Arguably, the most important economic issue facing the world today is the persistent poverty endured worldwide by over one billion people. Educators on issues of world hunger work with great vigor and skill to raise student’s awareness of this and other social justice issues. Yet one part of the high school curriculum—the economics class—is typically currently structured in such a way that it largely works against inspiring meaningful action on hunger.

Most economics textbooks treat global poverty quite briefly, if at all. When it is discussed, it is treated not as a problem of social justice, but as a simply technical problem of insufficient market penetration and modernization. More investment in agriculture, industrial machinery, and education, the standard treatment implies, will eventually cause poorer countries to “catch up,” in terms of income and lifestyles, with richer countries. Because poor countries often have very little savings to spare for investment purposes, investment by foreign-owned companies is often looked at as a primary development tool. Poor countries are also encouraged to borrow—from richer governments, foreign-owned banks, and international organizations such as the World Bank—in order to finance increased investments. Countries are encouraged to reduce all their barriers to trade and focus on increasing their exports. Governments are supposed to shrink, in order to make more room for the private sector. High school students are often encouraged to believe, by the standard economics teaching materials, that world hunger can be solved more or less automatically by strict adherence to the mantra of “private property, free markets, and economic growth.”

Nowadays, however, development experts and even many mainstream economists have grave doubts about the validity of this simplistic and optimistic story. While living standards have risen in some areas, they have fallen in others. And in places where hunger has decreased, this has not necessarily been due to the sorts of policies advocated in the textbooks. While a few countries, such as Singapore and South Korea, have experienced rapid economic growth from export-led industrialization, many countries have gained little—or even suffered from—the advice to welcome foreign companies, borrow, and open their economies to trade. Some foreign investments, for example, simply create industrial “enclaves” that do little to promote investment or innovation elsewhere in the economy. Multinational corporations have sometimes engaged in damaging practices,
such as colluding with local leaders to violently suppress worker unrest. Foreign debt has become such a burden on many countries that a disproportionate amount of their national incomes goes to paying interest to rich countries. Cutbacks in government spending have often led to the slashing of health care and nutrition programs.

The relation of development goals to ecological concerns is also a subject of lively debate. The impossibility of the “catch up” hypothesis is most clearly illustrated by analysts’ estimate that getting everyone in the world to a U.S. lifestyle would require an extra two to four planets to provide materials and absorb wastes. Yet, from a global justice perspective, it is clearly unfair to ask poorer countries, in which many people are still poorly nourished, housed, and educated, to simply halt their economic growth. Many are now calling for ecologically sustainable growth in poorer countries, and reduced growth in richer countries, to raise living standards among those who need it most. This, however, is easier said than done—particularly as long as richer countries remain obsessed with maintaining and raising their own high consumption levels.

Understanding the means of achieving ecologically sustainable, healthy economies requires going outside of the story taught in the economics textbooks. Teaching materials that take a more real-world and historical approach bring in other issues, such as the contributions to rising living standards that come from a non-depleted endowment of natural resources, social and economic rights for women, a lack of disease (especially AIDS and malaria), a stable and non-corrupt government, absence of foreign military interventions, freedom from warped economic patterns created by colonialism, civil peace, and the “social capital” created by trust and good social relations.

The activities of households and governments—neglected by the usual curricula’s emphasis on private entrepreneurship—are also critically important in raising living standards. Households are where nutrition, care, and basic education are “invested” in the next generation of workers. When “shrinking government” policies, then, cut back on social services, increase job-family stress, or increase child poverty, they can have a very negative effect on well-being and growth. Government investment in infrastructure (such as roads and communications), basic scientific and technological research, health and education, and environmental and safety regulation are also often vital to fostering increases in well-being. Historically speaking, many instances of rapid economic growth were due in large part to extensive government regulation of investment and trade. Much industrialization in Britain and the United States, for example, was accomplished during years in which high tariffs on imports protected domestic producers.

Industrialization of Japan and much of Europe also depended on government-led deliberate “industrial policies” to build up their economies. The historical record does not support the purely market-led approach advocated in the textbooks.

