

EVENT 2007 World Social Forum: Another world is possible

Date 20-27 January

Venue Nairobi, Kenya

Organizer World Social Forum

Any fears that the 2007 World Social Forum (WSF) in Nairobi would be hit by disruption and chaos were groundless. In fact, for some, the event was rather tame, more NGO workshop than street festival. There was little participation by grassroots organizations, and the energy and vibrancy they brought to previous Forums was precisely what seems to have been missing in Nairobi. If this is going to be a trend, it seems like a missed opportunity, because the Forum is about the airing of genuine alternatives, not just protest. When activists and community groups rub shoulders with development professionals and the more adventurous funders, working alternatives to existing practice can be explored and new ideas can emerge. Andrew Kingman (Allavida) and Patrick Ochieng (Ujaama) ponder these issues and the future of the World Social Forum.

Living up to expectations?

AK Patrick, you've attended previous WSFs. What were you expecting from Kenya?

PO I attended Mumbai and Porto Alegre. I expected an African-dominated Forum but I was disappointed. I didn't see as many black faces as I'd hoped! But there was a lot of scepticism in advance of the Forum; people thought Africa couldn't host an event of the magnitude of WSF, especially because a lot of funders won't help. Well, the sceptics were proved wrong. As for the debates, they were pretty much the same, perhaps less vibrant than elsewhere, because there were fewer ordinary people.

AK Was there more local presence in India?

PO India had the best mass participation; people danced and sang, pushed every agenda you could think of. Nairobi missed that. But the week has been good and a lot of debate has taken place.

AK I expected more chaos. In a way, the relative calm of the event is a testimony to the organizers, but the limited participation of activist groups from Kenya was a real surprise. I wonder if it says something about the nature of Kenyan civil society compared to that of India, where social movements seem so much stronger and more radicalized?

PO It also illustrates how NGOs get settled into a comfort zone. Very little effort was made to help ordinary citizens take part, and in the end we got a magnificent NGO workshop! NGOs can organize workshops even if no one attends – they seem happy to organize workshops for chairs! For me the Forum is about other things, so it was an anti-climax. There were no incentives for community representation. The entrance fee was too high. People had to choose between a meal for the family or going to the Forum.

Kasarani is only ten minutes away from the slum, but nothing was done to reach out to the slum-dwellers.

In Mumbai, the organizers showed solidarity with the poor and refused to allow the Forum to become an NGO workshop.

The wrong crowd

AK There was a sense that this was a comfortable Forum for those who might have been worried. Coming at it from a funders' perspective, for instance, it was not threatening. For many activists, the 'another world is possible' paradigm means exploring alternative economic, social and political systems, and there was plenty of discussion about that: challenges to the Gates/Rockefeller 'Green Revolution' plans for Africa, challenges to GMOs and so on. But in fact, I got the sense that a majority of people and organizations at the Forum would be happier with a paradigm based on making the current system work better rather than replacing it.

PO Yes, there was a reformist majority. This was the wrong crowd. Look how worried people became when street children forced their way in to protest about their exclusion and about food prices. I heard groups talk about anti-globalization, but to me they looked very 'globalized'! They focused on their own agendas and programmes. Other Forums have been like street festivals, with barely room to move. The one in Mumbai was crowded with local vendors selling snacks and local drinks.

AK Here in Kenya we had upmarket safari companies selling holidays!

PO And we had too many sessions set up like a classroom with big speakers taking up much of the allocated time. In Mumbai, most sessions were debates and they were charged. People intervened throughout, often in their local language, and somehow communication took place. Yet here in Nairobi I hardly heard any African language. So again, the discussions were only open to those who could speak English – or occasionally another European language.

AK Does what you've been describing represent a trend in the WSF – a closing off of the open space?

PO No. The Forum has been expanding and when it went to India, it took on new momentum. Many people thought that hosting the Forum in Africa would increase the momentum, but I feel that it was lost in Nairobi. Yes, we have to have sponsors, but why did we have to give such huge prominence to the private companies? But this doesn't have to be a trend. There needs to be a review of strategy for the Forum.

AK Has there been a shift in that people expect the organizers to make it more like a controlled conference?

PO I don't think so. There were organized workshops at the previous Forums, but in Mumbai and Brazil the workshops and marketplace were just elements of a much broader process and event.

AK Leaving aside some of these criticisms, I do feel that the WSF was a really valuable event. Some of the discussions I attended were of an extremely high standard, with knowledgeable practitioners and activists. An event like the WSF is a great opportunity to inform yourself about causes and issues that you might have sympathy for but can't give the time to find out about. I came away feeling that I'd learnt a lot. I was really pleased to hear from farmers brought from Uganda by a local NGO. So some organizations did make an effort.

The role of funders: sponsors, spectators or participants?

AK I want to ask about the role of funders, and particularly of foundations, at the WSF. There were a lot of funders present at the Forum, but most were either pushing their own agenda, like the German operating foundations, or else coming from a broadly sympathetic perspective, like Global Greengrants. Do you feel that funders should participate in debates?

PO The INGOs were already subverting the Forum by pushing their own projects. The World Bank was there, and they survived without their tent being turned over ... just!

AK Funders are complex institutions, staffed by people with a wide range of views. Within one funding institution there might be some programme officers who favour one of the alternatives to the dominant paradigm, others who are broadly reformist, and maybe a few who support the status quo. It seems to me that the value of the Forum for foundations in particular is allowing this range of people and opinion to challenge and be challenged. We know that too much philanthropy is conservative. I'm not suggesting that funders should be organizing panels, but it would be good if they felt they could stand up and participate.

