

Citizen Action: Challenging the Limits

How many of us have asked ourselves, what difference can one person make? How many of us have wondered “how can I help to preserve and sustain a community in which I and all others feel at home, and where people have secure livelihoods, children receive a good education, and the elderly live with dignity?”



As Inter Pares marked our 30th anniversary over the past year, reflecting with colleagues, counterparts, and many of our supporters across the country, we have shared many stories of struggle against great odds, of learning from our mistakes, and building on our strengths.

When we reflect in this way on our place in the wider world, the challenges we face often seem beyond our individual strength, knowledge, and power. We are confronted with obstacles that seem to be immovable and beyond our control. What do we do about the unrelenting assault on the natural environment that sustains our lives? How do we change the fact that so many fellow human beings are excluded from the bounty that a small minority enjoys in abundance? What do we do about the fact that the liberties and opportunities of most of the people of the earth are limited not by their own imagination and effort, but by social and political systems that discriminate against them on the basis of their gender, class, and race?

These are the questions that millions of women and men wrestle with, in different ways, in every country on earth. But when individual people share their questions and concerns, as friends and neighbours, as fellow human beings, we often discover that we are not as alone as we might think. We discover shared fears, but also shared dreams. We also discover the wisdom of our experience, affirming that what we know and what we care about matter. At some point, that sharing leads to action, and we realize that as citizens acting together, we can make a difference.

Inter Pares was created in 1975 by individuals who wanted to make such a difference in the world by working with others. For the past thirty years, we have worked with counter-

part organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Canada to promote and support citizen action for a better world. This citizen action has taken many forms – from fisherfolk managing coastal resources in Guinea-Bissau, to women asserting their rights to health and security in Sudan, from the creation of community clinics in the slums of Manila, to the participation of indigenous women in local governance in the highlands of Peru. By building political and financial support for this action in Canada and around the world, we have been promoting strong civil societies within just and democratic countries. We have brought these lessons home, not only through sharing our learning with others, but also through connecting struggles in other places to struggles here in Canada.

In this action over thirty years, we have witnessed how often the ideas and courage of a few determined people provide the opportunity for many more to make a significant change in their lives. And we have seen how the success of one group can inspire others – whether in a neighbouring village, or another continent – to challenge the limits of the present and make a difference for the future.

During this 30th anniversary year, we have been honouring the people in Canada and in many other parts of the world who have been part of our history. We tried to do this by looking toward the future together. We have discovered that sharing the stories of thirty years of learning and working with others around the world provides more than inspiration. The sharing of history also sharpens our vision and strengthens our endurance. And it reminds us that the answer to the question “What difference can one person make?” is – all the difference in the world. ☘

Making Connections: Citizen Action in Canada and the World

As part of Inter Pares' 30th Anniversary activities last May, our colleagues Asha El-Karib of the Gender Centre for Research and Training in Sudan, Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kori, Bangladesh and Yao Graham of Third World Network-Africa based in Ghana, travelled to Winnipeg for a public forum entitled "Citizen Action – Challenging the Limits: Towards a New Internationalism." Peter Gillespie of Inter Pares then accompanied Khushi Kabir to Nelson and Comox in British Columbia to share experiences of citizen action for change with Inter Pares' supporters and members of the public. What follows is Peter's report.

Winnipeg

We were not prepared for the cold of Winnipeg. Although it was early May, it was still 12 degrees below zero and snowing. Susan White of the Canadian Women's Health Network (CWHN) graciously gave us a social history tour of the city, including a visit to the grave of Louis Riel. We attended a meeting of the Just Income Coalition, a grouping of 25 community groups in Manitoba advocating an increase in the minimum wage. A family earning the minimum wage, we were told, is living well below the poverty line. So far, the provincial government has made no response to appeals for a living wage.

A crowd gathered at Winnipeg's West End Cultural Centre to hear Khushi, Asha, and Yao speak about their work. For Khushi, the evening completed a circle that began when she first visited Winnipeg in 1982 to meet with local groups about women's health and women's activism. Appropriately, the evening was introduced by Madeline Boscoe, the Executive Director of CWHN, who commented on the connections between Khushi's visit in 1982 and subsequent initiatives by Inter Pares that contributed to the creation of the Canadian Women's Health Network.

Khushi spoke about her work with the poorest and most marginalized people in Bangladesh, of organizing so that people can collectively assert their rights, of the central role that women play in development processes. She drew parallels between her work as an anti-poverty activist in Bangladesh and the efforts of Manitoba's Just Income Coalition. "We are all facing similar problems," she said, "and thus we need to find solutions together."

