

Connecting the Dots: the power of people meeting people



Senegalese farmer welcomes the international delegation.

Songs and Seeds of Freedom

Building solidarity among farmers from West Africa and India.

Learning exchanges are a key part of Inter Pares' methodology. For nearly 40 years, we have seen that by bringing together dynamic and dedicated people from different geographies, the cross-pollination of ideas leads to new knowledge, bonds of solidarity – and to put it simply, bigger and better things.

ERIC CHAURETTE, INTER PARES PROGRAM MANAGER

“This one is called Bob Marley”, explains a farmer from the village of Diouroup, 140 kilometres south east of bustling Dakar, Senegal.

“Why do you call it Bob Marley?” I ask, looking at the sorghum he is holding.

“Because it makes your mouth sing.” I smile as we walk along the evenly planted rows of sorghum and millets under the beating midday sun.

I am here with Sathesh, Secretary of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), a long-time counterpart of Inter Pares in India.

Sathesh is accompanied by Jayasri Cherukuri and Narsamma Masanagari, two dedicated women who are helping DDS document, through film and photography, the beautifully diverse fields of crops all around us.

We later visit the community of Fandéne where we are greeted by Georges Birane and other farmers of his community. Georges invites us to sit under the *arbre à palabres* – or talking tree – an area where people gather under the shade to discuss issues of importance to the community. **PAGE 4 ►**

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Health and Humanity

Connecting the Philippines and Canada.

We live in a world influenced by the idea that everything is for sale, where if you've got the money you can get too much health care, and if you don't have the money you don't get enough health care.

MIKE MCBANE

In April 2014, with funding from the Douglas Coldwell Foundation, Inter Pares brought together Dr. Junice Melgar, Director of Likhaan Centre for Women's Health in the Philippines, and Mike McBane, then Coordinator of the Canadian Health Coalition (CHC). Dr. Junice and Mike presented at our Annual Speaker Series event in Ottawa. Over a hundred Inter Pares supporters joined us for an evening of discussion and storytelling.

Mike McBane reminded us that the Canada Health Accord expired in March 2014. By refusing to re-negotiate with the provinces, the federal government has signalled that it will no longer take a leadership role in healthcare. Public health analysts predict this will lead to less access and more fragmented healthcare in Canada.

This is a concern to Dr. Junice who told us that Filipino public health students often study Canada's system to find ways to improve their own. But Filipinos know the dangers of a highly fragmented healthcare system. Their system is mostly private, with over 1,500 independent regional health systems. In some regions of the Philippines, lobbying of local health councils by religious leaders has led to contraceptives being banned. As a result, poor women in these areas suffer from the debilitating health consequences of too many unplanned pregnancies.

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Inter Pares has supported and funded Likhaan's work for over 20 years. We have also contributed financially to CHC over the past 10 years, and our Executive Director Rita Morbia serves on its board of directors.

With counterparts around the globe, we will continue to work to ensure that health is recognized as a human right. Through discussions like this year's Annual Speaker Series, we are globalizing the struggle for universal healthcare. 

ONLINE Watch a video of Dr. Junice describing the health system in the Philippines: www.interpares.ca/resource/philippines-health-system



PATRICIA CHAREST MUGWANENZA

Top photo from left to right: Dr. Junice Melgar (Likhaan), Mike McBane (Canadian Health Coalition) and Kathryn Dingle (Inter Pares) at the Annual Speaker Series event in Ottawa.

Dr. Junice spoke about how Likhaan mobilized women who live in the poorest areas of Manila to tell their stories to people in power, those in the Congress and the Senate. Their efforts led to the passage of the Reproductive Health Law in 2012 to reduce maternal mortality in the Philippines. They are now using this victory to push for wider reforms for universal access to healthcare in the Philippines.



DON SPENCE

The Solidarity Tour participants meeting with Maya Ixil women in Guatemala.

The Tour is Over, Solidarity Continues

Guatemalan and Canadian activists build stronger ties.

