

From WSF 'NGO trade fair' to left politics?

By Patrick Bond

A mixed message - combining celebration and autocritique - is in order, in the wake of the Nairobi World Social Forum. From January 20-25, the 60,000 registered participants heard triumphalist 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 neocolonial-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 "partners" in turn need to show their loyalty to their masters.'

* New Internationalist editor Adam Ma'anit: 'The sight of Oxfam-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 mic 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.'
(<http://kenya.indymedia.org/news/2007/01/531.php>)

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. For Oloo, 'These social movements, including dozens in Kenya, want to see the WSF being transformed into a space for organizing and mobilizing against the nefarious forces of international finance capital, neoliberalism and all its local neo-colonial and comprador collaborators.'

Can and should the 'openspace' concept be upgraded into something more coherent, either for mobilizing around special events (for instance, the June 2-8 summit of the G8 in Rostock, 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 (http://www.forumtiersmonde.net/fren/forums/fsm/fsm_bamako/appel_bamako_en.htm).

In support was the leader of the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity, Hassan Sunmonu (also a WSF International Council member). Complaining that 'billions of ideas have been generated since 2001 up till the last Forum', Sunmonu found 'a lot of merit in that Bamako Appeal that we can use to transform the lives of ourselves, our organizations and our peoples.'

But reacting strongly against the Bamako Appeal, CCS student (and Johannesburg anti-privatization activist) Prishani Naidoo and three comrades criticized its 'last century' tone and content, which mirrored 'the mutation of the WSF from an arena of encounter for local social movements into an organized network of experts, academics and NGO practitioners.'

For Naidoo, 'It reassures us that documents like the Bamako Appeal will eventually prove totally irrelevant and inessential to struggles of communities in South Africa as elsewhere. Indeed, the WSF elite's cold institutional and technicist soup, occasionally warmed up by some hints of tired poeticism, can provide little nourishment for local subjectivities whose daily responses to neoliberalism face more urgent needs to turn everyday survival into sustained confrontations with an increasingly repressive state.'

In contrast, Naidoo and the others praise the 'powerful undercurrent of informality in the WSF's proceedings [which] reveals the persistence of horizontal communication between movements, which is not based on mystical views of the revolutionary subject, or in the official discourse of the leaders, but in the life strategies of their participants.'

A third position on WSF politics is the classical socialist, party-building approach favoured by Ngwane and other revolutionary organizers. Replying to both Amin and the autonomist critique at the July workshop, Ngwane fretted, on the one hand, about reformist projects that 'make us blind to recognize the struggles of ordinary people.' On the other hand, though, 'I think militancy alone at the local level and community level will not in itself answer questions of class and questions of power.' For that a self-conscious socialist cadre is needed, and the WSF is a critical site to transcend localist political upsurges.

A fourth position, which I personally support, seeks the 21st century's anti-capitalist 'manifesto' in the existing social, labour and environmental movements that are already engaged in excellent transnational social justice struggle. The WSF's greatest potential - so far unrealized - is the possibility of linking dozens of radical movements in various sectors.

Instead, at each WSF the activists seem to disappear into their own workshops: silos with few or no interconnections. Before a Bamako Appeal or any other manifesto is parachuted into the WSF, we owe it to those activists to compile their existing grievances, analyses, strategies and tactics. Sometimes these are simple demands, but often they are also articulated as sectoral manifestos, like the very strong African Water Network of anti-privatisation militants from 40 countries formed in Nairobi (<http://www.ipsterraviva.net/tv/nairobi/en/viewstory.asp?idnews=838>).

These four positions are reflected in a new book released at the Nairobi WSF by the New Delhi-based Institute for Critical Action: Centre in Movement (CACIM) and CCS. The book, free to download at <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/files/CACIM%20CCS%20WSF%20Politics.pdf>, contains some older attempts at left internationalism, such as the Communist Manifesto (1848) and the Bandung Communiqué of the Asian-African Conference (1955), as well as the 'Call of Social Movements' at the second and third Porto Alegre WSF, the 2005 Porto Alegre Manifesto by the male-heavy Group of Nineteen, and the Bamako Appeal with sixteen critical replies.

There are also selections on global political party formations by Amin, analysis of the global labour movement by Peter Waterman, the Women's Global Charter for Humanity, and some old and newer Zapatista declarations. Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar of CACIM have worked hard to pull these ideas into 500 pages.

Lest too much energy is paid to these political scuffles at the expense of ongoing struggle, we might give the last word to Ngwane, who reported on his Nairobi debate with WSF founder Chico Whitaker at a CACIM/CCS workshop: 'Ordinary working class and poor people need and create and have a movement of resistance and struggle. They also need and create and have spaces for that movement to breathe and develop. The real question is what place will the WSF have in that reality. What space will there be for ordinary working class and poor people? Who will shape and drive and control the movement? Will it be a movement of NGO's and individual luminaries creating space for themselves to speak of their concern for the poor? Will it be undermined by collaboration with capitalist forces? I think what some of us saw happening in Nairobi posed some of these questions sharply and challenged some of the answers coming from many (but not all) of the prominent NGO's and luminaries in the WSF.'

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