

The three faces of the World Social Forum

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After seven years, is it any closer to making another world possible? Anthony Barnett in Nairobi takes an engaged yet critical look at the World Social Forum.

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The World Social Forum (WSF) is about three things, a young Frenchman told me. We were coming back from Kenya together. He had been to most of them since they first began in Porto Alegre in Brazil in January 2001. They are, he said, about protesting, networking and proposing.

Protesting power

When they began, before 9/11, the protest was against the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos which appeared to celebrate the end of government and the triumph of market-driven, “neo-liberal” capitalism and its rampant inequality. It was in the wake of the battle of Seattle in November 1999 that disrupted the world-trade talks. The creation of the WSF as an anti-Davos ensured that the new century began with a multinational stand in the name of the peoples of the world against the presumptions of the world economic order.

Since 2001, until this year, the WSFs have grown and, undoubtedly, shifted the agenda, making sure that the big battalions have not had it all their own way. It has been a remarkable achievement. In 2004 the WSF was held in Mumbai with an enormous mobilisation of Indian organisations. In 2005 it returned to Porto Alegre. In 2006 it went regional or “polycentric”: to Caracas in Venezuela, Karachi in Pakistan and Bamako in Mali. One reason for this was that the decision had been taken to hold the next full world forum in Kenya, giving the organisers plenty of time to prepare against the backdrop of poor infrastructure.

Thus, this year, global civil society and Africa were planned to come together for the seventh World Social Forum in Nairobi (20-25 January 2007), close to the great rift valley from which the human species first emerged in triumph on its own two legs. The hope was that in 2007 the social movements of the world would inspire African civil society to stand up and show its strength, wisdom and the music of its needs.

For, unlike the mere protest mobilisations such as Seattle in 1999 (or the one being planned for the G8 meeting in June 2007 in Germany’s remote Baltic resort of Heiligendamm), WSFs are designed as a form of positive protest, exemplary sites of solidarity with the struggles of the poor, to give voice to the “have-nots”.

Such aspirations were pitifully unfulfilled at the Kasarani stadium complex, which was hired for the

WSF 2007 in Nairobi. As a mobilisation against the dominant order, it was a public-relations disaster. The main headlines that it won around the world, in so far as it gained any, was the protest against it by the hungry poor of the Kibera slums (made famous by the film *The Constant Gardener*) who stormed the gates against the high price of entry and the rip-off cost of the food (Patricia Daniel blogged the story for openDemocracy). As Adam Ma'anit of *New Internationalist* wrote in his blog at the start of the forum, there seemed to be a corporate and commercial air to its organisation that undermined its aims.

The poor from the slums were headed by a young spokeswoman, Wangui Mbatia, who is in possession of astonishing political talent. Alas, she had to direct it inwards, against an appalling organisation that closed off the WSF from Kenyan society, when she should have been supported by it to address her calm and determined eloquence to the wider world.

Networking Africa

In its second role, as an event for networking, I was impressed. In his account of his disappointment with what he felt was a lack of politics, Firoze Manji in *Pambazuka News* considers whether Nairobi's WSF was "just another NGO fair". But where else can the far-flung universe of all those who are working for a better world come together? In advance the organisers boasted that 150,000 would attend. When it opened they claimed 50,000. I doubt if more than 20,000 participated, including Kenyans (but not including the water-vendors).

But still, to get 20,000 people from around the world to equatorial Africa is an achievement. A wonderful, friendly variety of views, arguments, dress, interests, beliefs and backgrounds came together in many conversations - such as Susan Richards and Solana Larsen described in their openDemocracy reports and blogs from previous WSFs (see box).

Below the radar of the public platforms, from the Habitat International Coalition to the network on water resources, and women's rights to human rights, new connections were being made and a younger generation was assessing the intercontinental scene. Patricia Daniel in her blog described this energy and intensity among the women's networks that were a large part of the forum.