Materials are available that can be used in the high school economics classroom to counteract the naïve view of global poverty given in the standard textbooks. A few suggestions include:

★ While the PBS (www.pbs.org) educational web site “Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy” takes something of an overall pro-growth, free-trade slant, some of its component units (such as video clips and lesson plans) give a more rich and nuanced picture. Its unit on economic growth—which includes discussion of distributional issues—is visually rich and comes with a guide for educators.

★ Jubilee USA Network, part of an international movement lobbying for cancellation of the debt of poor countries, maintains a list of resources, including print educational materials and films (www.jubileeusa.org). Be aware that some (but not all) of these materials are designed for use with church groups.

★ The readable essay “Kicking Away the Ladder: How the Economic and Intellectual Histories of Capitalism Have Been Re-Written to Justify Neo-Liberal Capitalism,” by Ha-Joon Chang, documents how import-protection tariffs and subsidies that are now forbidden to developing countries played key roles in the development of Britain and the United States. It is available from www.paecon.net.

★ Students may be interested in learning about the “fair trade” movement, which seeks to make international trade more beneficial for producers in countries of the South, and often to make it more ecologically sustainable as well. Transfair USA is one organization involved in this movement, and its website (www.transfairusa.org) offers resources (including fact sheets and links) that could be useful in teaching.

Mark H. Maier and Julie A. Nelson are the authors of Introducing Economics: A Critical Guide for Teaching by (M.E. Sharpe, 2007), a volume intended to help instructors counter the narrowness of many high school economics curriculum materials. Following the outline of a typical high school textbook, the guide gives a broader view of arguments on topics including consumption, labor, corporations, the environment, and globalization, as well as suggestions for classroom materials and activities. This article is adapted from Chapter 16, “Economic Growth and Development.” More suggestions of resources are available at their website, www.introducingeconomics.org.
O
de would not normally pick up a book called *Introducing Economics* with expectations for an exciting evening. As economist Robert Heilbroner is reported to have remarked “Mathematics has given economics rigor, but alas, also mortis.” So the good news is that *Introducing Economics* manages to be both rigorous, and un-deadly.

This is a book meant for high school teachers assigned to teach economics. Although the subject is relatively new to the high school curriculum, Maier and Nelson note, most states now mandate some economics teaching in the high school curriculum, and half of all high school graduates take an economics course. How do their teachers learn the content, since many of them would never have had a course in economics themselves?

There are, of course, textbooks, and an abundance of supplementary materials available to help teachers out, in print and on line. But “[M]ost available textbooks are slanted toward free market, small-government solutions,” Maier and Nelson observe, and many of the available supplementary materials “are sponsored by groups with a vested interest in standard neoclassical economics.” This slant is far too limiting, the authors believe, to fully address the kinds of questions economics tries to answer.

But this book is not designed simply to argue with neoclassical economics; it is intended to expand the vision of the field, to introduce to those who are teaching this often dreaded subject matter the basics of other major schools of economics—Entrepreneurial, Keynesian, Consumer, labor, ecological and the like—in order to provide an intellectual history of the subject. Their hope is to enable teachers new to economics, or unhappy with limits of standard texts, to evaluate—and expand on—the viewpoints they encounter in these texts as well as in the National Council on Economic Education’s Voluntary National Content Standards. To introduce beginning economics teachers to a broader set of materials, ideas, and internet resources is to enable them to go outside standard texts and find something exciting to use in the classroom.

After an introduction that offers “A primer on Major Schools of Economics”—designed to answer the question “where did this idea come from?”—the body of the book consists of fourteen chapters that take up one by one the topics found in a typical economics course, with commentaries, hints for clear teaching, and directions to resource materials for each.

Consider their handling of NCEE Standard #1 “Productive resources are limited. Therefore, people cannot have all the goods and services they want; as a result they must choose some things and give up others.” What such a formulation leaves out, the authors note, is that resources are unequally distributed to start with so that “some people get to choose between Jaguars and Maseratis, while others have to ‘choose’ between medicine and rent.” The seemingly incapable reality that people have basic needs—like medicine and rent— is given short shrift. Many neoclassical economists, they note, actually dismiss “need” as a meaningful economic concept “on the grounds that needs are subjective, whereas relative ‘wants’ for one item compared to another will be revealed in market demands.”

