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DOES IT WORK?

Feminist Analysis and Practice at Inter Pares

## Inter Pares Occasional Papers Series

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Inter Pares is a Canadian organization dedicated to promoting international social justice. In Canada and overseas we work to build understanding about the causes and effects of poverty and injustice, and the need for social change. We support communities in the Global South to create healthier, safe and secure futures. We support people's struggles for self-determination and their efforts to challenge structural obstacles to change.

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# Does it work?

## Feminist Analysis and Practice at Inter Pares

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### Introduction

As an organization engaged in the pursuit of social justice and equality around the world and in Canada, Inter Pares has also considered itself a feminist organization throughout the majority of its thirty-five-year existence. Feminist analysis and principles have played a central, if not defining, role in the development of the organization's internal practices, program priorities and long-term collaborations. But this rich history had never been documented or explored until now. With an interest in unearthing the links between a feminist analysis and methodology, and the results yielded by our work, Inter Pares embarked on a two-year participatory research project supported by the International Development Research Centre. We sought to answer the following questions through this research:

- How does Inter Pares integrate its feminist analysis into its practice?
- What is the relationship between Inter Pares' internal daily feminist practice and the ways in which it works externally with counterparts?
- How does the way Inter Pares works relate to the results that have been noted by counterparts and documented in evaluations?

Inter Pares staff developed a participatory research methodology that involved former colleagues, collaborators from around the world, funders and Board members. Through participatory workshops, interviews, an extensive review of organizational documents, and a thorough validation process, Inter Pares staff documented and critically analyzed the views and experiences of those with whom we have collaborated over many years. This paper is the result of this research and was prepared using a collective editorial process among Inter Pares staff. The principal writers are staff members Karen Cocq, Rachel Gouin and Samantha McGavin.<sup>1</sup> The authors thank Eric Chaurette, Peter Gillespie, Rebecca Wolsak, Rita Morbia and Jean Symes for their editorial comments, and all Inter Pares staff members for their support.



## 1

## Feminist thinking every day: Integrating feminist analysis into practice

### 1.1 Defining our feminism: A brief history

It should be said from the outset that this research has not set out to answer the question, “What is feminism?” The guiding principles of the research have sought to steer the work towards developing an understanding of how feminist thought and practice have influenced Inter Pares as an international social justice organization. This requires Inter Pares’ own feminist analysis be given some shape and definition, in order to draw links between it and the practice, methodology and results that have been the focus of this research.

While many, but not all, staff members consider Inter Pares a feminist organization, we have not always or consistently claimed this identity publicly, whether with funders, counterparts, collaborators or donors. Feminist analysis and practice remain, however, central and influential in our pursuit of social change.

When we were writing our next five-year program plan in 2000, we had a discussion about whether we wanted to describe our work with women using the heading GAD [gender and development] or feminism. And we came to the conclusion that what we want, what we’re talking about, what we feel most comfortable with is feminism, so we talk about a feminist analysis in Inter Pares’ programs.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>2</sup>

In this section, we highlight some key principles that inform our feminist analysis, while not attempting to define our analysis in a static way, nor attempting to define feminism more broadly. That is, we outline how we describe our *own* feminism, in order to understand how it has manifested itself in our practice.

The political analysis on which Inter Pares was first founded was not explicitly feminist in its orientation. The underpinnings of this early political analysis, however, made the genesis of Inter Pares’ feminism in later years possible. The politics that inspired Inter Pares’ founding sought to question and re-imagine relations between North and South and to seek a different way of relating to progressive forces in the South working for social change, with an analysis that identified the structural and systemic problems that entrenched poverty and inequality at a global scale:

Even though there was not an explicit feminist analysis at the beginning of Inter Pares, some of the seeds were coming from a desire to look at things differently – how we were related to organizations in the South. Did these foundations make it possible for future things to happen?

– Staff member, Inter Pares

The analysis behind Inter Pares’ founding was influenced a great deal by the experiences of some early staff members as cooperants working in the development field overseas, as well as by the anti-colonial liberation struggles that had been waged over the preceding decades. Early Inter Pares staff members were also very much involved in community organizing activities in Canada, and were influenced by popular education (also known as emancipatory pedagogy), and by the concept of consciousness-raising emerging from feminist movements at the time.

Early programming priorities had a strong focus on development education. Programs were influenced by emancipatory pedagogy – their premise was that popular education fostered conscientization, that it was a pedagogy of people engaged in their own liberation. For instance, programs such as the *Sounds Different* radio show, which discussed development issues facing the South drawing on the perspectives of Inter Pares counterparts, or the *From the Roots* project that used literacy education as a tool for political organizing with immigrant communities.

The feminist practice of consciousness-raising also appears to have had a strong influence on the analysis and methodology at Inter Pares. Consciousness-raising – “the interaction of content (analysis of women’s oppression), interactive structure (reciprocity and equality), and epistemological premise (to start from subjective experience)”<sup>3</sup> – shared many commonalities with the programming methodology used by Inter Pares. The organization emphasizes the communal aspects of learning; that learning happens when people come together to share experiences in a non-hierarchical environment (participant-led), with an open agenda that prioritizes dialogue, and a focus on action.

This political foundation sowed the seeds for a feminist analysis to develop in later years, one in which the

politics and practice of equality and justice were seen as essential elements in seeking fundamental and structural change in social, economic, and political relations. Early on, the development of Inter Pares' analysis of poverty and development included looking critically at "patriarchal modes, systems, control," and "sexism," as well as "racism, structural and institutional," and sought "fundamental change" as a goal (Board member, Inter Pares). The analysis was already critical, structural, and transformative, and fundamentally rooted in equality. This was a strong foundation into which principles of gendered oppression were incorporated.

The reciprocity in our earliest counterpart relationships allowed Inter Pares' thinking to be profoundly shaped by our counterparts' analysis. The beginnings of a feminist analysis within Inter Pares have been traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, to the influence of Southern feminists who were program counterparts in Bangladesh.

We were very fortunate in our choice of partners in Bangladesh. Almost all of them were way ahead of the curve on gender issues ... That gave us an insight we had not had. It sort of led us in that direction.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

These relationships laid the groundwork for the early-to-mid 1980s, when new staff joined Inter Pares and initiated the process of turning this analysis onto the organization itself:

Inter Pares had a hierarchical management structure [when I was hired]. But some people had recently joined Inter Pares who had a feminist analysis, who identified themselves as feminists. Inter Pares is a Latin term which means 'among equals', and the name is meant to imply the nature of the relationships we seek to develop with organizations in the Third World. And they were the ones who started a discussion, who said: If we want to espouse these values we have overseas around equality – shouldn't we be looking at our way of working with each other and try and put those values into practice in terms of how we organize ourselves internally?

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>4</sup>

The transition to a co-management structure was also precipitated by the funding situation in which Inter Pares found itself in the early 1980s. Debate about hiring a professional fundraiser (at a high wage) led to a discussion about the ethics of pay in an anti-poverty

organization, wage discrepancies, the value of work and parity and commitment, which laid the foundations for the later transition to a non-hierarchical management structure (a more detailed discussion of this transition and structure can be found in the next section).

Early discussions of feminism and its relationship to Inter Pares' work were informed by debates underway in feminist circles at the time, as well as by staff members' questioning and changes taking place within their personal lives. "What was happening to each of us as persons was critical to the possibilities and imperatives that we saw within the institution and influenced our deliberations and choices internally – it was iterative and interactive." (Former staff member, Inter Pares) This motivated staff members to interrogate the way gender and sexism impacted interactions both within the organization as well as with overseas program decisions.

*Early discussions of feminism and its relationship to the work of Inter Pares were informed by debates underway in feminist circles at the time, as well as questioning and changes taking place in the personal lives of staff members.*

An illustrative example is a series of all-staff discussions organized in the summer of 1986 – which was prepared with talking points and reading lists (theoretical and fiction) – to further staff's analysis of gender relations and sexism and to identify how these forces played themselves out in both the organization's daily practice and the direction and focus of the overseas program. Notes to prepare the discussion laid out some basic starting points:

Inter Pares is not a blatantly sexist environment. Nonetheless, gender relations do affect our own interactions, and our overseas program choices and decisions. We propose a series of staff discussions which will help us to do the following:

- Understand the subtleties of gender relations in our own lives and work
- Explore how gender relations affect our work
- Further our understanding of feminist thinking and work towards a shared theory that incorporates feminism



One of the central tenets of feminism is the idea that ‘the personal is political’. Methodologically, feminists have tried to affirm and integrate our experience (rather than deny, compartmentalize, and fragment it) and to synthesize, seek common ground, and reach consensus (rather than polarize and confront). We are therefore proposing a first staff session that tries to build on these principles. We suggest the following first session:

1. Each staff member will reflect on the relationship between personal, institutional and international development – as she or he sees them
2. Each of us will have three to five minutes to express how we see the relationships between these three levels of our lives and work
3. Others can then ask questions of information, but cannot immediately pass judgement on what the others have said.
4. We will record what people say as we go along.
5. We will then seek the common ground, and discuss further those points on which agreement has not been reached.

This will be session one – as far as we get. We can all then decide how best to proceed – in a single group, in gender groups, in interest groups, or whatever.<sup>5</sup>

The first of these discussions was meant to address the question: “Do you think that there are distinct male/female patterns which operate at IP? How would you describe these?” The reading list for these discussions included such texts as *Last Hired, First Fired* by Patricia Connelly<sup>6</sup>; *Right Wing Women* by Andrea Dworkin<sup>7</sup>; *Toward a New Psychology of Women* by Jean Baker-Miller<sup>8</sup>; excerpts from the quarterly magazine produced by the *Breaking the Silence* Collective; *The Personal is Political: Feminism and the Helping Professions* by Helen Levine<sup>9</sup>; various works by Alice Munro; *The Colour Purple* by Alice Walker<sup>10</sup>, and others.

What developed over the years was an anti-capitalist feminism that critiqued liberal feminisms and their application to development issues through ‘Women and Development’ and ‘Gender and Development’ approaches, and gender mainstreaming: “There is a difference between feminist process and the gender equality industry...the actual process is what keeps the analysis alive.” (Former staff member, Inter Pares) Inter Pares’ analysis rejected the quantitative measures of women’s empowerment that featured so prominently in these liberal conceptions,

such as numbers of women in positions of political leadership or numbers of women participating in development initiatives. Rather, support was given to organizations and social movements that were engaged in long-term processes of transforming social attitudes and undoing structural barriers to women’s full autonomy and agency.

I remember being in the Philippines with [a women’s organization]...They came out with this document that I ended up sharing with Inter Pares in the late ‘90s. They were asking themselves that very question. Is gender equality the same as feminism? Or are they contradictory? They had done a whole study of this. Institutionalization and professionalization had happened. The money was going there instead of movement-building.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

*There is a difference between feminist process and the gender equality industry... the actual process is what keeps the analysis alive.*

Instead, the analysis within Inter Pares understood feminism as transformative of both patriarchal and capitalist structures that sustain inequality and poverty. The analysis valued autonomy – the power for women to ‘define themselves for themselves’ – as opposed to empowerment:

Empowerment has this connotation that you can empower somebody else...at Inter Pares we talk about the ‘right to be’. And part of that is the right to ‘become’...Women and all people have a right to be free from all forms of oppression and dominance... But it’s also this notion of a right to become, to become yourself, personally and as part of a community of people, of autonomy and collective growth.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>11</sup>

Inter Pares’ analysis also placed a strong emphasis on prioritizing the struggles of women, their needs, their labour, and their leadership. As a result, a substantial portion of Inter Pares’ programming throughout the years has focused on supporting women’s organizations engaging in direct support to women’s organizing processes, whether around health and reproductive rights, anti-violence work, or policy advocacy in favour

of women's rights, supporting women in exercising their economic, political, and social rights, or promoting women's leadership at various levels of political organizing. This focus came out of an understanding of the systemic barriers to women's full participation in political, social, and economic life, and the consequent need to actively create spaces where women could take a lead in defining their own needs and the strategies to address them.

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Inter Pares' analysis is also holistic and broad. It is a framework through which staff understand and articulate an analysis about intersecting oppressions:

Inter Pares offers a certain kind of feminism that is not just gender, but that includes an analysis of class, race, and other systems of oppression. Inter Pares, through its feminism, is able to see how it relates to development and development practices. Inter Pares does gender work, but also has other aspects of its work that is affected by its feminism.

– Counterpart, Philippines

During a participatory research workshop, Inter Pares' feminism was described by current staff using the following key concepts and words:

horizontality | equality | justice | solidarity  
| collectivity | process | listening

valuing experiences/subjectivity | consensus-  
building | autonomy and agency | confronting  
power | respecting diversity

linking the public and private | making the  
personal political

Although it is clear that current thinking at Inter Pares has built on the history of feminist thought, and that there is a strong continuity in the key political beliefs that are at the centre of Inter Pares' analysis, staff turnover has affected the nature of the organization's feminism. Many of the current staff members were not there during the transformative years at Inter Pares, and

have a very different experience of feminism. A much more heterogeneous understanding and approach to feminism thus exists within the organization today.

Inter Pares' feminist analysis translates into practice in two primary ways: in the area of process and in the area of program. The former encompasses the methodologies and structures used internally within the organization, those used by Inter Pares with our counterparts, and the ways in which Inter Pares collaborates with other organizations. The latter includes the priorities or areas of focus for our program (and how we go about identifying and shaping these); how we understand the issues affecting development; how we understand processes of social change; and the centrality of women's roles and agency in these.

## 1.2 An analysis that translates into process

The focus on process is a central element of Inter Pares' analysis. This stems from a key feminist principle that social change cannot be shaped around pre-determined outcomes, but rather that the process of social change itself is an important part of re-making social relations, and being an active and leading agent in this is a politicizing and liberating experience. This does not imply that achieving results is not important; rather that how we achieve them is as important as what we achieve.

This understanding underpins everything that Inter Pares does. Within a framework of clear objectives and goals – of justice and social change – there is a strong emphasis on process. This manifests itself in three important areas: in our internal practice, specifically our management structure; in how we relate to our counterparts; and in how we relate to other organizations with which we collaborate.

### 1.2.1 Working together: Co-management, parity, consensus

One of the important ways in which feminist principles manifest themselves in Inter Pares' practice is through the structures and processes used internally for making decisions and managing the organization.

Inter Pares is governed by its Board of Directors and is co-managed by its staff. The Board and the staff each operate in a democratic manner in which all important decisions are made by consensus. The Board of Directors' governing role involves ensuring that Inter Pares has an appropriate and clear set of objectives and that staff work effectively towards those objectives and meet Inter Pares' responsibilities to its members, counterparts,

fundere and the Canadian public. Inter Pares staff are collectively responsible for managing the institution – we work non-hierarchically. The co-management structure involves all staff members participating as equals in establishing organizational priorities, and in seeking out and allocating resources.

The principle of equality among staff, in the co-management structure and in the application of parity, was originally inspired by a feminist analysis of equality – between Northern and Southern organizations, but also against hierarchy – and the desire to put into practice internally the principles that the organization was espousing externally.

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The discussions about non-hierarchy and co-management reflected a tension that had begun to develop within the organization around different modalities of working.

We were an organization in crisis...some had a vision of a more personalist, high profile approach... which gave a competitive advantage to the dramatic and flashy, campaign-type initiative, while others were moving in a more quiet, long-term, organic approach based in relationship and mutual learning and engagement, and the notion of accountability, of consensus, of talking through things. So there was a divergence for a way forward for Inter Pares. For years we worked and transcended the contradictions and the conflicts and eventually couldn't do that anymore. The more we became a democratic, feminist organization, the deeper became the contradiction.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

Staff continued to discuss the need to re-organize themselves to better reflect the feminist values staff members were espousing and to truly work 'among equals'.

