

WORLD SOCIAL FORUM - QUO VADIS?

In this issue

From Words to Action	1+6
Dying – Or More Alive Than Ever?	2+6
'NGO Trade Fair' To Left Politics?	3
Little News from Nairobi	4
Learning from the African Experience	5
Visit http://www.ipsterraviva.net/TV/Nairobi/en/default.asp	

Voices of the South on Globalization is a monthly newsletter intended to inspire a meaningful North-South Dialogue by raising awareness for global interdependences and by offering a forum for voices from the South in the globalization debate. Each edition will present short analyses or commentaries from a Southern perspective on one particular issue of the globalization process.

Voices of the South on Globalization is published by IPS Europe with financial support from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

For further information please contact:

IPS-Inter Press Service Europe,
Ramesh Jaura, Marienstr. 19/20, 10117 Berlin
Tel.: ++49-(0)30-28 48 23 60
Fax: ++49-(0)30-28 48 2369
rjaura@ipseuropa.org

FROM WORDS TO ACTION

Roberto Savio *

Seven World Social Forums (WSF) have been enough for the dynamic of civil society to complete a cycle and initiate a stage of profound change -- in contrast to the World Economic Forum (WEF), which has been held 37 times.

With the Forum held in Nairobi, Kenya, from January 20 to 25, the original cycle of the WSF comes to a close: the concept of the open space, conceived in 1999 by the Brazilians Odeed Granjev and Chico Whittaker. Conceived as a reaction to the WEF in Davos, the idea was to create an open space for debate and meetings that would stimulate the participation of and exchange among participants such that they could create alliances and return to their daily tasks energised and better prepared.

The Charter Principles of the WSF, designed to create alternatives to neo-liberal globalization, invited all organisations and individuals to recognise each other in the desire for another world in an environment with a minimum of exclusion -- only those who accept violence or war or are responsible for injustices are not welcome. Its originality and uniqueness (it was formed in the wake of the mobilisations of Seattle and Geneva) lay in the fact that it presented only a site for debate and barred any demonstrations or declarations in the name of the WSF.

Thus the WSF was held four times in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with the number of participants rising from 50,000 in 2001 to 120,000 in 2005. 2004 saw the first major change: the WSF left its birthplace and was held in Mumbai, India, with an extraordinary level of success in preparation and debate. At this Forum, there was a shift from the focus on a central area of debate to various self-organised sites.

In 2006, the WSF tried the model of a polycentric forum, and three smaller fora were held simultaneously in Africa (Bamako), the Americas (Caracas), and Asia (Karachi). Finally in 2007 the great challenge: to hold the entire Forum in Africa. For those who know this continent, it was clear the organisational challenges would be immense.

Moreover, African civil society is the world's youngest, established in many cases by international civil society, particularly European, which sought interlocutors that were closer in spirit than the African governments. It is also the civil society most repressed and least heeded by the political class of the continent. It can rely on no support from the political and economic systems of the region, which view it as a dangerous alternative to rule characterised by corruption and inefficient, arrogant bureaucracy. *(Continued on page 6)*

* Roberto Savio is a member of the WSF International Committee. He is founder and president emeritus of Inter Press Service (IPS).

DYING – OR MORE ALIVE THAN EVER?

Mario Osava

RIO DE JANEIRO (IPS) - There are plenty of prophets of doom foretelling the death, or at least a deep crisis, of the World Social Forum, based on reports about organisational problems and a great fall in numbers at the 7th WSF, held in Nairobi.

Some champions of the WSF, in contrast, tend to exaggerate its alleged triumphs, such as a decisive contribution to the election of left or centre-left governments in eight Latin American countries, and the inclusion of social issues on the international agenda.

But this global gathering of civil society, first launched in January 2001 in the south of Brazil, could not have had the influence attributed to it on the political current now sweeping the region. The Latin American leftist movement arose from processes that are now decades old, when grassroots and social movements swelled the leftwing electorate.

The first WSF in Porto Alegre also took place after the major United Nations conferences on the environment, human rights, social development, population, women, habitat, and even the UN meeting that approved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which mobilised heads of state, diplomats and experts between 1992 and 2000, giving civil society delegates a major voice in the discussions for the first time.

The usual critics of the WSF, for their part, are forgetting the recent history of diversification, or fragmentation, of social and political movements, which destroyed the monopoly enjoyed by trade unions, the class struggle and political parties in fighting the injustices of capitalism, and added various forms of discrimination and inequalities to be battled.

The WSF is a response to the need to overcome the dispersal of the diverse initiatives and efforts that make up society, and to make international connections between them, without using traditional mechanisms of representation via elections or unions. It is developing new ways of doing politics and creating a more participative kind of democracy.