Or consider NCEE Standard #9. “Competition among sellers lowers costs and prices, and encourages producers to produce more of what consumers are willing and able to buy. Competition among buyers increases prices and allocates goods and services to those people who are willing

(Continued on page 4)
In their more extended discussions of each of their topics, the authors are so thoughtful and enlightening that it is difficult to choose a single example. But here is one: “Economic Goals.” Many textbooks, the authors note, don’t even bother to “explicitly discuss the goals we would like our economics to achieve, but simply launch into discussions of consumer desires, efficiency and GDP growth.” This leaves out, among other things, survival of the human species in a time when the environment is under stress and when “15,000 children a day die worldwide from malnutrition-related diseases.” This narrow focus leaves out, as well, what should be the real goal of a functioning economy, human happiness, whose sources are not “economically” obvious when abundant evidence has made it clear that happiness is not a necessary—or perhaps even usual—consequence of simply fulfilling one’s “consumer desires” efficiently and thereby raising GDP.

Although the flow of topics is meant to reflect that of a typical course, from “What is Economics?” through “Gross Domestic Product” and “Fiscal and Monetary Policy” to “Global Economics and Trade,” the authors urge readers not to be tied to a linear use of the book, but to zero in (using the detailed index at the back where necessary) on specific topics that seem relevant at the time. Right after the table of contents, they helpfully provide a much longer “List of Activities and Resources” arranged alphabetically from “Advertising: The Tricks of the Trade,” through “Employer Power,” to “Unemployment.” They also provide at the back of the book a selection of sources of resource material, annotated to alert readers to the biases they may encounter.

One of my dearest friends, properly tamed through her growing years by a steady dose of Catholic school, went on to a Catholic college whose sociology department was run by a Marxist nun. That’s how I would love to have learned at a vulnerable age that everything I had been taught was not necessarily true, but barring such a fortuitous combination of circumstances, one can only hope that every high school teacher in the United States assigned to teach economics—whether as a separate class or part of another—gets hold of a copy of *Introducing Economics* and uses its insights and resources to enrich her own thinking and that of her students. How much wiser this nation’s political debates would be if we had generations of high school graduates trained to think through the economic assumptions so many of us have been taught to live by.

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*and able to pay the most for them*  Strikingly, as the authors note, the issue of market power is nowhere to be found in much teaching about “competition.” The idea that large transnational corporations can restrict competition or that unregulated competition might have social costs, are entirely missing from the NCEE standards.
I
n the state of Yaracuy in the northwest of Venezuela, a small flag flaps in the wind, rising above a dusty field dotted with tiny green sprouts of corn. Nearby sit a makeshift shelter, some agricultural equipment, and a banner on wooden poles. This is the newly formed Pele el Ojo Cooperative, and though it may not look like much, it represents a lot.

This had been the site of a small farming community, which was violently occupied by a wealthy landholder in the 1950s. Today, some of the very people who were expelled from this land are part of the process of reclaiming it - together with their children and grandchildren. Now that they are back on their land, they are working to transform it based on a shared vision of what it can become. “We plan to create a diversified system with different types of crops to provide better food for the community,” explain several of the elders. “We will restore the soil, which has been poisoned over time, using ecological practices rather than toxic agrochemicals. We want to move away from a system that makes the earth and people sick to one that is healthy for the people and the earth.”

A Different Approach

The process of transformation of the Pele el Ojo Cooperative in many ways symbolizes Venezuela’s path towards food sovereignty, as part of a broader struggle for national sovereignty and a transformed society. (1) Food sovereignty, in short, is the right of people to determine their own food and agricultural policies. It involves restoring control over food access and food production from large corporations and international financial institutions back to individual nations/tribes/peoples - and ultimately, to those who produce the food and those who eat it.

Article 305 of the new Venezuelan constitution adopted in 1999 not only guarantees food security for all, but also guarantees food security through a stable, sustainable, and largely self-sufficient domestic food system. Furthermore, it promotes sustainable agriculture and rural development. In essence, this article is guaranteeing food sovereignty.

