



INTER PARES

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WHEN THE PEOPLE SPEAK: *Civil Society and Social Change*

Last May, the President of Guatemala suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament, arrested his opposition, imposed harsh censorship and declared himself ruler-by-decree. For a few days the world watched, certain that Guatemala was once again to descend into the cruel violence of a military-backed dictatorship.

But then the people spoke. Courageously and openly, they defied the president and his army. Ignoring the censorship of the media, they denounced the coup and demanded justice and democracy, assisted by international human rights and justice organizations in Canada, Europe and the United States. As a result, the illegal regime was rejected and a new interim President appointed by the Congress.

With the crisis past, the people of Guatemala have continued to press their longer struggle for justice in a land that for five hundred years has institutionalized inequality and repression. The theatre of this ongoing struggle, and its main instrument, is known as *civil society*.

The term "civil society" generally refers to the voluntary political and cultural expression of organized citizens within a society – excluding commerce and industry, which are part of the political economy and international financial systems. The International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development offers a definition which captures the common sense of the term as it is presently most often used: "the sum of all social institutions and associations (excluding the family) which are autonomous, independent of the state,

and capable of significantly influencing public policy".

The coalitions of citizens that transformed the coup in Guatemala is one example of civil society at work. Around the world we see the same

heroic people resisting repression and insisting on justice and change. As in Guatemala, the changes in Eastern Europe were not the beginning of democracy, nor are they a final victory. The fall of the Berlin Wall was the culmination of one stage of a process within civil society, just as the recent resistance in Guatemala was a result of years of struggle and dissent. The peace accords in El Salvador were not won merely on the battlefield, but through an unarmed civilian democracy movement which mobilized daily in the streets and challenged militarism and the institutions of repression in that society.

These struggles continue. Democracy is not merely elections. Democracy is the free and dynamic interaction within civil society to organize people in their own interests to express and debate new visions of society, create change, and hold governments accountable.

Civil society is not automatically open, democratic and free. In many countries, civil society is limited to an elite that controls all cultural, economic and political institutions relating to governance and economic well-being. Civil society too often works to *restrict* the democratic participation of the majority, discriminating on the basis of gender, race, religion and class. In these circumstances, democracy has to be won and protected through the concerted action of organized citizens. To this end, Inter Pares supports activities that promote the freedom and capacity of all citizens to debate and create a social consensus about the directions of their societies and their governments.



Nicaragua National Literacy Campaign

process unfolding: the changes occurring in South Africa, troubled as that country remains, is but another, as is the peace process in El Salvador, and the democracy movements in the Philippines, Burma, and Bangladesh.

What is often missed in interpreting dramatic events is the long, invisible struggle that precedes the events we see in the news. These events are only possible because of the activism of

TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT

Rarely a day goes by when there is not a headline in the news about the process of "globalization" – the internationalization of the institutions of political and economic control. Ordinary people are losing the ability to influence the economic and social policies that affect their lives. Within our own country we are able, in varying degrees, to influence and hold our governments accountable. But how are we to influence the United Nations or international trade agreements, or exercise some control over multinational corporations? And how are we to ensure that in international fora our government acts in our interests, while at the same time not diminishing the interests of people in other countries?

There is increasing recognition that national people's organizations must collaborate internationally on issues of common concern. This collaboration is essential if we are to develop the capacity to influence the international decisions and processes which affect our lives.

For several years, Inter Pares has promoted

this type of international collaboration. We have worked with colleagues in the Third World, for example, in research and advocacy on population issues. We have facilitated South/South and South/North linkages – so important in developing a broader analysis and global strategies. Through this work, Inter Pares has made a small contribution to the evolution of an international people's movement on population – the meeting of people and ideas across borders, leading to mutually supportive work for social change.

Inter Pares has also brought international perspectives on population back to Canada. For example, we are members of the Canadian National Advisory Council, a group formed to make recommendations to the Canadian government in the lead-up to the 1994 UN Conference on Population and Development. The Advisory Council includes Canadians from the fields of international development, human rights, health, the environment, as well as women's organizations, refugee advo-

cates, demographers, church agencies, and Native groups. Inter Pares has participated in this process. In this way, the deliberations of the Advisory Council have been enriched not only by the experiences of a broad range of Canadians, but by the experiences of our overseas partners as well.

Just as groups of people have been meeting in Canada as a prelude to the UN conference, similar dialogues are taking place around the world. In the Philippines, Bangladesh, Uganda, Brazil, the USA and Europe, various groups, particularly women's organizations, have struggled to come to terms with population issues – not always sharing the same perspectives, though often finding agreement on fundamental principles.

