

Building relationships of solidarity and hope

Inter Pares develops our programs in collaboration with social justice groups around the world, including Canada. We raise money and generate political support for their work, collaborate in developing plans of action, connect them with like-minded groups, and engage in policy advocacy and public education here at home. While our concerns are broad, the threads that connect them are solidarity and social justice – supporting marginalized communities to build better futures. The following are a few examples of what we have all achieved with your support.



Seeds of hope

In 2008, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) added another 40 million to the total number of hungry people in the world, nearing one billion today. Those who have felt the brunt of the food crisis are those who are dependent on food they do not produce. Years of imposed and ill-advised agriculture and trade policies have meant that in many parts of the world today, countries produce what they do not eat, and consume what they do not produce.

But the food crisis has not affected everyone. In the Deccan region of Southern India, an area often exposed to prolonged drought, some communities have found ways to eat well. Rather than depend on imported rice, these communities have gone back to the crop that has sustained them for generations – millet. Millet is often denigrated as being backward and the “poor people’s crop,” but the 5,000 women of the Deccan Development Society (DDS) are proving millet’s value and versatility by planting varieties of all different shapes, sizes, colours, and tastes. Through ecological and biodiverse farming, DDS has reclaimed degraded lands and enhanced food security in the Deccan plateau. Their efforts are helping communities buttress their farms against climate change, as documented in their recent film *Millet, the Miracle Grain*. According to DDS’ analysis, millet farming also uses six million litres less water per acre than conventional rice monoculture. With Inter Pares’ support, DDS is now promoting millet across the country through the Millet Network of India.

Freedom, equality and solidarity

2008 marked the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As much as it was a moment for celebration, it was also a time to reflect on both the progress and the challenges of six decades of promoting human dignity.

La Ligue des droits et libertés is part of this rich history. In 2008, La Ligue worked to ensure that governments, corporations and individuals in Québec and in Canada respect their human rights obligations. La Ligue was active on a wide range of issues such as access to decent housing, the use of Tasers by police, freedom of expression for independent publishers, and racism and marginalization in Montréal-Nord. In all those cases, La Ligue spoke out. In addition to supporting this work financially, Inter Pares also collaborated with La Ligue through the International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG), a coalition which monitors the implications and abuses of laws and measures related to Canada’s involvement in the so-called war on terror.

La Ligue culminated 2008 with two public events. The first, in November, looked at issues of food sovereignty and human rights with the participation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter. In December, La Ligue also held a conference on “Rebuilding our social solidarity through human rights.” La Ligue marked the 60th anniversary of the UDHR by bringing together people committed to social justice and human rights to remind all of us that the struggle for universal human rights and dignity continues, here at home as well as internationally.



Women working for healthy communities

Over thirteen years ago, a small group of women came together to form the organization Likhaan. They were determined to do something about the situation of women in some of the poorest neighbourhoods of metro Manila in the Philippines. They wanted to work with women who had no access to family planning, and experienced some of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the country. With assistance from Inter Pares, Likhaan established local clinics, trained women from the communities as health promoters, and helped build strong local organizations in poor communities. PiLaKK, a federation of these women’s organizations and of youth groups, now has over 3,000 members. The clinics provide family planning to thousands each year, and have saved the lives of many women in critical health situations.

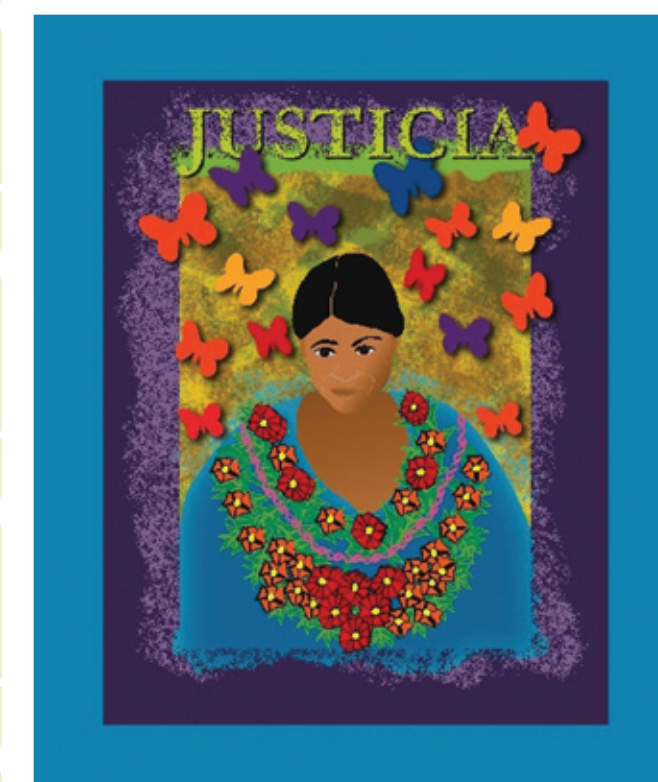
Despite many obstacles, including conservative political forces and increased military harassment, the organization has grown, incorporating women from different neighbourhoods into its staff. During the past year, the approach that Likhaan and PiLaKK members have developed was recognized by the United Nations as a successful means of addressing the problem of high infant and maternal mortality. This encouraged Likhaan to begin work in the islands of Buhol and Samar. In eastern Samar, there is now a strong women’s organization with “reproductive health sentinels,” women trained to monitor their neighbours’ pregnancies and ensure appropriate care. A centre was built where pregnant women from remote villages stay, waiting to give birth in a safe and supportive environment. By combining clinical treatment with community organizing, Likhaan and PiLaKK have helped ensure healthier futures for women and their families.

