Local Futures’ Project Coordinator Alex Jensen reflects on the 21st International Economics of Happiness Conference in Ladakh, India, which took place on September 20th-21st, 2019.

The capstone of this year’s Ladakh Project, the 21st ‘Economics of Happiness’ conference took place on the 20th-21st of September at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS), jointly hosted by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, the CIBS, Local Futures, Julay Ladakh, and the Himalayan Film House.

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 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 including Local Futures Founder/Director Helena Norberg-Hodge 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 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 urbanization have not translated into human well-being, but rather deep psychological and spiritual impoverishment and ecological degradation.

Keibo lamented the fact that, unlike a place like Ladakh, industrialized 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 industrialized 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 utilized 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 localized, re-ruralized 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 scrutinized 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 globalization; 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 localization, 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.

*Photos by Sonam Dorjai*

For more information about the conference, videos, photos, speakers, go to:


https://ladakh-economics-of-happiness-conference.localfutures.org
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Alex has worked with Local Futures in the USA and India, where he coordinates our Ladakh Project. He has worked at the Sambhaavnaa Institute of Public Policy and Politics in Himachal Pradesh, India, and represents Local Futures in the Vikalp Sangam/Alternatives India initiative. He has worked with cultural affirmation and agro-biodiversity projects in campesino communities in a number of countries, and is active in environmental health/anti-toxics work.