The problems related to population, environment and development must be resolved at global levels, and with strategies that address their interrelatedness. To do this, we must commit ourselves to listen to others and strengthen the silenced voices of people around the world.

n MEXICO: *Unveiling the Faces of a New Society*

The recent debate over NAFTA has brought international attention to Mexico's growing inequality in the distribution of wealth, the collapse of workers' rights, the marginalization of indigenous peoples, its severe environmental problems, the violations of human rights' and a political system which is characterized by corruption and electoral fraud.

In recent years, some Mexicans have begun to address these problems through the creation of associations and organizations independent of the government and political parties. Today there are many organizations promoting sustainable development, rural and urban social movements, informal education, micro-enterprise projects, the rights of women, children and indigenous peoples, and the struggle for free and fair elections.

The social and economic integration of Mexico with the rest of North America offers favourable conditions for reforms which could promote the democratization of the Mexican state. Popular participation, however, is indispensable if such a transformation is to occur.

In 1990, Mexican NGOs formed the Convergence of Civil Organizations for Democracy. The Convergence, with 137 member organizations, provides a structure to coordinate actions to strengthen the efforts of groups working to defend their rights and improve their living conditions; to promote a participatory democracy that includes the daily involvement of Mexican citizens and organizations in public affairs; and to ensure the people's right to elect representatives through fair and honest elections free of fraud and deceit.

In Mexico's democratic transition, the presidential elections of August 21, 1994 are of great importance. For two years the Convergence has been engaged in a program to certify the reliability of official results of Mexican elections. In the process, thousands of citizens have received civic training and have observed electoral processes in eleven states. Over the next few months, the

Convergence will build on this experience and focus all its attention on the upcoming presidential elections.

To support its efforts, the Convergence has appealed for international solidarity from organizations in other democratic countries. As an organization within Canadian civil society, Inter Pares supports the program of the Convergence by providing institutional support to the Mexican Academy of Human Rights. Our support allows the Academy to play a major role within the Convergence in the area of civic education and training for election monitoring. Inter Pares has also agreed to coordinate its efforts with other Canadian organizations to inform the Canadian public about the political reality of Mexico, and to ensure Canadian presence in Mexico to provide protection to Mexican monitors throughout the electoral process.

In the new context of economic and social interdependence in the Americas, we must advocate that Mexican authorities demonstrate the same respect and defence of democracy and human rights that, as Canadians, we demand from our own government.

CANADA IN THE WORLD: *Giving Canadians a Voice*

Just as each of us is defined as much by how we relate to our neighbours and our community as by how we live at home, as Canadians we are also defined by how we relate to the wider world. The world is our community. Our security and our future are bound up with that of the entire planet, and our behaviour has a profound impact on others. It is common to hear that our future is threatened or enhanced by events outside; it is far rarer to hear that we ourselves affect, positively and negatively, the lives and opportunities of others.

But we do affect others: in our patterns of consumption, our manufacturing and resource extraction industries, in our trade policies and our extensive foreign investments, in our immigration policies, our tourism, our promotion of the arms industry (presently 12th largest in the world), in our participation in international financial institutions and the United Nations, and in our overseas assistance

programs and our military alliances. None of these things is neutral. They affect us, and they affect others. Together they make up what we call international relations and foreign policy.

In many of these areas the interests of the majority of Canadians are not being met, let alone the interests of people in other parts of the world. Some argue that it is primarily the interests of Canada's business elite and transnational corporations that are served by present foreign policy. Others argue that Canada is far too liberal in its foreign policy, and that we should pay less attention to international obligations and focus more on Canada and Canadian interests.

This debate is important, and with the election of a new government, very timely. It has been several years since the Canadian government has subjected Canada's foreign policy to close public scrutiny. There are a wide variety of interests and viewpoints that should be heard and debated, so that a broad social

consensus can be formed among us, as Canadians and as world citizens who share this finite and fragile planet with others.

Along with the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, Inter Pares has called for a public parliamentary review of Canada's foreign policy, a recommendation now adopted by the federal government, to begin in March 1994 and continue over the remainder of the year. This is an opportunity for all elements in Canadian civil society to debate these issues among themselves and to exercise the right and the responsibility to hold government accountable for Canada's foreign policies as we enter the 21st century. This is the heart of democracy and the exercise of national and global responsibility.

In our next few *Bulletins*, Inter Pares will highlight a few of the issues that we believe are important for this debate within Canadian society, as together we reform Canada's relations with our fellow world citizens.

n ZIMBABWE: *Out of the Shadows*



Edith Dahlischen

The women of Chitungwiza and Mutsvaire, two communities in Zimbabwe, know their needs and problems. They know the limitations on their legal rights. They know how poverty affects the health of their children. They know the experience of violence in their lives.

To the women of these communities, their problems are clear. More difficult is finding a way to communicate these concerns to officials, politicians and development organizations so that these experiences become relevant in decision-making.

Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF) is determined to ensure that women do participate in the definition of their

needs and in finding solutions to their problems. With assistance from Inter Pares, WILDAF is working with the women in both Chitungwiza and Mutsvaire to research and document their lives. The goal is to assist these women to collectively define their problems and share solutions that build on their own skills and resources.

In the long term, WILDAF hopes to give appropriate support to women so that they can communicate their needs, interests and priorities. Most importantly, WILDAF wants to show that women can achieve their own solutions by breaking down their isolation and by working together.

n BANGLADESH: *Speaking for Themselves*

With support from Inter Pares, the Bangladesh Society for Environment and Human Development is helping indigenous people organize so they are better able to promote their interests with government and international agencies.

Through training, research, media reports and film documentaries, the experiences of Bangladesh's indigenous people have been brought to public attention. Much of this work has shown how development projects, even those that appear on the surface to be beneficial, can destroy traditional lifestyles and environments. The forest-dwelling Garo people, for example, have documented how reforestation projects have led to the loss of traditional forests and displaced people from their homelands. With the help of the Society, the Garo have found an international audience and have been able to encourage at least one multilateral bank to review its support and loans for reforestation activities.

Through this work, Bangladesh's indigenous people are asserting that they will no longer be victims of externally-imposed development strategies. Rather, they are insisting that activities that affect them must be carried out with their knowledge and consent.

n NICARAGUA:

Rebuilding from the Roots



Jonathan Learning

Three years after the end of the contra war and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, Nicaragua is near collapse. The external debt, estimated at \$10-billion (US), is the highest per capita in the world. Unemployment and underemployment rose from 40% in 1988 to 60% in 1993. Personal income has dropped to levels comparable to the 1930s. Child death rates are again among the highest in Latin America. As is often the case, it is the poor and the marginalized who disproportionately carry the burden of economic deterioration.

The political scene is characterized by power struggles and corruption. Internal feuds among leaders of various political parties, and between the extreme right and the Sandinista opposition, have paralysed the National Assembly. The government's refusal to take a proactive stance in land disputes, coupled with a lack of policies to encourage agricultural production, is destroying the agricultural infrastructure of the country. This situation threatens to reverse the gains made during the land reform of the eighties, the most impressive achievement of the revolution.

Government promises of land and credit to ex-combatants and uprooted populations have not been kept. Former soldiers and contra rebels have rearmed in an attempt to pressure the government to honour its promises, leading to a resurgence of violence. This undermines progress already achieved in the process of peace and reconciliation, and is laying the

basis for renewed military confrontation.

But in the midst of the economic chaos and the political void, Nicaragua can still count on the presence of articulate popular organizations that emerged during the revolution. In today's polarized context, unions, peasant associations, women's groups, cooperatives, the communal movement, and organizations of ex-combatants have taken it upon themselves to rebuild the social fabric of their communities. Through various community economic initiatives, they struggle to sustain local productive capacity, especially in the countryside. They continue to engage and challenge the government through political pressure, dialogue and negotiations in the search for alternative economic and social policies.

The Federation of Nicaraguan NGOs recently declared that stability, peace and reconciliation are necessary if the country is to recover. The Federation called on the government and all sectors of civil society to search for ways to bring people together in a dialogue to create a strong and lasting peace. It appealed to the international community to help this process by protecting the right to democratic participation and by providing material resources for development.

It is these priorities that guide Inter Pares' program in Nicaragua. Our support to popular organizations and NGOs such as the Union of Rural Workers (ATC) and the Fundacion Augusto C. Sandino (FACS), a member of the Federation of

NGOs, encourages economic alternatives with the potential for sustainable local and national economies. Our support also fosters the participation of the poor and the marginalized in dialogue with the government and other sectors of civil society in the search for these alternatives.

For example, through institutional support, technical assistance and training programs, Inter Pares has helped the ATC to negotiate worker ownership of 39 state coffee farms, thus promoting the interests of rural workers and protecting some of the social gains of the revolution. Inter Pares also contributes to a revolving credit program of the FACS to fund small-scale economic projects with agricultural producers, cooperatives, women, artisans and local community associations. Last year, some 1,844 families were able to grow food for local consumption through access to small loans from this program. As well, Inter Pares provides institutional support to enable the FACS to play a policy formulation role within Nicaragua and to have a voice in international fora where, with other Third World partners, they can advocate changes in the international rules which perpetuate inequality between rich and poor.

WHEN THE PEOPLE SPEAK

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This work is as important as our specific project support. Housing, health and economic opportunity are important basic needs, but without democratic participation in the development of free societies that respond to the aspirations of all of their people, the need for international assistance will never end. International assistance on its own cannot reduce the misery of the hundreds of millions of absolute poor, nor guarantee their birthright to dignity, security and human rights. This requires not international social welfare, but an international movement for justice and change.

This Bulletin shares some examples of how Inter Pares works for change by promoting people's participation through civil society and popular organization.

