

# Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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## Neighbours: *Living on a Round Planet*

In one of her early novels, written some twenty-five years ago, Marge Piercy creates a traveller from the distant future, a naturalist who is trying to learn about the folly of the twentieth century societies that almost destroyed the planet Earth. At one point the traveller observes how human refuse and industrial waste is flushed into the water and washed away. The traveller is incredulous and, in one of the great expressions of environmental awareness, exclaims, "But, don't you know that the world is round!?"

A lot of progress – although not enough – has been made on the environmental front in the decades since the novel was written. Certainly there is a much greater consciousness that "the world is round", and that there is no escaping the ecological consequences of environmental pollution anywhere on the planet. Much less progress has been made in the social environment and the realm of human livelihood and quality of life.

About the time that Marge Piercy wrote her novel, people began to talk about the "global village". This was a popular notion that saw the planet joined in harmony brought about by the communications revolution. We know now that the revolution in communication technology has not created a global village. The global village is a gated city, inhabited by an affluent few. For most people, alienation and inequity have increased, and these new technologies have deepened the marginalization of those without access to this new future. Over half of the planet's people lack the basics of a humane and fulfilling existence, and many more are living on the margins, alienated from the governance of their own societies. This situation is a repudiation of the ideal of social solidarity, of global interdependence and a global commons.



Pedro Isztin

But, like the shift that has taken place in our awareness of the fragility of the natural environment, there is a growing understanding that the social environment of the planet is integral to other ecological concerns, and that we cannot separate nature from society, nor society from nature. When one is degraded, so too is the other. This insight is leading to a renewed vision of one shared world – a world that is indeed round and interconnected – a world that demands social solidarity and mutual support if it is to be truly healthy and sustainable.

This vision is a long way from the image of the village. The world is not a village, and humans are not villagers on our planet. Nor is the world a "community". It is impossible to imagine only one community – there is incredible and wondrous diversity within and among the communities of the world, a diversity to be cherished and protected.

But we are neighbours. What we do affects our neighbours, and what our neighbours do affects us. And increasingly we understand that, just as the environment nurtures us when

we care for it, so also when we care for each other – when we care for the global neighbourhood – the global neighbourhood is a safer, more nurturing and healthy place for all of us.

In our Annual Report last spring we wrote about how the original meaning of "economy" includes an ecological appreciation that emphasizes managing resources and livelihoods in an equitable, balanced and healthy way that uses and conserves local resources, and global resources, for the benefit of all. This is a vision that sees human beings literally as neighbours – sharing values, sharing dreams, sharing a common humanity, and sharing action for change, locally and internationally.

Inter Pares promotes this ethos of common cause and common humanity. We work for change with others, as global neighbours, sharing visions and hopes for transforming the world. And working in common cause, we promote the ideas of the global commons, of one shared world, and the ideal of one common standard of dignity for all human beings on the planet.

# Building Community in the Midst of War

One of the aims of the repression waged by Burma's military junta against the country's ethnic peoples is the destruction of the social bonds that nourish and maintain community. The military sweeps through remote regions, burning villages and forcing people to relocate to "controlled zones" where they can be supervised by the army. Families are torn apart, village economies destroyed, and ethnic communities eradicated. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced and many have sought sanctuary in neighbouring countries.

Yet in the midst of this repression, Burmese activists are working to re-build and recreate community as a key strategy of resistance. And, across continents and oceans, people are reaching out and joining hands to support this process.

One of these Burmese activists is Dr. Cynthia Maung, a Karen physician who fled Burma after the military cracked down on the democracy movement in 1988. She arrived at the Thailand border after a 17 day walk through the jungle. She was soon ministering to the thousands of sick and exhausted refugees. She trained refugee students in first aid and primary health. She organized mobile teams of these student para-medics and trekked into the hills and jungles inside Burma to reach communities scattered by the war. She established tiny clinics in remote hamlets in Burma to support the health needs of displaced people. She worked in refugee camps, organizing training and support programs for women.

As word spread about Dr. Cynthia and her work, physicians, nurses and medical students from Canada, the USA, Europe and Australia began to visit, volunteering to work with the health program. Most admit that they learned more than they contributed; many return, year after year, drawn by the plight of the refugees and the commitment of this remarkable woman. In this way, their "neighbourhood" has been extended all the way to the Thai-Burma border.

Dr. Cynthia Maung bandages wounds, treats malaria, delivers babies, tends to sick and malnourished children, comforts women who have lived through horror. But she is more than a physician.



