



Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Giving as an Act of Solidarity

Staff member Rachel Gouin recently travelled to Guinea-Bissau to meet with young organizers who are building a better future for their country. The following is an excerpt from Rachel's trip report.

I made my way to the youth drop-in centre, located on a backstreet of the capital city of Bissau. Twenty young people had quietly gathered and greeted me shyly. Didier, who had invited us, introduced me and explained that part of my work in Canada involves raising funds for Inter Pares' social justice programs. I had come to this tiny West African country to share experiences with young organizers and facilitate a workshop on how to garner human and financial resources for social justice work.

As a starting exercise, I asked participants to draw images of the challenges they face and the vision they have for the future.

João, a young man who works to promote culture through traditional music, dance and theatre, tells us how, when the only music school in Bissau closed, former students, including himself, created an association called *Netos de Amizade* ("Grandchildren of Friendship") and began introducing children to their cultural heritage. The first image João drew was of a burning plant, illustrating the loss of tradition. The second image, his vision for the future, was of a pirogue (a fishing boat). "In this pirogue," he said, "we are at the helm."

Inter Pares has worked with the Bissau-Guinean organization, Tiniguena, for close to 20 years. Every two years, Tiniguena organizes an exchange bringing young people from the capital of Bissau to other regions of the country. The goal is to deepen their appreciation for their country's biological and cultural diversity so that they will work to preserve it. "What you know and love, you will protect," Tiniguena staff members say. When participants return to the city, they organize fundraising activities to support a community project in the area they visited. One year they raised money to repair a school's roof that was in such poor condition that it was threatening to collapse during the rainy season. Ten years later, the school is still standing, and members of the community remember the young people who helped make this happen.

The communities are not the only ones to benefit. The exchange program also builds leadership among participants. Many have remained active with New Generation of



Didier Monteiro (GNT), Manuel da Silva (Cupelum de Baixo Youth Association) and Luana Pereira (GNT) participating in a workshop facilitated by Rachel Gouin of Inter Pares.

Tiniguena (GNT), conducting research and education on issues such as the food crisis. Others have joined neighbourhood youth associations to improve living conditions in areas such as sanitation, education and culture. It is these young people who gathered with me that morning to share stories and learn from each other.

I described how Inter Pares encourages Canadians to express financial and political solidarity with our work. For us, the main goal of fundraising is to build a movement by gaining the support of people who care about social justice and are willing to stand with us, financially and politically – a message that resonated, as these young people are also looking to build financial and political support in their own context.

The youth I met during my trip have many challenges to overcome, including a lack of material resources, and the fact that many of their colleagues are leaving to study abroad. But some are returning, and the optimistic vision they have for their country is unwavering. Their work does not appear to be a weight they carry but a joy at the possibility of a better world, one they have an active role in creating.

Sharing Inter Pares' experience of building Canadian political and financial support for social change was a learning experience for me. Tiniguena's work has helped create a generation of activists working to improve their own lives and communities. Bissau-Guineans' own contributions to youth associations demonstrate their ownership and commitment to seeing this generation succeed. In this nexus of joint action and learning, Canadian and Bissau-Guineans meet in a global movement of social solidarity. ☪

Building Community Across the Atlantic Ocean

We were surprised when in August 2008, our colleague Ibrahim Ouedraogo, coordinator of the Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN), asked us when the monsoon season would end in Canada. We laughed, understanding how he felt after spending a few rainy weeks in Eastern Canada. Accompanied by staff members Erum Hasan and Caroline Boudreau, Ibrahim met Inter Pares supporters in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Quebec, engaging in lively discussions on issues we all care about.

At the Fredericton farmers' market, teacher Kurt Schmidt gave us a brief taste of the depth of his community involvement. Accompanied by his wife Catherine and their baby, the Schmidts had a lot to share with Ibrahim, as both parents had had the opportunity to work in Africa. They were interested to learn more about how COPAGEN works across West Africa in so many different languages. Ibrahim explained that through collaboration with linguists, farmer leaders, and scientists, they have succeeded in translating complex ideas such as biotechnology and genetically modified organisms into local languages.

A few days later, in Halifax, Patricia Brennan-Alpert warmly welcomed us with freshly made bread. With her two grandchildren listening attentively, she told us about the taste of rice she remembers from her years in Liberia. Ibrahim then shared how COPAGEN works with rural communities to promote their rights over their own lands and genetic resources to ensure that rice, and other locally produced and

consumed foods, are better valued and protected.

