

Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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Beyond Poverty: *The Lives People Live*

How do we define poverty?

The image we have long been given is one involving masses of faceless people who nonetheless share a common visage: they are “the excluded”, the “have-nots”, the deprived, the bereft – those without adequate food, shelter, clothing, healthcare and education. They are the homeless for whom our heart wrenches as they search for hand-outs in the cold, the barrio-dwellers for whom we despair as they queue in endless line-ups before communal water taps, the farmers for whom we weep to see the ruined crops and flooded fields.

To speak of poverty in this way, however, is to obscure individuals and the very distinct and unique circumstances of particular lives. It is to posit people as victims, helpless and hopeless, and to make invisible their social agency as shapers of their own lives. More profoundly, it is to deny the desires, visions and broadest dreams driving the efforts of people everywhere trying to shape the world in which we want to live.

But what if poverty were defined instead by the face of dignity and grace, by the countless acts of courage, creativity and intelligence that drive the everyday occurrences of billions of people around the globe? What if we saw in poverty, not defeat, but acts of heroism – the triumph of all who struggle daily to overcome want and despair?

What if, indeed, we simply stopped talking about “the poor”, and found other ways to describe the lives people live? What would be the implications for our efforts to create social justice?

Since its inception, Inter Pares has worked alongside people in the most deprived and remote regions of their countries, and in urban squatter communities, refugee camps, mountain highlands and agricultural plains. There, we have had the privilege of

learning from and helping to support the innovative efforts of people acting to realize their futures. Infused with wisdom, agility, determination and strength, these efforts flow from the very real and very different circumstances of people’s lives, as they are unfolding within the global and local economic and political environment.

Aimed at protecting peoples’ lives, livelihoods, cultures, and ways of being, from the assault of globalization and all its failed promises, these efforts are as rich and as varied as the individuals whose lives depend on them. They include attempts to reclaim the commons – the water systems, forests and agricultural lands – from the privatizing forces of the formal economy. They embrace the efforts of millions of migrants to overcome prejudice and historic tensions and to construct new communities rooted in values of peace and reciprocity. They involve the work of women globally to end discrimination and misogyny, and to promote a more equitable, peace-filled vision of community.

To be sure, these efforts also include the dogged strategies of hundreds of millions seeking enough food to get them through the day. They involve the urgent struggles of those left homeless in the wake of natural disaster, and of refugees seeking security from the violence of civil war. To move beyond definitions and to talk about the lived experiences of individuals is not to deny the abject conditions in which more than two billion people live. Nor is it to romanticize the daily grind of people’s lives.

Rather, it is simply but profoundly to assert human agency – to recognize our shared efforts in trying to transform our world. Equally important, it is to remove “the poor” as objects of our charitable intentions and development



Photo: Philip Grain

vision, and to make possible instead our capacity to engage in common cause. It is to recognize that each of us is a creative subject of a future that we are capable of shaping and realizing together. By starting with the particularities of people’s lives, it becomes possible to understand how best to support each other in our struggles to negotiate a vision of development that embraces local histories, knowledge and realities.

This bulletin takes us into the lives and communities of some of our counterparts, and celebrates the ingenuity and determination with which people are shaping their futures.

Promised Lands

Aniceto Torrejos has worked for the past 12 years on a banana plantation in Mindanao, a southern island in the Philippines. Like many landless Filipinos, his ancestors migrated from another part of the country in the 1950s to Mindanao, which was seen as a promising frontier for acquiring and farming land.

In the 1960s, Mindanao also became the land of promise for large multinational corporations such as Del Monte and Dole, and for a wealthy landed elite who acquired large strips of the rich, arable soil. Huge commercial fruit plantations were established and,

unable to compete for the land, migrants and local farmers had little choice but to become farmworkers on the plantations.

Aniceto, his wife, and four children live in one of the small farmworkers' communities that are almost hidden in the heart of these leafy plantations. Like 30,000 other plantation labourers, Aniceto's family has been exposed to the highly toxic chemicals used in aerial spraying to keep the banana plants free from pests and disease. Respiratory and skin problems are common among these families. Low wages make it hard for families to make ends meet, and increasingly women and girls are travelling to

Manila or abroad to earn money as domestic workers or as "entertainers" in the sex industry.

