
FRANCES MOORE LAPPÉ

BY CARLHA VICKERS

Frances Moore Lappé shot to fame in 1971 with her book *Diet for a Small Planet*. Her latest book is *Democracy's Edge*, which completes a trilogy begun in 2002 with *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet* (co-written with her daughter Anna Lappé). In 1975, with Joseph Collins, Lappé co-founded the California-based Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First). In 2001, Frances and Anna Lappé founded the Cambridge-based Small Planet Institute, a collaborative network for research and popular education to bring democracy to life. Frances is a resident of Belmont, MA.

CV: Does sustainable agriculture play a large part in your research on the economics of food, and, if so, how?

FML: Very much! 37 years ago, when I began, my wake-up call was the realization that human beings are actually creating scarcity out of plenty! Today's industrial, extractive food system generates both enormous waste and pollution. And it is heating the planet. Agriculture contributes over a fifth of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Livestock outstrip transport as a contributor to harm from greenhouse gas emissions. Starting with food we can see what is wrong with our world economic and political systems today.

I have just completed a chapter on world hunger for a sociology textbook to be published by Oxford University Press where I dispel the myth that sustainable production yields less food. In the research, I found new evidence for what I'd intuited and written about years ago: that working with nature we realize its abundance. In organic farming, carbon emissions per acre are from one-half to two-thirds less than industrial, chemical agriculture. And one recent interdisciplinary study from the University of Michigan concludes that, if we converted the entire world's agriculture to organic methods, output could increase by over 50 percent.

CV: Is it better to buy organic food that has come from long distances or should we buy conventional food grown by our local farmers?

FML: This is not an easy question at all. The problem of pesticides is not just for eaters and producers but is a broader ecological problem. I try to buy local organic food whenever I possibly can. From the point of view of fossil fuels heating

the planet, it's more important to buy local produce even if it's not organic. From the point of view of helping the lives of farm workers and saving the environment from pesticide pollution, then buying organic has an extremely high value. Overall, we need to create a demand in the market for organic produce and local availability.



CV: In New England, most farmers use the Integrated Pest Management system, and a lot of people reject IPM out of hand because it is not organic. What are your feelings on this?

FML: If I had to buy either organic from the West Coast or IPM local I would definitely buy IPM local. The goal is to put greater and greater demand on pesticide reduction.

CV: Food in America is the cheapest in the world; what are the issues and costs that you see inherent in consumers always buying the cheapest food that they can find?

FML: That American food is the cheapest in the world is a myth. The reason our food appears cheap is that it does not include the true health and environmental costs of its production. We are paying roughly

\$20 billion in tax subsidies to commodity producers who are heavy users of chemicals.

I think that people forget how expensive processed food is per pound. Certainly junk food; certainly processed. Organic oatmeal is about 1/3 the cost of boxed cereals. I try to counter the whole notion that eating well is more expensive. If you shift your diet from a meat-centered one to a plant-

centered one, you can use this saved money to buy local organic produce. While produce at a farmers' market may seem more expensive than produce bought at Costco, actual cost is not a simple calculation. Americans have always valued community and so when you shop at a farmers' market instead of an anonymous giant supermarket you are strengthening the community; you cannot put a price tag on that because it cannot be denominated in dollars.

CV: Under the current rules of the World Trade Organization, it would seem almost impossible to have food democracy. Can the general public through their purchasing power indeed influence a change?

FML: I agree with you on the obstacles. It will be very interesting to see what happens in Mali (West Africa), where they have just declared food sovereignty – a determination to be food self-sufficient and not dependent on the world market for basic foods. Let's see if the WTO is going to try and block them. Hopefully with the upsurge in understanding of the importance of healthy food, the costs of long distance travel, and the urgency of global heating, people will recognize that food is different from other trade goods. There is a new book called *Food is Different* where the author, Peter Rossett, points out that food is not like any other commodity. To emphasize local provisioning is the only realistic long-term strategy, whether you are concerned about terrorism or about food quality or global heating. My hope is that there will be an awakening globally to buy local food as it is the only sane future for our planet. Then the WTO will have to change its approach that says that you cannot favor one type of producer over another.

CV: What can the average Belmont citizen do to improve and sustain the world that we live in?

FML: It's in the choices that we make, whether it's eating low on the food chain or being more responsible in the way we live: reducing our own purchases, our own consumption, and our own carbon emissions. Those are all things that we as individuals can do. They are limited but they are extremely important.

The more we align our own life choices and values, the stronger and more effective we become as a people. We must change the logic of this one-rule economics — by that I mean the single driver of highest return to shareholders and executive - that's driving the concentration of power and destroying our planet; in order to do this, we have to join with others. This is why getting involved is very important. Everyone should look deeply inside themselves, listen to their own questions - that's what changed my life forever -- and connect with other people, whether this is through purchasing a CSA, buying local produce or getting money out of our political system. The key is to connect with other people. Alone we cannot turn the spiral of destruction to the spiral of health; alone it will be very difficult for us to do the work that we need to do to get to the root of the problem.

CV: Are there any final comments that you would like to make to Belmont citizens that I have not addressed?

FML: We are all educators; we are all teachers; we all face the world and with every choice we make we send out direct ripples and someone else is watching us. If we are embodying the enjoyment we get from these choices, then we become more aligned with the flourishing of our planet and people will want to be part of that. It is about helping people see the underlying causes and living in the world in a way that other people will say "I want that" because it is really a rich life. Often people think that the only way to affect the world is by making conscious choices, as if our unconscious choices have no impact. But I want to remind people that all the choices we make have an impact. You don't have a choice not to change the world; you can only choose how you will change the world. That is very empowering. Every choice we make ripples out, and we cannot avoid that even if we want to. It's the nature of things.

The motto of our Institute sums up our learning for all the energized people we're meeting all over the planet: Hope is not what we find it evidence. It is what we become in action. ❖

Interview with Frances Moore Lappé
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Carlha Vickers is a writer for the Belmont Farmers' newsletter Roots and Sprouts and lives in Belmont, MA. Her writing can be viewed at <http://www.belmontfarmersmarket.org/newsletters/2007/newsletter-2007-05.pdf>. Carlha can be reached at carlha@verizon.net.

