

On the Move: The search for a better life



Pirogues line the coast of Senegal. Abdoulaye boarded a similar boat to make the treacherous journey north to the Canary Islands.

ERIC GOURTELLI, INTER PARES

Hope in the Countryside: Abdoulaye's story

Eight years ago, Abdoulaye Déme left his village in Les Niayes, Senegal, and boarded a pirogue for the Canary Islands. Risking strong currents and towering waves in the open ocean, the small open boat eventually reached the Spanish islands, 1,500 kilometers away. From there, he made his way to the Spanish mainland where he lived for years far from his family, clandestinely, and in poverty. Abdoulaye's story is not unique. Recurrent droughts and

damaged soils, along with limited access to land have taken its toll, and many people, especially youth, unable to farm or find work, are forced to move to the city, or further away. *Barça ou Barzakh* is a popular saying in Senegal – literally meaning “Barcelona or death”; it expresses the despair of many youth in Senegal who choose to make the perilous journey north in search of a better life.

In November 2018, Inter Pares invited our Senegalese counterpart, Mariam Sow [PAGE 4](#) ▶

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Defying Dichotomies: People who move



KEVIN MAJSEED, INTER PARES

Rohingya refugees from Burma carry supplies into Kutupalong refugee camp, Bangladesh. Over the last 50 years, several million people have fled armed conflict in Burma.

The immigration laws that determine migrants' lives are based on a forced/voluntary distinction, but the reality is much more complex.

In 2017, the latest wave of genocidal brutality by Burma's armed forces and militias towards the Rohingya came to the world's attention. The murder, mass rape, and atrocities documented by Inter Pares' counterparts Kaladan Press Network and Arakan Project left an estimated 10,000 people dead and nearly 400 villages destroyed. Roughly 700,000 people fled to Bangladesh, where they joined the some 400,000 who had fled earlier waves of violence. The million-plus Rohingya in Bangladesh are now among the several million people worldwide who, over the past half-century, have fled Burma's brutal campaigns of territorial control and ethnic assimilation.

When people speak of migration, a distinction is often made between voluntary and forced displacement. "Refugees" are people like the Rohingya, who are forced to leave their country in order to flee persecution or war; "migrants" are people like those

in the Central American caravans, who are frequently portrayed as choosing to move solely for economic reasons. The immigration laws that determine migrants' lives are based on this forced/voluntary distinction, but the reality is much more complex. In the caravan example, for instance, Inter Pares' long experience in the region has underscored the depth and ubiquity of threats to women in Central America, where the legacy of armed conflict has been a weakened state, emboldened gangs, rampant violence, and a culture of impunity for crimes against women and girls.

Industrial activities by the global North have also exacted a price on people's abilities to live full and safe lives in their home communities. Natural resource exploitation by Northern companies has contributed to poverty and conflict, forcing untold numbers of people to migrate. The climate crisis has exacerbated this reality: today, 60% more people are displaced by natural disasters than by armed conflict.¹

Even among those displaced by armed conflict, people are not automatically considered to be refugees. In southeastern Burma, for instance, some people became internally displaced within the country's borders; others fled to one of the refugee camps in Thailand that are supported by Inter Pares' counterpart The Border Consortium. But many, many others crossed the border into Thailand discreetly as "migrants" to avoid attracting attention, where they are not given any official support or recognition as refugees.

In recognition of these flawed distinctions, Inter Pares and our counterparts use a holistic approach when working with conflict-affected people. By working on both sides of national borders, and by addressing the drivers of displacement, our goal is to support people's efforts to build safe and fulfilled lives wherever they live. ☺

¹ www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2018

“Until We Find Them”: Searching for missing loved ones on the road to the North

On the morning of March 6, 2010, when her 18-year-old son Heriberto said goodbye and left for the United States, Maria Elena Larios de Gonzalez had no idea he would vanish.

