

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

Vol. 21, No. 2, March 1999

Image and Reality: *Lives Behind the Scenes*

"Beauty lies behind the scenes. If we wish to experience it we must demolish the scenery."

Milan Kundera

A terrible hurricane in Central America, or Bangladesh. The media present images of floating bodies, hungry mouths and grasping hands. Reporters' voices describe the nameless misery of victims of yet another "natural" disaster. On another day, a slaughter of innocents by military forces in Colombia, or Central Africa. More images of the dead, and of weeping relatives. Reporters' voices again describe helpless victims, this time the anonymous victims of a faceless cruelty. It is a similar story with drought and famine, whether in north Africa or southern India. Reporters' voices intone another "tragedy unfolding". The anonymous, haunted faces this time are those of emaciated children; the searching hands, the hands of their mothers.

In each case, aid agencies replay these voices and images in appeals to Canadians for money to help, while sombre expressions of Canada's official sympathy are accompanied by earnest political announcements: "several tons of food aid", "Canadian rescue helicopters". Then silence. Until the next time.

What kind of world do we live in? A world of chaos and terror, a world that offers no respite to tragedy and grief? It is easy to understand why many of our children believe that this is the only world that exists outside their own limited experience. It is the dominant image of the world they see represented on television, on radio, in the newspapers or movies, and even in the material they encounter at school.

And tragically, this world *is* real. These scenes do occur, too often and, it sometimes seems, without end.

But this is not the only world, nor is it the primary experience of the people caught up in the events that are being reported. Peoples' lives are diverse and complex, even in situations where it is possible to freeze

some ultimate horror in terrible images. Behind those images are dynamic histories of people who, like each of us, live 24 hours each day, through a life-time of days. People who live, laugh, cry, love and are loved, bear children, play, eat together, die natural deaths and grieve natural grief; people who dream and hope and work and plan and build and rebuild. They do not live merely the instant that it takes for a shutter to click, or a journalist to describe their pain in a paragraph.

Is there anything in these images, or brief news items, that tells a mother's story or that of her child – that asks her questions, that gives voice to her lived experience and the lessons her life teaches? Is there anything in these images that provides a clue to what she would tell the world, if she could?

The world we see in the media, and in the advertisements of aid agencies, is a selective, extremely limited representation of the world that exists. It usually ignores the clear and vivid analysis that poor and marginalized people have of their own reality – which they readily share when they can. Unfortunately, poor people are often most impoverished in their lack of power to represent their lived reality themselves, and to use their own voice to try to change their lives and the world they experience.

The way that we and others describe this world, therefore, is an important ethical and political act, whether to raise money for relief projects, or to convince people to lobby the government concerning specific elements of Canada's foreign policy. When organizations like Inter Pares describe our work, we do not merely



mirror the world as neutral observers; our description of the world reflects our own direct experience and inevitably includes our biases, values, and social objectives. The images we use, the "realities" we isolate and emphasize, are choices – indeed, political choices. And we cannot hide the implications of the images we use behind a facade of humanitarian altruism, nor our politics behind the myth of objectivity, distance, and neutrality. We are responsible for the way we represent the world, and for the effects of these images in society. And we are responsible for finding ways to promote the capacity of marginalized people to speak directly on their own behalf, as agents of change.

This *Bulletin* explores the dilemmas that Inter Pares and other international organizations face in representing the world we experience, and the experience of the people with whom we work. And it describes the way we work with others to deal with these dilemmas.

Behind the Scenes of Disaster

Late last summer, Bangladesh suffered severe and prolonged flooding. The water destroyed crops and livestock, flooded industrial and residential areas in urban centres, and submerged millions of homes throughout rural districts of the country.

Television screens broadcast the devastation around the world. What wasn't captured by the cameras, however, was the resilience and ability of people to cope. "We were constantly amazed with how people adapted to the situation," said Farida Ahkter of the Bangladeshi organization BINIG. "And it was inspiring to see how people supported each other, how they worked together to deal with the problems."

Few economic sectors were spared from damage, and large parts of the country remained under water for several months. Farida's organization decided that it needed to help rehabilitate productive activities while at the same time promoting self-reliance and building on what people were already doing to cope with the situation. UBINIG, with many years of experience working with farmers and weavers, felt that their priority was to support farming and weaving families to get

back to work.