Thus, the WSF may change its methods, how it organises its meetings and even its name and its key ideas, but global civil society will no longer be able to do without a forum for representatives from all over the world to articulate and energise their struggles, exchange experiences and reflect together.

The WSF is a new actor on the world stage. Its organisational style is diffuse, but at particular moments it can reach a consensus that has mobilising power, such as the 2003 demonstrations against the war in Iraq. It is here to

stay, and it plays a role in democratisation. And it is searching for the best ways and means to empower participants and get their voices heard.

The civil society meeting arose out of opposition to the World Economic Forum, and proved that it met a need by gathering a mass following, promoting wide debate and spawning new international networks and campaigns, as well as local, national and regional meetings. But there is nothing permanent about its present shape, let alone its uniqueness.

There are pressures to convert it into a political instrument that would adopt resolutions and action plans. Many activists and even members of the WSF International Council are calling for decisions and action, arguing that the current formula is causing immobility.

At the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre, a group of 19 prominent intellectuals tried to change the WSF's course, by proposing a "Consensus Manifesto" and inviting people to sign it. But it fell by the wayside.

As an open space for free dialogue between civil society movements, without any hierarchy and fully respecting diversity, as its Brazilian founders intended, the WSF can absorb dissension, opinions and proposals of all kinds.

The participating organisations and movements are free, and encouraged by the forum context, to unite and mobilise around common proposals.

Francisco Whitaker, one of the founders, defended this methodology in his book "Desafio do Forum Social Mundial: um modo de ver" ("The World Social Forum Challenge").

He stood up for the Charter of Principles which have defined the WSF since 2001 as an "open meeting place for democratic debate," not a representative nor a deliberative body, that is against the use of violence and neoliberal globalization.

But the ambition of the WSF to strengthen connections and mobilise civil society in order to build "another possible world" implies huge challenges. Press coverage of the mega-forums declined sharply once the initial novelty wore off, so a different way of communicating with the people of the world is needed.

(Continued on page 6)

'NGO TRADE FAIR' TO LEFT POLITICS?

Patrick Bond *

A mixed message -- combining celebration and autocritique -- is in order, in the wake of the Nairobi World Social Forum. The 60,000 registered participants heard the triumph of radical rhetoric and yet, too, witnessed persistent defeats for social justice causes - especially within the WSF's own processes.

Kenya Social Forum coordinator Onyango Oloo listed grievances that local activists put high atop the agenda: 'colonial era land edicts and policies which dispossessed their communities; the impact of mining and extraction activities on the environment and human livelihoods; discriminatory policies by successive governments that have guaranteed the stubborn survival of pre-colonial conditions of poverty and underdevelopment among many pastoralist and minority communities; the arrogant disregard for the concerns raised by Samburu women raped over the years by British soldiers dispatched on military exercises in those Kenyan communities; ... and tensions persisting with neo-colonial-era settler farmers and indigenous Kenyan comprador businessmen in hiving off thousands of hectares of land while the pastoralists and minority communities are targets of state terror, evictions and denunciations.'

WSF organiser Wahu Kaara: "We are watching [global elites] and this time around they will not get away with it because we are saying they should cancel debts or we repudiate them. We refuse unjust trade. We are not going to take aid with conditionality. We in Africa refuse to be the continent identified as poor. We have hope and determination and everything to offer to the prosperity of the human race."

Firoze Manji, the Kenyan director of the Pambazuka (www.pambazuka.org) Africa news/analysis portal: "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 and 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."

Nairobi-based commentator Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem (also writing in Pambazuka): "The WSFs show up Africa's weaknesses whether they are held outside or inside Africa. One of the critical areas is our level of participation and preparedness. A majority of the African participants - even many from Kenya itself - were brought by foreign paymasters or organisations funded by outsiders. Often they become prisoners of their sponsors. They must attend events organized or supported by their sponsors who need to put their "partners" on display, and the

and the "partners" in turn need to show their loyalty to their masters."

New Internationalist editor Adam Ma'anit: "The sight of Ox-fam-branded 4x4s cruising around flauntingly, the many well-resourced charity and church groups decking out their stalls (and even their own office spaces) with glossies and branded goodies, all reinforce the suspicion that perhaps the WSF has become too institutionalized. Perhaps more worryingly has been the corporate sponsorship of the WSF. The Forum organizers proudly announced their partnership with Kenya Airways. The same company that has for years allegedly denied the right to assembly of its workers organized under the Aviation and Allied Workers Union."

