

redefining realities: the art of social justice



For more than 35 years, long-term Inter Pares counterpart Deccan Development Society (DDS) has worked with poor, Dalit caste women farmers in southern India. Dalit women have lived on the margins of society, their voices unheard, their lives as small farmers disparaged. They have little to no formal education, and few have had the opportunity to learn to read or write. There are 900 TV channels in India, which is home to the biggest film industry in the world, but the lives of these women are rarely portrayed except in images of poverty and pathos.



For over 20 years, Inter Pares' counterpart Deccan Development Society has trained Dalit women in India to be at the helm of a camera, documenting their own realities and perspectives.

Photo credit: DDS

Seeing our lives through our own eyes

Film is an accessible communication technology, and DDS has long used it to raise awareness about social issues to effect positive change. So twenty years ago, DDS collaborated with Dalit women to create an alternative media outlet, the Community Media Trust (CMT), accessed and controlled by the women themselves. ►

◀ Through CMT, Dalit women have learned how to use cameras and edit films about their lives and communities. And just as crucially, they've learned to be proud of their knowledge, their skills as farmers, and the food they produce. In creating Community Media Trust, DDS has facilitated processes for Dalit women to better understand the injustice they face in their daily lives. And the women have empowered themselves through the act of documenting their own realities, and creating art through their own camera lens. In stark contrast to the portrayal of Dalit women in mainstream Indian media, in CMT films they are smiling, happy and proud – a celebration of their lives.



If our technology and our use of it tells us *what we are*,
art tells us *who we are*, and *who we could be*.
~ Brian K Murphy:
Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the World

Building on this experience of the women as film-makers, in 2019 DDS launched the Jai Chandiram Memorial National Community Media Film Festival, named for a journalist who promoted women in media and the use of film for education. Presenting 34 films created by marginalized people from India and other Asian countries, the festival became a platform for the voices of marginalized people themselves. It made their struggles

visible to a wide audience, and simultaneously celebrated these beautiful expressions of their lives. From sustainable food systems of Indigenous people, to the efforts of women to be recognized as farmers, to documentaries about the ceremonial log drums of Nagaland, the films present the people's lives holistically – mobilizing, educating and raising awareness of a rich reality that is rarely seen by others. Their films say to the audience “this is who we are, see us, learn about us. Yes, we struggle, but we are also happy and capable and proud and beautiful.”

Film is a tool in these struggles. In the women's hands it has become art as they interpret their lives through their own eyes, showing the world their strength and joy, their determination and confidence. Their art has helped them reveal who they are – their whole selves – to themselves and others, and such power can help change the world. 🌍

The Chandiram Memorial National Community Media Film Festival, an initiative of DDS, not only honours films created by marginalized people from India—but also provides a platform for the voices of marginalized people themselves.



Photo credit: DDS

Promoting trans-inclusion through art in Colombia

Culture and tradition can be sources of pride and belonging to nations and peoples. They can also be powerful tools to push back against alienation and exclusion, by challenging rigid definitions of who belongs and who does not.

In Quindío, Colombia, trans women have created Kathleya Trans, a grassroots group that combats violence and provides a safe space for trans women to come together. In a promotional tourism video the group produced, several members don the traditional *chapolera* dress and speak with great pride of the characteristics of their coffee-growing region, a UNESCO World Heritage site. In a cultural context in which trans women have had their right to wear traditional garb challenged, their



wearing of the dress is, in itself, a powerful act of reclamation, and affirmation of trans identity. The group hopes to take part in upcoming cultural festivals – spaces where gender-diverse people have historically been excluded – to celebrate the region’s unique landscape while challenging the structural and cultural norms that promote violence and discrimination against trans people.

In another part of Colombia, next to the Venezuelan border, Fundación Dignidad Trans is also using powerful cultural symbols – in its case the *loropo* dance – to build bridges among the region’s inhabitants and press for better conditions for trans women, sex workers and Venezuelan migrants who are part

of the community. Last year, for the International Day of Trans Visibility, members of the group wore traditional dress and gave an open-air concert in which they performed the *loropo*.

Trans people in Colombia continue to face high levels of violence and a denial of their rights. Inter Pares counterparts support grassroots groups to resist violence, including by marching on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.



Photo credit: Fundación Dignidad Trans

Despite some advances in recent years, trans people continue to face high levels of violence and a denial of their rights. According to the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Transgender People (REDLACTRANS), transgender women in the region have an average life expectancy of only 35 years.¹

Cristina Rodríguez, Program Coordinator of Fondo Lunaria, an Inter Pares counterpart that supports both grassroots organizations, says, “Kathleya Trans and Fundación Dignidad Trans recognize the importance of art and culture as pillars of social activism. For these trans women, art represents resistance against the violence they experience every day. It transforms their realities, gives new meaning to their territories, and becomes a powerful tool for social change.”

¹ <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2018/october/transgender-rights>

Fundación Dignidad Trans prepares for the International Day of Trans Visibility with trans women in Colombia.



Photo credit: Fundación Dignidad Trans

The art of emancipation

On a starry night in Bissau, under towering kapok trees, hundreds gather to celebrate. To drumbeats and rhythmic songs, dance troupes from various ethnic groups of Guinea-Bissau parade, dance and sing to the delight of the audience. This festival, organized by Inter Pares counterpart Tiniguena, is one of the ways Tiniguena links ecological struggle with cultural emancipation.

At a time when tropical forests are disappearing, Tiniguena has preserved them by supporting a network of community forests protected by local people. At a time when oceans are being emptied of fish, Tiniguena has protected a critical fish spawning ground by creating a marine protected area managed by the local Bijagos.

Art is the way to communicate culture. It goes beyond all barriers.

Augusta Henriques, co-founder of Tiniguena, explains the role of art in its work: “Art is the way to communicate culture. It goes beyond all barriers. During the struggle for independence in



On the Bijagos Islands, off the coast of Guinea-Bissau, women dance at the opening ceremony of a seed bank supported by Inter Pares’ counterpart Tiniguena. Dance has long been used in Guinea-Bissau as a form of resistance and celebration.


Photo credit: Eric

Guinea-Bissau, the slogans, the rallying cries, came from artists. They are messengers. And through art, they transmit their visions of the world and new paradigms.” Augusta shares a conversation she had with her mentor and friend, the famous author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire: “We were talking about liberating the creative energies of the people! Art and culture is what allows the expression of the people.”

These teachings influenced the first youth field visits Tiniguena organised. “It wasn’t just tourism – young people had to express what they had seen, through essays, poetry, music, drawing. Art is communication and through art we managed to link our love of nature with our love of culture.”



For Augusta, art is also a dialogue between peoples and territory, referring to the *Kilkidinos tem balur* (What We Have Has Value) initiative. Through working with artists and organising festivals, this initiative has firmly placed identity, local knowledge, and agricultural biodiversity in the public mind and, literally, on peoples’ kitchen tables. Demand for local products remains high in Bissau, to the benefit of local farmers.

Inter Pares is proud to support Tiniguena and their work to protect Guinea-Bissau’s delicate ecosystems through conservation and cultural emancipation. 

Inter Pares

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6P1 Canada
Tel: 613-563-4801 • Toll free: 1-866-563-4801 • Fax: 613-594-4704 • info@interpares.ca • www.interpares.ca

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 inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.