



Inter Pares

BULLETIN

VOLUME 32, NUMBER 4, NOVEMBER 2010

Shining a Light: Inter Pares' thirty-five years of social justice action

At our April Annual General Meeting, staff member Peter Gillespie reflected on his more than two and a half decades with Inter Pares. Here is some of what he said.

What I thought I would do tonight is to tell some stories to show what Inter Pares does and has been doing since this organization was created thirty-five years ago.

I have been privileged to work with some of the most extraordinary people in the world: anti-poverty workers, human rights activists, people in the anti-apartheid movement and anti-dictatorship struggles in Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Burma. These people knew that democracy, human rights and social justice were values worth devoting their lives to and risking their lives for. Remarkably, even in the face of danger, they organized; they developed farmer's cooperatives, women's organizations, health and education programs for displaced people, services for the survivors of torture and violence. It has been an honour to accompany these struggles – although I am still haunted by the loss of friends and colleagues along the way.

I have also had the privilege of working with some of the most marginalized people in the world: with rickshaw wallahs in Bangladesh, whose generosity despite their poverty always humbled me; with landless people defending themselves from forcible eviction; with sugar workers in the Philippines, working to dismantle a feudal system that had trapped them and their families for generations; with refugees from Burma who, despite mortal danger, organize health teams to go into war zones to serve displaced communities...

Part of what makes Inter Pares unique is that we have always considered Canada as part of the terrain in which we work. When I joined Inter Pares in 1985, we were addressing the medicalization of women's health and the targeting of women by the pharmaceutical industry. Our work engaged Canadian women's health activists and incorporated parallel experiences of

women in Bangladesh. Throughout the 1990s, in Canada and overseas, we worked on reproductive rights issues, challenging top-down, coercive and often forcible sterilization programs that targeted poor women in places like Bangladesh and Indonesia, as well as aboriginal and disabled women in Canada.

Inter Pares also participates in debates about Canada's role in the world – on regulations for Canadian mining companies operating overseas, on agrofuels, and on the need for an ethical framework for the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board...

In recent years we have been working with Burmese refugees in Malaysia, supporting their efforts to organize for their own protection. To be a refugee in Malaysia is to be criminalized. Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees, and views refugees as illegal migrants. So these people – already forced to flee their homes – are subject to arrest, extortion, detention, flogging and deportation. Refugees are frequently sold by Malaysian immigration authorities to traffickers who in turn sell them as slave labourers to the plantations and fishing fleets. Women refugees often simply disappear. The Malaysian government has organized civilian vigilantes to hunt refugees – paying these vigilantes a bounty for every refugee they bring in. You can imagine what happens.

Several years ago I visited one of the jungle camps in Malaysia where a group of forty refugees lived. The camp was in a ravine full of mosquitoes and people slept on bamboo platforms with plastic sheeting overhead. On the only level ground they built a chapel. As they gathered at the chapel, I sat and listened to their stories. Every few months, they told me, the police would sweep through on horseback; the refugees would run into the jungle while the police burnt everything. After a few days they would return and re-build. Some of them had lived in the camp for ten years.

When it came time for me to leave, an older man stood up. He was crying. He said, "That someone from so far away cares enough to visit us makes my heart weep."

I think that's a pretty good description of what Inter Pares does. We try to shine a light on what is happening to the most marginalized people in the world. And we try to support their own efforts to achieve safety, security and justice. ✂

*For the full text of Peter's speech go to
[www.interpares.ca/en/publications/pdf/
PeterGillespie-Re actions-AGM2010.pdf](http://www.interpares.ca/en/publications/pdf/PeterGillespie-Re%20actions-AGM2010.pdf)*

Inter Pares has been forming relationships for social justice action for thirty-five years, linking people who insist that our futures can be better. In this *Bulletin* are some examples of what can be achieved when people work together – among equals.

Making Rights Real

Nijera Kori stands out amongst the 22,000 NGOs in Bangladesh. Since 1980, Inter Pares has supported their work with the poorest of the poor to build organizations that help them claim their rights as citizens. It's a process of "making rights real", as Nijera Kori puts it.

Largely in response to the demands of funding agencies and the realities of a weak state, many Bangladeshi NGOs are now providing the country's basic education, healthcare and social services. What we in Canada consider to be the responsibility of the state is now provided by NGOs or private companies. Nijera Kori believes that these basic services are the state's responsibility. And thanks to Nijera Kori, 800,000 members of the village groups are holding their government accountable to provide education, healthcare and social services.