Blogger Sokari Ekine ('Black Looks') on the final WSF event: "Kasha, a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender and Intersex activist from Sexual Minorities Uganda went up to the stage and asked to make a statement. She was asked for a copy of what she would be speaking about and gave them her piece. The organisers threw her piece on the floor and refused to allow her to speak. Kasha stood her ground saying she, like everyone else, had a right to speak here at the WSF. Despite the harassment by the MC and organisers, Kasha took the microphone and spoke. She spoke about being a lesbian, about being a homosexual. She refuted the myth that homosexuality was un-African. She spoke about the punishment and criminalisation of homosexuals in Kenya, in Uganda, and in Nigeria. She said homosexuals in Africa were here to stay. Homosexuals have the same rights as everyone else and should be accepted and finally that even in Africa Another World is Possible for Homosexuals. Kasha was booed and the crowd shouted obscenities at her waving their hands screaming: "No! No! No!" But she persisted and said what needed to be said."

These sobering observations were reflected in a statement by the Social Movements Assembly at a January 24 rally of more than 2000: "We denounce tendencies towards commercialisation, privatisation and militarisation of the WSF space. Hundreds of our sisters and brothers who welcomed us to Nairobi have been excluded because of high costs of participation. We are also deeply concerned about the presence of organisations working against the rights of women, marginalised people, and against sexual rights and diversity, in contradiction to the WSF Charter of Principles."

(Continued on page 5)

* Patrick Bond directs the Centre for Civil Society.

LITTLE NEWS FROM NAIROBI

The scant coverage of the World Social Forum in the global media was a favourite subject of discussion among bloggers that was kicked off by a radio listener in the Netherlands. 'Voices of the South' documents some of the blogs. – The Editor.

"Sunday morning, 7.05 AM. Most people are still asleep. I am playing with my son and listening to the radio, and it is the first time this week that I hear some substantial radio coverage of the 2007 World Social Forum. I had no time this week to watch the evening television news more than once or twice, and hence do not know whether the Dutch television paid more attention. But I did read the newspaper, and listened to the radio, and heard almost nothing about the WSF.

So no attention to the WSF on primetime. Perhaps it's just my impression? Or perhaps it's just the Netherlands? (Not that there is important local news here – the government formation is happening behind closed doors, with no gossip spreading to the People). I hope I am wrong, since the WSF offers a good opportunity for the mainstream press to report on structural issues of global injustice and poverty, instead of only reporting on natural disasters, flaming wars, and other cases of instant misery." - *Posted on Sunday, January 28th, 2007 at 2:32 am*

Comments

It's not just the radio – I've heard nothing about the WSF on the left forums and blogs I frequent. - *Posted by a very public sociologist Jan. 28 at 10:30 am*

It was ignored. I saw one semi-mocking story noting that some slum children had run through the open conference area "stealing" the packed lunches. The only Nairobi thing since in the news is the still mysterious killing of 2 US Embassy personnel yesterday. - *Posted by P O'Neill Jan. 28 at 11:02 am*

Actually I heard quite a bit of coverage of it on what seemed to be relayed BBC broadcasts on one of the local (Oregon) public radio stations for most of the morning one day this week. - *Posted by Gene O'Grady Jan. 28 at 12:11 pm*

With similar emphasis as Davos? - *Posted by P O'Neill Jan. 28 at 12:33 pm*

Consider the number of reporters wanting to cover Davos, compared to those wanting a junket to... Nairobi. Sadly, news agendas are often set by the holiday plans (and the preferred expenses reports) of the journo class. - *Posted by nick s Jan. 28 at 1:59 pm*

A google news search gives few results from the past week – one NYT article which obliquely mentions it in an article on Chavez, Castro and Ortega; the San Diego Union had an article a few days ago in which the WSF was described as anti-capitalist; a few other references in which it is described as anti-globalization. The net impression given in all of these mass media references is that this characterization is all that the reader needs to know, or would even be interested to know – just a minor little meet-up of unimportant opposition figures, ho hum. With

no more information one might well think that is true.

- *Posted by grackel Jan. 28 at 3:09 pm*

I was not so much thinking about a comparison with Davos 2007, but rather with the WSF in the previous years. I remember that the previous ones got much more covering in the mainstream news, including very good background reporting (for example, through interviews) on some of the more structural problems for developing countries in the world trade system.

- *Posted by Ingrid Robeyns Jan. 28 at 3:33 pm*

Isn't it the entire "anti-globalization" movement, not just the WSF, that's no longer getting much attention? And is it really such a mystery why it's not getting the attention it used to?

