Frances Moore Lappé: Shifting the Frame to Imagine a Different World

Interview by Lorelei Hanson and Patricia Ballamingie

We were fortunate to meet Frances Moore Lappé in May 2009 at Carleton University, where she delivered the keynote address at the annual Environmental Studies Association of Canada conference. Although the talk was inspiring, even more enjoyable was the chance to share a glass of wine with her following the event, at which time we approached her about doing an interview with Aurora.

Frances Moore Lappé is a democracy advocate and world food and hunger expert who has authored or co-authored 17 books. Perhaps her most famous work is her first book, Diet for a Small Planet, which has sold three million copies, and introduced many to the ecological, social and political implications of eating; long before local and organic food were hot topics. She is the co-founder of three organizations, including Food First: The Institute for Food and Development Policy, and, more recently, the Small Planet Institute—a collaborative network for research and popular education to bring democracy to life—which she leads with her daughter, Anna Lappé.

In 1987, Frances received the Right Livelihood Award (widely known as the Alternative Nobel Prize). She has also received 17 honorary doctorates from distinguished institutions. In 2006, she was chosen as a founding councilor of the Hamburg-based World Future Council. She is a member of the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture, and the National Advisory Council of the Union of Concerned Scientists. She serves as an advisor to the Calgary Centre for Global Community and sits on the board of David Korten’s People-Centered Development Forum.

Aurora: Whose ideas have you been most influenced by in your work and writings?

Frances Moore Lappé: Certainly, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions by Thomas Kuhn that I was assigned in college in 1965 or 1966 in a history of science course, proved formative. Until these last few years, I never realized that in some way that's what I have been writing about all along – the power of the paradigm. So even though I wasn't conscious of it, when I wrote Diet For A Small Planet I was in the process of trying to crack what I saw as the dominant failing paradigm of scarcity, and in some sense, everything I have done since then has continued that work. When I was writing Diet For A Small Planet, I was influenced by the work of Georg Borgström, who was a geography professor at Michigan State University. He wrote a book called The Hungry Planet and he was the first person who convinced me that it's not that the rich that are feeding the poor, but the other way around; we in the North are taking resources and devoting fast track export crops to feed the North rather than the other way around – again, the paradigm shift. Bergström had a very interesting concept that he called "ghost acreage" – you know, all that acreage we in the North are using in other countries. That was also a major turning point for me. In terms of my work on living democracy, I was very
influenced by Benjamin Barber's work and his book, *Strong Democracy*. There are so many people. In the 1990s, the book that has very much influenced my current writing is the work of Erich Fromm, particularly, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. He allowed me to see that it's man's humanity that makes him so inhuman.

He talks about the power of what he called the “frame of orientation” and what Anna and I call “the mental map” in our book *Hope's Edge*. This goes back to Thomas Kuhn, you know we all see the world through a particular lens that literally determines what we can see and what we can't see, what we believe our nature to be, and therefore what we believe is possible. My effort is to enable us to see that map that either limits us or frees us.

**Aurora:** Frances, it seems over the course of your career as if you have been calling consistently for these massive paradigm shifts à la Thomas Kuhn, in a series of different contexts. I am wondering where you have seen the most progress and what you think will be the next victory?

**Frances Moore Lappé:** I see the world moving in two directions at once, so it’s hard for me to use the word progress because I see the “both/and” of our world. I see where we are moving toward greater and greater oppression and deprivation and constriction of people’s voices – the silencing of people. At the very same time, I see the emergence of what I call “living democracy”, which is about democracy as an everyday practice in which we all have a voice and take responsibility for finding solutions; I see that also emerging, particularly in food and agriculture. And again, it is the “both/and”. I could provide example after example from my writing of people who are realizing that we know enough to combine our knowledge of ecology with our traditional knowledge of how to plant and harvest food in ways that sustain our bodies and the earth at the same time.

