

The World Social Forum 2007: A Kenyan Perspective

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Background:

In its Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum is described as "an open meeting place for reflective thinking.... by groups and movements that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.." Such was the description that created, amongst the members of the People's Parliament, an unprecedented enthusiasm and excitement, particularly because the WSF was coming, for the first time, to Africa and to their door steps in Nairobi, Kenya. To many of them, it was an opportunity that they knew was not likely to present itself again during their lifetimes, and there was on their part, understandably, an urgency to participate, to be part of and to contribute to the WSF in Nairobi.

A member of the Organizing Committee describes the People's Parliament as a disorganized group, and perhaps from his perspective it is. Despite the fact that they get things done, viewed from the ivory tower a group of people who have spontaneously met every day for the last 15 years without a CEO to direct their business, office premises or potential to buy large 4-wheel drive vehicles to ferry their 'bigwigs' must appear disorganized. But in their desire to participate in the WSF, members of the People's Parliament hosted the African Social Forum at Jeevanjee Gardens in 2005, and were active in the pre-planning meetings in early 2006, before the planning process became closed to social movements and was left only to a small clique of high-handed intellectuals (and their close family members) with a long history of attendance at previous WSF in Porto Alegre and Mumbai. From the onset, it was clear that the WSF process in Kenya had its "owners" and they did not include the ordinary Kenyan.

In the spirit of making "another world" possible, the People's Parliament decided to join the "permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it" and refused to be excluded in the World Social Forum in Nairobi. Members resolved that WSF in Nairobi was an opportunity that they would not miss, especially since the WSF process "brings together and interlinks organizations and movements of civil society from all countries in the world".

When January 2007 finally drew near, it became clear that something was amiss; the WSF in Nairobi was not going to be open to many Kenyans. Attempts to get a hearing with the organizers of the WSF Nairobi proved futile, but members of People's Parliament were determined, remaining patient

and hopeful until on January 19, 2007, the eve of the WSF when volunteers at the KICC registration site denied members access to the notice board because they could not afford the Kshs. 500 required for registration. Apparently one needed to pay just to view a notice board in the middle of the KICC grounds! The denial was the final straw that broke the back of the erstwhile enthusiastic People's Parliament, prompting the group to invoke the right "to deliberate on declarations or actions they may decide on, whether singly or in coordination with other participants". Considering that the WSF is "open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging of the organizations and movements that decide to participate in it", People's Parliament decided on January 19, 2007 at 2:00pm:

To immediately protest the apparent determination of the organizers of the WSF to deliberately lock out poor Kenyans by imposing a registration fee of Kshs. 500 that was too high and to work constantly towards ensuring that the fee was removed, and

To organize with speed, an alternative forum to provide poor Kenyans with an alternative space to participate in the WSF process at no cost.

To work towards ensuring that the outcomes of the discussions held at the alternative forum were included in the WSF declarations.

As expected, the WSF provided a rich fabric of experiences, both positive and negative and in the final analysis, the People's Parliament is the better for having participated in the processes.

Successes of the WSF 2007 in Nairobi

The WSF 2007 in Nairobi is a solid foundation upon which a lot can be built. The forum had some positive impact, including but not limited to the following:

- It was perhaps the most impressive gathering of leftist organizations ever to have convened at one place in Africa. It provided, especially to the African participants, an unprecedented opportunity "to strengthen and create new national and international links among organizations and movements". The WSF went a step beyond that, it created an environment in which participants were able to socialize and make new friends, to inspire and be inspired, to laugh and to dance.
- It had the widest representation of African participants ever to attend a World Social Forum.
- It had plenty of activities organized by many organizations and movements and it presented those that were lucky to attend it with the opportunity to hear first-hand about the struggles and the achievements of many communities.
- It provided some of the least visible groups in the society, such as the Dalit of India, with the kind of visibility necessary to make another world possible. There was also a very healthy participation of women and minorities at the WSF. Notable for the Kenyan community, the Gay and Lesbian Network had its first opportunity to come out of the closet.
- It made, albeit only for a short while and within the closed gates of the stadium, another world possible- demonstrations and actions in protest went on without the usual tear-gas, and despite the heavy (and somewhat peculiar) presence of the police. At least within the Kasarani stadium there was unhampered exchanges between groups and people.
- There was a visible presence of women and feminist groups, which is a complete departure from ordinary civil society meetings in Nairobi.

Failures and lessons learnt at the WSF 2007

Members of Organizing committee and International Council of the WSF seem content with the mere fact "it happened", never mind how mismanaged the process might have been! The People's Parliament believes that an opportunity to showcase the immense capacity not just of the Kenyan people, but of the African people, was squandered by short-sightedness, greed, and lack of compassion compounded by great arrogance exhibited by the organizers.