Asha talked about violence against women in Sudan, the recent peace accord and the constitutional negotiations. She

talked about her organization's work in helping to put an end to the widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) in Sudan. Through gradual, painstaking work, Asha and her colleagues have engaged communities in discussions about FGM. Through this process they discovered that no one had talked openly about the practice before, and there was widespread recognition of how violent, degrading and damaging FGM is for girls. Through this careful participatory approach, Asha and the Gender Centre have inspired dozens of villages to ban the practice.

Yao Graham of Third World Network-Africa spoke about Africa's place in the global economy. "It is a mistake to think that African countries are not integrated into the international economy," he said. "Most African countries are deeply integrated into world commodity markets and that is a primary reason for widespread poverty." Most African economies were organized during the colonial era to be dependent on the export of one or two commodities. The collapse of world commodity prices over the past 20 years has been devastating and resulted in huge debt loads as governments tried to compensate. "If commodity prices had remained stable over this period," Yao said, "income in Africa would be much higher today." These historical structural problems must be dealt with when considering poverty and development in Africa.

Yao also spoke about the "democratic deficit," the lack of real democratic control by citizens of their governments, which he said is evident in virtually every country of the world and especially with respect to multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. "Here in Canada, and in Africa," he said, "we must work to help people become

In Defence of Land and Livelihood

Inter Pares has worked with Nijera Kori for many years and, with the support of other Canadian NGOs, documented the social and environmental impacts of the shrimp aquaculture industry on coastal communities in Asia. The report can be found on the Inter Pares Web site: www.interpares.ca/en/publications/colworks-archive.php

Engendering Democracy in Sudan

While in Ottawa, Asha El-Karib made a presentation to the Canadian Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs on the prospects for ending conflict in Sudan. She stressed the need to "engender" democracy during the peace process and to address the underlying causes of poverty. The full transcript of Asha's presentation, as well as a recent interview which appeared in the September 2005 *Bulletin*, are available on Inter Pares' Web site under "Publications."



Khushi Kabir with Peter Gillespie.

active citizens so that they understand the decisions that affect them, and so they can challenge the elites who are organizing the world to their benefit. That is our most important role.”

Nelson and Comox, British Columbia

Following the Winnipeg events, Khushi and I traveled on to the picturesque town of Nelson, British Columbia. We were picked up at the airport by Delyse Sylvester, a Board member of Inter Pares and a Nelson resident. That evening, local residents came to hear Khushi speak about her work and her relationship with Inter Pares. She said that much of what passes for development in Bangladesh today is little more than social welfare for the poor. “Organizing people so they can assert their rights as citizens,” Khushi said, “is critically important. Otherwise nothing will change and the structural roots of poverty will remain.” The discussion was lively, with many questions and comments coming from the audience. One person pointed out that organizing in Canada is also critically important if we are to overcome our own problems of poverty and exclusion. A man asked about the key health problems facing people in Bangladesh. “Poverty,” Khushi said simply.

The following day in Comox, on Vancouver Island, Inter Pares Board member Agathe Gaulin had organized a public event in a church hall on the edge of the harbour. That evening people of all ages gathered in the hall. Khushi spoke about the social and environmental impacts of the shrimp aquaculture industry in Bangladesh. “People are violently evicted from coastal land areas,” she said. Agricultural land that once supported people is being converted into massive salt water ponds to produce a luxury food for foreign markets. The Bangladeshi government and the World Bank have encouraged this industry, promoting it as a “development” activity that generates foreign exchange revenues. I spoke about Inter Pares’ education and documentation work on the shrimp industry in Asia and about my visits to coastal communities devastated because of the destruction of mangroves that had once provided protection against cyclones and tsunamis.

People in the audience quickly drew parallels between shrimp aquaculture in Bangladesh and the fish farms along the British Columbia coastline. There was an animated discussion about the environmental consequences of fish farms and the depletion of wild salmon stocks. As in Bangladesh, many fish farms are owned by off-shore multinationals catering to off-shore markets. The result is that resources are taken out of local hands and turned over to those connected to the international marketplace. At the end of the evening, a woman stood and thanked Khushi for coming to Comox, saying that she was honoured to have the chance to meet her. Another person thanked us for “reviving his spirit” and re-energizing him for his local activism.

