

# Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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## *Innovation and Risk: Creating New Beginnings*

It was more than five years ago that Farhad Mazhar found himself pitching his Australian textbook on organic farming into the trash. His earnest step-by-step composting project had failed spectacularly and he found himself joining the Bangladeshi farmers as they laughed at his inexperience and compounded mistakes. Still convinced that farming without pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers was the best option for the survival of rural peoples, Farhad, the managing director of the Bangladeshi development organization UBINIG, realized he had to try again. Casting aside his modern prescriptions for bio-diversity-based farming, Farhad began listening more closely to the age-old wisdom of the farmers.

And slowly, a remarkable process began. A handful of farmers offered up small but precious parcels of their land to serve as the basis for experimentation. Together with UBINIG staff, they explored the pest-fighting qualities of different crop combinations, investigated the nutritional value of weeds they allowed to grow in the fields, and weighed the nutrient benefits to soil of various composting methods.

It would be three years before their efforts were rewarded with a rich and thriving variety of crops. Today, more than 50,000 Bangladeshi farmers pursue this new, yet ancient form of agriculture, constituting a growing social movement that is challenging notions of progress, technology and modernity – the basic tenets of industrialized agriculture – and breathing new life and hope into Bangladeshi rural society.

At the core of this experience is the capacity and desire to innovate – to take risks, to make mistakes, to step in the dark, to proceed with faith. It has been 25 years since Inter Pares first witnessed the intensity of these qualities among our colleagues and marginalized peoples in the South. Throughout this

period, we have accompanied and supported them as they sought new ways to recreate communities, rebuild trust, and challenge the injustices of poverty with which they are confronted.

And today, even as economic globalization marginalizes and dehumanizes the poor, even as it consolidates power in the hands of a wealthy minority, people continue to pose new questions and strategies in an effort to bring about a truly just, humane, and equitable world.

We see it in post-war Guatemala where thousands of people are creating new means to govern themselves, learning new ways to express their aspirations, developing new bonds of friendships with one another, and slowly but steadily creating a more peaceful and hopeful existence.

We witness it in the courage of our counterparts as they overcome hate and destruction in Burundi and Rwanda. It is evident in the determination of inhabitants of Apelo Cruz in the Philippines as they help each other through the devastation of fire that destroyed their community, and in the efforts of groups like Focus on the Global South in Thailand that are challenging traditional economic theory and understandings of North-South relations.

And we are witnessing a resurgence of popular organizing as communities come together to assert new political and social visions and solutions to the crises and vulnerability they experience. These local associations are, in turn, reaching out at the national, regional and international level in strategies of mutual support and collaboration.

The role of our counterparts remains critical in this process. Development organizations are often the catalyst that ignite innovative ideas for developing

creative, vibrant, and caring societies. They nurture the mutual support and social solidarity that are at the root of every community, and help mobilize action in the interest of the entire community. Like UBINIG, their work and presence is vital to the processes not only of taking risks but also of minimizing those risks by promoting values of social responsibility, re-building faith in local tradition and culture, creating new ways of understanding, and promoting the possibility of new beginnings.

Indeed, for our counterparts and the marginalized communities in which they live, creating change is always about new beginnings. It is about finding the will to step forward, however tentatively, with the faith and hope that things can and will be different. It is about inventing new ways to listen, to learn, to see and to dream.

This *Bulletin* celebrates the inventiveness, daring and innovation of people in different parts of the world as they work to reshape the communities around them.



Pierre St-Jacques

## Daring to reinvent the world

After a 36-year war that ended with the signing of the Peace Accords in December 1996, Guatemala finds itself confronting its past and its future, and the challenge of rebuilding a country. In the hope that has emerged through this fragile peace process, Guatemalans are holding to their desire to invent

a new social and cultural landscape in which injustice will be a thing of the past. The Mayan people have seized upon this opening and set out to recapture their own identity, based on values inherited from their ancestors.