We see the dramatic successes of agro-ecology, both in terms of feeding and empowering people. And at the very same moment, we see the rise of the ideology and the power of multinational corporations – I think of Monsanto as the primary example – to persuade people to become dependent upon their products and to practice a way of agriculture that is destroying our long-term viability. I see living democracy as very much progressing in ways beyond what I had ever imagined, and at the same time I am aware of the continuing farmer suicides in India, for example, and that people have been enticed and persuaded by advertising that they should turn to distant suppliers of risky technologies. I try to live in that world of “both/and”, and try to keep expanding my heart big enough to hold it all. So, I’m really encouraging people not to believe that there is some answer that is really clear and dominant, but rather that we have choice – because the choices are never so clear as they are now. I don’t know if that is a satisfying answer, but...

**Aurora:** I think it’s a nuanced answer, which is the best kind.

**Frances Moore Lappé:** A lot of my work is psychological, and what I try to offer an audience is a sense that this is as much about how we live in a world of such clear choices without being overwhelmed by the magnitude of them, and how we build courage, all of those things. Because to live in this world where we acknowledge that we are moving very fast in two directions means that we urgently have to do the inner work to have the courage to really stay focused on the positive.

**Aurora:** You mentioned some really interesting thinkers, but do you use those people as personal role models – as guides for doing that inner work – or is there somebody else you turn to in terms of that more personal work related to thinking about these coexisting and very different paradigms?

**Frances Moore Lappé:** I very much believe in the power of heroes. I believe in this phenomenon of mirror neurons. The neuroscientists are telling us now that we actually take in what we observe and actually incorporate that into ourselves. I believe that works not just on direct observation. They discovered monkeys whose mirror neurons were activated when they observed some other monkey reaching for something. Well, I think there is evidence that it works also on the level of a mental state. I think of people who Anna and I met when we traveled the world to write *Hope's Edge*, people like Wangari Maathai. She started with seven trees on Earth Day in 1977 and suffered a brutal attack, and she was hospitalized for her environmental activism. So I definitely focus on people like Wangari, and a very different kind of woman in Brazil, Adriana Aranha. Adriana was a fairly young woman when we met her and she didn't have to face what Wangari did, but she broke the mold in Belo Horizonte, the fourth largest city in Brazil, as the city’s food security administrator. She definitely broke the mold and had to, I'm sure, go through tremendous obstacles to be part of a movement that was declaring food as a right of citizenship and have that really become the norm in the city government. She was then able to cut child death rates in ten years through that approach. I was just so taken with these women, but not exclusively women, who have shown the way. Alongside the writers that I have learned from, these individuals have shown that change is possible. You think of Wangari Maathai’s work, those seven trees turned into 45,000,000 trees planted by
During a speech I gave last week, I talked about what I call “bold humility”. The humility piece of it is acknowledging that the things that most excite me, that keep me on my feet, and keep me determined to take my own next step, is that I realize that of all the inspiring stories I describe for an audience, I would have given virtually none of them much chance for success 30 years ago. So it’s that theme that it’s not possible to know what’s possible… that is really the humility that keeps me going. It is ultimate hubris to think that we can say we know which way our planet is going, because we’ve never been here before.

Brazilian land reform is another powerful example. When I wrote Food First with Joe Collins in the 1970s, any attempt at genuine land reform was met with the death of peasants, slaughtered by landowners who were clinging to their land. Now, Brazil has the most successful land reform in this hemisphere, perhaps in the world, and it’s humbling, if you get my meaning of the word humility in this case.

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Aurora: I would like to pick up on that thread of humility. You’ve also touched on courage and heart in some of your writing, and I’m thinking specifically of your essay “Natural Abundance”, which was in The Best Buddhist Writing 2008. You talk about the merits of a beginner’s mind and the thinking that originally led up to Diet For A Small Planet, and you describe this as “the mind trained for pure unfiltered experience”. Are there other Buddhist principles that have informed your activism and politics?

