

Interview

Kenya: The People's Parliament

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Nairobi, Kenya,

Could you present yourself and your organisation: what is it doing, how did it start and what are its practices and objectives?

My name is Wangui Mbatia, I am a member of Bunge la Mwanachi, which is translated as People's Parliament in English. Our organisation is a people's movement, it is not quite an institution; it is a movement of the people. It started 15 years ago just by having a gathering of Kenyans sitting under a tree in a park discussing their issues. And it has met every single day for the last 15 years, and under that tree we've discussed a lot of our problems; we've come out with solutions; we've created awareness.

So essentially the objective of the People's Parliament is to provide the people with a voice when it lacks one, to create awareness about different things: it could be about health matters, like HIV AIDS; it could be about political matters, for instance we worked very actively during the Kenyan constitutional reform process. We create awareness among the public about things that affect them: laws, for instance - we always make sure that we discuss the laws that are being discussed in our parliament, so that the people will know what the law will actually mean to them.

On many occasions we do take a pro-active role in ensuring that the rights of the people are respected. That is why we think that the World Social Forum is very important for Kenyans to participate in when it is in this country. This is our first World Social Forum. Our members are largely ordinary citizens who would not be able to afford a ticket to Brazil or even to India because it is too expensive.

So whereas some of us have been aware of the World Social Forum process, most of us cannot afford to participate and could not afford to participate when the World Social Forum was being held out of the country. Many of us thought that if the World Social Forum was coming to Nairobi, it would have included us, but it appeared however that too many things in the way the forum was organised have made it difficult for Kenyans to participate.

The first one was the fees imposed on us to access the World Social Forum. You know that to attend the World Social Forum and to participate in you had to pay large sums of money. For Kenyans, for instance, if you want to have a restaurant in this forum you have to pay approximately \$500. The average Kenyan lives on less than \$1 a day. So to be able to have a restaurant here would have taken the average Kenyan more than a year's worth of income, which means, literally, we were excluded. But even if we want to go and put up a restaurant here, just to attend the forum the organisers insisted on a fee of 500 shillings, the equivalent of just over \$6 which is about a week's worth of wages.

We did not think that that was fair, considering again that the ordinary Kenyan lives on less than \$1 a day, and to attend a forum just to be able to commiserate with others, to discuss issues, to exchange experiences with others, it was very unfair to ask us to pay so heavy a price that we were

excluded. So the People's Parliament took that up as an issue. We organised our forum; we ran our forum in a public park for free for three days. That was on Sunday, Monday and yesterday, Tuesday.

But then we thought today was going to be action day in the World Social Forum, and we thought that maybe if we come to this Social Forum we will find our fellow activists and our fellow comrades in action. So at our park we came up with a few resolutions about what to do. And one of the things that we needed to do was to create awareness that one, food prices in Kenya are just too high; and secondly that the World Social Forum should be a place where even the institutions that are allowed to participate are carefully selected, so that we don't send the wrong message.

And our action today at the Windsor restaurant is just an indication of that. We selected this restaurant as our point of action because of many reasons. The Windsor restaurant has a long history with the people of Kenya. The owners, the people of Kenya feel, have not treated them well in the past. It is reputed to be owned by our cabinet minister in charge of internal security. And he is a man not many of us are fond of because he has done some incredibly hurtful things to us as a people. So we thought that because he has made immense profits out of the World Social Forum, we would have some actions around his restaurant so that we can remind him and those like him that we are here and we exist.

What do you think or say could be your common objective after the world social forum ends, and for you in Kenya how can it help you in building your organisations and struggles?

I think that is one of the best aspects of the World Social Forum. It brings people who are like-minded together in a way that is not done in any other forum because here we have been able, as just average members of the public who are not normally able to travel outside to the world, we've had the world brought to us. And we haven't just had the world brought to us, we've had the right world brought to us, so that we speak to people who speak our language, they believe in what we believe in, they think the way we think, they want to do what we want to do.

