

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Feeding the Earth

To visit the Bangladeshi village of Tangail we drive through fertile plains and rice paddies — a lush green and yellow landscape touching a pale blue sky.

In Tangail, supported by Policy Research for Development Alternatives (UBINIG), people are protecting their livelihoods by recuperating and sharing local expertise, particularly in weaving and farming. The building we have come to see is built on a bamboo frame with earthen bricks and tiled roof. Inside on rough plank shelves are hundreds of clay pots, brimming with seeds collected by local farmers from previous seasons' crops. Each pot represents a distinct variety of the various species of produce cultivated in the district, painstakingly identified and catalogued. This is the Tangail District Community Seed Wealth Centre, curated and maintained by the farmers who own it. Each planting season they "borrow" seeds from the bank; after the harvest they deposit in the bank twice the amount of seed they borrowed. In this way the farmers are working together to ensure the rich diversity of seed that is required to protect their crops from being wiped out by any single blight or pest, or extreme variations of weather.

The simple lesson that we take on this day is that what the farmers take from the earth, they return to the earth. They feed the earth and the earth feeds them. This is what it means to "cultivate." The villagers are recuperating the skills and knowledge of the past to protect themselves today and to change the future for their children. Since a small start-up grant several years ago,



Roger Lemoyne, CIDA

the project receives no external money, and receives no advice from outside scientists. Indeed, scientists come here to study and learn from these farmers. And so does Inter Pares.

The example of Tangail, and thousands of similar local initiatives around the world, demonstrate that there are alternatives to the unrestrained commercial exploitation of land and natural resources. Since urban Canadians have relied for so long on the exploitation of our own natural resources for our prosperity, we too often are blind to the effects of this activity, and the big questions about who pays and who benefits. As our miners die early and painful deaths, and mining towns shut down; as our fishers are driven from the sea, and their children driven from their communities in search of new livelihoods; as the last few family farms are bought up by agribusiness, we need to ask — what for? In whose interest is all this happening, if not for the miner, the fisher, and the farmer? Is it sustainable, let alone just, to exploit the land and its people in this way?

This is a question being asked throughout the world today. Energy and mining companies, many of them Canadian, have gained unrestrained license to rip apart the earth to take away what no one can ever put back,

destroying landscapes and livelihoods in their wake, with virtually no benefit to local people except a pitiful wage for a few that will not last even a generation before the mines and the land will be gone forever.

The same scenario is being played out in tropical forests being destroyed for lumber, and to create pasture for beef for fast-food outlets throughout the world. It is being played out on the coasts of Ecuador and Thailand, Nicaragua and Bangladesh, as delicate coastal ecologies are torn asunder to create ponds for industrial production of shrimp. It is being played out as a few giant transnational chemical firms tighten their grip on global agriculture through their control of hybrid seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, driving small producers off the land, and exhausting the diversity and vitality of the land itself.

Community leaders and activists across the globe are determined that this exploitation of people and their land must stop, and that the unrestrained freedom for property and capital must give way to a movement for corporate accountability and social responsibility. This *Bulletin* highlights the activities of some of these activists, who advocate a new season for humanity, a season that feeds rather than exploits the earth, and nurtures the bodies and souls of its people.

In Defence of Land and Livelihood

In February 1997, 85-year-old Jagannathan went for a walk. It was to be a long walk. In the style of Mahatma Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave, Jagannathan and his supporters embarked on a protest journey on foot from the south-

ern tip of India to the city of Madras, 600 kilometres away. Walking and holding meetings in villages en route, Jagannathan talked with people about the threat to their livelihoods from shrimp aquaculture – the pollution,

the destruction of mangrove forests, the depletion of the fish catch from coastal waters.

Jagannathan and the organization Land for the Tillers Freedom have been at the forefront of the movement to stop the destruction caused by the commercial shrimp industry in India. On behalf of coastal communities, Jagannathan launched a case in the Supreme Court of India, arguing that the shrimp industry violated the right to life and livelihood of millions of people in India's coastal villages. After an extensive review of the problem, the Supreme Court agreed with this position and effectively ordered the industry to shut down and to compensate coastal people whose livelihoods had been ruined.

The industry retaliated. Several months later, an Act of Parliament was hurriedly passed, nullifying the Supreme Court order. Jagannathan embarked on his 600 kilometre walk to protest this new legislation.

Citizen mobilization against shrimp aquaculture is not limited to India. In Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, Ecuador and dozens of other countries, coastal peoples are organizing to resist the industry. Inter Pares and several Canadian NGOs have provided assistance to document the impact of the industry and helped bring together community activists from different regions to develop an international campaign to stop the destruction.

Khushi Kabir of Bangladesh was in Canada recently to speak about her work in trying to persuade her government to regulate the aquaculture industry. "In country after country the stories of the destruction of land, fisheries and livelihood are the same," she says. "Producing luxury food at the expense of our coastal poor, and making it affordable to overseas consumers, doesn't make sense. Our priority must be to produce food for our own people."

When asked how Canadians can support the anti-shrimp campaign in India and Bangladesh, she says, "Ask Canadian consumers of shrimp if they know where it comes from. Consumers can make educated choices."