Frances Moore Lappé: The teachings of Buddhism have most helped me, and maybe this is where my definition of humility comes from, to understand that the essence of existence is change. If we really believe that, it is in a way so heartening. Often within the Buddhist teachings, in trying to wake us up, the focus is on death; loss is inevitable. Every moment is the loss of something, but we can also just flip that and say that every moment is the emergence of something. I try to balance the idea that every moment is a loss, with the idea that every moment is also a birth. If change is the nature of the world, it opens some new possibilities as well. I think that theme of chance and acceptance of change, and acknowledgment of how hard that is for people has really helped me because I’m really asking myself and others to change in such profound ways. This mental map shift is the hardest thing that people can do. As Eric Fromm so beautifully articulates, we human beings cannot live without these frames, these ways of finding meaning. We don’t walk into a meaning void; we are just not able to do that. Before we can take that next step, we have to find a new way to put things together before we can let go of the old. So I think the Buddhist emphasis on change, and yet the difficulty of change, maybe that’s made me more patient with myself and others. I hope it has.

I never thought of it quite like that, but thinking about the combination of Eric Fromm and Buddhist wisdom, I realize that the flip side of Eric Fromm and the power of frame is the beginner’s mind. In a way then, if the frame is so determining then the unschooled eyes become a real advantage. I was so young when I made these connections (although I thought I was a late bloomer at the time), but I had something to see because I didn’t have a Ph.D. I was thinking at the time when Diet For A Small Planet was just about to hit the bookstores, I thought, wait a minute, this cannot be true, because if it were true, some nutritionist, some development economist, some agronomist would have been saying this. So how can this be true? Have I missed a decimal point along the way? I try to stress this with young people – to realize that gift of the untrained eye – before you narrow into a specialty.

Aurora: So are you saying in terms of the untrained mind, it’s a matter of asking the simple questions or examining the taken-for-granted assumptions? As a teacher, I so often encounter students that come with black and white responses to things and I see it as my role to try to get them to understand in shades of gray. Especially in environmental studies, they are so passionate about the topic and they often think there is one right answer. But I see my job as one of getting them to see that it’s a little more complex and there are many things at work at once, and that there might be a little bit of truth in every side of a debate. At present within academia we talk a lot about teaching our students critical thinking. I remember when I was a student and someone told me that I was to illustrate critical thinking, and I thought oh geez, I missed that class. I was searching around and kept asking my professors, what do you mean when you use this term and I never actually got a clear response. So being able to respond to that question...
is something that I certainly have taken on: I've tried to help my students recognize what it would mean to be a critical thinker. One of the things that I talk about is asking the simple questions and looking at assumptions and within this, asking questions about the assumptions that are implicit in the way people talk. When I think about that, I think of that as not necessarily arising out of an untrained mind, although it certainly arises out of curiosity.

Frances Moore Lappé: There are so many ways to approach this and I don't think it's an either/or. I am following what you are saying and it seems like it's a contradiction, but I do think that in so many disciplines, to narrow into a specialty, one has to build on a whole series of assumptions. Certainly, when I approached world hunger, the overriding assumption was that the problem was lack of food and therefore, the solution was more food — to state the problem in a simplistic way. The untrained mind, in my case, was to go back and say, well, is there enough food? I just started putting the numbers together to see what I could see. It was just so clear to me that there is hunger; the assumption was that there was not enough food. I think that maybe what we are both saying is that it's continuing to always ask the question behind the question. What is the unasked question here? When you said assumptions, I think of it as the question behind the question. If I had more room in the subtitle of Getting A Grip, it would have included the word curiosity to indicate the importance of the continuation, not ever believing that you've settled, continuing to be curious about what you have missed, and looking for other ways of approaching a problem. So perhaps it is more about keeping the curious mind, maybe not always the beginner's mind, because clearly by the time you're my age, you're not a beginner. Yet, I feel I'm just as curious as I was when I was sitting in the UC Berkeley library writing Diet for a Small Planet. Actually, I'm more curious about more things now. Maybe that's just keeping curiosity alive, keeping the questioning mind alive, seeing one's journey. I just gave a talk as part of a graduation ceremony at a local college here in the Boston area. I explained that my life goal is to create a community of questioners, and that seems to me what every institution of higher learning should want to do.

