

The Nairobi World Social Forum - An Initial Summing up

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The seventh World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Nairobi, Kenya from 20 to 25 January 2007. There were numerous important issues at stake with Nairobi providing the space for working out alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation. Held in Africa for the first time, its purpose was above all to deepen the roots of the anti-globalisation movement on the continent most affected by neo-liberal politics. Unfortunately, for a variety of organisational reasons the expectations generated by this global event were seriously disappointed. Nonetheless, despite its shortcomings, the WSF once again showed its resilience. What is more, the event represents a turning point in the anti-globalisation movement, since there will be no 'traditional' WSF in 2008 but, instead, a series of global action days. The question is: Is the movement losing impetus or is it in a period of transition?

The WSF at Nairobi - The African Challenge

After expanding the movement in Asia, it became a logical and necessary step to "make a halt" in Africa. Even though the continent is wracked by social and economic tragedy - absolute and relative poverty are at frightening levels, armed conflicts abound, debt is crushing the life out of the people, it suffers recurrent famines and a never ending pillage of its resources - African social movements remain the great "absentees" of the anti-globalisation movement.

The proceedings thus faced many challenges: to heighten awareness for the situation on the continent and to shine a spotlight on its struggles, to create enduring alliances and foster solidarity, but also to forge links with South American countries like Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Unfortunately, although we had hoped to work in an open, focussed and dynamic manner, a number of difficulties quickly became apparent. Right from day one, trouble increased and problems multiplied.

Although it is not our intention to write this particular WSF off altogether, these problems should be the object of some constructive, if severe, criticism.

The WSF in Nairobi - The Problems

Whilst bearing all the social and political factors of the region in mind (such as Kenya's weak social movements and the wars in its neighbouring countries), some of the organisers' decisions were frankly absurd. To pick

out a few:

1. The merchandisation of the WSF. Rather than rely as much as possible on the energy and good-will of Kenya's social movements for the preparation of the WSF, the organising committee decided to hand over the running of all of the forum's activities to private companies. Transport, translation, food and security, everything was run along commercial lines. Everything had to be either rented or bought. The organisers even went as far as signing a sponsorship deal with the communications company Celtel, giving it monopoly rights to calls to and from the forum! Besides contravening the principles of the Porto Alegre Charter, such outrageous commercialisation had further negative implications. It meant that the food was very expensive (three or four times as much as the normal domestic price), that the Kenyan social movements were not really integrated in the process, that the forum itself was hugely expensive (\$3 million or thereabouts). It prevented the flow of information particularly for those participants outside the forum and led to a total breakdown in translation services - vital aspects of the smooth running of an event like this. Is the Forum turning into a marketing opportunity, with capitalists big and small ready to cater for the "anti-globalisation tourist", instead of being a meeting-point for those engaged in the anti-neo-liberal struggle? It was this totally unacceptable situation that led certain organisations (such as the CADTM) to launch the slogan "The WSF is not for sale!".

2. Huge entry fees for Kenyans. By the same commercial logic, the organising committee deemed that, in order to balance the books, they would increase the registration fees substantially compared to previous years. It almost goes without saying that it is only correct that individuals and organisations from the North should pay the lion's share of the WSF's costs but to fix entrance fees for Kenyans at the equivalent of five euros each was totally unacceptable. It is ridiculous that the very people in whose country the WSF is being held should be prevented from being there and taking part in the debates and the decision-making by the price of a ticket. But with fees set so high, this is exactly what happened, seeing that 80% of the population in Kenya live below the poverty line and five Euros represent a week's wages for the majority of Kenyans! Certain Kenyan organisations protested angrily about this, correctly saying that "The WSF is welcome in Kenya, but the Kenyans aren't welcome at the WSF!"

3. The choice of venue further excluded Kenyans. Although the initial choice of a venue for the forum was the big park in the centre of the city, the organising committee finally decided to rent the gigantic stadium Kasarani, situated more than 15 km away from the city. This added to the exclusion of the local population. This building, able to hold 80'000 people, was totally inappropriate, the number of participants being estimated at between 12'000 and 15'000. As a result, several big halls were practically empty. The organisers felt that their choice was justified since they needed to assure the safety of the participants. According to them, had the WSF been held in the centre of the city, the park would have had to be fenced in. Is it not the very purpose of a WSF to meet with and, if necessary, fight with those who are poor, oppressed and exploited by the

capitalist system? Why should one seem to be protecting oneself from them?

