

INTER PARES

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BULLETIN Vol. 16, No 5, November 1994

KEEPING THE FLAME BURNING



Mary Brodhead

Several years ago we wrote about Elizabeth who, in the midst of civil war in late 1987, returned to El Salvador after years in exile as a refugee in Honduras.

We described how Elizabeth arrived in the small deserted village of Santa Marta after an exhausting journey, resolved to begin again to build her community. She found the ruins of her family home, now just a few remnants of the adobe walls left standing, and overgrown with bushes and weeds.

With her children at her skirts, she moved the few unbroken roof tiles aside and scraped bare the cottage hearthplace, the centre of generations of family warmth and shared meals. Then carefully pacing off several steps from the hearth, she knelt again and began to dig. There Elizabeth found the family milling stone, exactly where she had hidden it before grabbing her children to flee the army so many years before. Elizabeth was home. She had returned to her land.

The children, the hearth, and the milling stone: these are the symbols of hope reborn and the promise of new life.

At this time of year it is worthwhile to focus on these symbols, and on the capacity of the human spirit and human community for creation and regeneration.

For almost twenty years Inter Pares has worked with communities in over twenty countries, each community working with what they have today to build a better tomorrow.

Although we have seen wondrous courage and determination, and many successes, this is not a romantic activity, with glorious victories and earthshaking change. Too often we have worked in the context of war, repression, poverty, and natural disaster. Too often local elites and structures have conspired to oppress their own people and undermine their efforts to change their situation.

What is it, then, that allows the struggle of the poor to continue? What is it that assures that evil and injustice can prevail for a long time but ultimately, with struggle, they always give way to the loving and the good? The answer to this question is the experience that sustains us in our work, gives us hope, and the will to carry on.

There burns within the human breast a flame of knowledge about what is human, and what the world could be. This is not merely optimism, for crises and tragedies can too easily bleed optimism from those struggling to survive. Rather it is a faith in self and humankind, and a deep hope for the future that is nurtured by the daily

acts of kindness and solidarity that every person experiences who offers kindness in return. It is the knowledge that in spite of all, there is more good in this world than evil, and that we humanize ourselves by contributing to the good.

What is never seen in the media images of bitter poverty, cruel wars, and natural disasters, are the countless acts of courage and kindness offered by one to the other, and the will to survive and prevail that is nurtured within families and communities by these simplest but most profound of human capacities: kindness, love and will. From these grow a quality of hope more powerful than the worst excesses of greed and cruelty.

It is these capacities that carried Elizabeth back to El Salvador and her birthplace, Santa Marta. She came back with her family and her community, helping each other to do what no one could achieve alone: to continue their journey, sustaining their humanity, their spirit, their dignity, their sense of self.

Elizabeth and her community challenged repression and militarism in their will to live in peace in their own place. Now, many years later, the peace that Elizabeth sought has also been won, and the democracy she dreamed about has slowly, if imperfectly, begun to emerge, as the struggle for deeper justice continues.

We have seen this experience of determination and struggle countless times, and have been witness to the progress of ordinary people who dare to dream and make the dream become reality.

In this *Bulletin* we share with you examples from around the world where Inter Pares has joined with people changing their lives. These experiences nurture our own faith in humankind, our hope for the future, and our determination to participate with others in making our dreams a reality for the world.

ASSEFA: A People's Celebration

This summer, thousands of people from all over India gathered in Madurai, Tamil Nadu to celebrate 25 years of development work by the Association of Sarva Seva Farms (ASSEFA). The celebration coincided with the 125th birth year of Mahatma Gandhi, whose teachings have guided ASSEFA's work with the poor. The fact that the celebration was in Madurai was appropriate, for it was here that Gandhi first began to wear the loin cloth in empathy with the poor.

In a district where many of the older people remember Gandhi's visits, this development approach has been enormously successful. Schools, adult education, and health programs have been established. Co-operative grain storage and marketing programs have been set up in most villages. Spinning and weaving factories are operating. Four village-owned banks have been established with over 12,000 members. Veterinary and animal insurance programs are operating and several dairies have been developed. More



Roger Lemoyne, CIDA

For the people living in the Natham Block district near Madurai, there was much to celebrate. ASSEFA began its development work in this district in 1980. The development achievements in the area have been remarkable and ASSEFA has directly had an impact on the lives of more than 50,000 people.

The core of ASSEFA's approach is the Gandhian philosophy of *gramdhan*, the transfer of individual land rights to the community. ASSEFA worked throughout the 175 villages in the district, promoting the *gramdhan* concept. *Gramasabha* village assemblies were established, in which all community members participate to define village problems and agree on solutions for the welfare of all.

than 6,000 acres of waste land have been reforested with orchards and woodlots.

Perhaps the best indication of success is that ASSEFA is now leaving Natham Block to turn its attention to a new district. "Our work here is almost complete," said ASSEFA Director Sri Loganathan. All the programs and services developed with the assistance of ASSEFA are the achievements of people themselves. All these activities, whether schools, banks or dairies, will continue to be managed by the *Gramasabha* village assemblies.

