

Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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Celebrating the Past, Anticipating the Future

On a soft spring evening last April, over a hundred and fifty friends and colleagues of Inter Pares gathered to celebrate our 25th anniversary. Inter Pares staff and Board members were joined by many donors, colleagues from other Canadian social justice organizations, as well as activist colleagues from the South.

Maude Barlow, just returned from the Washington trade summit, addressed the group with passion and optimism, reminding us that it is possible for citizens to challenge and influence the actions of our governments, at home and abroad. Beside her in the front of the theatre, Farida Akhter, our colleague from Bangladesh, described the rich experience of communities working nationally and internationally in common cause. Although they were meeting that night for the first time, Farida and Maude spoke in a united voice about the right and obligation of citizens everywhere to resist injustice and greed, and promote caring and conserving societies that nurture life and opportunity for all.

Throughout the evening, memories and stories about Inter Pares' early days were shared. But though it was the past that brought us together, it was our commitment to the future and the challenges facing us in the next 25 years that animated our discussions.

As Inter Pares' Executive Director, Molly Kane, said in her welcoming comments, citizen activists for global justice and peace find ourselves in the midst of a major global transition. This transition could signal the end of the violence and repression that marked the 20th century, and herald an equitable and just transformation of the planet for the benefit of all – wherever we live, and however we envision our communities and our livelihoods. The alternative

is a further consolidation of the wealth and privilege of a minority, and the deepening of the alienation of marginalized and impoverished people who are the majority of virtually every nation on earth, including increasing numbers of poor people in industrialized nations such as Canada.

Inter Pares has developed and matured during the turbulent past quarter century that has crystalized these choices that we all face. As Inter Pares begins a new era, we are sustained by a vision and hope for positive and fundamental transformations that can bring peace, justice and universal dignity to the human community. This hope is rooted in the reality that around the world people are engaged in a profound dialogue and debate about how such a historic project can be brought to fruition within the next century.

Citizen action has become one of the most important political realities in countries around the world. As this organizing consolidates, we are seeing local associations reach out to others in their communities and beyond, to the national, regional and international level, in strategies of mutual support and collaboration on major issues – such as ending violence and constructing peace; enforcing government and corporate accountability; promoting democratic governance, human rights, social equity and economic opportunity; protecting local food security and traditional primary producers; and conserving the natural and cultural



Illustration: Edicio de la Torre

environment, including bio-diversity.

We are encouraged in our own work by the ingenuity of people in communities throughout the world, who make history every day. People who resist cynicism and despair. People who act on their dreams and believe in themselves and in others. We are also inspired and sustained by thousands of people across Canada who make our work possible through their solidarity and generous financial support.

Inter Pares is committed to continuing to lead and learn and grow through our program and our policy engagement in these major social justice issues and debates. Most particularly, we are pledged to cooperate with others – people such as Maude Barlow and Farida Akhter and the many others who celebrated with us in April – to forge actions that contribute to permanent, progressive social transformation in the conditions, opportunities and livelihoods of the poor and the marginal throughout the world.

This *Bulletin* describes how Inter Pares is organized to continue this action, and offers just a few examples of the activity that roots our hope for the future.

Inter Pares from the Inside

We receive many letters from supporters asking how Inter Pares is organized and how we work. Inter Pares was created in 1975 by a group of Canadians who had been profoundly influenced by work experiences in the Third World. From the beginning, we were convinced that we wanted to work *with* people, not *for* people, and that we wanted to organize ourselves internally using the same democratic values that we promote in our work outside. We wanted to remain small and flexible. We wanted those with whom we work

around the world to be colleagues in common cause, rather than beneficiaries; and we wanted to bring the lessons of our work back to Canada and Canadians to enhance social justice activism here.

To this day Inter Pares works primarily with organizations created by people to work together to solve their shared problems. Inter Pares means “among equals”, and we relate to our counterparts as equals in common cause, working together to confront injustice and promote healthy and sustainable models of human community.

We see our work as an ethical response to the world. We act in our own name and our own interest as well as in the interest of those living in the communities whose efforts we support. We know that charity is not the solution to the problems of people in the Third World – but rather justice and equality – and that the humanitarian work we do must be represented to Canadians in a critical light. We also know that part of our role is to carry out human rights education here in Canada and internationally, to protect the work of our partners, and their lives.

Inter Pares is a small organization of thirteen staff. Our preferred way of working is to collaborate with other international organizations whose goals are consistent with our own. We do not maintain field offices overseas, preferring to relate directly to local organizations. Our staff regularly visit with counterparts in over 20 countries where we support local initiatives. Inter Pares staff form a cooperative management team organized on the principle of parity – parity of salary and parity of responsibility.

