

Defending Land and Livelihood

“THE WAY HOME,” AMIRI IMA, CREATIVES COMMONS. SOURCE: IFC/ICRP/6484/P

The Power of Collective Action in Bangladesh

The Meghna River in Bangladesh is a big, fast-moving river in the south of the country. Along its banks, in the communities of Charbata, thousands of poor families make their living from farming the rich alluvial soil and from fishing. Many are members of landless groups organized by Inter Pares’ counterpart Nijera Kori.

Wealthy local businessmen have been trying to take control of this area, and last year they claimed they had leased a large

area of the river. They planned to build embankments enclosing the area for intensive agricultural production and fishing, depriving people of the riverside land and access to the river. The businessmen signed a secret agreement with labourers from another village to begin the work.

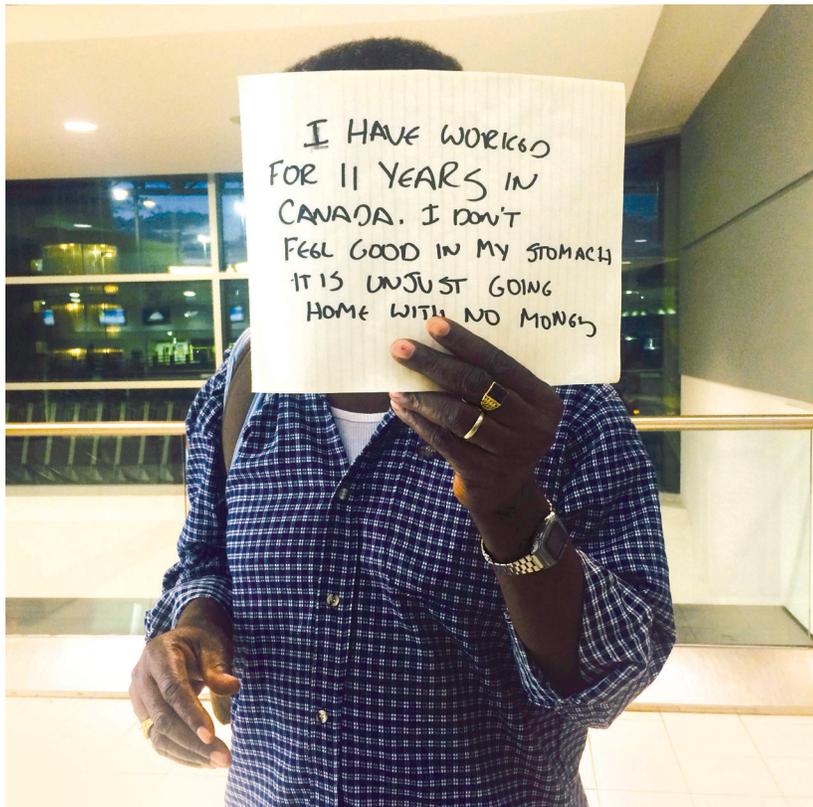
When Nijera Kori landless groups found out, they quickly began to strategize how to resist. By organizing a series of public meetings, and using street **PAGE 4 ►**

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

IN SOLIDARITY WITH TEMPORARY MIGRANT WORKERS

THE TRUTH FROM OUR FIELDS

In Solidarity with Temporary Migrant Workers



JUSTICIA FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

A migrant worker leaving Canada as a result of the “four in four out” rule. The photo was taken last June by a Toronto-based social justice group, Justicia for Migrant Workers, as part of its airport actions.

“I can’t believe such injustices can happen here in Canada,” said Lucy, an Inter Pares donor. Her statement resonated in the room, and a silence followed. The Inter Pares Film Night participants all turned back to the screen, where Min Sook Lee, filmmaker and activist, was speaking with the group via Skype from Toronto.

We had just finished watching Min Sook’s documentary *El Contrato*, a twelve-year-old film that continues to give a relevant and insightful analysis of the working conditions of seasonal migrant workers who come to Canada every year. Min Sook was not surprised by Lucy’s reaction. Even though there are more than 300,000 migrant workers in Canada being employed in sectors as diverse as agriculture, food services, and

health care, their precarious working conditions and challenges go almost unnoticed.

Fueled by the crowd’s interest, Min Sook explained how the current framework contributes to migrant workers’ vulnerability and positions them as second-class citizens in terms of their rights and benefits. Though they pay taxes, many can’t access employment insurance or public health services if they become ill or injured. With few exceptions, workers can’t apply for permanent residency, and their visas are tied to their employer, who has the power to terminate their contract at any time and have them deported. This skewed power dynamic has led to exploitation and sometimes physical abuse of migrant workers.