Three years later, and still without news, she came into contact with the Committee of Families of Deceased and Disappeared Migrants of El Salvador (COFAMIDE), an organization formed in 2006 by families who joined forces to support each other and search for loved ones who went missing on the route north. A longstanding counterpart of Inter Pares, the organization also advocates for policy and legislative changes to ensure safer and more dignified conditions for migrants and their families.

With COFAMIDE’s help, Maria Elena reported the disappearance of her son. She also participated in workshops and received psychological support. “I used to cry and cry. I didn’t speak up, I didn’t demand anything”, she says. But as she became part of a community of people who shared similar experiences, she became stronger: “The tears turned into strength, courage, and struggle.” Today, she sits on COFAMIDE’s board and supports other families, while continuing her own search.

Once a year, COFAMIDE coordinates a caravan of mothers who travel through Central America and Mexico to investigate the whereabouts of missing migrants and to raise their profile. It was in Chiapas, Mexico, as part of one of these caravans that Maria Elena found the first clues to Heriberto’s whereabouts in six years. Out of 306 cases, COFAMIDE has so far located 44 persons, roughly half of them alive; for the others, the organization undertakes the difficult task of informing families and helping them repatriate the bodies.

There was no single reason why Heriberto Antonio Gonzalez Larios decided to leave El Salvador. An affectionate joker who liked to tease, he was about to start a family and was eager to work. Violence and the lack of



MARIA ELENA LARIOS DE GONZALEZ

Maria Elena Larios de Gonzalez has been looking for her son since 2010, when he went missing en route from El Salvador to the United States.

As Maria Elena became part of a community of people who shared similar experiences, she became stronger: “The tears turned into strength, courage, and struggle.”



COFAMIDE

Inter Pares counterpart COFAMIDE organizes an annual caravan of families to search for missing loved ones who disappeared on the route north.

opportunities, among other factors, have forced him and an estimated one fifth of the country’s population to get out. “It used to be about the ‘American dream’,” Maria Elena explains; “Now, people leave just to save their lives.”

Like so many others, she remains determined to keep searching for her son and to accompany other families, so they know that they are not alone. No matter the obstacles, and until they find them. ☹

Hope in the Countryside: Abdoulaye's story

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of ENDA Pronat, to Ottawa to speak at the launch of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) signature report the *State of Food and Agriculture* before a crowd of government officials and development and humanitarian sector representatives. The UN report explores the interconnections of migration, agriculture and rural development, and climate change, providing a holistic perspective on why many people, like Abdoulaye, choose, or are forced, to migrate. Quoting the United Nations

got married, and is now the proud father of three children. This happy ending to what could have been a tragic story is no accident. Abdoulaye is the son of Tiné Ndoye, President of the National Rural Women's Network of Senegal. Tiné, along with ENDA Pronat, have been working tirelessly, organizing women's groups, providing training in agroecology and developing market demand for local organic produce in nearby towns and cities, such as Dakar. Together, they slowly turned things around, breathing new life into Les



ERIC CHARBETTE, INTER PARES

Abdoulaye stands with his mother, Tiné Ndoye, on his organic vegetable farm.

Secretary-General, the challenge is “to maximize the benefits of migration while ensuring that it is never an act of desperation.”

Abdoulaye's story does not end there, however. As Mariam explained in her remarks, after years of hardship in Europe, Abdoulaye returned to Senegal and thanks to land that his mother was able to access, he started his own organic vegetable farm,

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Niayes, a now picturesque area characterized by green fertile valleys dotted with small vegetable farms.

As Mariam likes to say, we need to make agriculture *agréable* (pleasant), where people can live with dignity instead of migrating out of despair. Mariam repeated this message many times during her visit to Canada, whether it was at the Food Secure Canada assembly where she also spoke, or during meetings with policy makers and elected officials, including Minister of International Development Marie-Claude Bibeau. Thanks to the work of ENDA Pronat and the courageous women that make up the National Rural Women's Network of Senegal, for youth in the countryside, the promise of a better life is more within reach. ☺

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

ISSN 0715-4267 • Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1
Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by Global Affairs Canada.