Faris Amhed

Dr. Cynthia's contribution is not only her medical training, but her commitment to bringing people together to help and heal each other. She refuses to allow herself, or others, to be victims, to give in to despair. There is too much to be done – there are social organizations to create, schools to be built, homes to be found for orphans, training programs to be arranged for refugee women, medical teams to be planned. There is hope to be nurtured and sustained. She knows that the latter is her most important

task – keeping hope alive, nurturing solidarity among her people, and preventing their spirit of resistance from being extinguished.

Through her work, and the example of her own life, Dr. Cynthia proclaims the right to a life of dignity, hope, and security. And she promotes a vision of universal humanity and solidarity which is shared by thousands around the world – including Inter Pares donors – who support her work and the struggle of her people.

## A Woman of Distinction

Earlier this year, Dr. Shree Mulay was presented the Woman of Distinction award in Montreal by the YWCA, an honour bestowed on women who have made valuable contributions to the advancement of women. It is not the first time that Shree has been recognized for her work with women and with immigrant communities.

Shree Mulay's neighbourhood is worldwide, and her "communities" are many, extending from the local – for example her work with the South Asian Women's Community Centre in Montreal – to the National Action Committee on

the Status of Women Canada, to international women's health networks, including the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights.



As an academic, Shree is able to combine her personal values and professional interests in her position as Director of the Centre for Research and

Teaching on Women at McGill University, and as Assistant Director of the Endocrinology and Clinical Biochemistry

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# Courage and Compassion Across Borders

Deadly and destructive, war is a reminder that people often fail to live peacefully as neighbours. Wars destroy nations, divide communities and families and leave scars on our homes and our hopes. But, even in times of war, we witness profound solidarity that reaches across boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, religion and even ideology.

Inter Pares has worked closely with people who have experienced the dislocation and suffering caused by war. At times the cycle of violence appears as though it will never end. And yet, in every situation of conflict, the madness and destruction of war have been resisted by a majority of people who valiantly preserve human values of compassion and community, and work to build the basis for peace and reconciliation.

Recently we have seen yet another example of this courageous spirit. Last June, civil war broke out in the small West African country of Guinea Bissau. Tens of thousands of refugees fled to the neighbouring countries of Senegal and Guinea Conakry. Hundreds perished as they tried to escape by sea in overloaded boats. Opposing factions of the military of Guinea Bissau shelled the city, destroying the communications system, cutting people off from the outside world, and making life impossible.

The staff of Tiniguena, long-time colleagues of Inter Pares, were caught in the crisis. For many years, Tiniguena has been promoting sustainable development in rural communities, building the capacity of people to care for their land and improve their

livelihoods. Tiniguena built bridges of education and support between those rural communities and the youth of the city to strengthen a national vision for environmental conservation and economic development. This painstaking work, and the work of other community organizations in Guinea Bissau, was violently interrupted by the outbreak of war.

Yet, in spite of all the difficulties, in a matter of days the staff of Tiniguena began working with their fellow Guineans and

neighbours in bordering countries to organize support to refugees and those caught between the warring military factions. They rallied the support of people in communities far away, including Canada, to respond to the needs of the victims of war. Those who had been working for decades to nurture communities at home are now drawing on the support of their neighbours, at home and abroad, to sustain the reconstruction of these communities, and their hopes for lasting peace.

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## The Rights of Migrants: *Neighbours Protecting Neighbours*

Much is made of the how economic globalization has created a “world without borders”. Of course, we know that this cliché is true only for a small and affluent elite. For the poor and dislocated seeking a place within this new world, the borders are wide and difficult to cross. An excellent example exists in our own backyard, along the US-Mexico frontier, and by extension, along the Canadian border itself.

The migration of Mexican workers in search of work in the United States has been a recurrent feature ever since the Americans annexed parts of Mexico a hundred and fifty years ago. Over the past several decades, there has been an increase in migration flows as a result of conflict and deteriorating economic conditions in Mexico and Central America. Just as in previous waves of immigration to North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the United States and Canada have benefited socially and economically, as the new citizens who have migrated from Mexico and Central America contribute to their adopted societies.