PO It depends on the funder. In Mali, USAID was a key funder of the Forum, but many people were deeply uncomfortable with their visible presence.

AK OK, but while the bilaterals and multilaterals aren't going to shift policy on the basis of a few days at the WSF, for foundations – particularly the smaller foundations with few staff – with an interest in funding in the South, the Forum is a wonderful opportunity. They should send programme officers to soak up this huge range of issues and causes, listen to the radical voices, test their own assumptions, meet activists, and feel the heat! In the session challenging Gates and Rockefeller over their 'Green Revolution' plans for Africa, there were plenty of alternative approaches to maintaining seed quality and food sovereignty – it wasn't simply an attack on the foundations. If there had been smaller foundations there, with say an interest in organic agriculture, they could have spent their entire week going from one session to another hearing from people who are practising or supporting agriculture that enshrines farmer independence, utilizes natural pesticides, and so on. The assumption is that the Forum is about opposing and not promoting, but there was a lot that was about presenting alternative approaches.

PO Yes, but so much of that is hidden, swamped by the larger agencies that are really presenting their own proposals and programmes; it's self-interest rather than serious presentation of an agenda for wide-ranging change. So visitors tend to see either the face of resistance or the marketplace!

On another tack, some of the international NGOs will be thinking about the impact of their investment. They organized lots of sessions but few people turned up. They brought their programme staff to engage and lobby, but not the masses. I think some of those NGOs will be feeling that they didn't get a good return! But they have to understand that the WSF is not a place for workshops, it's a jamboree. Workshops are fine if they're truly global in scope, but not if they're about pushing a programme.

AK I agree, the intermediary NGOs shouldn't see the Forum as a way of promoting their own agenda; it should be about learning, facilitating, and ensuring that their supposed constituencies can participate. I guess this might be threatening: bringing a few 'representatives' of community groups is safe because they can be handpicked, but you can't control what might happen if you support large-scale participation of community activists! But surely that is the role of NGOs. If there's a debate about land rights, pay for people to come from communities that are battling absentee landlords, not the staff member who manages the project on land rights.

Where are the alternative funders?

PO We have been challenging the bilaterals and major conservative foundations, but where are the alternative funders, those who want to work in a different way and move away from the project mentality and the elites?

AK Some of them were at the Forum. Global Greengrants, for instance, New Field Foundation, Gaia Foundation.

PO Great, but so few. And how many are prepared to engage with or even acknowledge the political issues? The debate about politics and funding simply isn't happening and the WSF is a place where it should happen. The smaller intermediary funders or independent foundations should be here challenging the major funders.

Funding the Forum

PO There's still a problem of the Forum raising money. Perhaps some of these smaller alternative funders would be prepared to contribute even in a small way to ensure that the Forum can create space for alternative platforms to emerge, for local movements to participate, and to prevent the dominance of international NGOs that have budgets to splash out on things like the Forum.

AK Look at the affinity groups of the European Foundation Centre and the Council on Foundations and you see plenty of members of human rights, Africa, environmental groups. But the problem is that the lists are dominated by the largest foundations, and the rest tend to be relatively conservative or reformist. I don't see too many radical foundations in those lists. What you're calling for is a cross-cutting approach, encouraging independent foundations and other funders to get together around a broad agenda and understand the linkages between rights, environment and so on.

PO We have to find out where some of the large NGOs get their money to participate in the Forum. Why aren't the 'upstream' funders here themselves? Maybe they are, but we need to hear from them.

AK I suspect one of the issues for many funders is that the Forum is stronger on critiquing the dominant system than on putting forward coherent alternatives. Funders who put money into initiatives through other organizations might well balk at flying from Europe or the US in order to hear a range of views with which they are broadly sympathetic. They need to spend money on 'solutions' to 'problems' they have identified.

However, activist grantmakers such as Urgent Action Fund-Africa and African Women's Development Fund were exceptions, and they were challenging the status quo. I remember one session with the title 'Where is the money for women's rights in Africa?' Maybe this new type of funder is bringing a more activist perspective. And it's not about scale. AWDF has just been given £1.5 million by Comic Relief and has received other large grants, so growing in scale doesn't mean that a funder can't still challenge the status quo in a direct way. The key thing with these groups is that they were tackling wider issues, not presenting their own specific need or project.

PO Exactly. They were demanding that money should go to different places. The Forum needs more funders prepared to challenge how money is used and engage in debates about where to target it.

But the biggest thing we must discuss is the involvement of the grassroots, wherever the WSF goes. It can only survive if the grassroots engage. At some point we also have to reflect on how to engage directly with government and multinationals. We need to continue destabilizing the neo-liberal consensus; in other words, the WSF is not just about the biannual meeting, it's about its participants continuing to use the energy the Forum produces to challenge the status quo in their own locality whenever possible. We have to sort out the relationship between the international and local organizing committees.

In the end, it's all about personal choices and activism. I supported seven youths from the Coast to get here and take part. They have been here and gained so much. But how many people have done this sort of thing – not just individuals, but grantmakers? Instead, we have funders who work with so-called 'partners' in various poor parts of Kenya, and they don't even fund their partners to attend, never mind the local people, but fly their staff in from Denmark or wherever to stay in nice hotels.

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