



# Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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## Different Continents, Same Struggles

*In January 2012, Inter Pares staff members David Bruer and Eric Chaurette traveled to Andhra Pradesh, India, to participate in an exchange they had organized to bring Asian and West African activists together to share knowledge and strategies to promote ecological agriculture and food sovereignty. The following is a short account from David's perspective.*

**W**est Africa and Southern India, on the face of it, do not seem to have a lot in common. I work with counterparts in Asia, and my colleague Eric with groups in Africa, and yet we always seem to find ourselves talking about the same issues – concern over the introduction of genetically engineered (GE) seeds, the importance of local varieties of crops, and the struggle to maintain biodiverse agriculture in the hands of farmers. When we proposed to the Deccan Development Society (DDS) in India, and to the Coalition pour la protection du patrimoine génétique africain (COPAGEN) in West Africa, an exchange where they could come together to discuss these issues, they both agreed on the spot; the DDS-COPAGEN exchange was born.

A few months later, in January 2012, Eric and I met up with four members of COPAGEN at DDS's agricultural research centre in Andhra Pradesh. COPAGEN staff were enthusiastic to see the work of DDS and to share what they were doing in their countries – none more so than René Segbenou, a rural sociologist from Benin, West Africa, whose desire to learn and share epitomizes what exchanges are all about.

The next day we were thrown into DDS's annual Biodiversity Festival – a joyous, loud, colourful gathering of women farmers leading a caravan of elaborately decorated bullock carts from town to town. These farmers are proud of what they know and do, and eagerly share their knowledge and seeds with others. Through music, songs, dance, and film, they attract residents and share their message about the importance of biodiversity and the millet-based agriculture they practice.

Later on, the exchange included a broader international symposium examining the implications of GE crops on small farmers in Africa and Asia. During the two-day event, we heard the testimony of farmers and other experts from India who explained how GE cotton had raised all of their costs but not their yields, leading to an epidemic of farmer suicides. This tragedy only reaffirmed the participants' strong commitment to the movement against the corporate control



West African delegation at Biodiversity Festival.

ERIC CHAURETTE



Indian farmers explain their experience with GE cotton at the Symposium. (David Bruer in foreground with baseball cap).

ERIC CHAURETTE

of agriculture, and the need for farmers' control of their land, their seeds, and their ways of farming – their food sovereignty.

While in India, COPAGEN took the time to document DDS's experience in farmer-led research on the impacts of GE cotton. For René, the most important lesson was how to involve the farmers in the study so that they become co-researchers.

## Asha El-Karib and Amanda Dale: An ongoing conversation



BAHAR SHADPOUR

Asha El-Karib (left) and Amanda Dale (right).

mean losing all other legal recourse. For Amanda, the efforts to amend the *Arbitration Act* – ensuring that in Ontario, the settling of family disputes would only be based on Ontario and Canadian laws – was a life changing-experience. “It was a five-year struggle that was the epitome of the fact that plurality of beliefs – culture, religion – did not have to be on a collision path with women’s rights.”

This struggle resonated with Asha and the work SORD continues to do to achieve women’s equality in Sudan. SORD began its work in 2007 by analyzing the laws affecting the lives of Sudanese women. They determined that family matters in Sudan – divorce, inheritance, child custody – were regulated by discriminatory laws premised upon women’s subordination. Advocating for changes in the family law became a core part of SORD’s work, because the organization recognized that women could never make true strides toward equality if they are oppressed in their homes. Amanda agreed with this focus: “Family law is the area of law that is the most difficult to improve because it is where culture is being passed on – not to say that culture is embedded in those violations, but culture is often being used to justify violence.”

***There is nothing in Islam or in Sudanese culture that legitimizes the discrimination of women or to treat them as minors... This is not about culture, it’s about patriarchy.***

As a result of their work, SORD’s members have been accused of opposing Islam; particularly in recent months, they have been attacked by Islamic fundamentalist groups in Sudan. But Asha maintains, “There is nothing in Islam or in Sudanese culture that legitimizes the discrimination of women or to treat them as minors... This is not about culture, it’s about patriarchy.”