The celebration this summer in Madurai was attended by thousands of local people. And while there was much gratitude for the work of ASSEFA, everyone knew this was also a celebration of themselves.

PERU: Making a New Life

The small region of Julcamarca in Huancavelica department includes six outlying agricultural communities that have known severe political violence, in what continues to be an area of intense poverty. Displaced peasants have relocated to the town of Julcamarca as a result of the fear and insecurity that persists in the countryside. But many continue to work their small plots, travelling discretely to their land several times a week, returning to the safety of Julcamarca in the evening.

This practice is so common, it even has a name: *ir y venir*, which means "come-and-go". Families migrate in stages. Some remain close to the land, some move to the provincial towns, some move as far away as the national capital. The land provides one source of income and a "home place"; those living in the towns and cities augment the farm income by wage labour, or by selling produce from their family's rural plot in city markets. This network often includes not just one family, but entire communities.

This form of cooperation allows displaced families to maintain ties with the land and with those who have remained in the countryside. It provides a greater and more secure income for those who remain close to the land, without tying the livelihood of everyone in the community to subsistence agriculture and outside merchants. And it provides the opportunity for diversified family income when those who have migrated take work in the towns and cities.

The displaced peasants are working together to revitalize their economic and agricultural activity, using this strategy of family and community self-help. The Julcamarca Intercommunity Association for Development has established rotating loan funds to distribute seeds through organizations created by displaced people themselves. It also administers loans to promote small family-based livestock projects, which improve family nutrition, and provide cash income from local markets. Finally, working with organizations of displaced people, it is developing training and facilities for small sewing and weaving workshops.

The displaced in Julcamarca are making themselves a new life, enhancing their opportunities for integration and community participation in ways that will lead to increased social and economic security.

TINIGUÉNA: *This Land Is Ours*

The people of Cubucaré and Cacine, in the West African country of Guinea Bissau, have subsisted for generations through the careful harvesting of river and forest resources. One of the forests in this area, Cantanhês, is among the last of the primary sub-tropical forests in the country and home to many species of plants, birds, and animals. The Cubucaré people have learned to manage their forest carefully. To this day, they are the only people who know their way in and out of the forest. They have kept secret the places where sacred ceremonies are conducted. And they are protecting their heritage from poachers and loggers who see the forest as merely a resource to be exploited for profit.

The organization, Tiniguéna – “this land is ours” – aims to help people protect and preserve the forests and other fragile natural environments. Tiniguéna is working with the people in Cubucaré to organize brigades to protect the forest from poachers and fires. Tiniguéna also works with local people to encourage non-destructive ways of collecting and processing forest products. Small loan funds, for example, have been established to

assist local women to process palm nut oil, to make jams from wild fruits and to make baskets. Support has also been provided to village groups to establish community grain mills and economic activities that respond to community needs.

Tiniguéna also recognizes that it is essential to educate people in the urban areas about the importance of preserving natural resources, particularly the last remaining forests. In a recent program, Tiniguéna organized school exchanges to

promote respect for the natural environment. Tiniguéna also completed a video documentary on forests and forest peoples called “To Know is to Love, and to Love is to Protect: Cantanhês”.

Tiniguéna and the people of Cubucaré are demonstrating that development need not be at the cost of depleting precious natural resources. Rather, with appropriate management of their environment, people can continue to live in harmony with their natural heritage.

AETAS: *Preserving their Homelands*

For generations, the Aetas of the Philippines have made their living from their ancestral forests and lands on the slopes and foothills of Mount Pinatubo. And for generations, the Aetas have defended their homelands from invasive mega-projects, loggers and mining companies.

In 1991, the Aetas faced a new and awesome threat to their homelands. Mount Pinatubo erupted, burying the surrounding territory under tons of volcanic ash and debris. Lava poured down the mountainside, setting forests alight and filling the rivers. Tropical storms that followed the eruption made the situation even worse, causing mudslides and widespread flooding. The landscape of the entire region – once the rice granary of the country – was permanently altered.

But the Aetas refused to abandon their devastated homelands. Once the danger was over, they began to clear the ash and mud and start the slow process of re-claiming their land. The Aetas reconstructed housing, replanted banana trees and rootcrops and developed a tree nursery. By 1993, they had planted thousands of trees including jackfruit, cashew, tamarind, star-apples and hardwoods. Small farm plots were once again brought under cultivation by the community, producing staple foods for Aeta families.

The eruption of Mount Pinatubo was one of the worst natural disasters in world history. Yet, the actions of the Aetas to reclaim and preserve their ancestral lands is testimony to hope, determination and an affirmation of the human spirit.

VILLAGE MARKET: *A Dollar a Day*



Bruce Paton

Due to the actions of ten hard-working women, Filabusi, a village in southwest Zimbabwe, now has a marketplace.