Aurora: In many of your writings you provide inspiring examples from around the world of communities "getting it right". Sometimes they may be addressing fundamental roots of hunger or child poverty, and sometimes implementing environmental advances and moving towards sustainability. I am wondering if you can speak to what you consider a few of the most inspiring of such communities and explain the specific challenges that they overcame and the creative responses that they implemented.

Frances Moore Lappé: There is one example that I use a lot, but I do not want to oversimplify or glorify the experience there, because with any major innovation, it's never simple. But as I mentioned earlier, there is the example of Adriana Aranha who I met in Belo Horizonte in Brazil in 2000. Her work has resulted in actual, measurable children saved. I think that the simple outline of what happened there is that a city government was elected in 1993 that put forth this platform of food as a right of citizenship, basically saying to the people, "look, if you're poor, you're still a citizen and we in the government are accountable to you." Rather than taking the path of charity and food handouts, the goal was to create a market that was responsible to everyone, in other words, a market in which everyone could participate. So my current reframing based on this, is that I want us to redefine free market as the freedom to participate in the market. In other words, a free market is one where all are free to engage in it because we have the wherewithal and our basic needs are within our reach. So that was their goal. Then the living democracy part of it was the reframing and inclusion of the principle that what is essential to life is a human right. As well, the living democracy element that I observed in it was that they reached out to broad sections of society, whether it was the small farmers they brought in, or the institutions – from schools to hospitals, business and markets – all were brought in to brainstorm and to develop these programs. "Fresh from the Countryside" – I believe they called the one program where small organic farmers were allowed to use city-owned land if they kept the cost of the produce they grew and then sold within the price range of the poorest people.

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So, in the heart of the inner city, you could have access to this wonderful food. Then they also did an exchange where they had to take truckloads of food out into more distant barrios or favelas, I guess they are called there. The programs included everything from school gardens to bus stop signs where you could see the price of the 45 basic commodities so that you could buy those commodities at the cheapest cost and this was also a way to keep the business people honest and not price gouge, as they do here. There were also “people's restaurants” where people paid a very cut rate for a fabulous, nutritious meal, not in a depressed grungy establishment, but in an open-air restaurant. Another part of the whole ethos was that they posted the newspapers of the day, so that if you could not afford to buy a paper to keep up with what was going on, your community
Aurora: was a Worker Party
Frances Moore Lappé: the same principles, is that how they were able to
case, like they did in Brazil, that
to dismantle everything that worked for the farmers. When I think
production hierarchy,
they keep giving out money to these middle people, but
Canada; they have been working for decades to try to get governments to
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**Frances Moore Lappé:** Yes, this was a city initiative. I should have added, however, that Adriana, because of what happened, was then picked by the president of Brazil, Lula da Silva, to help spread this throughout Brazil. We have a little charity where we collect money and give it away to things we believe in—and so we gave a grant to get Adriana to a big meeting here of the community food security coalition several years ago. The people here in the States got very excited hearing Adriana speak and have since gone down there as a study tour to learn about what they did in Belo Horizonte. So that was also thrilling for us to spread this hope and this approach.

**Aurora:** Frances, what do you think we can glean from a community such as this that could be applied in our Canadian and American contexts, especially considering our relative affluence and political apathy?

**Frances Moore Lappé:** I don't believe in the existence of apathy. I think what comes across as apathy is really a pathos—the absence of feeling, caring, and passion—that is really depression. It is really about feeling defeated. I think people care, but it hurts too much to care when you don't feel powerful to bring forth solutions, so I think it's a symptom of powerlessness that leads to despair. That's how I read it in this country because people are just so discouraged. That's why this incredible extremism is coming out now in the US Tea Party movement. In terms of relative affluence, did you know that half of American children will be on food stamps at some point in their childhood?

