

What's it to do with the price of fish?

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“What's it to do with the price of fish?” is another way of saying “why is it relevant?”. Price – how much money something is sold for – in this saying is used as another word for important. This might seem strange; why would the price of fish be used in place (as a metaphor) for whether something matters? Especially given that prices vary so much over time, and between places. Prices vary because they are based on a combination of costs of making, growing or catching (production), availability, need, and how much people are willing to pay (demand). Each of these things varies.

Now consider the price of fish, or of food more generally. Food is a basic human need. However most of us in the Britain do not produce our own food. We live in a money-based economy where people are paid in tokens (coins and notes, or electronically into their bank account), which can then be exchanged for other goods or services of their choice. If the price of food increases then we can buy less of it. If the price increases too much it is possible that we could starve because we couldn't access enough food. This is happening now in some parts of the world. This is why the prices of fish, and other food stuffs, matter very much.

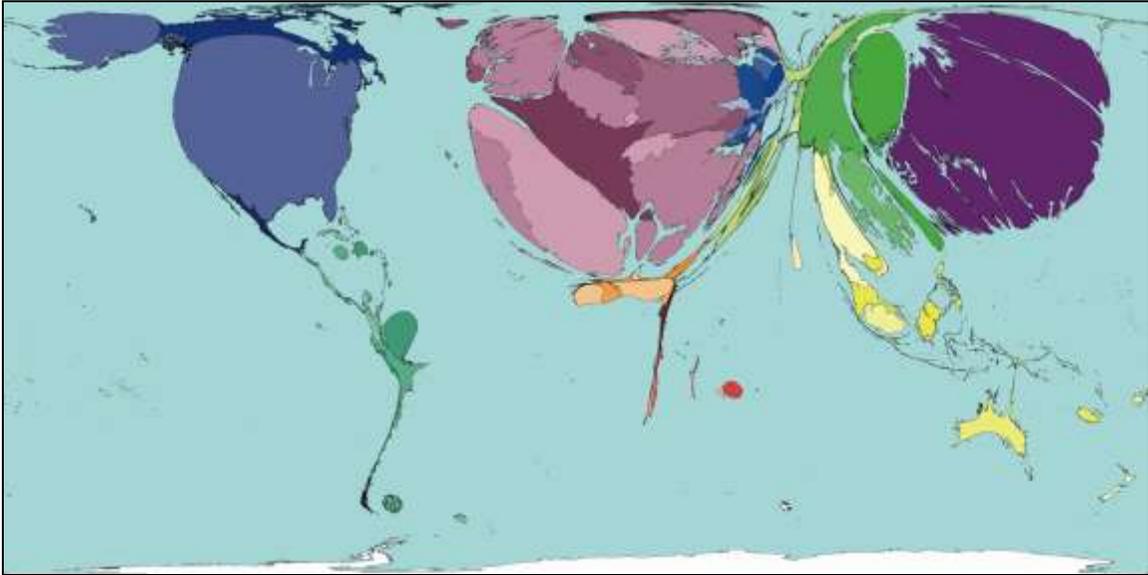
Prices are important parts of the trade relationships that exist around the world. Much of our food comes from thousands of kilometres away. Our daily intake can easily include apples from New Zealand, rice from the United States, chocolate from the Côte d'Ivoire and coffee from Ethiopia. Between producers and consumers there stand various people: traders who buy and sell goods, people processing and packing goods, people actually moving goods, advertisers marketing goods and shop owners selling goods. Also involved are governments and international bodies who usually try to protect the financial interests of one group at the expense of another. Thus one person's 'goods' can be another person's 'bads'. It need not be that way but it usually is.

