

INTER PARES

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WORKING FOR LIFE



D. Bregnard, UNHCR

“But the conditions we live in are not the worst of it”, said the small wiry man, glancing sideways at the children playing on the dirt floor. The woman sitting opposite him nodded quiet agreement as we sat at the rough table where we shared tea and cookies that she had presented with proud generosity.

“What is the worst is not having work, not having anything useful to do, nothing to build and to live for – no *dreams!*” He raises his voice emphatically, then smiles shyly at sharing this thought, and the idea of dreams in such a place: a settlement of displaced people perched on the scorched dunes in the coastal department of Ica in southern Peru.

“We live; we can get by with the help of the agencies and the church, and odd jobs and what little we can buy and sell. But live for what? I want to leave something behind...”

He looks nervously at his wife, acknowledging the indiscretion of such an intimate thought among strangers, then continues: “Something for our kids, something that says that we were here, that we contributed,

that our lives were worth something.”

This man and woman – their names are Martín and Sara – are in Peru. But we see them everywhere: in Africa, in Asia, and in Canada. People who have lost the dignity that comes from being free to work and build and contribute to life, family and community.

Work is often seen as employment, an income – the capacity to put food on the table and a roof over a family’s head. And it certainly is that, especially for those who have nothing. But work is much more than labour for hire and a meagre wage.

Work is economic, it is social, it is political and it is spiritual. Above all, work is the opportunity to create and build, to make something, to express oneself through physical and mental effort, to express oneself in a community, in an economy, in a society.

Work situates us, *places* us. Work is reciprocal: it takes something from the social and physical environment and creates something more – something more that includes ourselves. It is a relationship with the environment, an

accommodation and a contribution.

Work comes from freedom, and leads to dignity. In doing so, work recreates freedom.

In this sense, work is at the heart of what it is to be truly and fully human. But work is more than paid labour. Work is also the effort that free people expend to bear and raise their families, to build and maintain their homes and communities, to create art and culture, to promote change in their society. Work at its most profound and free is “re-creation” in its most meaningful sense: the opportunity and capacity to re-create self and community, contributing to society through effort with others. Work is a gift, that gives a gift.

In a healthy community, everyone has the right and opportunity to work – to work for a living, and to work for life. When a person’s labour is stolen or exploited, when workers are depersonalized and treated merely as labourers who own neither their labour nor the fruits of their labour, they are dehumanized. This is the root of almost all injustice.

In a healthy community, economic opportunity to sustain family and self is integrated with the opportunity to voluntarily contribute physically, intellectually, and spiritually through cultural and political action to sustain community and build society. In the programs that Inter Pares supports, we seek this quality of integration, so that economic opportunity is not seen in isolation, and the broader capacity to work for life is nurtured and sustained. Our program in Peru, where we met Martín and Sara, does just this, supporting community economic initiatives while promoting the fuller integration and participation of displaced people in their new communities.

This *Bulletin* provides examples of other actions supported by Inter Pares that demonstrate this broader notion of work, and the dignity, freedom, and contribution to community and society that it entails.

In Common Cause



T. Bolstad, UNHCR

When we describe the work of the people we support, we usually describe what people are doing for themselves, building their community for the benefit of themselves and their children. At the same time, there are thousands of people who contribute their labour in solidarity and common cause, sharing with others the skills and expertise they have.

Antonio Argueta is a lawyer who heads a Guatemalan organization called COJUPO – the People’s Legal Coordinating Body – which contributes legal advice

from lawyers who volunteer their skills to work with indigenous people and peasants organizing for land rights and for fair agricultural wages. Antonio is also legal counsel for the National Indigenous and Peasant Coordination (CONIC), an organization of 190,000 people in poor communities across Guatemala.

As a young lawyer, Antonio looked at the justice system, and saw a system that upheld injustice rather than corrected it, that defended those with wealth and power against the claims for justice by the poor. “The large landowners have lived by illegality,” says Antonio. “If they don’t pay the minimum salary, they’re breaking the law. If they evict peasants when they demand their rights, they’re breaking the law. If they pay a woman half salary, they’re breaking the law.” The system that upholds this illegality continues today in Guatemala, although thanks to the work of Antonio and other lawyers who have joined their efforts with the landless poor, changes are beginning to take place.

As Antonio told us recently, some of the communities that belong to CONIC have had their communal land title over-

turned by local courts in favour of claims by wealthy landlords, threatening eviction of indigenous people who have farmed the land for generations. Sharecroppers and farm labourers, who have been paid less than half the legal minimum wage for 40 years or more, are now threatened with eviction as the plantations are turned over to cattle and other less labour intensive agricultural activities for export, or as the landowners attempt to avoid paying legal wages and benefits.