Inter Pares maintains its fundraising program in-house, including development of all materials. We do this to be as cost effective as possible, and to assure the quality and accuracy of the material. We are committed to the principle that all Inter Pares staff should be directly involved in reaching out to our donors, and our donors should have direct access to us.

All of this we try to do in the spirit implicit in the notion of “among equals”, a spirit of reciprocity and mutual accountability. These principles have served us well for 25 years, and will continue to guide our work in the challenging times ahead.

Government and the Voluntary Sector: *a creative tension*

For 25 years, Inter Pares has received financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and has counted as friends many people who work within CIDA. Inter Pares could not have developed without this support, for which we are very grateful.

At the same time, we have always been careful to protect our right and responsibility to speak openly and freely about international issues and Canada’s international role. At times, we are critical of Canadian policies. Our experience has been that, for the most part, CIDA and other government officials have promoted our right – indeed, our obligation – to participate in important debates, to disagree, and to offer constructive criticism.

To ensure our capacity to carry out this role, we have built our own

base of committed supporters across Canada. Today we receive support from more than 10,000 Canadians and from several private foundations. This support allows us to maintain our independence while engaging with public sector actors.

A healthy relationship between government and voluntary organizations such as Inter Pares is characterized by transparency and mutual respect. We have a responsibility to ensure that the perspectives and interests of our counterparts and our supporters are represented in public policy debates. This is a central role of the voluntary sector. In this sense our relationship with government is essentially one of “creative tension” – a reality that must be maintained and nourished if we are to preserve a fundamental element of the democratic process.

Conserving knowledge, constructing the future

The *Ebgan* is a term used by the Kankana-eyes, an indigenous group in the northern Cordillera region of The Philippines. The *Ebgan* is a traditional home for women elders, single or widowed, who live together. It is a place where women meet to share their life stories, and where elders teach younger women about their responsibilities in the family and the community.

As a women's support system, *Ebgan* is also the name of an organization based in the Cordillera, which works for women's empowerment through community-based action and policy advocacy. *Ebgan* is reviving the traditional women's support system, with a more political edge. Collaborating with local women's groups in three provinces in the Cordillera, *Ebgan* engages indigenous women in consciousness-raising activities, addressing concrete issues affecting them, their families, and



their communities.

By facilitating the sharing of their experiences as daughters, wives, mothers, agricultural workers, or small-scale entrepreneurs, *Ebgan* assists women to analyse their multiple roles, and discuss what they would like to change in their lives and their communities and how they can work together to do this.

Women are naming problems such as domestic violence, sexual

abuse, and prostitution, which have long been taboo subjects in their communities.

Through skills training, education, and help in accessing resources, *Ebgan* also assists local women's groups to initiate and sustain health, education, and economic development programs. Women are launching initiatives in these areas that recuperate traditional knowledge and integrate new ideas, including reviving the pottery industry, recovering indigenous health practices in birthing and healing, cultivating and selling herbal plants as a source of medicine, and establishing a women's carpentry shop.

By accompanying women in these ways, *Ebgan* lives up to its Kankana-eyes name as a place for teaching and learning, linking the past and the future, and promoting women's leadership and collective strengths.

Lives of action, lives of hope

In Rwanda, Inter Pares' counterpart, ACORD, continues its efforts to promote peace and improve the opportunities and livelihoods of the poor. Working with local associations and women's organizations, ACORD staff carry out training programs in small business management, farming techniques, animal husbandry, construction of fuel-efficient stoves, and masonry skills that are vital not only for improving family livelihoods, but also for the economic reconstruction of the wider community. ACORD has also successfully promoted access to clean drinking water in some of the poorest areas by mobilizing community efforts and resources in collaboration with local authorities.

Alongside these economic activities, ACORD Rwanda supports cultural and social activities that bring different

groups together to help create conditions favourable to reconciliation. ACORD has organized numerous activities to promote human rights, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. For example, teams of mediators have been trained to help resolve conflicts among neighbours, easing tensions at the community level where social relations remain fragile.

Of course, these local efforts alone cannot address the threats to the security of the people of Rwanda created by the extreme poverty and wars in the region. The international dimensions of Rwanda's problems are well-known and also demand urgent attention. However, in urban



Fred Bangu

neighbourhoods, and in rural villages and farms, women and men are living their lives in action and in hope. They strive daily to meet their basic needs and to build the foundation for a better future for their children and their country.

