



Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Reclaiming Our Food

In 2008, the world food crisis reached unprecedented levels. In many parts of the world, grain prices doubled or even tripled. Food riots erupted on various continents, and desperate pleas were made by the World Food Program for governments to increase their support to food aid to feed 850 million hungry people.

The food crisis is attributed to a variety of factors: rising oil prices, financial speculation, proliferation of meat-based diets, massive conversion of foodcrops to ethanol and biodiesel, and severe droughts and flooding. These elements merged to create a “perfect storm” that led to the fastest depletion of food reserves in decades. But there is more to the story. The “perfect storm” was decades in the making. It was predictable – and avoidable.

Agriculture has always involved risks, and farmers, communities, and countries have developed strategies to manage them. These include public food reserves and supply management boards – mechanisms to collectively manage what and how much is produced in a given year to ensure a fair price for farmers and an adequate food supply. Strategies also include planting a diversity of crops and varieties. Biodiversity and farmers’ autonomy have been the cornerstones of effective and adaptable agricultural systems.

But neoliberal economic policies and industrial agriculture fly in the face of this wisdom. These forces have turned autonomous farmers into debt-ridden clients of chemical companies. They have turned once healthy and biologically diverse fields into uniform and toxic green deserts. They have turned breadbasket countries into countries facing food insecurity. We have lost control over how our food is produced. It has made us vulnerable, and it is pushing forward a model of agriculture that is inexorably leading to further hunger and environmental destruction. We can and must change the course we are on.

2008 marks the 30th anniversary of the People’s Food Commission, an unprecedented civic process that unfolded across Canada. The Commission was launched in 1978 at a time when, like today, fuel and food costs were rising dramatically, and farmers were going out of business. The Commission visited 75 communities across the country,



Sorghum, a staple crop in Mali.

ERIC CHAURETTE

from Victoria, British Columbia to Nain, Labrador, building critical awareness among Canadians of the forces shaping food and agriculture policy. It generated ideas and inspired new visions of how things could be done differently. A generation of food activists was born, and with it, initiatives for building a food system based on solidarity, health and equity.

These initiatives have matured and expanded, linking with others around the globe to form a movement for food sovereignty. This international movement is promoting policies that favour ecological agriculture and local production for local markets. It is asserting a central place for family farms and rejecting the notion that water, seeds, and food be treated as simple commodities to be traded. Food sovereignty has become a powerful rallying cry for resistance, while also proposing workable alternatives.

For many, 2008 was a year of crisis. But it was also a turning point. The world has recognized that the time for change is now. Perhaps the greatest challenge ahead is for us to have the courage to look critically at ourselves – our lifestyles – and to become the change we want to see.

This last *Bulletin* of the year celebrates individuals and organizations that are at the forefront of the struggle to reclaim our food, and to organize our agriculture, our economies, and our societies differently to eliminate hunger and ensure healthy communities and a healthy planet. ☘

From Food Insecurity to Food Sovereignty

“Laxmamma is an amazing farmer. She knows every different type of soil in this region, exactly what kinds of crops are best adapted to grow on each, and when and how to plant them. We have learned so much from her.” This comment was made by the Secretary of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), an Inter Pares counterpart in southern India. Laxmamma has no formal education, belongs to the *Dalit* caste (better known as “untouchables”), and has little land of her own. Together with twenty other poor women farmers, she belongs to the village *sangham* – a village-level women’s group. With the accompaniment of DDS they have taken back control of their land, their seeds, their food and, to a large degree, their future. This is a shining example of what many people refer to as food sovereignty.

DDS works in the Deccan region – semi-arid, susceptible to serious drought, and one of the poorest areas in India. This remarkable achievement in food sovereignty is part of DDS’s work with over five thousand women who belong to *sanghams* in 75 villages throughout the region. In the early 1990s, women farmers began to use intercropping and rotation to add beans, vegetables and fodder crops. With these and other organic techniques they were able to increase yields of their staple grain, millet, on their small plots. However, they did not have sufficient arable land to produce enough food for the entire year. So these women began a process to recover degraded land.

Responding to pressure from the *sanghams* and DDS, the government provided one-time loans to plough the soil and apply locally gathered manure to restore fertility. The loans were repaid in the form of grain to Community Grain Funds that are managed by the women. With this approach, women farmers have brought over 4,000 hectares of marginal, degraded land into production. The women of the *sanghams* now grow, store, and distribute enough food so that even during droughts they have sufficient supply, and do not require government assistance.

The women achieved this food security without new “high-tech” seeds, but with the same varieties that local

farmers have developed over centuries, adapted to the highly variable local conditions. These crop varieties do not require chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Using organic methods, farmers like Laxmamma remain unaffected by skyrocketing prices of chemicals.

In the Deccan region, women are the seedkeepers, and they preserve, lend, borrow and exchange the seeds of the crops they grow in their fields. They know that climate change will affect their agriculture but they feel prepared. Over generations they have developed seeds that are already adapted to a huge diversity of conditions and, Laxmamma adds, “we are happy to share them with others.” Beginning with genetically modified cotton and moving on to food crops, the Indian government and multinational agribusiness have aggressively promoted new and very expensive seeds. Through DDS’s participation in the coalition South Against Genetic Engineering (SAGE) – supported by Inter Pares – they reject the introduction of genetically modified crops and the resulting loss of control over their seeds.