For farmers, the key priority was to plant the next crop immediately after the water receded. Many farmers, however, had lost their seed reserves. UBINIG helped mobilize a massive program of seed exchange. Farmers in non-flooded areas freely provided seeds to the "seed wealth centres" that they had established in the past few years with UBINIG's assistance. These seeds were in turn provided to farmers in flood-affected areas. Farmers agreed to return a portion of the seeds from their next harvest to the seed wealth centres. In this way, farm families supported each other while strengthening the collection and preservation of local seed varieties.

Similar assistance was provided to handloom weavers whose finished products were damaged by the flood waters. UBINIG purchased these damaged materials from the weavers, allowing them to recover a portion of their losses. Some of the damaged materials were then distributed to garment workers in Dhaka who had lost their belongings in the flood. In addition, UBINIG organized a campaign in Dhaka to encourage residents to buy hand-woven cloth as a way of helping

rehabilitate weaving families. Local residents responded enthusiastically to the campaign. In this way, weaving families recovered from a situation that otherwise would have been disastrous.

These are examples of actions that took place "behind the scenes" of the Bangladesh disaster, and cannot be captured in a photo or a headline. They are examples of people working together, not as passive victims but as actors capable of adaptation, creative action and cooperation to transform disaster into opportunity and change. These examples also demonstrate how appropriate assistance, which builds on local skills, capacities and aspirations can be very effective in helping people recover from disasters.

Too often disasters are described in the passive voice — things, disasters, *happening to* people — rather than the more realistic active voice where people do things to help themselves and others. There is always an inclination to present simplistic and heart-rending images. But these images reinforce false assumptions about the causes and effects of disasters, and especially about the people and cultural communities that subsist in zones of vulnerability. In fact, the chronic and ongoing vulnerability of people due to their poverty and lack of political power is a permanent disaster, the second phase of which occurs when these vulnerable people are killed or dislocated by natural events such as typhoons and floods.

Our work with UBINIG and other counterparts in Bangladesh attempts to permanently reduce this vulnerability, and even in times of emergency such as the recent floods, it is this long-term work with people that has today made possible their capacity to survive and transcend the disasters that strike their communities.



Common Cause, Common Voice

With the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the ongoing negotiations to expand a common market to all of the Americas, the people of Canada and Mexico are sharing an increasingly common social, economic and political reality. Driven by financial and trade interests, our governments are shaping our common future without significant consultation or input from the citizens in whose name they govern, and to whom they are accountable.

Concerned by the lack of government accountability, social justice coalitions from Mexico and Canada are working together to create opportunities for people to influence governments and put forward their own visions of the future of the Americas and their own societies. For Mexicans, this challenge is compounded by the struggle to sustain and deepen the fragile democratization process they have begun in their country. For over 60 years an institutional elite has controlled power through autocratic government, marked by violence, impunity, corruption and electoral fraud. This repressive political culture has curtailed the emergence of a strong independent civil society. But the last decade has seen a rapid development and expansion of civic movements and popular organizations that have come together to struggle for democracy and economic justice, to protect the environment, to establish independent trade unions, and to defend human rights. These organizations are working to create the conditions where they can have a say in their own future, and have the capacity to do so effectively.

In this dynamic context, Inter Pares is collaborating with Mexican colleagues to strengthen the capacity of their organizations to participate with a strong and effective voice in

the public policy arena, in Mexico and within the broader context of the Americas. The initiative includes institutional support, leadership training, civic education, as well as technical assistance for social research, investigation and policy formulation. In the process, Inter Pares and other Canadian organizations working in solidarity with our Mexican counterparts hope to learn from the rich Mexican experience to strengthen our own strategies and capacities to advance social advocacy on common issues here in Canada. The initiative also aims to contribute to more equitable forms of collaboration between Mexican and Canadian civil society, based

on people's direct experience in engaging our governments and building an alternative social agenda for the Americas.

The experience of Inter Pares has shown us that it is neither just nor effective for external actors to speak for others, no matter how benevolent our intentions, nor can voice be "given" to the voiceless. Profound change happens when people – whether in Canada, Mexico or other countries – are able to support each other as equals in our mutual efforts to represent our own reality and experience, in our own name and in our own voice, and to resist injustice and bring about desired social, political and economic changes in society.

The Ethics of Public Outreach

The following are excerpts from a Code of Ethics endorsed by over 100 member organizations within the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC). Inter Pares is a member of CCIC and endorses this code of ethics.