Before Khushi boarded her flight for the long trip home to Bangladesh, we reflected together on what we had seen and heard in Winnipeg, Nelson and Comox. We noted that there was widespread recognition amongst people we met that we are all essentially doing the same work. Whether it is promoting women’s right to health services, organizing for citizen’s rights in Bangladesh, or organizing in urban Winnipeg to address the root causes of poverty, we are all working to deal with structural inequalities in our societies. We are all citizens, active in our own contexts and there is much we can learn from each other. It was also a privilege to meet so many Inter Pares supporters, in their own communities, whose financial and political support have been crucial in helping to sustain our work over the past three decades. ❧

Promoting Democratic Economies in Africa

Third World Network-Africa (TWN-Africa) collaborates with citizens’ organizations across the continent to conduct research and education on the impacts of international trade agreements on African economies. TWN-Africa also works with government officials to increase their understanding of what is at stake in the negotiations of the World Trade Organization. Inter Pares has been bringing TWN-Africa’s perspective to our own decision-makers, so that Canada may play a more responsible role in promoting democratic economies. To read a transcript from a recent presentation made by Inter Pares Executive Director Molly Kane to the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, visit our Web site at www.interpares.ca under “Publications.”

Our Home is our Promised Land



Augusta Henriques is General Secretary of Tiniguena, an organization dedicated to supporting sustainable development in Guinea-Bissau by fostering citizen engagement in the conservation and respect for natural and cultural resources. The following is an excerpt from her opening address to Inter Pares' 30th Anniversary Symposium in April 2005. The complete version of Augusta's keynote address is available on Inter Pares' Web site, in French only.

I live in Guinea-Bissau, a tiny country, ignored by the international community, situated between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry. It is a very beautiful country, rich in natural and cultural resources, but impoverished by policies imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions in the 1980s: structural adjustment, the liberalization of our economy, and the abandonment of our social sector by the State. As a result of these policies, socio-economic disparities have widened, corruption is further entrenched, poverty and violence have intensified, and we witnessed a year of armed conflict from June 1998 to 1999. Since then, Guinea-Bissau has been plunged into instability.

In the face of all this, how do we maintain hope for the future? How do we contribute to social change? How do we help Guineans believe in their capacities to change their present conditions and their future? How do we mobilize citizen action to challenge the limits of our country, and our own limits?

Since its foundation in 1991, Tiniguena, the NGO that I lead, has worked to foster social change in Guinea-Bissau with the support of various international partners, Inter Pares being one of the most engaged. Tiniguena works at the local level, supporting community-based conservation initiatives for greater local control, and sustainable management of their natural resources. We also work at the national level, carrying out educational, awareness-raising and advocacy campaigns to promote the conservation and appreciation of our country's natural and cultural heritage.

Last February, I was in Mali to attend a meeting of the Coalition for the Defense of African Genetic Heritage, which was established in January of 2004. We participated in the second Forum on African Cotton, where peasants debated issues concerning the production and promotion of cotton, international trade, and the risks associated with the introduction of Monsanto's infamous genetically-modified cotton known as "Bt cotton." The motto of this meeting was: "Resistance, creativity, and solidarity."

I believe that our response needs to be *resistance* to manipulation and barbarism, for the preservation of resources that are essential to life, for control over our own existence, for the promotion of values and ways of life that are healthy and harmonious.

Our actions will require *creativity*, because we are caught in a vicious cycle from which we need to escape, and to do this will require plenty of imagination.

Solidarity is essential since it is excessive individualism and egotism that has led us to this dead-end of self-destruction. Only by reflecting, by acting together, by reinventing new ways and means of solidarity, will we be able to find our way back to the path of humanity's true vocation.

But we need to dare to dream that change is within our grasp, that the promised land is one we can build. To dream – not to escape, but to dream – is a right. ✎

Inter Pares gratefully acknowledges the International Development Research Centre for its support of the activities featured in this Bulletin.

Protecting the Commons

While Augusta was with us during our 30th anniversary, she received news that Tiniguena's work had led to the official recognition of the Urok Management Plan and of the new Communal Marine Protected Area by the government of Guinea-Bissau for the Urok islands (Formosa, Nago, and Chedia). This recognition provides the Bijagos peoples of Urok with exclusive access and resource use rights over areas that they identified as being of critical importance. This will contribute to the islanders' food security, protect the biodiversity of the islands' coastal areas from the commercial fishery and unsustainable practices, and empower communities to manage the resources on which they depend. For more information about the Urok Management Plan, please see Inter Pares' September 2004 *Bulletin* on our Web site at www.interpares.ca.

 **Inter Pares**

ISSN 0715-4267

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6P1
Phone (1-613) 563-4801 Fax (1-613) 594-4704 www.interpares.ca

Inter Pares works overseas and in Canada in support of self-help development groups, and in the promotion of understanding about the causes, effects and solutions to under-development and poverty. Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1.

Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by the Canadian International Development Agency.

