A Current of Hope

by Helena Norberg-Hodge

As the US presidential election draws closer, it is an appropriate time to consider some of the big political questions of the day: Who really controls the economy? Who is in charge of foreign policy? Who decides what sort of education our children receive?

The answer should be that we do, through our elected representatives. That, after all, is the very essence of democratic government. The truth, however, is very different.

Clearly, there are real and substantial differences between Republican and Democrat, Labour and Conservative, Schwarzenegger and well, just about anyone else. But when you take a global perspective it becomes apparent that these differences are relatively small. Far more striking is that in virtually every country in the world - from left-leaning governments like Tony Blair’s to distinctly right-leaning administrations like John Howard’s in Australia - politicians, and the whole political process, are increasingly in the hands of big business.

Everywhere you find the same economic agenda: growth through ‘free’ trade, growth through environmental and social destruction, growth through unaccountable speculation. Politics has gone to the casino and it’s our money they’re playing with.

That might sound like a position of despair. But the good news is that there is a counter-current building momentum—one that offers tremendous hope for the future. Fifteen years ago, I felt far less hopeful. Deregulated global trade was already decimating non-western cultures around the world, yet no one seemed to...

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Turning the Tide in Cancun?

by Becky Tarbotton

This year’s WTO talks in Cancun, Mexico, collapsed in a cloud of finger-pointing. Blame has been laid at the feet of stubborn rich countries, complaining poor countries, presidential elections and even the beleaguered consensus decision-making process.

But the fundamental reason behind the collapse of the meeting is to be found within the false logic of the global trade regime itself. Producers in both ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ countries are told that their livelihoods are threatened by foreign production and that they must increase exports to gain a competitive edge. Absent from this argument is any recognition of the fact that a handful of major corporations now dominate 80% of all global trade and so any benefits of increased trade will invariably flow to them. As a small farmer from Wisconsin pointed out at the demonstrations in Cancun: “They hope to divide us, pit farmer against farmer, farmer against consumer, North against South.”

Unfortunately, this distorted argument has gained significant support. Many otherwise progressive NGOs and civil society groups have allied themselves with official G22 negotiators to fight for a reduction in US agricultural subsidies. They believe this will “allow poor countries some of the same public-private development strategies that the United States and Europe have used to good effect”

But what should we be working toward? The words of an Indian farmers’ group, in their letter to the Prime Minister of India demanding that he withdraw India from the WTO, perhaps say it best: “We don’t like money and markets from abroad to rule our villages; we want our nature, hard work to be utilized by us only to fulfill the need of every citizen. Let the right to water, forest and land be with our village communities. Our hard work is for self-reliant, equitable distribution.”

The collapse of the Cancun talks can be celebrated as one more step along the path towards a turning of the tide away from corporate globalization.

Footnotes:
1. a statement to the campesinos at Cancun from WONEWOC Wisconsin organic farmer James P. Goodman.
2. ‘Poor nations revolt at rigged trade talks’ by Robert Kuttner, Boston Globe, 9/17/2003
The Ladakh Project

As most of our supporters know, ISEC has been running a wide range of ‘hands on’ projects in Ladakh (or ‘Little Tibet’) in the Indian Himalayas since the mid-1970s. Our work has won international acclaim for countering the negative effects of conventional development.

This summer we had quite a lot of media coverage including a journalist writing for The Times (UK) and another doing several programmes for national radio in Germany. A number of television teams covered our work, including one from Korea and another from Europe. The latter team produced a prime-time documentary, which will be aired in France, Germany, Switzerland and Austria (7pm December 8th). The producer hopes to sell it to UK and US television as well.

[Thubstan] Chhewang [head of government] is honest about the fact that it becomes difficult to change things once one enters the political world. ‘We have to take everyone, including the bureaucrats, with us.’ But he is unequivocal about the value to Ladakh of ISEC’s work, ‘Helena was among the first to propagate alternative ideas. She was a lone voice. At the time, people were awed by development, while she was talking about respecting our own culture and encouraging technology appropriate for our land. It’s had enormous impact.’

— Excerpt from The Ecologist magazine v.33(10).

The Farm Project

The Farm Project enables people from all over the world (particularly Western countries) to spend a month living and working with a Ladakhi farming family. For the Westerners this experience is often life-changing, and the effect on the Ladakhis has also been very positive. Seeing Westerners out in the fields, getting their hands dirty - and actually enjoying it! - has helped to raise the status of farming, among the young especially.

During the 2003 season, over thirty people came to Ladakh on the Farm Project. Participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and nationalities. Several came from the UK, the US and Australia. Also participating were people from Germany, France, Japan, Switzerland, Canada and the Czech Republic.