Antonio and the other lawyers with COJUPO provide assistance to peasant communities in court procedures to establish precedents for community land titles and labour and civil rights. This empowers poor people to use the legal system to protect themselves, rather than being its victims, and contributes to the improvement of the legal system itself.

For Antonio and his colleagues in COJUPO, the reason for doing this work is clear: they contribute their time and their skills out of common cause with the poor and landless, to make the world more just and more decent – a world they will be proud to leave to their children.

Migrant Workers: the Invisible Export

People leaving their homes and countries in search of work is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history, men and women have migrated in the hope of finding a secure livelihood. Families, villages, and even entire peoples have moved great distances in times of famine, persecution, and war, to save their lives and eventually create new communities.

The poverty that makes millions of people leave their families and homelands today also prevents them from participating in that essential part of being human, building community. Migrant workers – whether in domestic service, or in other sectors where the work is dirty, dangerous and demanding – live in a state of legal and economic insecurity that reduces them to bonded labourers.

The earnings they send home support impoverished families and bring hard currency into countries struggling to pay crushing foreign debts. Yet the immigration laws in most host countries deny these workers the right to settle and have their families join them. The migrants contribute their labour and their earnings

to economies that do not offer them the basic rights of workers or citizens.

The majority of migrant workers in the world today are women. And the country that has sent the largest number of women into the overseas labour market is the Philippines. The Philippine government has called these women the “heroines of the Philippine economy”. Last year 300,000 Filipinas – many of them teachers, nurses, or social workers – left the country to work as overseas contract workers, mostly as domestics.

These women keep their families alive by sending home a portion of their wages, but they are not able to enjoy the benefits of family and community, nor contribute their talents to the long-term development of their country. The hard currency from their remittances enables the Philippine government to maintain interest payments of \$1.8 billion a year on its foreign debt. But neither the Philippine government nor the governments who benefit from the loan payments protect the

basic human rights of these “heroines”.

Filipina migrant workers have resisted the dislocation and insecurity of migrant work for many years. In cities around the world, small groups gather to break down the isolation and support each other in situations that are often lonely and dangerous. In recent years, voluntary organizations in the Philippines have provided information and support to women leaving the country, and have advocated for the rights of migrant workers.

In December 1994, GABRIELA, a national alliance of Philippine women’s organizations, co-hosted the International Gathering of Migrant Filipinas. The conference strengthened the network of groups working in the North and South to resist the exploitation of migrant women and to promote their basic human rights.

With the support of Inter Pares, GABRIELA will continue to help strengthen migrant women’s organizations and make visible their lives and work around the world.

Peasant Knowledge and Community Livelihoods

Around the world, a very important form of work is the collective effort of entire communities to transform their lives and environment. A good example of this communal work is found in Nicaragua.

In 1987, Buena Vista was an isolated settlement of some 400 displaced people in a war zone along the San Juan River bordering Costa Rica, in the humid tropics of southern Nicaragua. Lacking basic infrastructure, and marginalized from the national economy, the people of Buena Vista sought the support of Inter Pares to improve their community and generate economic activity. Their hope was to establish a sustainable local economy and secure livelihoods.

The people of Buena Vista had already organized themselves into several cooperatives involved in the production of *raicilla*, a medicinal plant cultivated amidst the undergrowth of the jungle. These cooperatives had developed a relationship with scientists from the National University of Agronomy working on a program to protect biodiversity and explore its potential for local economic development.

With the technical assistance of the agronomists and researchers, and a modest financial contribution from Inter Pares, the peasants increased their knowledge, systematized their approach and enhanced their production of *raicilla*. They also improved their management capacity and administrative skills. They have also managed to negotiate a fairer price for their product from international brokers by establishing a centralized marketing mechanism serving not only the cooperatives, but also the individual producers of the Rio San Juan. As a result, members of the cooperatives now have a minimum annual income to support their families.

At the same time, cooperative members improved the living conditions in the community. Volunteer committees and work brigades built roads and bridges to connect neighbouring villages and bring products to the market. They installed electricity, built a community centre, set up a small agro-industrial mill, and repaired the

local school and health post. Gradually these improvements resulted in the development of small scale economic activities which generated some profits. The community decided to invest some of these profits in other income-generating initiatives, such as a communal nursery of fruit trees and a cattle-raising cooperative which ensures a milk supply for village children.

