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***From the Land: Reconciliation in action in Canada and Colombia***  
**Inter Pares' 2016 Speakers Series**  
**Opening reflections, Jean Symes**

Thank you so much for joining us for Inter Pares' annual Speakers Series.

For Inter Pares, this is a time to reflect on issues that affect the people we work with overseas, and connect them to issues here in Canada.

In 2001, as part of the Inter Pares Latin America team, I was involved in accompanying our counterparts during the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation hearings in Peru. During that process, people who had been victims in the dirty war a decade before – families of the disappeared and massacred, mothers' committees, youth groups, indigenous communities – all came together in a joint statement to speak their truths and publically acknowledge their lost loved ones:

*“We express our deepest respect, recognition and regret for the thousands of people who were victims of the conflict. We accept them all as our own kin, and reaffirm our commitment to continue working for truth and the search for justice, the only glue that can make reconciliation possible in Peru.”*

*Truth and justice*, the glue that makes reconciliation possible. This wisdom has stayed with me.

Later I found out that the word ***reconciliation*** comes from a Latin word meaning “to bring things back into balance.” And in situations like Peru, Colombia and Canada, our societies have become seriously out of balance.

Some people's truths have never been told.

Some people have never been able to access justice.

The process of reconciliation – which is a process of generations – can take place when people are able to tell the truths that have been suppressed, and when other people hear those truths. It can happen when people seek justice, and others support them to ensure that justice is done.

Almost since its inception, Inter Pares has supported the efforts of people in many countries who are taking action to build and rebuild their societies with justice. And in this struggle, the issue of land is always central.

To the powerful, land represents profitable resources: mineral wealth, petroleum, lumber, large-scale agriculture.

To many of the people who are displaced from their land, and especially Indigenous people, land is so much more.

The title of this year's Speakers Series is *From the Land: Reconciliation in action in Canada and Colombia*. Tonight we'll explore reconciliation through the lens of land and land rights, and what reconciliation means in practical terms for every day people in Colombia and in Canada.

We chose this theme with the knowledge that a historic moment is being lived in both Canada and Colombia.

We are both at turning points in painful conflicts that have wracked our countries for generations. While the conflicts and their aftermath are still ongoing – in both Canada and Colombia – we now have the challenge *and* the opportunity to build understanding through truth, to seek justice for all, and eventually, to build reconciliation on that foundation.

In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report on the crimes against indigenous people in Canada came out last year. In Colombia, peace agreements are being negotiated to spell the end of a war that has raged for over 50 years, with repression that reaches back further.

In both places, the crimes were against the most marginalized peoples, often in rural areas, and involved the theft of the land these

peoples lived on. Much of the rest of the population, particularly people in the cities, were unaware of the injustice – or turned a blind eye – and were taught to blame the victims.

Our speakers will be talking about how this process has unfolded in Canada and in Colombia.

But we also wanted to bring in the voices of many people we work with who couldn't be here today. So before I introduce our speakers, we have a brief video presentation of the people Inter Pares works with in El Salvador, Guatemala, Cote d'Ivoire, Sudan, Kenya and Guinea-Bissau reflecting on land, and what it means in the search for truth, justice and reconciliation.