



Savouring the Past – Anticipating the Future

Just the other day Ian Smillie, one of the founding members of Inter Pares, dropped by the office to meet with current staff regarding some work of mutual interest in Africa. As we were chatting, Ian noticed a beautiful old wood bookcase topped with flowers and hanging vines and stacked with manuscripts, books and binders. The bookcase stands out among the more modern “off-the-rack” modular office furniture, and is one of our favorite objects in the office.

“That bookcase belonged to my father,” he said. “It was one of the first pieces of furniture Inter Pares scrounged when we were starting up. It is wonderful to see that it has traveled with Inter Pares all this way and over all this time.”

Indeed, it is wonderful, and in a way symbolic of how Inter Pares has retained its roots, even as it makes its way in the world toward a more humane global future we all hope to see some day. And the visit and discussion was a reminder that as we near the end of one challenging year and approach the uncertainties of the next, Inter Pares also approaches the threshold of its fourth decade of international social justice action.

Inter Pares will mark its 30th anniversary in 2005. Yet, in many ways it seems like only yesterday that this adventure began. It was 1975 when several young and idealistic Canadian activists fresh from stirring experiences in Canada and overseas set out on an experiment in international social change action. And since its first days with borrowed furniture and youthful energy and optimism, Inter Pares has been a uniquely home-grown endeavour to build common cause relationships among Canadians and colleagues in countries around the world, north and south, among equals. And although there has been ongoing renewal of the staff team, Inter Pares retains deep personal and political links with the original generation, both within present staff and through our ongoing collaboration with the many, many people with whom Inter Pares has worked and grown since its early beginnings.

What does it mean to build something like this over thirty years? Most importantly, it means relationships, in



Canada and around the world: shared experience, shared commitment, shared learning, shared action. And as the years go by, the relationships we have built are strengthened by shared roots and mutual support, each one nurturing the other. There is an ecology to it, an interdependency.

Inter Pares’ actions take various forms. We think of it as naming the world, improving the world, and changing the world. This means political analysis – describing the world truthfully, the way we find it. It means material assistance – assisting people at the local level to improve the concrete daily conditions of their lives in the real world as they find it. And it means political action – carrying out policy activism to help fundamentally change the world so that it ceases to be the way we find it, and becomes a more humane place for every child, woman and man.

Building something over thirty years is also growing and learning. Our memory is part of the knowledge that leads us forward into the future. Our experience makes us confident about the possibilities for influencing the quality of the future that we share – a future based in relationships, affinities and common aspirations. We also know that what we hold for the future depends on what we do with the past – with the experience, the knowledge and the relationships formed over these years.

What we hold for the future is rooted in an active engaged memory of our past and the legacy of those who created Inter Pares and those who have spent part of their precious lives participating with us in our joint action. This *Bulletin* explores just a few of these relationships and the shared experience they now contain. ❧

Inter Pares and ACORD: 30-Year Companions on the Road to Social Justice

On a warm, rainy evening last April, a group of friends and colleagues met around a table in Montreal to share a meal, and ideas for collaboration and action. Laughter rang out and conversation flowed; a passer-by would have thought this was a group of long-time friends, meeting to catch up and share stories from their past. But while this group of international activists does share in a long, rich history, this face-to-face gathering was a first for those seated around the table.

Four of the people at the table had travelled to Montreal from across Africa: Kenya, Sudan, Burundi and Chad. Bonaventure Wakana, Asha El-Karib, Sophie Havyarimana and Seid Sultane are all staff at ACORD, a pan-African organization based in Nairobi, Kenya. They were in Canada as part of a visit organized by Inter Pares to deepen links with long-time Canadian colleagues and to create new relationships.

Also part of the group that night was Tim Brodhead, the first Executive Director of ACORD, and one of the founders of Inter Pares. Everyone at the table listened intently as Tim told the story of the founding of ACORD and the bond with Inter Pares that now dates back almost three decades. In return, Tim was delighted to learn from Asha that one of ACORD's first projects, a vocational training school in Sudan, continues to thrive.

ACORD was created in the early 1970s as a consortium of European international development agencies. These agencies sought to create an organization capable of implementing projects in remote areas in Africa where the members themselves did not have any operational capacity. The consortium's first two projects, in Sudan and Mali, were in response to humanitarian crises caused by civil war and drought.

