

# Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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## *Conserving the Garden, Protecting the Hearth*

One of our staff tells the story of how she travelled with Peruvian colleagues through the highlands of Peru – by road while there was still road, and then on foot across high meadows. In each community she was greeted as a sister and invited to share in the women's experiences and plans around the warmth of the stone hearth. And in each meeting, food was brought out and she was urged to eat, to share the stew and the bread, and whatever sweets had been prepared to mark the specialness of the event.

All Inter Pares staff are familiar with this experience: the generosity of people everywhere – regardless how humble their dwelling or meager their provisions – to share their food and entrust a stranger with their struggle. Everywhere, and in every culture, the common breaking of bread and sharing of food is at the very heart of community and social solidarity.

On a global level, this willingness to share the bounty of the land, even when that bounty is scarce, is not only an issue of solidarity, but also an issue of security – of common security. Indeed, not so long ago, the issue of food security was central to any discussion about global justice. The spectre of famine and widespread hunger was still fresh in the memory of many, in both the north and the south, and was a real force in government planning, and in politics. People everywhere were aware of their collective vulnerability to a disruption in food supplies. And regardless of ideology or system, every government and regime was aware that its survival depended on ensuring that there was sufficient food available to meet the basic needs of the population.

Today, the triumphant rhetoric about the benefits of globalization and the integration of global markets implicitly and uncritically assumes that food security has been achieved, and that this new reality benefits everyone. And when

we see the mountains of produce glistening in the stalls of modern supermarkets, it is tempting to believe these claims. But this bounty benefits only those with access to the supermarket, and with money to pay for the array of choices that are presented. For others, there is no bounty, and often it is their deprivation that subsidizes the choices that most of us take for granted.

The reality is that the world's food supply is less secure today than ever before, even with the remarkable increase in production that has been achieved in the past half century. Certainly today there is enough food produced for all; indeed, in many sectors there is vast over-production. At the same time, this unparalleled production devastates landscapes and livelihoods and is a manifestation of the contradictions inherent in global food systems that threaten the security of most poor people every day, and threaten us all in the long term.

The gains in food production that we have seen in recent times have been achieved through intensive and concentrated cultivation based on chemical inputs, genetic engineering, and monoculture. The resulting loss of genetic diversity and wasting of landscapes is making all basic foodstuffs vulnerable to catastrophe. The cost in livelihoods and generations of farming wisdom is potentially even more catastrophic. Millions of small farmers around the world, including tens of thousands of farmers here in Canada, have been driven off the land by the unrelenting competitive pressure of industrial agriculture. Turning our backs on centuries



Carolyn Luce

of tradition, knowledge and stewardship of the land, we are entrusting global food security to a coterie of unaccountable global corporations.

In this global system driven by commercial logic, and where governments have abdicated responsibility for ensuring the basic well-being and livelihoods of people, distribution of foodstuffs is left to the market. This means that those driven out of the market – and those who were never part of it in the first place – go hungry.

These developments have not gone unquestioned or unchallenged, and resistance to these trends has built worldwide. One of the central issues discussed around the hearth by our colleague in Peru was precisely the issue of food and livelihoods, and how women can influence the character of the changing rural landscape, preserving local control over basic food supply and conserving the values of social solidarity imbued in their communities.

This *Bulletin* explores the issue of food security from the perspective of the work carried out by Inter Pares and our counterparts.

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# Celebrating Biodiversity, Securing the Future

We looked up with astonishment as the rain began to fall, a rare sight in the midst of Bangladesh's dry season. It was an auspicious inauguration of the third annual celebration of *Nayakrishi Andolon*, a national social, political, and cultural movement involving more than 20,000 farmers. For three days, women, men and children celebrated their determination and success in transforming inequitable and environmentally destructive agrarian practices into life-giving, nourishing, and sustainable livelihoods.