Eventually, after a few different iterations, a decision was taken in 1985-86 to transform the organization from a hierarchical structure to “more of a staff-led organization, more of a values-based organization” with a co-management structure (staff member, Inter Pares). This included the introduction of the principle of parity – parity of rights and parity of responsibility where, based on the idea that all work is equally valuable, all staff would be paid the same base salary. At the same time, all staff would share the work of the organization, share responsibility for its well-being, and be accountable to each other, the Board of Directors, donors, and overseas counterparts. Consensus was adopted as the mechanism for decision-making. The decision-making body became the bi-weekly all-staff meetings, where issues are fleshed out with the perspectives and contributions of everyone. This consensus process requires that staff members articulate their positions and be capable of listening to others' concerns, talking over issues until a consensus can be reached. Several years after the shift to a co-management structure, staff introduced 'check-ins', a common feminist practice, at the beginning of meetings:

We start off our staff meetings with a personal check-in...to get a sense of how people are when they're coming in the room and what's going on with them. We adopted that from Women's Health Interaction, a feminist health collective which is a sister organization of Inter Pares. It's a way of connecting the personal and political.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>12</sup>

The internal culture that resulted from this structure continues to place feminism at the heart of its programming priorities:

It is very empowering to see that a mixed organization can integrate feminist work...we didn't take away women's work from women's organizations. For most feminist institutions, the experience has been that when men are included, women's issues retreat... Women's programs wither and die in mixed organizations. There is something to be explored about why this has not happened at Inter Pares... it must have something to do with structural and also personal style – what is allowed within the group.

– Board member, Inter Pares

It should also be noted that women vastly outnumber men in the organization and have for some time. The institutionalization of feminist values into the entire

organization is the structural reason why feminism has been maintained in the entire organization: in our non-hierarchical structure, in our daily practice of consensus-based decision-making and collaboration, in the transparency created by collective management, in the ethos of care in our staff policies and staff relations, and in the political analysis which is brought to programming. Although, as one staff member noted, our ‘ethos of care’ is not perfect. “Definitely there were tensions. There were times when we were not very feminist in our behaviour. As situations changed, we had to think about how to be true to certain values without stepping all over somebody.” (Staff member, Inter Pares)

The practice of equality and parity is challenged by the everyday and structural realities in which our work as an organization and our experiences as individuals are embedded. Staff at Inter Pares are diverse in their experiences of various oppressions – whether gendered, racialized, or on the basis of class, age, sexual orientation, or ability. Inter Pares staff also operate within a structure of parity that is intended to value all work, but within which it can be difficult to accommodate sometimes marked differences in experience and years working for the organization. The co-management structure, in its pursuit of equality, can sometimes mask these very real inequalities and the ways in which they structure our relationships and positioning with each other.

We had a lot of discussions in the last year or two about dealing with conflict. One of the things that really stuck with me was something a Board member said... it was about the fact that it is amazing to have this co-management structure but in some ways it renders power invisible. It was important for me to hear, and something I like to remind myself of. Just to be aware of it.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Sometimes when we talk about how in hierarchies, power is more visible... it’s true that the lines of authority and decision-making are more visible, but power is not.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

These tensions were raised by many current and former Inter Pares staff, as well as by some counterparts, over the course of the research. In particular, current and former staff pointed to how our political ideals and convictions of equality and social justice can impede honest assessments of our realization of these ideals in

our day-to-day practice. Over the years, this has manifested itself in a number of ways within the organization. Staff raised the issue of consensus-building and how it can be negatively affected by differences in relative social privilege and unofficial power individuals can have within the organization.

There was a lot of pressure on people who didn’t speak, to speak more. It was almost oppressive ... people would think that if you didn’t speak, you were acquiescing. Then they would not be able to trust that you had taken your responsibility and that you were part of the consensus entirely. But it is sometimes hard to tell how much agreement there is in the room. I think it’s a line that we have to walk.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

*Our political ideals and convictions of equality and social justice can impede honest assessments of our realization of these ideals in our day-to-day practice.*

Staff also pointed to the challenges we have faced over the years as an organization in confronting these tensions and inequalities, naming them openly and addressing them. While the organization strives for egalitarianism, we have experienced difficulties and conflict in our many years of non-hierarchical organizing, when power relationships within the organization have been masked by our horizontal structure.

There is something I would like to raise because it was something that was very difficult. The way we dealt with conflict. Before I started, there was a lot of tension and a lot of conflict. It was not easy. I don’t know what to say about it. It’s there. We can’t just act as if it’s not there – like we often do... There is a discourse about being respectful and then conflict happens. How do you reconcile this and continue doing the work?

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

The very nature of the organization’s identity, or *raison d’être* – the pursuit of social justice – means that raising issues of power within the institution is all the more difficult because it may challenge deeply held beliefs about who we are as activists. As Srivastava writes:

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of social movement organizations ... is that most contemporary social movements have focused not only on changing society 'out there' but also on developing practices for looking inward, with the aim of shaping community and self. ... In other words, social movements require a vision not only of a community of individuals but also of shared ideas, morals, and ethics.<sup>13</sup>

*While the organization strives for egalitarianism, we have experienced difficulties and conflict in our many years of non-hierarchical organizing, when power relationships within the organization have been masked by our horizontal structure.*

This vision of social movement organizations as 'good' and progressive makes it challenging to identify and name power relations. "This political and ethical climate means that there is a great deal at stake – not only one's sense of goodness and sense of self but also one's political identity, one's career as activist or worker in a feminist organization."<sup>14</sup> At Inter Pares, as in other social justice and feminist organizations, there is both an institutional and a personal imperative to maintain the assumption of innocence. During a workshop, a staff member expressed it in these words:

I wonder when you have an organization that is aspirational in its form, in trying to have that coherence, that people can feel it is difficult to challenge each other and feel it is difficult being challenged ... If you are in some way implicated in abusing power, or not seeing power ... there is an unwillingness to recognize our own privilege. There is a real attachment to being oppressed ... and you get called on oppressing someone else in a situation, and that is devastating. "I am not going to say it, because I don't want to devastate you." When you get fifteen people, it is so intimate ... the intensity of working together raises the stakes so much.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

We raise this to signal the reality that a non-hierarchical structure does not guarantee equality, and that consensus-based decision-making does not always

reflect a collective will. The degree to which we work to challenge inequalities internally also affects our ability to challenge them externally, a point made by both staff and counterparts. There are moments of incoherence between our daily practice and our stated convictions. Examples of this included instances where differences in power have been ascribed to Inter Pares staff by others, based on assumptions about hierarchy and authority, and were not effectively challenged – for instance, someone assuming the more senior member of staff is 'the boss' – and where the ways in which staff have related to each other have not reflected our aspirations of equality. One counterpart from Guatemala noted that while there is an internal commitment to consensus, horizontality, equality and democracy, sometimes it is apparent that there is incoherence in the practice versus the idea, and that power relations exist between people.

Practicing equality on a daily basis within the organization is an on-going process, one in which we are constantly challenged to unlearn hierarchical ways of being and be accountable for the power relations that exist between us. It is a process that exists constantly in the making, rather than as a completed outcome.

### 1.2.2 Relating to counterparts

The other most important area in which Inter Pares puts its feminist principles into practice at the level of process – at the level of *how* we do things – is in how we relate to our counterparts in Canada and overseas. The influence of feminist thought can be seen in three primary ways: understanding and challenging power dynamics in traditional North-South relationships; building relationships of common cause and solidarity, as true allies; and promoting Southern leadership and autonomy by supporting the capacity of local organizations and social movements to be the authors of their own development.

Challenging traditional North-South, donor-recipient relationships was the founding mantra of Inter Pares. In the beginning, this motivation was rooted in an anti-colonial politics and a social justice analysis that acknowledged the structural imperatives of global inequalities and their role in sustaining the underdevelopment of the South. The gradual integration of feminist principles into the organization solidified the central importance of subverting and re-fashioning North-South relations. A feminist analysis that privileged equality brought further clarity and political weight to this objective, and building genuine relationships of solidarity became a means of *practising* equality. The feminist analysis added potency to this goal in many ways.

Re-imagining North-South relationships involves re-imagining the role of the North or the donor, questioning established narratives of superiority, development, progress and charity. This requires relinquishing, to the extent possible, the authority and power that comes with being the donor. Or rather, it requires a willingness to follow the lead of Southern organizations, learn from them, and support their autonomy and agency. Re-imagining North-South relations also requires valuing subjectivity – both our own, as Inter Pares, and of those we work with – and rejecting the idea that there exists one best practice for development. For Inter Pares, this has meant subverting project logics in favour of long-term relationships that are responsive to changing needs and realities in the contexts in which our counterparts work. It has also meant embracing reciprocity and mutuality, bringing what we can to a relationship and seeking opportunities to learn from that relationship as well.

Building relationships of solidarity and mutual respect has required that Inter Pares recognize what we are able to bring to a relationship, and recognize the limits of what we know and what we can offer as well. This is again a recognition of our own subjectivity, an awareness of the importance of raising our voice in our own backyards, and ceding the space for counterparts to take up the political space that is rightfully theirs. One staff member reflected on this, highlighting the certain level of humility required in order to do this:

I remember going to Ghana for the first time and meeting with Tetteh from Third World Network-Africa ... He asked “How did you get to do this?” I told him about the two-week leave I had done [to prepare for my new work in Inter Pares’ Africa Program], and he said, “A whole two weeks?!” ...I said, “It’s not that I know about Africa, you know about Africa. I need to know enough to have a conversation. I know about other things.” This is the basis of the relationship.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

This approach is multi-faceted in its characteristics. It is an approach that is often described by counterparts themselves as flexible, respectful, open-ended, collaborative, and in the spirit of building true solidarity and common cause. Some counterparts have described it as “what true partnership between the North and the South ... should be in aid.” (Counterpart, Bangladesh)

I can understand you may be getting funds from ... government and you need to meet certain requirements, so we can both collectively decide to work out how we meet those requirements and reporting system. It doesn’t have to be you pushing us and telling us this is what we need to do.

– Counterpart, Bangladesh

*It is an approach that is often described by counterparts themselves as flexible, respectful, open-ended, collaborative, and in the spirit of building true solidarity and common cause.*

Counterparts have also noted that Inter Pares works to build mutual trust in relationships, making it “a genuine relationship of solidarity.” (Counterpart, Philippines) Just as we should not idealize staff member relationships, neither should we romanticize our relationships with counterparts. There are challenges, even within long-standing collaborations. Staff members from one counterpart organization shared their observations that, in a situation where one organization is strengthening another, it is easy for the weaker organization’s internal difficulties to be visible and dissected much more:

The closeness of the relationship between Inter Pares and Project Counselling Service (PCS) raises a tension around the autonomy of both organizations, but especially PCS, in that relationship; that there is a difference between knowing internal issues and honesty and transparency – Inter Pares has always known the internal issues in PCS, but never the other way around.

– Counterpart, Guatemala

In spite of the great importance we give to building relationships of solidarity and equality with our counterparts, we have also had to grapple with the reality that there is more often than not a financial transaction that underlies these relationships. This exchange of money, and our political location as a Northern donor, introduces an historic inequality into our counterpart relationships that is very difficult to resist. This requires a constant negotiation on our part to navigate this tension and attempt to address it.

*Just as we should not idealise staff member relationships, neither should we romanticize our relationships with counterparts.*

What has allowed many counterpart relationships to survive is the political basis of solidarity that is the foundation of these relationships. When that exists in the context of mutual respect and equality, there can be room for disagreement and debate. While this is true in some more intimate counterpart relationships, it is not always the case: “we sometimes romanticize our relationships.” (Staff member, Inter Pares) For instance, counterpart relationships are resource intensive and not always easy for Inter Pares staff to manage. Counterparts may also experience the relationship as demanding: “Sometimes people don’t think of us as co-conspirators and colleagues. We are a funder and we are a meddling funder.” (Staff member, Inter Pares)

The ability to nurture trust between Inter Pares and counterparts sometimes masks the reality that our connection with our counterparts is at base a funding relationship, mediated by money and the inevitable power imbalance this brings, including dependency. Mutual trust is not achieved by masking or ignoring the reality of this power imbalance, nor the realities of the accountability that we must maintain in this kind of donor relationship. But within the confines of this dynamic, we strive to build an accountability that is reciprocal, so that we are also held accountable by our counterparts to the political and financial commitments we have made to them.

If somebody is going to insist on seeing you as a funder, there is nothing that we can do about it. Our work is to try to ensure that we are as empowering as possible. We are in a relationship with our own funders, who we treat like that, or otherwise, depending on who they are and how they act. Sometimes money becomes part of the conspiracy. Working with our counterparts from Burma, we would conspire with them and try to find funding for what we could.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

This subversion of traditional North-South relations is also a decision to forge explicitly *political* relationships, thus rejecting neutrality or objectivity in development

as a falsehood: “We see our work as political, for sure, we’re not interested in charity and neither are our counterparts; development is not neutral.” (Staff member, Inter Pares)<sup>15</sup> This reflects a principle that is central to feminist thought, the importance of being political. Counterparts noted that Inter Pares’ willingness to take an explicitly political approach to its work, to take risks and support the work counterparts are doing on cutting edge or potentially controversial issues, regardless of whether these issues are on the radar of international cooperation, is evidence of the organization’s feminist analysis in practice.

*We strive to build an accountability that is reciprocal, so that we are also held accountable by our counterparts to the political and financial commitments we have made to them.*

Subverting the traditional North-South relationship then involves forging different kinds of relationships, based on mutual respect, trust, reciprocity, and a shared political project:

And we have benefitted as much as our counterparts have – they have contributed so much to our thinking and our work in Canada. It’s often the ‘beneficiaries’ language that implies that people ‘over there’ benefit. So we try to break down that us/them dichotomy – we have shared interests and shared goals and we collaborate to bring about change.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Among counterparts, this feature of our relationships was cited regularly and emphasized:

We see ourselves more in terms of colleagues. We really don’t relate as funders and beneficiaries. Our relationship is not so much focused on funding, but on analysis and programming. It is not the same in Europe [with European donors]. We don’t intervene as frequently on their platforms as we do with colleagues in Canada. Inter Pares is a partner because we share a similar analysis and program approach ... Funders have a more hierarchical approach, but with Inter Pares this is not the case.

– Counterpart, Ghana, regional

Building relationships based on a foundation of openness and honesty also involves leaving room for disagreement, discussion and dissent, where Inter Pares and counterparts can challenge each other on questions of program strategy or direction in the spirit of solidarity, confident that the political foundations of the relationship are strong. Some long-term counterparts pointed to such moments over the history of their relationship with Inter Pares, identifying them as moments that tested the strength of the relationship but from which both Inter Pares and our counterparts learned a great deal and that ultimately made the relationship stronger. In one instance, a long-term counterpart shared the story of debating with Inter Pares the benefits and drawbacks of longer-term institutional funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which was Inter Pares' proposal, versus continuing with existing short-term project funding. Ultimately, the move to longer-term and larger-scale funding proved to be a very positive one, allowing them to focus on longer-term objectives and build a stronger social movement on the borders of Burma.

*Subverting the traditional North-South relationship then involves forging different kinds of relationships, based on mutual respect, trust, reciprocity, and a shared political project.*

There have also been instances when the very foundations of relationships have been tested, and what has prevailed is Inter Pares' commitment to political ideals, even when this commitment has necessitated the end of a long-standing relationship. In one particularly challenging case, Inter Pares and an important ally parted ways because of a disagreement on a profound issue of principle. The decision to part ways with collaborators with whom we shared a considerable number of experiences – institutional and personal – was taken after much deliberation, both internally and with the counterpart in question. The process and final decision had profound financial, psychological and programmatic effects on both organizations.

The results of Inter Pares' institutional evaluations have affirmed the outcomes of an egalitarian approach to our relationships. These evaluations noted that relating to

our counterparts as allies in a shared political project is evidenced by the degree to which we share objectives and vision:

The organizational mission or goal of the counterpart organizations that were reviewed during this evaluation show that there is coherence and considerable convergence between their institutional mission and goals and Inter Pares' program objectives.<sup>16</sup>

*Evaluations noted that relating to our counterparts as allies in a shared political project is evidenced by the degree to which we share objectives and vision.*

Perhaps the most important element of our relationship-building methodology is the focus on promoting Southern leadership and autonomy. This underlies the work we have done over the years to build institutions, supporting the capacity of our counterparts to sustain and carry forward their work for social change. This is informed by our belief that as a Northern organization, our role is not to occupy the political space that should belong to Southern social movements or to usurp their voice. Rather, we can use our resources and our political commitment to support these organizations in assuming their agency and taking the lead in processes of social change.

That was a key methodology for Inter Pares... giving other people the capacity, the means to strengthen their own voices too, is part of the process. It has been a process of us not appropriating people's voices.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Funding agencies have reflected on Inter Pares' commitment to supporting Southern agency in this way, calling it an 'empowerment approach' to supporting Southern organizations (Funding agency, Canada). Many evaluations have pointed to our role in institution-building as one of the most notable outcomes of our work over the years. This was the case with our most recent institutional evaluation, which documented Inter Pares' our role in the transition of the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD)



into a locally led pan-African organization, and our role in the formation of Project Counselling Service (PCS) and its transition from a donor-led consortium to a Latin American regional organization.<sup>17</sup> (See the following chapter on the relationship between our internal and external practice for details on these experiences).

