

Challenging Colonialism



Augusta Henriques, founder of Tinguena, facilitates a meeting with residents in the Community Marine Protected Area of Urok in the Bijagos Islands. Inter Pares embraces Tinguena's grassroots approach to developing local leadership to protect biodiversity.

Decolonizing Development

Forty-five years ago, a group of young Canadians with a passion for global peace and justice returned home from volunteering overseas, disillusioned but motivated. Their experiences revealed how foreign aid actually undermined local grassroots organizations in the Global South, imposing ideas of “development” that were based on Eurocentrism and White supremacy. Rather than supporting local

activists in their own context, aid often recreated colonial power dynamics and exacerbated inequalities.

And so, inspired by anti-colonial struggles, feminist consciousness-raising, and community organizing, they founded a new type of social justice organization: one that united activists in Canada and the Global South to work for change *inter pares*, or “among equals.” [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

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Dismantling Systemic Racism and Exclusion in Colombia

“Stop what you are doing, or you’ll pay the consequences.” Manuel Angulo,¹ an Afro-Colombian teacher² and community leader, knew only too well that this threat should be taken seriously. Manuel has been working for over twenty years promoting the rights of Afro-Colombian communities. A large focus of his work is the struggle for ethno-education: the right of Afro-Colombian children to receive culturally appropriate, quality education that reflects their history and traditions, and that combats racist stereotypes and colonial ideologies prevalent in the existing curriculum.

Over the years, this struggle and many others, including the right to free, prior, and informed consent regarding development projects affecting Afro-Colombian territories, led Manuel to assume key leadership roles. This earned him the respect of his community, but also made him a target of powerful people invested in maintaining the status quo.

Colombia has one of the largest Afro-descendant populations in Latin America, representing approximately one quarter of the entire country. Afro-Colombians, many of whose ancestors were kidnapped and brought to the Americas during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, continue to face widespread discrimination. Together with the country’s Indigenous peoples, they face high levels of poverty, exacerbated by decades of armed conflict that have disproportionately impacted them.


For Manuel, ethno-education is not only an obligation of the State, it is fundamental to dismantling systemic racism and exclusion.



Afro-Colombian teachers from the Pacific Coast take part in a protest in the city of Pasto in support of ethno-education.

For Manuel, ethno-education is not only an obligation of the State, it is fundamental to the dismantling of systemic racism and exclusion that Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities face.

Since receiving this first threat in 2017, Manuel and his family have been forced to relocate five times, and are now among the estimated 7.5 million Colombians who remain internally displaced. The organization that he leads – UNAFRO – is part of COMOSOC, a broad coalition of social organizations and movements supported by Inter Pares. Since 2016, over 1,000 social leaders, among them numerous members of COMOSOC, have been murdered as a result of their work of challenging unjust and deeply engrained systems.

The threats faced by Manuel and so many people like him cannot be allowed to continue. Inter Pares will continue to work with our Colombian counterparts and Canadian allies to demand that the Colombian government take decisive action to end structural violence, comply with its obligations under the 2016 peace agreement, and stop the systematic attacks against the country’s social leaders. 

¹ Manuel’s real name has been changed to protect his identity.

² Afro-Colombian human rights and social justice movements normally use the terminology “Black, Afro-descendant, Palenquera and Raizal” peoples, which reflects distinct cultural and demographic centres in the country. For brevity, we are using the term “Afro-Colombian” in this article.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Colonialism Start with Us

For many people, 2020 was a year of increased awareness about injustices in our society. The outrage sparked by the death of Joyce Echaquan and the momentous Black Lives Matter protests represent a public rejection of a system where power is not shared equally, but for the advantage of a dominant group.

To confront this system, we must name it, recognize it, and understand it. La Ligue des droits et libertés, an Inter Pares counterpart, defines systemic racism as a system of oppression that favours one group at the expense of racialized groups.¹ In recognizing this as a system, we can move away from individual accusations of racism and instead uncover underlying discriminatory policies and norms. When we understand that power structures inherited from a colonial past perpetuate these injustices, the possibilities for collective change are greater. Each person can then become open to taking individual and collective responsibility for realizing anti-racism.