One Western participant commented:
“At first I was most excited about the place. Likir was a revelation. Then the work, the chance to contribute in a concrete way, and even learn a bit about the way the farm runs. Seeing a Buddhist culture from the inside, having time and freedom to explore Likir, the phu [high pastures], and still be there for almost every meal with them.”

Tourist Education Program

For over twenty years now ISEC has made an active attempt to encourage communication between tourists and Ladakhis. Since the 1990s the project has encompassed daily workshops at the Women’s Alliance Centre in Leh (the capital).

Tourists watch ISEC’s highly acclaimed film about the changes in Ladakh—Ancient Futures—and take part in a discussion facilitated by ISEC staff and volunteers. During the past decade, over 30,000 tourists have attended these workshops. The workshop is eye-opening and leaves tourists with a better understanding of the problems caused by conventional development and globalisation, not only in Ladakh but in their local communities as well.

“Every tourist should have to see this before entering Ladakh!”

“It has been very useful to see how you are working because in Mexico we are facing the same problems. I would love to be in contact and share the projects and the things we are doing. Thank you”.

—Comments from tourists attending the workshop.

Reality Tours

One of the best ways to counter unrealistic, romantic notions of the Western consumer culture is for people to experience life in the West for themselves. They can then see that, for most of the population, Western life is not as glamorous as it appears in the media.

Since 1982, ISEC has sponsored nearly 50 Ladakhis to visit the West on ‘reality tours,’ including men and women, young and old, community leaders and students. They have been hosted mainly in the UK, but also in Sweden, Germany and the USA, from one to several months. The tour encompasses both downsides of the consumer culture, as well as many positive initiatives that are emerging.
In July 2003, Dolma Tsering and Tsewang Dolma (both from the Women’s Alliance) visited the UK on a Reality Tour. Among the places they visited were an old people’s home, a hostel for the homeless, a landfill site, and some of the sex shops of London’s Soho. The women were amazed to discover the lonelier sides of western society. Dolma asked the director of the homeless shelter, “If he’s got brothers and sisters, why doesn’t he live with them?” They were also taken to visit an organic farm and a community in Devon. ISEC also hosted an evening with the women in Devon (where the ISEC UK office is located). Many local people and ISEC supporters turned out to listen to the women talk about their life in Ladakh as well as their experience on the reality tour.

ISEC also helped organise opportunities for the women to communicate their experience of the West on their return to Ladakh. They shared their observations and insights on radio and at meetings in numerous villages:

“They call it organic. It’s just like what we do.”

“They have special doctors and special pills just for people who are unhappy.”

“They were always rushing, or on the phone, or driving the children somewhere. They never seemed to have time to enjoy themselves.”

“We have so much in Ladakh. We must learn to use what we have like our parents and grandparents did. We must be proud in our dress, our food, our land.”

This reality tour will be featured in the aforementioned television documentary. The film will also be available to the general public on video. We hope the film will generate more interest and support for this unique and important project.

**Women’s Alliance of Ladakh**

In 1990, when ISEC initiated a large feast of Ladakhi food, bringing together women from different villages, it was considered almost a joke to celebrate the local food. At the gathering, Helena and several Ladakhi women spoke to assembled Ladakhi leaders about the importance of keeping local farming alive within a changing culture. The festival has now become a hugely successful annual event celebrating Ladakhi knowledge and skills, including spinning, weaving and dyeing, and the preparation of indigenous foods. Now even Western-trained doctors are broadcasting the benefits of eating fresh local food.

The Women’s Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) also grew out of that first gathering. This rural women’s organisation now boasts over 6,000 members and is one of the most powerful political forces in the region. ISEC staff and volunteers continue to assist WAL in running their ongoing projects, including:

• Regular clean-up campaigns aimed at encouraging community responsibility for the environment.
• A seed-saving programme to promote the cultivation and protection of local varieties of grains and legumes.
• Networking with farmers elsewhere in the South.
• An educational campaign about the hazards of pesticides, fungicides and chemical fertilisers.

A handicraft shop to promote the products made by farming women, thereby supporting the self-reliant local economy and preventing urbanisation.

• Regular handicraft courses, including weaving, natural dyeing, knitting and tailoring, for rural women to provide a cash income while remaining as farmers on the land.

We have also helped to set up a number of other groups in Ladakh and, while these have become mostly independent from ISEC, we continue to provide guidance and practical support.