For decades, banana workers have organized and struggled for agrarian reform of these plantations. They won a major battle when the government of former President Corazon Aquino targeted commercial plantations for redistribution to farmworkers under the 1987 Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). However, the banana plantation owners were not about to give up their lucrative holdings, and exerted powerful political pressure that led the government to extend a ten-year deferral from agrarian reform to plantation and commercial farm owners. While the deferral came to an end in 1997, farmworkers' struggle for agrarian reform of "banana country" still continues.

Aniceto and 59 other workers sought the assistance of the Mindanao office of the Philippine Network of Rural Development Institutes (PhilNet) to form the United Farmworkers Agrarian Reform Association. Over the past four years, PhilNet, an *Inter Pares* counterpart, has helped to organize local workers' associations in 11 plantations covered by CARP. Organizational efforts centre on capacity-building and awareness activities on the rights and entitlements of banana workers under the agrarian reform program. Drawing on the experiences of these local associations, PhilNet also documents and exposes landowners' attempts to subvert the transfer of plantation land, including harassment of workers like Aniceto.

Despite the hostile political environment, and despite the fact that the government is offering limited financial assistance to enable farmworkers to purchase the land, Aniceto, his colleagues, and thousands of other banana plantation workers still see an opportunity for change. They have not given up their dream of acquiring and cooperatively developing the land. With PhilNet's assistance, they will keep pushing the government to honour the promises of CARP, and to invest in their vision of a peaceful and productive future for their children.

Humanitarian Resistance: *Backpack Health Workers of Burma*

In the remote regions of Burma, up to two million people have been displaced by a civil war that has been going on for more than a decade. Many of these people, fleeing from the army, establish themselves in small settlements in the jungle, poised to move the moment the army comes into the area. Some of them cross the borders of neighbouring countries, becoming refugees in Thailand, India, Bangladesh or China. But most remain as internally displaced people. The United Nations calls this situation a massive humanitarian crisis – people have little access to food, shelter, or health care and are in constant danger of reprisals from the army.

Refusing to be merely victims of this crisis, many of Burma's refugees are organizing themselves to reach out and support each other. One such initiative is the backpack health workers program. With support from *Inter Pares*, refugees have sought training as medics to administer emergency first aid and treat common infectious diseases. Organized into small teams, these medics travel into remote border regions to reach displaced communities to provide health assistance. In many cases, these teams are the only contact that displaced communities have had with the outside world for years.

Not only do the medics deal with wounded and sick people, they also teach people in displaced communities to look after their own health. This can involve training and equipping traditional birth attendants, teaching people about malaria prevention, and about how to access or implement basic public health measures.

This work is dangerous and physically demanding. There are few roads, and medical teams may have to walk for hundreds of kilometers through almost impenetrable jungle to reach the displaced. Many of these areas have been strewn with land mines. If the health workers are intercepted by the army, it is quite possible they will be summarily executed.

More and more people are requesting training and, despite the risks, the backpack health program is expanding. For many of the participants, becoming a health worker is a concrete way of reaching out to help others who have also been traumatized by war. Indeed, becoming a health worker is a way of resisting a brutal military dictatorship through promoting compassion, solidarity and mutual support.

Pride and Perseverance: *Hope in Burundi*



A thin morning mist floats in the air. Although it is still early, the sun is pouring down over two dozen workers. Men and women – some with babies perched on their backs – bend low, their feet dug deep in the dark brown mud, silently but steadily transplanting rice in the paddy.

Across the lush green valley lies a range of wooded hills and the bordering country of Tanzania. We are in Cendajuru, the poorest commune of the poorest province – Cankuzo – of Burundi. Torn by a seven-year civil war that has claimed the lives of over 100,000 people and forced 500,000 to live in internal refugee camps, Burundi is a small country in central Africa where Inter Pares has been supporting peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts since 1998.

What is striking in Cendajuru is the sense of initiative and pride expressed by local people in spite of recent war and conflict. Fueled by their hope for

a better future, members of the local community set out to irrigate what used to be a vast marshland. In pursuit of this ambitious project, they sought out modest support in the form of machinery, wood planks and technical expertise.

In just a few years, the people of Cendajuru tripled rice production by using improved irrigation techniques and rice varieties better adapted to the climate. Malnutrition, which was rampant in the months that followed the return of refugees from Tanzania, is no longer prevalent, and producers now sell rice and vegetables to neighbouring areas.