Communities constructing peace in Africa

When people affected by divisions among and within their communities choose to commit to peaceful coexistence, hope is invigorated. This is what happened when thousands of farmers, mothers, unemployed youth, choir singers, soccer fans, and local leaders from Sotik and Borabu, two districts located in Kenya’s Rift Valley and Nyala provinces, came together to negotiate their own peaceful coexistence through a social peace contract. The communities wanted to heal the wounds provoked by the post-electoral violence that took place in Kenya at the end of December 2007 and the beginning of 2008.

Building on its past experience of developing social contracts in post-war Burundi, Inter Pares’ counterpart ACORD (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development) accompanied members of the Sotik and Borabu communities to identify issues that had exacerbated existing tensions and led to conflict and violence. Community members recognized that cattle rustling, land disputes, and demeaning stereotypes about other communities all contributed to deepening divisions. The communities called on everyone to practice acceptance, and to resist the manipulation of political parties and politicians.

Inter Pares staff member Caroline Boudreau was honoured to witness first-hand the commitment expressed by representatives from these two communities that culminated in an official signing ceremony animated by traditional dance, singing, food and a soccer game. Since then, members from Sotik and Borabu have been visiting each other and reactivating their common market area. With Inter Pares’ ongoing support, ACORD is accompanying communities such as these in their long journey for peaceful coexistence and strengthening a broader movement promoting peace and social justice in Africa.



Overcoming fear, finding hope

In many countries in Latin America, massive human rights violations committed during armed conflicts are still met with impunity. Survivors are forced to watch as those responsible for genocide, disappearances, torture, and rape are elected to political office, or grow ever wealthier in times of supposed peace.

In Guatemala, the obstacles to prosecuting top generals in the national courts led organizations like the Centre for Legal Action in Human Rights (CALDH) to request the Spanish courts to try the case under international jurisdiction. CALDH has been accompanying the national victims’ organization, the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR), with Inter Pares’ support. CALDH has been strengthening the AJR’s capacity to mobilize its members, recuperate collective memory of the genocide, and prepare testimonies. This has required years of emotional, political, and legal support to assist victims in overcoming the paralyzing fear they have lived with for more than thirty years – fear of reprisal, of more genocide, of justice not being served.

In April 2008, the Spanish judge in the genocide case began taking witness testimonies. CALDH and the AJR quickly mobilized national and international alliances for political support, organized a media strategy, and implemented a security plan to ensure the safety of witnesses. For days, with international media attention, AJR members testified about the terrible crimes committed against them. The AJR has successfully taken on a challenge that a few years earlier would have seemed impossible – overcoming fear. The case is sending a message of hope to survivors across Latin America that impunity can be overcome.

Realizing hope through advocacy

Last October in Geneva, the Women’s League of Burma (WLB) coordinated a group of nine women to attend a meeting of the Committee of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). At this meeting, the Committee reviewed Burma’s compliance with the convention. For ten days, the team of women from Burma reported on the systematic and epidemic discrimination against women in military-ruled Burma.

In 2007, the military regime had submitted a CEDAW country report which gave no hint of the discrimination women suffer in Burma. During 2008, Inter Pares counterpart WLB coordinated community-based organizations to compile data for a shadow report to the junta’s “official” submission. The participatory report-writing process concluded with a series of workshops to generate feedback on a draft and formulate the Agreed Recommendations. While in Geneva, the team met with the CEDAW Committee and later observed the Constructive Dialogue with representatives of the military regime. During the dialogue, the Committee raised almost every issue from the shadow report and most of the concerns were also outlined in its concluding report on Burma. It was an unusual opportunity for the women to watch the regime’s representatives struggle to answer the CEDAW Committee’s tough questions. When the young women returned from Geneva, they were glowing with even more optimism and audacity than before. They returned to work with more energy to resist injustice and to step up their efforts to promote women’s human rights in Burma.