Eight years later, men and women speak with pride about the achievements of the community. But this pride is not solely linked to the value of the physical work invested in community improvements. It also reflects the recognition of the value of the knowledge of the peasants by the agronomists and researchers who accompanied the process during almost a decade of collaboration between peasants and scientists.

This collaboration continues today. With the support of Inter Pares, the scientists and peasants from Buena Vista and nearby villages have founded *Güises Montaña Experimental*, a research centre

exploring economic alternatives for peasants based on the biodiversity of the forest. The approach aims not only to protect the environment, but to find within the humid tropical forest economic alternatives that can ensure a level of sustainable livelihood for neighbouring communities.

As part of this research process, peasants have been involved in the identification of plants which have been used traditionally in the community and which could have commercial potential at the national and international level. Their initial findings are soon to be published in a book. Having accepted assistance to recreate their community, the peasants of Buena Vista are now sharing the fruits of their labour with the world.

Members of the Buena Vista cooperatives in Nicaragua, joining efforts to bring electricity to their community.



Recovering a Craft, Revitalizing Communities

Before the colonial period, the city of Dhaka was a bustling industrial centre producing fine quality handwoven cloth in great demand around the world. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Great Britain set out to destroy the textile industry in South Asia to protect its own markets. In Bangladesh today, there are only a small number of skilled handweavers left, living in scattered communities in rural areas.

In the mid-1980s, the Bangladesh development organization, UBINIG, became interested in reviving handweaving before the craft completely disappeared. With a small grant from Inter Pares, UBINIG embarked on a research project to investigate the conditions of handweavers, particularly women, and to identify the types of support required to revive and strengthen the handloom industry.

UBINIG discovered that small numbers of handweavers still continued to practice their craft. While there was a demand for the high quality cloth produced by these weavers, the market was controlled by middle-men, or *Mahajans*. The *Mahajans* provided credit and raw materials to the weavers in exchange for

the finished products. The *Mahajans* then marketed the products in the towns and cities of Bangladesh and India.

UBINIG realized that if the weavers were to prosper they would have to escape the control of the *Mahajans*. UBINIG began to organize weaving families in several villages in Tangail district, providing credit for the purchase of raw materials. UBINIG helped weavers adjust their looms to create new designs and established a marketing outlet in Dhaka. As the control of the *Mahajans* was weakened, weavers received a better return on their products and could invest more in their production.

UBINIG supported women to set up and operate their own looms, which over time became more socially acceptable. UBINIG also supported the women with literacy and numeracy training programs and established a primary school for children from weaving families, creating a curriculum emphasizing the skills that weaving requires.



L. D. Frazer

Since 1986, the financial return to these villages has been over \$500,000 and the demand for their high quality products is increasing. As a result, villagers have several new schools, and new support programs in health and agriculture. In rejuvenating a traditional craft, UBINIG has supported weavers to revitalize their communities and transform their lives.

Artisans of the River

The young people assembled on the banks of the Rio Grande were telling us that, for as long as they could remember, their families had fished the waters of the river to feed their families and maintain a lifestyle as artisan fishers. Their parents remember the days when the fish were so abundant and the varieties so diverse that they could count on a steady income that allowed them to stay in their village rather than move to the city to find work. Today, many of the small fishing communities are deserted, and only a few markets remain open for those who will not give up their way of life.

Local fisherfolk face intense competition from the foreign-owned fishing boats. Little control is being exerted by government to prevent overfishing. The export of shrimp is a major source

of foreign currency, but the stock of shrimp is diminishing rapidly in the absence of a national policy to establish and monitor quotas. The lack of management of one of the country's major natural resources has not only depleted the waters of the many varieties and quantities of fish, but has threatened the livelihood of more than 10,000 fishing families.

In 1992, a small group of fisherfolk from Cacine on the Rio Grande decided to pool their resources to find ways of replacing their fishing material and equipment, and to build a store where they could keep their catch and dry the fish for sale in city markets. With the help of Tinguéna, a local NGO working with village people on issues of sustainable development, the Fisherfolk Association of Cacine was formed and

financial assistance was provided to set up a small credit scheme for the purchase of fishing equipment. Through exchanges with other fishing communities, the Association is exploring new techniques in fish conservation and processing that will allow them to increase their marketing possibilities.

The Association has initiated talks with state authorities to address the problems related to marketing, storage and transport. They have also asked for a national policy that would protect artisanal fishing and have requested that the law on illegal fishing be enforced. With the help of Tinguéna, the Association wants to promote and defend artisanal fishing as a rational and sustainable way of life in Guinea Bissau. The fisherfolk are determined to find solutions that will allow them to continue living and working in the way they love and know best.