**Aurora:** That puts it in perspective, doesn't it?

**Frances Moore Lappé:** So food deprivation is extremely real here, and certainly the quality of our diet, especially for low-income people, is so poor. Some of the things that most excite me here are people who are working in the poorest communities. It is my understanding you are ahead of us in some cities in Canada, such as in Toronto and other places, on improving food access in poor communities. But certainly we are behind here. Yet I can think of the Boston Food Project. I think of Oakland, California, where I used to live, where people are creating community gardens and People's Stores, which are community-owned food stores and involved in this kind of very direct community organizing—which leads me to my other theme song, which is that we have to believe in the US in the possibility of public financing of our elections. We actually have two bills in Congress now that Obama said he will sign that put in place public financing, a viable option for people to run for Congress without being dependent on corporate donations.

> **“The theme of all of my work is this “both/and” – the community building at the very local level combined with whatever else we are doing going to the mother of all political issues, solving climate change or hunger, and removing the power of wealth and creating a real democracy. It is both of these objectives at once; we can’t do just one or the other.”**

**Aurora:** Frances, often when we look at these inspiring examples of change within Brazil, and beyond in Central or South America, or other parts of the less developed world, people often look at examples like the one that you gave about Brazil, or Naomi Klein talks about workers taking over factories in Argentina, and people look at them and say, “yeah, but we don't have those desperate situations and so people aren't mobilized to the same extent”. I never have a response to that. What is the response to that? Why is it that we don't have people being politically mobilized to the same degree?

**Frances Moore Lappé:** I think there is a great deal of desperation, but I think there is much more effective propaganda here, mental map fixing happening, certainly in this country. The media is so concentrated and the messaging of media so tightly controlled in this country, and people have bought the idea that we are the best. I mean, look at the health care debate. There are 19 states that are refusing to participate in the health insurance reform and people suing the government that this is not constitutional because they really believe that we have the best health care system in the world, even though we rank 34th in infant mortality rates. I think the handicap for our country and our culture that has intensified in the last 20-30 years is the belief in the myth that we really do have the best system, whether it is our economic, health care or educational system. If you really believe that then you are completely confused if you are not doing well, and you feel you have to blame yourself, because if we have the best of everything, then what is wrong with you? There is a tremendous amount of self-blame built into this belief system.

I think that is the biggest handicap. And now people feel so defeated because they believe that Washington doesn't represent them and they look to this big anti-government movement now and the Tea Party. And yet what alternative do you have? A large corporation? Well yes, isn't BP a great example of the responsibility taken on by large corporations? So I don't think it's apathy, I think it's fear, and how people deal with fear is to often just retreat. I guess that's my self-appointed mission in life, my job description, is to try to help people see a way to see the world that allows them to feel their power. My single biggest life goal is to help myself and others to appreciate the power we have. If my diagnosis is correct—that it is not about preaching at people to be more giving and...
more generous and more this or that, but rather to not give up and not feel powerless. That is the bigger challenge. We are plenty good enough, we human beings. I think that the new neuroscience and anthropology, etc., have convinced me that there is a great deal of innate capacity for empathy and a great sensitivity to fairness and a joy of cooperation. What is lacking is a feeling of efficacy.

"My single biggest life goal is to help myself and others to appreciate the power we have."

Aurora: We were struck by what Muhammad Yunus said when you and Anna visited him in Dhaka: "I'd like to say the solution can be born in the womb of the problem," which seems like a very profound idea, as it's both simple and difficult to conceptualize. We were wondering if you could talk about that concept.

