

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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No Longer Abandoned – Reclaiming Citizenship

Recently a new chapter began in the life of the communities in the municipality of El Castillo on the Rio San Juan in Nicaragua. The municipal council formally challenged the decision of the national government to cede exploration rights on hundreds of square kilometers to the Canadian mining firm, Placer Dome, which is seeking to exploit rich gold seams that run through the region.

For many years, local activists and public officials in El Castillo have been nurturing broad participation in local governance, and an active role for local communities in environmental resource management and sustainable economic development. Today, the local people, whose communities border on the *Sí-a-Paz* Bio-Reserve, are determined to retain the right to restrict access to their region by mining interests. Concerned with the danger of soil damage, threats to bio-diversity, and the contamination of water — and the lack of effective environmental protection legislation to deal with these concerns — municipal authorities have declared that the lack of consultation with local communities is a breach of municipal autonomy and authority. The municipality is seriously worried that the exploration proposed by the mining companies will lead to mining operations that are incompatible with locally-established development priorities, which include eco-tourism and the development of the river fishing industry.

This action by the Municipality of El Castillo is just one example, among many that we have witnessed, where communities are asserting the pre-eminence of local issues and priorities, and their right to shape their own environment and determine the conditions



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within which they struggle for survival and prosperity.

This is an important and encouraging trend. Although citizens around the world feel adrift and abandoned, people are increasingly eager to address directly the issues of governance, most particularly the participation of all citizens in renewing their communities and creating pro-active, democratic government at the local and national level. Activists in virtually every country in the world, including Canada, are advocating a new and explicit compact between people and their governments — a social and political compact that re-establishes the authority of the citizenry and the accountability of government, and the obligation of governments to act on behalf of all citizens.

In the last two decades a growing sense of abandonment, increasing alienation, and social disintegration have become the legacy of the abdication by governments of their responsibilities to their citizens, and the burden that

the poor have to carry as national economies and social infrastructure deteriorate. The disintegration of communities has eroded the fundamental base of national life and social renewal, and made durable development action at the local level extremely difficult. This crisis of governance has not been a crisis merely for governments. It is especially a crisis for citizens who not only have lost the right to govern themselves — that is, the right to self-determination — but have even lost the “privilege” of being governed. The resurgence of local activism marks a significant movement to hold governments accountable, and reverse their widespread abdication of their responsibility for the common good.

A primary focus of Inter Pares’ program has been support for actions that forestall and repair the deep malaise of abandonment and communal disintegration, and initiatives that nurture and enhance the capacity of communities to resist and transform the forces that are undermining them. This includes attempts by citizens to address the dilemmas of local, regional and national governance, and promote broad popular participation in the processes of democratization. The challenge by the people of El Castillo to the international mining industry and the government of Nicaragua is one example of how people are exercising their civic power and are actively bringing their experience and their influence to bear on the decisions that affect their lives and their futures.

This *Bulletin* offers other examples of activities and organizations supported by Inter Pares that help people to reclaim their citizenship, and their government, for the good of all and the development of their communities.

Towards People-Centred Development in the Caribbean

When Caribbean social justice groups came together in 1991 to form the Caribbean Policy Development Centre, they knew the mandate they were giving themselves was a challenging one. Indeed, the tasks of making governments accountable and building Caribbean-wide unity — unity based on a shared and people-centred vision of development — are nothing less than daunting in this politically, economically and culturally diverse region. Still, against a backdrop of ten years of relentless economic restructuring in countries like Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago — years that saw the deepening impoverishment of the poorest, and intensifying social disintegration the newly-formed regional coalition took up the challenge.

Today, the Caribbean Policy Development Centre is governed by 23 member organizations scattered across 15 Caribbean nations, which themselves embrace at least four national languages. Most of these organizations are also coalitions, some of them comprised of up to 100 nationally-based groups.

In this context, how does one organization influence public policy? What

policies should it advocate, and on whose behalf? How can it achieve coherence among national, regional and international advocacy efforts?

In 1994, CPDC organized a People's Alternatives Forum where more than 100 Caribbean activists came together to reflect on the culture, creativity and identity of the region. From their reflections they created a vision for social, economic and political transformation, linking the lived realities of the poor to specific policy alternatives and objectives.

Developing the ability and the space to articulate this vision and action plan was the next critical step. Thus CPDC began bringing its members together to share their knowledge and skills in everything from policy advocacy and negotiation to gender-based analysis. In the process, they increased their knowledge of the varied civic processes into which they can insert themselves to present their development alternatives.

As a result of these activities, CPDC members have become increasingly involved in all levels of governance, as witnessed through their participation in CARICOM Heads of

Government meetings — the regional policy-discussion fora for Caribbean heads of state — as well as in national consultations on diverse issues from environmental regulations to the entrenchment of community government.