Kabawil, an organization of landless Mayan peasants, is working to mobilize its member communities to obtain access to land when the redistribution set out in the Peace Accords takes effect. On the strength of this shared commitment to transform their world, women and men are working together to make their voices heard at last. Women face the extra challenge of obtaining recognition for their full autonomy. They have to free themselves from the still acutely remembered sufferings of a genocidal strategy that made them the primary victims, and the weight of Mayan traditions that confine them in subordinate roles. In addition, Mayan women have no right to land, even though they have always participated in agricultural work on the same basis as men.

This structural inequity in the relations between men and women, inherent in patriarchal societies both in Guatemala and elsewhere, is also intrinsic to Mayan culture. Kabawil, aware of this reality, has committed itself to an internal process to increase women's participation. Mixed workshops on consensus decision-making have shed light on the stereotypical behaviour of men and women, opening the way to a redefinition of what is "normal". In just a few years, women have gained more autonomy and men are learning to respect the choices women are making about their roles. While drawing its inspiration from Mayan culture, Kabawil dares to propose a new model of gender relations that derives its strength from mutual respect.

Inter Pares is supporting Kabawil in this process of social transformation which calls upon both women and men in a concerted effort to invent a world where each human being will have full rights as citizens.



Patricio Baeza

## From the Ashes

"New creations" took on new meaning this fall for *Likhaan*, a national women's health organization in the Philippines, whose name in Filipino means, "a place for new creations".

*Likhaan* has worked with a squatter's community in the Apelo Cruz area of Metro Manila for eight years, to build a community-based women's health program. *Likhaan* helped to organize women into the Apelo Women's Health Association, trained local women in primary health care, and helped set up a clinic, a credit cooperative, and educational programs.

In August of 1999, a fire devastated the community. It spread quickly among the makeshift houses, leaving 800 families without even the most basic possessions. The AWHHA health clinic was burned to the ground. The people were in a state of shock and in urgent need of food,

medicine, temporary shelter, clothing, and clean water. In the fire's aftermath, *Likhaan* and AWHHA found themselves at the centre of people's efforts to re-create the community.

The health workers (all of whom had lost their own houses) immediately began helping out – as cooks, medics and counselors. *Likhaan* joined the workers to establish a relief centre and a temporary clinic. Focusing on the poorest, they arranged temporary shelter for 350 people and, since most residents were determined to remain in the area, *Likhaan* subsequently provided hundreds of families with assistance to help rebuild their homes. The health workers' knowledge of the personal circumstances of local residents was invaluable. As *Likhaan* later related to us, "It is obvious that the women health workers are the backbone of the community".

Inter Pares quickly mobilized support for our colleagues at *Likhaan* and Apelo Cruz. The *Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace*, based in Montréal, responded generously to this appeal, and their support for emergency relief was added to Inter Pares' own contribution to longer-term rehabilitation efforts. Our appeal to the Filipino community in Canada was also met with solidarity and support.

There are plans to rebuild the clinic, and to re-establish the AWHHA credit cooperative, which has helped to finance so many local programs. Thanks to the efforts of *Likhaan* and the AWHHA women, and the courage and resourcefulness of the people of Apelo Cruz, the community is reinventing and rebuilding itself - literally from the ashes.

## Citizen's Action: From the Local to the Global

In the past several decades, the activities of voluntary organizations and citizen's groups have become much more sophisticated. No longer are citizen's groups involved only in the development of small scale, local activities. They have also learned that they must work at other levels to create the conditions in which local initiatives can thrive. And they have learned that they can influence governments, sometimes in powerful and durable ways.

One example of the power of citizen's action is work with which Inter Pares has been involved in the Huancavelica region of Peru. Huancavelica is a beautiful, remote, snow-capped mountain area in east-central Peru, and the scene of terrible violence between government and anti-government forces in the 1980s. The region has been virtually ignored by the central government – there is little in the way of physical or social infrastructure, and few people have electricity or telephones. The people of the region, descendants of the Incas, survive mainly through subsistence farming. Resource extraction companies have had easy access to the abundant resources of the area, but few benefits have been gained by local communities.