Counterparts have also noted Inter Pares' approach to supporting institution-building and movement-building as a strategy for social change. It is reinforced by having a focus that extends beyond the completion of projects and the achievement of certain pre-determined results, and that instead values and nurtures organizational development in its fullest. This approach is informed by the feminist principle of valuing work equally, a principle that directly translates into the way we relate to counterparts: "One of the first things I noticed about Inter Pares was that administrative work was seen as political and it made my work feel valued." (Counterpart, Guatemala) In addition, counterparts have noted that the kind of core support Inter Pares gives allows flexibility and evolution in program priorities and direction at the local level.

They [Inter Pares] are getting the issue, which is demonstrated through the core funding they provide us. This allows us to get salaries to health workers who are poor people. Everybody says they want to give money to the poor, but giving them salaries is different. This is a way to get money to poor people.

– Counterpart, Philippines

*One of the first things I noticed about Inter Pares was that administrative work was seen as political and it made my work feel valued.*

The ability to offer core support requires trust and understanding. The trust built in our long-term relationships has proven especially important when Inter Pares has remained committed to counterparts when other donors were ending their support. This commitment has been essential to the survival of organizations through difficult periods.

Long term partnerships was the first thing I noticed about you. In an internal evaluation, [we] found the length of the relationship to be the single most important factor in successful programming: more than money or anything else. That was also my instinct. And that's what Inter Pares did.

– Funding agency, Canada

### 1.2.3 Working with allies

One of the key programming methodologies that has surfaced again and again in the research data is Inter Pares' work in coalitions. Since the early years, Inter Pares has played a central role in forming, building, and sustaining many historic and influential coalitions of Canadian NGOs on a variety of issues – solidarity work with the Philippines under the Marcos dictatorship, solidarity work with Central America during the civil wars, and women's health and reproductive rights in Canada and overseas. More recent examples include Canadian policy work on food sovereignty and biotechnology, work in defence of civil liberties and human rights, and work to regulate the practices of Canadian extractive companies operating overseas.

*Our reliance on coalition work as a central programming methodology can be linked to the importance we have historically placed on collaboration and collective process.*

Our reliance on coalition work as a central programming methodology can be linked to the importance we have historically placed on collaboration and collective process. These values have been incorporated into the everyday workings at Inter Pares and have developed into an ethos that has profoundly influenced all of our programming over the years. This spirit of collaboration recognizes the limits of our knowledge regarding our capacity to effect change in isolation. When confronting root causes of poverty or injustice, and when working toward structural change, more is learned and processes are made richer and more effective when there are many actors implicated that can pool their expertise and resources. One of Inter Pares' funders reflected on this:

You see coalitions across various issues ... for me it's a manifestation of feminist practice ... at the root was a common analysis ... of factors of oppression and disempowerment, and that we needed to come together to oppose them. You don't see that today – things are more stove-piped, separate. At Inter Pares I see the strength that this earlier tradition [of coalition-building] manifested – I don't see that separation.

– Funding agency, Canada

Coalition work also requires that collaborators be willing to forego protagonism and share responsibilities:

I see collaborative relationships fostered in what is often a competitive environment, where organizations have basically one trough to source government funds – it fosters competition, unfortunately. Seeing Inter Pares work against this, with a collaborative approach, is perhaps feminist.

– Funding agency, Canada

Similarly, this spirit of collaboration has very often led Inter Pares to take on a role as convenor, bringing people and organizations together to debate, discuss, learn, strategize, and work collectively. We thus use our resources and relationships to facilitate participation in knowledge sharing and knowledge generating exchanges for counterparts.

You have the connections that we don't always have and you bring us into the room, into a room where we otherwise could never be ... There are many incidences where Inter Pares has opened the door, set the table and then invited us.

– Counterpart, Canada

Many counterparts named this as a particularly valued element of Inter Pares' methodology. Giving examples such as the exchange between the Mae Tao Clinic (Thai-Burma border) and Likhaan (Philippines), counterparts valued the opportunities these exchanges created for sharing with similarly minded organizations that allowed them to learn from others and reflect on their own work. Former staff commented on the rationale behind exchanges such as these:

We've been supporting this health clinic started by a refugee doctor, who trains medics and backpack workers... We've worked with a women's health organization in the Philippines that has a very clear feminist analysis... We invited them to come and meet with our counterparts on the Thai-Burma

border: women's organizations that are based in refugee camps, migrant women's groups, teachers, paramedics, etc., because the women on the border had identified a need to develop some skills around trauma counselling... The whole approach was a feminist approach, starting with women's oppression in linking domestic violence and state violence and sharing principles and approaches to counselling.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>18</sup>

Inter Pares once brought an activist from the Philippine women's movement to speak to the Annual General Meeting of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), and later, took the president of NAC to the Philippines to meet with the women's movement there, in an effort to build international solidarity: "That way women could inform each other's analysis but also work together jointly in other ways... So that's part of our strategy – to internationalize Canadian work and get Canadians more involved internationally." (Staff member, Inter Pares)<sup>19</sup>

In 2002, Inter Pares facilitated an exchange between Guatemalan women and women who had fled the Burmese military regime living on the Thai-Burma border.

The Burma-Guatemala exchange was based on the idea that refugee women from Guatemala and Burma have parallel experiences, and much to learn from one another. They share the experience of fleeing state-sanctioned violence and struggling to survive in exile with access to few social or economic supports. They share the experience of recognizing the need to organize as women, often for the first time. They share the challenges to that organizing such as finding an autonomous voice and resisting male hostility and discrimination. Furthermore, indigenous Guatemalan women were not only refugees in exile, facing many of the same issues as Burmese women refugees, but they also returned to their country, which brought new challenges.<sup>20</sup>

As part of this exchange, women from Guatemala visited the border area, and women from Burma went to Guatemala to learn about the return of refugees during the war. Guatemalan women heard about how women on the Thai-Burma border were documenting sexual violence against women, offering counselling to women, and breaking the silence around this profound taboo. This exchange led to the development of a programme on sexual violence in Guatemala.

I spoke to the women who went to Burma. They said that there, with the Burmese women, they sort of understood the importance of speaking aloud [about sexual violence]... For the women that took part, the relations of these women with their peers was important... There have been other exchanges. It had an effect on the Inter Pares program as well [Inter Pares developed a regional program on sexual violence with Project Counselling Service] ... And because PCS is regional, that had an influence on the scope of the sexual violence program.

– Colleague, Peru

The exchange between indigenous women in Guatemala and Burma was explicitly named as evidence of Inter Pares' commitment to feminist process and outcomes, because it prioritized and recognized the value of bringing women together and creating an opportunity for them to share and learn. "These values, creating spaces for exchange – this is how feminism manifests itself in the methodology." (Counterpart, Guatemala)

*This strategy of bringing people together to share experiences and knowledge, particularly of bringing women together, has been a very influential methodology in shaping Inter Pares' program since the 1980s.*

This strategy of bringing people together to share experiences and knowledge, particularly of bringing women together, has been a very influential methodology in shaping Inter Pares' program since the 1980s. The work on women's health and reproductive rights, pharmaceuticals, and population control is an illustrative example of this methodology: "Our goals were that we wanted to connect with the women's movement, to find ways to support a stronger voice for women in Canada, we also wanted to internationalize the thinking here." (Staff member, Inter Pares)<sup>21</sup> Inter Pares brought Bangladeshi women to Canada and toured across the country to share stories and experiences on women's health concerns. This ultimately led to the creation of Women's Health Interaction (WHI), and a popular theatre piece on women's health called *Side Effects* (for a detailed analysis of this work, see chapter three).

In the 1980s, Inter Pares staff member Brian Murphy, in collaboration with colleagues from Concordia University, began to detail a methodology they would call 'learning circles'. The learning circle is a self-directed group of people who are willing to make a mutual and reciprocal commitment to each other to critically investigate a shared issue or concern. It involves a concerted effort to construct knowledge based on the experience of the group and integrate the knowledge and experience of others in order to reflect, analyse, and act. Learning circles can be open-ended, but are more effectively used for short term endeavours focussed on very specific learning goals. Those involved in a learning circle engage in a democratic and participatory learning project. This methodology is one that Inter Pares has used on many occasions. In 2006, a learning circle on migration was convened, bringing counterparts together to create knowledge and deepen our collective analysis and understanding of the ways in which people are categorised and dealt with when they migrate. In 2007, women from Africa, Asia and Latin America, twenty in all, gathered to discuss their work and the challenges and opportunities they faced in ending sexual violence against women in armed conflict. Learning circles and feminist consciousness-raising groups draw on similar values and ideas, namely that self-directed learning is a powerful driver for change.

Feminist methodology values learning and knowledge creation as political acts. Inter Pares often describes itself as a learning organization because of the high priority placed on knowledge-building and analysis in every aspect of the work. There is a recognition that our work depends on a sharp analysis of context and causes in order to be relevant and effective. Behind this learning practice is an understanding that we must seek to continuously improve our work, situating ourselves within processes of learning, participating in the co-creation of subjective and inter-subjective knowledge with others, rather than extracting ourselves and purporting to teach others. The influence of consciousness-raising and popular education principles associated with feminist theories of social change is very clear.<sup>22</sup>

*Many counterparts named openness to learning as an identifying and feminist characteristic of Inter Pares' approach to working with others.*

Many counterparts named openness to learning as an identifying and feminist characteristic of Inter Pares' approach to working with others, and pointed to the value of the theoretical or analytical rigour behind our work as an important contribution to social justice efforts. Several participants in the research even named this research project as an example of our commitment to feminist process: "This process in itself reflects this feminist political commitment and analysis. It's a way of being complicit in the work." (Counterpart, Guatemala)

### 1.3 An analysis that translates into program

The feminist analysis Inter Pares has adopted and nurtured over the years has not only influenced *how* we do our work, but has also had a tremendous impact on *what* we do. This is the case not just in the obvious centrality we place on work that addresses issues of gender and women's rights, but is also made evident by our larger focus on issues not narrowly defined as 'women's issues' but as social justice issues more broadly.

The most obvious way in which Inter Pares' feminist analysis translates into practice is in the gendered analysis that we apply to all areas of our programming. First, this means devoting a substantial portion of our program resources to work that is specifically focused on women's rights and equality. But this also means having an understanding of issues that highlight the gendered experiences and impacts, and bring women's leadership and agency to the centre. A gendered analysis is integrated into everything we do – one example offered by current and former staff is of an occasional paper produced by Inter Pares on food security that focused on women's experiences and that put forward a gendered analysis of food sovereignty.

Institutional evaluations of Inter Pares have noted the centrality of gender in our work:

Virtually all Inter Pares programming addresses fundamental issues of concern to women – their long-term civil, political, economic, social and cultural viability, safety and security... all overseas programming has a substantive gender component, if it is not the major thrust of the work.<sup>23</sup>

Inter Pares' approach extends beyond simply a focus on gender equality or women's issues. In an example from Bangladesh, one counterpart noted that Inter Pares was willing to support feminist perspectives on land reform and other economic issues, which at the time this programming was being developed, fell outside the more conventional notions of women's rights issues.

*Inter Pares' program decisions have been shaped by listening to the experiences and analysis of counterparts and people at the grassroots level.*

Some counterparts commented that this gender analysis is front and centre in Inter Pares' programming, setting us apart from other donors. Specifically, the holistic and comprehensive nature of Inter Pares' gender analysis was identified as a distinguishing feature of our work. This focus has had an impact on the analysis and program interventions of our counterparts over the years. In the case of Project Counselling Service (PCS), it was Inter Pares' application of a gendered analysis that eventually resulted in the development of a gender policy for PCS. An evaluation of Inter Pares' program in Peru found that we played an important role in shaping PCS' gender policy.

The PCS gender policy is a notable result in itself, according to the former Director of CIDA's Gender Fund in Peru. "PCS is one of the few funding agencies that has an explicit gender policy that has been discussed, approved and published. PCS has gone beyond good intentions to clearly define its gender policy. That is significant" ... The seeds of its current policy were sown in 1993-94, through Inter Pares' work with PCS in Guatemala and Peru ... Inter Pares asked the PCS country teams to assess the differential impact of displacement on women and men. After a long and difficult discussion, PCS teams agreed to begin a gender review process in 1995 ... According to a member of PCS' Consultative Committee, "Inter Pares played a leadership role in promoting the gender policy and gender issues within the SG [Sponsorship Group]. Inter Pares has the strongest gender analysis among the SG members, so it led the process and enriched the discussion. Inter Pares worked with PCS to rewrite its draft gender policy. As a result of Inter Pares' leadership, other members of the SG have made progress on gender issues within their own organizations."<sup>24</sup>

By developing a gender policy, PCS enhanced its ability to support women's federations and other community organizations to become "better organized and stronger," to gain "credibility and power in their communities" and to participate in "other political arenas such as

communal assemblies and local government.”<sup>25</sup> The policy also served as a basis for developing regional programs on sexual violence against women in armed conflict. PCS is now seen in Latin America as an organization with a very sophisticated gender analysis that supports groundbreaking work on gender and women’s rights.

Inter Pares’ gendered analysis translates into methodology and program focus in several important ways. Informed by central tenets of feminist thought, such as listening to women’s stories and valuing the knowledge of lived experience, Inter Pares’ program decisions have been shaped by listening to the experiences and analysis of counterparts and people at the grassroots level: “Inter Pares started its analysis always from the lived experience of the people they went and spent time with overseas. That determined where the work went, always based on the day-to-day reality on the ground.” (Former staff member, Inter Pares) Many counterparts have pointed to this as a unique characteristic of the programming methodology Inter Pares uses. It is appreciated as a sign of respect and equality: “My relationship with Inter Pares has been one of mutual respect, but I think that what I really appreciate about Inter Pares is that they go to the grassroots for analysis.” (Counterpart, Canada)

The shape of Inter Pares’ program – thematic areas of focus, geographic reach, and the strategies both we and our counterparts employ – is the result of a flexible and organic approach to program development. A counterpart from Bangladesh noted that our approach to determining program priorities and direction is very iterative, and that the quality of our long-term relationships allows us to be responsive to changing priorities and needs. “We have learned so much over the years from our ... counterparts; their thinking and analyses have really informed our work, especially around women.” (Staff member, Inter Pares)

*We have learned so much over the years from our ... counterparts; their thinking and analyses have really informed our work, especially around women.*

Inter Pares’ work with women’s organizations on health, reproductive rights, pharmaceuticals, and population control is perhaps the best example of a methodology based on listening to women’s stories and taking direction from these experiences to shape program

interventions iteratively and responsively (see chapter three for an in-depth analysis of this work).

Our work with women’s groups in Canada and in Asia has been the most synergistic. Once we started to collaborate on health issues, especially on population control issues and on women’s reproductive rights, there were many real spin-offs from that.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>26</sup>

Although a feminist analysis is central to shaping the kind of work Inter Pares does and how, not all counterparts are feminist organizations or women’s organizations. This speaks to the way Inter Pares understands social change – the ultimate goal – more broadly. Feminism is a key framework for understanding poverty, injustice and underdevelopment, and for informing and shaping strategies for social change. But rather than consider a feminist analysis a pre-requisite for social change, we consider the development of this awareness to be an important part of the process of social change itself. As a result, many counterparts with whom we have started relationships have had neither a feminist nor even a very strong gender analysis, but raising the profile of gender issues and incorporating a gendered analysis has been an important aspect of the political accompaniment that we provide.

As a function of this analysis, we understand social change to be a long-term and fundamentally transformative process. We choose to invest in movement-building, seeking structural change at a global level to address the conditions that sustain and reproduce poverty, inequality and injustice. This view frames our choice of counterparts and informs the strategies by which we choose to invest our resources: “We work with groups to try and have an impact on social change processes. That is why we support social change movements and organizations in Canada as well as overseas.” (Staff member, Inter Pares)<sup>27</sup>

Feminism serves as one of the foundations for Inter Pares’ analysis of poverty, injustice and social change. It brings a structural and holistic dimension to our analysis, and a focus on radical transformation to our understanding of development: “You [Inter Pares] recognize the political nature of poverty, human rights ... it’s an illustration of feminist practice.” (Funding agency, Canada)

We believe that underdevelopment is not a natural thing, that poverty has been created and perpetuated by those whose interests are served by the status quo – elites in the North and South. People are impoverished and kept impoverished by

the dominant economic system, by patriarchy, and by unequal power relationships within and among countries. We want to try and change this in Canada as well as globally by working in concert with other groups. We actually tend to describe our relationships as relationships among ‘co-conspirators’ who conspire together to change the attitudes and structures and processes that oppress people everywhere. There’s poverty, women’s oppression, there’s racism in Canada – all sorts of things that need to be challenged and transformed.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>28</sup>

This analysis has been described by counterparts as ‘big picture thinking’, that looks to the long-term and makes connections between issues that are often treated as distinct. This relates also to the focus of Inter Pares’ programming being more structural in nature, rather than being driven by project funding or by the ‘flavour of the month’, as one counterpart from Bangladesh stated.

