



EcoMind: Changing the Way We Think, to Create the World We Want

Frances Moore Lappé was keynote speaker at the fifth edition of Floriade Dialogue. In her books and publications she champions the power of people to take action through their own behaviour to balance the food chain.

MAARTJE SMEETS

After a conference on global environmental problems, Frances Moore Lappé realised that alarmists were missing the mark: “Arriving home after the conference, I was deeply troubled and asked myself: ‘Are we environmentalists actually defeating our own ends? Just when the magnitude of our environmental crises is becoming clearer by the day, are we pushing people to despair?’”

The uneasy feeling stayed with her and resulted in the writing of *EcoMind*, the author and activist’s eighteenth book. Nowadays, much is known about what goes wrong with our planet owing to human action. The problems seem so overwhelming that they paralyse us. What environmentalists should do, instead of hammering on about the extent of the problems, is convince people of their ability to contribute to change. “Central to our ability to solve a problem is how we perceive the challenge,” says Moore Lappé. “We have to start asking different questions to get different answers.”

The common thread throughout the work of Moore Lappé is the food issue. She caused a stir with her first book *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), which sold 3 million copies. It is now seen as a blueprint for eating with a small carbon footprint, though it was published long before the term was coined. “The food issue is being approached from the perspective of scarcity: ‘There are too many mouths to feed and

crop yields are insufficient.’ But the fact is that never before have we produced as much food as today, and yet we are stuck within the ‘scarcity-diagnosis.’” The key question we should be asking ourselves is how humans can obtain a broader sense of responsibility and self-confidence. Agriculture should give farmers more empowerment through a long-term income. It is not easy to shift to a more positive perspective on a complex international system dominated by governments, mega food companies and existing rules and laws. “Yet, also, that international system is what we make of it”, argues Moore Lappé. “The Monsanto and other large food companies of this world are so powerful because we give them that power. They arose from a belief system that gene technology and chemicals are necessary to produce the amounts of food required to feed the world population. We ourselves have to come up with alternatives if we want our food to be produced differently. Once we make that shift, there will be amazing breakthroughs.”

Agricultural revolution

That this is in fact possible becomes apparent through an example from the region of Punjab, India, as described by Moore Lappé in *EcoMind*. India was one of the early adopters of industrial agriculture. The country used so many pesticides and other chemicals that the costs for these made up one third of the average farmer’s income. In addition, the population became ill



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from the chemicals used. Moore Lappé notes, “People started to turn against these practices and demanded a different way of working. The high numbers of diseased and the falling income of the farmers convinced the government, who then set out



A mustard farm in India. The government reduces poverty by raising agricultural productivity in an internationally competitive, and diversified agricultural sector.

PHOTO: ANP RAMINDER PAL SINGH

to find alternative ways of farming that did not require the use of pesticides.” The Indian government commissioned to look for local, natural pesticides and fertilisers. The farmers learned to use their own compost. “The result was no loss of yield, but rather healthier, better yields.”

According to Moore Lappé, the strength of the project was that the farmers regained their dignity: “On a global scale people are moving from the country to the city, looking for work and an income. In Punjab the opposite is happening. People either want to stay in the country, or they return from the city because they can be independent again in earning a decent income. They are back in control of their own lives. Dignity is key here and that is exactly what is missing in the current game. It is something extremely powerful when people start to fight for their dignity. That is the force that can change the world into a better place.” In Western countries it seems that small-scale food production is only reserved for

the hip elite pursuing urban farming, guerrilla gardening and organic farming. But food provides precisely an opportunity to involve the disadvantaged in society, says Moore Lappé. “In Chicago an interesting experiment is taking place, in which former prisoners and homeless people are being educated to grow food, so food production is an ‘inclusion project’. People feel important again, involved, worthy. That is the power food has, and we can use it to our advantage to feed the growing world population.”

The power of small farmers and consumers, according to Moore Lappé, is greater than many people think. “We think we have detached ourselves from our food and its production, but food is in fact the most direct link between consumer and producer. Every man must eat, just as we need to breathe and sleep. This makes food – and even more so the way we eat – a powerful tool for permanent change.”●

The 7 thought traps that hold back change:

1. **Endless growth is destroying our beautiful planet, so we must shift to no-growth economies.**
2. **Because consumers always want more stuff, market demand and a growing population drive endless exploitation of the earth.**
3. **We’ve had it too good! We must power down and learn to live within earth’s limits.**
4. **Humans are greedy, selfish, competitive materialists. We must overcome these aspects of ourselves if we hope to survive.**
5. **To save our planet, we have to override humanity’s natural resistance to rules.**
6. **We’ve become so disconnected from nature that it’s pretty hopeless to think most people can become real environmentalists.**
7. **It’s too late! We’re at the point of no return. Democracy has failed and big corporations have too much power.**