Tim left ACORD to return to Canada as one of the founders of Inter Pares. His experiences at ACORD shaped his vision for this new Canadian organization. Rather than build a large structure with overseas staff, Tim and his colleagues decided to keep Inter Pares small, collaborating on an equal footing with activists in developing countries, and building networks that would bring people together to effect change. In keeping with this way of working, Inter Pares became one of the first Canadian members of the ACORD consortium in 1977.

Since then, Inter Pares has remained deeply involved in the life of ACORD, serving on the organization's Board of Directors over many years, offering political solidarity and providing funding, institutional, and technical support to programs in different regions of Africa. And when ACORD began its transformation in 1998 from a consortium of northern donors to an Africa-led international organization working in alliance to promote development and social



Inter Pares and ACORD Staff.

justice, Inter Pares committed itself to accompanying its long-time counterpart in that change process.

Just as the ACORD experience helped shape the structure and methodology of Inter Pares in the 1970s, so did Inter Pares' experiences influence the innovative directions taken by ACORD. As the Chair of the Board of Directors of ACORD for the past four years, Inter Pares Executive Director Molly Kane has played a key role in helping to build this new alliance for international co-operation that is now led by people in Africa. The new structure links local actions in individual countries to advance the goal of strengthening pan-African social justice movements to bring about systemic change.

Inter Pares and ACORD have travelled the road of social justice together for thirty years. The story of ACORD is forever linked with that of Inter Pares, just as an important piece of ACORD history resides here in Canada, with us. Our stories will remain linked, as we move forward together to build a better future. ❧

Remembering the Future in Guatemala

November 2003 was election time in Guatemala, and the country was at a crossroads. Running for President was former General Ríos Montt, whose dictatorship in the early 1980s was one of the darkest periods in the 36-year long war that devastated the country. The army's scorched earth policy forced hundreds of thousands to flee, as their villages were burned to the ground, and their family members, friends and neighbours massacred. Genocide was perpetrated

thirty members of *Nosotras las Mujeres*. The group is relieved by the election results, but they are also concerned by some of the actions of the new government, and are determined to keep this non-partisan political space alive, to continue to exercise their rights as citizens and hold their government accountable.

In our conversation with these women, some of them dear colleagues we have known for many years, we are reminded of Inter Pares' role in accompanying Guatemalan women over the past two decades as they have struggled to overcome histories of exclusion and to open spaces in which to organize and make their voices heard. *Nosotras las Mujeres* would not have been possible without these struggles, and Inter Pares is privileged to have been present as these women have organized, changed, grown stronger, creating together the possibility of a future free of violence, injustice and exclusion.

Inter Pares was present in the refugee camps in Mexico in the early 1980s, when Guatemalan refugee women came together to meet the basic needs of their communities – nutrition, health care, education – and to ensure that their voices were heard in decision-making. We accompanied these women as they returned home to Guatemala and struggled with the daily grind of building communities anew. We supported returnee women, and women who had never left Guatemala, in their struggles for land, livelihoods and voice. We supported indigenous women in their efforts to create their own organizations that respond to their needs and interests. And in 2003, several returnee women accompanied us to the border regions of Thailand and Burma, to talk with Burmese refugee women about their experiences in exile and in returning home. Their courage and strength gave hope to Burmese women who are engaged in their own struggle against war and militarization.

The relationships we have formed over this long history are deep and enduring, and our continuing presence in the turbulent postwar period in Guatemala is valued by our counterparts and colleagues. When wars end, peace does not magically appear. The struggle to overcome deep-seated structures of violence to create the conditions for peace, including justice, equity, tolerance and reconciliation, is a long one. Our commitment must also be long-term.

As our meeting winds down and we step out together into the cool evening, we hear the echoes of many voices from throughout the years, and the laughter from shared journeys that shaped our lives. Together we remember a future for Guatemala, where, as one of the *Nosotras las Mujeres* banners reads, there is “no more violence in my country or my home.” ❧



GABRIELA PORRAS

against the indigenous population, and women were the targets of specific forms of violence, including rape.

