

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Shared Vision, Shared Lives

Her voice is serious, but her eyes reveal her joy and enthusiasm as she speaks to us about the health program her team is establishing for adolescent girls. Olga Mendez is part of *Conrado de la Cruz*, a group of Guatemalan women who have been reaching out to indigenous girls labouring in factories and as domestics in private homes, providing them with information on labour rights, protection against abuse in the workplace, and helping them continue their schooling.

As the team discusses their work, the quiet man at the corner of the table listens with interest. Julian, a priest in the shantytowns of Guatemala City, had introduced us to Olga and her colleagues several years ago. In his parish he had come to know and respect young women like Olga, who worked to help support themselves and their families, but who wanted to protect their younger sisters and cousins from the harsh treatment they had suffered in the workplace.

Four years ago, when Julian and Olga first told us about their plans to reach out to young workers to help them transform their lives through labour rights protection and alternative schooling, *Conrado de la Cruz* was a small group, and they weren't sure how they were going to achieve their dreams. Now, with a team of eight women, including a doctor and a psychologist, they have assisted hundreds of young workers to come together in mutual support.

Today, Olga's glance seems to turn inward as she speaks about the plans some of the young workers are making to continue their school work. "The señoritas know what they want, and can make their own decisions – they just need to see that others believe they can do it too."

The vision of a more fair and safe world which Julian and Olga shared,

and passed on to the other young women of *Conrado de la Cruz* as they first began to plan this work together, is the basis on which a long and lasting friendship has been built. This shared vision encouraged them all – that is, it gave them courage – to dream the impossible, and to act to make it possible.

The opportunity for Inter Pares to share this table and this conversation among friends is the joy of doing our work – and its engine – and is something that is only built over time. While friendship alone is not what makes change possible, friendship is what emerges in common cause, as a result of people's commitment to shared action, and a shared vision. And it is friendship that sustains action through the difficult times.

The friendship between Olga and Julian, and now between them and us, is a friendship among people who have acted together in the belief that there is a different way of doing things, with a common vision of a world based on equity and justice.

We and our colleagues in the South don't think of ourselves as "partners", which implies a division of labour, of reward, of responsibility, of authority. Partnerships are rarely equal. Even when both sides in a partnership achieve real benefits, partnership remains a limited, negotiated relationship. Authentic relationships among people working for social justice are constructed through collaboration and cooperation based on shared values, goals and interests, and a commitment to working together as equals to make a better world.



Conrado de la Cruz

This means that at Inter Pares we are also committed to challenging the causes of poverty and inequality here in Canada, and for which we as Canadians are responsible. Only as we integrate our own struggle for a better future for ourselves and our children can we collaborate and conspire with others – our friends and counterparts around the world – in genuine solidarity.

We have learned a lot working with colleagues like Olga and Julian in Guatemala. They, and countless others around the world and here at home, continue to inspire us, and remind us that change is possible, with struggle, with joy – and with friendship. This Bulletin relates some of our experiences of long-term collaborative work in which Inter Pares is proud to be involved.

New Creations

Creating alternative
pathways for women
Of their own choice
On their own terms
For their own sakes
Arm-in-arm with other women
(Likhaan)

Likhaan, a Filipino word, suggests a place for “new creations”. It is also the acronym for *Linangan ng Kababaihan*, which literally means, “a place for developing women”. Likhaan is a centre for women’s health care, education, organizing, research and advocacy. Since its inception, Likhaan has been the locus for many new creations, including alternative health programs in marginalized communities, innovative research, building networks, and women’s advocacy.

From the very beginning, there has been a dynamic of reciprocity between Inter Pares and Likhaan. Likhaan has

an interest in making links with women’s organizations and individuals in Canada and other countries, to share their perspectives, to learn from others, and to build international solidarity. Inter Pares has a similar interest in internationalizing the social action of Canadians, and promoting mutual learning and support on issues that affect us all.

