

People Over Profit



PATRICIA CHAREST MUGWANEZA

Supporters of the Open for Justice campaign call for an Ombudsman to hold extractive companies accountable for widespread human rights abuses globally.

Challenging, Confronting and Defying Corporate Power

SNC-Lavalin. General Motors. Facebook. Along with so many others in Canada these days, we at Inter Pares are reflecting upon the seemingly ubiquitous and far-reaching nature of corporate power. Confronting corporate harm is central to our economic justice programming. Where public interest collides with corporate interests, we believe the government has a role to play as a responsible counterweight. We ask whose voices are heard, and in whose interests decisions are made.

Lucy Sharratt challenged corporate power as she testified in front of a Parliamentary Committee on the topic of “public trust” in our food system. Lucy is the coordinator of the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN), where Inter Pares is an active member. CBAN promotes food sovereignty and democratic decision-making on science and technology issues in order to protect the integrity of the environment, health, food, and livelihoods in Canada and globally. [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

LAND IS LIFE

STOPPING THE UNSTOPPABLE: CITIZEN RESISTANCE TO EXTERMINATOR TECHNOLOGY IN BURKINA FASO

Land is Life



REBECCA WOJSAK, INTER PARES

Karen villagers rely on surrounding mountains for their livelihoods. These mountains face increasing threats of disappearance as demands from the area's cement industry intensifies.

Our counterparts in Burma courageously unite around the guiding principle that 'land is life'.


Land – and its control, management, and ownership – has been at the epicenter of decades-long conflict between the Burma Army and ethnic armed organizations. It is a central issue within the current deadlocked peace negotiation process as ethnic groups continue to struggle for self-determination, rights, and security of land tenure. But tenuous ceasefire agreements have opened up large ethnic areas to investment, both domestic and foreign. New market-oriented laws designed to attract corporate investment facilitate the appropriation of small-holder farmers' land into the hands of industry. The ongoing genocide and human rights violations haven't deterred the businesses still eager to capitalize on 'Asia's last frontier'. These conditions all pave the way for a surge in corporate power... But at what cost? And who pays?

Burma's ethnic populations bear the brunt of the corporate capture of land and the mega-development projects sprouting up around the country. The government touts 'business as usual', which equates to land

confiscation, forced displacement, loss of livelihoods, and threats to the cultural and spiritual lives of communities, whose resource-rich homelands are deeply intertwined with their identities and well-being. Dam, mining, and infrastructure projects are militarized, thus conflict is exacerbated. The environment is degraded and biodiversity is endangered. Health impacts arise from polluted water, air, and food insecurity. Women and girls in particular pay the

price, be it through their increased exposure to toxins, a burgeoning sex industry, or exclusion from consultations.

Yet grassroots civil society is speaking truth to military-backed corporate power. One Inter Pares counterpart* develops and advocates for policies that protect the lands, resources, and livelihoods of communities and promotes their participation in decision-making. Based on decades of grassroots work, they published a roadmap for devolved federal resource management that seeks to safeguard rights and land tenure, protect against environmental destruction, and prevent the escalation of conflict. Their alternative to corporate control is community control, by recognizing the importance of protecting the sustainable customary practices passed down for generations and supported by ethnic governance bodies.

While the refrain from the state and corporations is 'business as usual', our counterparts in Burma courageously unite around the guiding principle that 'land is life'. We're proud to stand with them. 

* Human rights and environmental defenders in Burma experience intimidation, coercion, criminalization, and violence because of their work. Our priority is the safety of our counterparts. For this reason, we have chosen to not name the counterpart featured in this article.

Stopping the Unstoppable: Citizen resistance to exterminator technology in Burkina Faso

“We will not be your guinea pigs!” Inter Pares counterpart COPAGEN asserted at a press conference denouncing Target Malaria’s plans to release gene drive mosquitos in Burkina Faso.

Target Malaria is a research consortium developing gene drive mosquitos. Also known as exterminator technology, gene drives are designed to force a trait through an entire population; in this case, the supposed goal is to exterminate malaria-carrying mosquitos. Gene drives have never been released in the world. They can alter entire ecosystems and have unpredictable consequences. According to COPAGEN and civil society groups around the world, it is an unnecessary, risky, and highly unethical experiment as malaria has, and can be, effectively eradicated through proper sanitation and public health measures. The fact that the United States military is the main investor in gene drive technology also raises concerns.