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Change also happens by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups as they demand respect for their rights. For example, Justicia for Migrant Workers (J4MW) is an activist group that advocates for change in the unjust treatment of migrant farm workers in Canada. The federal Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program promotes a division of labour based on race, makes essential agricultural work



Members and supporters of Solidarity Across Borders, a migrant justice network based in Montreal, march as part of the Status For All campaign in July 2020.

precarious and denies the rights of racialized workers, while contributing to global structural inequalities. In resistance, J4MW launched the Colours of Food campaign to highlight the injustices suffered by these essential workers.

Glimmers of transformation are appearing: media coverage and analysis throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is revealing how migrant and racialized people are disproportionately affected; and Montreal established a commission on systemic racism. Each action in itself is small, but as they multiply, they foreshadow a greater collective awareness. As Natasha Kanapé Fontaine, Innu poet and activist, said following the death of Joyce Echaquan, “We must demand justice, we must demand that systemic institutional racism be eliminated so that each person is treated with dignity and humanity ... We absolutely must be able to work together, fight together, so this can stop. ... We must call for solidarity and for people to come together.”² 

¹ *Systemic racism...Let's talk about it!* La Ligue des droits et libertés. April 2018. <https://liguedesdroits.ca/brochure-systemic-racism-anglais/>

² *Racism systématique : Elisapie et Natasha Kanapé Fontaine interpellent Legault.* Valérie Boisclair, Radio-Canada. 1 October 2020.

Decolonizing Development

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Inter Pares still aspires to uphold that principle for which we were named. We work with counterparts – grassroots organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Canada – in long-term, political relationships built on mutual respect and common cause. We view our counterparts as activists and experts on their own local context, and embrace their leadership in our collabora-

tions. By working in Canada, Inter Pares also recognizes the injustices within our own borders. Our approach is not one of charity, but of profound solidarity.

As Canadians, many of the resources and privileges we enjoy have been gained through exploitation, within and beyond our borders. Our solidarity with our counterparts strives to address the global

political and capitalist power Canada wields at the expense of others. For example, through MiningWatch Canada and the Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability, we work with allies in Canada to hold the Canadian government and extractive industry accountable. This work was instigated by counterparts in Nicaragua, Ghana, and

the Philippines, who, decades ago, highlighted that the community initiatives we supported were undermined by Canadian mining companies. Similarly, two years ago, when we heard from our counterpart in Burkina Faso, COPAGEN,¹ that a predominantly Northern consortium was imposing an unsafe and unproven technology – namely releasing genetically modified mosquitoes – without community awareness and consent, we supported counterparts' own research and advocacy efforts.

When we raise funds for international counterparts, we are doing what we can to redistribute resources that have been unfairly concentrated in the Global North. Still, colonialism, and by extension racism, are ingrained in the systems in which we must operate. Despite Canada's creation of a *Feminist International Assistance Policy*, the government mandates that we “direct and control”² the funds with which we support our counterparts. As a registered charity, Inter Pares is required to act as if local counterparts are devoid of agency and simply implementing our programs. Ultimately, such restrictions are not about accountability, but express a fundamental mistrust of communities in the Global South – mistrust that is still based in Eurocentrism and white supremacy. At Inter Pares, we see our long-term relationships with counterparts at the heart of a reciprocal approach to accountability. We are advocating for aid structures and a comprehensive feminist foreign policy rooted in solidarity and equality. ☰



Inter Pares' Jean Symes walks with Hannah Cheptais, then-Kenya Program Coordinator for long-time counterpart ACORD, while visiting women's food processing cooperatives.

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¹ COPAGEN is the Coalition pour la protection du patrimoine génétique africain (Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage) working in nine countries in West Africa.

² “Direction and control” is a term used by the Canada Revenue Agency.

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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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