

Author says challenging simple concepts can save planet

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Author and democracy activist Frances Moore Lappé says we already know how to solve the pressing issues of our time, such as climate change and world hunger.

But she says our own pre-conceived ideas about how things should work - our mental map of the world - is actually preventing us from taking action.

In a speech at Ottawa's Carleton University as part of the 78th Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Lappé called for a wholesale revamping of the way we view government, the economy and democracy. If we manage to do it, she says, we can save ourselves from our own demise.

Lappé, made famous in the 1970s by her bestselling vegetarian cookbook *Diet for a Small Planet*, is an activist, author and co-founder with her daughter Anna Lappé of The Small Planet Institute. She says many people today are frightened by the potential for disaster, ecological and otherwise, and fearful that nothing can be done to prevent it. Lappé says we can do something - if we challenge five assumptions about the way the world works.

The first is that going green means "powering down," or reducing our consumption of [energy](#). Lappé says all we have to do is stop getting energy from fossil fuels and start getting it from renewable sources like the sun.

"Every day the sun supplies us with 15,000 times the amount of energy we're now using in fossil fuels," she says. If everyone had a solar panel or windmill on their roof, we wouldn't be dependent on oil companies - and as individuals we'd feel more in control of our own destiny.

The second idea to dispense with, she says, is that going green means an end to economic growth. What we have to do, she says, is change our idea of what growth is. Right now, she says, the Walton family - owners of Wal-Mart - controls as much wealth as the bottom 40 per cent of the U.S. population. Is it growth if the wealthy families just get wealthier?

There's plenty of room for growth, she says, if we learn to do things more efficiently. For example, she says various estimates show that between 25 and 50 per cent of all food produced in the United States is wasted. And that every year, Americans throw out some 300 pounds of packaging material.

The third idea she wants to challenge is the notion that humans are by nature greedy, self-centred and materialistic. Under certain conditions, she said, we can be monsters. But there wouldn't be 6.8 billion of us on the planet today if we didn't also have positive qualities such as empathy, cooperation and fairness. As a society, she said we should simply try to make sure our rules try to bring out the best, not the worst in us.

The fourth idea she disputes is that we dislike rules. She says humans crave structure, particularly rules that make sense to us as individuals and which foster a sense of inclusion. We will accept the right rules, she says, citing as an example a German law that enables individual citizens to sell power they produce at home, through renewable sources such windmills or solar panels for example, to utilities at a guaranteed price. People there have embraced the idea, she says.

The final concept she wants to challenge is the idea that our problems

are so pressing there's no time for democracy, and only an authoritarian regime can save us. She believes the only hope for the planet is to trust in people and set rules that bring out the best in us.

"The mother of all issues is who makes the decisions," she says, adding that if decisions are taken by people with the most money, we all suffer.

Lappé says she's not against a market economy - just the idea that there's only one way to run the economy.

She also wants to challenge the idea, she says, that change is impossible. Recent history has shown that seemingly insoluble problems have in fact been solved.

"It's not possible to know what's possible."

Source: Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences

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