- *Posted by Dan Simon Jan. 29 at 12:34 am*

Dan Simon, would you mind elaborating? - *Posted by Ingrid Jan. 29 at 3:25 am*

Ingrid, you are complaining that the media did not show much interest in the WSF meeting. But what exactly are these new and interesting ideas proposed or discussed in Nairobi that would show that the event does deserve interest? - *Posted by Teddy Jan. 29 at 4:32 am*

Ingrid, the first WSF was held in early 2001. At that time, globalization and opposition to it were (rightly or wrongly) at or near the top of the international affairs agenda in Europe, and possibly in America as well. Since then events have caused other issues to displace globalization on the priority list. I assume I don't need to identify those events and issues... - *Posted by Dan Simon Jan. 29 at 10:22 am*

There's some BBC coverage here. - *Posted by John Quiggin Jan. 29 at 7:38 pm*

I made mention of the media neglect last week while calling attention to a couple mentions of WSF ... As for the press ignoring "globalization" The Economist cover story last week focused on the very same. And, I did see repeated mainstream coverage of the World Economic Forum – especially coverage of which celebs were and were not attending as well as which dignitaries got front row seats and which were consigned to back bench status ...

- *Posted by Jim Johnson Jan. 29 at 8:51 pm*

Teddy and Dan Simon, my concern is with the lack of media attention for the structural issues that cause poverty in the global south and global injustice. There is nothing "new" about them but they are nevertheless not less important. ... Journalists generally need an "event". ... These are issues that are very difficult to convey to the masses, and the WSF offers an opportunity. Of course, you may disagree with me that these structural causes of world poverty and global injustice need regular attention ... in which case my "complaint" might not be justified.

- *Posted by Ingrid Robeyns Jan. 30 at 2:12 am*

LEARNING FROM THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Hilmi Toros

NAIROBI (IPS/Terra Viva) - As the curtain fell on the World Social Forum in The Green City under the Sun, some called it a success, others doubted it. To some, WFS is indispensable; others question its value, if not its very nature and future.

But, after heading to Nairobi from across Africa and from as far afield as Asia, Europe and the Americas, what did ordinary participants get out of the five-day event weighted down by a 174-page programme of events as they debated, networked, chanted, danced and staged protests against current social ills?

If consensus is needed, it could easily be -- apart from the all-embracing and catch-all Another World is Possible -- "The African Experience". It is, in short, seeing global issues gripping the WSF through an African perspective. That is the view of six participants chosen at random from Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia. Twenty-year-old Sandra Solero and 27-year-old Jenny Andersson are both university students from Sweden who worked and saved the equivalent of \$4000 each for "the African experience" during which they stayed at a guest house.

"It's been fantastic," said Sandra. "I now see African problems in a real place, not from Europe. I am more committed."

"I feel inspired," notes Jenny. "I have a lot to tell to people at home in Norrköping."

Sister Jacinta Katusebe, 28, and four other sisters from the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Sisters of Holy Cross, took a 15-hour bus trip from Kampala to be on hand for the Forum.

A teacher, she felt her mission was accomplished through attending workshops on education for all and the status of street children. "I met so many people from Asia and South America and we talked for hours about education," she said. "I have a new perspective. I couldn't have achieved this anywhere else."

Lourdes Cervantes from Cuba, Chief of the Political Department of the Organisation for Solidarity of African, Asia and Latin American People, has attended all WSFs and considers the Nairobi one the most significant because it displayed Africa's perspective to activists from other continents.

"Each Forum went further and reached higher," she said. "But, after talking seven years, it is time to make concrete proposals." Another Forum veteran was G. Farid Awan, Secretary General of the All Pakistan Trade Union Federation. This was his fourth forum and he urged that Forums be held at national and grass-roots levels. ☑

(Continued from page 3)

Conflicts included arrests of a dozen low-income people who wanted to get into the event; protests to forcibly open the gates; and the destruction of the notoriously repressive Kenyan interior minister's makeshift restaurant which had monopolized key space within the Kasarani stadium's grounds. Soweto activist Trevor Ngwane was a protest leader, but after the first successful break-in by poor Kenyans, reported stiff resistance: "The next day we again planned to storm the gates but found police and army reinforcements at the gates. Those officers carried very big guns. Comrades decided to block the main road until the people were allowed in for free. This action took about half an hour and then the gates were opened. The crowd then marched to the Organising Committee's offices to demand a change of policy on the question of entrance. Another demand was added: free water inside the WSF precinct and cheaper food."