Every year in February, the women of DDS beautifully decorate dozens of large bullock carts to create the “Biodiversity Caravan,” and then take the caravan to walk the dusty roads of the Deccan region. They visit villages throughout the state to share knowledge about seeds and farming techniques with other farmers, bringing a message of the importance of biodiversity and farmer control over land and agriculture. Through a series of films made by the women themselves, the message has reached an international audience in countries around the world.

In spite of the global food crisis, these activities continue to grow every year to include more farmers and more land. People in the villages where DDS is active have a good food supply, their nutrition has improved, the soil is more fertile and yields have increased. The improvements were not a result of biotechnology or chemical fertilizers. They are the result of supporting farmers in regaining control of their own agriculture, and on a local scale, achieving food sovereignty. ☞

A CLOSER LOOK AT AGROFUELS

The Agrofuels Rush

- Only 2% of global arable land is currently used for agrofuels, but with new mandatory targets set by governments for ethanol and biodiesel in fuel, this is likely to increase to 12% by 2050.
- During the 2007-2008 crop year, 11% of the world’s corn production went to agrofuels. In the US, 25% of the corn produced went to agrofuels.
- A 2007 Library of Parliament report estimates that approximately

half of Canada’s current farm land used for corn would be required to meet the target of 5% ethanol in gasoline by 2010.

- Global investments in biofuels rose from \$5 billion (US) in 1995 to \$38 billion in 2005, and is expected to top \$100 billion by 2010.

Fueling a Food Crisis and Human Rights Abuses

- According to the World Bank, three-quarters of the dramatic rise in global food prices is due to the increase in agrofuels production in the US and the European Union.

Crops, Cars and Climate Crisis

Across the global South, farmers and community organizers are using the word “agrofuels” to describe the industrial production of crops for fuel. Some say that we are confronted with a choice between feeding cars or people. But for people in the global South, the debate is also about human rights violations, forced displacement, land ownership, the impacts of industrial agriculture, climate change, the increasing divide between urban and rural populations, and over-consumption.

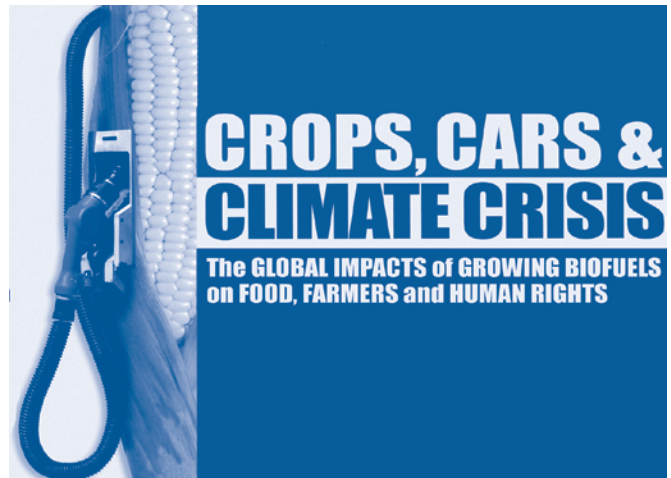
Last May, Inter Pares, along with a coalition of social justice, international solidarity and farmers’ organizations, carried out a six-city tour across Canada to raise public awareness on agrofuels. Despite the touted benefits of agrofuels as a “green solution,” the use of food to feed cars and machinery rather than human beings is increasingly being questioned. Under the theme “Crops, Cars and Climate Crisis,” public debates were organized with local groups and with the participation of farmers, researchers, and activists from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America.

Marilyn Machado, an Afro-Colombian woman, explained that increased demand for palm oil is leading companies to violently force people off their land to convert it to palm oil plantations. Communities are denied the right to decide what they want to grow on their land, while large-scale palm oil monocultures compete with the production of food for local consumption and reduce biodiversity. Marilyn said that she felt her government was more worried about economic policies that would benefit foreign companies and respond to Northern energy demands than about the well-being of its own population.

Moreover, corporate manipulation and control of markets, combined with financial speculation in food reserves, are invisible but crucial elements of the global food system. In the words of Alberto Gómez, a peasant leader from Mexico who also participated in the agrofuels tour, “We cannot let transnational corporations decide what food will get produced and how it will get distributed, where and to whom.”

- Canadian consumers can be expected to pay roughly \$400 million more annually for food due to ethanol supports.
- Filling the 25-gallon tank of an SUV with corn-based ethanol requires over 450 pounds of corn, which contain enough calories to feed one person for a year.
- In Asia and Latin America, government-supported schemes for large-scale plantations of crops for fuel is resulting in the destruction of entire villages, forced displacement of people, and even assassinations.

For further information: www.cban.ca/resources/topics/agrofuels



Similar concerns were expressed by Ousmane Samaké from Mali, who detailed the expansion of jatropha crops for agrofuels in his country. For Ousmane, the large-scale and water-intensive jatropha monocultures erode biodiversity and reduce access to water. Moreover, jatropha tends to be cultivated on lands that are essential for grazing and where women collect firewood, thereby exacerbating conflicts between communities over scarce resources.

