

World Social Forum Winds-Up in Nairobi

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The World Social Forum (WSF) that took place in Nairobi was one of those 'once in a life time' events for many people; and 'once a year' events for the veterans who continue to attend every one.

It is an all-comers forum. For instance, the gay and lesbian lobby in Africa are there along side the Maoists, Anarchists, peasant movements, trade unionists, radical scholars, grassroots movements, all kinds of gender activists and more. The reactionaries will say: all lunatics are in town.

It should be no surprise if there were many Africans since this is taking place in Africa, but so marginalized are we in our own affairs that one is always happy to see Africans at these meetings even when they are happening here. Many of the usual suspects are around, from the veteran radicals to the budding ones; and not only from Africa but from across the world. If you want to gauge the state of global revolutionary consciousness, the frustrations, the challenges and opportunities of the global forces for change and transformation, the WSF is the place to be.

But these gatherings always frustrate me for many reasons. One; they show up Africa's weaknesses whether they are held outside or inside Africa. One of the critical areas is our level of participation and preparedness. A majority of the African participants - even many from Kenya itself - were brought by foreign paymasters or organisations funded by outsiders. Often they become prisoners of their sponsors. They must attend events organized or supported by their sponsors who need to put their 'partners' on display, and the 'partners' in turn need to show their loyalty to their masters.

Two; even when these meetings happen in Africa, the participation of local groups and citizens are constrained by the three factors of fees for participation, language of discourse, and location. Local activists and sympathizers in the WSF had to organize a protest and even a temporary occupation before the fees for Kenyan participants were waived.

Three; we go to these events without adequate preparation about our own agenda and line up behind other peoples' not-so-hidden agendas, although at this WSF there were a number of attempts to forge a Pan-African agenda before the summit consultations. One of them was the Pan-African Youth Forum working closely with the Youth Commission of the WSF. But the truth remains that many of the youth who came did so on the platform of one donor or the other and were mostly not African.

This dependence on foreigners, both financially and ideologically, is so pervasive that it cannot be ignored anymore. There are signs that an increasing number of Africans are not only outraged by it but becoming ashamed by it, and are looking for ways and means of freeing our activism from the clutches of donor funding and donor-driven agendas. These issues were frankly and honestly discussed at many forums before and during the summit.

This dependence on foreigners raises a lot of disturbing issues about the state of Africa's NGOs and CSOs, and their capacity to contribute to lasting changes in the social, economic and political conditions of Africans in favour of social justice.

The first is a question of legitimacy. Who do these NGOs represent? Who are they accountable to? To whom do they owe their loyalty: to their donors or to the African people they claim to speak for? The second is the related question of the generally anti-government posture of these NGOs. They take money from foreign governments/agencies like DFID, USAID, DANIDA, SIDA, allegedly as independent CSOs. But why should foreigners be helping us to be independent of our own governments? How are their own citizens independent of them? The same African NGOs that queue up to suck up to all kinds of foreign governments and funders will raise their eye-brows and shout 'autonomy' and 'sell out' if any of their members has close financial or political links with their own governments.

In effect, the autonomy they are asserting is one of being sovereign against their own government and subservience to any foreigner. Where governments are illegitimate or have bad governance records this may hold for sometime, but in the long run it delegitimises the NGOs concerned.

The third issue is the constant conflation of NGOs to mean CSOs which should not be the case. Genuine CSOs will include trade unions, guild and professional associations, self-help groups, village or town associations, faith-based charities or interest groups, etc. Their most distinctive character is that they are voluntary, membership-based and generate their funds from their members.

How many of our busy-body, noise-making NGOs qualify in this sense? It is similar to our governments being dependent on the aid of outsiders, and we demanding that they should be accountable to us. We do not pay taxes but demand representation and wonder why the leaders are more responsive to any noise that comes from outsiders?

The worst excesses of the dependence on foreign sponsors are the various scams that have developed in many of these NGOs about 'creative accounting', which does not mean accountability: Per diem wrangles, multiple claims, bogus ticket refunds, multiple accounting, budgeting and reporting for similar proposals from the same organisation and many other unsavoury practices that make these organisations not dissimilar to the governments we climb on holy mountains to attack for being corrupt, inefficient and unaccountable.

And this issue of dependence on foreign donors is not just because there are no resources. How come the nationalists freed this continent from the yoke of colonialism without writing proposals to any funder? Why are our peoples not willing or able to support our activism? Could it be that the people do not associate themselves with the self-given mandate of these largely middle-class led, elite focused, and urban-based counter elite? Or worse still, people may be seeing that these self-declared crusaders, whether foreign or local, are only there for their own interest. The proliferation in the last decade of MONGOs (My Own NGO), GONGOs (Governmental NGO), BONGOs (Business NGO), PONGO (Private NGO), all over Africa, may be an indication of democratic openings, or state collapse, or of the irresponsive state, but are not good indicators of building democratic, people-led, people-based organisations connected to and organically linked to the wider social movements without whom social progress, democracy and development is not possible.

If they truly belong to the masses the masses will defend them. And if they are truly based on the interests of our peoples their first allegiance will be to those they serve.

In that sense it should worry us that the African participation in the first ever WSF in Africa in Nairobi is more of a gathering of NGOs than that of the real social and political movements and peoples' organisations who can make lasting change possible. Many of our successful NGOs and INGOs, like their forebears, have become gate-keepers - or to use a better term - commissioned agents between the masses and their oppressors, occupying spaces for the poor and the marginalized when most of them do not or no longer belong to that class or share their vision of

change.

P.S.

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