Although that demand was not met, Oloo gracefully confessed the 'shame' of progressive Kenyans during the Social Movements Assembly rally. WSF logistical shortcomings reflected the Kenyan Left's lost struggles within the host committee, he said. The interior minister (the crusher) snuck in at the last second, and the Kenya Airports Authority systematically diverted incoming visitors to hotels, away from home stays (2000 of which were arranged -- only 18 actually materialized thanks to diversions). Setting these flaws aside, consider a deeper political tension. Said Oloo: "These social movements, including dozens in Kenya, want to see the WSF being transformed into a space for organising and mobilising against the nefarious forces of international finance capital, neo-liberalism and all its local neo-colonial and comprador collaborators."

Can and should the 'open space' concept be upgraded into something more coherent, either for mobilising around special events (for instance, the June 2-8 summit of the G8 in Germany) or establishing a bigger, universalist left-internationalist political project? In South Africa, the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) has hosted several debates on this question, with at least four varying points of view emerging. Last July, for example, the great political economist Samir Amin presented the 'Bamako Appeal', a January 2006 manifesto which originated at the prior WSF polycentric event, and which combined, as Amin put it, the traditions of socialism, anti-racism/colonialism, and (national) development. ☑ *By courtesy of ZNet*

DYING – OR MORE ALIVE THAN EVER?*(Continued from page 6)*

Less than 50,000 people came to the Jan. 20-25 WSF in Nairobi, barely half the number of participants in each of the previous four years, and half the expected number for this year.

The high registration fees limited attendance by poor delegates from Kenya, fuelling criticism of elitism by those who want to make the meetings more accessible so as not to continue to reproduce social inequalities.

But surveys have shown that three-quarters of the participants at the January forums are university students or graduates, indicating that they are indeed economic elite.

This is the reality, caused by long and costly journeys and the fact that participants are mainly from the third sector (civil society, non-profit and voluntary organisations).

The WSF International Council decided to postpone the next global meeting until 2009, given the difficulty of self-financing annual gatherings. This has added impetus to its would-be epitaph writers.

Instead, in January 2008, major protests will be held around the world during the World Economic Forum, the annual meeting of the global financial and political elites in Davos, Switzerland.

An even greater challenge for the WSF is to overcome the chaotic degree of diversity of its debates. There were 1,200 seminars, panel discussions, dialogues and rallies at Nairobi: too many, although they were half the number held at previous forums. This indicates that the connections focusing actions and programmes are still not strong enough.

The ideal number would be about 500 different events, according to Cándido Grzybowski, another Brazilian coordinator of the forum. In spite of -- or because of -- the variety, there is a lack of overall, holistic vision, and several struggles are being carried on in parallel.

Environmentalists, for example, feel themselves to be "peripheral" to the WSF process, in spite of the urgency of the issues they espouse, and have developed their own ways of international networking.

In addition, little attention is paid to the political and economic viability of the many proposals and causes, in spite of the slogan "Another World Is Possible."

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of IPS Europe.

FROM WORDS TO ACTION*(Continued from page 1)*

Despite all of this, the WSF of Nairobi was a major historic success. Almost 50,000 people participated, in 1800 panels, seminars, and conferences that for the first time were completely self-organised by the participants, without any central space.

The high point was the almost total absence of support for journalists in attendance, which resulted in even greater erosion of the presence and image of the WSF in the international press, a tendency that seems irreversible.

Nairobi was thus a historic stage of the WSF process, which demonstrated that the WSF formula is possible everywhere in the world (which was certainly not true for the WEF when it met in New York instead of Davos in 2002, with serious organisational problems).

Each of the Forums held away from Porto Alegre spurred a miraculous process of integrating the civil society of the region and succeeded in unifying the very fragmented civil society in India and in Nairobi, where hundreds of African organisations met for the first time. For this reason Nairobi is the first unifying act of African civil society; without the WSF this probably wouldn't have happened for quite some time.

Africa has a serious problem of political leadership. The first generation of leaders, which included Kenyatta, Nyerere, and Senghor, was a generation with a clear vision of independence that it fought for. The second generation was, with few exceptions, one of power and corruption, like the third generation that is now in power. Today throughout Africa young people are demanding change, which means that civil society could have a potentially major impact in African politics, in part thanks to the WSF.

But Nairobi was the last forum in keeping with the original concept of the WSF. The entrance of more radical forces into the WSF International Council in recent years has caused a very important change of direction. As a result, next year the forum will not be an occasion for meeting and debate but rather mobilisation. During the days the WEF will be held in Davos, local events will be staged throughout the world by participating organisations, including marches and demonstrations.

Even the WSF International Council has decided to meet in Germany on the occasion of demonstrations against the G8. This is a new path, one that is closer to that of the social movements that are becoming the driving forces of Global Civil Society. - **COPYRIGHT IPS**

Note: This contribution first appeared in the IPS Columnist Service and may not be reproduced without prior permission.