I have been to Venezuela on three occasions to learn what national support for food sovereignty actually looks like on the ground. Each visit has helped me piece together a picture of Venezuela’s advances in this area, along with a better understanding of the challenges that remain.

Land for Food, Food for People

"Agricultural land, first and foremost, is for producing food, food for people”

These words of lifelong farmer and political leader Braulio Alvarez are simple, yet carry years of intense struggle over the right to land for farming. Disparities in land access and ownership have historically been so extreme that, according to a 1997 agricultural census, 5% of the largest land owners controlled 75% of the land, and 75% of the smallest landowners controlled only 6% of the land. (2) Much of this land in the hands of the large landholders sits idle or underused.

In 2001, the passage of the Law of the Land gave communities a legal framework for organizing themselves to settle and farm the idle lands. A powerful example is the Aracal Cooperative, formed on newly recovered land totaling 2553 acres. The land, originally owned by the state and illegally occupied by a single family, now belongs to the 150 families who are members of the co-op. Together, they manage a sustainable agriculture system of livestock, fruit trees, and mixed crops of vegetables, grains, and legumes. Most of their crops are sold directly through community markets.

Aracal was granted a title to the land in 2004, and the title belongs to the entire community, rather than to any one individual. In order to retain the title, the community must ensure that the land is producing food for people. Not only are community members granted secure land access, they are charged with being the stewards of the land, ensuring its productivity in order to work with nature.

Not only are Venezuelans working to increase domestic food production; they are looking at how food is being produced. In conversations with Miguel Angel Nuñez of the Institute for the Production and Research of Tropical Agriculture (IPIAT), he describes an agroecological approach to food production as critical to achieving true food sovereignty. (3) Agroecology

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essentially means farming with nature rather than against it - building up soil as the basis for productivity; working in sync with the cycles of nature; using natural inputs; etc. Agroecology provides a viable alternative to the industrial model of agriculture, which degrades the soil, creates extra waste while requiring extra cost, and fails to reach the same levels of productivity as more appropriate, locally-adapted systems. An agroecological approach to food sovereignty requires looking not outside, but within communities, for traditional crop varieties and growing techniques adapted to local microclimates and local cultures. This means seeking out and valuing the wisdom of typically marginalized populations, such as women, indigenous, and afro-descendants.

Communities Feeding Themselves

The efforts to bolster domestic food production in Venezuela are being met with efforts to increase the ability of communities to feed themselves. The country has over 6,000 casas de alimentación, or feeding houses, which provide nutritious food to those who need it most (pregnant women, children, the elderly, etc.), while serving as hubs of community gathering and organizing. These programs are primarily based out of people's homes, and many were started by volunteers, purely to meet needs of their communities. They are now run through a remarkable grassroots/government partnership: the government provides food and kitchen equipment, and members of the community prepare the food and keep the sites running. Venezuela also has a national network of subsidized food markets, Mercal. Food in each of the over 15,000 Mercal outlets around the country is sold at 20-50% off regular prices, and the stores are open to anyone of any income level.

A Vision of Food Sovereignty

Many challenges still remain along Venezuela’s path to food sovereignty – for instance, lack of adequate infrastructure to get food from farms to markets. Nevertheless, there is a clear commitment on the part of the people and the government to making it happen. And while the problems of Venezuela’s food system have not changed overnight, the advances towards food sovereignty made in a relatively short time point to an important process underway - one that is worth paying attention to.

This article is excerpted from a longer piece available at www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/cs_vfsv.html.

Footnotes

1. Venezuela’s food sovereignty initiatives cannot be examined in isolation, as they are part and parcel of the country’s broader political and social change. Venezuela’s political process is known as the Bolivarian Revolution, named for Simon Bolivar. Bolivar led struggles for independence throughout Latin America in the early 19th century, and has come to represent the popular struggle for Latin American self-determination and liberation from imperialist and colonialist forces. These ideals figure heavily within the Bolivarian Revolution and are important in the struggle for food sovereignty. A collection of articles in English on the Bolivarian Revolution is available at www.venezuelanalysis.com.

2. Gregory Wilpert, “Land for People not for Profit in Venezuela,” Venezuelananalysis.com, 23 August 2005

3. For a collection of articles by Miguel Angel Nuñez on agroecology and food sovereignty in Venezuela, see www.inmotionmagazine.com

Christina Schiavoni is International Coordinator at WHY. She can be reached at christina@worldhungryear.org.

