

# Inter Pares

B U L L E T I N

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## In Celebration of Activism

When Daniel Querol – biologist, environmentalist, international activist – began to speak to the gathering of supporters and colleagues at Inter Pares' Annual General Meeting in April, it was in an atmosphere of friendship and solidarity. Many of us knew Daniel well from his long association with Inter Pares in Nicaragua, first in a program to conserve plant biodiversity that Inter Pares supported in the mid-'80s, and for the past several years as the founder and director of Güises Montaña Experimental, a community-based eco-conservation program on the Río San Juan in Nicaragua. And many in the room, including Daniel, had just returned that day from Québec City where they had been working to develop an alternative program for justice and peace to present to thirty-four heads of state gathered at the Summit of the Americas.

The room was abuzz with memories of long-ago journeys in the Nicaraguan countryside, and more recent memories from the Citadel in Québec. But Daniel did not focus exclusively on the events in Québec. Rather, he spoke of the lessons taught by fifteen years of solidarity and common cause that he and his Nicaraguan colleagues had shared with Inter Pares. He spoke of what we had done and learned together, and how events like Québec were moments in a long journey to make the world a more just and secure place for future generations. Such moments, he said, are made possible, and made significant, by the activism of millions of ordinary citizens – in Canada, in Nicaragua – and around the world who live every day their firm commitment to promote peace, justice and community, locally and globally.

Inter Pares is honoured by its relationships with activists such as Daniel Querol, Dr Cynthia Maung (pictured above), and others you will meet through this



*Dr. Cynthia Maung (left) with Inter Pares staff member Elizabeth Milan while on a visit to Dr. Maung's clinic for Burmese refugees in Mae Sot, Thailand.*

Credit: Peter Gillespie

*Bulletin.* It is our privilege to know them, to work with them in their own communities, and to help connect them with fellow citizens worldwide to share the lessons, trials and joys of the activist vocation.

For activism is a vocation. It is a "calling" – a calling to active hope in the possibility that together we can do the things that are necessary to make the world a better place. It is a recognition that events in the world do not just happen, but are the result of actions and choices of real people and institutions, public and private. It is a recognition that the way our world is organized and governed has been invented, and can be re-invented over time by citizens, by our communities, our clubs and associations, and by our governments.

Activism is the decision we take, individually and collectively, to participate in the political and social processes that make and re-make the world every day, and to participate consciously and responsibly with others who share our vision and values. The challenge and opportunity of activism is to give breath and heart to innovative and alternative

ideas for developing and conserving creative, 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 activist role is participation – indeed, is citizenship itself. It is, as we have expressed it before, "thinking about the world in the active voice".

The world *can* be changed for the better. Inter Pares works with people who have the will and the courage to struggle to make their communities and the world a humane and creative place for all of us. This *Bulletin* celebrates this kind of dedicated activism and energy – an energy that inspires and encourages. The activities described in the *Bulletin* are sustained and supported by the generosity of thousands of individual Canadians who have made a choice to believe in themselves, and the world, and through their contributions to act on this conviction to contribute to a better future.

## A Living Commitment

Sharon and Gerry Channer, long-time Inter Pares supporters, live their commitment to change, both locally and internationally.

Since the late 1960s, Sharon and Gerry have lived and worked in Tanzania, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Peru and Canada, sharing their skills in agronomy, home economics and agricultural management. As volunteers with non-profit agencies, or working on contract, they preferred to live in rural areas where they were able to learn local languages and customs, and to establish direct relationships with the people with whom they cooperated.

Sharon and Gerry believe that development programs must be built from the bottom-up, initiated by the people most familiar with their own problems and capacities. "Sustainable development means the participation of those who will be most directly affected," says Gerry. Sharon's work with rural women echoes these values. Being told that "women are not important" fueled her passion to make women's work more visible. Sharon assisted women to upgrade their skills, and promoted women's collaborative actions. This commitment has led to

innovative projects – conceived and managed by women themselves – that have enhanced women's economic opportunities and led to greater status and power for women in their communities.

Inspired by a communal garden project in Sri Lanka, Sharon and Gerry started the Herb Garden in the Ottawa valley in 1995. They grow and sell 250 varieties of organic herbs as well as herbal and other natural products, and provide training in growing and using culinary and medicinal herbs.

But the Herb Garden was always intended to be more than a source of livelihood. Guided by the same values and skills they had applied in the Third World, the Channers helped bring together local producers to share knowledge, cooperate on obtaining supplies, and develop mutually-supportive ways of working. Together they formed an association of small herb businesses and initiated the annual Ottawa Valley Herb Festival which now draws thousands of visitors each year. This



Gerry and Sharon Channer

process of networking has helped create more awareness of ecologically-sound horticultural practices and has generated new opportunities for local production and marketing. Sharon and Gerry also regularly host farmers from around the world who come to visit the farm, as they continue to share their knowledge of agriculture and entrepreneurship.