Through these efforts, NGOs are clearly helping to shape public policy. One member's intense collaboration with CARICOM governments prior to the Fourth U.N. Conference on Women in 1995, for example, led CARICOM leaders to take one of the most progressive positions of any government at the conference. At the national level, another CPDC member — the Association of Development Agencies in Jamaica — has formed the Coalition for Community Participation in Local Government which is securing greater community control over areas such as education and economic development.

To be sure, this heightened participation in government processes poses new dilemmas. Yet in creating CPDC, Caribbean social justice organizations have invented a new and promising avenue for learning and promoting change.

An Experiment In Participation: *Agrarian Reform in the Philippines*

For Philippine peasants, land reform has long been synonymous with aspirations for social and economic justice. In the view of peasant and farmworker organizations, however, the redistribution of land is no longer sufficient to deal with modern agricultural realities. It is necessary to ensure not only that privately-held lands are distributed to the rural poor, but also that programs promote fundamental agrarian reform and rural development, including support for diversified agriculture and rural industries. For this to happen, direct participation of the poor in the governance of their own futures is also necessary.

For small farmers and farmworkers, this vision is still a dream. The political power exercised by big landowners, along with the government's emphasis on export-oriented agricultural policies, have remained serious impediments to agrarian reform and rural transformation that benefits the majority.

In 1988, the government of the Philippines introduced the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, a ten-year plan that was denounced both by landlords, who see it as a threat to their interests, and by peasants, who view it as too limited. Over the past eight years, wealthy landlords have

found many ways to circumvent the reform program and exempt their lands from its regulations. At the same time, peasant groups have been calling on government to implement more radical and effective reforms. In an attempt to produce results in the remaining two years of the program, the government has announced that it will expedite the distribution of private agricultural lands above 24 hectares to peasants and farmworkers in the country.

The Philippine Network of Rural Development Institutes and its associated peasant and farmworker groups are determined to take advantage of this opportunity. They are negotiating for the transfer of over 50,000 hectares of land in 17 provinces of the country, including agreement on the long-term use of this land. By the end of 1998,

Bangladesh: *From survival to self-sufficiency*

In spite of their responsibility to create the conditions for economic survival and social opportunity, all too often national governments are virtually absent from the lives of people, especially in their most critical hour of need. In the absence of government support, it has been the interventions of local non-governmental organizations that most often help communities consolidate the capacity to control the basic elements of their lives, as this example from Bangladesh illustrates.

The vulnerability of the remote coastal region of Badarkhali was revealed when a cyclone slammed into the area in 1991. Badarkhali was devastated. Five years later, Badarkhali is once again a bustling and productive region of farmers and fisherfolk, re-built almost entirely through the resources and initiatives of the community itself. The Bangladesh organization, UBINIG, has played a key role in this remarkable recovery, supporting rehabilitation activities while demonstrating ways in which the community can manage its own resources and serve its own needs.

Critical to this process has been to

increase the community's sense of ownership and control of environmental resources. In 1991, the coastal mangrove forest, which provides protection against tidal surges associated with cyclones, had all but disappeared from Badarkhali due to indiscriminate cutting. In the aftermath of the 1991 storm, community members recognized that mangroves must be re-planted and preserved if Badarkhali was to have protection in the future. UBINIG mobilized the community to grow seedlings and replant the coastline with mangroves. People volunteered their labour for the project. School children spent an hour a day after school helping out in the project. After months of work, more than 250,000 trees had been planted along five kilometres of coastline. This year, the community will plant an additional three kilometres of coastline.

With UBINIG's assistance, the people of Badarkhali also built a primary school and hired teachers. The community has established committees that will manage the school programs, which particularly emphasize the participation of girls. They are presently

adding a primary school extension program to reach out to children who work on farms or fishing boats.

UBINIG also helped strengthen the community's health promotion capacity. Most services to pregnant women and infants are provided by traditional mid-wives or *dhais*. UBINIG organized the area dhais into a network that meets regularly to discuss health issues, problems and strategies. The dhais have been trained to keep records of pregnant women and survey the health needs of the community. This initiative has been so successful that there has not been a maternal or infant death in Badarkhali in the last two years.

The task ahead in Badarkhali is to consolidate these activities and ensure that they are managed by the community for the benefit of all. At the same time, UBINIG is drawing lessons from this experience to be integrated with policy advocacy toward the government, pointing out the role that government could be playing to help communities such as Badarkhali build their own future.



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they will present regional plans for a mix of diversified farming and sustainable rural industry, including inputs and support services required from government.

This innovative initiative is being launched in spite of many perceived risks. Cooperation between peasant organizations, NGOs and government is new in a country where mistrust of government and the judicial system is deeply ingrained. The peasants and farmworkers also fear strong resistance from the powerful landlords in the countryside, many of whom still have their own private armies. Still, local peasant groups are determined to begin the process of rural transformation they have long advocated, working with local governments to ensure that legal land transfers happen quickly and peacefully. The Network of Rural Development Institutes is working with the peasants and farmworkers to strengthen their organizations and to

learn how to use the legal processes to exercise their rights, while at the same time enhancing their knowledge of agricultural productivity and management systems. Throughout this process, advocacy for more fundamental agrarian reform policies will continue.