Pre-Event Awareness: There was, decidedly, very little publicity about the WSF in Kenya prior to the event. Little effort was made to provide information to the people before and during the event; there were no posters, banners, fliers, advertisements, or information desks in strategic parts of towns to direct interested or potential participants to the event. Many visitors noted with concern that there was little indication of the magnitude of the event- taxi drivers at the airport were not even aware of the WSF!

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the organizers tried to hold 'regional' social forums to create awareness. At least one such forum was held in Kisumu with lackluster results. Persistent problems of micro-management and nepotism dogged these regional forums.

Communication: During the planning processes there was a notable lack of communication between the organizers of the forum and other groups interested in participating. In-fighting amongst the local organizers eventually made it nearly impossible for outsiders to figure out what was happening and what kind of support the organizers required.

Fees:

Registration Fees: Set at Kshs. 500, the registration fee was untenable for the poor masses in Kenya. Converting to about \$7, the fee is equivalent to about one week's wages, and with 60% of Kenya's population living on less than \$1 a day, the fee served to exclude many Kenyans from the WSF process.

Activity Fees: To organize activities and or discussion at the WSF, organizations were required to pay Kshs. 30,000 which meant that small groups and movements of poor Kenyans were reduced to spectators during the events. Only big NGOs were able to pay, creating an uneven representation that excluded grassroots movements and social initiatives of the people.

Exhibition/ Vending Fee: According to the vendors, it cost about Kshs. 60,000 to acquire a small booth to sell food and water. As such, the opportunity was open only to the large enterprises owned by the rich and in order to recoup the exorbitant fee, the cost of the merchandise, including food and water was increased by more than 500% in some instances.

Venue: At about 10 km from the city, the Kasarani Stadium is the farthest from downtown. There are at least 6 other parks and stadiums, all within 10-15 minutes of the city center and of each other that would have been suitable for the forum including Uhuru Park (where the opening and the closing ceremonies took place), Central Park (across the street from Uhuru Park), Nyayo Stadium (where Kenyans convene for national celebrations & holidays), City Stadium, Jamhuri Gardens, Kamukunji Grounds (the site of Kenya's political mass actions), and Jeevanjee Gardens (where People's Parliament successfully hosted over 4,000 participants of the alternative forum).

The long distance from our neighborhoods made it expensive for Kenyans to travel to Kasarani. There was a lot of theft and general insecurity at the Kasarani despite being touted for its safety and having a large contingent of police in the stadium, which put to paid the organizers claim that the

venue had been chosen for security reasons. In any case, putting people in secure seclusion during the day and releasing them to the mercy of criminals in the city at night defeats simple logic. Besides, People's Parliament organized an alternative space in Jeevanjee Gardens in downtown Nairobi, with no fee and no restriction on attendance and during the three days of the forum there was no report of any loss of property or insecurity whatsoever. The secluded and closed nature of the stadium increased insecurity rather than enhanced. To most participants the stadium was one large maze and navigating one's way through the myriad of entrances and exits was a nightmare. Being constantly lost made many participants vulnerable.

The closed nature of the venue also meant that actions and or demonstrations made by the participants were contained so much so that no one but the participants got any wind of them, resulting in making the participants' actions essentially like graceful dances performed in pitch darkness.

Militarization: There was a very visible and heavy police presence. Strangely, the police appeared either unable or unwilling to deal with the insecurity at the stadium.

Marginalization of small organizations and social movements: Perhaps owing to the hefty activity fees imposed on organizations, many small organizations, particularly those social movements that are not part of well-established networks, were sidelined in favour of large NGOs which seemed to have unlimited access to space and time in the WSF. That created inequity. For instance, Action Aid alone had 25 events while the Human Dignity Network had 70 events. What dictated events was not the importance of the message but the amount of spare cash an organization had. At the same time, the ubiquitous activities of the religious groups are a growing concern for many participants.

Commercialization: According to its Charter of Principles, "alternatives proposed at the WSF stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations.." In view of that, we are still wondering what Celtel, a large multinational corporation was doing at the WSF, and what prompted the organizers to allow Celtel to sponsor the forum, provide registration, and to limit the participation of Celtel's competitors such that nearly all participants were given Celtel phone lines and other providers were barred even from selling phone credit at the Kasarani Stadium.

Insecurity: There were thefts of phones, cameras, wallets, laptops and other valuables in Kasarani. The suggestion by the organizers that the slum-dwellers who gained free entry were responsible for the insecurity is insulting; the organizers seem to think that poor people own a patent on crime and bad behaviour. Indeed, it is this attitude that informed the organizers' arrogance and made it impossible for the poor people of Kenya to get a fair hearing before and during the WSF. Besides the random thefts the security of the copies of the identification documents that were made during the registration process remains a major concern for many participants, especially considering that the fate of such copies is not known and that Kenya remains a transit point for drug and people traffickers.