At Inter Pares’ invitation, women from Likhaan have spent time in aboriginal communities in Canada discussing women’s health concerns, and have participated in other events from which exciting linkages have emerged. Last year, Likhaan participated in a preparatory meeting for the World March of Women 2000, an initiative launched by the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* for global action on poverty and violence against women. Women’s March organizers wanted input from women in Asia, and Likhaan felt that

being part of the planning would create opportunities in the Philippines for women’s organizing and networking. Likhaan brought together a network of over 20 Philippine women’s groups who developed a consensual document for the March, which Likhaan presented in Montréal.

Now, Likhaan and Inter Pares are working on further international cooperation with our long-time colleagues at the Burma Relief Centre in Thailand. Together, we will share experiences and knowledge on women’s organizing, reproductive rights, and on health approaches in areas of intense military conflict.

In such ways, our relationship with Likhaan is an example of sharing friendship and action to develop “new creations,” arm-in-arm with other women’s and social justice organizations who share our vision of a safe, just and equitable world.

An Environment for Change

During the same period, Daniel Quérol participated in efforts to bring international attention to the loss of genetic diversity and the privatization of the world’s genetic resources by multinational corporations. Inter Pares supported these activities, which in turn reinforced our own policy work in Canada concerning regressive plant breeders rights legislation.

Our relationship with Daniel deepened when he initiated scientific research on the humid tropics in the remote Rio San Juan area, in collaboration with peasant cooperatives. Inter Pares accompanied this effort by supporting the improvement of basic infrastructure in health, education and communication, the strengthening of community organizations, and various small economic initiatives. Daniel and his colleagues provided technical assistance in production and management training to local leaders and members of the cooperatives.

In the early nineties, recognizing the value of the traditional knowledge of the peasants with whom they had been working for so many years, Daniel and his colleagues founded the research centre, Güises Montaña Experimental.

There, scientists and peasants work side-by-side to identify alternatives to slash-and-burn agriculture in an effort to reverse the destruction of the Rio San Juan forests while offering improved economic prospects for local communities. Inter Pares has been intimately involved since the beginning, providing input on management and organizational development issues, assisting with seed capital, and helping to secure support from other major funders.

From this jungle research station, Daniel remains engaged in global activism, knowing that the fate of tropical communities is increasingly determined by global policies shaped in the North. Together with another Inter Pares counterpart, Third World Network, Daniel has played an important role in the elaboration of proposals for global protection of bio-diversity.

For Inter Pares, this relationship is another example that progressive change comes about as the result of shared commitments and deep relationships of solidarity and common cause. It is also a vivid example of concerted global advocacy rooted in local action.



Daniel Quérol of Güises Montaña Experimental

One of the initiatives supported by Inter Pares in Nicaragua in the early eighties was the Genetic Resources Program of Nicaragua (REGEN). Its mandate was to increase domestic food production and self-sufficiency through conservation and enhancement of local seed varieties. REGEN evolved with the technical support of Peruvian biologist, Daniel Quérol, and the financial support and advice of Inter Pares in the area of institutional development. By 1985, a first generation of Nicaraguan agronomists had graduated, and they have been operating the program successfully ever since.

Reconstructing Hope

Martín Soto completes his description of the goals and current activities of the new regional roundtable in Huancavelica, Peru, whose development Inter Pares is assisting. “Human rights, governance, poverty and development, peace and reconciliation,” he says, “We can’t deal with any without confronting all. This is what we’re trying to address in the Roundtable, and that’s why this development plan has to have the participation of everyone.”

Martín is right. Over the last couple of hours, our conversation has covered many issues: the case of a peasant leader jailed on false charges and our actions to have her released; the accountability of municipal governments; efforts to address conflicts among communities divided by war; the successes of local women’s organizations; challenges in livestock production and agriculture.

Although the Peruvian military has declared that the war is over, there has been no reconciliation process in Peru, and the wounds of war remain. Last year, Peruvian human rights organizations recommended a national peace process to deal with the social divisions deepened by the conflict. This suggestion was rejected by the government, and the people who made it were accused of “terrorist sympathies”. The government continues to harass and intimidate people who express lawful critique, particularly in the rural highlands where the war began. And so the inequity and injustice that were the root cause of the war remain outside the realm of public discussion, and the society remains politically, socially and economically fragmented. This is especially true in the poor rural highlands such as Huancavelica, where whole communities have been destroyed.