**The Ladakh Ecological Development Group**

From its early beginnings as a project to demonstrate the benefits of solar heating and greenhouses, the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG) has since established three Ecology Centres. The largest is in Leh and houses administrative offices, an extensive library (of texts ranging from those on renewable technology to Buddhist philosophy), meeting rooms and exhibition space. There is also a craft shop for locally produced goods (from organic apricot jam to handmade clothes). The building itself, a combination of traditional architecture and active solar and wind technologies, is an example of how the traditional and the modern can be successfully combined.
Amchi Association

The Amchi Association, with more than 150 amchis (doctors), works to protect the traditional medical system of Ladakh. The Association's main activities include:

- Operating an amchi pharmacy unit.
- Operating amchi dispensaries in Leh town, for both local people and foreigners.
- Organising amchi/astrologer training, conferences and workshops.
- Conducting mobile amchi health camps for very remote areas.
- Conducting four year Dusrapa diploma course (the entry level degree in amchi medicine) for students from the most remote areas of Ladakh.
- Developing remedies and conserving endangered medicinal sources.

ISEC has supported the Amchi Association since the early 1980s, as well as sponsoring a number of Ladakhis to study amchi medicine at the Institute for Tibetan medicine at Dharamsala.

Promoting the Local, Globally

Throughout each year ISEC’s director and staff give lectures and workshops around the world in an effort to spread our Global to Local message far and wide. In 2003, ISEC’s director, Helena Norberg-Hodge, gave numerous talks in many parts of the world. These included the Social Forum in Australia; ‘Strengthening New Mexico’s Local Economy in an Age of Corporate Globalization’ in New Mexico; ‘How to Survive the Global Economy’ Schumacher lecture in Hereford, UK; ‘Making the Shift from Global to Local’ in Frankfurt, Germany; ‘Privatization and the Consequences for Women’ conference in Germany; Mcplanet.com conference in Germany; Convergence festival in Dublin, Ireland; and the Buddhist Economics workshop in India. She also gave a public lecture at the New York Open Centre and spoke, by special invitation, at the Heifer International headquarters in Arkansas.

Last November, Helena taught a course at Schumacher College on rebuilding community with Richard Douthwaite and Francis Moore Lappe. With other colleagues, Helena led a week-long conference in April — ‘No Place Like Home: Localisation in Action’— at Findhorn Ecovillage in Scotland. In July, after meeting with leaders in Tuscany, Italy, Helena was invited to join their commission on food policy. Helena has also been invited to visit South Korea this autumn to take part in a lecture series sponsored by the magazine Green Review and the Institute of Humanities of Yeungnam University. She will also be giving media interviews and attending other public speaking events. Before returning to the UK, Helena will be attending a meeting on Buddhism and Development with Sulak Sivaraksa in Bangkok, Thailand.

Other ISEC staff also participated in several events in the US and UK, for example:

- Becky Tarbotton (Roots of Change Coordinator) gave a keynote lecture alongside David Korten at the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies national meeting.
- Katy Mamen (US Local Food Program Coordinator) presented ISEC’s local food message at numerous agriculture-related events in California, including the Bioneers conference and to the Department of Health Food Security Task Force.
- Kristen Steele (Fundraising Coordinator) presented a slideshow on the benefits of local food at ‘Taking Back the World,’ a Simultaneous Policy event.
- Rachel Sykes (Program Assistant) facilitated a workshop at an Agenda 21 ‘Local Food for Local Schools’ conference and gave a speech at an event arranged by the Slow Food movement.
- Steven Gorelick (US Program Director) gave a workshop on ISEC’s economic analysis at “Growing the Movement,” the annual conference of the Community Food Security Coalition in Boston.
Local Food—from the UK to India

ISEC’s Local Food Roadshow continued to tour the UK throughout 2002 and 2003. The poster series was displayed and the slide show presented to audiences at universities, conferences and farmers’ markets. The Action Pack, designed to help activists and the general public understand the global food system and enable them to get involved in the local food movement, was completed in late 2002. Along with other materials, it is included in our new Local Food Toolkit (see award announcement). We have also recently produced a full-colour leaflet entitled ‘Why Buy Local,’ which presents the multiple benefits of buying locally produced products in a clear, illustrated format. It is now available for customers to take away from over twenty-five grocery stores, pubs and restaurants in Southwest England, and this number is growing all the time.

We recently discovered that Samdhong Rinpoche, the Prime Minister of the Dalai Lama’s government in exile, Dharamsala, was so impressed with our local food materials that he had them duplicated and sent to Tibetan representatives all over India. As the local food movement grows in the UK and elsewhere, so do requests for our publications and expertise.