We then continued to Quebec City, where we met Jacques Gélinas, author of *Freedom from Debt: The Reappropriation of Development through Financial Self-Reliance*, and a collaborator and committed donor of Inter Pares. His questions about the impact of the recent food crisis on the African continent led to a lively discussion on how to connect the implications of international policies to the realities of urban and rural communities across Africa and Canada.

Talking with Ibrahim before his return to Côte d'Ivoire, we thought back to how warmly we had been welcomed in each place we visited. People were generous with their time, and expressed a deep level of confidence in Inter Pares' work. Many were surprised when we reminded them that they had been donating to Inter Pares for 12 or even 25 years. In our discussions with donors about the importance of their financial support, it was obvious that money is only one part of their commitment; they also feel a sense of pride at being part of a larger movement of people who believe in acting for change. These encounters strengthened our belief that Canadians care about the struggles of people around the world, and are seeking new ways of building community.

Inter Pares would like to thank our thousands of supporters from all across Canada, including those who have taken the time to welcome us and our counterparts in their communities. If you would be interested in welcoming us for an individual visit or introducing our work to your friends and family, please get in touch any time. ✂



Kurt Schmidt and Ibrahim Ouedraogo at a farmers' market in Fredericton.



Inter Pares staff members Caroline Boudreau and Erum Hasan along with Ibrahim Ouedraogo, coordinator of COPAGEN.

CAROLINE BOUDREAU

“Burma Got a Hold of Me”



Rod Germaine

While living and working in Hong Kong in the early 1990s, Rod Germaine and his wife Adeline spent their holidays travelling in the region. They took a two-week holiday in Burma in 1990 and were struck by the disturbing contrasts: stunning physical beauty and warm, engaging people under the control of one of the world’s most corrupt and brutal military regimes. As Rod says, “Burma got a hold of me.”

Years later, when they returned to Vancouver, Rod felt that it was time to do something for Burma. He had recently taken up golf and decided to combine his two passions. He first turned to the Vancouver Burma Round Table for information about organizations providing health services to people from Burma and learned about the Mae Tao Clinic, the Back Pack Health Workers Team and Inter Pares. He then turned to his community and organized a golf tournament to raise funds for Burma. This past September, the sixth annual Just Golf Tournament and Dinner raised over \$30,000.

Rod’s work has evolved from organizing golf tournaments to establishing the Just Aid Foundation. While the golf tournament is still their biggest fundraiser, the charitable foundation is expanding to include other events. The Saffron Revolution last year, in which thousands of monks, nuns and others protesting against the junta were violently suppressed, motivated a fresh group of activists in Canada. Rod met some of these people at events in Vancouver and many of them have now joined the Foundation’s board.

Through the tournament, Rod met Dr. Penny Ballem, former Deputy Health Minister of British Columbia and they immediately began planning for her to visit Burma’s border and meet the Mae Tao Clinic and Back Pack Health Worker Teams. In 2007, Inter Pares staff Rebecca Wolsak accompanied Penny for an exchange with these two health organizations. Penny is now the President of the Foundation.

The Just Aid Foundation contributed \$75,000 in 2008 to Inter Pares’ health program on Burma’s borders. In addition to this significant financial contribution, Rod’s commitment to Burma has attracted many others to the cause, demonstrating how an individual’s passion can be contagious, expanding a movement for solidarity and justice. ✂

In It for the Long Haul

Inter Pares staff members are often asked how we maintain hope for peace and justice in an increasingly militarized and violent world. Along with drawing strength from the courageous work of our counterparts in different countries, we are continually inspired by our community of supporters in Canada. With every gift, letter or telephone call we receive, our work is reaffirmed. Despite geographic distances and varying backgrounds, our supporters make it clear: solidarity for a better world exists.

One such supporter, the Sœurs de la Congrégation de Notre Dame from Montreal, shares this sentiment with us. Underpinning each financial contribution to Inter Pares are their politics for social change, and their vision that social action can lead to the dignity of all human beings. As Sister Jauvin puts it, “We are not looking to temporarily bail out those in need; instead we want to transform the conditions which create injustice ... for us the most important thing is that every human being have autonomy and be a valued member of their community, however long this takes.”