The fact that Inter Pares does not see the locale of intervention as bounded geographically – it’s an illustration of your recognition that these are structural issues that are global in nature. There is work at the local level but also regional and international levels, promoting local partners to be the voice in international practice... That you’re building solidarity between those who resist across sites of intervention illustrates feminist practice.

– Funding agency, Canada

This approach has been valued by counterparts as a means of protecting space for solidarity within international cooperation – “resisting the logic of projects, defending the logic of process.” (Counterpart, Guatemala) For counterparts, this is what distinguishes Inter Pares’ approach as one of movement-building versus conventional development: “It builds people-to-people solidarity.” (Counterpart, Philippines)

While Inter Pares’ approach has not always been identified as feminist, or labelled as such, there is a clear influence of feminist thought and practice within the institution and in our choice of methodologies. This relationship between the organization’s internal and the external practices is explored further in the following chapter.

## 2 From the inside out: How our daily internal practice influences our work with counterparts

Inter Pares' co-management structure requires and cultivates particular sets of skills, which are exercised and developed daily through staff interactions. These same skill sets are used in our external interactions. External relationships benefit from the daily internal practice of working at Inter Pares. The organization's collaborative and co-management way of working draws in people with shared values who chose to work together; hones staff members' relational skills, which supports relationship-building with counterparts; builds staff members' organizational development skills, which has helped them support coalitions and Southern-led organizations; supports women's leadership; and nurtures a culture of learning and knowledge-sharing. Inter Pares has several internal practices that were repeatedly identified as influential throughout the research project. These practices stem from the co-management structure and have a formative influence on external relationships.

### 2.1 Being on the same page

Inter Pares' work is a political project, where people who share similar values come together to promote social justice. This is important in establishing egalitarian relationships.

You need the right people around the table. Recruiting and choosing partners is a skill. Part of Inter Pares' longevity has relied on being able to bring these people to the table and putting shared values at the centre.

– Board member, Inter Pares

Going back to your question about how we relate to counterparts. I think it's a reflection of our recruitment process. We recruit people with those political values, which is why our hiring process is so important. It's a way to determine if there is an affinity around our political values. If you don't have that affinity around work with people as equals, you would not be allowed in the door. That's what we look for when we hire people – those values, orientations, to the world.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

A strong internal affinity is created through Inter Pares' rigorous hiring process, in which each potential new staff member, after having been interviewed and recommended by a hiring committee, participates in 'rounds'. This is a procedure in which the candidate meets individually or in pairs with all co-managers. What is

being assessed by current staff during these interviews is less technical capacity than 'fit' with the institutional culture: the nature of the candidate's political analysis, the alignment with institutional values, their thoughtfulness about relevant issues, the compatibility with management structures and processes. In turn, the candidate is absorbing important messages about the institutional culture and how decisions are made: "The extensive process of 'rounds' is the beginning of acculturation into Inter Pares' social contract and appreciation of its collective values and ethos."<sup>29</sup> The result is that new staff members arrive with a high, pre-determined degree of affinity with others: shared values, political analysis, and sometimes (not always) shared activist/professional backgrounds. This strong affinity facilitates working together towards common goals. While disagreements occur regularly, there is usually not a need to bridge vast political differences in their resolution.

Collaborators often comment on the ability to recognize this commonality of analysis and values in staff members. This sends the message that we can be a reliable counterpart and coalition partner.

[Inter Pares was an obvious choice as a counterpart] because of the way that you work. That your policy and positions are completely in line with [our] policy and positions ... We are on the same page. You get it. You talk to anyone at Inter Pares and there's just this wonderful understanding. ... Where with other organizations, we might agree on certain positions,

but every time that we go to form a coalition on a certain issue, they come and go. With Inter Pares, we know we are on the same page.

– Counterpart, Canada

Because of the high degree of internal cohesion created by Inter Pares' hiring process – although there still exist a diversity of voices around the table – institutional relationships can survive staff transition. Like-minded new colleagues can take over and quickly form bonds based on shared analysis, vision, and knowledge of the organizations' shared histories. One newer Inter Pares staff person described the immediate and intimate connection she formed with a Project Counselling Service (PCS) staff member on this basis:

She has been at PCS for seven years. We ended up in a workshop on how organizations in the North can integrate gender equality ... the way that [she] spoke about Inter Pares and our relationship, it was so revealing about how we have been accompanying PCS. She had internalized that. It was the first time I had met [her]. We had both been working for organizations that have been working together for years. We were intimately connected to that.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

In contrast to her relationship with Inter Pares, one counterpart from Bangladesh commented on how hard it was to undergo staff turnover in other institutional partnerships, because there is not the same coherence and commitment, nor the same shared values. Changes in staffing provoke a setback instead of a continuous institutional relationship. The collaborations between Inter Pares and counterpart organizations are between institutions, but also very much between individuals; several former staff members also described their past counterpart relationships as friendships and collaborations with individuals. "Inter Pares stands for ... long-lasting, profound, deep relationships with not only organizations but individuals. My example was the relationship that I was fortunate to build with Tiniguena and [its Executive Director] in particular." (Former staff member, Inter Pares) This sense of friendship and collegiality is often reciprocated, as the two following comments illustrate. "[Inter Pares staff members] have good relationship-building skills, analysis, they have relationships with many staff and regional program managers." (Counterpart, Ghana, regional)

The partnership that exists between Inter Pares and Tiniguena extends beyond a partnership between institutions. There exists a partnership between people's lives, intimate links. There is a recognition that we see each other as equals and that we are walking a single path, together.

– Counterpart, Guinea-Bissau

*Inter Pares stands for ... long-lasting, profound, deep relationships with not only organizations but individuals.*

The personal dimension of institutional relationships is both beneficial and problematic. While external relationships can be personal as well as institutional, it was of particular importance to some research participants that the personal aspects not outweigh the institutional aspects, or that the institutional aspects be broad enough to include many personal connections. Staff members responsible for fundraising, finances and administration, for instance, are more likely to feel excluded when programmatic relationships are framed as personal friendships between program managers and key people at counterpart organizations.

As a fundraiser it is very important to me to have the opportunity to do some relationship-building with colleagues and counterparts ... having a chance not just to meet and see them first-hand, but to have them see me as Inter Pares, not just the person they relate to. That has been very important ... The strength of the institution is that you can go beyond these individual friendships so that many people get to meet each other. That can happen through meeting [counterpart organizations'] support staff and other colleagues... there are so many people behind them. Then you can transcend these individual relationships.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Moving beyond the identification of particular individuals as the point-people for institutional relationships can take some effort but it is necessary if we want to avoid the external misperception of internal roles, such as younger staff members not being equal to older or more senior staff members, or fundraising and administrative staff being dismissed as political actors.



## 2.2 Getting good at consensus

Internal decision-making at Inter Pares uses principles of consensus. While consensus-building is based on an inclusionary vision, for reasons of practicality not all decisions are taken by all staff members together. Some decisions are taken in groups of varying size depending on either the magnitude of the issue or the number of people whose contributions are needed to make the decision. Major institutional decisions, for instance, such as hiring and deployment, finalizing the yearly institutional budget, or deciding on staff policy, are taken by all staff due to the nature of their impact; decisions around what content to include in the *Bulletin* are also taken amongst all staff so as to profit from the widest range of story ideas and perspectives, and to ensure our communications represent the breadth of our work. Other decisions, such as those entailed by day-to-day program implementation, are taken within clusters by those staff members who are both the most intimate with the background and consequences of decisions and who will be tasked with carrying them out. Regardless of how many people participate, the goal is to take decisions that everyone concerned feels comfortable implementing.

*The goal is to take decisions that everyone concerned feels comfortable implementing.*

Each staff member thus has daily practice in improving her or his skills in consensus-building. Given the longevity of most staff members, this practice spans years. “I did hone my skills at building consensus and got better at doing it quickly. What is the commonality? What are the points we disagree on? To get to some resolution on that.” (Former staff member, Inter Pares) Inter Pares staff’s consensus-building skills manifest in external relationships in varying ways.

The co-management principle and structure was often pointed to as an underlying factor in the ability of many Inter Pares staff to take leadership roles in a wide number of policy debates within the NGO community, and to present generally well-informed and well worked-out positions on various issues ... Their effectiveness is strengthened by the working methodology of their co-management model ... A number of NGO colleagues in Canada

perceive that Inter Pares staff allocate more time for policy development and joint analysis than do more hierarchical organizations, or those which are more operational. As a result, they are better prepared and more forceful in putting forward their views. Over time this has generated some resentment, and avoidance of debate with Inter Pares staff.

Inter Pares staff for their part were aware of these dynamics to a large extent, and understand the need to manage their external relationships and profile. They have chosen to open debates which may challenge other agency positions; but they noted that over time, many of their more unpopular or unusual positions have been adopted in the wider NGO community. Inter Pares has deliberately chosen to devote more staff time to inter-agency work than other organizations feel they can commit. Inter Pares benefits from this strategy in several ways: staff have access to more information and contacts than they would have working alone; they are able to know where and how to raise additional funds; they have a forum for promoting their ideas.<sup>30</sup>

Staff members are practiced in respectful discussion and working to bridge differences in opinion; this experience is useful in counterpart relationships. One counterpart remembered a discussion he had had with Inter Pares staff members about the value of multi-year funding.

We feel that they know very well, respect what we are doing. ... These are really good discussions. We may not always agree with Inter Pares ... but these are conversations we need to have in a friendly, among equals context.

– Counterpart, Thai-Burma border

Staff also find themselves assuming the role of facilitators externally, bringing people together and seeking common understanding.

The [staff members] I relate to now have a very open, inclusive style, facilitating without dominating, while having a clear sense of core values. ... [I sit on a Board of Directors with an Inter Pares staff member who] has played an extremely important role ... she has a lot of skills in negotiation and facilitation.

– Collaborator, Canada

Listening is also a key component of consensus-building. Its particular importance within Inter Pares’ internal culture was recognized by Board members who under-

scored the role it played in creating a democratic environment where consensus could be reached even on contentious issues.

Inter Pares is a democratic organization in the truest sense of the word in that on most occasions each person can voice his or her opinions and ideas and is listened to with respect. This does not mean that people always agree with each other. What is important is that each individual has a chance to speak his or her mind freely.

– Board member, Inter Pares

Staff members have built meaningful relationships with Board members. One Board member provided this example of meeting informally with Inter Pares staff members:

I once raised the concern that although many people had looked at my C.V. through the Board selection process, I had no idea of the rich histories of staff members. It was immediately suggested that I come for lunch or coffee with staff members ... this demonstrated the key approach to developing meaningful relationships.

– Board member, Inter Pares

The slogan ‘the personal is political’ has been a feminist tenet since the essay by that name was published in 1969; at Inter Pares, the slogan has been a mainstay since the early 1980s, an era which ushered in the adoption of Inter Pares’ co-management structure. The erasure of this private/public divide has meant that feminist workplaces recognize the influence of, and connection between, the various aspects of staff’s lives and their politics. The result is an environment of rewarding work, where staff are recognized as full individuals and form meaningful relationships of common cause with others.

The Inter Pares staff practices building meaningful relationships on a daily basis. Though staff members collaborate most closely within their clusters, each has the opportunity – through committees, projects and all-staff discussions – to work with every other staff member. These professional relationships are strengthened through human relationships; Inter Pares recognizes the importance of staff members’ personal lives and affective state, and gives these institutional space and priority through attempts to create a caretaking culture. This culture is established in different ways: through personal check-ins, institutional monitoring of mental health and work/life balance, and generous physical and mental health benefits (including vacation time). Staff create

opportunities to spend time together socially. The personal dimensions to our professional collaborations enable us to build a deeper sense of solidarity with each other. Solidarity provides a strong motivation to continue producing high-quality work in a timely fashion – we feel a sense of personal commitment to each other, and a greater willingness to work out issues that arise.

## 2.3 Building and managing organizations

Through the co-management structure, all staff members gain experience in building and running an institution. This experience lends itself well to building new organizations (for instance, when coalitions formalize and become umbrella organizations, with their own infrastructure, governance, and fundraising needs) and to sharing with organizations looking to strengthen their institutions.

The institution-building and management knowledge that Inter Pares staff members develop and hone through daily co-management has been extremely useful programmatically. While this can be limited to offering opinions upon request, particularly in relationships with less intimate counterparts, more intimate relationships are characterized by diving in and taking on work. Institutional strengthening is in fact a central part of close programming relationships: contributing to strategic thinking, helping to raise funds, working to secure political support, and offering feedback on internal planning.

Two factors strengthened IP’s [Inter Pares’] ability to monitor, understand, and contribute to its counterparts. First, all organizations benefited greatly from a foundation of trust, mutual confidence and knowledge that they had built over the years. Secondly, IP’s co-management system facilitated sharing of information within the organization, so that different staff members were able to contribute to counterparts’ organizational development.<sup>31</sup>

The management model Inter Pares has adopted has a bearing on its programming approach and its relationships with other organizations, whether counterparts or members of coalitions.

For one, it gives Inter Pares added credibility and speaks to their integrity because they actually have actively pursued, in the very way they have structured and manage the organization, their vision of a more just and equitable world and their

basic principles of equity and accountability. This was mentioned by a number of the people that we interviewed. People respect and admire the fact that ‘they walk the talk’ and continue to work at improving the model. Inter Pares is modelling a different way of managing that is being noted by others and some aspects of which are being tried by others.

For its own purposes of sharing, interacting and decision-making, Inter Pares has had to establish various mechanisms such as geographic clusters, thematic groups, functional committees, etc. The analytical and process skills that all staff members have developed through their involvement in these various mechanisms and in Inter Pares’ management structure contribute immensely to their effectiveness in working in coalitions and with their counterparts. It is these skills that Inter Pares staff bring to their work that counterparts and coalition members invariably identify as one of Inter Pares’ most significant contributions.<sup>32</sup>

Many times throughout Inter Pares’ history, staff members have participated in founding or restructuring other organizations and coalitions, using their hands-on experience from Inter Pares. The end results are strengthened organizations but also strengthened relationships.

*The institution-building and management knowledge that Inter Pares staff members develop and hone through daily co-management has been extremely useful programmatically.*

In recent years, Inter Pares has accompanied two major counterparts in a transition from Northern-driven organizations to Southern-led international institutions. Not surprisingly, Inter Pares’ 2004 and 2009 evaluations reported significantly on these transitions – outcomes of long-term relationships between Inter Pares and the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) and Project Counselling Service (PCS). A full description of these transitions, which unfolded over many years, is not possible here, but a summary is warranted.

### 2.3.1 Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD)

ACORD was founded in 1976 as a consortium of international agencies, including Inter Pares, with the purpose of collectively responding to emergency situations in some of Africa’s poorest, most marginalized areas. Over the years, the work developed in 17 countries on humanitarian relief, rehabilitation, long-term programming, research, and capacity-building. A process of institutional change began in 1998, which transformed ACORD’s programming, management, and governance structure.

