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Antidotes to High School Economics (Mis-)Education on World Hunger

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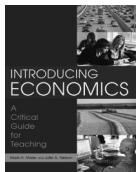
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Finding Solutions Newsletter

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ANTIDOTES TO HIGH SCHOOL ECONOMICS (MIS-) EDUCATION ON WORLD HUNGER...

By Julie A. Nelson and Mark H. Maier

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,

About this issue...

We are especially excited about this issue of the newsletter.

A publisher of curricula recently asked us to review a new book, *Introducing Economics: A Critical Guide For Teaching* written by Mark H. Maier & Julie A. Nelson. We reached out to the authors and they agreed to do an article based upon their curriculum. (pg1)

We sent a copy of the curriculum to Advisory Board member, Dr. Joan Dye Gussow, requesting her to review the book. She made it clear to us that she is not an economist (a fact we were well aware of) but she would read the book and let us know. She was truly blown away as you will see when you read her review. (pg3)

Our good fortune continues with Christina Shiavoni's article dealing with food security in Venezuela. Not only is food security a “hot” topic in today's world, but the relationship between Venezuela and the United States is constantly in the newspapers. Schiavoni takes us behind the headlines describing the vision the people of this country have to become more self sufficient. (pg5)

In the continuation of our People Making a Difference series, Dr. Martin Fergus asks us to simply “say yes.” His life story and involvement with the issue of hunger and poverty serves as a “road map” for all who want to make a difference in the world. (pg7)

We would be interested in hearing comments from you about these articles.

Peace.

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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.*