

Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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The Privatization of Citizenship

A young student coming across a basic Canadian grade eight civics textbook from the 1950s would be forgiven for believing that it was science fiction rather than history, for today there remains little of that sense of “responsible” government which emphasizes the reciprocal rights and responsibilities between citizens and our governments.

Without announcement, stealthily, we have become “stakeholders” in society, rather than citizens, as though society is merely an economic enterprise rather than a collectivity of citizens and interacting communities. We have become fee-paying “clients” of our governments, as though basic social services are commodities rather than the entitlements of citizenship. Hospitals have been closed, schools boarded up, the local governance structures of towns and cities – many older than Canada itself – disbanded and amalgamated, all at the hands of politicians who see themselves as corporate managers rather than public servants. Education, health care and other basic social services, roads and highways – even our most primary natural resources such as water – are being privatized. And those who join together as responsible citizens to advocate different social priorities and policies are spurned as “special interests”, and a threat to “democratic” order and good government.

This description of developments in Canada applies in virtually every country in the world – and more tragically so in the countries in the South that have been cruelly set back in their struggle to establish social democratic traditions that Canadians, until recently, have enjoyed for decades as a right of citizenship. The strategic effect of prevailing economic policy has been to liberalize – that is, “free” – international financial and commercial enterprises from the influence of governments, through the deregulation of trade and commerce and the privatization of the social functions of the state.

In this process, the idea that democratic national governments should promote and protect the common interests of citizens has been betrayed, while private corporations have come to enjoy rights that no individual citizen can claim.

The prevailing economic ideology declares that the logic of the market is the motor of society, rather than the logic of society itself determining the mechanisms of the market and the economy. This fundamental inversion isolates and marginalizes those already remote from market mechanisms, and disenfranchises large swaths of entire societies – often a significant majority of the population. With the withdrawal of the state from its role as the promoter and protector of general social welfare, and the privatization of even the most essential social services, the affluent can purchase all the services they wish – water or electricity, education or medical care, police protection

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or legal assistance – while others have access to nothing, even the resources required to respond to their most basic needs. To the limited extent that the state intervenes to provide meagre assistance to those in need, it is dispensed as charity, not as an entitlement of citizenship. The result is a system that reinforces deep economic and social disparity in society, and in which the basic rights of citizens are privatized and commodified – available for purchase, but only for those with the means.



Photo: Pedro Isztin

Inter Pares’ work is rooted in the principle that every person has the “right to be”. This right implies that every person and every community has a right to a quality of life that is human and humane. Every person has a right to live decently and with dignity, and to develop their authentic human capacity and qualities to their full potential. This right goes beyond the right to live with a minimal degree of physical security. It is also the right of all citizens to be thriving and growing individuals, to be full participants in a free and equal society, to resist oppression and promote justice.

Inter Pares exists to initiate and support actions that promote people’s right to live creatively and actively as citizens in their communities, their countries and their world. This *Bulletin* explores the efforts of some of our counterparts to restore responsible government and the rights of citizenship through concerted activism and advocacy.

Promoting Public Health Care

Like many countries in the world, the Philippines is a country polarized between those with the means to purchase the privileges of citizenship, and those on the margins – the working poor, the unemployed, the dislocated, and the dispossessed – who have lost access to even the most meagre services that people have long struggled to gain as a right from their government.

This is particularly true within the health sector, given the high degree of private control by national and foreign companies and the decreasing role of government in building and providing public health care. It is no surprise that the incidence of infectious diseases remains high throughout the country. The Philippines ranks third in the world, for example, in incidence of tuberculosis, according to the 1998 UN Human Development Report.

At the same time, spending on health remains a low priority in the government's agenda. During the 1980s, the health budget accounted for just over three per cent of all government spending, and 60 per cent of that went to the pharmaceutical industry. The 1991 devolution of power from national to local government units contributed to the decline in accessibility to public health care services because local officials decided not to invest in health. Public investment in the building and repair of hospitals and health centres has steadily decreased, while private for-fee practice attracts almost 80 per cent of all physicians and dentists.

Drug companies, private hospitals and clinics benefit the most from this situation. According to Likhaan, a women's health organization and Inter Pares counterpart, "health products and services have become mere commodities-for-profit, the majority of which are sold by big foreign drug companies". Local profit margins made by drug companies range from 1,000 to 2,860 per cent. This is not a new phenomenon. What is alarming, however, is that progress made after 1987 towards strengthening national industries and

developing generic medicines – which served to lower drug prices, promote domestic industry and improve public access to health – is now being undermined by legislation to further deregulate the drug industry.