Inter Pares is supporting this initiative through the Network of Rural Development Institutes in the provinces of Mindanao in the southern region of the country. It is hoped that by assisting peasants and farmworkers to design workable agricultural alternatives, and exercise their voice in negotiations with local and national governments, their struggle for social equity and economic justice may be brought a little closer to reality.

Social Solidarity in Canada: *Conserving a Caring Society*

As governments in Canada cut back and scale down, the voluntary sector is being cited as the solution to respond to increasing economic dislocation, poverty and social alienation. Those who promote a reduction in the role of government argue that charitable organizations can pick up the threads of our unravelling social safety net and compensate for the diminishing responsibility of government for health, education, housing, local economic development and environmental protection. It is difficult not to see this as a regressive vision of governance and social solidarity. It is a vision that is eroding the historic social contract between Canadians and their government, reducing it to a mere service agreement — one that diminishes the essential universality and equity of social programs that should be financed through the tax system, while at the same time undermining the authentic role, integrity and values of voluntary sector efforts.

Voluntary action expresses and builds community throughout Canada. People participating in voluntary action at the local level make a significant difference in their communities. They provide mutual support among citizens. They improve relations among diverse

groups within communities. They create support for local economic development and the wise use of resources. As Canadians we discover what is best in ourselves through our participation as citizens in community action for justice, cultural development, education or recreation.

However, Canada's national social programs are also an essential expression of our values as citizens and as communities. These programs were won through decades of struggle, as citizens organized to make their elected governments express through economic and social policy the aspirations of Canadians for a caring society — a society of fairness and equal opportunity for all.

Around the world we witness the ingenuity of women and men working together to transform situations of great deprivation and suffering. We have learned that the best community development affirms the dignity of human beings and leads to a shared awareness of the power of people working together for the collective good. At the same time, such voluntary efforts also expose the *limits* of local action, and the importance of democratic systems of government to provide essential services and support the civic action of people at the local level. This is

as true in Canada as elsewhere. When elected officials attempt to transfer responsibility for the common welfare of citizens from government to the voluntary sector, the essential democratic element of that responsibility, won over decades, is destroyed. The responsibility that our governments are abdicating cannot be taken up by the diverse expression of voluntarism at the community level. Although the best and most effective organizations in the country will continue to do what they can in cities and towns across the country, they will never have the mandate, nor the resources, to ensure equity and opportunity for all citizens. Nor should they be expected to.

As social spending cuts increase, needs intensify and greater demands are placed on the voluntary sector to fill the gap. But this gap is not a hole to be plugged. It is a fabric to be mended and rewoven, using the complementary strengths of the public, private and voluntary sectors. Without this consolidated effort, the social and economic consequences will be far worse than the fiscal dilemmas we face today, and a grim and tragic legacy for the next generation of Canadians.

The Alternative Federal Budget: *Presenting Choices*

The phenomenon of people organizing for good government, economic equity and social justice is not isolated to those in the poorest countries in the South. Similar movements are emerging in countries in the industrialized North, which are also experiencing economic dislocation and social disintegration. In Canada too, we are seeing people across the country reclaiming their right to participate in the political and economic decisions that affect their lives and communities.

An example is the Alternative Federal Budget campaign developed by the Winnipeg-based social justice coalition, *CHO!CES*, in cooperation with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. For two years, the AFB campaign has developed an alternative budget and presented it to communities across the country, and to the national media, at

the same time as the federal government introduces its own budget in Parliament.

The alternative budget is a detailed economic plan produced by economists and social planners in consultation with community, social and labour organizations across the country. Although a non-partisan campaign, the alternative budget is clearly values-led and grounded in explicit social principles that include full employment, an end to poverty, the protection of basic labour rights, stronger social programs and public services, environmental improvement, economic equality between men and women, a fairer tax system, and a more equitable distribution of income.

A major task of the campaign is the extensive consultation process of developing the alternative budget document. Equally important have been "budget schools" which help people understand

the economic dilemmas facing Canada and their communities, and help them to participate meaningfully in the process of drafting the budget.

The Alternative Federal Budget campaign brings together provincial and territorial social action coalitions that are united within the Action Canada Network, of which Inter Pares is a member. Many national members of ACN, such as the Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice, also participate actively, conducting economic training sessions with their own constituents.

For more information about the campaign and ways that your community can get involved, contact *CHO!CES*, 703-275 Broadway, Winnipeg, R3C 4M6, 204-944-9408, or CCPA, 804-251 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, K1P 5J6, 613-563-1341.

