, MEJN's main input to the process had been to secure some funding for a range of social safety nets (prioritised poverty expenditures) as advocated by the World Bank as a containment measure.

Having thus been co-opted, MEJN leaders began to complain that network members lacked the necessary 'capacity' to input in any meaningful way to the process and the projects that emerged from it. Domestically, members resisted MEJN leaders' demands to alter their approaches from more radical campaigning to technocratic policy work in line with the demands of donors and the political elite. Conflicts developed and many members left the network. Internationally however, MEJN was attracting interest for an entirely different reason. International aid agencies, largely

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Malawi-German Programme for Democracy and Decentralisation, National Initiative for Civic Education, Malawi).

[21] This is due to a large amount of donor influence over the process. Studies on PRSPs in many other countries also found that they, by and large, merely represented 'old wine in new bottles'.

unconcerned with the fact that the new PRSP strategy looked much the same as previous failed strategies, and unaware of internal dynamics within the network, began lining up to contract MEJN to carry out budget monitoring projects on their behalf. Using donor funding, MEJN leaders employed 'professional' staff to carry out the work, leaving the original members behind. MEJN quickly grew from a grouping of voluntary activists employing one coordinator to a large organisation in its own right. Drawing down a budget of US$ 900,000 between the years 2002-04 and with funding from over 10 international donor agencies including Trócaire and Irish Aid, MEJN had clearly moved far beyond its activist roots.

However, the expectations that MEJN had raised through its extensive media work and more radical approaches at the outset had left their mark. Public debate, for MEJN had become extremely well-known as a catalyst for the resistance that was bubbling at the heart of Malawian society, centred on MEJN's legitimacy in 'representing the poor' as it claimed. With an office and growing staff in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital, MEJN seemed far removed from the concerns or exigencies of the poor. Criticisms of its legitimacy grew. In 2002, in an effort to stem this criticism, MEJN leaders began establishing a structure of local representation nationwide. MEJN Chapters were set up in all 28 of the 29 districts throughout the country during the years 2002-2004. These consisted of committees of locally elected community leaders who were willing to work in a voluntary capacity to ensure that the perspectives and needs of their local communities were addressed both at district level (through their own lobbying actions using the MEJN label as a way to gain access to local elites) and at national level (through MEJN leaders' ongoing policy and campaigning work).

However, a fundamental contradiction soon emerged between what local Chapter members (and their communities) expected from MEJN leaders and what MEJN leaders expected from local communities. While Chapter committee members saw themselves as a portal for the concerns and demands of their communities, feeding this up to MEJN at national level, MEJN leaders saw them as structures through which donor-funded projects could be carried out. Again, MEJN leaders were meeting with resistance on the ground, with growing demands for support and accountability coming from their district level members for concrete action on distinct issues such as healthcare, schooling, local infrastructure, and the critical area of fertiliser subsidies which the World Bank insists should be reduced or removed although they have proven key in averting food shortages and famine[22].

The specific case of MEJN provides a doorway into the multiple sites of political struggle and contestation in Malawi and elsewhere. It remains to be seen how MEJN leaders will negotiate the conflicting demands of the state and donors on the one hand, and Chapter members and their 'communities' on the other. One thing is clear however, bridging these relations and poised with one foot in, and one foot out of the hegemonic order, MEJN's journey has served to demonstrate that, contrary to both the 'Save Africa' and 'Securitise Africa' faces of contemporary imperialism, the

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[22] Successes in national food security have been widely attributed in part to government subsidies on fertiliser for maize (Malawi's staple crop) production. Severe drought combined with low subsidisation of fertiliser (in 2004, a 50kg bag cost Kw 4,000 (US$ 27)) left 5 million people in need of food aid in 2005. Subsidised prices of 950 Kw (US$ 6.50) per 50kg bag are cited as a key factor in the highly successful harvest of 2007.

Malawian poor are neither passive, nor are they violent. Rather, they are peacefully, yet determinately resistant. MEJN's experience serves to demonstrate that popular activism and resistance is alive and well in towns and villages throughout Malawi.

Conclusion: Some lessons and what of 'alternatives'?

So what does MEJN's journey teach us? There are two main lessons we can draw. First, MEJN's experience warns us to be wary of culturally imperialist discourses and attitudes towards Africa and her peoples that deny or misrepresent local agency and local activism and thus open the space to justify further exploitation under the guise of 'helping', 'assisting', 'securitising' or indeed 'saving'. Second, the case of MEJN highlights the need to interrogate more fully the nature and practices of local organisations funded by Irish Aid – are they actually supporting social change or are they merely reinforcing political inequalities by strengthening local elites[23]? And what is our (the public tax payer's) role in this?

I would like to finish, if I may, with a short word on the issue of 'alternatives', as these are mentioned in tonight's title. In the face of both material, but especially cultural imperialism, it is important to remember that there are always alternatives – many yet to be imagined. However, there are not always spaces in which, or opportunities through which these may be imagined. Nor are there always channels through which they can take shape.

In relation to Africa, it is not our place to imagine alternatives. It is however our place, and indeed our responsibility, to push for spaces in which these may be imagined, and equally, it is our responsibility to push for channels through which they might develop. We can do this by challenging attitudes, discourses and practices which, under the guise of 'saving' or 'securitising' Africa, simplify and misrepresent the complexities of political and social life played out in the shadow of imperialism, and which deny the right and the power of African peoples to be authors of their own destinies, both in their own countries and on the international stage.

Perhaps Africa is indeed a 'White Man's Burden', but not as Kipling meant. It is our Burden in revealing the extent to which we have, wittingly or not, participated in its continued marginalisation, exploitation and misrepresentation. In opening our eyes to the complexities and wrongs of both the past and the present, a new Africa will be revealed, one that will hopefully lift the Burden for all, Westerners and Africans alike.

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Niamh Gaynor
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