Several years ago, voluntary civic associations, women's groups, and people's organizations, with support from Inter Pares and the Project Counselling Service, launched the "Huancavelica Roundtable", an exercise in citizen's participation to develop consensus on local needs and priorities. The participants developed proposals related to accountable local government systems, land reform, taxation and revenue, health programs, schools and social development, and natural resource management. These proposals led to a long-term development plan that the Roundtable presented to the national government in Lima in November, 1999 after a public march 500 km to the capital. Since the plan was based on a long and careful process of debate and dialogue, it has built widespread support in the region.

The Huancavelica process has already led to permanent change – after years of violence, citizens are freely and openly talking of their vision of

the future. Perhaps most significantly, the perspectives of women have been deliberately sought and included in the dialogue process, something that has never happened before.

Another example of citizen's action at the government policy level is the work of UBINIG in Bangladesh. In its sustainable agriculture program with farmers, UBINIG realized that all this work would remain vulnerable unless the national government could legally protect the plant genetic resources of the country. UBINIG animated a debate within the government's agricultural institutions, advocating that government develop legislation to protect plant varieties from privatization by multinational companies and to make farmers central to preservation strategies. Through a long process of discussion and debate, the government agreed to the need for legislation. UBINIG was appointed to the legislative drafting committee and played a key role by providing examples of legislation being developed by other countries. The result of these efforts was the presentation of two draft acts of legislation outlining the legal framework for government protection of local farmers and plant varieties.

Citizen's groups are also becoming active on the international stage, attempting to influence international trade and economic policies. For example, in the

lead-up to the 1999 negotiations of the World Trade Organization, Third World Network-Africa brought together representatives of voluntary groups from 10 African countries to discuss the implications of trade and investment liberalization. These groups shared their concerns about the potentially devastating impact of liberalization on food security and sustainable economic development. The groups agreed to create a common platform for advocacy to continue their research and to raise their concerns with the trade ministers of their own countries as well as co-ordinate advocacy activities at meetings of the Organization of African Unity. Representatives of these groups joined an international gathering in Seattle, Washington last November in conjunction, with the meeting of the World Trade Organization, to press this organization to slow down and alter the process of global economic liberalization.

All of these are examples of how citizen's groups, recognizing the dilemmas of development at the local level, have taken their concerns to larger arenas of influence and decision-making. And they are all examples of the increasing sophistication of such groups as they engage governments and international institutions in an effort to create the possibility of more secure livelihoods at the local level.



*Uncommon Questions: A Feminist Exploration of AIDS*, is a discussion paper by Women's Health Interaction, an organization with which Inter Pares has collaborated during the past 16 years, specifically on issues of women's reproductive health and women and pharmaceuticals.

*Uncommon Questions* challenges mainstream theories on the causes of AIDS, raises concerns about dominant medical treatments for HIV/AIDS, and explores the implications of the AIDS "paradigm" for women's health and human rights. WHI does not claim to have all the answers but believes that raising questions and seeking answers is essential to the AIDS discourse and to finding appropriate treatments for sufferers of chronic auto-immune deficiencies. This booklet is available at Inter Pares, and is also accessible on the WHI Website: [www.web.net/~whi](http://www.web.net/~whi).

# Organizing to realize our dreams

Since 1995, the Innu and Inuit have been challenging the plans of the giant mining company International Nickel (INCO) to exploit one of the world's richest nickel deposits, estimated at 150 million tons, at Emish (Voisey's Bay) in Labrador. The Innu fear that extensive mining will ruin their environment, destroy their fishing grounds and cause social degradation, while providing little economic return to the community.

Representatives of the Innu Nation were in Ottawa last September to share lessons from their struggle with 70 other participants from 32 aboriginal organizations and communities from across Canada attending the Aboriginal Communities and Mining conference. The conference marked the first time aboriginal people came together to discuss mining activities, and share experiences and strategies on their own terms. It also marked the first major event organized by Canada's new mining advocacy organization, MiningWatch Canada.