Local Food—Coast to Coast

Our US Local Food Program has had a successful first year. Our Local Food Toolkit was launched in December 2002 and ISEC staff have since presented the slideshow to a variety of audiences in the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet it’s been even more inspiring to see folks in over twenty states and Canadian provinces take local food advocacy into their own hands, presenting ISEC’s materials at festivals and food stores, educational institutions, conferences and churches.

In California, we are working with members of the California Sustainable Agriculture Working Group to create a joint public education and policy project. We have also been collaborating closely with a range of other groups to work for change at the state level, as well as with several national groups to build coherence in the US local food movement. ISEC staff have also been actively disseminating our perspective on food and farming through workshops and lectures, including for business leaders, government officials, community groups and the non-profit sector.

Our California food system report is set to be released in the spring; stay tuned for news of a launch event in the Bay Area. In the meantime, check out our slideshow or poster series, which can be used to educate your community about the benefits of local food systems!

Food and Farming in California: a Sorry State

by Katy Mamen

Thoughts of California often conjure up images of idyllic and productive fields serving up an abundance of diverse foods. The California Department of Food and Agriculture tells us that “California has the safest, highest quality food supply in the world.” Yet recent ISEC research reveals some alarming trends behind this façade.

Approximately 60% of farm products consumed in California are imported from outside the state, while close to half of products originating in California are exported across the US and abroad. Brussels sprouts are shipped in from Belgium, while Californian brussels sprouts are shipped to Canada; the US is exporting California pistachios and almonds to Italy while simultaneously importing Italian pistachios and almonds. These trends are a direct outcome of free trade policies and government subsidies that favour monocultural production for export over diverse production for local consumption. Since the inception of NAFTA in 1994, imports from Canada and Mexico have increased 105% while exports to these countries have increased 73%.

The globalization of California’s food economy undermines small-scale and sustainable producers and food-related businesses all along the food chain. Though the state is...
ISEC wins Guild of Food Writers Award

‘...like all good educators [ISEC] is committed to reaching everyone who expresses the tiniest spark of interest, whatever their initial level of understanding; to clarifying the issues at hand; and most importantly to giving the reader or listener a strong sense that they too can make an invaluable difference at both a local and a global level. The overall impact of the Toolkit is encouraging, empowering and immediate...’

—Guild of Food Writers Panel of Judges.

In May, we received an award from The UK Guild of Food Writers for our ‘Local Food Programme Toolkit’. The Derek Cooper Award for Investigative or Campaigning Journalism recognises the increasing importance of work focusing on news and issues related to food policy. ISEC was honoured to be given this award over many other high-calibre submissions.

The Toolkit was produced last year with an emphasis on ‘education for action’. It contains many indispensable materials for local food activists, including the recently published book ‘Bringing the Food Economy Home,’ which graphically illustrates the problems associated with the global food system. It demonstrates clearly why we need to make the shift towards a local food economy. The audio CDs of our Local Food conference and the book ‘From the Ground Up’ give further understanding of these issues. The Local Food Slideshow and Poster Set allow individuals and organisations to present these arguments to wider audiences in a clear, direct and visual form. The Action Pack gives practical steps towards bringing about change to empower people to take action in their own communities, and includes a comprehensive resource list.

The Toolkit is an invaluable and empowering resource for anyone interested in these issues, whatever their initial level of understanding. It helps to clarify the issues at hand and most importantly gives people a strong sense that they too can make a difference at both a local and a global level.

Going Back to our Roots

The original Roots of Change curriculum was designed in 1991 and although it has been modified and updated several times since then, we felt that it was time to re-think both the contents and the structure. In the past decade, interest in globalisation issues has grown exponentially. Relevant information has become much more available thanks in part to the efforts of the growing network of organizations working on these issues. Recognizing this, we decided to transform the curriculum into eight distinct modules incorporating a wide range of sources, woven together with ISEC’s unique voice. Each module will contain guided study questions as well as workshop ideas, suggested activities and further readings. The modules can be used individually as a study-guide, or as part of the series. The new curriculum is due to be launched in 2004. We are currently seeking funding to be able to publicise the new resources and further develop Roots of Change and would greatly appreciate donations for this programme.

Despite directing our efforts toward revising the programme, eleven new groups started up in the US and the UK. In the UK, people got together to study our curriculum in Bristol, Ireland and Suffolk, while in the US, groups met from coast to coast from Las Vegas to Missoula, Massachusetts to California.

the fourth largest agricultural economy in the world, bringing in $28 billion a year, over 75% of this goes to the largest 6% of farmers. As in regions around the world, most farmers in California are struggling to make a living. In an effort to compete in the global food economy, they are pushed into environmentally-harmful practices that threaten the long-term viability of agriculture.