KIDS NEEDS YOU!

With this issue, we bring to a close our annual fund raising drive for 2007. If you have already sent in your contribution, we thank you and you need not read any further.

For those who have not taken the time or simply forgotten to send in your contribution, it is not too late. Despite the fact that we were honored by Teaching Tolerance Magazine as a program that “breaks the mold”, 2007 fund raising was not only less than our target but was less than the prior year. This means that without your help we will not be able to achieve many of the goals and objectives planned for this year.

So please if this newsletter is important to you, take a moment and send your contribution to us so that we can continue to provide you with thought-provoking articles in 2008.

Peace,

Larry and Jane
Involvement in the fight against hunger is a central priority of my life. But this is not something that happened all at once. It is a product of gradual evolution. At various points in my life I have been presented with opportunities to address this problem – all I had to do was say yes.

The earliest instance of this occurred in the mid-1960’s, about the time I graduated from college. I received in the mail an appeal from the N.A.A.C.P. Emergency Relief Fund that focused on minority families in the South who were too poor to purchase food stamps. Contributions to this fund would be used to help these families buy food stamps, converting a small gift into a much larger amount of purchasing power. I was impressed by the good that could be accomplished and I became a regular contributor to the fund.

By the mid-1970’s I was teaching political science at Fordham University but none of my academic focus was on the hunger issue. I was, however, pursuing this calling outside my professional life. I attended a workshop on world hunger offered by the American Friends Service Committee, where I learned for the first time that there was more than enough food in the world to feed everyone. About the same time I received in the mail a flyer about a new organization called Bread for the World. It was applying the Common Cause approach to the hunger issue, working through churches and their parishioners to lobby federal officials to support anti-hunger policies and programs, both in the U.S. and abroad. I became a member of Bread for the World and began participating in their annual legislative campaigns.

Another opportunity offered itself, this time in academia, when Fordham established a Values Program, encouraging faculty to develop courses that explicitly raised value questions in relation to some of the major issues of the day. The committee that established the program listed a number of relevant topics, including world hunger. I made a proposal to teach a course on the Politics of Hunger and it was accepted. From that time on the hunger issue became a central theme of both my avocation and my vocation. With the department’s support I retooled, moving into the newly-emerging field of political economy and the hunger issue became a permanent component of a number of my courses, including Political Economy of Poverty, Politics and Economic Globalization, and Introduction to Peace and Justice Studies. World hunger and development issues, especially the role of NGO’s (non-governmental organizations), became the central focus of my research and writing.

Meanwhile, opportunities outside the university continued to present themselves. In the early 1980’s I sat next to a staff member from Bread for the World at a workshop. I innocently asked her who the volunteer Congressional District coordinator was in my district, since I wanted to become more active in the organization. When she turned and smiled at me I knew that there was currently no volunteer coordinator in that district, and that the job now was mine. Later I served for six years on Bread’s national board of directors.

When my wife and I attended the 1997 Bread for the World national gathering and lobby day in Washington, D.C., we sat next to a staff member from the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. When the staff member found out I was a Lutheran, she asked if I would become chair of the Metro New York Synod world hunger committee. A month or so later I agreed to serve as chair, a position I held for a decade.

My most recent opportunity to engage in anti-hunger activities occurred two years ago, after one of the students in my course on poverty had completed a research project on an organization called Kids Can Make a Difference. This led to an invitation for me to have dinner with Larry and Jane Levine, at which time I was invited to become a member of the KIDS advisory board. A few days later I gave them my affirmative response.

On June 30th of this year I retired from Fordham University, but I continue to serve as a member of the KIDS advisory board and remain active in Bread for the World and various hunger missions of the Lutheran Church. I am still adjusting to this new reality – and looking forward to the next opportunity I will have to just say yes.

Dr. Martin C. Fergus is Associate Professor, retired, in Political Science Department of Fordham University, Bronx, NY. He currently resides in Minneapolis, MN. He may be reached at fergus@fordham.edu or martinfergus@hotmail.com.
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