Last November, Inter Pares staff member David Bruer met with Nijera Kori's Health Watch Committee (HWC) in the village of Sagatha. Sitting on the ground at the back of one member's house, they eagerly told him about their achievements. They recounted one case where a woman went to the local hospital for treatment related to her pregnancy, only to be refused because she could not pay. The HWC intervened and the doctor agreed to provide the service for free, as per the law. Thanks to training from Nijera Kori, the HWC understood their rights, and the responsibilities of the public health system, and the members were determined to make sure that the system worked.

In another meeting, the Land Watch Committee told David that people in Bangladesh have a right to receive state land if they are landless. However, corrupt officials and wealthy elites manipulate this process, and many people never obtain land. But over the past six years, members of Nijera Kori obtained the registration of 21,235 acres of state land, benefiting more than twenty thousand families. With this land, these families now have a secure source of food and income.

Social mobilization, the methodology used by Nijera Kori, is about poor people organizing to make society fair and equitable – but does it actually improve living conditions for the poor? The answer is a resounding yes. Nijera Kori asked itself this question and hired outside evaluators to help answer it. The women and men of Nijera Kori improve their lives by holding the government accountable for services like healthcare but also the awareness of their rights, built up through the process of social mobilization, results in other concrete improvements to people's lives. Members of Nijera Kori understand and use child immunization and family planning, are more likely to send their daughters to primary school, and have more diverse and nutritious diets. Simply stated, people are better off, or as one woman put it "for us, real rights produce real results." ❧

Leaders in Their Own Right

In April 2010, staff member Rachel Gouin travelled to Khartoum, Sudan, and heard about women's participation in the country's elections. In 2006, Amanda Dale, now an Inter Pares Board member, was part of an international exchange with Sudanese women's organizations to begin strategizing for elections. Below, Rachel and Amanda discuss their experiences.

In preparation for the elections, women in Sudan succeeded in having all parties adopt a 25 percent quota for women candidates. To ensure that women's rights were part of party platforms, women's organizations, including Inter Pares counterpart the Gender Centre for Research and Training, trained women candidates on human rights and campaigning. They also facilitated education programs on registration, voting and election observation.

Rachel, this is so exciting! Back in 2006 I traveled with Inter Pares staff and we worked with participants from all over Sudan in a three-day advocacy and planning session. Many of the younger women had no knowledge of their own proud history of women's rights. There were some really hard moments as older women reconstructed the history of women's leadership that had been lost under a fundamentalist regime. We shared strategies we used to battle religious arbitration for settling family law disputes in Ontario, and made links to Sudanese women's struggle with Sharia Law. This exchange was quite breathtaking.

I also met with women politicians. With little backing from their parties, women campaigned collectively across parties, encouraging people to vote for women, and ensuring women's rights were an electoral issue.

I get shivers listening to you. I am sorry to hear of the challenge women faced, but I am so happy to discover that four years later, they were loud and present. How brave. Inter Pares used my visit and the upcoming elections to bring people together and strengthen civil society.

Now women are looking ahead to the referendum on southern independence planned for 2011, and to the next elections. The civic education they are doing with youth will ensure that come next elections, they are not only voters and observers, but also candidates.

Hearing this just confirms how strengthening local civil society groups really pays off. Even under a repressive regime, it bolsters women to assume leadership in their own right. ❧

Fifteen Years of Friendship: Cam and Joy McMann

Cam and Joy McMann are modest people. Their home in Calgary is filled with the pieces of a two decades long marriage – children's photos, mementos of their travels, books and a cat who they warn "doesn't much like outsiders." It is a home of simplicity and joy.

Inter Pares staff have had the great pleasure of meeting with Cam and Joy on several occasions and we have developed a comfortable friendship. We exchange our concerns, our wishes for the future and a shared vision for social justice.

As a young couple in the late 1980s their political and social conscience was emerging. They were concerned about apartheid in South Africa and as they learned more about the impacts of poverty and politics in Africa, they were introduced to Inter Pares by their friends. Gradually Joy and Cam came to appreciate the work Inter Pares was doing more broadly in Africa and elsewhere to support the building of civil society. As their knowledge grew they realized that social justice is a long-term struggle. The issues they were committed to were underrepresented in the media and as such they looked to the literature produced by NGOs to analyze the complexities.

