

Working for Change Among Equals



SUSAN MEURE

Over a hundred people participated in Inter Pares' 40th anniversary event "The Future of International Solidarity: An open dialogue" this spring.

The Future of International Solidarity

What is the biggest obstacle to globalizing equality?" Last April, this question was put to four Inter Pares counterparts, who were featured speakers at our 40th anniversary gathering that day. *Lack of political will. Corporate control over natural resources and policy processes. Privileging individual interest over the common good. Militarism and human rights abuses.* The answers were a sober reminder of the formidable challenges in our collective path.

Speaker Paul Sein Twa's personal story encapsulates these challenges. Growing up in Burma by the mighty Salween River, Paul's village lived off the bounty of the river and the rich teak forests along its banks. In 1989,

the country's dictatorship began selling off the forest to a handful of corporations, who began logging for export, and in the process eroding the riverbank, fish stocks, and local livelihoods. The money gained from this plunder enabled the military to buy weapons, and the army used the logging roads to penetrate the thick forest and attack civilians and resistance fighters alike. The countries whose arms producers supplied weapons to the regime, or whose forestry companies profited, had no interest in intervening.

Our counterparts are driven rather than daunted by such challenges. After fleeing his village, Paul joined with other young activists to form the Karen Environmental **PAGE 4 ▶**

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Burma: Bringing Grassroots Experience to Canadian Policy



Four colleagues from Burma on the front steps of Parliament after providing their testimony. From left to right: Pippa Curwen, Wahkushee Tenner, Jessica Nhkum, Inter Pares staff Rebecca Wolsak, and Htwe Htwe.

Each discussion was an opportunity to provide insight into what is happening in the daily lives of people in Burma's ethnic states, and to contrast these stories to the headlines that occasionally reach Canada.

“We much appreciate your coming by and providing us with testimony. You’ve given us a lot of insight.” With these words, Member of Parliament Scott Reid, Chair of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, closed the meeting. He was thanking four colleagues from Inter Pares’ Burma

program and two staff who had just testified on the current situation in Burma.

In March of 2015, Inter Pares hosted this delegation of four women to meet with Canadians originally from Burma, other members of the public, First Nations organizations, and activists from Colombia, Sudan, and

Canada. Each meeting was a chance to hear about people facing similar struggles, and to share camaraderie and strategies. Each discussion was an opportunity to provide insight into what is happening in the daily lives of people in Burma’s ethnic states, and to contrast these stories to the headlines that occasionally reach Canada. And in each meeting with Members of Parliament, Senators, and civil servants, the women took the opportunity to offer policy recommendations.

During her testimony to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, Wahkushee Tenner from the Women’s League of Burma spoke of the continued impunity for perpe-

trators of sexual violence. She asked Canada to call for an international investigation into human rights violations in Burma, particularly related to military sexual violence, and to provide support to local civil society.

Upon returning to their communities, the women reflected on their time in Canada and noted the value of interacting directly with Canadian policy makers. Htwe Htwe from the Karenni Safe House had never travelled internationally before. She felt it had been important for her to share her experiences of providing legal and counseling support to survivors of violence. She summarized the trip’s impact on her, saying “now I feel more powerful.”

Exposure trips such as these are integral to Inter Pares’ approach. Better-informed policy makers in Canada and empowered community workers in Burma are both key drivers for social change. 

Healthcare, Political Will and Federal Leadership

Kevin Page is someone Canada listens to. On March 31, 2015, the University of Ottawa professor and former Parliamentary Budget Officer spoke to a packed room of parliamentarians, senators, and activists, at the invitation of the Canadian Health Coalition (CHC). The CHC, an Inter Pares counterpart, was commemorating the anniversary of the end of the Health Accord, which governed federal funding for healthcare in consultation with the provinces.

Page's message was simple but powerful: Funding universal healthcare in Canada is economically viable, but it requires political will and federal leadership. His unequivocal statement directly countered the myth that our country cannot afford to look after its people's health.

It is equally true elsewhere. Our Philippines-based counterpart, Likhaan, has worked tirelessly for many years to establish low-cost, high-quality primary care facilities for women in the poorest areas of Manila. The clinics are effective models of care, reducing horrific levels of maternal mortality. However, without a comprehensive national framework for universal healthcare, these efforts have felt like a superficial response to a system that doesn't address the roots of socio-economic inequality.

However, it has been inspiring to witness what happens when the progressive ambitions of a national government and activists come together, even when resources are scarce. A new Reproductive Health Law, along with major increases in the national healthcare budget, will change millions of lives in the Philippines. The law guarantees a national plan for women's reproductive healthcare, including free family planning and emergency obstetric care. Its passage took many years of advocacy by Likhaan and allies, also withstanding an eventual Supreme Court challenge. At the same time,



Inter Pares Executive Director and CHC Board Member, Rita Morbia, poses with Kevin Page, Melissa Newitt (Interim Executive Director of the CHC), Adrienne Silnicki (Executive Director of the CHC – on leave) and baby Grace.

the government has tripled the Philippines' healthcare budget by increasing "sin" taxes on alcohol and tobacco. Much of the increased allocation is directed towards PhilHealth, the national health insurance plan which provides coverage for poor people.

Surely Canada, with our greater per capita resources, can rise to our own healthcare funding challenges. Kevin Page is right. We can afford healthcare, but it will take political will and federal leadership. Inter Pares is committed to the goal of universal healthcare as foundational to just societies, and to supporting the CHC and Likhaan in their efforts. 

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The Future of International Solidarity

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Featured speakers at Inter Pares' 40th anniversary event. From left to right: Diana Bronson, Aline Zongo, Pilar Trujillo, and Paul Sein Twa.



and Social Action Network. Working with communities, they protect ancestral lands, establish livelihoods, and promote local culture. Our other counterparts have been similarly moved to act in their own regions, whether it be West Africa, Latin America, or Canada.

For four decades, Inter Pares has been building long-term relationships of mutual trust, support, and solidarity with and among people and organizations who are transforming their cultures and societies from within. Social change must come from people acting in their own contexts, actively participating in creating solutions to the injustices that affect them. Since our inception, we have worked with such local leaders, offering solidarity and acting in common cause.

This approach also leads us to be agents for change in our country. Day by day, we are building a constituency of engaged Canadians, who are ready to contribute funds and moral support; promoting responsible government policy and corporate accountability; and connecting overseas collaborators with activists here at home.

Over forty years, we have witnessed incredible change in the countries where we work.

Over forty years, we have witnessed incredible change in the countries where we work. Dictatorships have fallen, armed conflicts have ended and refugees returned, laws protecting human and civil rights have been passed, public health has improved.

But while such gains have improved the lives of millions of people, in many ways, struggles have only evolved. Militarized power structures outlast wars, and true democratization often remains a goal.

While some rights have been gained, others become threatened. A country's most vulnerable people remain its unhealthiest. The work of globalizing equality – of everyone on Earth reaching their full human potential – is unceasing.

So we look ahead with the conviction that there will always be a need for people to come together to fight inequality and work for peace and justice – but also the knowledge that we are already building the world we want, together. The future of international solidarity is here, right now. 

ONLINE Watch videos of the event at interpares.ca/videos-40years

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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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