COPAGEN met with Target Malaria and community authorities and learned that research participants were paid a mere 90 cents per hour to expose their legs to collect mosquitos potentially infected by malaria. They also learned that the National Biosafety Agency had approved the release of 10,000 genetically modified mosquitos without proper prior consultation with citizens as required by law. Alarmed, COPAGEN and allies convened a press conference and a march, halting the proposed release.

In partnership with ETC Group, Inter Pares also facilitated a second fact-finding mission to gather testimonies from villagers in the planned release sites. Journalist and film maker Zahra Moloo documented the mission, and created *A question of consent: exterminator mosquitos in Burkina Faso*. The film reveals the stark lack of consent by local populations and was shown at United Nations meetings where decisions on how to regulate gene drive technologies were negotiated. There, countries agreed that restrictions




Salimata Karambiri is a member of the Steering Committee of Women of the Hauts-Bassins region, a group that represents thousands of women. The group has been vocal about their concerns with the Target Malaria project and the risks it poses to their community.



Ali Tapsoba, COPAGEN ally and founder of the local group Terre à vie, has been raising awareness about Target Malaria in Burkina Faso and in international fora.

were needed to ensure that free, prior, and informed consent of local communities is sought or obtained before gene drive organisms are released in the environment.

On July 1st, to the dismay of COPAGEN and civil society organizations worldwide, Target Malaria released 6,400 genetically modified “male sterile” mosquitoes in the town of Bana, Burkina Faso. COPAGEN has since redoubled its efforts to denounce what they view as a dangerous, unethical, and illegal release.

Pressure from corporations and the military to allow the release of gene drive technologies in the environment is tremendous – but equally powerful is strategic collaboration among citizens working in solidarity to ensure research is carried out in the public interest. Inter Pares will continue to stand with COPAGEN in their resistance. 

COPAGEN has redoubled its efforts to denounce the release of genetically modified mosquitoes.

Challenging, Confronting and Defying Corporate Power

From page 1


Inter Pares actively supports organizations and movements that interrogate, challenge, and curb corporate power.

CBAN questions how farmers can truly have control over their livelihoods when just four companies own 66% of the global commercial seed market. And how Canadians can make informed food choices if our government refuses to establish mandatory labelling of genetically engineered foods. CBAN also seeks to expose Canadian regulators' heavy reliance on science generated by the very same companies asking for product approval.

Emily Dwyer confronted corporate interests earlier this year in front of national media when she expressed extreme disappointment that the Canadian government had reneged on a commitment to establish an independent ombudsperson for corporate abuses of human rights. Emily works for the Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA), another coalition of which Inter Pares is a key member. CNCA has spent countless hours trying to establish a Canadian regulatory framework to hold extractive companies accountable for their widespread and egregious human rights abuses globally. The government promised to establish an ombudsperson with investigatory powers, full independence, and a mission to reform Canadian corporate behaviour abroad. However, the ombudsperson established has no such powers and affected communities

overseas, who are often poor and vulnerable, still have little recourse. Despite this setback, the CNCA's struggle for corporate accountability continues undeterred.

Melanie Benard defies corporate power when she speaks about the critical need for a universal, public pharmacare program in Canada. Melanie works for the Canadian Health Coalition (CHC), another coalition to which Inter Pares belongs. The CHC is committed to preserving and expanding our universal public healthcare system. Canada is the only country with a public healthcare system that doesn't cover access to prescription medication. Globally, we pay the third highest prices for medication. Currently, one in four households cannot afford their prescription medication. Large pharmaceutical and insurance companies are a major barrier, desperately lobbying to protect their vast profits. The CHC passionately advocates for pharmacare so that no one in Canada has to choose between putting food on the table and getting the medication they need.

Inter Pares actively supports organizations and movements that interrogate, challenge, and curb corporate power. Lucy, Emily and Melanie are remarkable activists resisting and organizing for change. It is a privilege to work alongside them. 



COURTESY LUCY SHARRATT

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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.

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