

Countering the Myth of “Lack” with Plenty of Activism

New Realism and Food Sovereignty

By Frances Moore Lappé

The article below is adapted by Loie Hayes from a talk given by Frances Moore Lappé at Grassroots International’s 25th Anniversary celebration, November 15, 2008.

It’s so meaningful after all these years to celebrate Grassroots International’s 25th anniversary with you. What a moment to be celebrating this anniversary—at the end of the Bush era, and near the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet there are many more people now going hungry than when I wrote *Diet for a Small Planet* in 1971. The UN reported about a month ago that another 75 million people had been pushed into hunger by the beginning of 2008, and that number is predicted to double by the end of 2008. More than a billion people are hungry. **This is not the result of a scarcity of food, but a scarcity of democracy.**

The world view most visible in corporate media today is premised on scarcity. This premise says: There’s not enough goods, not enough energy, not enough food, not enough land... There’s just not enough. And even worse, there’s not enough goodness in us. Because if you peel away the fluff of human nature, all you can really count on is that we are these selfish little shoppers, ready to elbow each other out in the mall. This is drummed into us, so we really believe this about ourselves.



Frances Moore Lappé, founder of Food First and co-founder of the Small Planet Fund, spoke at Grassroots anniversary celebration.

This dominant reigning premise of scarcity has led to an economic system that concentrates wealth to the point that billionaires are growing in number eight times faster than the global economy. Inevitably, that concentrated wealth infects our political system. But this thin, thin, thin democracy, if you can even call it that, is really cracking. You can see through it to other possibilities.

There is opportunity in this moment as we begin to see the complexity of human nature, and begin to recognize that we can create the rules and norms that bring out the best in us and keep the worst in check.

Neuroscientists are pointing to the fact that human beings have deep, powerful social needs and capacities that are hardwired in us. They have looked at our brains with MRI scans when we’re cooperating and compet-

ing. They find that when we’re cooperating with one another, the same parts of our brains are stimulated as when we eat chocolate. The scientists were surprised, but I’m not. I don’t think we would have made it to 6.7 billion [people] if cooperation were not very pleasant.

Empathy and fairness are also hard-wired. Rhesus monkeys will go for up to 12 days without eating if some heartless experimenter has set it up so that in order to get food they have to give a fellow Rhesus an electric shock. We evolved in tight knit tribes. When things aren’t fair or enforced fairly, everything crumbles, as evidenced in our society today. And just as important is our deep need to be doers, to have *efficacy*. Eric Fromm, the social philosopher, asks us to turn Descartes around from “I think therefore I am,” to “I am because I effect.”

What would it mean then, to move forward with this heart-centered realism? It would mean that we move to ensure that all the rules and norms of our societies continually disperse power. And of course, part of that is the creation of new power, which Grassroots’ partners are doing in

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communities around the world.

Scientists at the University of Michigan conducted a cross-disciplinary study and did projections of world food supply if the entire world moved to agroecology, which is of course so embedded in the movements that are represented here by Grassroots International. Their most realistic prediction was that world food availability would increase by over 50% if we moved toward this vision.

We can let go of the premise of scarcity, and certainly, we can see examples of democracy. Grassroots International's longtime grantee CEDICAM (Center for Integral Campesino Development of the Mixteca) in the Oaxacan highlands began to reclaim eroded soils and over time planted close to a million trees. As a result of restoring the land, it has been able to end the out-migration. People can actually make a living there again. CEDICAM and Grassroots have shown how to move from the premise of scarcity to the creation of plenty.

Grassroots International and all its partners are creating a new meta-story to begin to dissolve this destructive one based on scarcity of goods and goodness. It's powerful, this vision that Grassroots International has represented for 25 years. The reason it's so powerful is that it is truly aligned with nature and with human nature. This is your power. I congratulate you, and ask you to glory in it. Thank you. ■



Nikhil Aziz and Frances Moore Lappé

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR.....

“Grassroots was formed... out of the drive to do not just the direct [relief and development] work but to analyze and talk about what was behind these situations, to use our position on the ground to explain from the experience of the peoples affected by them what was happening and why it was happening.”

– Dan Connell, Grassroots International founder, at an event celebrating Grassroots’ 25th anniversary.



Grassroots continues to play the unique and powerful role that Dan describes above, supporting peoples profoundly affected by injustice and bringing their analyses and voices forward.

Two of those voices spoke at our 25th anniversary celebration: Alberto Gomez Flores and Dena Hoff, co-chairs of the North American Coordinating Committee of the Via Campesina. Alberto, a Mexican farmer who, like so many of Grassroots’ partners, knows first-hand the impact of U.S. trade, agricultural, and energy policies, as well as industrial farming, from the position of the Global South. Dena, a Montana farmer, experiences similar challenges in the North.

We were also joined by a longtime colleague and friend, Frances Moore Lappé. Frankie’s message on the scarcity of democracy underscores why the work of our partners like the Via Campesina and others is so important.