As they moved into their respective careers, Cam and Joy committed to making regular annual contributions to NGOs. They chose organizations like Inter Pares that seek enduring solutions, that keep administration costs low and that address the political and economic realities hampering democratic processes in Canada and abroad. Since the mid-1990s Cam and Joy have supported Inter Pares' work on an annual basis.

During our last visit in May, Joy told us of a book she was reading entitled *The Soul of Money*. She said it helped her understand how financial gifts, when properly channeled to groups like Inter Pares, ensures she is part of a social movement for positive social change. Through their gifts Cam and Joy commit themselves to long-term and sustainable social justice initiatives. This work is so important to them that they were inspired to leave a gift in their will to Inter Pares.

In Inter Pares' thirty-five years of social justice work we have been delighted to meet many of our supporters and on every occasion, we feel we are among friends. ❧

Make Dinner or be Dinner

Across the country, people are discussing food and politics at their kitchen tables. From indigenous communities in British Columbia to Labrador, in farming communities in the prairies, and in inner city neighborhoods, people are imagining a food system that reflects their values. As Colleen Ross, a farmer and Inter Pares colleague says: “They are talking with their mouths full – full of ideas about how to improve our food system.”

These kitchen table talks are part of the People’s Food Policy Project (PFPP), a pan-Canadian network of citizens and organizations that is creating Canada’s first comprehensive food sovereignty policy. This policy is based on a vision of a society in which nobody goes hungry, and in which everyone has a stronger connection to the sources of their food, where food sources and food providers are honoured, and where people define and shape the policies that govern the food system through an inclusive, democratic process.

Over the last thirty years, government policies have led to the collapse of the cod fishery and have impoverished family farms. Genetically modified crops have been introduced, dramatically increasing the use of herbicides and pesticides. We have even seen the Canadian government attempt to lift a moratorium at the United Nations on the infamous Terminator seed technology.

These policies affect us all. Our grocery bills keep going up, while farmers are getting poorer. Our health system is overwhelmed with increased rates of disease directly related to over-processed, high-sugar, and fat-laden foods.

Worldwide, a billion people are starving while half a billion people suffer from obesity. There is an urgent need for a change in policy direction that puts decision-making over how our food is produced, processed, and distributed back into the hands of citizens. This need was eloquently expressed during Inter Pares’ Annual General Meeting last April by Kenyan activist Firoze Manji who exclaimed: “Either make dinner or be dinner!”

The PFPP is all about making dinner. The origins of the PFPP are in the People’s Food Commission of the 1970s. This grassroots commission travelled to 75 communities across Canada, documenting stories about how people were affected by the food system. The final report, *e Land of Milk and*

Money, warned of the challenges we are faced with today. It also helped educate a generation about the politics of food. Since then, a vibrant food movement has blossomed across the country. We can see it everywhere: city food councils, neighborhood gardens, community-supported agriculture, seed fairs, sustainable local fisheries, urban agriculture, and organic farms. By tapping into these locally grounded and successful models, the PFPP is bringing a diversity of voices and solutions forward.

The PFPP counts on the support of its wonderful coordinator, Amanda Sheedy, and a group of 70 dedicated volunteers from across the country. They include leaders who were involved in the original People’s Food Commission, as well as a new generation of farmers, researchers, community workers and organizers who are busily organizing kitchen table meetings in their towns to generate policy proposals from the ground up. Since it was launched in 2008, over one thousand people have taken part and hundreds of policy proposals have been submitted. A team of writers is synthesizing these into a People’s Food Policy that will be launched in 2011.

Perhaps as significant as the policy is the web being woven amongst people across Canada who are striving for a just food system. Along with them, Inter Pares has decided that we are no longer waiting to be served policy – we are making it! ✂

Join the People’s Food Policy Project!

- Take part in the Food Secure Canada assembly in Montreal (Nov 26-28) where the Peoples Food Policy will be discussed: www.foodsecurecanada.org
- Host your own kitchen table talk
- Contact the animator in your region to see how you can get involved. Visit www.peoplesfoodpolicy.ca or contact Amanda Sheedy at: peoplesfoodpolicy@gmail.com

 **Inter Pares**

ISSN 0715-4267

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6P1
Phone (1-613) 563-4801 or (1-866) 563-4801 (toll free)
Fax (1-613) 594-4704 www.interpares.ca

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.

Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1.
Financial support for the Bulletin is provided by the Canadian International Development Agency.

