

World Social Forum: just another NGO fair?

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The World Social Forum, which took place in Nairobi, Kenya for the first time in Africa, was supposed to be a forum for the voices of the grassroots. But Firoze Manji writes that, despite the diversity of voices at the event, not everyone was equally represented.

As one would expect, WSF was highly heterogeneous. There was a lot going on. At one level no one can deny the diversity of people from all parts of the world. WSF seemingly reflected the heterogeneity of civil society internationally: there were initiatives from grassroots women's organisations, from feminists, social movements, small and large African organisations, international (or is it 'multinational'?) organisations, donors and funders, grantees, activists, hustlers and the hassled. There were vociferous anti-capitalists and anti-(capitalist) globalisation meetings and discussions, as one would expect of an event that evolved out of the need to assert an alternative to imperialist globalisations of the Davos kind. And there were those whose politics could reasonably be viewed as part of the civil society infrastructure of modern-day imperial expansion.

But to describe only the diversity would be to miss the real, and perhaps more disturbing, picture. The problem was that not everyone was equally represented. Not everyone had equal voices. This event had all the features of a trade fair – those with greater wealth had more events in the calendar, larger (and more comfortable) spaces, more propaganda – and therefore a larger voice. Thus the usual gaggle of quasi donor/International NGOs claimed a greater presence than national organisations – not because what they had to say was more important or more relevant to the theme of the WSF, but because, essentially, they had greater budgets at their command. Thus the WSF was not immune from the laws of (neoliberal) market forces. There was no levelling of the playing field. This was more a World NGO Forum than an anti-capitalist mobilisation, lightly peppered with social activists and grassroots movements.

And the sense of the predominance of neoliberalism was given further weight by the ubiquity of the CelTel Logo – the Kuwaiti owned telecommunications company that had exclusive rights at the WSF; a virtual monopoly provided to a hotel that provided food at extortionate prices that most Kenyans, if they were allowed in, could hardly afford. And rumours were rife that the business of catering involved people in high places winning exclusive contracts. Hawkers, on whom most of Nariobians depend for providing everything from phone cards to food and refreshment were for a while excluded physically (as well as financially) from entering the China-built Moi Sports Stadium in Kasarani, the venue for the WSF. And it was only when frustrated activists took direct action to occupy the offices of the organisers that a more liberal policy for entry was implemented.

This was the first full WSF held in Africa (Mali was host to one of the polycentric WSF's last year). But the forum was marked by the under-representation of social activists from Africa – or indeed from the global south. Inevitably this reflected on how debates and discussions were framed. Pambazuka News staff had hoped that this space would be the basis for forging a broader radical pan-Africanism. But that was, sadly, not to be. The white North, with its hegemonic parochialism, was over-represented. Social movements from the South were conspicuous by their numerically small presence at the forum.

Probably the most consistently heavily attended forum throughout the week was that organised by the Human Dignity and Human Rights Network which had the largest tent, and held meeting after meeting throughout most of the week, with a caste of well known speakers. But like most of the events at WSF, the set-up of the meetings was of a traditional platform of speakers with the audience being talked at rather than being engaged in discussion. While we heard the experience of both survivors of human rights abuses and human rights defenders, there was little political analysis.

And that probably catches the sense of most, thankfully not all, of the WSF events: there was lots of talking and sloganeering. There was much discussion about policies and alternatives to existing policies. But one couldn't help feel the absence of politics. It's as if many believe that nice policies (or human rights legislations) get made by nice people. But the reality is that what ends up as policy is the outcome of struggles in the political domain – fundamentally between the haves and the have-nots. But in a week in which the voices of the have-nots were under-represented, I guess we should not be surprised by the absence of politics.

I think everyone was disappointed by the surprisingly low turn-out: estimates of 30,000 to 50,000 people attended, compared with an expected crowd of 150,000. What made so many keep away in droves? Despite asking many this question, I have found no satisfactory reasons offered.

P.S.

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