Likhaan is active in challenging this privatization and in promoting a national public health care system. With the support of Inter Pares, Likhaan is developing an alternative public health program in some of Manila's most depressed neighbourhoods, demonstrating that it is possible to deliver effective and efficient universal basic health care within communities. Likhaan is also playing a key

role in various women's and health coalitions to pressure the government to reverse the trend towards privatization and deregulation. It advocates for policies that promote universal health care, guaranteed and funded by the national government.

As Junice Demeterio-Melgar of Likhaan points out, "truly meaningful and responsible health care reforms in the globalized era need – at the very least – to mitigate the unhealthful effects of the rapidly-growing social inequities. At best, health care reforms should also be the tools for correcting and reversing these inequities."

The Water Hyacinth: Women & Citizen

Farida Akhter likes talking about the water hyacinth. The water hyacinth is a common aquatic plant found in the ponds and river systems of Bangladesh. Water hyacinth, says Farida, is non-hierarchical. It does not grow upwards but spreads out and holds other plants together. It grows quickly, and can cover

large areas of water. It is a strong plant that can survive on muddy soils. It is a useful plant, providing shade and nutrients to fish, and can be used as fodder for cattle. The water hyacinth has a simple but beautiful purple flower. It is for these reasons that Farida sees the water hyacinth as a metaphor for the women's movement in Bangladesh – strong, ubiquitous, nurturing, non-hierarchical.

In 1999, Farida and other members of the women's movement in Bangladesh set out to organize a national women's book fair. Book fairs are quite common in Bangladesh. Rarely, however, have women's books been featured. Yet, there is a rich history of women's literature in Bangladesh. Traditionally, women were often confined to their homes, relegated to the domestic sphere and denied the basic rights of citizenship. Many women responded to this isolation by writing poetry and stories. As women began to overcome the barriers to their participation in society, this literature became more visible and is becoming more available.

Farida and her colleagues were determined to organize a book fair that not only displayed books written by women, but also provided a forum for women to talk with each other. As the



Mali: Promoting Citizenship and Peace

The isolation, hardship and exploits of the people of Timbuktu and the surrounding desert are legendary. But in spite of the mystique and wonders of this part of the world, for those who call northern Mali home, the geographic, social, and political isolation have been a source of conflict, and a significant barrier to participation in the governance of their country.

Like many African countries burdened by debt and the legacies of colonialism, Mali faces tremendous obstacles to democratization and poverty eradication. It lacks the basic economic and social infrastructure necessary to support the local development

initiatives of struggling communities throughout the country. And economic adjustment programs imposed by foreign lenders continue to restrict government spending on health, education, and basic social services – the essential elements for long-term peace and security.

For many years, development agencies have attempted to fill that gap through programs of assistance to the poor. Some of these programs have been quite successful in the short-term. However, rarely have they addressed the fundamental causes of poverty. Even more rarely have they acknowledged and promoted the rights of poor people to determine their own futures as citizens, through participation in local decision-making and through representative and accountable government.

Inter Pares' counterpart in Africa, ACORD, has been working in northern Mali for 20 years, even through times of violent conflict. Over that period, ACORD staff carried out successful programs of literacy and agricultural training, revolving credit, and water management, and earned a reputation as a valued and respected agent of local social development. And yet, when reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of their work, the ACORD team in Timbuktu questioned whether this was the best focus for their program.

Consultations and discussions with local citizen associations brought them to the conclusion that to promote authentic local democracy and economic development, ACORD should focus its work on assisting local citizens to organize around their basic needs and interests and to peacefully assert with government authorities their perspectives on community problems, and their proposals for solutions.

Working with local women's associations, farmers and pastoralists, ACORD staff conducted a series of seminars, community visits and workshops to help people identify development priorities for the region. Together they reached agreement on a new set of priorities for citizens' education and support to community associations. Now, local cooperatives, women's organizations, credit unions, community associations, and local government employees are working with ACORD to strengthen their capacity for management, planning, and action-research, and to investigate solutions to the problems they have identified. As a result, they are beginning to participate more effectively in dialogue between civil society and local government to promote regional development planning and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

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idea for a book fair spread, women across the country responded enthusiastically. Hundreds of women volunteered to help organize the event. Women writers, both published and unpublished, brought their manuscripts.

The book fair was held over seven days in December. More than 3,000 women attended and an astonishing 10,000 books by Bangladeshi women writers were on display. Women from all walks of life attended – farmers, housewives, factory workers, professionals. The book fair became a cultural event, and women shared their stories through poetry readings, songs, and dance.