For those who were not able to join the festivities, you will see and read more about them in the pages of this newsletter. Grassroots International’s work and mission remain vital in these daunting times. Together with the support of contributors and friends, in the past few months Grassroots has done some amazing things:

- Coordinated a relief effort for our partners in Gaza. The devastation in the strip is vast, including to our partners. Grassroots’ donors rallied to raise \$80,000 to send the Gaza Community Mental Health Program, Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees, Palestinian Center for Human Rights, and Palestinian Medical Relief Society.
- Co-sponsored and co-organized a delegation to Gaza for International Women’s Day with CODE PINK and others.
- Supported an Oakland Institute report entitled “Voices from Africa: African Farmers and Environmentalists Speak Out Against a New Green Revolution in Africa.” (www.oaklandinstitute.org/voicesfromafrica)
- Facilitated a cross-border training, sending three representatives from the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil to train their counterparts in Haiti.
- Awarded grants to a number of U.S. allies that are working with our Global South partners in the movement for resource rights and food sovereignty.
- Participated in the World Social Forum in Brazil and the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Network international strategy meeting in Kenya.

There’s a phrase Latin American activists use: *La lucha continua* (or in Portuguese, *a luta continua*) — the struggle continues. With your help, Grassroots has already moved forward on to our next quarter century of supporting global movements for social change. Thank you.

Nikhil Aziz

Grassroots Partners Discuss Food Sovereignty, Social Change

Grassroots International was honored to have three leading advocates for food sovereignty and social justice join in a discussion during our 25th anniversary celebration. They include Frances Moore Lappé—author, activist and longtime Grassroots' advisor; and the co-coordinators of the Via Campesina North America, Alberto Gomez Flores (National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations-Mexico) and Dena Hoff (National Family Farm Coalition-USA).

Below is a brief excerpt of their discussion, edited by Loie Hayes.

LAPPÉ: During the long recent campaign for the U.S. presidency, little was said about the relationship between immigration and our trade policy. How would you explain to the American people this connection?

HOFF: When you destroy the agriculture in rural communities in one country you have to expect that those people are going to move and look for a way to feed their families. Several years ago, George Naylor (then president of the National Family Farm Coalition) and I were in Mexico City and we hired a car to go out into the countryside to see what we could see. Everywhere we saw abandoned cornfields, abandoned farms where people had come to the United States looking for work.

People probably would have been very happy staying in their own homes, on their own farms, in their communities if they could have made a living there. But the trade policies make that impossible. Everything is reduced to the lowest common price so that there can be the highest possible returns on investment. Everything can move freely across the border... that is, everything except people. That to me seems criminal.

GOMEZ: The [global financial] crisis is having a huge impact on the 20 million Mexican immigrants living in the United States. This year we're expecting to see a 17% reduction in

the remittances that people working here send back to their families. Now the reverse is happening—families in Mexico are beginning to send money to their relatives in the United States to help them out. They don't have a



Dena Hoff (left) and Alberto Gomez with Grassroots International's Maria Aguiar.

place to live, they don't have anything to eat, they don't have jobs.

We're expecting that three to four million migrants will return to Mexico. Politicians in Mexico are alarmed because there are no jobs. It's a country where there's a very deep economic crisis. And this is going to create even more conflicts. A campaign for full rights for the immigrants and against the border wall will be necessary.

LAPPÉ: What can we most effectively do here?

HOFF: Everyone has got to start getting more involved in governments whether they're local or national. There will be proposed legislation such as the TRADE Act that is very,

very important for people to stand behind. Talk to your legislators and tell them that they should sign on as a sponsor or, at the very least, vote for this legislation. Until we change our trade policy we won't be able to change any policy, because Congress can hide behind WTO and other trade rules saying, "Oh, we can't do this because the trade rules do not allow it." What kind of a government do we have that will allow their own populations, their own country, and their natural resources to be devastated by pirates, captains of industry with very huge pockets?

Everyone has to be involved and stay involved. You can't just think, well, we've got a new administration coming in, and that's the end of it. That's just the beginning of it.

GOMEZ: Our problems are not north or south. The cause of all of our problems are the transnational corporations. We need to demystify, deconstruct and expose the role

of these corporations.

The food system has been broken. Today we need to rebuild our food system based on agricultural techniques relying on hundreds of years of accumulated knowledge. Our native Creole seeds or our heirloom seeds have so much knowledge incorporated into them. Societies need to understand that industrial agriculture is dependent on fossil fuels. The processes to transform crops into food and the current system of long-range transportation of food are contributing to global warming.

Small-scale family and peasant agriculture can help to cool off the planet, but we need to struggle to have an economic framework that will be favorable to food sovereignty. ■



Images from Grassroots International's 25th Anniversary Event



1. Grassroots International supporters listen to the partner presentations.
2. Grassroots intern Wasadrey Urban helped register guests.
3. Founder Dan Connell (center) stands between former directors Kevin Murray (left) and Tim Wise.
4. Board members Katherine Yih (left) and Judith Radkte
5. Dena Hoff answers questions after her talk.

All photos by Ellen Shub

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Grassroots International works to create a just and sustainable world by building alliances with progressive movements. We provide grants to our Global South partners and join them in advocating for social change. Our primary focus is on land, water and food as human rights and nourishing the political struggle necessary to achieve these rights. Grassroots International is supported entirely by private donations, which are tax-deductible.

Visit our website at GrassrootsOnline.org