Volunteerism: There is need for the WSF to redefine volunteerism. About 400 translators "volunteered" at a rate of US\$ 100 per day, which is a hefty price to pay. Other professionals volunteered their services for up to US\$ 400 per day. In addition, many other people earned all manner of monies for wearing a green volunteer tag and going round and round in the stadium doing absolutely nothing.

Translation and equipment: Despite spending over US\$ 40,000 per day on translation, there was a total failure in translation occasioned either by the lack of or faulty FM radio units. The FM radios

for use by participants were not suitable and were never tested before 50,000 units were ordered. Further compounding the failure was the fact that the radios were not effectively made available to the participants. Instead, several “volunteers” were seen with boxes of the radios that they were selling to weary participants at Kshs. 100 per unit.

Cost of food and water: With the organizers turning a blind eye to neo-liberal corporations, the price of food and water was exorbitant. Participants were exposed to exploitation by commercial enterprises by first denying them choice through competition- Kasarani is very far from restaurants and hotels that would offer alternatives- and then by not selecting with care, the providers chosen so that exploitative establishments such as the five-star Windsor and Norfolk hotels found space at the WSF. It is worth noting that over 50,000 litres of free water were donated but were never made available to participants. The organizers argued that it was not possible to distribute the water due to logistics. Hogwash. Had the bottles of water been placed at every entrance, participants would easily have taken the water themselves. Besides, it is most likely that the donated water somehow found its way into the market at an inflated price of 300% of the normal value.

Inaccessibility of venues & Events: The program of events was a rare find, and even when one had it, navigating through the myriad of gates and events, poorly labeled at best, made it nearly impossible for one to know what was going on. The end result was that people from organizations, networks, or movements were only able to attend their own events making the whole idea of exchanging experiences moot. Many of the events turned out to be people from the same networks preaching to the converted.

Speeches: Never again should participants of the world social forum be exposed to over 45 minutes of the most excruciatingly boring speeches by retired presidents with time to sing ballads on the side!

Indifference: Processions to and from the slums were a tasteless addition to the WSF menu. The poor people of the world are not for display, not even to the sympathetic multitudes that attend the WSF. Poverty should not be a fascinating event within the WSF, nor should the assumption that poor people have no feelings prevail. Such casual treatment of the plight of the poorest of the poor lowers their dignity and robs them of their humanity. WSF should actively include poor people in its program or stay away from their homes rather than march in fascination to slums.

Dishonesty: The organizers of the WSF were consistent only in their inconsistencies. Despite making several declarations that the registration fees had been waived for poor Kenyans, it took the intervention every morning at the stadium, of a group of sympathetic protesters to get the gates opened and even so, the moment the protestors went into the stadium the gates were promptly closed.

Recommendations:

There are reasons why parallel social forums were organized in India and in Kenya. These parallel forums are a symptom of a deeper problem and not, as the organizers would like to believe, the cause of problems within the WSF. They exist because the WSF has problems that must be addressed. From our experience at the WSF 2007, we recommend that the following steps be taken:

- That the people selected to lead the WSF process must be loyal to the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum.
- The WSF organization process must be inclusive, transparent and participatory.

- That all residents of the host country who can demonstrate the need for a waiver of fees be given free access into the WSF.
- That the WSF be held in a place where the largest possible number of participants can access it, and not in closed stadiums far from people's habitats.
- That WSF should not be commercialized, and in particular no multi-national corporation should be given access to the WSF, either as a vendor or as a participants.
- That there be some form of affirmative action to facilitate equity in the allocation of time and events in order to enable small groups and social movements to participate at the program level rather than just as spectators.
- That the WSF impose simple rules to curb exploitation such as price limits on food and water, as well as allowing small entrepreneurs access to the WSF market places.
- That key decisions such as the venue of the WSF be left to the local organizers to decide.
- That enough resources are allocated to publicizing the WSF before, during and after the event in order to build solidarity in the host country and to leave a lasting impact.
- That proper procurement procedures for tendering of services and purchase of items such as translator radios are laid down and followed.
- That accountability and transparency be the guiding principles especially during the planning process so that nepotism, corruption, over-handedness, arrogance, greed, incompetence and negligence are eradicated from the WSF.
- Organizers should be encouraged to develop a tolerance for constructive criticism and diplomacy so that suggestions, corrections and other similar contributions do not elicit ad hominem attacks.
- NGOs organizing the WSF should be vetted to avoid situation in which there is duplication leading to a small group of people working through many different groups to the exclusion of others. There should be proper auditing and local vetting of the organizers to ensure wide representation in WSF process.