



## *Tackling the Root Causes of Hunger*

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Everything changed for Anna Lappé in middle school when she took a trip with her mother to rural Ohio. There, for the first time, she met some of the farmworkers who harvest the food that finds its way to our plates. While Anna had been raised to think about where her food came from, until that trip, the ideas had always been abstract for her.

Growing up, Anna split her time between her parents' homes, both of whom were passionate activists with a common goal: to make the world a healthier, safer, more equitable place. Typical family dinner conversations revolved around issues of world hunger, social injustice, or the dangers of toxic chemicals. That trip to Ohio brought home to her those many conversations over the years.

Since the 1970s, Anna's mother, Frances Moore Lappé, had been exploring the root causes of hunger and inequality in the United States and beyond. Through her mother's work, Anna learned firsthand about the impact of United States foreign policy, development aid, and farm programs. She learned about inequality in the United States and the exploitation of the people who grow the country's food and how farmworkers are regularly exposed to toxic pesticides. On that trip to Ohio, Anna was deeply moved as she listened to one woman tell how she had been diagnosed with a cancer that was probably caused by pesticides she came into contact with while working the fields.

While growing up middle class, the plight of farmworkers in rural Ohio may have seemed a world away, but she was aware that all of us are implicated in their situation. She knew that the lettuce, grapes, and tomatoes that come to dinner tables from thousands of miles away also come with grave human and environmental costs.

Anna knew she had to do something. Luckily, she had her mother to guide her. Frances Moore Lappé had sparked a revolution with her book, *Diet for a Small Planet*, which has sold over three and a half million copies since it was published in 1971. The book radically reshaped the conversation about hunger, helping people see that the real cause of hunger is not a scarcity of food, but a scarcity of democracy and how our industrial animal agriculture squanders abundance in raising factory farmed livestock. The book urges people to adopt a healthy, plant-centered diet to minimize the environmental costs of our food consumption and provides recipes for such a diet. But more than that, the book encourages its readers to see themselves as actively shaping the world around them, through everyday choices like what they eat to big choices like what they do with their lives.

Her mother had always been a role model for Anna: she sparked Anna's curiosity about social justice and the food system. Some of Anna's most vivid childhood memories are of spending time at her mother's office at the non-profit she cofounded, the Institute for Food and Development Policy known as Food First. She remembers afternoons on the office couch reading institute newsletters and evenings stuffing donation envelopes for fundraising drives with her mother's coworkers. Like her mother, her father also had committed his life to rooting out injustice, as a scientist and medical ethicist. These values inspired Anna to study international affairs and political economy in graduate school, where she learned about the political and economic concepts behind the injustice she had learned about growing up.

Around the 30th anniversary of her mother's first book, Anna had an idea. She proposed that her mom write a sequel: If the original book's premise was that hunger was caused by a scarcity of democracy, where around the world were there social movements and civic leaders tackling those roots to create thriving communities? The book, too, would

include recipes, bringing to life meals that celebrate earth's bounty. Her mother agreed to do it on one condition: that Anna work with her.

Together, Anna and her mother travelled the world, covering five continents; meeting passionate leaders and investigating ways to build real food democracy. They spent time in India, Bangladesh, Poland, Kenya, France, and Brazil. The result of their journey is a book called *Hope's Edge*.

After the trip, Anna continued to work with her mother. The two founded the Small Planet Institute and the Small Planet Fund, to raise money for some of the groups profiled in *Hope's Edge*. Since then, the fund has expanded: it now supports other organizations working to protect the planet and reduce global inequalities. To date, the Small Planet Fund has given away nearly two million dollars and two of its grantees have won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Working with her mother, Anna realized the importance of generations working together for change. Anna sees the work of social change to address our challenges as a kind of "relay race:" people learn, work, and pass the baton from one generation to the next. As an activist, she always remembers the generations before her whose work she is building on and she envisions how future generations will take over from what the activists of today.

"Young people offer fresh ideas and perspectives, while older activists can share what they have learned through many years of experience," she says. She adds, "A leader is someone who takes responsibility for the world. We need leaders of all generations to solve the world's most pressing challenges."

Today, Anna is an advocate for better food systems that will protect the environment, promote health, and provide quality jobs with dignity. She has published two more books and contributed to more than 12 others. Her most recent is *Diet for a Hot Planet*, which focuses on the link between the global food system and the climate crisis—and how food can be a key climate solution. In the book, she reveals the climate impact of industrial agriculture, particularly meat and dairy production. And she shows how sustainable farming and ranching can help reduce the climate impacts of the sector, even pull carbon out of the atmosphere to lock it in our soils. "Farmers and ranchers need to be part of any feasible climate solution," she says. "Unless we stop agribusiness driven rainforest destruction and push for a radical transformation in how we farm, the greenhouse gas emissions from this sector will continue to rise and contribute to climate change."

With these ideas in mind, Anna founded Real Food Media, which exposes food industry misinformation and shares the stories of food movement leaders around the country. She also founded and leads a grantmaking program for a family foundation that supports grassroots change around the world. Today, her work aims to help people reflect on the environmental and social implications of the food they eat and to see how they, too, can be part of building a food system that promotes health, animal welfare, sustainability, and worker wellbeing. "Taking on food is of critical importance if we are to create a sustainable future for people living on this planet," she says.

Equity, transparency, and accountability are Anna's key principles. Today the 21.5 million food workers in the United States are some of the most underpaid and most exploited employees in the economy. Women, people of color, and immigrants are especially vulnerable. Many of the practices used in the industry remain opaque, and powerful lobbyists often stand in the way of change.

But Anna will not give up hope. She calls herself a "possibilist." Neither an optimist nor a pessimist, she says a possibilist sees herself as someone who is ready and willing to adapt to the constantly changing world we live in.

Anna's unwavering curiosity, and her passion for the work she is doing, help her keep going even when the way forward is discouraging. "The fight will be long and hard, but you never know what is possible until you try," she says. She adds, "Activism can be a great source of solace and energy."

Through her activism, Anna helps continue her mother Frances' legacy, working towards a world where people everywhere have access to nutritious food that is produced ethically and sustainably.

*In a world of plenty, no one, not a single person, should go hungry.*

*But almost 1 billion still do not have enough to eat. I want to see an end to hunger everywhere within my lifetime.*

**Ban Ki-Moon, United Nations Secretary-General**

**Call to Action:** Make a difference by being conscientious about where their food comes from and choosing products from farms that take care of their workers and the planet. **Links:** Real Food Media & [Small Planet Institute](#) & [Small Planet Fund](#)

Stone Soup Leadership Institute  
[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)  
[www.soup4youngworld.com](http://www.soup4youngworld.com)