Min Sook also drew attention to the “four in and four out” rule, in effect

since April, which will force thousands of migrants who have worked in Canada for four years or more, to return to their country, without any possibility of re-applying for another four years. She noted that, while the need for jobs fulfilled by migrant workers is ongoing, rules like this reinforce the fabricated notion of temporary needs. Worse, it depicts migrant workers as a disposable labour force.

Migrant workers must be treated with equity, dignity, and fairness. Along with our allies and counterparts here and abroad, Inter Pares will continue to advocate for safe and just working conditions for migrant workers, and raise awareness among Canadians around these issues. ☎

ONLINE Watch *El Contrato* at interpares.ca/elcontrato

Even though there are more than 300,000 migrant workers in Canada, their precarious working conditions and challenges go almost unnoticed.

The Truth from our Fields

ERIC CHAURETTE, INTER PARES STAFF MEMBER

Sitting in a circle, Oumarou and twenty-five other farmers greet us as we finally arrive after a bumpy and dusty ride from Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Oumarou was one of three cotton farmers who participated in an international learning exchange that Inter Pares organized in 2014 to India. While there, he met with Indian cotton farmers, and heard first-hand accounts of the many hardships and farmer suicides due to the failure of Monsanto's genetically modified (GM) Bt cotton. He also heard of the burden of debt that the victims' families still have to carry today.

Oumarou and the other farmers present today introduce themselves as "farmer-researchers." Working with COPAGEN, an Inter Pares counterpart, they have received training on how to record and document crop yields, the amount of pesticides and

Many claims have been made by GMO proponents that they provide better yields, require less pesticides, and help to solve hunger. We have heard a different story.

fertilizers used, and the costs incurred in producing their cotton. This is all part of a three-year farmer-led research initiative called "Bt Cotton and Us: The Truth from our Fields."

For the past two years, over 500 farmers from the different cotton-growing regions in

Burkina Faso have documented their experience with Monsanto's Bt cotton. This research is providing an important counter-balance, as Burkina Faso was the first country in West Africa to adopt genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and industry often lauds its success when promoting GMOs in other countries.

Oumarou explains how Bt cotton was first introduced in his area. "The cotton



PATRICIA CHAREST / MUGWANEZA



PATRICIA CHAREST / MUGWANEZA

farmers were not consulted. We were told that Bt cotton would be good for us, and we would save money as we would have to spray less pesticides. This was true for the first year, but not after that. We now have to spray two to three times more, and the caterpillars still come."

I ask Oumarou what motivated him to be a leader in this research. Oumarou answers, "The farmer suicides in India left many orphans. We do not want this to happen here."

Many claims have been made by GMO proponents that they provide better yields, require less pesticides, and help to solve hunger. Through our work with farmers in the global South and here in Canada, we have heard a different story. In 2005, [PAGE 4](#) ▶

Top:
Oumarou Ouedraogo,
farmer-researcher,
Burkina Faso.

Bottom:
Farmer-researchers
meet with
Inter Pares staff and
COPAGEN leaders,
Boucle du Mouhoun,
Burkina Faso.

The Power of Collective Action in Bangladesh

From page 1

theatre and songs, members brought the situation to their neighbours' attention. They collected signatures, made banners, staged marches, and demanded a meeting with the local government and water development board. The government engineer investigated and pronounced, "As per the law, the river belongs to the people and this river has not been leased by the government. To occupy the river or construct embankments in the river is a punishable offence."

Despite this pronouncement, a few days later, the hired labourers, protected by an armed gang, began construction. Shortly after,

more than 2,000 landless group members surrounded the armed gang and workers. After a three-hour standoff, the gang and the labourers gave in saying, "We are just doing this job to try to earn our living. We give you our word that in the future, we will not come to occupy the river. We are also poor people, and we support your movement."

It was a victory for the poor over the powerful, of collective action over greed and violence. More than 2,000 people defended hundreds of families' food security that day, by protecting the land to farm and the river to fish. ☺



Women of the landless groups in Charbata, Bangladesh, leading a protest to protect their land.

WIDEKORU

The Truth from our Fields

From page 3

Inter Pares convened farmers from around the world to a policy dialogue with the Canadian government to share concerns about genetic engineering and the impact it was having on biodiversity, family farms, and peasant agriculture. Participants heard stories of contamination, intimidation, debt, and desperation. The dialogue helped to bring badly needed contextual analysis into policy-making that was too narrowly focused on technology.

It's been twenty years since GMOs were first introduced in Canada. In an effort to

shed more light on their impact, Inter Pares is working with the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network on its GMO Inquiry. Just as in Burkina Faso, this research process is providing some important information to farmers and to the broader public – information that we hope will help us move towards farming systems that are more ecological and nurturing for the Earth and for family farms. ☺

ONLINE Watch interviews with farmer-researchers and learn more: www.interpares.ca/GMO

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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 inequalities 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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