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Press Release

ECONOMICS OF HAPPINESS HITS LADAKH

A 2-day international conference, ‘Economics of Happiness’, came to a conclusion on Saturday September 21st at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (Deemed to be University) in Choglamsar, Ladakh. The conference was jointly hosted by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (Deemed to be University), Local Futures, Julay Ladakh, and the Himalayan Film House.

This marked the 21st International Economics of Happiness Conference in a series of conferences organised by Local Futures in various countries, including Australia, the USA, Italy, Japan, Korea and the UK, over the past decade. The conference series, which has been hailed as antidote to despair, is responding to unprecedented challenges facing humanity and the planet today: from climate change and ecological destruction to the breakdown of community, from a mental health crisis to growing wealth inequality and unemployment. Both richer and poorer nations are seeing epidemics of depression and suicide. With the gap between rich and poor widening worldwide and decision-making moving away from communities to distant, centralised structures, conflict and violence are on the rise. Even in Ladakh, these modern problems are increasingly apparent, and the future looks unsure.

But beyond diagnosing these crises and highlighting the systemic connections between them, the conferences aim to focus on the hope to be found in deep and systemic solutions through re-localisation and ecological and cultural re-vitalisation. Local communities and governments around the world are taking action, and Ladakh is no exception – for example, the LAHDC’s *Mission Organic Ladakh* commits to converting the entirety of Ladakh into 100 percent organic farming by 2025, and various grassroots organisations are working to rebuild locally interdependent economic systems and community. What’s more, both within Ladakh and globally, we are witnessing a powerful trend of younger people searching for alternative forms of socially-just and ecologically-sustainable development.

The first day of the conference, September 20th, coincided with the International Climate Strike calling on people everywhere to demonstrate in demand of strong and urgent action on the climate crisis. Conference participants and speakers showed their solidarity by assembling on the steps of the CIBS auditorium with signs calling for “system change, not climate change.”

With hundreds of participants – Ladakhi, Indian and foreign – during the two days, the conference at CIBS provided an opportunity and a platform for networking and mutual learning between local Ladakhis and guests from outside with a rich pool of inspiring plenary sessions, issue-specific workshops, and stalls by environmental and cultural preservation NGOs and local Ladakhi food enterprises.

International luminaries like Helena Norberg-Hodge – author of *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* and director of Local Futures – and Satish Kumar – peace and environmental activist, and founder of Resurgence magazine and Schumacher College in the UK – inspired the audience with impassioned talks about the importance of reweaving community and compassionate re-connection between humans and the Earth.

Indian conservationist and author Ashish Kothari spoke eloquently about the rich collection of living alternatives to industrial growth-based development that are already existing across India, showing clearly the viability of ecologically sustainable and culturally rich futures. Afsar Jafri from the international small-farmer advocacy group GRAIN starkly spelled out the severe threats to Indian agriculture and consumers from globalisation and free-trade treaties that will throw open the country's food markets to powerful foreign agribusiness industries. However, he also shared how across the country farmer's movements for food sovereignty are pushing back against this fate, showing that locally-based agro-ecology is the solution for both secure and safe livelihoods for farmers, ecological security and sustainability, and nutritious and adequate food for consumers.

In his inaugural speech, Geshe Dakpa Kalsang, Dean of Student Welfare at CIBS questioned the mainstream belief that only economic growth and material accumulation can yield happiness. Ancient wisdom traditions teach otherwise, and this is affirmed by the example of rich countries where people with abundant amounts of money nevertheless suffer from mental illness, stress and insomnia and rely on drugs.

Similarly, Keibo Oiwa, founder of the Sloth Club in Japan and author of *Slow is Beautiful*, poignantly illustrated the cultural and spiritual dead-end of industrial growth-based development, sharing the experience of his home country of Japan where technological sophistication, monetary wealth and near-total urbanisation have not translated into human well-being, but rather deep psychological and spiritual impoverishment and ecological degradation. He lamented the fact that, unlike a place like Ladakh, industrialised countries like Japan have no villages to go back to, and no elders from whom to still re-learn traditional place-based knowledge. Ladakh, by that standard, is in a far better position to respond to an uncertain future marked by climate disruption and ecological breakdown, and to become a model to which industrialised countries will need to look as the high-energy and high-consumption economic system gets exhausted.

This theme also featured in discussions at the conference about the perils and possibilities for Ladakh at this critical historical juncture when the region has been granted Union Territory status, but much uncertainty remains about how this will be utilised and what sort of future society will be pursued. Sonam Wangchuk, founder of SECMOL and HIAL, delivered a rousing speech articulating the urgency of this situation and laying out a vision for a localised, re-ruralised future Ladakh that could, with the right implementation and commitment, become a beacon for the world. In his plenary talk, Snow Leopard Conservancy director Tsewang Namgail similarly called for a development model that is 'slow, sensible and sustainable.'

The knowledge and wisdom of the elders, of the traditional farming and pastoralist practices, so long denigrated as “backward”, “unscientific” and “superstitious” were presented in a radically different light by speakers including renowned film-maker Stanzin Dorjai Gya and independent scholar Padma Rigzin. The modern technological worldview, while being deemed “rational”, has pushed the entire planet to the brink of collapse, while traditional beliefs and practices sustained the land and its human communities since time immemorial. Both speakers scrutinised the role that the modern education system has played in perpetuating a deep bias against the traditional and sustainable and towards the industrial and technological. Both were taught in school as children to disvalue the beliefs and practices of their farming and shepherding parents and grandparents, to disdain traditional Ladakhi food and to aspire towards the urban. In the face of planetary crisis, the validity of this kind of education system, still dominating today, was radically questioned by these and other speakers at the conference.

A total of 21 concurrent workshop sessions during the conference’s 2 days provided participants with a wide range of opportunities for deeper engagement with knowledgeable and experienced speakers on specific issues including: revival of natural building; strengthening local food and farming in Ladakh; zero-waste; mental health and globalisation; alternative education in India and beyond; and rethinking tourism. There were also well-attended sessions on youth perspectives on the future of Ladakh and possibilities for a sustainable future under UT, with Ladakhi civil society leaders in conversation with experts from other parts of India.

‘Walking the talk’ of localisation, the conference featured a number of local Ladakhi food enterprises to provide nourishing and delicious meals, drinks and snacks for participants, at the same time giving a boost to these enterprises and the local farmers that supply them. No disposable plates, cups or cutlery was allowed, making the conference nearly zero-waste.

The conference concluded with a cultural performance and celebration by the traditional dance group from CIBS, eventually enlisting many of the audience members in the final dance. Participants left with a sense of both urgency and possibility to build a better future based not on endless competition, growth and wealth, but on cooperation, sufficiency and connection.

For more information about the conference and speakers:

<https://ladakh-economics-of-happiness-conference.localfutures.org/>

For more information about the conference series:

<https://www.localfutures.org/events-calendar/past-conferences/>

<https://www.localfutures.org/past-conference/ladakh-india-2019/>