Frances Moore Lappé: For me, returning back to my own culture, what that means is that the problem has now reached such proportions, whether we are talking about the extreme inequality, the worst that has ever been measured in this country, and related to this the concentration of wealth and this leads to the lack of corporate accountability, which then leads to the environmental crisis that we are experiencing, including health crises from environmental toxins. What I feel is that if we can create the context to ask why, then when things get so stark as this, then there is a possibility for the reframe. That's what has happened in Dr. Yunus' life, when walking by people dying of hunger on his way to teach his economics course and suddenly he said, "oh my god, how does what I am teaching relate to this death I am walking by?" It was that moment that was so stark for him. Well, when half of our children are on food stamps, it is time for people to recognize this – to have that moment of "Hey, wait a minute". We have to go back to asking questions, since our assumptions are incorrect.

So many people in my generation and even younger grew up thinking, oh yeah, the US has things together, it is just a matter of cleaning up around the edges – racism here, a little poverty there. But we have now reached this point in my elder years where we have lost so much ground. The root of the problem calls us to go back to fundamentals in a way that we never did when we were just thinking, oh things are getting incrementally better, as they did up until my children's young years through the '70s, things were improving and then they stopped and started turning in the other direction. I guess that's why I feel so humbled and encouraged by the depth of the problem to ask these square one questions again. And that's why I have been starting all of my speeches as follows: why are we together creating a world that not one of us individually wants? What's up with that? It makes no sense on the surface. How could this possibly come to be? That's what I have been grappling with. The only way I can explain it is that we have started from false assumptions that take us away from our common sense.

Aurora: I follow your line of thinking. It makes a lot of sense to me about this paradigm shift. We think that there is not enough, and we need to get away from that thinking because that becomes such a brick wall that obscures possibilities for change. So this question relates to that. Hans Bolscher said when you and Anna visited him that the challenge is to create a link in the minds of consumers between Fair Trade and an intangible that makes us as consumers feel good about ourselves. When I read that, I was baffled because I would say that modern advertising is all about making connections for people between consumption and feeling good. I'm not sure that people consciously recognize what they are being fed within advertising and at the same time, I do not think they are culture dupes. So where does this notion of us needing to reduce our consumption patterns fit in to a reframed discourse where we reduce our consumption patterns, but do not fall into the paradigm of thinking "there is not enough" in the world – enough resources, time, compassion, etc. How do we balance those ideas?

Frances Moore Lappé: This is very much what I get into in a book I am going to be redoing this summer. I have published a limited edition book that I am sharing with some of my readers to provide feedback on, and then I am going to rewrite it this summer and release it next year. It's called Liberation Ecology. In that book, I argue that what people call consumerism is a symptom and really a misdiagnosis. So much of consumerism is based on fear and driven by a desire to have standing in the world. This is hardly an original thesis, but I think it is very real that to have standing, to have status, is really not about the things themselves we buy, it is not necessarily about the comfort they give us, rather it is about the status they give us with one another. Of course, that's not entirely true, it is fun to dress up and people have been wearing makeup since we first lived in caves. There are things we enjoy doing, decorating ourselves, and celebrating through special objects and gifts, which is again very rooted in our cultures long before anyone invented the word consumerism. But this kind of hyper-compulsiveness to consume is not about the things themselves as much as it is about our status in relation to others. That is built by this constant message of insecurity and as it is heightened and concentrated our insecurity increases, so it's a never-ending spiral of demand that is created. If that is true, then living democracy in and of itself addresses the problems of hyper-consumerism. Living democracy as a shift in culture to democracy as a way of life, of building viable communities together including our work places and our schools, etc., this would fulfill that need for connection and feeling part of a team and part of a group,
that would be met through living democracy, rather than through the brands we wear. Then the pressures caused by consumerism would be diminished. That's one way I approach it. But if we think of consumerism as the issue and try to then tackle it directly by preaching to people to stop consuming so much, I think that can never truly succeed.