It really is the case that that one person need not suffer because another gets what they want. There really is enough for everyone, and often too much for the rich which is one reason why we are getting fatter in Britain! The question of how to share out properly is one of distribution. As it can be hard to understand how things are shared out around the world, here are some maps that simplify our complex and dynamic world. Map 1 shows that the highest value of fish imports are to the richest parts of the world (particularly Japan, Western Europe, North America). Map 2 shows where most undernourished people lived in 2002; they lived in very different parts of the world from where major fish imports were received (many undernourished people live China, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa). Of course fish prices are not driving this, but ability to buy fish has the

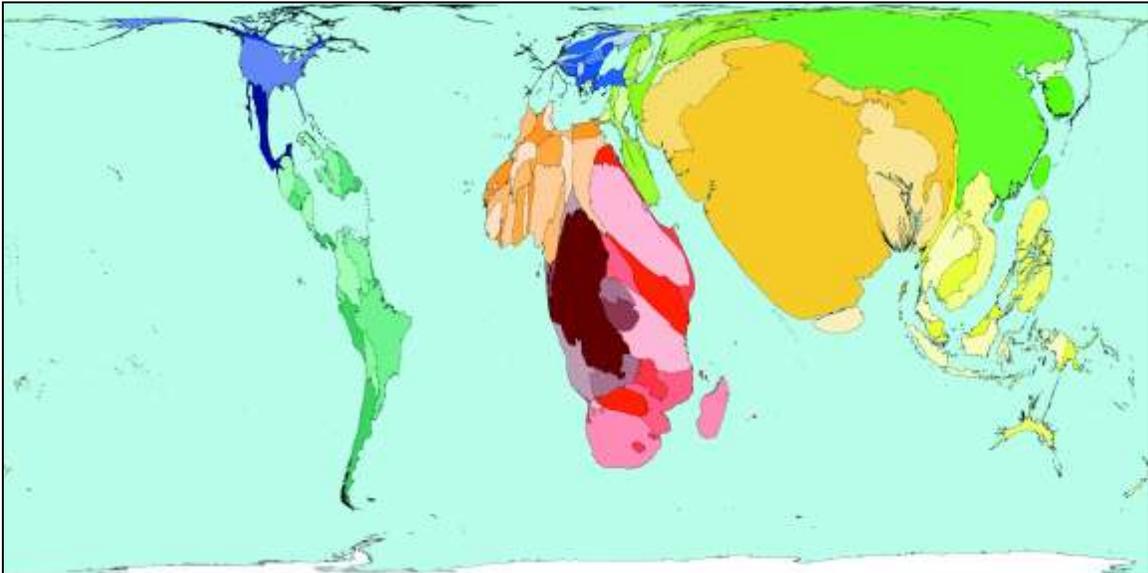
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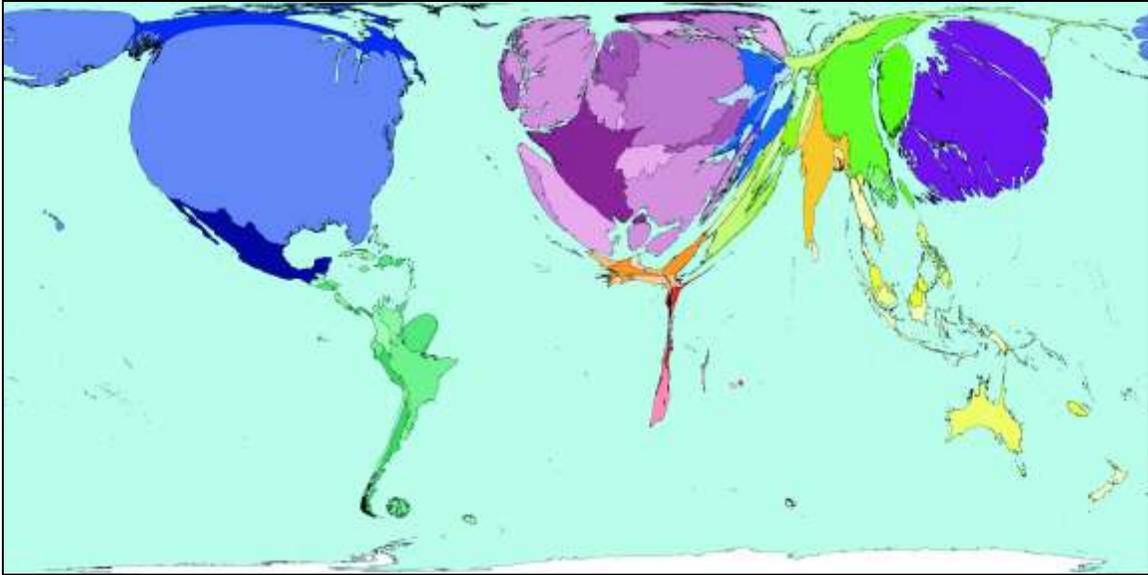
same pattern as where people with most money in the world live (see map 3).