The case of the *Arbitration Act* in Ontario and the battle to amend it demonstrates that no right should be taken for granted, even within secular democratic states such as Canada. During our 2012 speaker series, Amanda reminded us that women’s access to justice needs to prevail, always. Asha couldn’t agree more. The conversation between Asha and Amanda that started six years ago demonstrates the need to build an understanding about family law and how it impacts women’s rights around the world. Inter Pares remains concerned with the international rise of religious fundamentalisms – in all major religions – and the corresponding resurgence of strict patriarchal values, and we will continue to support the global struggle for women’s rights and equality. ☞

**W**hen Asha El-Karib and Amanda Dale met for the first time six years ago in Khartoum, their discussions on family law and its impact on women’s lives were timely for both of them. Asha is the Executive Director of the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD), based in Khartoum, and Amanda is an Inter Pares Board member and Director of the Barbra Schlifer Clinic – a Toronto centre providing counseling, language interpretation, and legal support to women experiencing violence. When they met again in April 2012 in Ottawa during Inter Pares’ speaker series, Asha and Amanda talked about the commonalities of their shared struggle for women’s rights.

***Plurality of beliefs – culture, religion – does not have to be on a collision path with women’s rights.***

Amanda recalled that when she first met Asha, it had been a year since the women’s movement in Ontario had successfully brought changes to the Ontario *Arbitration Act*, a law originally created in 1991 to facilitate international commerce. The unintended consequences of the law were the empowering of religious tribunals to settle family matters, and that this process would be legally binding – meaning that going through religious arbitration would



# Linking Activists Around the World



SAMANTHA MCGAVIN

Claudia Paz y Paz

The DDS-COPAGEN exchange described in this *Bulletin* is just the latest in Inter Pares' long history of counterpart exchanges. Over the years, Inter Pares has convened a number of inter-regional gatherings. In 1989, for instance, we helped bring together Nicaraguan and Filipino sugar workers to share strategies about popular organizing and gaining access to land. In 2002, we facilitated an exchange between counterparts from Burma and Guatemala to discuss women's experiences of

organizing during conflict and peacebuilding. In 2008, Inter Pares helped connect Indigenous Colombian women who were members of our counterpart, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, with their Canadian Indigenous sisters at the Native Women's Association of Canada to discuss women's political participation and human rights.

Counterpart exchanges are an integral part of Inter Pares' programs. Their conception is enabled by our highly collaborative work structure, which allows staff to identify common issues shared by counterparts in different regions. Exchanges inspire and give momentum to people working in difficult conditions, while providing concrete ideas, skills and opportunities to enhance their strategies and actions.

Participants can reflect on their context and work, viewing them through a different lens, and break their own isolation to build global solidarity.

Exchanges can also be seen as a feminist methodology as they emphasize the lived experiences of participants – a key feminist tenet – and focus on process rather than results alone. While we cannot always predict specific outcomes, our experience has shown that exchanges are powerful learning opportunities, as well as profound personal experiences.

In 2007, Inter Pares invited counterparts from Burma, Sudan, Burundi, Colombia, Guatemala and Peru to discuss sexual violence in armed conflict. Among them was an articulate and insightful Guatemalan, Claudia Paz y Paz. Claudia cofounded the Institute for Comparative Studies of Criminal Sciences in Guatemala (ICCPG), an Inter Pares counterpart, specializing in criminal justice and human rights issues. During the exchange, Claudia spoke about how the military was taught to perpetrate acts of sexual violence during the conflict in Guatemala, and how women needed political and judicial defenders. The discussion revealed that seen through the lens of patriarchy, state-sanctioned sexual violence was but part of a continuum of violence against women. Today, this courageous woman is Guatemala's first female Attorney General, with a personal and political agenda to fight impunity.