We have to rethink our production systems, not primarily to do less, but rather to do what we do differently. How do we think and create like an ecosystem? How do we think of every part of our lives as a system, including meeting our basic needs? I'm just afraid that focusing on less is still a mechanical view of less and more, instead of thinking like an ecosystem and thinking differently. How do we meet our needs in a very different way? It is just a very mundane thing. Now I know of several middle class people having these clothing exchanges where they just get together and bring all the clothes that they are kind of tired of and then they trade. Well, it doesn't mean that maybe that year I had fewer new clothes because they were new to me, but I had a totally different way of going about enjoying decorating myself. It is about thinking differently rather than doing with less; I guess that is my approach.

Aurora: I read your books when I was a university student some 20 years ago, and ever since then I have been enraged whenever I go to environmental conferences and people bring up the issue of population. And I always think: what's wrong with you? I can't believe how many so-called experts and well-considered thinkers raise population as the #1 environmental issue in the world. How does one get through to these people the kind of analysis that you and Joseph Collins published so long ago, all that work you two did dealing with that particular issue, and all the flaws in thinking that overpopulation was the cause of hunger and environmental problems. It seems to me it's an issue of what you just said, of not addressing it as an issue of less or more, but perhaps thinking about human population growth in a different way?

Frances Moore Lappé: Just a few weeks ago, somebody refused to come to my talk because they told the person that invited them that, “oh no, I can't go hear her because she does not recognize that population is the biggest environmental problem”. Finally, I got so frustrated I wrote a book entitled, Taking Population Seriously. If you're really serious about population, here's what we do. We look at it through this kind of relational lens, okay what is it that enables people to choose smaller families? It's still out there.

Aurora: On a more personal note, I cannot think of anything more rewarding than sharing a life of activism and engagement with my daughter, which is the life that you have. It's been almost a decade now since you co-founded the Small Planet Institute with Anna and I understand that she has just published Diet for a Hot Planet. So I was hoping you could comment, on your working relationship with your daughter.

Frances Moore Lappé: I agree it is the greatest blessing. I actually work with both of my children. My son is a filmmaker and producer and book writer. He was just with me on this graduation speech helping me to develop the slides to go with it and everything was so fun. It's been so rewarding. Anna started editing me when she was in high school, so it was kind of natural in some ways, but it was also just a miracle that she was in graduate school when I started writing Hope's Edge. She was finding it frustrating to really get her teeth into something that was rewarding. The professors let her do some research with me as part of her course work and we realized immediately that we were really partners, and it was not a junior/senior relationship. It has really just continued on. It has been such a blessing for me also that I keep coming back to food, and I want to do another book on world hunger in the next few years – one that really puts forward living democracy solutions to this issue. And it is so rewarding to me that Anna is continuing on with the food message, in Diet for a Hot Planet and in other things she is working on. It allows me to deepen this living democracy work, and to constantly see the linkages that this is all really one question of which food is only one dimension. It is just so great that she is carrying on in such a brilliant way.

Aurora: I am wondering whom else you see as taking up this important work on hunger and living democracy?

Frances Moore Lappé: I guess I consider my biggest peer ally in living democracy and food to be Vandana Shiva in India. As we point out in Hope's Edge, she is using the term “earth democracy”, which I also like. But to me, her concept has a slightly different connotation of embracing all of nature. She also has used “living democracy” as a term, so I feel like her approach is the seamless statement that the only pathway to help with the earth is through healthy human relationships empowering communities. I feel like we are very much on the same wavelength. Certainly, there are also people like Wangari Maathai and Adriana Aranha, whom I have mentioned. All of these people, it's seamless. The science of agro-ecology is inseparable from the empowerment of people. Actually, my favorite news story about living democracy and food comes from Andhra Pradesh in India, where illiterate women made huge strides in reclaiming their traditional foods after a disaster in which Monsanto's GMO crops failed.