The governments of Canada and the United States, however, have responded to increasing migration by adopting ever more restrictive immigration policies for people arriving from the south. The US has intensified its border patrol, resulting in massive increases in arrests, imprisonments and deportations. Increased smuggling of illegal immigrants has been accompanied by hundreds of murders of nameless migrants whose killers are never brought to justice. Migrants deported south of the Rio Grande find themselves alone, without legal protection or basic social services

such as food, shelter and medical attention.

Concerned by this situation, Mexican organizations have collaborated with their neighbours to the north to protect the human rights of migrants and to coordinate policy initiatives. With support and cooperation from Inter Pares and other Canadian and American agencies, the Mexican organizations, Centre for Border Studies and the Promotion of Human Right, and Sin Fronteras, monitor the situation of Central American and Mexican migrants along the US border, document violations of human rights, provide legal and humanitarian assistance, and assist undocumented migrants to relocate and reconstruct their lives within Mexico.

In addition to providing basic social and legal services, Sin Fronteras also carries out public education campaigns and human rights education within migrants' communities of origin. Sin Fronteras assists these migrant communities to save and invest workers' earnings to promote greater economic sustainability, reducing the pressure to migrate for those who would prefer to stay in their homeplaces.

Canadian and American human rights organizations are also working with these and other Mexican organizations on the larger issue of promoting more open and humane immigration policies that reflect the reality of increased continental economic integration. It is through such concerted action, collaborating as good neighbours and concerned citizens, that the needs and rights of migrant workers and their families will be protected, and economic opportunity shared justly among the people of the Americas.

Laboratories at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Fortunately, Shree's range of communities also includes Inter Pares, where she has been a member of our Board of Directors since 1995. We share her belief that “much of the strength people have comes from working in community. You have much more when you work collectively than when you work individually.” Shree has inspired Inter Pares to broaden our involvement in reproductive health issues and to raise awareness about the links between racism, injustice and the health of women.

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# Global Networks – Global Neighbourhoods

The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights marks its twentieth anniversary this year. Linking over 1,600 members and subscribers in 123 countries of the world, it promotes activism locally and internationally, and provides a forum for discussion and debate on issues affecting women's health.

Whether lobbying the World Bank to end economic policies that undermine women's health, exposing unethical practices in the research, testing and distribution of reproductive technologies, or reinforcing women's local health concerns through international campaigns, the Network reflects the diversity of women's struggles.

Network members, including Inter Pares, work for the recognition of women's reproductive rights as human rights. We believe that feminist activism for reproductive health must involve women at all levels of society as agents of change, and that this is a political struggle for the social and economic conditions that

will make women's autonomy and choice possible.

Within this common framework, the network's strategies are quite diverse, reflecting the different contexts in which women live and the challenges they face. In Africa, activism focuses on primary health and basic services. Network members in Asia are resisting coercive population control programs. In Latin America, the focus is on reproductive rights as human rights. In Europe and North America, women are organizing to challenge the disintegration of health and social services. All of these concerns are linked in a common analysis of challenging existing power relationships between women and men, rich and poor, and inequalities within and among countries of the North and South.

The Women's Global Network offers alternative visions of women's health and promotes a reorientation of priorities towards health policies and programs that are women-centred and

controlled. Its *Newsletter*, published four times per year in English, Spanish and French, provides information and analysis for discussion and debate on various aspects of women's health. The network coordinates the Women's Health Day of Action on May 28 each year, as well as the international campaign to stop anti-fertility "vaccines".

In all of this work, there is a recognition that women are strengthened by global solidarity and mutual support in the common struggle for women's empowerment around the world.

For more information on the Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights, their campaigns and publications, contact:

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## World March of Women 2000

For ten days in 1995, 850 women walked across Quebec to bring attention to their platform of nine demands for social justice. Along the way they were welcomed by over 15,000 people who supported their cause. Later the same year, many of these Quebec women carried the momentum of their march to the International Women's Conference in Beijing. There the plan to organize an international women's march in the year 2000 took form.

Women around the world know the value of family and community ties in confronting adversity. In spite of the borders that can divide and separate people, the joy and suffering of human beings around the world often take the same form and have the same face. In this way women, in all our diversity, are linked by common experiences.

In this era of globalization, people around the world are organizing across borders to resist exclusion and impoverishment.

**The World March of Women 2000** aims to create networks of solidarity to demand concrete actions from governments to combat poverty and violence.

More than 500 groups from 83 countries have already endorsed the March. These women dream of peace, of joy, and of sharing a round planet, encircled by a cord of friendship and mutual support. They are acting together to make their common dream a reality.



For more information,  
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