

Reflections on WSF

Talkshop, reminder of an alternate world or forum for mobilisation?

Azad Essa, Aisha Lorgat, Bianca Tame, Nomkhosi Xulu attended the 2007 World Social Forum in January and came away with ambivalent feelings.

The world came to Africa this past January to discuss and find alternatives to the problems of debt, HIV/AIDS, rampant economic globalisation, food security, biodiversity and challenges to women's and workers' rights among other issues.

About 66 000 activists, students, intellectuals, ordinary men and women and various notables of the 'left' descended on Nairobi for the 6th World Social Forum (WSF), the first to be held on the African continent. The rallying call at this, as at every WSF previously, was the slogan 'Another World is Possible'. A world that is based on the principles of justice and fairness and in which the weak are protected as opposed to the nightmare in which competitiveness and free trade (the deities of the WTO's Davos) rule, and survival of the 'fittest' is determined by subsidies and brute military force.

The ideals and objectives were clear, in principle, for all who cared to know them. However, it appears that in reality this alternative world would be very difficult to achieve. Even in the sacred confines of the WSF venue, held in the wide expanses of the Moi International Sport Centre complex in Nairobi, the contradictions between the rhetoric and the lived reality were glaring and,

to those of us who held hopes of witnessing a microcosm of another, better, more inclusive and just world, depressing.

The WSF 2007 was supposed to be the first forum to benefit from the polycentric social forum processes that took place in Caracas in Latin America, Bamako in Africa and Karachi in Asia during 2006.

In every sense the WSF in Nairobi was a historical venture. As the first world forum to be held on the African continent, the WSF's agenda was clearly Africa-oriented with more (but not quite enough) African participants than ever before. However, despite being an entity made up of movements and processes, the WSF was marred by real organisational, logistical and age-old imperialist prejudices.

The forum was geared towards being a melting pot of ideas, alternatives and struggles. Instead this attempted integration of different movements, grassroot organisations and large international NGOs resulted in what was often an uneven, fragmented and dissatisfying collection of workshops, seminars, protest marches and cultural activities.

But herein lies the essential debate concerning the functionality of the WSF. Should disparate activities

and approaches to cultural resistance be synchronised into collective action or does the WSF serve merely as a space of inspiration and solidarity, where activists gain insight into fellow international struggles? Is it simply a proverbial talk-shop without any distinctive concrete outcome in the form of an end-of-forum strategy of action?

While the WSF brought Africa's issues to the fore, with debt relief and fair trade very high on the agenda, many African participants found it difficult to reconcile the reality that the five day Capitalist-bashing event was really *just that*.

Also, Kenyan nationals found it ludicrous that not only did they have to pay 500 KES (5 Euros) to enter the forum, but many were embarrassed that the event had turned into a tourist trap with the price of basics such as food and water, available for sale within the venue, set at five star hotel levels. Added to this was Celtel, a Kuwaiti based telecommunications multinational, whose logo was appended to WSF banners and whose stalls and service personnel were more numerous than WSF help desks and volunteers, as the most visible corporate sponsor (or 'communications partner'). Many believers were left dumbfounded by the rampant capitalism on display in

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a form that was totally against the WSF's expressed values.

In response to these concerns, the local WSF secretariat was adamant that provision had been made for Kenyans who could not afford entrance fees. They could apply for a discount of up to 90%. However, those who could make use of this were largely unaware and this led to anger and protests by locals. The WSF organising committee offices in the VIP suites of the stadium were breached on more than one occasion, even when guarded by armed police, until it was eventually announced that entrance was free.

For some of the globe-trotting foreign activists, this challenged their liberal beliefs. One could not help but be aware of the discomfort caused by attempts to control the 'disturbance' that real poor people caused within the carefully constructed intellectual space of the WSF. In essence, these entrance fees fed into the idea that the poor were subjects rather than actors: they needn't be present to voice their dissatisfaction and socio-economic struggles. One local activist exclaimed that poverty wasn't a story or a statistic for them. Instead, they experience malnutrition and poverty on a daily basis and they demanded to be heard.

The WSF does not and cannot exist in isolation from current capitalist realities. Hiring the Moi International Sports Centre cost the WSF secretariat 13 million KES (\$185 000) thus justifying the entrance fees to a certain extent. Participants from wealthier countries of the north had to pay significantly higher registration fees than locals and other Africans. The fact that the WSF is not an autonomous financial entity means that it will always be dependent on external financial aid in order to fund its activities. It was only in 2004 that the WSF (in Mumbai) declined assistance from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, a stance that was driven by radical Marxists within the Mumbai organising committee. Their African counterparts had no choice but to rely on multinational companies' assistance and donor funding as in the previous *Porte Alegre* forums.

The WSF is all about these dynamics, issues, and contradictions brought to the fore in one space. It is still the ultimate activist gathering the world over with more activities planned, people meeting, and organisations networking over one week than could be possible in the course of a normal entire year. Despite the haphazard organisation and logistical deficiencies, the WSF

provided a *jukwaa* or platform for a multitude of actors to share their struggles, discuss alternatives and exchange information aimed at continuing and enhancing their work in their different locations. This serves to make the WSF both sustainable and pertinent.

At the same time, the African version highlighted the vast inequities suffered on the African continent, and the need for the WSF to move beyond dialogue to another level. In this, the reduced number of participants, as compared to what was expected, suggests that the WSF is at a cross roads. Whether the 'talkshop' can evolve into a more clearly articulated and acknowledged political actor with participants pursuing political goals in their individual contexts through mobilisation, civil disobedience, alternate media institutions, or political parties, all carrying a WSF mandate remains to be seen. But what is clear is that the world needs the WSF if only to keep the dream of an alternate world alive, albeit with some rethinking.

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