

A very social affair - Anticapitalist Curry at the Nairobi WSF

Friday 2 February 2007, by [MA'ANIT Adam](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2007).

Things were looking a bit grim at the World Social Forum to begin with - but then they started serving 'anti-capitalist curry'.

The first time I approached the Kasarani stadium complex on the outskirts of Nairobi, I just thought it couldn't be the right place. It being my first World Social Forum, I didn't know what to expect, but somehow the sight of lorry-loads of red-bereted soldiers toting Kalashnikovs and trailing leads tied to menacing alsatians didn't quite fit the picture I had. They weren't even handing out flower garlands ...

It became clear to me quite quickly that this event was not as "open" as the WSF organisers pretended it to be. The fact that it was held at a razorwire-ringed white elephant of a stadium named after Kenya's former despot, Daniel Arap Moi, seemed hardly apropos at that. But we're here to "make life better", I tell myself. Oh wait - did I think that myself, or is that the mobile phone company and official sponsor of the WSF, Celtel, had its corporate motto ubiquitously displayed all around the complex?

Hang on a minute; I need to sit down - this is all a bit much. Seven years of World Social Forums has brought us to this? Anti-war yet surrounded by soldiers? Anti-corporate yet brought to you by Celtel and Kenya Airways? Anti-capitalist yet food and water too expensive for most Kenyans and southerners to afford? WSF or WTF? In this context, the forum's theme this year of "people's struggles, people's alternatives" seemed to ring hollowly off the crumbling walls of the Moi International Sports Complex.

But wait. This is the World Social Forum, damn it! We are not going to accept this. We can reclaim these spaces and unlock the chains that close us off from the nearby slums and squatter towns and demonstrate that another world is possible.

It took a day or two to build up the required momentum, but thanks particularly to the inspiring agitation of Kenyan social movements and activists, the forum had been saved. Another social forum was possible. Spontaneous protests broke through security cordons and reached the WSF organisers' space where demands were made and WSF representatives were held to account. The protests did not let up until demands were met. Gates were flung open, exorbitant fees for Kenyans first reduced, and then finally scrapped altogether. The monopoly of catering companies was broken as sellers from nearby areas came touting their wares. Street kids feasted on the finest food from the internal security minister's now occupied catering company. One Pakistani group sold "chapatis against Bush" and "anti-capitalist curry" at affordable rates. The first few days of underwhelming, half-hearted workshops seemed a distant blur.

In the last few days, the forum was invigorated with a new vitality. "This is the World Social Forum, not the World Economic Forum," was the chant. We made the most of the time we had left. It is just

unfortunate that it had to be this way. After seven years of being the de facto AGM of the global justice movement, perhaps the World Social Forum organisers need to do some soul-searching and reconnect with its founding ideals. Moi's stadium (who ironically banned the teaching of Marxism under his 20-year reign) is where activists put the "social" back in to the World Social Forum. Let's keep it that way.

P.S.

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