Through a process of strategic reflection involving staff, the international Board of Directors and the communities with whom ACORD was involved, ACORD determined that it would transform itself into an organization that would be more relevant and effective in promoting social change in Africa. To do this it resolved that:

- it would build on its credibility and the trust that it had established with the many marginalized and remote communities it had been working with over the years, but that it would work with them in a different way; it would go beyond helping them deal with the consequences of poverty and help them understand, challenge and work to change the conditions that cause their poverty and exclusion;
- it would actively encourage the linking and sharing of this community-based work through an integrated global program that would unite practical work with advocacy;
- it would work in alliance with other organizations who shared the same concern of promoting development and social justice;
- it would change the management and governance structure of the organization so that it was consistent with these new programming directions and enabled the program transformation being envisaged; part of the change would involve making ACORD an ‘Africa-led’ international organization (this was done, in part, by hiring of an African Executive Director, moving ACORD’s headquarters from London, UK to Nairobi, Kenya and ensuring African representation on the Board of Directors).<sup>33</sup>

The 2004 institutional evaluation determined that Inter Pares had played a critical role in this transformation: “initiating a process of reflection with the Board,”

“contributing financially to this process,” and bringing “its organizational experience and process facilitation skills to bear in providing guidance and leadership to the process.”<sup>34</sup> Going even further, Inter Pares’ then Executive Director was chosen as Chair of ACORD’s Board of Directors. “Her leadership, enthusiasm in the potential of a renewed ACORD, and confidence in the change process were all key to bringing about the transformation.”<sup>35</sup>

*The evaluation described Inter Pares’ applied and strategic role in organizational change and development as enabling, the result of which was the organizational survival of ACORD.*

Similarly, a 2009 evaluation found evidence that “in the domain of organizational development, IP can legitimately point to significant, even critical, contributions which enabled the organizational survival and strategic development of its two principal counterparts in Africa and Latin America.”<sup>36</sup> The evaluation described Inter Pares’ applied and strategic role in organizational change and development as *enabling*, the result of which was the organizational survival of ACORD, as well as the organizational change and transition of ACORD and PCS. These results have served as “a foundation for other, programmatic results” that could not have happened “without the profound changes enabled by IP.”<sup>37</sup>

### 2.3.2 Project Counselling Service (PCS)

PCS, a Latin America-based international organization, was founded in 1979 by an international donor consortium – Dutch Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, University Assistance Fund (Holland), and Inter Pares – in order to support the humanitarian and political efforts of Latin Americans embroiled in civil conflicts and military repression. As Brian Murphy, former Inter Pares staff member, notes in a case study of PCS prepared for the 2008 Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) Leadership Forum:

There was always an ambiguity built into the very founding of PCS: was it an international consortium of Northern NGOs, or an autonomous Latin American Regional NGO? In fact, it was both, and this was both a strength and a weakness.

He goes on to write:

After close to thirty years of evolution of the original consortium model of governance, an intensive review carved out in response to emerging dilemmas has very recently led to the re-incorporation of PCS as an autonomous [international] NGO with its own independent Board of Directors.

With this transition, PCS became responsible to a Board of Trustees consisting of persons predominantly from Latin America – rather than a consortium of Northern agencies – from which an Executive Steering Committee was elected. The transition was locally driven, and evolved in a participatory process including both management and country staff teams, with the engagement of independent Latin American experts and the active support of the Board at the time. This was a positive step in the process of transferring ownership to the local level, which allowed PCS to more autonomously follow the logic of its own work and experience in the context of Latin America, independent of the priorities and exigencies of Northern agencies. As was the case in ACORD’s transition, Inter Pares offered PCS considerable financial, political, and moral support.

And what was important for us as PCS I would say, was ... we always felt there was support for our views ... that was important to have an ally, for the teams of PCS. I always found the people of Inter Pares very willing to behave and to act as part of the PCS team, not as [a donor].

– Colleague, Peru

IP’s practice of accompaniment with its principal Latin America counterpart shows an approach to program design that echoes its Africa program: a readiness to align its own contribution of time and money to respond to the priorities of its counterparts, while joining those counterparts in strategic thinking about organizational and program direction. Counterparts in both continents praised IP’s flexibility and creativity, in its thinking and its funding.<sup>38</sup>

ACORD and PCS still face many challenges, not the least of which are funding challenges and programmatic dilemmas, as priorities of donor countries shift. But both the ACORD and the PCS transitions were an expression of our desire to transform North-South relations. The transitions, while ongoing, are significant in that Inter Pares played a central role both in establishing these

Northern-led organizations and in leading their transformation. We effectively transformed our own relationship to these organizations, making it more egalitarian, while still sustaining a strong political link.

*We effectively transformed our own relationship to these organizations, making it more egalitarian, while still sustaining a strong political link.*

### 2.3.3 Other examples

Whereas ACORD and PCS experienced a profound transformation, smaller organizations have also benefited from Inter Pares' organizational support in modest yet significant ways. This has resulted in stronger local institutions that are able to deliver programs and secure further financial support for their work.

A 2004 institutional evaluation found that counterparts spoke of the support they had received from Inter Pares at key moments in their growth as organizations. Drawing on interviews with Inter Pares counterparts – Likhaan, the Burma Relief Centre, Focus on the Global South, Third World Network-Africa, and Nijera Kori – this evaluation found that

Inter Pares was ready to support these organizations financially at the very beginning, or when they were initiating a new program. In many cases Inter Pares helped them clarify their thinking and strengthen their organizations. And in a number of cases, it was able to identify or help secure funding from other, often larger, donors, including CIDA bilateral funding. In such instances it is legitimate to say that Inter Pares' often limited financial investment (along with its human resource and intellectual contribution) was very instrumental in leveraging much larger financial contributions for its counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

One counterpart working on the Thai-Burma border explained the benefits of having received multi-year funding with the help of Inter Pares. Knowing they had secured a financial base of support – a benefit of Inter Pares' privileged long-term relationship and accompaniment – they were able to focus on programming priorities.

We were really able to ramp things up ... by having a five year program – if you look at the state of the women's organizations for example ... we really could focus on developing some of the lesser known communities, the women's groups from different ethnic groups who have now become ... quite a powerful force, especially within the opposition and internationally ... having long-term funding, a long-term approach ... we were not having to struggle year to year, it helped us focus long-term. I think for [Inter Pares] it was obvious that we should [secure long-term funding and ramp up program] – [they] knew that then, but we didn't ... It was a period of discussion between us about whether we would go forward long-term or short term. It was one major sea change for us, not only in our relationship [with Inter Pares] but ... for us, a major sea change. It made us a lot more high profile.

– Counterpart, Thai-Burma border

In the case of Tiniguena in Guinea-Bissau, Inter Pares played a supportive role in developing an evaluation and strategic plan that would enable the organization to renew its leadership and involve a younger generation more intimately in its work.

Inter Pares has supported Tiniguena in two ways. First, its funding has contributed to both the programming and administrative costs of Tiniguena, offering secure funds within a regular planning cycle, applicable to different aspects of organizational life. Secondly, however, IP has held a close and sustained dialogue with Tiniguena about its own evolution and change. IP offered the methodology of its own institutional evaluation ... as a basis for Tiniguena's 2008 strategic review of its 2005-2007 program, and Tiniguena engaged an IP staff member as co-facilitator [for the review] ... That review generated not only program recommendations but also an approach to institutional evolution, particularly towards renewing Tiniguena, anticipating that the founding generation must be followed by a new one, if the work of the organization is to continue. IP's accompaniment with Tiniguena has thus included a strong component of organizational development, and an applied advisory role in the process.<sup>40</sup>

*Inter Pares played a supportive role in developing an evaluation and strategic plan that would enable the organization to renew its leadership and involve a younger generation more intimately in its work.*

## 2.4 Supporting women's leadership

Recognizing and nurturing women's leadership, their potential as agents of political change, and their authority over their personal experiences and lives has long been a practice at Inter Pares, both internally and externally. Externally, Inter Pares recognizes and nurtures women's leadership and supports the development of longstanding relationships with organizations that do not consider themselves feminist or whose work does not focus on women:

Within Tiniguena, Inter Pares has much encouraged our capacity for reflection and our analysis on the role of women. This was clear during the elaboration of the strategic plan when Inter Pares asked what role youth, and young women especially, had in the organization.

– Counterpart, Guinea-Bissau

We also seek out women's groups to support their organizational and political goals, which has the effect of supporting their development as authorities on the issues that concern them and their leadership within their own struggles. These relationships begin with conversations, then collaborations. This focus does not only mean collaborating with women, but ensuring that a feminist lens is applied to analyzing the context, and that women's issues are prioritized.

Internally, women's leadership is developed in part through their dominant numbers; a political decision has been made by the institution to have a majority of staff and Board members be women. Women are thus the majority beneficiaries of internal skill-building and greater institutional space, both of which contribute to leadership development. The sharing of administrative tasks, which habitually fall to women in hierarchical workplaces, is another way of ensuring that women have equal opportunities to pursue new challenges in the workplace. The workplace culture of "empowered

autonomy and agency for each individual"<sup>41</sup> also creates a supportive environment for staff to explore and develop programs and initiatives, assuming greater leadership within those programs. For 25 years now, Inter Pares has made a conscious decision to have its Executive Director be a woman, which is a strong political statement about valuing and promoting women's leadership. Women's leadership is also important on the Board of Directors. In addition to having strong women on the Board, one Board member noted the importance of having fellow members support and endorse staff members in developing an explicit articulation of their feminist analysis.

There is an intentional choice of a majority of women for Board members and staff members. To value women's work and knowledge. To ensure women's priorities are addressed.

– Board member, Inter Pares

Women working at Inter Pares, however, have not always found it easy to consolidate their work life with their desire to raise children. This was especially true before one-year maternity leave benefits came into effect in Canada.

I felt like we were very attentive to women's experiences overseas but not so attentive to women's experience here. I had a new born baby and I needed to be dealt with differently for a period of time. That was really hard.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

Inter Pares has a strong feminist analysis and feminist process. I cannot call it a feminist organization. Because I think that until an organization has grappled with the realities of part time work and reproductive labour, it can't call itself a feminist organization. Which is not to say that it doesn't do profoundly important feminist work.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

While parental and maternity benefits have improved, there still exists a tension around working and having children.

It's so hard because the strength of the organization is in having everybody at all meetings and being there every day. That accountability is a strength of Inter Pares. It is recognized for having strong management... For me personally, trying to wrestle with wanting a family, and wanting to spend time with my baby, and having to choose between that and Inter Pares was really hard. Should I be trying

to encourage a more thorough conversation on part time work? These will continue to be tensions... we will continue to lose people who make that choice.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

Women bear the weight of these tensions at Inter Pares. As one staff member explained:

We are an incredibly supportive work environment for having dependents, even though the nature of the work we do is not conducive to having dependents (travel, long hours, intense working periods, etc). I think this is an important distinction and one that we do not always acknowledge.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

## 2.5 Learning and knowledge and creating knowledge

Inter Pares has a culture of fostering and supporting learning that manifests in various practices: sharing management tasks; rotating committee membership; identifying learning goals in self-evaluations; a long and deliberate integration period for new staff; and an emphasis on support systems, particularly for staff who are in periods of transition and thus increased learning. This environment was recognized by staff during the research: “We try to improve people’s skills and share knowledge of work to support staff and protect the organization.” (Staff member, Inter Pares) As this quote suggests, the twin motivations for adopting a learning culture are the desire to foster individual growth and the desire to ensure excellent management. The two are not disconnected; in a co-management structure, excellence in management must not rest solely on the strengths of a handful of individuals, but on the ability of each team member to carry out her or his role.

Inter Pares has many established internal processes for sharing various kinds of information: news and developments in program themes and countries; political analysis; intelligence on other actors’ (collaborators and funders) situations and activities; evolutions in Inter Pares programs; and fellow staff members’ emotional/professional health. To share information or make news known to staff is referred to internally as ‘socializing’ information. There are many established practices for socialization: articles are shared through e-mail and through the mail file (a folder containing all incoming mail and articles of interest, which circulates to all staff); updates and information are shared orally at all-staff meetings and by e-mail; written reports on trips

and programs are circulated; verbal ‘check-ins’ at staff meetings (when staff members share how they are feeling personally and in their work), retreats, and informal social interactions ensure that staff members have a reading on how their colleagues are faring.

*Inter Pares has a culture of fostering and supporting learning.*

This continuous sharing facilitates the development of common positions and directions, as staff members can use their knowledge to move more quickly to a point of convergence. Staff members therefore share a common perspective and analysis, allowing us to make timely decisions in our work. This clarity of thought allows for a cohesiveness and coherence within Inter Pares and is also the basis for building relationships of trust with counterparts and other NGOs that enable collective action. Mark Federman, in his PhD dissertation research involving Inter Pares, described its importance to what he terms *collaborative leadership*:

The value of socializing information can be neither underestimated nor overstated in a collaborative leadership environment that provides true empowerment – enabling every member to commit the organization to a particular tactical activity or strategic direction ... The idea that involving everyone in all matters is more efficient over the long-term is, at first blush, counter-intuitive. However, it creates unanimity in supporting decisions, eliminates undermining, and creates a shared understanding of the organization’s present reality in each person’s mind ... These help to reinforce the sense of common cause and vested commitment among all organizational members.<sup>42</sup>

The high degree of internal information sharing can also offer greater power and influence to Inter Pares staff when operating in external environments. In particular, this power and influence arise when working with collaborators, such as Canadian coalition partners, with whom many staff members collaborate separately. There are thus multiple sources of intelligence about these collaborators, which, when socialized, lead to a very well-developed map of the sectoral landscape; staff members can thus position Inter Pares more intelligently within prevailing discourses, and better navigate other institutions’ agendas.

For me the coalition work worked well because we were all involved in coalition. In other organizations, only the Executive Director was involved. We knew every single coalition inside out, we came back in and debriefed. All twelve of us were in coalition. We could walk into a coalition – we knew more about the community than anyone else at the table. We had so much power because of our knowledge. Because of our collective knowledge, we had this information which allowed us to play such useful roles.

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

The regularity of the monthly staff meetings, the preparation and advance reading that takes place ... and the conscientiousness with which staff members participate and deliberate ... help ensure that all staff are very familiar and have internalized the organizational vision, purpose and positions; and therefore allows all staff to speak on behalf of the organization (an important point when it comes to effectiveness in working in coalitions, since there is less need to refer back to the organization to articulate the organizational position).<sup>43</sup>

Externally, importance is placed on investing in people and their organizations. Counterpart visits and exchanges build up the knowledge and contacts for these counterparts, who then share the learning within their institutions.

Educational exchanges and opportunities to learn from other counterparts (as in counterpart-to-counterpart exchanges) and from the Canadian context (during visits to Canada for learning circles or other activities) were a valued part of the relationship with Inter Pares.

– Counterpart, Philippines

I felt that it was important for me in terms of my experience, my learning of other processes, and my reading of feminist approaches as well, to have these inputs from you in terms of feminist approaches to social reality. And I always found support when I wanted to read or to go in depth into some topics, or aspects of this kind of approach. That was useful for me as well. I'm grateful in this relationship with Inter Pares, not only institutionally, professionally, but in personal terms as well.

– Colleague, Peru

*Importance is placed on investing in people and their organizations.*

Most importantly, these exchanges enable Inter Pares staff and counterparts from different regions of the world to build a common analysis and a shared understanding of the context in which each of us acts. These are essential in developing relationships of trust.

These horizontal exchanges you had with us, we knew that they were the same sorts of relationships you had in other regions. And that gave us in a way more confidence, or trust in what you were experiencing, or recommending, or discussing with us.

– Colleague, Peru

I think Inter Pares is a unique organization in the way it's run, in what Inter Pares is all about, and what it offers in the way it relates to people in different countries. And we really think of it in terms of a sharing experience: learning from each other and getting a lot of information from each other.

– Counterpart, Bangladesh

As will be illustrated in the following chapter, Inter Pares' attention to learning and knowledge-creation has supported collective and concerted action in Canada and internationally.



# 3

## Does it work? Feminist practice brings results

Over the years, Inter Pares' approach has been referred to as participatory, feminist, social justice oriented, egalitarian, collective, and anti-colonial. How people describe 'the way we work' varies greatly depending on whom you speak with and their relationship with the organization. Rather than labelling the organization's approach, we have, in previous chapters, described Inter Pares' methodologies and begun to discuss outcomes. In this section, we share key outcomes of our work that can be linked to the methodological practices discussed earlier.

### 3.1 Coalitions

The historical nature of this research project has rendered some measure of revisionism inevitable, as people remember certain aspects of programs while omitting or forgetting others. However, there are some identifiable outcomes that were noted in externally conducted evaluations and by participants in the research. Participants spoke not only of achievements; they were also able to articulate *how* results had been achieved – the processes in place that allowed for our collective successes. Inter Pares' belief in the power of working in coalition, and our choice to fund and support the efforts of others, makes attribution of results difficult. Nonetheless, Inter Pares' approach to North-South relations has enabled it to play a leadership role in building and sustaining coalitions on a wide range of issues – listening to grassroots movements, bringing women's voices to the forefront, making international links, and shaping Canadian policy and NGO practice.