Inter Pares' Solidarity Tour to Guatemala was a ten-day trip involving two Inter Pares staff, twelve Canadian supporters, gatherings with eight counterparts, 1,200 kilometres travelled in a mini-bus, one meeting with the Canadian Ambassador, and unquantifiable *moments of transformation*.

It was the first time that Inter Pares had organized an exchange between supporters and counterparts *outside* of Canada. Doing so in Guatemala, a country with a history and context that are so rich and so challenging, and with our long-time counterpart Project Counselling Service (PCS), gave the trip a particularly special design.

Bringing together people who otherwise would never have the chance to meet was a powerful experience. Imagine a 6'3" retired law professor from Toronto meeting a diminutive Indigenous woman whose first exposure to the legal world was her own participation as plaintiff in a historic case of sexual slavery during the country's internal armed conflict. One could feel the human connection and solidarity growing as our group demonstrated with their presence that Canadians do know, do care, and do act in favour of struggles for justice.

The bus rides between towns and meetings were full of questions, discussion, and podcasts relating to the difficult context in which many organizations we support operate. Meeting by meeting, our conversa-

tions built on one another and participants began to connect the issues: impunity and ineffective rule of law; the impact of weak legal institutions when dealing with tense disputes between Indigenous communities and powerful mining corporations; land conflicts fueled by mining and monocrops; how this in turn compromises food sovereignty and security. We learned how nothing exists in isolation.

For Flor Salvador, a PCS staff member who travelled with us, seeing her country through foreign eyes was an extraordinary and transformative experience. She was encouraged by knowing supporters of Inter Pares in person and deepening the common thread that unites us – one that is based on respect, solidarity and camaraderie.

Once home, many participants took action in their own communities: organizing meetings with migrant worker solidarity groups, hosting public and private presentations about Guatemala, publishing blog posts and poetry, and fundraising for Inter Pares' programs. Transformation is not something you can easily measure, but these examples of actions are surely proof of it.

The Solidarity Tour was in many ways an experimental exchange. We have seen a beautiful pattern emerge: exchange – transform – act. The Tour is over, but solidarity between communities continues. 

ONLINE www.interpares.ca/content/solidarity-tours

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JAVASRI CHERUKURI

“Bob Marley” sorghum given to Narsamma Masanagari, from India’s Deccan Development Society.

Songs and Seeds of Freedom

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Colourful mats are placed under the ancient umbrella-shaped tree and appetizing dishes of millet and juice lay in the centre. Satheesh asks the farmers how many types of millets they farm. They answer two or three. “Would you be interested in growing fifteen?” The farmers are skeptical but also curious, and begin asking dozens of questions.

This is simply the next chapter of a story that is being written by farmers from India and West Africa. It began in 2012, when Inter Pares facilitated an exchange among

leaders from the West African farm movement, Coalition for the Protection of African Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN), to learn from DDS’ ground-breaking work on biodiversity-based millet agriculture¹. They also learned about DDS’ work to document, through farmer-led research, the devastating impact that genetically engineered Bt cotton is having on farmers lives. Since then, COPAGEN members have put what they learned in India into practice. Inspired by DDS’ work with farmer-researchers, through a project they are calling “Bt cotton: the truth from our fields,” COPAGEN is working with 500 farmer-research-

ers in eighteen regions across Burkina Faso to document the impact of Bt Cotton. COPAGEN also launched “foods of sovereignty,” an initiative that mirrors the work of DDS and its Millet Network of India.

COPAGEN is working with women farmers to expand the ecological cultivation of traditional crops (black-eyed peas, sorghum, yams, millets, and sesame).

COPAGEN is working with women farmers to expand the ecological cultivation of traditional crops (black-eyed peas, sorghum, yams, millets, and sesame), and in doing so, reclaiming degraded land and increasing food security for communities in Mali, Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

As we leave his farm, Georges gives us some seeds to carry back with us. It is a fitting gift as seeds are a promise of good things to come. ☺

¹ See November 2012 *Bulletin* entitled *Different continents, same struggle*

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Charitable registration number (BN) 11897 1100 RR000 1.
Financial support for the *Bulletin* is provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada.

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.

ISSN 0715-4267