4. A forum dominated by tones of moderation. Right from the opening afternoon, before an audience of less than 10'000 people, a distinctly moderate tone was taken. The question of "good governance" was paramount and barring a few exceptions, nothing indicated a desire to break with the globalisation. What is more, throughout the Forum, those pretending to give capitalism a human face dominated over the more radical and alternative voices. This fact could be partly explained by the WSF's exorbitant registration fees, since the major NGO's can spend significant amounts and so monopolize a political space. This in turn means that they do not need to respect the needs of smaller movements in the organisation of local or regional campaigns. For example, the NGO 'Action Aid' filed for 25 activities even though the WSF was only three days long! Church representatives and religious NGO's were out in force, some of whom expressed views totally at odds with the WSF's Charter of Principles (for example in opposition to women's rights, opposition to sexual rights etc.).

5. A wasted fourth day. The great innovation of this forum was to be the organisation of a "fourth day". This idea was conceived during the International Council held in October 2006, the intention being to leave space for the social movements and organisations to work out a common plan of action. However, rather late in the day, without consultation and as a way of closing the forum, the organisers decided to set up thematic work groups in 21 different locations! Needless to say, these met with little success (fewer than 1500 people turned out for all the assemblies). What exactly had been the point? To give opportunity for convergence or for fragmentation? Moreover, nothing was reserved for the social movement's assembly. One could even infer that the fourth day was organised specifically to prevent the voices of the social movement from being heard...

Without a doubt, all of the points mentioned above can be firmly placed in a minus column. And yet...and yet...

Despite major faults the proceedings carried a huge esprit

First of all, we should remember that the Nairobi WSF is not the only forum that has had problems. Although one could say that this one had more than its fair share of them, all previous Forums have experienced difficulties as well. It is a pity, though, that nothing very much seemed to have been learned from past mistakes. That said, the great work carried out by those involved should be acknowledged. The debates were very rich as was the sharing of experiences of struggle and ideas for alternatives. This WSF strengthened the fighting spirit and synergies of the social movements. It also gave ample opportunity for the planning of future mobilisations such as the anti-G8 demo in Rostock coming up in June 2007 at which there should be a high turnout. Finally, one must not underestimate the power of spontaneous solidarity, the informal discussions and meetings that went on were positive in many ways.

Most notably, the social movements present demonstrated their capacity to respond collectively, actively and efficiently to the above-named problems.

1. Direct action guaranteed free entrance for Kenyans. Right from the first

day, the huge queues outside the main entrances forced those responsible to open the doors to all the Kenyans wanting to get in. After sustained protest, the committee finally conceded that they should not prevent local participation just on the basis of not being able to afford the entrance fees.

2. Action against commercialisation. On 22 January participants organised a demonstration against the high food prices. On the 24 January, a group of Kenyan and international activists occupied the two private restaurants inside the stadium, thus enforcing a free distribution of food to the dozens of local Nairobi youths who had made it inside.

3. The organisation of an alternative Forum Faced with the 'economic' impossibility of participating in the Forum, the 'People's Parliament', an organisation that is highly active, especially in Nairobi's shantytowns, decided to set up an alternative forum. The Parliament, set up right in the town centre, was a huge success. Down to earth, democratic and grounded in the work of militants, over the three days it welcomed thousands of participants as well as many delegates from a range of overseas movements.

4. A successful social movement assembly. As well as such collective measures that were aimed at rectifying the forum's 'mistakes'; from the outset the social movements came together to set up their own assembly in order to facilitate the important work of coordinating action for the future. At a meeting called on the same day and not even on the official programme, the assembly succeeded in unifying more than 2000 participants in a common declaration. Despite its somewhat 'lite' content the declaration put African struggles and resistance at the top of the agenda, denounced the commercialisation and militarisation of the WSF and sent out a strong message that the WSF is not for sale. In the end, this fourth day allowed the proceedings to conclude in an atmosphere of fraternity, of struggle and accord which, alas, had been absent up until then.

A partial success is also encouraging

Even if it isn't possible at the moment to evaluate the global impact of this particular Forum, it is nevertheless possible to summarise it as at least a partial success. Despite its flaws, the WSF demonstrated a profound vitality and those who maintain that the WSF is in its death throes were roundly refuted. The task remains, though, to learn from the mistakes of the past and to correct them in a democratic and transparent manner. This must be done so that the action days planned for the end of January 2008 are a success and so that these demonstrations and actions can give weight to the slogan "Another World is Possible". They must remind people of the reality being lived by the oppressed all over the world.

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