The Channers are convinced that people, working together, can bring about change; this is what sustains their activism. Inter Pares is privileged to receive their support, and we are inspired by their work.

Credit: Wayne Hebert/Ottawa Citizen

## Indigenous Rights and Citizenship



Credit: Miguel Pickard

Marisela García Reyes

Even on a bone-chilling November evening in San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico, the caring and passion that drives Marisela García Reyes is obvious. The cold is quickly forgotten as she speaks about

her involvement in the indigenous movement and the people with whom she has shared her life for the past sixteen years.

Born into a poor family, as a child Marisela was intrigued by the Nahuatl men and women walking down the neighbouring mountain in search of work. Although "the Indian" has always been part of the Mexican identity,

this identity has been constantly debased, repudiated or distorted by those in power. Marisela chose long ago to walk in the footsteps of the indigenous shadows of her childhood, and their descendants, in their struggle for the recognition of their peoples' rights.

Today, Marisela works for the Centre for the Defence of Indigenous Rights (CEDIAC) in remote Chiapas, where the indigenous movement has deep roots, and which has one of the highest concentrations of indigenous people in Mexico. The Zapatista uprising of 1994, and the negotiations that followed, revealed the miserable living conditions of indigenous people in Mexico, and made it possible to crystallize indigenous demands in the San Andrés Accords. These Accords, if implemented, would be the first step toward the inclusion of indigenous people as full Mexican citizens.

At CEDIAC, Marisela is in charge

of the Training Centre for Indigenous Leaders (CEFIFI). Inter Pares has been supporting the work of Marisela and her colleagues with the Tzeltal communities to help women organize to learn about and defend their rights as citizens and as women. Last year, sixty Tzeltal women, representing their communities, marched for over two months in the Jubilee 2000 pilgrimage that took them from Acteal in Chiapas to Mexico City. The women denounced the marginalization of indigenous people and the violence that confronts them as indigenous women. Demanding the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, the women spoke of their struggle for their rights as citizens.

Marisela and her colleagues at CEFIFI know that the women's struggle is one that must be taken up by all Mexicans, and they are committed as Mexican citizens to work for a more inclusive and just society for all.

## Active Citizenship

When over fifty people came together last May for the Africa Canada Forum, the person who had made the longest journey was from Timbuktu in northern Mali. As a guest and colleague of Inter Pares, Alpha Mahamane Toure came to participate in discussions among African and Canadian development workers about the challenges of promoting democratization and citizen participation in Africa today.

Over the course of the three-day symposium, Alpha contributed the insights of his work as coordinator of ACORD's program in Mali to support democratization and conflict resolution. Alpha carries out education activities for women's groups, peasant associations, and pastoralists to develop greater understanding of the rights and responsibilities of the citizens of Mali. He also works with communities and local government officials to promote the participation of all citizens in the management of local resources and economic development.

Alpha brought to the symposium his practical experience in community organizing and adult education – and just as valuable – his personal conviction and commitment to the cause of justice and equality in his own home

and in the world. Alpha's belief in the necessity and the strength of active citizenship is as infectious as his good humour and warm smile. He has spent most of his life in a community marked by caste, class and gender inequalities, as well as the legacy of racist colonialism. He is now devoting his life to transforming those relationships

of power and creating new avenues for all members of the community to participate in ensuring their livelihoods and determining their future.

When asked about the origin of his desire to bring about such fundamental change, Alpha says that it was his family and community that taught him the values of fairness and civic responsibility that guide his choices of work and action. After pursuing studies in law and working for several years in the capital, Bamako, Alpha returned home to join the ACORD staff in 1998. Through his work with



Alpha Mahamane Toure

Credit: Molly Kane

ACORD, Alpha has found a way to put his legal training and his personal values and convictions to work. He can see small but important changes on the horizon, as local associations gain confidence and knowledge of their rights and power to engage with local authorities and express their aspirations. He is also inspired by the shared learning and solidarity of activists in other parts of the continent, and the world, who assert the creativity and strength of citizen action for justice and lasting peace.

## Building their Future

Charm Tong is twenty years old and loves maple ice cream. She jokes often and laughs openly. But as a refugee from Burma, feeling and expressing joy have not come easily. "I used to think that I couldn't have any fun, that I had to work hard all the time," she says. Now, laughing and feeling joyful have become Charm Tong's act of defiance against the brutal Burmese military dictatorship.

Charm Tong is Shan, an ethnic minority in Burma. She spent her childhood, moving with her family from place to place within Shan State, in order to escape the repression of the military. Like Charm Tong, many Shans have taken refuge in neighbouring Thailand.

When she was seventeen, Charm Tong testified before the UN Commission on Human Rights on the situation of people in Shan State. Her presentation made such an impact

that she was chosen to testify again the following year. When she speaks, she never fails to move her audience with her honesty, sincerity and integrity. Last year, Charm Tong was a delegate to the Winnipeg Conference on War-affected Children. She has also shared her experience with other youth from Angola, Cambodia, Colombia, Bosnia and Uganda in a project called *Children as Peacebuilders*, which explores the effects of war and conflict on children and youth. This summer she was nominated by Canadian Friends of Burma, an organization Inter Pares supports and collaborates with, to participate in a three-week intensive human rights course, given by the Canadian Human Rights Foundation in Montréal. Charm Tong is a strong believer in the ability of young people to change themselves, their lives and the world.