So one of the most rewarding things about having the World Social Forum in Nairobi has been that... We have been able to meet with other organisers of movements elsewhere. Now for us again, because of the restrictions on the gates and because we have not been able to participate and portray clearly what our organisation is about, of course our opportunities have been somewhat limited.

However we are creative people and with the little that we have, I think we've touched a reasonable enough number of people, so that we think that perhaps our future will be a little brighter than it was before the World Social Forum came here. We have had immense support. For instance we took our lunch money during the past week in order to print our pamphlet. And when we started giving out the pamphlet and then we ran out of money various delegates who were attending the World Social Forum were generous enough to print our materials for us.

We did not want to be given money because we think that as a people we will get better when we get away from the culture of being given handouts. So we would simply tell them where they could go and help us print the pamphlet and they would print according to their ability. And we thought that was truly the pinnacle of socialism: to give according to your ability to those that have a need. Now for instance, a young lady has printed 5000 pamphlets for us, those were printed yesterday.

You can understand the incredible camaraderie that we have found... Do we think that we will have the opportunity to build lasting networks? We believe so. I think so far the visitors that have come to us have opened their doors to us, so we believe that it is up to us take that to the next level and I

think that if somebody has seen the people of Kenya in their true elements, they will find that we are generous and hospitable people who are willing to carry out change and who have tried and endeavoured to do so in the most peaceful manner.

We have been trying to avoid conflicts when it is necessary but we are also a hopeful people, we do not give up easily; which is why we have resisted having those gates closed, every single day we have had to force those gates open, every single day, so that we can come in and be with you, be with the other people that are here. And I think in a small way the World Social Forum has presented us with an opportunity to fight for ourselves. Sometimes when the world gives you trouble it is not always right to look at it as pain. Sometimes it is a good, a hopeful learning experience. And I think for us the World Social Forum has been a good learning experience. If it should come again next week we will be better prepared for it.

Beyond the World Social Forum what will be the situation in Nairobi and Africa; what will be the challenges for radical networks in Kenya and in Africa in the next months and years? What are the main issues to build and help to build, in your opinion?

We think that in our own small way we are helping to set the pace for those movements that tend to be excluded from mainstream World Social Forum events; so that we hope the next World Social Forum will give a bigger space for people like us, wherever it will be held. We think that by carrying out the two actions that we did, we have perhaps given a reasonably good idea to other movements out there about what can be done with just a little bit of innovative thinking, a little bit of creativity, a little bit of voluntarism, and a little bit of giving, to reinstate and stamp back the authority of the poor person within the Social Forum, of the person who is a revolutionary within the Social Forum. We think that we would do much better if the radical voices were on occasion allowed to air their opinion, so that we stop being a congregation of the agreeable. Sometimes it is healthy to disagree agreeably.

What about the broad political issues? In your opinion what are the social and political issues activists around the world have to be taking into account, especially African ones.

For us in Kenya this is an election year, so we will be going to election for the first time after having had a coalition government which has quickly fallen apart and left us hanging as the people that voted it in. So we have a tremendous task again of re-educating our people on the process, the democratic process of election. Summarily, for us as an organisation we will take an active role in that.

But our organisation also deals with matters that have both a local and an international angle to them. For instance we are very concerned about the trend of war and terrorism because that in itself has been an instrument for creating terror in the ordinary citizens' lives. For instance, in Kenya our organisation has been very instrumental in ensuring that the anti-terrorism law was not passed here, because that law was going to install in Kenya a police state, where we were going to lose all our civil rights in exchange for protection from terrorism that doesn't even really exist here. So we do take our place in global causes.

We are very keen on dealing with the imbalance in trade. You know we are Africans and we suffer the brunt of inequality in trade. That is something we would like to deal with on a daily basis, although again ours is a grassroots movement, so it is limited by a lack of resources, but the innovative way of handling our issues allows us to go much further. We hope that the message that people who met with us will carry with them is that there is a group in Kenya that can work with them and that if we are included in processes we can make an impact, local perhaps, but a great impact; and that is just one step forward for all of us who want to change this world.

P.S.

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* Wangui Mbatia is a leading member of the Kenyan People's Parliament.