The site for this Farmers *Mela* was a vast, dusty field where farmers had erected dozens of bamboo-framed huts. One hundred and eight of the 250 varieties of rice *Nayakrishi* farmers grow were on display, including flood varieties whose roots can stretch up to five metres in length. The huts also showed a variety of other crops including 24 types of jackfruit, more than 100 kinds of beans, and a collection of eggplant in varying sizes and shades of purple. Among the most important of these displays was the "Uncultivated Food" hut, where women spoke about the 71 leafy vegetables they collected from fields, roadsides, and water bodies in ecologically-distinct regions of Bangladesh. These foods constitute a significant part of the rural diet, helping farmers and their families meet critical nutritional and medicinal needs.

The farmers wandered from hut to hut exclaiming over their discoveries. And, as poets recounted a history of a land rich in natural resources, as musicians sang about the achievements of *Nayakrishi Andolon*, and as farmers engaged in friendly competitions to name the countless local varieties of rice, one got the sense that this movement is truly alive, that it is turning fundamental assumptions about agriculture and "progress" on their head.

If the past 30 years have taught Bangladeshi farmers anything, it is that modern agricultural systems – systems that emphasize export-oriented production, high-yield seed varieties, single-crop cultivation, and labour saving technologies – are simply not economically,

socially, or culturally viable for the vast majority of people living a rural existence. Indeed, nutritional levels have dropped as families have abandoned multiple crop farms, and mono-cropping has stripped soils of vital nutrients. It has also diminished the natural capacity of ecological systems to manage pests, forcing farmers to invest in increasingly toxic pesticides, and in costly chemical fertilizers to nourish the soil.

Heightened indebtedness, vulnerability and economic dependence, together with the loss of control over production and the disappearance of traditional knowledge about the land and farming practices are all the legacy of the "progress" that modern agriculture has brought.

Several years ago, Inter Pares' counterpart, UBINIG, began to document these losses and to work with farmers to explore alternative agricultural models. Together, they began to recover traditional agricultural practices and to encourage innovation, planting fields with a variety of vegetables and herbs carefully balanced both to meet the nutritional needs of farm families, and to replenish the soil with nutrients. They reintroduced flowers and herbs to promote natural pest control, and explored composting to enhance natural fertilizers.

ening to undermine their security. The threat posed in particular by the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement, currently being negotiated by 132 governments at the World Trade Organization, is one example. TRIPS promotes the privatization of biological resources including plants, animals, and micro-organisms and allows companies to claim legal monopoly rights over innovations with plants and seeds that farmers have developed over centuries. Monopoly rights imply, among other things, that farmers cultivating patented seeds are denied the right to hold back seed to plant and experiment with the following season. They thus ensure the dependence of farmers on corporations, not only for continuous seed supply, but also for costly inputs needed to make those seeds thrive.

For UBINIG and the farmers of the *Nayakrishi Andolon* movement, it is clear that TRIPS is neither fair nor equitable – indeed, it allows foreign-owned corporations to reap massive profits from Bangladesh's biological resources, to claim the creative ingenuity of farmers as their own, and to destroy with impunity what is left of the country's biological diversity. In the end, TRIPS extends and deepens the cycles of dependency and vulnerability

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## TRIPS extends and deepens the cycles of dependency and vulnerability that have developed over decades.

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Central to these efforts was the use and promotion of local seed varieties through the development of community seed wealth centres where seeds are identified, preserved and exchanged. UBINIG encouraged farmers' innovation and experimentation in creating new and heartier seed varieties and knowledge about the land and its diverse resources.

If the farmers' *Mela* demonstrated the success of these efforts, it also revealed the extent of farmers' awareness of the current international trade regime and agreements that are threat-

that have developed over decades.

UBINIG is carrying the concerns of farmers to regional and international fora in the hopes of influencing governments to withdraw their support for this agreement. For *Nayakrishi Andolon* farmers, efforts to safeguard biological diversity in the hands of local farmers is a matter of life and death; it is their only hope for a humane existence today, and a viable future for their children. The joy and energy of the festival that day was testimony of their conviction; it may also be the surest sign of their likely success.

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# Images from the Coasts



Dominic Morissette

By building new links of solidarity between people here and abroad, Inter Pares seeks to contribute to creating strong communities of common cause, capable of resisting the economic exploitation of local resources waged in the name of the globalization of markets.