In the village, a group of women have become co-owners of a flourmill for grinding locally-grown maize and sorghum. With support from Inter Pares' counterpart, the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD), the women organized themselves, borrowed money to buy the mill and sought the necessary

training in its use. In the process, women radically transformed their lives – not only have they freed themselves from a back-breaking and repetitive process, but they have also managed to enhance their status in the community by continuing to provide an essential service to the community and by managing a prosperous small business.

In economic terms, the population of Cendajuru remains poor. However, there is strength among people that does not come from material wealth, but rather stems from a sense of playing a role in the development of their community. In collaboration with ACORD, a community that had been marginalized and excluded for generations has developed self-confidence and strength. Far from the limelight of the media, the people of Cendajuru are helping to build a lasting peace in Burundi by actively and patiently transforming their world.

No Turning Back: *Nicaragua after Mitch*



Photo: from the cover of *Poder Local Viejos sueños, nuevas prácticas*

Driving to the municipalities of Pueblo Nuevo and Esquipulas in Nicaragua is quite an experience. Gaping holes in the pavement make us zigzag across the road, and washed out bridges not yet rebuilt force us to detour for several kilometers. We pass vehicle after vehicle pulled over with flat tires. The landscape is devastated, strewn with boulders and trees uprooted by landslides and the ebb and flow of ground stream water levels.

A year and a half after Hurricane Mitch, the effects of its passage are still visible. Indeed, the isolation of people in these regions has increased, in part because the majority of international organizations no longer venture far from the Pan-American Highway, and road conditions have made the delivery of reconstruction material difficult. Marginalized and impoverished, many people in these communities still shelter under plastic sheeting.

Well before the hurricane, the Project Counselling Service, Inter Pares' counterpart in Nicaragua, had begun to collaborate with organizations of farmers, women, youth, citizen committees, local NGOs and municipal authorities working in Pueblo Nuevo and Esquipulas to create a sustainable development program. The program emphasized concerted action to improve democratic citizen participation in establishing local community development priorities.

After the hurricane, far from bemoaning their plight, and with the support of the local NGOs and the PCS, the citizens of these municipalities rolled up their sleeves and mobilized to amend the program to include reconstruction.

In particular, they began to examine the vulnerability of their communities from a critical perspective. After decades of unrestrained deforestation, soil degradation, and the effects of Mitch itself, the environment is now extremely fragile, so that even the usual rainy season made the rivers overflow, decimating shorelines, homes and roads and carrying away tons of arable soil. It quickly became obvious that any reconstruction had to transform current agricultural practices, and ensure development that would reduce people's vulnerability to environmental disasters. Rather than simply recreating the model that existed before Mitch, the aim is now to implement a transformative agenda to provide a sound foundation for sustainable development.

People sought training workshops in agricultural diversification to replace the single-crop practices that were partly responsible for farmers' extreme vulnerability. Literacy classes increased the participation of women in these technical workshops, and they sought agricultural credit for reforestation, sowing and the purchase of poultry, pigs and cattle. Nearly 50 per cent of the credit has

been granted to women. Communities built stone dams to strengthen the riverbanks against another hurricane season.

People also recognized that another factor in their vulnerability was their lack of participation in civil processes at the local level where decisions are taken about the course of local development. And so, citizens committees and the municipality created a new forum for discussion of local development plans in which citizens are consulted on development issues in community meetings, and community delegates now attend the monthly development coordinating committee meetings of the municipal council. Recently, community members held general consultations with over 200 participants in each municipality, enabling women, for the first time, to have their perspectives heard in this process. The people of Pueblo Nuevo and Esquipulas are also organizing, through various associations, to insist that the majority of international aid funds for post-Mitch reconstruction granted to the national government be distributed among the municipalities that are responsible for rebuilding the local infrastructure.

Today, community members and local organizations share their points of view and participate in training workshops on citizens' rights and leadership that equip them with tools for ensuring that their community's development plan truly transforms local agricultural, social, political and democratic practices.

The people involved in this program see no turning back. They are conscious of the vast solidarity movement that arose out of the hurricane and are determined to rebuild their community, sustained by the lessons of vulnerability and social solidarity learned from the hurricane. They no longer fear the inevitable rocky roads ahead for they know that there is always a way to reach their destination. Inter Pares is resolved to continue accompanying them on this journey.