The women came up with the idea of a market because there was no central place in the region where producers could

sell their products. The women knew that a well-run market could stimulate economic activity as well as provide extra income for themselves. They developed an investment plan: each woman in

the group would contribute a dollar a day to the development and upkeep of a central marketplace.

The women approached the village council and were granted a piece of land. The community made contributions of sand and thatching. A small amount of funds was provided by the Organization

of Rural Associations for Progress to purchase construction materials. The women designed and built the market stalls themselves. As one woman said, “It is better to work and sweat ourselves, rather than wait for someone else to do it.”

Today the market is a thriving centre, not only for Filabusi but for surrounding villages too. The women sell vegetables, fish, fruits and farming tools. The presence of the market has stimulated other activities. A bakery has opened to supply fresh bread to the area, and farmers and fisherfolk are bringing their products to the marketplace.

The women and other vendors still pay a dollar a day for the upkeep of the market and now have built up a small capital fund. As the saying goes in Zimbabwe: “Great things start in small ways.”

Reflections

What we know of the capacity of people to regenerate their lives and their communities, we have learned from the people we support. These experiences give us renewed energy in our work. Following are excerpts from a journal entry by staff member Jean Symes on a recent trip to Peru, which reflects on how people transform their present to create their future.

Huancavelica, Peru... Crawled out of cold beds at 5 o'clock again this morning to catch the train down to Yauli, a small mountain town two hours by slow train outside of Huancavelica. The temperature had dropped almost to freezing, and the mist and the clouds hung damply around us... But the day was redeemed by the time we reached Yauli, where the sun was finally beginning to warm the edges of the morning. We bought cups of steaming maté to warm our hands and insides, and ease the pain in our eyes and head caused by the high altitude. We looked around at this place that had seen so much of

Peru's political violence, that looked so peaceful now – poor to be sure, but peaceful. And then we walked to the town hall to meet the women's federation of this district. It's led by Angelica, the Quechua woman who so impressed us yesterday...

The federation consists of over 200 women's clubs in the various communities throughout the district, each with 60 to 100 women who meet monthly, and send about 300 delegates to the district congress. We sat on wooden benches in the small town hall, while Angelica explained the work of the women at some length, and the men waited impatiently for us to meet them...

But Angelica seized the opportunity of our visit to make a speech whose real intended audience was the women she led, and the men she wanted to address. She spoke of the self-help groups of women, who ran lunch clubs for their children with donated milk, and she

showed us the pots and pans and the single kerosene stove that was the beginning of the communal kitchen they were trying to set up. She described other possible social strategies and actions to address the basic needs of families and their communities... Last night the men had talked to us of "self-defence groups", which are organized to protect the community from robbers, from the army, from the armed guerrillas that victimize civilians in Peru. Angelica now used the same words – "self defence" – to describe her program of social and community activism to protect the fabric of the family and the community.

...Later, we went to meet the mayor of the town, and the people in charge of the self-defence group, which is important here, even now as the violence diminishes. But I kept thinking about Angelica's method of self-defence, which in the long-term offers more hope, not only for protection, but for change.

KHUSHI KABIR: A Life Working for Change



Larry Frazer, Inter Pares

Twelve years after her first visit to Canada, Khushi Kabir of Bangladesh made a return visit in June, 1994. In the intervening years many changes have taken place in Bangladesh. The military dictatorship has been replaced by a democratically-

elect government, and people's organizations now operate openly. Though much remains to be changed in Bangladesh – the widespread poverty, the inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power – there is promise that further change is possible.

Through this period of turmoil and transformation, Khushi has remained the same. There is still a sparkle in her eyes as she talks about her country and the work

of NIJERA KORI, the peasant organization she coordinates. She still has the spirited laughter, great warmth, compassion and honesty – characteristics that have helped build trusting relationships with the rural women and men with whom NIJERA KORI works.

Khushi Kabir is an example of the commitment of Inter Pares to long-term collaborative relationships. Since 1980, Inter Pares has worked with NIJERA KORI (which means "We'll do it ourselves"), learning together how best to help each other work for change. In mobilizing rural peasants, Khushi and other NIJERA KORI workers have maintained their commitment to the belief that people are their own agents, and that harnessing their energy and talents must be central to development and social change.

Though it may sound paradoxical, in working for change it is good that some things remain constant. It is good that Khushi remains as optimistic and passionate about her work as she was a decade ago. And it is good that

Inter Pares is still accompanying such a wise and experienced colleague in these efforts.

In appreciation for your support

We thank the thousands of individual Canadians from coast to coast whose moral and financial support make the actions described in this *Bulletin* possible. This contribution is invaluable. These activities have also been supported by several private foundations and institutions as well as the Canadian International Development Agency, The Wild Rose Foundation of the Government of Alberta, the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Fund of the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, and Partnership Africa Canada. Inter Pares is grateful for the trust and support we have received from these organizations, and from all of our supporters.