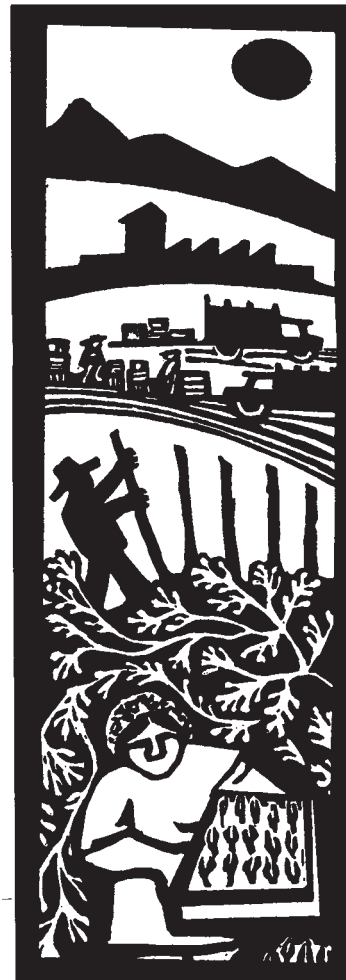
Huancavelica is one of the zones most severely affected by the political conflict during the ‘80s and the early ‘90s. Thousands of people – the majority of whom are indigenous – were forced to flee their homes during those years of war. Huancavelica remains the poorest department in Peru.

At the same time, in Huancavelica as in any society, there is a strong

countervailing capacity and tendency toward peace. Many communities there resisted the violence during the war, and through complex inter-communal negotiations were able to prohibit the entrance of any militarized forces – government or guerrilla – into their communities.

In 1993, when we first met Martín Soto, he was working in a small development organization supporting these community groups to re-establish agricultural production, to rebuild houses destroyed by the war, and to assist those who had fled to return to their homes. Since then, Martín’s organization has collaborated with other civil society organizations to engage local authorities and institutions, and to use this work as a way to rebuild social trust in Huancavelica.

This collaboration has given people hope and generated new ideas about how to address the future, and has resulted in the creation of the Huancavelica Roundtable (Mesa de Concertación), which Martín coordinates. The Roundtable includes local development organizations, agricultural producers’ associations, organizations of trades-people, small businesses, and women’s organizations,



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as well as municipalities and the Human Rights Ombudsman’s office. Formed last year, participants view it as a place in which the different social groups and government structures of Huancavelica can meet to begin to develop peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution, and to construct more accountable, transparent political processes. The Roundtable is elaborating a participative social, political and economic development plan for Huancavelica, involving each community in the design and implementation.

Huancavelicans are taking their lives into their own hands, and are finding ways to mend the wounds of war. They are working together, collaborating as equals. As Martín

says, “It will be a long process, but it is a hopeful process.”

These are the kinds of relationships that Inter Pares promotes, and that we seek to share in our work. We have contributed a little to the process Martín describes. But we have gained so much more, and what we have learned will serve us in Peru and in our other relationships world-wide, well into the future.

Thank you to Board members

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, many people have generously contributed their time and talent to Inter Pares as members of the Board of Directors. Board members work with staff to ensure that Inter Pares remains true to its purpose and builds for the future with creativity, integrity and accountability to our counterparts, our donors and the Canadian public.

We gratefully acknowledge the contri-

bution of three members of the board who stepped down this year after many years of service to Inter Pares. Margaret Phillips, Mark Stiles and Deborah McIntosh will be missed at future board meetings. However, we know that their long-standing relationships with Inter Pares, as friends and collaborators in the struggle to build a better world, will continue for many years to come.

