

World Social Forum 2011

Is another world possible?

The World Social Forum is a site of hope for many activists that 'Another World is Possible', yet, as **Llewelyn Leonard** describes, there is a long way to go and much grassroots organisation to be done before such a world can come into being.

It was in February that our delegation from the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg (UJ) flew to Dakar, Senegal to attend the World Social Forum (WSF) 2011. The WSF attracted more than 60 000 people pursuing the vision of 'Another World is Possible', with the event becoming a symbol of hope for environmental, social and economic justice.

The WSF was first organised in Porto Allegro, Brazil, in 2001, and provides a space for social and environmental activists from across the world to share ideas, strategies, tactics and struggles for creating another better world against the failures of the global neo-liberal capitalist system.

Upon arrival at Dakar Airport I was swamped by a hoard of Senegalese taxi drivers competing with each other to convince me to use their particular taxi to get to my hotel, suggesting the urgent need to address livelihood concerns. This was not unsurprising as the United Nations, Human Development Index, which is a comparative measure of quality of life for countries worldwide, has classified Senegal as a low human development country.

Unfortunately, my taxi driver to the hotel had 'not heard about the WSF', let alone that it was being held in Dakar. However, this was not uncommon as many of the local people I spoke to informally during my stay in Dakar had not heard about the WSF.

However, one middle-class local who knew about the event described it as an opportunity for business and to make 'lots of money.' It seemed ironic that local Senegalese most affected by poverty and injustice were not mobilised to be included in discussions at this year's WSF held on Senegalese soil.

CHAOS!

My general impression of the WSF event, although a place for social networking and solidarity, was that of utter confusion and disorder. The venue for the WSF was at the Cheikh Anta Diop University campus and unfortunately, there were numerous logistical problems.

Many participants found it a task to locate venues for different sessions. Our delegation was supposed to conduct a panel titled, 'Between Autonomy and Vanguardism: Social Movements, Leadership and Researchers',

which like the majority of other workshops and panels was cancelled.

Our panel venue was allocated away from the main WSF university location, about a 30 minute walk to the neighbouring campus and then a further 30 minutes to locate the venue. I assume that it would have made no difference if it had been located on the Cheikh Anta Diop campus.

This was compounded by the fact that the university was organising extra classes simultaneously to make up for the loss caused by a student strike a few days earlier over increased tuition fees being increased by the Senegalese state pursuing a neo-liberal agenda. Venues allocated for some events clashed with student classes.

According to George Awudi, Friends of the Earth Ghana, 'I've been to the WSF in 2007... which was much more better organised... here the places are not labelled. Many organisations have complaints that even on the day of their events; they don't know their venue.'

Clearly, the Senegalese government had no interest in supporting the WSF. The



university management was allegedly changed by the Senegalese president, which withdrew financial support for the event just days before it started.

Did perhaps the uprisings occurring at the time in Egypt and Tunisia and the spreading of social movements across North Africa and the Middle East make the power-hungry Senegalese president, Abdoulaye Wade, nervous of a possible revolution in his own country? Wade's rule has been marred by allegations of corruption, nepotism and constraints on freedom of the press and other civil liberties. The presence of the same social movements and global support networks that gave solidarity to the recent North African revolutions possibly made the Senegalese government rethink the WSF event.

Interestingly, the media was also not seen at the WSF and most discussions did not appear in the conventional media. This raised questions about constraints on press freedom and a lack of organisation on the part of the planning committee.

WHERE ARE GRASSROOTS?

Although this was my first

WSF attendance, I observed a continued trend from previous WSF critiques I had read about which included lack of grassroots representation and domination of the forum by middle-class activists.

I also got a sense of the growing dominance of NGOs over people's movements and local grassroots participation. I question whether a space is provided for grassroots voices to shape alternatives to globalisation from above, and whether coherence is growing within the WSF movement.

It seemed that middle-class activists had more hold on the direction of the WSF without including the attendance and concerns of those most affected. As Siziwe Khanyile, Air Quality co-ordinator of groundWork, South Africa noted, with reference to the climate change discussions, 'Africa is one of the worst affected by climate change... I don't know how many [local] people [are] part of the discussions. It would be nice to have a stronger African presence... It is more of the people you work with; there aren't any new people... people who have the funding have been able to come.'