African Mining Network

"In Ghana's Western region, indigenous people expressed their opposition to the expansion of mining activities by sitting on rocks that were to be blown up. Police were brought in, demonstrators were shot at and some of them killed."

The man who relates this story speaks calmly but the effort it takes to hold back his anger and frustration is visible. "For centuries", he continues, "we have extracted gold in Ghana. But with the rapidly expanding presence of transnational mining companies, this activity is increasingly becoming a source of massive destruction of forests, farms and the land. Water is polluted by cyanide and people drown in old mine pits. How can we reclaim the land and ensure that the mining industry benefits the people?"

The speaker is from the Ghana Mineworkers Union and is participating in a conference on Mining, Environment and Society organized by Third World Network – Africa Secretariat (TWN-Africa). The conference, which Inter Pares also attended, was held in Accra, Ghana, at the beginning of March, and brought together 29 activists from ten different African countries as well as environmental activists from Ecuador, the Philippines, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In Ghana alone, 11.4 million hectares of forest have been granted to mining companies for prospecting and extraction. And over thirty other African countries have made similar concessions, introducing permissive mining codes, deregulation and privatization in an effort to attract foreign investment. Millions of dollars are now

pouring in for exploration activities all over the African continent. Open-pit mining – with its drastic environmental consequences – is expanding dramatically.

Canadian mining companies are very active in this African gold rush, doubling funds for exploration activities every year since 1995, and reaching \$265 million in 1997. Canadian companies now dominate exploration programs in ten African countries.

In his opening address to conference participants, Charles Abugre, Coordinator of TWN-Africa questioned if Africans really benefit from this new mining boom. "We have to ask ourselves, in every country where mining activities are taking place, whether the country benefits from mining. In Ghana, the answer is clearly no. It is simply not true that any investment is better than no investment at all, especially when one factors in the social and environmental costs of open-pit mining."

Participants at the conference examined ways to support local forms of community resistance to destructive aspects of mining, and identified how communities can assert their right to govern their own destiny. They decided to establish the *African Initiative on Mining, Environment and Society*. The network will produce a country-by-country profile of mining activities, and establish a secretariat to coordinate the exchange of information.

In addition to our ongoing support to TWN-Africa, Inter Pares will assist the network by disseminating information on Canadian mining activities in Africa, and by informing our donors and partners of the actions and campaigns of the network.

Biopiracy and the Commons

Recently, several Australian agricultural research institutions applied for plant breeders' rights on two varieties of chickpeas. If granted these rights, the Australians would have been granted an exclusive 20 year monopoly to sell these chickpeas to farmers throughout the world.

The problem is that the chickpeas had originally been freely given to the Australians by an internationally-funded agricultural research centre in India from seeds developed and grown by farmers in India and Iran. How was it that the Australians could claim ownership of these varieties with the exclusive right to sell them back at a profit to the farmers who first developed them?

Fortunately, the Canada-based Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) uncovered the Australian attempt to claim ownership of these seeds. RAFI informed the international agricultural research community, the Indian government, the media, as well as non-government groups involved in the South Asian Network on Food, Ecology and Culture (SANFEC). Farhad Mazhar



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of UBINIG-Bangladesh, a member of the SANFEC network, called the Australian initiative a blatant act of biopiracy. "Australia is privatizing seeds that belong to our farmers, and they plan to sell them back to us with their own self-authorized monopoly."

The question of who "owns" the biological resources of the South has become a controversial issue. The Convention on Biological Diversity asserts that governments have sovereign rights to resources within their borders. However, Western corporations are increasingly using "intellectual property" provisions of the World

Trade Organization to secure monopoly rights over plants as well as other living organisms. Yet virtually all of the agricultural plants marketed today had their origins with farmers in the South who preserved and developed them over generations. Multinational seed companies have made fortunes on these biological resources; next to nothing has been returned to farmers, the originators of this enormous wealth.

Southern and Northern activists are working together to challenge this trend. SANFEC was organized to provide a South Asian perspective to the World Food Summit in 1996 and has since become an important forum on regional food security. SANFEC members are pushing their own governments to resist the privatization of biological resources and to recognize the rights of farmers.

Because of the work of RAFI, the Australians abandoned their claims to the chickpea varieties. Now RAFI is examining more than 50 other plant varieties for which Australians and others are making some form of monopoly claim, but which appear to have originated elsewhere. RAFI hopes that the Australian scandal will prompt a re-examination of the problem of biopiracy and the privatization of biological resources.

Inter Pares supports the work of RAFI as well as members of the SANFEC network.

In Defence of Land & Livelihood

by Faris Ahmed

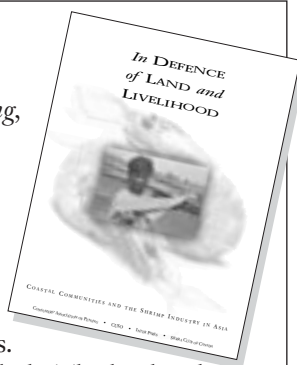
A documentation project of the Consumers' Association of Penang, CUSO, Sierra Club of Canada and Inter Pares.