Inter Pares came to know Charm Tong through her work on the Coordinating Committee of the Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), an organization that Inter Pares has supported since its inception in 1999. Through SWAN, Charm Tong has been involved in projects related to the trafficking of women from Burma into the Thai sex industry, violence against refugee women, and education services for the children of Shan migrants. Her fluency in English, Thai, Chinese and her native Shan has been extremely valuable to SWAN's work.

Charm Tong's involvement in so many activities, both local and international, reflects her deep commitment to the dream of an inclusive, democratic Burma. Her dedication and courage continue to inspire and mobilize everyone who works with her towards a more just and equitable world.

## Behind the Numbers

*Anne-Marie Zilliagus, Inter Pares' finance manager, visited Bangladesh in June 2001 to work with UBINIG in coordinating our accounting systems for a major new program. This program was established with the generous support of thousands of Canadians and a five-year grant from the Canadian International Development Agency.*

In the still of the morning the sounds of singing float through the air at Tangail Centre where I have come to see UBINIG's work in Bangladesh. People rise early at Tangail, gathering every morning at dawn to sing traditional songs before they start their day, songs that describe the work of *Nayakrishi Andolon*, the new agricultural movement that is bringing biodiversity-based farming practices back to Bangladesh.

As Inter Pares' finance manager, before this trip the closest I had been to our program in Bangladesh was reading dry financial reports that reduce projects to a list of accounts. There was never a hint of the haunting melodies, nor of the incredible beauty of the countryside, nor of the energy of the young women and men at the training centers so intently engaged in their work. Tangail Centre is one of a network of training centers. The staff of the centres provide training and encouragement that help farmers bring back the diversity of seed varieties and farming techniques that were lost over the last two decades, when farmers began to plant

hybrid and genetically modified seed, and use pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilizers. In the space of ten days I've travelled to four of UBINIG's centres, each in a different agricultural area.

Bouncing along the roads that teem with activity – the van veering in and out between bicycles, rickshaws, and buses – is an adventure. Off the highway, the road winds between rice paddies, ponds, and small clusters of houses, some made of packed mud with straw roofs, many of tin, all with gardens and fruit trees around them. Ishwardi Centre, located in central Bangladesh, is built in similar style, with vines growing up from the garden over the roofs of the buildings. A small open-sided pagoda, made of bamboo, sits beside the pond, and staff gather there to chat over the activities of the day, or to plan the next.

Another day we drove to Chapai, in the northeast, the mango district. The fruit is ripening and mangos hang from the trees like green globes on long slender threads. *Nayakrishi* farmers grow over 300 different varieties of mango, that vary as much in colour

and size as they do in their meltingly good taste. We stand under the huge trees talking of how pesticide use has decreased the yields and quality of the mangos in the region – a story that was told over and over – and how people's health has deteriorated, and crop yields have failed to live up to the Green Revolution's promise of abundance. Whether it was mangos or rice, I was told how *Nayakrishi* has helped farmers recapture their traditional knowledge and introduce improved agricultural practices.

Kushtia, the third center I visited, is near the grave of the revered Bangladeshi singer-saint Lalon. The centre is devoted to raising cultural awareness, teaching songs by Lalon and new ones that describe *Nayakrishi Andolon*. Students of the music school treated me to a concert – the same songs that wake me so early on my last morning in Tangail. The tabla, the harmonium, and the clear, joyful voices, linger in my memory, and will forever take me beyond the dry numbers and statistics in my financial reports.

## From the Heart

Augusta Henriques, the Executive Director of Tinguena, a development and environmental education organization in Guinea Bissau, is a long time friend and colleague of Inter Pares. Augusta has devoted her life to working for social change and peace in her own country and nurturing solidarity for justice with others around the world. She sent us this message:

"Here, in Guinea Bissau, people working with Tinguena are addressing all kinds of difficulties, to create a dream and build a country that will be worthy of our children. Our country is plunging more and more into insecurity and you cannot imagine what it is like to try to work for long-term



Credit: Molly Kane

*Augusta Henriques*

change in such a state of constant instability. But love for this country and for its people gives us courage.

Faith in what we are trying to build gives us the energy to continue to struggle and to show that it is possible to sow the seeds of hope for a future of justice and dignity. And all the women and young people with whom we are working demonstrate such magnificent courage. Every day, the staff of Tinguena also demonstrate such courage, struggling to make advances in our programs in spite of the unstable political situation and the difficult economic conditions . . . I wanted to share these words from the heart with you, and say that we are with you on this road and with the same conviction and commitment to build a future that will be more just and more worthy for generations to come."