Map 1. Fish imports. Territory size shows the proportion of worldwide imports of fish (in US\$) that are received there.

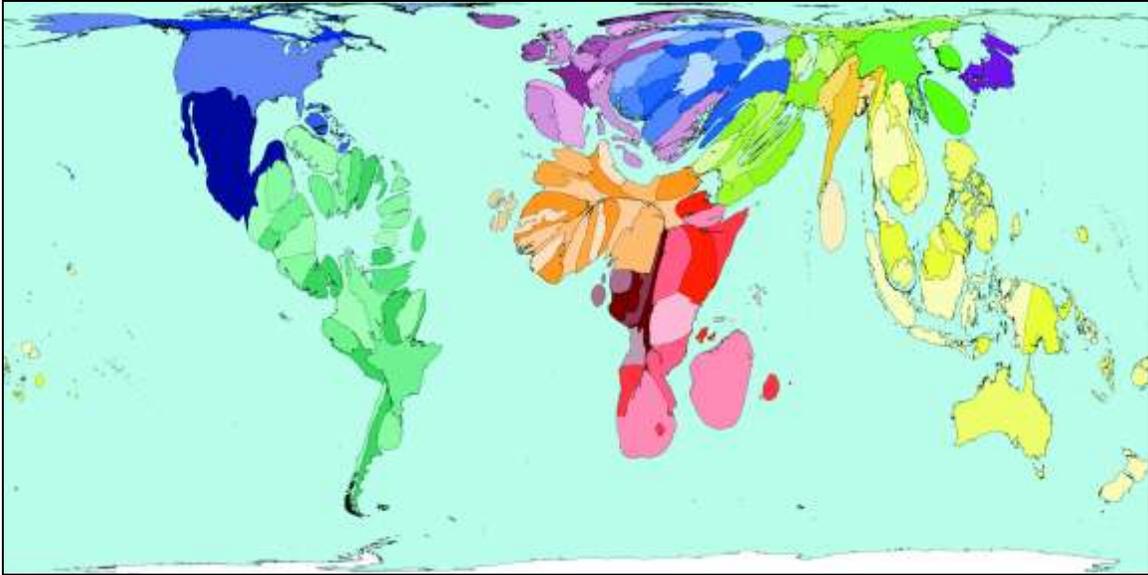


Map 2. Undernourishment in 2000. Territory size shows the proportion of all undernourished people worldwide, that live there.



Map 3. Gross Domestic Product in 2002. Territory size shows the proportion of worldwide wealth, that is Gross Domestic Product based on exchange rates with the US\$, that is found there.

The CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) website suggests that “just because we can’t change the world all in one go, we can still give a man a fishing net. Then he can earn a living, feed his family, and send his children to school.” From looking at the maps above, what do you think of this approach? We think it has the benefit of providing the tools to start a small business. However, if the prices that can be charged for fish are driven down it could be that the woman or man with the fishing net cannot earn enough to feed their family and send their children to school. The price of fish determines not just who can buy it, and how much money made from fish sales. The fisherman / woman could be caught in a position of selling their catch for less money than they need to feed themselves. And finally, what is the point of a net if there are almost no fish to be caught? The pollution and drying out of lakes on over fishing in the sea have dramatically reduced fish stocks world wide (see map 4). It is not fish that we get fat on in Britain. Although there is currently enough for everyone, if we carry on like this other things as well as fish will begin to run out. Shoals of fish, though, can grow in number again, but only if we learn how to share better.