For Joan Kuyek, Co-ordinator of MiningWatch Canada, the experience was as important for MiningWatch as it was for the Innu themselves. "Our main challenge was to convince aboriginal governments and organizations that we could create a safe space where they could express their views and develop strategies."

Launched last spring, MiningWatch Canada is the creation of social justice organizations, from across Canada, including Inter Pares, who came together to help communities respond to the threats posed by mining policies and practices in Canada and around the world. MiningWatch Canada will pursue policy advocacy, research, and education as well as support the efforts of communities to promote responsible mining practices.

MiningWatch derives its strength from the broad spectrum of organizations that comprise its membership. But it is also thriving because of Joan Kuyek's drive and experience as a social activist. When interviewed, Joan said, "Helping people identify new ways to struggle and resist, is something I've done all my adult life. I worked for seven years in a community legal clinic in Sudbury, Ontario. An awfully high number of people we worked with were miners who suffered injuries on the job, or saw their health deteriorate as a result of working conditions. Perhaps my best preparation for MiningWatch was

the work we did over the last seven years through the Sudbury community organization, called Better Beginnings Better Futures. There, on a daily basis, we could see the debilitating social impact mining has on the community. I also learned a lot from people organizing themselves to be heard and treated with respect."

For Joan, also a member of Inter Pares' Board of Directors, the fundamental issue is more than "responsible mining". It is challenging how the economy works for ordinary people. "The major costs of mining – pollution, health problems and social dislocation – don't even show on the ledgers of mining corporations. Mining should only be done in a way that's respectful of the community and the environment."

Helping to build stronger, healthier communities where people defend their rights and articulate their own vision of community and development is what

MiningWatch aims to achieve as it supports people's day-to-day struggles for dignity and justice in Canada and in the Third World.



Joan Kuyek, MiningWatch Canada

Nancy Hannum

## Focus: Creating Alternative Policy

Four years ago, Walden Bello, a Philippine activist and influential intellectual on Asian economics, and Kamal Malhotra, an India-born analyst with substantial experience with grassroots organizations in Asia, approached Inter Pares to support the formation of a new organization dedicated to linking policy analysis and advocacy on regional and global issues with community-based development initiatives.

When Focus on the Global South began, the staff had no idea that they would soon be playing a prominent role in shaping a people-centred perspective of the so-called "Asian financial crisis". Arguing that the collapse of the Asian "tiger economies" was due not to sudden, precipitous events, but rather to the predictable long-term effect of economic policies these countries had followed for many years, Focus' analysis became a key point of reference for people who wanted to understand the causes of the financial crisis. Focus examined the negative outcomes of these policies, including uncontrolled trade liberalization, wide-ranging privatization programs, and unrestricted financial speculation, and documented their devastating impact on people. Focus' critique was pivotal to the emergence of an alternative view that placed human security, sustainable

development, and democratic governance as crucial pillars of any economic development plan.

Similarly, Focus helped initiate the Southeast Asia Council on Food Security and Fair Trade, which conducted a fact-finding mission to Indonesia in February 1999 to study the food crisis in the country. The mission revealed that very questionable statistics were being used to justify an influx of external food aid – which supports agribusiness and farmers in the North – while efforts to support local farmers were being ignored. They learned that there was enough food being produced in Indonesia, but that people did not have the resources to purchase it. The Council took a courageous stand, denouncing the misinformation and the misuse of food aid, and drawing attention to the need for democratic governments to be accountable and responsive to people's real needs.

Since its creation, Focus' priority has been to analyze the impact of macro-economic policies on communities and people's lives, and to demonstrate how local development strategies can gradually influence national and regional economic plans. It is this quest to root regional policy advocacy in local concerns and community struggles that makes Focus' work both challenging and promising.

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