All the women who attended the exchange in 2007 returned to their respective countries motivated by the perspectives of new friends and colleagues, with more ideas and energy to advance their social justice work. Claudia Paz y Paz is but one incredible example of where the journey to effect change may lead our counterparts.

At Inter Pares, we are honoured to be able to convene social justice activists from around the world so that we may all learn from each other. ❧

## Investing in a Different Kind of Future

FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS, Carla Costuros and her family have supported Inter Pares and our work for equality and social justice. About ten years ago, she contacted Inter Pares to let us know that she and her husband intended to leave us a gift in their wills. "It was important to us to have our wishes and also our values captured."

When we spoke with Carla about her decision to leave a legacy gift to Inter Pares, the idea of wanting to make a contribution to a more equitable global community seemed to be at the forefront of her mind. "I'd like to know my life has touched people outside of my personal circle, my neighbourhood, and my country. I appreciate that Inter Pares works to support women. In most countries, women provide the social foundation. Empowering women ensures supporting the health, education, and well-being of children and a sustainable future for their communities."

Carla believes it is important to address the underlying issues, rather than simply meeting the basic needs of communities through the delivery of aid. "I value the concept 'between equals'. Beyond providing disaster relief, I wish to support agencies and people who are committed to working together for strengthened human rights, sustaining cultural identity, and environmental protection." Inter Pares is very grateful to Carla and her family for their commitment to share in the struggle for social justice now and for years to come. ❧

*Do you have questions about making your own legacy gift to Inter Pares? Contact Sarah Blumel at [sblumel@interpares.ca](mailto:sblumel@interpares.ca) or 1 866 563-4801.*

René explained how “when farmers participate in the collection and analysis of data, they also become creators of solutions.”

A few days later, standing under the scorching sun in a bone-dry field, we marveled as local farmer Chendramma Bidakanne showed us the huge variety of rain-fed crops she grew on her land. There were many varieties of millets, mixed with other crops so that if one failed, another would thrive, and if the price of one slumped, she could sell another at a good price. As René put it:

“At first you think it is a miracle, but when you listen to this expert woman, you come to understand. Even on completely dry and cracked soil, one can obtain this great harvest. The sparse rain and the dew that falls in the night are sufficient for these well-adapted crops. We don’t need GE crops to resist drought or to feed ourselves. When you read this in academic papers, it appears to be a fantasy, but seeing it with your own eyes, you understand and you become convinced. The only thing that can prevent our success is not having the courage to act!”

***At first you think it is a miracle, but when you listen to this expert woman, you come to understand. Even on completely dry and cracked soil, one can obtain this great harvest.***

Standing in the field, René reflected, “This is how farmers in Benin used to farm. Some still do, but many stopped because people say millets are only for the poor and we should adopt high-tech seeds and *modern* agriculture.” Chendramma smiled: “Then you must help them to learn again what they did before.”

Over a delicious lunch in Café Ethnic, an organic restaurant run by DDS to promote millet cuisine, Sandeep from DDS explained that “millet is a concept.” Millets can be grown as a monoculture on an industrial scale, as the Indian government is promoting, but that is not what DDS is about. For DDS, promoting millets means promoting small farmers, about growing a diversity of crops, about using your own locally adapted seeds, about farming ecologically and rejecting the control of corporations over agriculture. Sandeep coordinates the Millet Network of India (MINI), which uses education and advocacy to take this message to regions across the country. It was a message that clearly resonated with COPAGEN. As we started talking about how to take this movement to West Africa, both sides suggested forming “the Afro-Asian Millet Network.”

For India, West Africa, and the world, millet farmers like Chendramma represent an alternative to agriculture controlled by corporate interests. They are recreating the biodiverse agriculture that feeds both land and people, that is already adapted to whatever climate change will bring and that keeps agriculture in the hands of farmers. Inter Pares will continue to work with DDS and COPAGEN to build this alternative. ☞



Chendramma explains her cropping system to the delegates.



Display of seeds and art work during the Biodiversity Festival.

 **Inter Pares**

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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