In addition to a class imbalance

at the WSF, there was clearly also a gender imbalance. Many of the Southern NGOs and representatives present, mostly funded by Western donors, were men, with a limited attendance by women leadership, particularly those women who are normally at the frontline of social and environmental injustices at the household level. I question whether the WSF truly helps to unite social movements across the globe struggling against the forces of neo-liberal capitalism, while seeking a world order based on justice.

An interview I conducted with Desmond D'Sa, leader of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance in South Africa highlighted the urgent need to mobilise grassroots organisations within nations and communities so that local voices can shape WSF events, '... I haven't seen ordinary people active in most of the stuff... it also starts in home countries where civil society is fragmented and because of the fragmentation, it leads to individuals taking the lead...they are accountable to nobody... people [grassroots] taking the lead and being active in the process... does not happen... more women

need to be at the forefront.'

The divide between NGOs and grassroots activists also existed between environmental organisations, although less starkly, and the separation was mainly between the big international NGOs and other smaller environmental groups.

Firstly, it was rewarding to see the Climate Justice Tent which was erected on the south side of the campus engaging around 200 activists including NGOs, CBOs, community leaders, and academic-left activists on strategies and tactics.

This was far away from the market fun-fair on the northern side where most international/national NGOs advertised themselves (although some did engage in workshops), with some selling organic produce, while other local business people sold arts and crafts to amazed Westerners. Surprisingly, unlike the chaotic spaces of cancelled workshops and panels, this space for advertising and profiteering was well organised and clearly labelled.

There was a polarisation of cooperative participation between the two campus sites. Some international NGOs seemed to hold divergent ideologies from activists and community organisations engaging in discussions to strategise against the destructive effects of globalisation and climate change.

As Phil Thornhill, who works on climate change and is the national co-ordinator of the Campaign Against Violent Change in the United Kingdom noted on the environmental divide, '... the green movement is divided... more people have gotten interested in climate change and

become active... [however], people bring in a lot of political agendas, and sometimes these political agendas tend to dominate... there is also a role for a kind of big tent bringing all kinds of people together... [but] the big NGOs bring their brands...and they want to dominate the agenda...'

CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, besides the disorganisation, class and gender imbalances, lack of grassroots presence, individualised leaderships, and divergent ideologies, the forum's strength was in bringing together activists and groupings from across the globe to engage in common struggles that would not have otherwise occurred.

It was good to see activists making connections between different global struggles which showed how the WSF event has advanced since its inception at Davos where activists mainly criticised market forces.

Discussions (where possible) centred around international migration, the exploitation of land and natural resources, land grabbing and biofuels to name a few. Struggles against the tyranny in Egypt and Tunisia also formed a backdrop to the WSF, showing its role of providing solidarity.

A large rally was organised in Dakar in support of the people's movement in Egypt.

In addition, WSF gathering linked up activists globally for strategising and planning towards the United Nations Conference of Parties (COP17) to be held in Durban, from 28 November to 9 December 2011. COP is an annual event to assess progress in dealing with climate change and negotiations as an instrument for

the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

Activists planned actions to place pressure on government leaders converging in Durban to form legally binding agreements to address climate change. Khanyile noted, 'The WSF, in spite of whatever the problems are, is also a place to let the world know what we are planning for COP and how we can link with them and develop positions... we are calling for a move away from fossil fuels... we are going to make sure that our grassroots are aware of the climate issues and how it affects them... the week before the COP17 we're having a fossil fuels strategy meeting where we bring [local] people affected by coal...mining... oil and gas.'

However, while WSF events provide an ideal occasion to connect activists globally, delegates (especially civil society leaders of the South) would achieve more by mobilising and including their grassroots in discussions in future WSF events. Such actions will help build a more coherent progressive civil society that can provide solutions that reflect the needs of the people engaged in everyday struggles.

Future WSF events will also have to be sensitive to class and gender imbalances if 'another world' is to be achieved. The aim must be to move from the 'possible' to 'another world is here', but this transition can only be accomplished by mobilising those most affected. ■

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