Through their participation in these debates, Canadian audiences from Charlottetown to Saskatoon realized that agrofuels are not simply a matter for scientists, experts and farmers. They are a concern to all of us. The debate on agrofuels cannot be reduced to land availability or the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions – especially considering that, on a global scale, agrofuels will worsen greenhouse gas emissions because of deforestation due to agrofuel crop plantations.

As the tour crossed Canada, Bill C-33 was being debated and was subsequently adopted by Parliament, requiring that all gasoline include 5% ethanol content by 2010, paving the way for a \$2.2 billion subsidy for agrofuels. Participants in the agrofuels debates across the country demanded to know why public funding is being used to promote a so-called solution that is increasingly being called into question.

In addition to six public fora, Inter Pares also helped convene a high-level policy dialogue among agrofuels industry lobbyists, our international guests, and government representatives. Some industry representatives attempted to disconnect the push for agrofuels in Canada from the impact its production has on people around the world. But, as one of the participants said, “Canada is completely linked to the global context. If people in the South are coming under such extreme pressure to use their land to produce crops that cannot even feed them, then we have got to start looking at what our role is in creating such a global rush.”

The high-level policy dialogue was made possible with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

You can view the Crops, Cars, and Climate Crisis Ottawa Public Forum at www.interpares.ca/cpacvideo.

Food Activism Across Generations



ERIC CHAURETTE

Moe Garahan and Cathleen Kneen.

In the late seventies, Inter Pares and 125 organizations held hearings across the country. In 75 cities over 5,000 people shared their difficulties in producing and consuming quality, affordable food, and their visions for change. The People's Food Commission inspired a vibrant community of food activists and organizations that have been working to reclaim the food system for the past thirty years. Taking into account what has been accomplished, and looking forward to the challenges ahead, two Inter Pares collaborators, Cathleen Kneen, Chair of Food Secure Canada, and Moe Garahan, coordinator of Just Food and a farmer herself, share experiences and lessons learned across generations of food activism.

How did you become involved in food activism?

Cathleen: My first political engagement was as an eighteen-year-old activist campaigning for nuclear disarmament. It was the late sixties, and the whole mix of social justice analysis, feminism, and anti-war activism came together for me. In 1971, our family moved to Nova Scotia, and fifteen years of farming there instilled in me an analysis of social justice that is based on a daily practice of growing food. It didn't really hit me till I left the farm that the dominant paradigm of agriculture was rooted in the same violent patriarchal model that I had been fighting in other parts of my life. That was a "Eureka!" moment for me.

Moe: I had a very personal beginning. I lived in Northern Ontario and when I went to university in the nineties, I made a decision to become a vegetarian. In university, I was exposed to the theory that supported some of the choices I had made as an individual. When I moved to Ottawa, I worked in an emergency food bank. I was struck by the lack of interest in looking at the issues underlying poverty. I came to understand that an emergency food system has become a needed and structured element of our social safety net. A few of us began organizing collective kitchens, community gardens, and food co-ops. Eventually, this led to the creation of Just Food. I began to really understand food production issues when I grew my first tomato. I have now started my first farming adventure, on my own.

What has been a major accomplishment of the struggle to reclaim our food system?

Cathleen: Survival. It's so hard to look straight at the mess we're making. It's so painful. Whether it's farmers committing suicide because they have to surrender the land that their family has had for generations, or whether it's women who live on hot water with pepper and salt in it, calling it soup so that they can feed their children. And this is in our own country. It's land that's been made impossible to grow food on, toxic fish that you can't eat. We have to help people see the issues without being completely demobilized.

Moe: And help them access food in a way that makes sense for them. I think this is a major accomplishment in the development of a healthy food system.

What is your vision for a healthy food system in Canada?

Moe: If we did one thing to transform the food system – and there are many things that need to change – it would be to choose to pay the actual labour, environmental, and nutritional cost of food production. If we could pay for the full cost of fair and just food, it would go a long way to transforming the political and economic structures in Canada that maintain a food system that doesn't work for so many. This vision includes a social system that would provide for those who cannot access enough quality food on a daily basis.

Access to quality food is fundamental. My vision also includes an edible landscape in urban and rural environments so that children walking down the road to school can identify and take handfuls of currants as they walk down the street.

How do you see the road ahead?

Cathleen: The People's Food Policy Project starts where the People's Food Commission left off. It's a project to work with the organizations and the groups that have grown up over the last thirty years, some of them very recent, to address the inequities and problems in the food system.

Moe: Not only do we know what the problems with the food systems are, but we have a lot of need-based, people-focused solutions being implemented around the country. As part of the committee for the People's Food Policy Project, I want to push for policies that enable this healthy food system to emerge much more strongly. I am excited about this road ahead together. It is truly an intergenerational project. ✂

For the full transcript of this interview go to our Web site at www.interpares.ca. Inter Pares gratefully acknowledges the support of the EJLB Foundation for this work.

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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 inequities 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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