One of the guiding principles for the Sisters’ social

justice work is eliminating violence against women. As Sister Jauvin recounts, “Women are the heart of the community; if they suffer injustice, the entire community cracks...everything is linked, one injustice leads to another.”

For this reason, the Sisters have generously supported Inter Pares’ work in Guatemala. Seeking to promote women’s human rights and deepen their political participation, this work recently brought 65 women survivors of sexual violence to pursue their goals for justice, reparations and healing in the wake of decades of armed conflict.

The Sisters recognize that transforming deeply entrenched injustices is a long-term commitment from which they may not see immediate outcomes – an inspiring task they are willing to take on, like many Inter Pares supporters. The dynamic relationships Inter Pares forges with communities around the world are fuelled at the source by individual donors and organizations that provide social, political, and financial support. The activism of these essential actors may often go unnoticed – however it is their long-term commitment that allows the work for justice to be sustained. ✂

The Terrain of Solidarity

The following is adapted from a recent keynote address by Inter Pares Executive Director Molly Kane to a gathering of the Canadian Association of African Studies. The complete speech is available on the Inter Pares Web site at www.interpares.ca/caas.

Yesterday, during a panel on resource extraction in Africa, one of the presenters referred to the news that day that five hundred ducks had died in a tailings pond of the Alberta tar sands, commenting that “African leaders would be happy to only have to deal with the problem of five hundred ducks dying in a pond.” We did not have a chance to discuss this comment during the panel. However, it struck me at the time that his anecdote revealed a limited understanding of how we in Canada are connected with people in Africa, and therefore what the basis of our solidarity might be.

I returned to Canada a couple of weeks ago from Mali where I spent a few days with pastoralists in the Sahel, near the Mali/Mauritania border. The communities there are facing the destruction of their livelihoods and way of life, and eventual dislocation, due to loss of water through desertification and climate change. In the past two years, the water table has fallen so sharply that a vast area can no longer support people who have survived in this difficult and fragile ecosystem for centuries. I can assure you that African leaders do have to worry about what happens to five hundred ducks in the Alberta tar sands, and about the environmental consequences of exploiting this resource.

Our understanding of our relationship as peoples, as fellow citizens of the planet, suffers from not examining sufficiently the lens with which we have come to look at the so-called “African problem” – which is so often defined by poverty, violence, conflict, disease, and the failure of leadership. While this construct may move people in the West to express concern and sympathy for the “Other,” for those who suffer, it also tends to obscure history, agency, and diversity – and therefore tends to reinforce the belief that real change, transformative change, is simply not possible.

During a time of rising global campaigning around the future of Africa, I am struck by the extent to which the voices of the great majority of people in African countries are rarely heard outside the continent. I am struck, too, by how the messages broadcast by others in their name, and ostensibly in their service, often reduce their lives from historical, complex, and diverse aspirations for survival and self-determination to a “disaster,” a “basket case,” an aid project to be managed with the knowledge, technology, and power of others.

As a visitor to African civil society fora over the years, I have heard many stories and many points of view. Young people challenge the older generations to make way for new kinds of leadership and political action. Women assert their

determination not to be marginalized within movements. Farmers criticize NGOs and academics for appropriating their struggles and their voices. People discuss human rights, the World Trade Organization, debt cancellation, women’s rights, peace-building, and democratization. But rarely do I hear anyone say that Africa needs more aid. Neither does anyone say that Africa does not require aid. The subject just does not come up when Africa’s strategic development interests are being discussed.

And yet, in Canada, much of the advocacy for Africa has focused on the aid relationship – to the detriment of transforming the many other ways in which the lives of people in Africa and people in Canada are connected. The interests of ordinary Canadians and Africans are converging, as people struggle with environmental, social, and economic injustice everywhere; at the same time the chasm between the material circumstances of our societies is also widening and deepening. The complexity of this reality is not well-served by encouraging a charitable response to poverty without also encouraging reflection and action to address the perpetuation of inequality.

While the “terrain of solidarity” is difficult in such an unequal world, we can choose to find ways to bridge these divides that express mutual respect and our commitment to a common cause. Solidarity, whether within a family, a village, an association, or among nations, *can* and often does include sharing money. We should make every effort to share our wealth to support social transformation; to take risks, innovate, dissent, and engage in long-term accompaniment based on equality and accountability – accountability to those in Canada who share their money, and accountability to those in Africa in whose names we carry out our 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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