Inter Pares has also always had a strong commitment to working in our own context, engaging as political actors in Canada. While we have supported Southern-led institutions (as described in the previous chapter), we have simultaneously built a strong Canadian social justice organization, allowing us to nurture solidarity with our counterparts. Inter Pares' role in what a 2009 evaluation has termed 'self-development', but what interviewees have identified as 'working in our own back yard', relates to how Inter Pares has successfully built "a Canadian organization engaged with Canadian society."<sup>44</sup> This has been of great value to counterparts, who rely on Inter Pares to be active in its own milieu, and to hold the Canadian government and Canadian companies accountable for their actions abroad. In

doing this, Inter Pares has privileged coalitions as a methodology. Our experience of working collectively and our ability to support organizational development has helped us draw like-minded people together, set common goals, and set up the necessary structures so that a coalition can be effective in pursuing its mandate.

*Inter Pares has also always had a strong commitment to working in our own context, engaging as political actors in Canada.*

Mining Watch Canada, a pan-Canadian initiative supported by environmental, social justice, Aboriginal and labour organizations, is a case in point. Inter Pares was one of the organizations that founded Mining Watch Canada to address the urgent need for a co-ordinated, public interest response to threats to public health, water and air quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and community interests posed by irresponsible mining policies and practices in Canada and around the world. Mining Watch Canada is now institutionalized and has a strong political and financial base upon which to conduct advocacy.

The International Civil Liberties Monitoring Group (ICLMG) is another example. Inter Pares was one of the instigators of this pan-Canadian coalition of civil society organizations established in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. ICLMG brings together forty NGOs, unions, professional associations, faith groups, environmental organizations, human rights and civil liberties advocates, as well as

groups representing immigrant and refugee communities in Canada. The coalition has intervened in individual cases where there have been allegations of serious violation of civil liberties and human rights. It has also intervened to challenge proposed legislation, regulations and practices that contravene the Canadian Constitution, other Canadian laws and international human rights standards. What one organization could not challenge on its own, many organizations offering financial and political support have succeeded in challenging, all the while drawing public attention to the erosion of civil liberties and human rights in Canada under anti-terrorism measures.

Inter Pares staff members have contributed to building an organization able to act in its own name, and able to convene others to act together. It has gained the trust and mutual confidence of counterpart organizations and other NGOs in Canada. Coalitions are an important strategy for Inter Pares that has allowed us to achieve significant results. In his evaluation, John Saxby found:

In Canada, IP's investment in coalitions and networks has been especially effective and valuable. It has consciously broadened its net of working relationships in Canada to include individuals and organizations which are rooted in Canada, and which have an interest in international affairs but are not in the first instance part of 'the development enterprise'.<sup>45</sup>

*Coalitions are an important strategy for Inter Pares that has allowed us to achieve significant results.*

A 2004 evaluation made similar observations about how Inter Pares' "distinctly Canadian presence" gives it "a broader reach (and influence) and allows it to support a more coordinated approach to development assistance."<sup>46</sup> Inter Pares has always found it difficult to speak of our contribution to coalitions, not wishing to appropriate the outcomes of a group effort and risking undermining the collective aspect of the work. But it is worth noting that evaluations have consistently highlighted our role in initiating and supporting coalitions.

In Canada, it is clear that Inter Pares is viewed as a major contributor to policy work within the CCIC [Canadian Council for International Cooperation], and other inter-agency projects, such as the CAMG

[Central America Monitoring Group]. Staff are cited for the quality and thoroughness of their thinking on key development issues, and are generally appreciated for their ability to communicate their views, even when there is disagreement in the broader NGO community. An indicator of the success of this work is the recent appearance of articles on population issues in the press, magazines, and radio [the result of Inter Pares' work with Women's Health Interaction]. Inter Pares' Canadian partners credit them with introducing global perspectives and local as well as global contacts.<sup>47</sup>

Evaluations have confirmed Inter Pares' strength in coalitions.

Inter Pares makes a unique contribution in ... coalitions in several ways. First, its experience in applying its own principles and development analysis helps it promote methodologies within these coalitions which promote sustainable development and effective democratic functioning. Secondly, choosing coalitions working on issues which have resonance in Canada permits Canadian organizations ... to internationalize their perspectives and become more supportive of potential international allies through Inter Pares' Canadian programming. Thirdly, Inter Pares, on its own or in groups like the CAMG and CCIC, can attempt to influence relevant Canadian policies based on problems experienced or lessons learned in coalitions. Such influence is likely to be more effective if other coalition partners are acting in concert in their own countries and sharing the results of their work. These contributions represent a 'value-added' of Inter Pares' interventions.<sup>48</sup>

In interviews with a variety of coalition members, respondents indicated they really valued that Inter Pares has:

- Intellectual rigor
- Excellent process skills
- An openness and readiness to listen and include others
- The conviction to stay the course for the long-term if needed (not opportunistic) and to be fully engaged
- Clarity about its principles and values and remains true to these
- The ability to act quickly and decisively
- The awareness to take a back seat if and when necessary
- Financial seeding and contributions

In example after example, the evaluators heard of the effective role Inter Pares is contributing as chair or co-chair, or committee chair... and of the ability through networking and linkages and reputation, to draw in other members and other financial contributors.

It is our finding that Inter Pares maximizes its leverage by applying its own experience, reputation and analysis towards the achievement of financial, operational and substantive viability of the coalitions in which it engages.<sup>49</sup>

Challenges exist, especially with larger 'big tent' coalitions – those that include many organizations of varying sizes, constituencies, and differing objectives – where it may become difficult to agree on the analysis and the required action.

There have been a number of times when people want to join with different objectives. That is when the tensions can arise. [In one case], people wanted to join for reasons that the coalition was not set up to do. When you set up a coalition you have to be more or less clear what your common interests are as a group, what your objectives are. It's more a conflict of diverging objectives and interests, rather than divergence of membership in the group. [Furthermore,] there are politics involved in who participates. People may not want to participate if other groups are there, for safety issues. It is supposed to be a space where people trust each other and are mutually accountable.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

In Mining Watch Canada, there are a number of organizations that are front-line communities affected by mining. There are a few organizations that are institutional like Inter Pares. There are a bunch that are NGOs but really tiny, aboriginal communities, some of which have resources, some not. Quite a mixture in the membership and on the Board. That has always been a tension. One of the ways we try to deal with it is to even out the resources, give funds to front line organizations, understanding that they were giving volunteer time. Ensuring that community organizations were able to get funding to do research on effects of mining.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Broad-based coalitions have proven to be well worth the time and resources invested to multiply the possible outcomes. The best way to illustrate the concrete results that have been achieved through coalition work is to

share some of Inter Pares' coalition experience. Using interviews, evaluation data, and staff's own experiences, we share two case studies that describe Inter Pares' work in coalition, the role the organization played, and the results that were collectively achieved.

### 3.2 Case study: Women organizing for health and justice

Inter Pares was building broad-based coalitions to mobilize the public, gathering women's experiences from the North and South ... it was truly the most remarkable experience of my life.

– Board member, Inter Pares

#### Listening to women's stories

In the early 1980s, building on relationships established in Canada and in Bangladesh, Inter Pares organized a women's exchange tour. Two women social activists from Bangladesh were invited to tour Canadian cities and communities to meet women, learn about their concerns, and see how they were organizing. In preparation for the tour, a staff member travelled across Canada to talk about Inter Pares and our work (internationally and in Canada), and to learn about how women were organizing in their communities. We wanted to see if there would be any interest among these Canadian groups in learning more about the realities of women overseas. Inter Pares had a history of organizing exchanges among groups in the North and South in order to build synergistic relationships based on common cause, to identify whether a mutuality of interest existed, and to identify areas for cooperation and action.

In preparation for the tour, I went to all these communities, and just sat down and talked to people. It was very open-ended. I described the work of Inter Pares and our work in different countries and shared what women were working on in Bangladesh. There was lots of interest from people. In those days that kind of an exchange was unusual.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

A report was prepared on each visit, and shared and discussed with groups in Canada and Bangladesh, informing the planning of the tour.

Health was a major issue for women in Bangladesh who, in addition to demanding basic health care and nutrition, were part of the struggle for an essential drug policy in the country that would allow for generic drug manufacturing and, thus, low-cost medicines. Inter Pares had heard stories about how long-acting, hormonal contra-

ceptives were being imposed on women in Bangladesh without their knowledge or informed consent and how women were forcibly sterilized as a result of population control measures. But we didn't start out knowing how this situation might link to women in Canada.

The two women activists invited to tour Canada were well educated, middle-class Bangladeshi women, and while not representative of the majority of women in Bangladesh (and certainly not claiming to be), Khushi Kabir and Shireen Huq had been part of their country's struggle for independence. They then helped organize women in urban and rural areas to fight for their rights. The organizations they represented were also involved in policy advocacy work, something Inter Pares saw as a strength.

You can't do strong policy work without it being rooted in what's happening at the local level. Inter Pares was always reluctant to just fund policy groups or just fund grassroots organizations. We believe in praxis ... It was important for us to work with organizations that resembled our own: organizations with sound relationships at grassroots levels that were helping to build policy and strategies based on people's lived experiences and knowledge. Inter Pares never claimed to be a grassroots organization. We supported community development work in Canada, we spoke with people, we supported and learned from their work, and tried to connect it to the work overseas, and vice versa, building policy on that.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

When the tour began, our guests from Bangladesh were very curious to know what the situation was like for women in Canada, and how they were organizing.

The three of us would arrive in a community, we'd introduce ourselves. I'd give a little spiel about Inter Pares, our relationship to the organizations the women worked for, why we had come, and present a slide show on women and Bangladesh. Khushi and Shireen would introduce themselves, and then open it up and we'd have discussions. We didn't try to direct or steer the discussion in any way. I mean, Khushi and Shireen were so knowledgeable and so interesting and so funny and engaging, they just took over. And everybody loved them, just loved them. It was great. I loved them ... There was real dialogue. And that's how we'd get to a point where there seemed to be some commonalities there, things that maybe we could pick up and build on later.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

The methodology Inter Pares used was geared towards breaking down separations and dichotomies among people. It was a very process-oriented approach. While many workshops were facilitated, many meetings also happened informally, across people's kitchen tables, or in community coffee shops, etc.

When we developed relationships, we would do so on the basis of parity and mutuality of interest – by not only taking an interest in their work, but also determining if they were interested in the work that Inter Pares was doing domestically and overseas ... It's also important to get to know people on a more personal, and not only political, level, which for me was also part of being a feminist, and part of what I learned from other feminists ... In many of the gatherings, when we went to people's homes, or when we went to community centres or churches, we talked about our own experiences. That was so important, that's where you started. And then made links to the wider world. It wasn't that linear, but you know what I mean. It was always, always based on our own stories, and our own experiences.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

The tour in Canada was eye-opening. It was open-ended – this is important in our process. It's not that we don't have a sense of what we'd like to achieve, but it's important that the process is organic. Our agenda is to find out what the real situation is for women and people who are living in poverty.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

*While many workshops were facilitated, many meetings also happened informally, across people's kitchen tables or in community coffee shops.*

Inter Pares and the Bangladeshi counterparts were hosted by native people in different locales, by local women's organizations and health clinics, by economic development groups, by immigrant organizations and unions, as well as by the National Farmers' Union, the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, and British Columbia Council for International Cooperation, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), and many others. When the tour ended, Inter

Pares had discussions with our colleagues from Bangladesh about the links that were made, and organized a feedback session for the Ottawa community, inviting all those who had met the women. There was a lot of mutual learning.

We were so excited at the end; exhausted, but excited about the possibilities for linking to some of the groups that we'd met. The dominant theme that emerged from the tour, the one that was talked about most, was women and health. Khushi and Shireen were shocked to learn that Canadian women didn't always have access to birth control or safe and effective forms of birth control or even adequate health care in rural and native communities ... They were surprised to learn that women were also critical of some of the drugs being used here, including tranquilizers for what were clearly social and economic stresses and problems faced by women.

They were surprised at the situation for women in Canada, the poverty that they saw, the violence against women that they learned about. They were surprised by the lack of cohesive, sustainable, agricultural policies. There were some parallels that they could see, particularly around women's health and also around pharmaceuticals, as they were actively involved in a campaign in Bangladesh to promote the adoption of a generic drug policy, and locally produced drugs. Inter Pares and other Canadian organizations were criticizing the Canadian government for proposing changes to drug patent protection legislation in ways that would assist the multinational pharmaceutical industry to the detriment of Canada's generic drug industry. Another thing the women came away with was the realization that there was a need in Bangladesh for a feminist organization that worked on women's rights in health, pharmaceutical use, violence against women, and other concerns. Nari Pokkho, the organization they started following the tour, is still active today.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Inter Pares' practice of listening to women's stories and of bringing people together without imposing a pre-conceived agenda was inspired by feminist consciousness-raising. Staff members associated with the work on women and health believed in the power of feminist consciousness-raising to effect lasting social change.

### Women's stories as the starting point for a play

As a follow up to the solidarity tour, Inter Pares organized a workshop in Aylmer, Quebec called *Women and Pharmaceuticals*. Participants from several organizations were present – women's groups, immigrant service organizations, NGOs – many of which had met with our Bangladeshi counterparts. The Great Canadian Theatre Company, nurses, NGOs, NAC, social justice organizations, medical students, doctors, local development education centres, addictions centre representatives, union people, and a Health Canada policy advisor attended, among others. The workshop solidified a common desire to connect those working on women's rights and health. The idea of a network came up, as did the idea of a play, both of which generated a lot of excitement. Out of that workshop was born Women's Health Interaction (WHI), an organization based in Ottawa that would act on women's health issues with input from women across the country. Subsequently, WHI sister groups formed in Winnipeg and Kingston, acting locally and provincially.

*Collecting and documenting women's stories was an important methodology for WHI and Inter Pares, and this process was used in creating the script for a play about women and pharmaceuticals.*

Collecting and documenting women's stories was an important methodology for WHI and Inter Pares, and this process was used in creating the script for a play about women and pharmaceuticals. With the support of Inter Pares, two Canadian women – an Inter Pares Board member and a WHI member – travelled to Bangladesh to document women's stories related to these issues. They were hosted by and worked with our Bangladesh counterparts, who introduced them to a variety of women's and health organizations. One of the researchers described her experience in this way:

When I was sent to Bangladesh to gather women's stories, we originally set out to do a project on pharmaceuticals and drug dumping. But when we were in the field, we got a lot of stories on forced sterilization – Inter Pares took on these issues because it was part of women's issues. It was a constant process of gathering info, validating all

kinds of information – not just the written word, the intellectual word, but the lived experience of women, the lived experience of poor women, marginalized women. Taking that as real knowledge that needed to be thought about and analyzed and then going back and checking with the women ... asking: Did we get this right?

– Former staff member, Inter Pares

Our counterparts had described the population control measures in Bangladesh, but during this trip we were able to talk to women and document their stories in a more systematic way. Some women had been given high risk contraceptive drugs with no follow-up care. Inter-uterine devices that were taken off the market and drugs that were restricted for use in Canada were still being promoted in Bangladesh by multinational corporations and through Northern aid programs, including Canada's. High-risk contraceptive drugs and methods were also being prescribed to women in Canada, particularly to aboriginal women, immigrant women, and women with disabilities. Portions of many of these stories and those of Canadian women who had been part of the exchange tour were also included in the script for the play.

We sent out letters to all the groups we'd met across the country, saying, if you had one or two ideas, one or two points you'd like to make through this play, about women and pharmaceuticals, what would they be? We got lots of ideas back, great ideas, including: we have to link what's happening in Canada with what's happening in Bangladesh and internationally.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

Through collaboration between the Great Canadian Theatre Company, Inter Pares, WHI, and Ottawa's World-Interaction-Mondiale (a local development education centre), a draft script was produced, actors were engaged, and a performance was workshopped in Ottawa, attended by a broad cross-section of individuals and community groups. People were invited to provide feedback, which was largely positive, and which formed the basis for revisions to the script. The script was also reviewed by the two Bangladeshi women in the exchange tour, as well as by select women Inter Pares and our Bangladeshi colleagues had met in Canada.