...Fundraising solicitations shall be truthful, shall accurately describe the Organization's identity, purpose, programs and need, shall only make claims which the Organization can fulfill, and shall avoid using high-pressure tactics in soliciting donations. There shall be no misleading information (including material omissions or exaggerations of fact), no use of misleading photographs, nor any other communication which would tend to create a false impression or misunderstanding. Information in the Organization's appeals should give accurate balance to the actual programs for which the funds solicited will be used.

...Any and all communications to the public by the Organization shall respect the dignity, values, history,

religion, and culture of the people supported by its programs. In particular, the organization shall avoid the following:

- messages which generalize and mask the diversity of situations;
- messages which fuel prejudice;
- messages which foster a sense of Northern superiority;
- messages which show people as hopeless objects for our pity, rather than as equal partners in action and development.

...The Organization will ensure that the content of the messages sent out in disaster appeals does not undermine the work of development education which calls for long-term response.

A Voice of Struggle

In the November 1998 edition of this Bulletin, we described the efforts of our colleagues at Tiniguena to cope with the destruction caused by the war that broke out last June in Guinea Bissau. The war has destroyed precious economic and social infrastructure in a country that was already among the world's poorest. Augusta Henriquez, the Director of Tiniguena, like many of her compatriots, is now a refugee living in Portugal and working with others to mobilize support for a resolution to the conflict and for the eventual reconstruction of her country. Inter Pares has been collaborating with Tiniguena and other activists in Guinea Bissau for over 15 years, and in the present crisis is supporting their efforts to participate in rebuilding the basis for peace and justice in their country. We asked Augusta to offer her views on the crisis in Guinea Bissau, and the future of our work together. This is what Augusta wrote:

We must rebuild our organizations and our country for a future in which this kind of destruction will not be possible. We have to rethink the economic and political system that is dominating the world today if we are going to be able to live within our means and save the planet. This system, which is founded on the over-consumption of resources, inequity and selfishness, has already exhausted itself and it is no longer possible to renew it. The cyclical crises of

the stock markets are a sign — everyone knows it. But until now, we have refused to confront this reality and to change it...

We must dare to think of a new utopia, to create a new way of living that rehabilitates the human values of equality and fraternity, puts the human being at the centre of development in balance with nature, and restores to our world the humanity it has lost.

Today we must promote the idea of

a new citizenship based on democracy not within any one country, but democracy for the entire planet. And a true democracy — not just of ballot boxes that are so easily bought and sold. It is very easy for a country like the United States, for example, to give lessons in democracy when it consumes a quarter of the world's energy. And it is easy to give lessons in democracy when countries in the North sell arms to the South, only to come back later with humanitarian aid that is merely the leftovers from the tables of the rich. This aid eases their conscience. But what is really needed are solutions to the problems at the source of conflict, the first being inequity.

I am speaking to you as a refugee from a country at war. I have come to know about this labyrinth from my own suffering. Each day brings us closer to the heart of the crisis. Let us hope that our children will be able to tell us how to get out of it, because we do not have the courage nor the innocence to do it ourselves. Let us hope that the more affluent children of the North, who have had enough of their societies' over-consumption, and the children of the South from countries that have been disinherited by this system and who have had enough of its injustice, will take each others' hands to repair what our generation has succeeded in destroying in only 50 years.

Of Hope & Solidarity: *The Roots of Generosity*

Conventional wisdom tells us that the competition for charitable donations is intensifying and that charities have to use all kinds of gimmicks and marketing strategies to survive. This approach to fundraising often justifies almost any means of appealing to the public, as long as the money collected is for a good cause.

Our experience of what is needed to make a difference in the world tells us otherwise. The methods used to raise funds for development work are as important as the purpose for which those funds are eventually used. A charitable donation is value-charged. The human hope and solidarity that a donation expresses are signs of a powerful desire for change. It is essential, therefore, that the information we provide and the stories we tell sustain an authentic foundation for that solidarity — a foundation that

respects the reality and the integrity of the lives of those who receive financial support, as well as of those who choose to make a gift.

The money that Inter Pares contributes to support the actions of our counterparts in Asia, Africa and Latin America makes a significant difference in the lives of many people. This contribution is made possible by the generosity of our donors — and we know it matters. But we also know that justice is not a commodity, and building a better world requires more than money. It requires significant changes in how we value other people, and how we commit ourselves to making a better world possible. The words and images we share, the actions we take, the choices we make, join us in common cause in an ongoing effort to create the kind of world in which we all want to live.

erratum

In our November 1998 Bulletin, there is an error in the web site address for the Women's March 2000. The correct web site address is: www.ffq.qc.ca