To take one example, a network of activists in local authorities working for social inclusion asked the organisers for the facility to hold a day-long seminar. When they got no reply they met off-site in a hotel; 150 participated from all over Africa (including South Africa, Mali, Benin and Mozambique) and beyond. The connections made between committed local-government administrators will pay off in all kinds of ways.

However, there was no participant from Kenya - a telling comment on the failure of the Kenyan organisers, not only with respect to running (or failing to run) the forum itself but, more important, in terms of the impact the gathering was supposed to make within Kenyan society. A historic opportunity to activate the voices of Africa was lost, however considerable the links being made by the networks that were already organised.

Firoze Manji, whose Fahuma printing house launched *African Perspectives on China in Africa* at the forum, also complains that it was the larger, established and therefore (with the exception of the magnificent Action Aid) northern NGOs who made the running. Those who had the resources made the best impact. He rightly singled out the Human Dignity and Human Rights Caucus (HDRHC) who provided a printed and extremely full programme. So did the Germans, with a full-colour programme (in German and English) of all sixty-five events they were putting on.

The churches were out in force. While he was registering, a friend found himself next to a Jesuit who was bringing over fifty participants from Burkina Faso. Caritas, the huge Catholic network, created The Caritas-All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) Ecumenical Platform, "to facilitate the participation of the Churches of Africa at the WSF". Its secretary-general, Duncan MacLaren, stated: "It is important for us to be involved in this process to contribute to the globalisation of solidarity rather than the globalisation of inequality". Their presence led to intense debates over reproductive rights.

Thinking beyond

This brings us to the third role of the WSF. After the protests and the networking, what does it propose? Thomas Ponniah (who gave an interview to openDemocracy on the nature of the WSF in February 2003) put this question to a small session on the future of politics: "For seven years we have built a global consciousness. The question is, what next?"

The last meeting I attended was a gathering of all the social movements, organised by Christophe Aguiton of Attac. Trevor Ngwane of the South African anti-privatisation forum led the proceedings. About a thousand people initially thronged the spacious double tent. Being of the greying deadlocks generation, I enjoyed chanting "Down with Bush" (but drew the line at "Viva Chávez"). There was much condemnation of the commercialisation of the forum, about which a Brazilian speaker said "(It) is not enough that our cause be pure and just, purity and justice must also be within us".

But an answer to Ponniah's question came there none. In the different specialist areas there was strategic thinking. In smaller sessions there were arguments for engagement. Emira Woods of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington DC insisted that "grassroots campaigns, national campaigns and global campaigns can influence government". In a dedicated session on implementing United Nations resolution 1325 to enhance the role of women (which I blogged), Cora Weiss called for "participation, critical thinking and a holistic approach that engages with the issues..."

There was participation in Nairobi. The holistic approach was often just knee-jerk, "oppose all forms of exploitation". At that overall, movement level, there was little if any strategic thinking.

As a result, this year Davos won. Since that first WSF in 2001 China has doubled its wealth and output; India, and Turkey, have grown theirs by more than half. Then, Google had only recently got its initial funding. Today, the argument on climate change is over. For all the glitz and its versions of hot air, these huge changes are (as Simon Zadek's blog shows) being seriously mapped and assessed at Davos. In Nairobi they were addressed only peripherally, if at all.

Larry Elliott, the economics editor of the *Guardian*, sensed at Davos "more than a hint of a return to the future: a scramble for Africa, a sidelining of civil society, and geopolitical concerns trumping human rights". If so, there needs to be a World Social Forum that continues to set out its different claim on the global future in a way the world notices. Its international committee should be very concerned that this is slipping away.

It has already decided that next year the forum will distribute itself everywhere, to consist entirely of local events and actions. Could this provide the opening for original, critical thinking about how to achieve its aim of making "another world possible"? Or will it simply ensure that the WSF disappears completely from view, while the big NGOs find some other venue to continue the invaluable work of global networking?

P.S.

* From Open Democracy website:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/wsf_faces_4297.jsp

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