*Side Effects: A Play on Women and Pharmaceuticals*, linked women's stories across borders. Inter Pares and WHI raised funds from government and foundations, and *Side Effects* went on tour across the country, building on and nurturing women's community organizing. Each

performance of *Side Effects* was hosted by local groups and followed by a discussion with audience members, led by a panel involving the Bangladeshi women, the national tour coordinator (from WHI) and local facilitators. WHI and Inter Pares produced a *Side Effects* 'kit' that included logistical information, media packages, posters and postcards, background information on the issues, fundraising tips, and possible questions for discussion. It included everything organizers might need to know about hosting the tour in their own community. No single organization had the capacity to host its own event – an endeavour that included finding venues for the play, organizing accommodation, fundraising, selling tickets, and media outreach. Groups were encouraged to work in collaboration, and did.

Some of the groups knew each other already, and some didn't at all. So you had a range of community groups in different places that got together and formed their own planning committees. They talked about the goals that they wanted to achieve. It was a shared project.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

### *Side Effects: A Play on Women and Pharmaceuticals, linked women's stories across borders.*

The play was a success by all accounts. It was staged 45 times in 37 communities. It garnered positive reviews from national and local media and led to many new opportunities.

People had a real stake in it. They could see that this was going to support their public outreach and their collaborations ... Later on the script was translated into French and there was a French tour that our sisters in Quebec organized. We had a lot of requests for the script from around the world as people heard about it. At the same time, we were pushing policy change using the tour. And the local and national organizations we met used the play to make their own work better known to the community, to publicize the issues, and to undertake policy advocacy. It generated interest in policy change. The process was important. It wasn't just the play.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

The connections made through the play allowed all participants to strengthen their advocacy efforts. The Women's Health Clinic in Winnipeg, WHI-Manitoba, the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation, NAC, the Canadian Consumer's Union, the Medical Reform Group, Inter Pares and many others took action on drug policies and legislation, challenging the power of the pharmaceutical industry and drug patent protections, and bringing a women's rights perspective to bear on international development assistance. Side Effects was an impetus for groups to come together to create a women's health network in Canada, an idea that had been percolating among women's groups for some time. Part of Inter Pares' and WHI's strategy had been to deepen the effort to build a Canadian women's health network through the creation of the play and the vast outreach and networking involved, as well as to support organizational development and generate media attention about women and health. Another goal was to use the play as a popular education tool that would touch individual women (and men) at emotional as well as intellectual levels. Inter Pares played a key role in organization, coordination, and communications throughout the entire process and follow-up.

I think the one big gift that Inter Pares gave to WHI ... was my time. When we started working more concertedly on women and health issues, women and pharmaceuticals, reproductive rights, particular drugs, almost all of it was connected to WHI. My time was basically seconded. I was seconded by Inter Pares to do work that would strengthen WHI and the work we were doing together.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

*The connections made through the play allowed all participants to strengthen their advocacy efforts.*

### **Speaking out on women's health and reproductive rights**

WHI began writing and distributing newsletters to all the people who had been on the tour. There were articles on drug legislation in Canada, in Bangladesh, and in other countries, and ideas for action were provided to readers. Inter Pares, World-Interaction-Mondiale and WHI also produced a booklet entitled *For Health or For*

*Profit?*, an exposé on the pharmaceutical industry in Canada and in the South. In the years that followed, Inter Pares and WHI, in collaboration with counterparts in Canada and in the South, followed up on this work by producing other educational materials, including a *Canadian Bill of Rights on Women's Reproductive Health* (in English, Spanish and French); *Uncommon Knowledge: A feminist critique on reproductive technologies and contraceptive devices*; a booklet documenting Canadian women's stories about the use of Depo Provera; a video on new reproductive technologies; and several policy briefs to government on these issues.

*Advocacy and policy work drew on women's experiences. It was a feminist approach.*

The groundwork that had first been laid through the women's exchange tour, Side Effects, and WHI, also contributed to the formation of the Canadian Women's Health Network (CWHN), based in Winnipeg, allowing women in Canada to have a powerful voice in proposing and advocating for policies that would secure women's control over their health and reproduction. From the start, the CWHN sought, where possible, to link the concerns of women in Canada to those of women internationally.

Research was an important part of what Inter Pares and WHI were doing in Canada, and it complemented the work of Inter Pares' counterparts in Bangladesh who were producing research and documentation on top-down, coercive population control measures. Inter Pares and WHI were challenging the dominant medical model, making links between women's own experiences of health and the medical system. Advocacy and policy work drew on women's experiences. It was a feminist approach.

Inter Pares and WHI changed the population discourse in Canada. We built relationships in the Philippines, in Indonesia, in Latin America, in Africa, with women's groups and health groups. We helped build women's health networks and coalitions in South Asia and in South-East Asia, people who were campaigning against unsafe IUDs, DepoProvera, Norplant and forced sterilization, and the lack of basic health services in their own countries.

– Staff member, Inter Pares

WHI and Inter Pares prepared a policy brief on population control and new reproductive technologies in Canada and overseas. In it they challenged population control policies, the tactic of using incentives and disincentives to encourage women to be sterilized or, alternately, to have more children, and the unsafe contraceptive technologies that were being distributed to women.

We were challenged to look in our own backyard in a sense. We knew a lot about what women were fighting for here and so on, but when we got involved with population issues and reproductive rights issues, we did some research and found out that drugs like Depo-Provera were being given in Canada to immigrant women, native women, women of colour and...there was sterilization and population control happening in Canada too. So we worked with women's groups here to advocate for women's control over their own bodies, just as our overseas counterparts were doing, and we fed each other's analysis, and campaigns and advocacy work.

– Staff member, Inter Pares<sup>50</sup>

Inter Pares, WHI, WHI-Manitoba, The National Action Committee on the Status of Women, the Disabled Women's Network, representatives from aboriginal women's groups and immigrant women's groups – almost a dozen groups in all – met with government officials at the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). They challenged the government's dumping of high-dosage birth control pills in Bangladesh through its contribution to the World Bank population control program, arguing that Canada was facilitating access to dangerous drugs in a context where access to health care was limited. They called on the government to stop sending drugs deemed unsafe for women in the North to women in the South, stating, "If these drugs and devices are not good enough for us, they aren't good enough for our sisters in the Third World either." (Staff member, Inter Pares) As a result of these advocacy efforts and continued efforts on the part of Inter Pares and Canadian and Southern counterparts, CIDA insisted on the use of low-dosage birth control pills as part of its contribution to the World Bank population control program in Bangladesh.

This kind of work by Inter Pares and its partners, along with that of other like-minded groups is having an effect on thinking and practice among population programmers. This effect can be seen at several levels. At the level of project/program design and implementation, it is easier to identify links as a result of Inter Pares' advocacy activities.

UBINIG's reports have helped to persuade a major donor to cancel support for use of Norplant technology. CIDA's shift to low-dose pills may have been influenced by Inter Pares' representations on this issue.<sup>51</sup>

Inter Pares, along with our Canadian and international counterparts, also challenged the use of population control as an anti-poverty strategy. Major funding bodies in Canada, including the Canadian government, were funding population control measures under this premise.

In Canada Inter Pares mounted a number of advocacy and educational activities, including the preparation of an independent brief ... to the Cairo Conference [United Nations International Conference on Population and Development]. They established a committee of women activists from across the country to develop the brief, which was subsequently endorsed at a meeting of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, and by a number of other women's/health groups across the country. The brief was aimed at urging Canadian government delegates to the Cairo Conference to adopt a pro-woman stance that does not separate population from other aspects of development.<sup>52</sup>

This led to some significant results:

The Cairo Conference reflected a new rhetoric by large actors in the population debate, moving away from prophecies of demographic disasters toward the end for women's empowerment and reproductive health ... The Ford Foundation has completely re-oriented its approach from support for family planning to support for women's reproductive health and empowerment in the last five years. There has been donor pressure to lower coercive fertility control practices and curtail incentive systems in Bangladesh Family Planning. The pressure for change which has been gradually working its way through the population establishment and the large donor community stems from small groups like Inter Pares and UBINIG and others around the world which have been able to claim public attention for their concerns.<sup>53</sup>

Feminist consciousness-raising and popular education were at the heart of Inter Pares' work on women's health and reproductive rights. They created opportunities for women to construct knowledge together, from their own experiences, and to share and use these to work for social change. Women's stories, shared in informal settings in



Canada and in Bangladesh, later led to a more facilitated process of popular education through the Side Effects play. From this collective mobilization, policy and advocacy initiatives were born that ensured women were giving voice and their voices were heard on health and reproductive issues.

### 3.3 Case study: Movement-building for Burma

#### Background

In mid-1988, thousands of people in Burma took to the streets to demand democracy. General Ne Win, the dictator who had taken power in a 1962 coup, abruptly resigned and promised a return to democratic rule. Shortly thereafter, the army took control of the government. Troops were sent into the streets and thousands of demonstrators were massacred. A group of army generals, calling themselves the State Law and Restoration Committee (SLORC), came into power.

By 1991, the military junta believed it had the country under control and called a snap election. To the dismay of the generals, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, won the majority of parliamentary seats. The generals, however, were not about to hand over power to the NLD. Rather, they stepped up their repression against the democracy movement, arresting and jailing elected MPs and democracy supporters. Over the next few years, the junta also escalated the war against Burma's ethnic nationalities, creating a major humanitarian crisis as tens of thousands of people sought asylum in the neighbouring states of Thailand, India, Bangladesh, China and Malaysia.

Canada, like many countries, responded to the massacres of 1988 by cancelling its bilateral aid program to Burma. Unlike other countries, Canada did not re-allocate aid funds to support the democracy movement or provide humanitarian assistance to refugees. The Canadian government expressed concerns about the political and human rights situation in Burma within the UN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Asia Regional Forum. There were few Canadian NGOs with experience in Burma and thus few advocates for a more robust Canadian role in responding to the Burmese crisis.

#### Movement-building in Canada

In 1991, Peacefund Canada organized a seminar in Ottawa to raise the profile of the human rights and refugee situation in Burma. An important outcome of the Ottawa seminar was the founding of the Canadian Friends of Burma (CFOB) with a mandate to educate

Canadians about Burma and promote a more active Canadian role in response to the political and humanitarian crisis. Inter Pares, along with Peacefund Canada and the Montreal-based Rights and Democracy (International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development), became involved in an advisory committee to CFOB. This committee became a locus of collaboration for groups and individuals concerned about Burma, and was the precursor of the Canadian NGO Committee on Burma which formed in 2000.

Inter Pares first became involved in supporting activities with people from Burma in 1991-92, when we began to develop a relationship with the Burma Relief Centre (BRC) based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Through BRC, Inter Pares supported the work of Dr. Cynthia Maung, a Karen physician providing medical services to displaced Burmese on the Thailand-Burma border. Seeing the conditions under which Dr. Cynthia, herself a refugee, was working, Inter Pares secured funds from the humanitarian unit of CIDA to support Dr. Cynthia's health activities. In 1996, following a renewed influx of refugees into Thailand, Inter Pares asked CIDA to support the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), an organization providing humanitarian assistance to the Burmese refugee camps in Thailand. In 1997, CIDA agreed and has supported the humanitarian program ever since.

In the decade following CFOB's founding, the advisory committee of Canadian organizations working on Burma organized several public conferences and campaigned against Canadian investments in Burma. Working as an *ad hoc* coalition, we brought representatives from refugee and displaced people's organizations and the democracy movement to Canada to meet with officials and testify before Parliamentary committees. Several Members of Parliament were quite aware of the situation in Burma and lent their political support. The coalition submitted policy papers to the federal government and participated in several foreign policy roundtables on Burma. In 1999, Inter Pares and CFOB nominated Dr. Cynthia Maung for Canada's John Humphrey Freedom Award; she came to Canada to accept the award and was introduced to parliamentarians at a reception on Parliament Hill.

In 2000, Inter Pares worked with CFOB and the Burmese Relief Center to develop a concept paper and proposal to support organizations based in countries neighbouring Burma. These were accepted by CIDA and a five-year program was launched in June 2000, with Inter Pares acting as the executing agency. In 2005 and 2010, CIDA's

Asia Branch renewed its support to Inter Pares' multi-year capacity-building programs.

As an integral part of the program right from the beginning, Inter Pares formed the Canadian NGO Committee (CNC) on Burma comprised of Canadian organizations with an interest in Burma.<sup>54</sup> A small projects fund was incorporated into the program design to support CNC members to conduct educational activities in Canada as well as to facilitate the bringing of expertise and resources from other parts of the world to border-based groups.

A 2009 evaluation of Inter Pares' Burma program noted that

CNC's role is critical since it brings to the table a number of Canadian organizations interested in Burma ... It also plays an important role sharing strategic information and analysis, and in cross-checking and cross-referencing information gathered by different people who deal with Burma from different vantage points. This enhances each agency's ability to monitor what is taking place on the ground and with their respective partners.<sup>55</sup>

In 2005, the CNC and CFOB worked with MPs to draft and submit a motion, based on a CFOB policy paper, through the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs. The complete motion was passed, calling for Canadian government action on Burma, including the imposition of sanctions. The Canadian government enacted comprehensive economic sanctions in late 2007. CFOB played an important role in the establishment of a Parliamentary Friends of Burma group (PFOB), comprised of MPs from all political parties. This group became active in promoting the Burma democracy cause and in 2007 successfully persuaded the Conservative government to confer Honourary Canadian Citizenship upon Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's detained democracy leader. In 2008, members of the CNC introduced Prime Minister Harper to Dr. Sein Win, Burma's Prime Minister in exile.

*These activities helped promote an active and progressive Canadian role with respect to Burma.*

All of these activities helped promote an active and progressive Canadian role with respect to Burma. A small group of Canadian NGOs and individuals, along

with some supportive officials and parliamentarians, were determined that Canada should play a role in addressing the political, human rights and humanitarian crisis in Burma. Their actions continue to have a concrete impact on the people of Burma.

Inter Pares' work on Burma, initially through CFOB and the advisory committee, and later through the Canadian NGO Committee on Burma (CNC), involved building consensus among members on basic principles to which all were committed. These principles became the basis for future decisions on membership to the CNC.

Trust and transparency among participants were essential to sustaining the coalition work on Burma. Since these organizations worked together for many years, staff turnover in some organizations inevitably had an impact and there were periods of difficulty and tension associated with the integration of new people. An unanticipated crisis was provoked when some members of the Burmese diaspora in Canada challenged the legitimacy of the entire program, including the role of the CNC and the activities it was supporting in Canada and on Burma's borders. The crisis was resolved by opening and maintaining communication channels with the diaspora.

*Trust and transparency among participants were essential to sustaining the coalition work on Burma.*

### **Movement-building on the borders of Burma**

The development of a multi-year program of activities in Burma's border regions has been critically important in facilitating the development of relationships between members of the CNC and groups working on the ground. In a recent self-evaluation, CNC members noted that the program assisted them to develop new relationships with groups working on the ground, provided intelligence and updates on the Burmese context, and enabled the sharing of resources and expertise for activities in Canada that would not have been possible for one member alone.

The program funded by CIDA was intentionally started and maintained as a collaborative endeavour because Inter Pares and our allies felt it was the most effective way to work. Both Inter Pares and BRC advocated in favour of the CNC and for the inclusion of Canadian programming within the program.

The CNC was equally valued by groups on the Borders of Burma:

BRC also recognizes the importance of Inter Pares and the CNC in ensuring that there is a 'political' base for support for the work on the Burmese borders. It is critical to have a Canadian organization managing the political and administrative relationship with the Canadian government and its bureaucracy.<sup>56</sup>

An important focus within the Burma program has been the encouragement of multi-ethnic and multi-sectoral coalition-building. This was seen as a priority in order to increase the building of trust and cooperation among different ethnic nationalities that have historically been isolated from each other and, in some cases, hostile to each other.

This political support in Canada led to financial support for groups on the border, which in turn led to tangible results:

Many of the first CSOs to emerge were rooted in specific ethnic communities, but in recent years a number of multi-ethnic umbrella organizations have emerged that are building common cause and joint activities around specific issues ... BRC has played an important supportive role in this evolution towards a multi-ethnic approach. It has also increased cross-sectoral sharing and action ... These CSOs have worked hard at building their organizational and technical capacities, moving through the phases of emergence, consolidation and reaching out and making common cause in inter-ethnic and cross-sector coalitions at an impressive rate. The degree of sophistication in their advocacy efforts, internally (inside Burma), regionally and internationally and the quality of the reports that are produced, is significant.<sup>57</sup>

Another tangible result was an expanding role for women in the pro-democracy movement.