Aurora: Interestingly, all of those examples are women.
Frances Moore Lappé: Yeah. Here in the US, as in Canada, young people are working with people who live in poor communities to build community gardens and community-owned stores, school gardens – they are taking a very direct approach to community organizing. Many of those folks are young people on campuses – involved in the real food challenge – converting campuses to sustainable, locally grown, fair food. I see those young people as very much fulfilling everything that I have been working on all these decades.

Aurora: Actually that leads quite nicely to the last question which is, when you look at that next generation, what skills do you think that we need to equip them with in order to realize a more just and sustainable future?

Frances Moore Lappé: You're not going to be surprised that I feel the fundamental question of how we create sustainable organizations – how we practice the arts of democracy – is key. We had this little handbook downloadable from our website “Doing Democracy in the Practical Arts,” which is a section of a book that is now out of print called The Quickening of America. It goes through the ten arts of democracy, and integrates what we now increasingly know about what kind of democratic processes work: how we make decisions together, how we share power and build power together. So we need to take all of that as seriously as any victory on a given issue, and that is still something that I talk about. I tell the story in Getting a Grip about these young people in California who created environmental education programs. They started with a student run course on sustainability and then helped the administration of their university to integrate this into the system, and it became a system-wide, student-created movement, in the UC system. They told me that there was no way they could have done this without training in the arts of communication. They did real training, not just reading a few talking points. So I encouraged them to continue to build. Because for so much of my generation so much was lost in terms of internecine conflict, as we were so naive about how to build effective organizations – powerful organizations that really empower people – and make good decisions. I think that is something that this generation, and I hope myself as well, will focus more on. We need to learn more and share what I call the arts of democracy and organization building that take training and practicing reflection as seriously as any particular goal that they achieve in the wider world.

Aurora: Process as well as product.

Frances Moore Lappé: Yes, exactly.

Aurora: Thank you so much for this all.

Frances Moore Lappé: I'm just so happy to have the chance to reflect. It's a rare opportunity that I get asked such interesting questions.

Publications


Getting a Grip: Clarity, Creativity, and Courage in a World Gone Mad Small Planet Media, 2007.


Hope’s Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet (with Anna Lappé), Tarcher/Penguin, 2002.


Taking Population Seriously (with Rachel Schurman), The Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1990.


Book links: https://www.smallplanet.org/books

Related Links
Small Planet Institute (Frances Moore Lappé: complete list of writings, including books, book chapters, articles, editorials and videos)
http://smallplanet.org/

Environmental Studies Association of Canada
http://esac.ca/

Food First: The Institute for Food and Development Policy
http://www.foodfirst.org/

World Future Council
http://www.worldfuturecouncil.org/

Union of Concerned Scientists
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Lorelei Hanson is an Assistant Professor in Environmental Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Athabasca University.

Patricia Ballamingie is an Assistant Professor cross-appointed in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies and the Institute of Political Economy, at Carleton University.

Update: March 2018

Citation Format
Lorelei Hanson and Patricia Ballamingie (2010) Shifting the Frame to Imagine a Different World: An Interview with Frances Moore Lappé.

Discover Frances Moore Lappé famous and rare quotes. Share Frances Moore Lappé quotations about hunger, community and choices. “What an extraordinary time to be alive. We’re...” “Frances Moore Lappe on Creating an Ecology of Hope”. Interview with Mark Karlin, www.truth-out.org. December 26, 2011. “Getting a Grip 2: Clarity, Creativity and Courage for the World We Really Want”, p.317, BookBaby. 6 Copy quote. A life-long mission has been to counter the notion that political engagement is the spinach we must eat in order to have the dessert of freedom. Frances Moore Lappé. Order, Long, Political. Frances Moore Lappé (born February 10, 1944) is the author of 18 books including Diet for a Small Planet (1971) that The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History describes as “one of the most influential political tracts of the times.” She is the co-founder of three national organizations that explore the roots of hunger, poverty and environmental crises, as well as solutions now emerging worldwide through what she calls Living Democracy.