"It was an extraordinary experience," says Farida. "Women came together because they all understood that the perspectives of women have so rarely been validated. Women are saying that we want to be equal citizens, we want the right to be elected to parliament, and we want to be able to express our views in the public sphere."

Farida and her colleagues plan to hold another women's book fair, perhaps in two years time. The giant picture of a purple water hyacinth that had been erected at the entrance to the book fair was carefully stored away for another day.



ACORD staff discussing the importance of citizenship during NGO Peace Conference.

To Remake the World

As the articles in this bulletin illustrate, counter-balancing the effects of economic globalization, and the erosion of citizen rights, is the resurgence of popular organizing and the mobilization of communities of interest in campaigns of dissent, resistance and proposition. Communities are coming together to analyse and create local solutions to the crises they are experiencing. People are rejecting the privatization of citizenship, and reasserting the right and responsibility of citizens to influence and monitor their governments. In this process, links among citizens, and citizen groups – locally, nationally, regionally and globally – are also increasing. People are making incredible strides in taking control over their own lives, and it is in this context that voluntary sector agencies such as Inter Pares have a dynamic contribution to make.

The essence of this contribution is not service, nor is it merely technical assistance, which are the paths to which voluntary organizations in northern countries – with the encouragement of government and corporate sponsors – are allowing ourselves to be diverted. The voluntary sector should be the locus of organized resistance and dissent to the excesses of the market and privilege – whether the privilege of class, of race, or of gender – and a catalyst for social innovation and change. It has an indispensable role in creating spaces for people to come together to share experiences and to develop alternative proposals for how we might organize our communities and the world. Yet particularly when we have such a critical innovative and transformative role to play, the established voluntary sector is being diverted by a new “realism”, and the pragmatism of adaptation.

The greatest dilemma of activist organizations in the domestic or international arena is that the voluntary sector itself has become an intrinsic part of the international system that it was once committed to transform, making it possible for governments to abdicate social responsibility and erode the fundamental

rights of citizenship. The role of the voluntary sector is becoming merely “to ameliorate the worst effects” of a system that too many accept as inevitable – to care for those who are left behind, who the system says are not “prepared”, or cannot “adapt”. And in so doing, the voluntary sector is in danger of becoming merely the deliverer of charitable services, partner of downsized government, and handmaiden to a corporate philanthropic sector that sponsors charitable activity, often as advertising. Not only are people increasingly commodified, even in their poverty, but so too are voluntary organizations that once were expressions of cultural and political participation. The vision is not change, but charity. All of this is seen as natural, and those who challenge it are often described as unrealistic, unreasonable, out-dated – that is, also marginal.

But transformational activists, and effective transformational organizations, do not have to be marginal, and we

should not allow ourselves to be marginalized. The world is not the way it must be if it is to nurture and protect human health and prosperity. It can be changed for the better, and this can happen best through the direct participation of citizens collaborating to envision better ways and mobilizing to bring their propositions forward in the diverse theatre of debate we know as civil society.

The role of the voluntary sector in society is to give breath and heart to innovative and alternative ideas for developing and conserving creative, vibrant, tolerant, caring and dynamic societies. It is a role of nurturing mutual support and social solidarity, of promoting values of social responsibility and reciprocity, of supporting and mobilizing citizenship in the interests of the entire community. The essence of this role is participation, is activism – indeed, is citizenship itself.

Inter Pares believes that this role is not only necessary, but possible. We are committed to it.

Making Waves: Citizens Act to Reclaim Water

Only local citizens know the effect of job loss or loss of local farms when water sources are taken over by big business or diverted to far-away uses. It must be understood that local citizens and communities are the front-line “keepers” of the rivers, lakes and underground water systems upon which their lives and livelihoods rest.

Maude Barlow

Blue Gold: The Global Water Crisis and the Commodification of the World's Water Supply



Who owns water? In whose interest is it being privatized? What rights do corporations have to profit from its trade? And what is the role of government in protecting and sharing our most precious resource?

These are some of the questions that Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, raises in *Blue Gold*, a report on the roots of the global water crisis and on citizen's efforts to resist the commodification of water.

As the rights of private capital have grown over the years, local citizens' power to manage and control local resources has deteriorated. Yet, Maude argues, citizens and local communities are the best advocate and conservators of this finite resource. The report outlines concrete steps people can take to preserve water systems and protect or reclaim them from profit-seeking corporations.

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