Consumers also suffer. In California, the use of toxic pesticides has increased in recent years and drinking water is contaminated with agricultural chemicals. The state’s agricultural areas suffer from some of the dirtiest air in the country and food-borne illness is on the rise. Furthermore, corporate control and concentration of ownership in the food system mean that despite the appearance of diversity in the supermarket aisle, consumer choice is more and more limited and the economic benefits of the industry are accruing to an ever-smaller minority. ISEC’s upcoming local food report, due out in Spring 2004, makes the connections in California’s food and farming crisis, and offers compelling and strategic solutions to this dismal situation.
Unplug your Mind!

by Steven Gorelick

One of ISEC’s goals is to reveal the threads that link seemingly isolated problems. The mainstream media, by contrast, systematically avoids making connections - even obvious ones - when doing so challenges the dominant economic model. Consider some events of the past year, all of which are fundamentally connected to the energy-intensive global economy. Though the connections may seem obvious, the mainstream media (particularly in the US) did their best to obscure them:

First, there was the scorching heat wave that struck Europe in August, the worst in recorded history. Forest fires raged in Portugal, Spain and France. Farm animals died and crops shriveled in Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic and Serbia. The temperature in London climbed above 100 degrees F for the first time ever. Thousands of people died from the heat, including an estimated 15,000 in France alone.

Atmospheric scientists have warned us to expect events like this, thanks to human-induced climate change. But rather than link the deaths of thousands of people, most of them in France, to global warming, the media focused on the shortcomings of the French themselves, including “the widespread lack of air conditioning” in that country. This last ‘explanation’ turns an event connected to the profligate use of energy into an argument for still more energy consumption: buy more air conditioners and all will be well!

The media also supported business as usual in reporting on the biggest blackout in North American history, caused by a cascading failure of the electric grid. There was no scrutiny of the economy’s huge and growing dependence on energy, no look at the drawbacks of our highly centralized power infrastructure, and no consideration of decentralized renewable energy options. Instead, we got a heavy dose of sound bites, including President Bush’s “wake-up call” to modernize our “old and antiquated” energy infrastructure. Renewable energy did get some mention - usually an afterthought quickly dismissed because of the substantial “subsidies” needed to make that option “competitive”. No connection was made between the miserly support for renewables and the lavish subsidies that will be granted to “modernize” the electric grid or the hundreds of billions in tax dollars this centralized infrastructure has already received.

Finally, there is the biggest news story of the year, the war on Iraq. Almost everywhere in the world, people understood the link between this war and the oil that lies beneath Iraqi soil - the second largest known oil reserve in the world. But in America, the media helped obscure even so blatantly obvious a connection. Instead they dutifully focused attention on spurious propaganda: weapons of mass destruction, links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, and the spread of democracy through the Middle East. It’s therefore no surprise that on the eve of the war almost half of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A month after ‘major hostilities’ ended, 22 percent of the American public believed Iraq used weapons of mass destruction during the war.

People in countries without America’s ‘free press’ might have believed the war had something to do with the oil that lubricates the global economy, but Americans certainly weren’t falling for that.

All of this confirms to me the conclusion of a recent book on the impact of television news: the more you watch, the less you know. Thankfully, there are an increasing number of trustworthy sources of information. At ISEC we aim to provide a probing and accessible analysis of world events. We hope that our unconventional approach and educational materials enable people all over the world to make the connections needed to help shape a positive future.

ISEC’s Associate Directors

ISEC’s Associate Directors, Tracy Worcester and Zac Goldsmith, have both been prominent figures in the UK environmental movement for many years. Lady Worcester has worked with a number of environmental groups, including Friends of the Earth. For the last ten years she has provided valuable guidance to ISEC in her role as Associate Director, as well as representing ISEC at numerous events. This year she presented ISEC’s Local Food Roadshow around the UK. Tracy featured in several articles in the press. One of her own articles on the state of farming in Poland was published in The Spectator.

Zac Goldsmith, now the Editor of The Ecologist magazine (the foremost environmental magazine in the UK), has worked with ISEC in different capacities for many years. Over the past year, he has attracted much attention in the UK media and appeared as a guest speaker on television and at several high-profile events, including Hardtalk and Question Time on BBC television and the Schumacher Lectures. Interviews and articles have appeared in both alternative and mainstream press, including The Observer, The Guardian and The Times. He has also been instrumental in setting up FARM, a new campaigning organisation working to ensure a viable future for independent and family farms.