In the summer of 1998, Inter Pares helped two Québec activists and photographers develop a travelling

exhibit that toured the Atlantic provinces. Dominic Morissette and Catherine Pappas organized the exhibit after a trip to India a few months earlier where they had been struck by the similarities of the situation of fishing communities on both continents.

Entitled “Images from the Coasts”,

the tour raised public awareness of the plight of fish harvesters and fishworkers in India and the impact of aquaculture and shrimp farming on Asia’s coastal communities. This tour took them to more than ten coastal communities in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland.

During these visits, Catherine and Dominic not only presented their photo

exhibit, but also accompanied fishers and fishworkers in their everyday activities. And they spent many evenings in discussion with the fishers and the local media where they heard the recurring themes of the depletion of fish stocks, the impact of industrial overfishing on the marine ecology, and the concentration of fishing in the hands of major corporations. They also heard about the dedicated efforts of coastal communities on both continents, that are struggling to preserve the traditional fishing industry to ensure their communities’ survival.

Since the tour, Dominic and Catherine’s photographs of India and Canada have been presented on several occasions in Québec and at the 1998 *World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers*, in Ottawa. With new stories and a multitude of photos to share, Catherine and Dominic have now returned to India.

Inter Pares will continue to collaborate with these two activists to weave a net of solidarity among coastal communities fighting for the survival of their way of life, their culture and their identity.

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# From Food Aid to Food Security

There is no form of international assistance as controversial as food aid. One of the largest single categories of international assistance, food aid has been justly criticized for creating dependency on imported food products, for promoting change in people’s diets, and for depressing food prices to levels that put local producers out of business. Food aid programs that result in these types of problems undermine food security and people’s efforts for self-reliance.

At the same time, there are some specific situations where food aid can be an important form of assistance. Disasters such as floods or drought can destroy local food production to the point where hunger can be addressed only through short-term imports of food. Similarly, humanitarian crises that lead to the displacement of large numbers of people may also require food assistance.

The current situation in Burma is one such humanitarian disaster. Because

of a brutal military dictatorship and a long-standing civil war, hundreds of thousands of people have fled the country. In Thailand, there are 112,000 registered Burmese refugees living in refugee camps. There are perhaps another 600,000 living in Thailand as undocumented workers, and many thousands more in China, India and Bangladesh.

In the past several years, Inter Pares has received support from the Canadian International Development Agency’s food aid program to assist Burmese refugees living in camps in Thailand. This support has not, however, been in the form of Canadian food. Rather, CIDA assistance has been in the form of cash grants. This money is used to purchase locally-grown food – rice, beans, and vegetables – which is delivered to the refugees by the Burmese Border Consortium, a humanitarian coalition based in Thailand.

In this situation, the need for food

and humanitarian assistance is clear. And the form of assistance is appropriate. As a result of this approach, refugees have access to the traditional foods to which they are accustomed. This approach also ensures that local markets and producers are supported, helping to ease to some extent tensions that may exist between local communities and refugees.

For now, international humanitarian assistance for Burmese refugees is necessary, but the longer-term goal must be to resolve Burma’s political crisis. While Inter Pares is involved in providing short-term food assistance, we are also involved in supporting Burma’s democracy movement. Eventually, the democracy movement will win the struggle for freedom and democracy. A new and democratic Burma can then turn its attention to the needs of its citizenry – including ensuring food security – and rebuild the social fabric of the country.

# Canadians in the World

*Nettie Wiebe is past-president of the National Farmers Union, and the North American representative of Via Campesina, an international coalition of farmers working together to influence agricultural policy in their respective countries and globally. In December 1998, Nettie addressed a national meeting of Canadian activists examining the role of citizen action in challenging the negative effects of globalization in the world.*

When I was a student in Europe many years ago, I used to travel, and I was completely charmed by European villages, German villages, where always at the center of the village was the market square, always at the center. The economic activities that we engage in are of course, in one way or another, central to our possibility of survival. So always at the center of the village is the market square. And always – and I think this is the piece that we should be conscious of – hemming in that marketplace are buildings of public purpose. Very often in the larger villages are the cathedral, the town hall, buildings of public purpose, hemming in the marketplace. And I think that if there's one very pernicious thing about the trade agreements we've entered into, it is that we have failed to hem in the marketplace in that global village. It's run rampant. It dictates everything. It's everywhere.