Accompaniment

Doug Ward has been a member of Inter Pares' Board of Directors since 1990, and Chair since 1998. He recently retired after a career at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation where he served in a variety of roles from radio producer to vice president. He co-authored the report that led to the renewal of CBC Radio in the seventies, and was one of the creators of "As It Happens". He also headed the CBC Northern Service for a decade, focussing on the hiring and training of Inuit and Dene broadcasters. Doug accompanied staff member Jean Symes on a visit to Peru in May, 2000 to gain first-hand knowledge of our program there. Following is an excerpt from his journal:

Saturday May 20, 2000

0800: We drive from Huancavelica to Yauli for meetings. This market town is 22 km away from Huancavelica through steep mountain valleys. The rough gravel road has been damaged by the spring rains, and there are no guard-rails. From the truck window I look down hundreds of meters to the valley bottom, as the driver wrestles with the steering wheel to avoid potholes, washouts, mud-slides, fallen rocks, and oncoming trucks. My heart is in my mouth.

0900: While peasant women set up their wares in the market place outside the Yauli town hall, we meet the mayor inside. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the Huancavelica Roundtable, which brings together local mayors, producers, university people, women's groups, and others to plan the reconstruction of Huancavelica, and to help reweave the social fabric destroyed during the war. Inter Pares and Project Counselling Service (PCS) collaborated to provide funding and advice to establish the Roundtable.

1000: We are taken to a hall off the market square to meet with FEMUCAY, the women's federation of Yauli. Thirty rural women filter in, babies on backs, and sit on the floor. Each woman has come — most by foot — from a neighboring village, where she represents fifty or more women, members of the mothers' group in that village. The president speaks of how the women are getting training in livestock handling and market gardening, as well as in leadership, and in dealing with government departments. One-by-one, individual women stand, and tell us how FEMUCAY has taught them how to speak in public, and gave them power through links to other women in similar circumstances.

1200: Return drive to Huancavelica. Outside Yauli we are stopped by a herd of llamas on the road — a rather pleasant delay. Seven years ago this road was

nearly impassable, and Jean once made the twenty-two kilometer trek from Yauli to Huancavelica by foot. Stretching up the hill we see terracing, where people have grown crops for hundreds of years. War and world marketing patterns have combined to destroy the precarious livelihood these people once had.

1300: I am very impressed with Diana Avila, the Executive Director of PCS, her deep understanding of the people and society here, and her profound relationships with so many of the women. At lunch she talks about her first visits to this area in 1992, and she and Jean note the remarkable increase in the women's self-confidence since Inter Pares and PCS began working with FEMUCAY.

1600: We meet with the local representative of the Ombudsman. This office was created by the Peruvian Congress but most of its funding comes from international agencies, including CIDA. In this polarized election period, it is the only public institution still independent of the government. He tells us that the government food agency cuts off food distribution to people who do not attend rallies for President Fujimori. And opposition newspapers consistently disappear from the newsstands.

1800: We drop in on a conference of young people from all over Huancavelica. They insist on pulling us up to the front and thanking us for the support PCS provided to help get them together. During the conference these students and young workers talked of ways to initiate environmental clean-ups and encourage eco-tourism. Given the musical instruments I saw, I suspect they also had a good time!

1900: At dinner, Diana and Jean discuss a job vacancy in the Peru program of PCS. Diana wants Jean's comments on the raft of CVs, so Jean offers to review the applications overnight. I wonder when they sleep?!



2000: Dinner is over and I'm freezing! The temperature has been no more than 5°C all day, and no building is heated. I beg off and return to the hotel to shiver under a huge pile of blankets. Jean and Diana go off to meet with four women from Castrovirreyana, the poorest province in the department of Huancavelica, itself the poorest department in Peru. Women there have been encouraged to have their tubes tied (for free) without receiving information about possible consequences, and with no follow-up medical assistance. One of these women had the operation, and it was botched. She is in constant pain and walks bent over. She has been told there is no local medical facility that can help her, and if she goes farther afield for help, she will have to pay for it. Diana agrees to follow up with people working on this issue in Lima, to see what can be done to help her and other women in that situation.

0730 The next morning: at breakfast we meet a woman, a human rights activist. In a country where human rights is considered suspect by the government, she has been arrested twice, and tortured by the police. Why doesn't she leave? She talks of her commitment to her country and to her children's place in it. It is an honour to meet her and to know that Inter Pares is supporting her in her courageous decision to continue her struggle.

Inter Pares' program in Peru is supported by donations from the Canadian public, as well as grants from CIDA NGO Division, CIDA Peacebuilding Unit, and ACT-Netherlands.