Shrimp aquaculture has become a US\$9 billion industry, established in over 50 countries. The rapid expansion of this industry has meant that shrimp is now cheaper and more readily available to Western consumers. However, the social and environmental consequences of shrimp aquaculture have been devastating for coastal communities.

In this booklet, farmers and fisherfolk from India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Malaysia describe their experiences with the commercial aquaculture industry. These testimonies are grim as people talk about environmental destruction, the loss of mangrove forests, pollution, the displacement of entire coastal communities and the conflict that the industry has introduced. Yet these stories are also inspiring, as coastal people describe how they have organized to protect their environments and livelihoods, often under the threat of violence.

Available from: The Sierra Club of Canada, 1 Nicholas Street, Suite 412, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7B7

Price: \$5.00



Canadian Mining Interests Booming

In 1997, Canadian mining companies planned to spend some \$1.5 billion on exploration outside Canada, six times what they spent in 1992, and more than any other single nation in the world. In Latin America, their budgets have grown over 50% a year in the last five years, making Canada the largest player in the region. By 1996, 470 Canadian companies owned over 1,000 mining properties, surpassing the United States for the first time that year.

This "boom" has been fueled by several factors. Structural adjustment programs imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have forced Latin American countries to deregulate foreign investment and foreign ownership of resources. Almost every country in Latin America has adopted legislation that promotes mining exploration and mine development, with strong encouragement and support from the World Bank and some northern governments, notably Canada. Simultaneously, record levels of investment capital flowing into stock markets have increased the cash available to Canadian companies for new exploration.

This rapid increase in exploration and mining has generated serious concern among environmental organizations,

labour, church, human rights and community groups, as well as municipal authorities, who are seeking to mitigate the local impact of the aggressive expansion of mining activities. These groups question whether the perceived short-term economic benefits of mining offset the long-term social and environmental costs and the disruption in people's livelihoods. They note that the extreme differential in power and in technical knowledge between companies and remote peasant communities often leads to unfair distribution of benefits and jeopardizes the exercise of local democracy, and the right of communities to determine their own future and their own development priorities. This concern is especially acute in countries where municipal government structures are relatively new and still fragile.

Some communities regard mining as an assault on their land, their way of life and their environment. In northern Costa Rica, a coalition of church and social organizations has launched a campaign against Canadian mining companies, asserting that mining is absolutely inappropriate in the fragile ecosystem of humid tropical forests.

In some cases, rather than dealing directly with communities and local

authorities around social issues and concerns, mining companies are now trying to establish "social partnerships" with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), whereby an NGO receives funds from a company to carry out "social development" projects in communities where the company operates. This approach creates new dilemmas for NGOs. Instead of focusing on the empowerment of communities, they run the risk of becoming "mediators" between the community and the company. This strategy can also weaken local democratic processes by leaving out elected municipal authorities as the legitimate representatives of the interests of the community.

Inter Pares has been asked by our Latin American counterparts to support their efforts to monitor mining activities, research the environmental and social impact of resource extraction, and create mutual support networks of communities that are being approached by resource companies. And in Canada, Inter Pares is collaborating with other Canadian organizations to support our counterparts with information and contacts rooted in the long experience of mining communities in Canada.

Canadian Mining Tour

Last November, Inter Pares hosted the visit of some of our colleagues from organizations in Nicaragua and the Philippines, both of which are involved in struggles concerning Canadian mining activities. The Center for Environmental Concerns (CEC), in the Philippines, assisted affected communities to carry out environmental assessments following the 1996 Marcopper mine spill on the island of Marinduque. The spill poisoned two main rivers, destroyed agricultural crops and inland fishing, and seriously damaged the livelihoods of 25,000 people. Many were forced to leave their homes because of contamination and economic ruin. Local authorities tell us that the compensation package offered by Placer Dome, which owned 40% of Marcopper at the time of the disaster, is woefully inadequate to clean up the environmental damage and to

address the catastrophic effects of the spill on the health and livelihoods of the people.

The second organization, Güises Montaña Experimental, has been working closely with the municipality of El Castillo, in the tropical rainforest of southern Nicaragua, to protect biodiversity and develop local alternatives based on community environmental resource management and sustainable economic development. For almost two years now, local people and the municipal council have had to formally challenge and resist repeated attempts by Placer Dome to carry out exploration activities on their territory, despite the community's insistence that mining operations are incompatible with locally established development priorities, which include eco-tourism and the development of the river fishing industry.

The tour allowed representatives from CEC and Güises Montaña to share information and analysis of their respective experiences. It also enabled them to establish relationships with a growing number of Canadian organizations addressing the social, economic and environmental impacts of mining. The international visitors travelled to Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, and visited a mining community in Alberta. Melissa Morales from CEC told us that the tour allowed the two groups to raise Canadian awareness about the actions and impacts of the Canadian mining industry in Third World countries. As well, she said, "we've been able to share our struggle with Canadians who are working on the same issues. Now we have the opportunity to work together with our Nicaraguan and Canadian colleagues on joint strategies to hold government and industry accountable for the negative impacts of mining on our communities."