...Particularly in the place where I live and the place where I work, that whole concept of globalization being primarily, and really entirely, the globalization of trade and exchange of goods and services and money, is devastating. It's not just devastating in rural Saskatchewan [but everywhere] we see the systematic de-development of rural Canada...

...[We] are more and more vulnerable and that's what this farm crisis is about ... It's about leaving us, as small- and medium-scale food producers, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a global marketplace that is very uncertain, very unstable, and mostly relatively brutal to us. We are told ... that we are doing very well in that global marketplace, and we are when you just look at the numbers ... We have doubled our agrofood exports in the last decade – doubled it ... We have been brilliant in adjusting to the global marketplace and in the interim, during that very decade, net farm income has remained stagnant and is now in steep and precipitous decline ...

And fewer and fewer of us are left there. So the global village in agricul-

ture means that you have decimated real villages out there in the countryside. That's one of the ironies of success in the global village ... So many of my counterparts have not been able to make a living in this very wealthy food-producing area, that we are now down in our country to 2.8 percent of the population. In many provinces, including my own, over half the farm families that are out there – registered farm families – make half or over half of their livelihood from off-farm jobs ... One of the things that I continue to repeat in agriculture, is that if you think progress in agriculture is higher technological advances, more capitalization, investment in agriculture and more cash crops for export, let me tell you that we have succeeded on all three of those scores

with a vengeance – and we don't make a living on it.

...All of our culture militates against a recognition of how interdependent we are. So when we are thinking about global citizenship, if we are going to be useful in that global context, I think we just have to be very conscious and conscientious about defining, recognizing and valuing our interdependence. Not just with each other in our own sectors, or even across Canada working with other sectors, but with our counterparts elsewhere in the world ...

Solidarity is not charity. It sometimes demands charitable acts, but it is quite different than charity. It is work among equals who stand by each other because they recognize their interdependence.

## A Call to Action: A Citizens' Agenda for Reform of the Global Economic System

Inter Pares and organizations around the world have endorsed Third World Network's **Call to Action**. It outlines eight principles for global economic reform.

**Public Participation:** All people should have full and meaningful participation in national and international economic decision-making... Full and meaningful participation is fundamentally comprised of access to information, access to decision-making and access to justice.

**Democracy:** The global economy must strengthen rather than undermine the capacity of democratic governments at every level, from local to multilateral, to meet the needs of the public. International institutions and negotiations must operate transparently with full and fair public participation.

**Human Rights:** At a minimum, international economic rules and institutions must not undercut the basic rights set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**Sustainability:** The protection of human health and preservation of natural resources and biodiversity requires the integration of economic and social objectives, within environmental limits. In general, the more local the source and control of capital the more likely development will be sustainable.

**Development, not Austerity:** International and

national policies should alleviate poverty, create and sustain livelihoods and enable sustainable human development to improve the quality of life for all.

**Equity:** The current gap between the global rich and poor, exacerbated by the high debt burden of many developing countries, is unacceptable. It is unconscionable to act as if it can be a permanent feature of the international economy. Within countries, policies should be designed to reduce inequalities, thus improving health and social cohesion.

**Financial Stability:** Equitable, sustainable development requires economic stability. Destabilizing speculative investments should be regulated to limit boom and bust cycles and the severe social and environmental consequences of financial crises.

**Good Governance and Transparency:** Governments and intergovernmental organizations are only accountable to the public if they operate in a transparent manner. Corporations and markets also require effective regulation and transparent procedures if they are to function in society's interests.

For the full document in English, Spanish or French, TWN's website is <http://www.twinside.org.sg/> or write to Inter Pares.

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