

World Social Forum

Progress within challenges

Through interviews **Keke Motseke** argues that the organisational difficulties that the World Social Forum experienced in Senegal's Dakar were an opportunity to show activists from outside the challenges that African countries face in a neo-liberal world.

As we stood in the sweltering midday sun awaiting the World Social Forum (WSF) opening march on 6 February, there was a great sense of being illuminated. Little can be compared to the presence of so many different corners of the world in a minute western part of Africa armed with placards, pamphlets and posters, explaining, presenting and promoting their causes.

Organisations from 123 countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, Central America and the Caribbean, South America, North America and Oceania stood together in Dakar with the aim of stimulating social change and finding inroads to dealing with the negative impacts of neo-liberalism.

The march was also an opportunity for all manner of participants, and even non-participants of the WSF to have a podium where they could alert the world to their dilemmas. The lively, welcoming atmosphere amongst the street vendors as we walked past, the children who stopped their play to come and join the march, brought an exhilarating feel to a journey towards social change.

The approximately 100 000 participants of the WSF were comprised of representatives from religious groups, the environment

and climate change, women and children's rights, basic human rights, workers' movements, trade unions as well as students from the host university, Cheikh Anta Diop University.

Each group or individual attended the WSF with the intent of getting a certain message across, and also to be part of the discourse and possible answers to some of the burning concerns around the world.

During the course of the WSF I asked some participants a few questions to find out what their reasons for attending the Forum were.

PROGRESS WITHIN CHALLENGES

Although the conference was hosted at the Cheikh Anta Diop University, several sessions took place at other venues, including the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. The overarching challenge that faced this particular WSF was the logistics.

A few weeks before the WSF a new rector was appointed at the university. An agreement to host the conference, suspend classes, and make general use of the campus, as well as expose students to the WSF was made with the former rector, but not upheld by the new one. As a result classes were taking place during the WSF, venues were double

booked, talks had to be rescheduled or moved to other venues, and others were even cancelled.

Some people thought it was proper, if not to be expected, that there should be logistical challenges. One interviewee had this to say 'Yes, it is right, they must see how we struggle, they must live how we do, that way they will leave having a better picture of our challenges.'

It appears then, to some at least, the WSF achieved another indirect victory - exposing the poor infrastructure and the deficiencies of basic services in institutions that are meant to be funded and supported by the elite state. So in continuing with the activities of the university, the rector allowed us to witness the conditions that the students were taught under.

Even though the university was not built for the close to 100 000 people that it had to accommodate at the WSF, some of the structures were not affected by the numbers, but were just a representation of how things generally stood.

Even though logistics proved to be a problem, participants found a way to make their voices heard. Tents were brought in and put up by the army to accommodate the presentations that had lost their



Opening of the WSF in Dakar in March this year.

space due to classes continuing at the university.

Mr Sreedbar, an environmental scientist from the Environics Trust in India said, 'Even though things have not gone according to plan in terms of the logistics, this WSF was strategically placed in the best way to hear the voice of the underdog, furthermore, the WSF has to, as is possible, be in Africa, because change needs to come from within.'

There were other benefits from the lack of organisation in that people still had opportunities to relate less rigidly in terms of the way talks were structured, and the times they had to take place. This allowed participants to hold more casual, even if unexpected, debates.

One issue that came up during interviews was that many people, particularly those not based in, or originating from first world countries, believed that a contributing factor to their problems was that the first world kept them at arm's length. They were unable to make progress in dealing with their issues because they need assistance from first world countries, and they could not even get access to visas.

They felt that the administrative difficulties they encountered in their attempts to be heard made their quests all the more impossible. They put forward the idea of having a 'universal passport' that would allow activists admission into those parts of

the world in order to strengthen their causes.

WORD FROM ORGANISER

Taoufik Ben Abdallah, the secretary general of the Africa Social Forum, and member of the organising committee of the WSF found the Dakar conference a complete success. He said it was the largest the Forum has ever held in Africa.

He made reference to the previous Africa Forum which was hosted in Nairobi, Kenya which had deeper challenges because the government was not supportive of the event and was conducted in the midst of political upheavals in the country. However, because the Africa Social Forum is based in Senegal, and there are stronger local organising committees, less division and stronger integration, there were positive results in choosing Senegal as the host country of this year's WSF.

Ben Abdallah noted there was strong representation from trade unions, women and the youth and the WSF was very inclusive. He spoke very optimistically about the numbers, because in the growing numbers of attendees was the promise of a growing awareness about the need for change in the world.

Furthermore, Senegal, as home to 11 million people, contributed the overall 100 000 people who came to the WSF.

Although the attendees were mostly Senegalese, and indeed, students of the university were also actively involved in the proceedings, there was still a staggering 30 000 odd participants from outside of Senegal, even though a large portion of them were from neighbouring countries. Hosting the WSF in Senegal was a perfect opportunity to bring the world to see how Senegal was faring in the global regime of neo-liberalism.

CONCLUSION

The WSF in Dakar was situated at an opportune moment, with the signing of a petition that was circulated by the Alliance for Freedom and Dignity in support of forcing Egypt's Hosni Mubarak to stand down. The Egyptian president actually stepped down at the end of the WSF and the feeling of solidarity with Egypt's masses became part of the Forum's success.

Even though fewer delegates from Egypt and Tunisia than previously planned attended, some streamed into the WSF as it was ending and celebrated their liberation with us. This cemented the hope for the possibility of another world and that indeed we should continue our struggles. ^{LB}

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