The Dilemmas of “Social Partnership”

Recently within Inter Pares we have been reflecting upon “social partnerships”, a model for funding increasingly being considered by Canadian and Third World colleagues working in non-profit organisations. While the concept of social partnership – joint ventures between voluntary organisations and private corporations – is not new, its recent popularity within the international development sector is. For many, it is the way ahead for generating revenue to carry out their work given the fact that government budgets for domestic social services and international development have been so dramatically reduced.

Non-profit organisations in Canada and elsewhere see the possibility of “partnering” with the private sector as an appealing solution and offer solid arguments in favour of such partnering. Social partnership is seen as one way to enhance corporate responsibility and make private corporations better public “citizens”. In such partnerships, the non-profit organisations are assigned responsibility for the provision of social services ranging from community services and health and nutrition programs, to environmental rehabilitation, in part funded by the corporate “partner”. The corporations themselves continue their role of investment and commercial activity.

In Canada, many see social partnership as an alternative source of funds for community-based projects no longer supported by public funds. In the South, it is seen as a way to ensure that multinational corporations contribute to the social development of communities, rather than merely extracting local resources and profit. Others suggest that social partnership is an empowering mechanism because it provides community organisations with their own funds and a direct relationship with the private sector. In Latin America, Asia, Africa and Canada, there are communities whose economies rely on one or two multinational corporations. Engaging in “social partnership” with such corporations can be seen as a way of making the private sector pay greater attention to the social development of the communities in which they operate.

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Inter Pares does not engage in such relationships, and has always been wary of the concept. As we reflect on the essence of our work and our relationships with our colleagues and friends in the South, we consider what defines us as a voluntary, not-for-profit organisation, and our expectations for mutual accountability with our counterparts. The relationships we strive to develop are rooted in a vision of social justice and development, a vision that assumes that present relations between rich and poor are unjust, and that our role is to try to change these relations, not accommodate them.

From this perspective, we have concluded that social partnership is rarely a relation “among equals” based on common cause. From the beginning, these partnerships are set on an unequal footing. They are dependent on the interests of private corporations whose main objectives are profit and growth. The corporations are accountable only to their shareholders, not to the communities in which they work. They can always decide – solely on a cost-benefit basis – to withdraw from a community

or remove funding for social development. At the same time, non-profit organisations run the risk of mediating between a corporation and the community, undermining the role of local elected authorities and losing their own autonomy. Civil society organisations need to preserve their autonomous voices and their critical capacity to empower communities to control their own natural resources and human potential. Social partnership, as it is currently being promoted, undermines this possibility.

It is certainly going against the tide today to challenge the concept of social partnership. At the same time, we know we share this vision with many friends and colleagues in the South and in Canada working to sustain communities and local economies. It is vital that organisations in the voluntary sector continue to assert the importance of participatory democratic development. The long-term health of communities will not be ensured by short-term service contracts, but by long-term investment in the potential of people to control their lives and livelihoods.

Citizens Acting Together

Stakeholder politics, the abdication of activist government, and the increasing reliance on limited social “partnership” between communities and private sponsors, has meant that the responsibility for ensuring the health and safety of Canadians and their communities is falling more and more on voluntary organizations and the discretionary charity of individuals and private institutions.

Many Canadians are not satisfied with this new politics, and are critical of the effects of social and economic policy in Canada over the past ten years. They resist the erosion of the values upon which Canada has been built, and the destruction of the social fabric of the communities in which they were born, and in which they want to raise their own children. They see themselves as citizens, not stakeholders; they see their country as a nation, not a corporation. Organizations of citizens from across the country are exploring how they might work together to better understand and

challenge this fundamental undermining of government and social solidarity in Canada. The *Citizens' Action Social Watch* process is bringing together scores of local, regional and national organizations to assess the impact of government policy in their communities and develop alternative policies to propose to fellow citizens and to the various levels of government.

This project, which Inter Pares has helped to initiate, has been developed in cooperation with organizations from several countries carrying out similar investigations, rooted in visions and values developed and shared at the local and international level. Together these coalitions, which include many of Inter Pares' long-time counterparts, are sharing analysis, methodologies and resources to ensure fuller citizen participation in redefining socio-economic policy and the role of government in the new millennium.