### **Enabling women's leadership**

The development of a small project fund for CNC members allowed for some very creative programming. While not explicitly focused on women's rights, many CNC projects have aimed to support the development and work of Burmese women's organizations. The project funds have been used to support exchanges between Canadian and Burmese women's organizations, Burmese and Guatemalan women refugee organizations, Burmese and Filipino women's health organizations,

and Burmese and Rwandan women. The CNC has also supported activities of the Karen Women's Organization and the Shan Women's Action Network, as well as contributing to training and learning exchanges on issues such as violence against women. The project fund has also been used by CNC members to engage Canadian constituencies in broadening public understanding about the situation in Burma and building a Canadian constituency supportive of Canada's political and humanitarian role.

The negotiation of a long-term commitment from CIDA for program activities with displaced people on Burma's borders has also had extremely positive results for border-based groups who had the time and space to engage in the slow and methodical work of social mobilization and capacity-building. While the program was not specifically focused on supporting the development of the Burmese women's movement, it has clearly made an important contribution to this.

The first five years of the program ensured that counterparts could begin to build and strengthen ethnic women's organizations. The Burma Relief Centre (BRC) offered training on financial management and on how to organize, leading to initiatives such as daycares, service delivery to those who had fled from Burma, and education.

At the most basic level, the project has been successful in helping numerous organizations move from not knowing where to begin to being able to run an office and carry out activities ... many of the new organizations which BRC has helped nurture could not have gotten started without BRC support. Most other NGOs just cannot give the time and energy to foster new organizations made up of people who are learning about community organizing for the first time.<sup>58</sup>

*Women's organizations on the border were able to make strides in the pro-democracy movement.*

Using the momentum women's organizations had gained on the border, BRC was able to play an instrumental role in the formation of the Women's League of Burma (WLB). WLB is an alliance of several women's organizations that serves as a collective platform for action. Under the WLB, women from various ethnic groups could come together,

learn from one another and share a common solidarity. Women's organizations on the border were able to make strides in the pro-democracy movement.

Over the course of the project, some of the women's organizations have become important voices in their communities, and some have also moved beyond traditional social welfare functions to deal with sensitive issues such as violence against women and seeking a role for women in politics. These have been big steps for many women who, in the past, accepted that their role should be limited to running nursery schools and weaving projects.

The Karen Women's Organization is a good example of this. Established in 1949 as a social welfare organization, it has transformed in recent years. This is in part due to the training it has received through BRC and the funding it received from BRC for organizing trips, executive committee meetings, and short training courses. Claiming 30,000 members, the Karen Women's Organization is by far the largest women's organization BRC works with. It now runs a leadership school for young women, is addressing violence against women in the refugee camps, and is writing a report on Burma Army rapes of women in Karen State. The Karen Women's Organization is also now able to obtain funding for much of its work from other donors.

The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) established in 1999, is a much younger organization, but some of its founding members had already been active with other groups. With the publication of *License to Rape* (co-produced with the Shan Human Rights Foundation), which documents Burma Army rapes of women in Shan State, it has drawn international attention for its work. Because of this, male-dominated Shan organizations are paying more attention to SWAN, and other women's organizations have been inspired to tackle human rights issues as well. SWAN also responds to the needs of Shan migrant workers and undocumented refugees by running safe houses for women (not supported with CIDA funding) and by running a clinic in the border area where many Shan live (supported with CIDA funding). BRC provided core funding to SWAN when it faced a period without funding in 2001. SWAN is now able to obtain regular support from other sources for most of its work.<sup>59</sup>

*Burma's women's movement has become very strong with considerable influence both locally and internationally.*

Over the space of a decade, Burma's women's movement has become very strong with considerable influence both locally and internationally. The Women's League of Burma provides training and support to the development of services for women, is a key advocate for women's rights, and has become quite influential within the democracy movement. A recent evaluation of the Women's League of Burma concluded:

WLB is now perceived within the displaced communities of Burma, the broader border-based Burmese opposition movement, and among many interested agencies and organizations as a role model ... a role model on gender issues and international lobbying. Importantly, the WLB is viewed from the outside as having the potential to work through sensitive inter-ethnic issues in a genuine way. ... There is an emerging expectation among the WLB's member organisations, partner organisations and donors that the WLB can take a creative and leading role in moving inter-ethnic alliance building to new levels of genuine unity and political effectiveness.<sup>60</sup>

Inter Pares and other Canadian organizations interested in Burma came together to coordinate their efforts and build popular, political and financial support for those who had fled Burma's brutal military regime. Collaborating as allies with groups on Burma's borders, they ensured that women were active participants in democracy efforts and witnessed an emerging women's movement that has advanced the cause of democracy in Burma.

# 4 Conclusion

## 4.1 Fundamentals

The research shared through this Occasional Paper attempted to understand the role that feminism has played in Inter Pares' analysis and practice. We have argued that feminism has profoundly influenced our work, and that it is because of this that Inter Pares, as a modest-sized social justice organization, has been able to achieve the impressive outcomes that have been noted by our counterparts, collaborators and funders. We have argued that feminism has not only strengthened our analysis and our practice, but has been an essential factor in our achievements and our effectiveness.

Over the course of this research project, we were able to clearly establish some important distinctions between feminist process and gender work that are key to tracing the legacy of feminism within Inter Pares. The documentation of our practices and program outcomes, through conversations and workshops with counterparts, collaborators, funders, and former and current staff, clarified three key areas where we could clearly identify the role of feminist analysis and practice.

## 4.2 Analysis

A feminist analysis at an institutional level has strengthened our work on gender and women's rights, bringing an understanding of the complex and structural barriers to women's equality and the need for systemic change. The influence of feminism has broadened the focus of our work, bringing a feminist perspective to issues not traditionally considered 'women's issues' – we are always looking for the gendered dynamics of any issue, be it food sovereignty or migration, and seeking to highlight women's agency and leadership in these areas. Adopting a structural feminist analysis has shaped our understanding of social change – we see our work as long-term and encompassing the personal, the collective, the social and the political.

*The influence of feminism has broadened the focus of our work, bringing a feminist perspective to issues.*

## 4.3 Process

Our methodology has been profoundly influenced by feminism. We value the processes by which decisions are made and program priorities are established, and where those affected are engaged as lead actors in shaping the work. We have historically placed a great importance on listening to stories, particularly women's stories, and starting from people's experiences as the basis of knowledge and action. We have adopted an open-ended approach to setting priorities and developing plans of action, with a focus on collaboration and mutual learning. What has resulted is a practice that has allowed us to develop innovative and responsive programs that are flexible and dynamic, and that reflect the needs and aspirations of those with whom we work.

*The collaborative everyday management has allowed us to develop skills in consensus-building, facilitation and convening, bolstered by an ethic of collaboration that has made coalition-building a key methodology for our work in Canada.*

## 4.4 Organizational structure

Feminism inspired an important change in the structure of Inter Pares, prompting us to move to a non-hierarchical co-management structure with pay parity. Under a co-management structure, staff members expressed their commitment to equality in practice, to sharing administrative, programmatic and fundraising responsibilities, and to taking decisions by consensus. This structure not only reflected staff member's values; it allowed us to build a strong and efficient organization that is well-managed. Staff members have attained a high level of competence in their respective program areas and have built skills in institutional development. This has imparted skills that are central to our work with counterparts and collaborators.

The collaborative everyday management has allowed us to develop skills in consensus-building, facilitation and convening, bolstered by an ethic of collaboration that has made coalition-building a key methodology for our work in Canada. The importance we have placed on acting politically in our own context has made this coalition methodology highly effective in achieving concrete policy results in Canada, informed by the work of our counterparts and contributing to their ability to engage in their own struggles locally.

Our co-management structure has also given us institution-building skills that have allowed us to contribute to building strong organizations in the South. As highlighted in this paper, Inter Pares has played a key role in major institutional transition processes that created strong independent and Southern-led organizations that are able to be actors in their own context and be leaders in local and regional processes of social change.

The feminist ethic in our work has strengthened our political commitment to building relationships of solidarity, reciprocity and mutual respect – both internally, with each other, and externally, especially with our counterparts. Our political commitment to long-term solidarity and accompaniment has yielded strong and lasting relationships with counterparts that are based on mutual respect, reciprocity and equality. These are relationships of solidarity and cooperation that survive staff turnover, changing political contexts, evolving local needs, and unstable funding dynamics, while allowing space for disagreement, learning and growth.

#### 4.5 Tensions we are still grappling with

The practice of equality and parity is challenged by the daily realities in which our work as an organization and our experiences as individuals are embedded. This is the case at a personal level, in relationships between staff, and at a global level in our relationship to counterparts around the world.

At an internal level, staff members at Inter Pares are diverse in their experiences of various oppressions and in the privileges they bring with them. The reality of these inequalities cannot be simply erased by the mechanisms we have in place for building structural equality between us.

Consensus-building is central to our functioning as an organization based on parity. But consensus can be difficult to achieve in groups with diverse backgrounds and experiences. As much as staff at Inter Pares develop

proficient skills in consensus-building, unofficial power imbalances among staff – particularly if they go unnamed and unaddressed – can impair consensus, preventing some people's active participation or privileging the participation of others. Our strong political commitment to our work and our personal investment in it as activists and feminists makes it difficult for us to be challenged when our practice does not reflect our ideals. Our flat structure and the processes associated with it can sometimes mask the inequalities in power that exist among individuals, and leave us with few mechanisms for addressing them.

*Our flat structure and the processes associated with it can sometimes mask the inequalities in power that exist among individuals, and leave us with few mechanisms for addressing them.*

In addition, building an organization based on equality and parity is difficult in a world where the majority of individuals and organizations do not operate on this basis. We are often challenged by the expectations and assumptions of others, outside the organization, of hierarchy and authority that can sometimes be difficult for us to contest.

Over the course of the research, many participants raised another tension in the everyday practice of our feminism at Inter Pares. Women reflected on the struggles they have faced in balancing their work life at Inter Pares with their personal life, specifically their desire to raise and parent children. The intensive time commitment required by our co-management structure has often resulted in little accommodation for the demands of child-rearing through mechanisms such as part-time work, particularly as they related to the societal demands of women. For many, this raised a contradiction with feminist principles with which Inter Pares continues to grapple.

We pride ourselves on building long-term relationships of solidarity with our counterparts, relationships that are based on mutual respect, reciprocity and equality. We aim to subvert traditional North-South relations, based as they are on charity and a paternalistic donor-beneficiary model, that reinforce global economic and

political inequalities. And as the results presented in this research have shown, we have succeeded in developing these kinds of relationships with many of our counterparts. However, we have had and continue to have counterpart relationships in which our role is primarily that of funder, with the power imbalances that this represents. In addition, even with some of our closest counterparts there is a financial transaction that underlies our relationship, and our political location as a donor in the North means that this transaction generates a structural inequality. Because of our political commitment to building different kinds of relationships, it can be difficult for us to engage this reality honestly.

#### 4.6 Open questions

Inter Pares' co-management structure is a direct result of the influence of feminism in our history and a fundamental building block of the methodologies we have applied to our work. How do other co-operative management models compare to our own, and what differences can be attributed to our feminist legacy? What can be learned from other co-operative management models and what of our own experience can be taken up by others?

*How do other co-operative management models compare to our own?*

We have identified important challenges we face in dealing with conflict and addressing power imbalances within the organization. Our very structure – which yields so much in terms of our practice of equality on a daily basis – is also an impediment to confronting these inequalities and addressing them. What mechanisms and strategies can we develop to begin overcoming these hurdles? How do we better embrace practices of honesty and accountability when it comes to our relationships with each other?

The results we've been able to achieve have been possible *because* we are process-oriented. Yet the growing interest in short-term, concrete results in the industry of international co-operation is at odds with a more long-term, iterative, and organic approach to achieving results that are systemic and transformative. What space is there for this methodology of long-term social change in the current climate of international co-operation?

Working in coalition has been key to achieving important and lasting changes in Canadian policy, working with other Canadian organizations to share the lessons we learn from our counterparts and amplify our impact domestically. Some of the coalition work highlighted in this research was among the most innovative and impacting work in which Inter Pares has engaged. What lessons can we learn from these experiences, and how do we ensure that we continue to advance civil society organization and advocacy in Canada in these ways?

*The results we've been able to achieve have been possible because we are process-oriented.*

#### 4.7 What next?

This research has confirmed what Inter Pares staff and Board members suspected, that feminism has been fundamental to who we are as an organization and to the work we do, and that it can be linked to many of our achievements.

As in all research, we are left with many unanswered questions. However, the research process has been highly reflective, and involved looking back at the organization's history. The work ahead requires learning from the past to navigate the current political context for international co-operation and social justice organizations in order to continue to be social change agents in the future.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Those interested in learning more about the research methodology are invited to read "Feminist participatory research in a social justice organization" (Gouin, Cocq, & McGavin, in press). Please visit the Web site of the Action Research Journal (<http://arj.sagepub.com/>) or communicate with Inter Pares to obtain an earlier version of the paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Hendricks, S. (2001). *Inter Pares* interview, April 2001. Unpublished interview transcript. This document was reviewed as an organizational document, among many others reviewed as part of this research initiative.
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- <sup>10</sup> Walker, A. (1982). *The Color Purple*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>13</sup> Srivastava, S. (2005). "You're calling me a racist? The moral and emotional regulation of antiracism and feminism." *Signs*, 31(1), p. 34.
- <sup>14</sup> Srivastava (2005), p. 41.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>16</sup> Seydegart, M. & P. A. Turcot (2004, July). *Institutional Evaluation of Inter Pares*. Ottawa, p. 45.
- <sup>17</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009, June). *Final Report: Evaluation of Inter Pares' Program, 2005-2010*. Ottawa.
- <sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>20</sup> *Inter Pares* (2003). *Shared realities. Final report*, p. 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>22</sup> In her article, *Learning has everything to do with it*, Rachel Gouin takes an in depth look at the role of these pedagogies in *Inter Pares'* work. Please communicate with *Inter Pares* for a copy of the text.
- <sup>23</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 30.
- <sup>24</sup> Gander, C. (2000, May). *Evaluation of Inter Pares' Program in Peru*. Ottawa, p. 53.
- <sup>25</sup> Gander (2000), p. 57-58.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>29</sup> Federman, M. L. (2010). *From BAH to ba: Valence Theory and the Future of Organization*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Toronto, Toronto, ON. Retrieved February 21, 2011, from <http://valencetheory.pbworks.com/f/Abstract.pdf>, p. 130.
- <sup>30</sup> Stuart, R., P. McLaren, and M. Beauregard. (1995). *Institutional Evaluation of Inter Pares*. Ottawa, p. 35.
- <sup>31</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009), p. 35.
- <sup>32</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 31-32.
- <sup>33</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 49.
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- <sup>35</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 49.
- <sup>36</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009), p. 47.
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- <sup>39</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 15.
- <sup>40</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009), p. 26.
- <sup>41</sup> Federman (2010), p. 134.
- <sup>42</sup> Federman (2010), p. 128.
- <sup>43</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 6.
- <sup>44</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009), p. 39.
- <sup>45</sup> E.T. Jackson & Associates Ltd (2009), p. 52.
- <sup>46</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 21.
- <sup>47</sup> Stuart, McLaren & Beauregard (1995), p. 32.
- <sup>48</sup> Stuart, McLaren & Beauregard (1995), p. 28.
- <sup>49</sup> Seydegart & Turcot (2004), p. 16.
- <sup>50</sup> Quoted in Hendricks (2001).
- <sup>51</sup> Stuart, McLaren & Beauregard (1995), p. 18.
- <sup>52</sup> Stuart, McLaren & Beauregard (1995), p. 18.
- <sup>53</sup> Stuart, McLaren & Beauregard (1995), p. 18.
- <sup>54</sup> Initial members of the CNC were Canadian Friends of Burma, Rights and Democracy, Peacefund Canada, Inter Pares, the Primates World Relief and Development Fund, and the Canada-Asia-Pacific Research Network.
- <sup>55</sup> Turcot, P. A. & C. Munro. (2009, August). *Burma Border Areas Program Mid-Term Evaluation Report*. Ottawa, p. 32.
- <sup>56</sup> Turcot & Munro (2009), p. 31-32.
- <sup>57</sup> Turcot & Munro (2009), p. 18.
- <sup>58</sup> Fink, C. (2003, December). *Mid-Term Evaluation of the Capacity Building of Burmese Refugees Project of the Canadian International Development Agency*. Ottawa, p. 9-10.
- <sup>59</sup> Fink (2003), p. 11.
- <sup>60</sup> Women's League of Burma evaluation report (2006, April), cited in Turcot & Munro (2009), p. 19.





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