

Interactive comment on “The Irish famine of 1740–1741: causes and effects” by S. Engler et al.

Anonymous Referee #2

Received and published: 8 March 2013

General Comments:

It is a huge strength of the paper that it combines social, economic, political as well as environmental factors in order to understand the Irish famine of 1740/41. For their analysis the authors draw on a wide range of empirical data (reaching from reconstructions of climatic conditions to archival material such as letters and newspapers) and apply interdisciplinary perspectives for analyzing this data. Furthermore, the authors reveal a comprehensive knowledge about current theories of famine and vulnerability concepts. By introducing the "Famine Vulnerability Analysis Model" (FVAM) the authors apply an innovative approach for the understanding of historical famines.

However, the discussion of the "interaction of demographic, political, economic and environmental aspects is characteristic in this famine" remains sometimes superficial. It remains unclear why certain characteristics of the Irish society qualify as "indicators of

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vulnerability" (see Table 2). For instance, why does a specific "urbanization ratio" in- or decreases famine vulnerability? The same holds true for indicators such as "social classes", "social inequality" (which is misleadingly lumped together with marginalization) or "legal structure". These relationships need to be explained. Additionally, the evaluation of most of the 34 indicators and the attribution of specific scores (Table 2) remains highly in-transparent.

The paper's ambitious aim to "lead to a rethinking of the role of climate/environmental aspects in current research" cannot be reached. Nevertheless, the paper represents a good contribution to the scientific understanding of historical famines and the role of climatic conditions for their causation.

Specific Comments:

Page 1014: "Taking all definitions of famine into account. . ." -> Which exactly?

Page 1014/15: The authors define famine "as an extreme scarcity of food or a drop in exchange entitlements in a certain region over a multi-year period that threatens the way of life of the already-vulnerable resident population and frequently leads to a higher mortality rate." According to their own definition the Irish event of 1740/41 hardly qualifies for a famine.

Page 1015: The Food Entitlement Decline (FED) theory by Amartya Sen is predominantly used for the explanation of contemporary famines (where local availability of food is of minor importance). Why is the FED from the 1980's used as a rivaling theory for the understanding of the Irish famine of 1740/41?

Page 1021-23: In political science, the term "Policy" does not refer to "political systems corresponding institutions and structures" which are in the center of the indicator group labeled "Policy". "Political System" or "Governance structure" would be more appropriate for this indicator group. However, these are two indicators of this group. What do the authors mean by "Political System" and "Governance Structure"? And what is the

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difference? In short, this section lacks conceptual clarity.

Page 1023: Concerning "education" and "literacy" the argumentation appears to be a-historical: For contemporary (knowledge) societies, the FAO considers education as a crucial factor to reach food security. However, it needs to be explained how high illiteracy rates increased famine vulnerability of the Irish population in 1740/41! Famine memory and knowledge cannot only be passed on by literary language (in fact, for most time of human history it was not).

Page 1024: The same (a-historical perspective) holds true for "labour market" as part of the vulnerability indicator set: Fully established labour markets are, again, a feature of modern societies and their development is closely connected to the rise of capitalism. According to Karl Polanyi (The Great Transformation, 1944), in Britain a working (competitive) labour market was not established before the 1830s.

Page 1027: While the paper aims at making a complicated argument for the Irish famine of 1740/41 (with multiple factors), the authors simply state concerning previous famines: "Ireland was often hit by famines, which were primarily caused by extreme climates." This evaluation needs to be supported by sources.

Page 1027: "socio-environmental system" -> The term needs to be explained.

Page 1031: "The prices for other agricultural products increased by similar percentages." -> Source!?

Technical corrections:

Though, the paper's level of English is very high, it requires corrections & editing.

Page 1034: For non-German readers of the paper it should be explained that the acronym BMBF stands for "Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung", the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research".

Interactive comment on Clim. Past Discuss., 9, 1013, 2013.

C106

CPD

9, C104–C106, 2013

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