For many Guatemalan women, the prospect of Ríos Montt returning to power in the 2003 elections was intolerable. And so they came together, rural and urban women, indigenous and *ladinas*, community organizers, artists, musicians, and poets, to launch an educational campaign, *Nosotras las Mujeres* (We the Women), to lay bare the history of militarized violence in Guatemala, as well as Ríos Montt's own particular role. They unfurled banners “No more rivers of blood”, they marched, they made radio announcements, they wrote newspaper columns, challenging all Guatemalans to remember their history, to commemorate their dead and why they died, and to say, in one voice, “never again”. Their message spread to every corner of the country. When Ríos Montt made a campaign stop in the northwestern region of Ixcán, which saw some of the worst violence during the war, protesters against his visit held *Nosotras las Mujeres* banners up high. These images were then reproduced in the national media. People murmured in amazement, “Look at these women, at what they are doing, what they are saying.”

Ríos Montt lost the election, polling barely 11 per cent of the vote. Several months later, in a cramped office in Guatemala City, Inter Pares staff sit and talk with some

In Celebration of Friendship

Staff member Karen Seabrooke reflects on Inter Pares' 20+ year journey with activist Khushi Kabir of Bangladesh.



ANNA PASKAL

Khushi Kabir and Karen Seabrooke

October 1982

Khushi Kabir arrives in Gander, Newfoundland in the midst of a snowstorm that has shut down the airport in St. John's. She and Shireen Huq are in Canada for a series of meetings with women's groups and community organizations across the country, organized by Inter Pares. Khushi is the Director of *Nijera Kori*, a national landless peasant and women's organization formed just a few years earlier. Shireen is an organizer, researcher and women's rights advocate. They are both active in the women's movement in Bangladesh, and are young, bright, dynamic, articulate. I'm meeting them for the first time, having corresponded for several months in preparation for their visit. I'm nervous about the trip ahead, hoping we'll get along and that the meetings will lead to common cause and collaboration among Canadian and Bangladeshi women. Khushi and I end up billeted in the same house, in the same cold room. For over twenty years now we've joked about that auspicious start to our friendship – how neither of us slept well because of the cold, and the strangeness of it all.

We shared an important experience that month, and by the end of the visit we were no longer strangers. I learned so much from these two women and from others we met across the country – about the links between the personal and political, about poverty and violence against women in Bangladesh and in Canada, about women's organizing and feminism. Khushi and Shireen broke down myths and stereotypes – about Bangladeshi women, and about the causes of inequality and impoverishment within and among countries. Khushi and Shireen were catalysts, provoking Canadian women to keep debating, strategizing, mobilizing – to join our struggles for women's empowerment with broader social justice movements nationally and internationally. As Khushi put it, "Let's work together and strengthen each other, because our futures are bound together."

October 2003

On a sunny, unusually warm fall day in Ottawa, a group of Canadian women gather at Inter Pares to meet four of our colleagues – Asha El-Karib from Sudan, Junice Melgar and Sylvia Estrada-Claudio from the Philippines, and Khushi – sharing experiences and strategies to confront and resist political violence against women. Our international colleagues share insights into the context for women in their countries. Khushi describes *Nijera Kori's* work with women in rural communities of Bangladesh, providing examples of women's leadership and courageous resistance to violence and the status quo. All four women address the need to collaborate globally and mount an international challenge to fundamentalism in all of its forms – religious, cultural, economic, scientific, patriarchal.

I look across the room at Khushi. It is twenty-one years almost to the day that Khushi landed in Newfoundland. I recall the dynamic young activist I met then, and think about the journey Inter Pares and *Nijera Kori* have taken together since. I can still see Khushi discussing with women working in fish plants in Corner Brook; sitting with a group of women farmers in a kitchen in Brandon; speaking with immigrant and minority women in Sudbury; presenting at a public meeting on aboriginal women's health in Downtown Eastside, Vancouver; meeting with Inter Pares supporters in living rooms across the country.

Khushi's participation in this meeting in Ottawa is part of the political relationship between *Nijera Kori* and Inter Pares that began over two decades ago. Khushi tells the others that Inter Pares is unique among *Nijera Kori's* relationships with northern organizations, and the most long-standing. "Inter Pares has never behaved like a 'donor', but as a friend of *Nijera Kori*; we share our knowledge and aspirations, raise critical issues and challenge each other in constructive ways. You can only do that when there are shared values and a strong basis of trust."

Nijera Kori and Inter Pares continue to move forward, to build a future that honours women and is safer and healthier for all. There is still so much to be done – for our futures are bound together and we must join our struggles to change the world. ✎

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