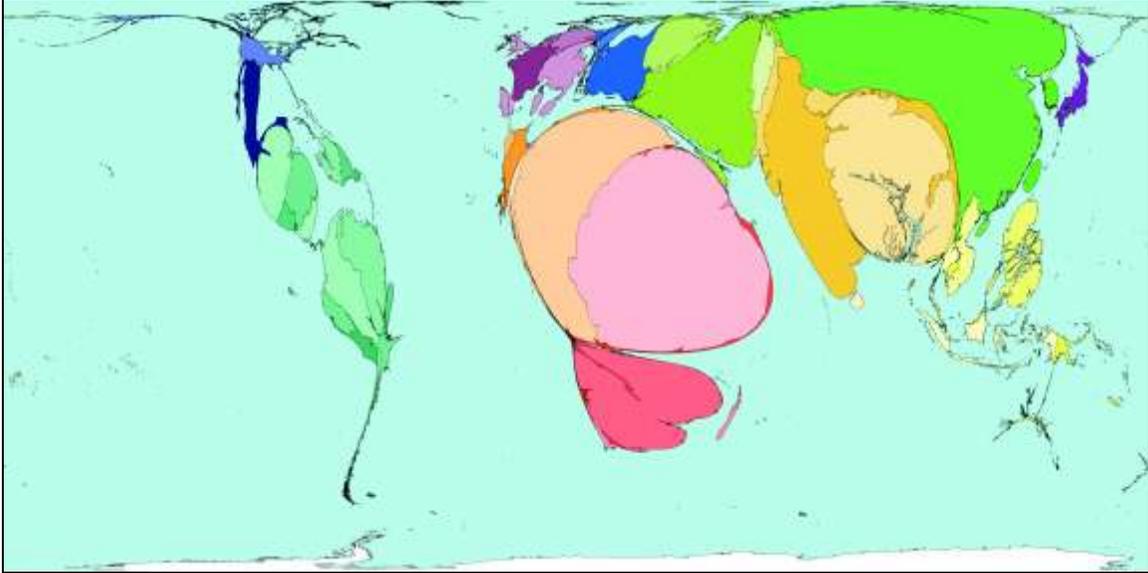
Map 4. Fish At Risk. Territory size shows the proportion of fish species assessed as locally at risk of extinction, found there.

Currently far more global efforts go into global aid than in trying to work out how better to share our finite resources. There is a clear role for foreign aid from both Non-Governmental Organisations and Governments, particularly when it is addressing a humanitarian crisis. The quick provision of food, shelter and medicines can save many lives. However, many aid projects do not address the underlying causes of such crises, that may make future crisis's even worse. Most people killed by disasters are in poorer parts of the world (map 5) partly because there are generally fewer hazard warning systems, communications systems, durable buildings, medical facilities, and other resources which would help deal with this.

The reason for this is partly poverty, which is linked to international trade relationships, including the price of fish. When my dad next asks me "*what's that got to do with the price of fish?*", I may well reply "*quite a lot, actually!*".

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Map 5. Killed by Disasters. Territory size shows the proportion of all deaths caused by disasters, which overwhelm local resources, that died there 1975-2004. It includes outbreaks of infectious diseases not normally found there.

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We have produced 366 world maps, that distort countries based on many topics, for example the proportion of children living there, fruit exports from there, or people with malaria living there.

Data is used to shrink and expand territories: *the more of something that is found there, the bigger the country.*

The data used are mainly from United Nations agencies, including the World Health Organisation, United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme. The maths behind these maps was developed by the physicist Mark Newman, following work by the geographer Waldo Tobler.

This is run by researchers at the Universities of Sheffield (U.K.) and Michigan (U.S.A.). The maps, posters, frequently asked questions, data, and other articles are all available at: www.worldmapper.org