The Most Important Conference You Never Heard About

By Frank Joyce, AlterNet. Posted February 16, 2007.

The recently concluded 7th World Social Forum in Kenya included 66,000 participants and was the most globally representative so far.

"G-8, G-8 -- We've got a Question for You
Why do you want us to suffer?
Why do you want us to perish?
We are the creditors
Cancel Debt, Cancel Debt"
--Lyrics to a song performed by HOPE RAISERS, a Nairobi Hip Hop group at the 2007 World Social forum held in Nairobi, Kenya

It's best to look at the recently concluded World Social Forum (WSF) 2007, held in Nairobi, Kenya through a telescope, not a microscope. What you see is a gathering force, a mood, an attitude. It's the kind of thing you might have sensed, if you knew where to look, in Montgomery, Alabama or colonial Africa in the late 1950's or, for that matter, in the British colony of North America in the 1770's.

Officially, more than 66,000 participants came together for WSF 2007. They were nuns, slum dwellers, academics, activists, Nobel Prize winners, students, trade unionists, NGO staffers and government officials including Kenneth Kaunda, the former President of Zambia. There were more than 1,400 participating organizations from 110 countries. More than any of the previous world forums, they came from Africa. That made the 2007 WSF the most globally representative yet.

As a cultural and political phenomenon, there is nothing quite like the WSF which started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001. Even if you visit the United Nations or attend the Olympics, you won't be so engaged with people from so many countries speaking so many languages, wearing so many different styles of clothing and so driven by a broadly shared social vision. Nowhere else can you have this kind of six day opportunity to march, sing, dance, demonstrate, talk, listen and learn. WSF 2007 included 1,200 workshops formal workshops (the newsprint program was 176 tabloid size pages long), rallies, musical performances and other events.

It would be inconsistent with its nature and character for the WSF to take place in plush surroundings. And so the participants had to contend with numerous organizational and logistical tribulations. Workshops met in the less than ideal meeting conditions that came with holding the conference in the Kasarani sports complex, miles from the center of Nairobi. The acoustics were poor. Moreover, especially when sound systems *worked,*

fabric "room" dividers did little to stop the audio from bleeding into the adjoining workshop. Bench seating for meetings scheduled to last two and half hours also leaves a lot to be desired.

Also problematic was the distance of the stadium from virtually any available accommodations including those in downtown Nairobi -- a $15 cab ride over crowded, pothole filled roads. That's $30 round trip, times five days of meetings. Public transportation in the form of buses and Matutu's (a common form of transportation in urban Kenya) were available. Using them, however, was discouraged because of rampant crime.

Admittedly, it isn't easy to find a venue *anyplace* for tens of thousand of people from all over the globe, especially when most are not affluent. And holding scores of simultaneous workshops in a soccer and track stadium does have one advantage. It is big enough to accommodate in one place all of the myriad WSF activities including meetings, workshops, demonstrations, eating facilities, vendor sales booths and cultural performances. Some who had attended previous forums considered that a worthwhile tradeoff from events held in many scattered locations. In any case, the net result was a vibe that was generally warm and friendly. And the quality of the conversations on labor rights, water, debt relief, resisting or reforming the architecture of global capital (the World Bank, IMF, WTO etc.), HIV/AIDS, tax issues, bio-diversity and a host of other subjects was quite high.

Was there a lot of Bush bashing? You might expect so. But you would be wrong. Sure, there was an anti Bush poster or reference here and there. One African group was selling a T-Shirt featuring a picture of Paul Wolfowitz that said, "Send the Wolf Back to Bush!

But mostly Bush and, for that matter, the US, were little mentioned. WSF participants simply take it for granted that the US symbolizes the world that stands as the polar opposite to the WSF slogan "Another World is Possible." Further, the meeting was in Africa. The African struggle against colonialism left a legacy of deep understanding that oppression and exploitation come from a *system*. It is simply not the "deviant" policy of a "bad" leader like George Bush. (One of the more profound and more amusing banners at the WSF read, "MAU MAU -- Fighting terrorism since the 1800's.")

Many delegates focused on an "issue." Some activists think that access to clean water is most important. Some concentrate on debt relief. HIV/AIDS in Africa is critical to others. Some see tax policy as the cutting edge struggle. The one clearly unifying theme is opposition to the grinding poverty found throughout the global South.

Americans might find that hard to understand. Our awareness of poverty in the global South is low. Likewise, the breadth and depth of opposition to poverty is also little appreciated. Some of that is attributable to the media. As Wahu Kaara, a Kenyan activist who played a key role in bringing the WSF to Africa, put it matter-of-factly "the architectural design of media is to misinform." A fine example of that misinformation is the invisibility of poverty, even domestic poverty in the US, let alone the deeper and

wider poverty below the equator. The "shock and awe" that came with Katrina is the exception that proves the rule.

Americans live in bubble and a very thick bubble at that. For the most part, we like it in there. We'll take American Idol over Anderson Cooper reporting from Darfur any day. Other than Nicholas Kristoff and Anderson Cooper, can you think of any other MSM journalists who bother at all to report regularly on poverty and suffering outside the US? I can't. By the way, once you get past Danny Schecter, the alternative media list isn't very long either.

The net effect makes it hard to exaggerate the degree of isolation we experience. Poverty; disease; the genital mutilation of women; corruption that makes Jack Abramoff and Tom de Lay look like choir boys (although maybe not Dick Cheney); the pandemic of HIV/AIDS; brutal political dictatorships; the conscription of children as soldiers; the lack of clean water; open sewers, the hourly threat of crime and violence faced by billions: mostly, we don't *want* to know.

After all, one of the greatest privileges of affluence is the willful ignorance of mass suffering at home and abroad. WSF coverage in Europe was quite extensive. But as best I can determine, not one MSM media outlet in the US carried so much as one story about the WSF.

While the New York Times had at least 20 stories and columns referencing the World Economic Forum meeting of the plutocrats in Davos, Switzerland, they carried not a word on the WSF What make this all the more interesting is that they did manage to get a reporter to Nairobi the day *after* the WSF ended. What get their attention? Two American white women and several diplomats were robbed and murdered there in recent weeks.

Media attention or not, is the WSF is precursor to a new world government of peace and justice? Should the very existence of the WSF give even a moment's pause to the masters of the universe who meet every year in Davos?

Is another world possible?

Even though there is no WSF scheduled for 2008, in the years ahead, I believe that WSF *will* play a major role in spawning the kind of organizations and movements that will challenge the hegemony of transnational capitalism. (There will be a global week of WSF activities and a one-day worldwide mobilization in 2008. A WSF 2009 will take place, although the host country has yet to be determined.)

As US social activist Grace Boggs has put it, "Another World is Possible. Another World is Necessary. Another World is Already Happening."

In the "already happening" department, one of the outcomes of WSF 2007 was the creation of the Tax Justice Network for Africa, which is struggling against illicit capital flight, tax evasion, tax competition, tax avoidance and other brutal tax

policies and practices. A new Africa Water Network was also formed by more than 40 organizations across Africa opposing the privatization of water. It is these kinds of networks that begin to take the WSF into a realm beyond that of a morale building festival.

John Christenson, staffer for the London based Tax Justice Network told me that the formation of the Africa tax justice group was a direct outcome of conversations at previous WSF meetings. According to Christenson, tax issues will emerge as the "next big thing' for global anti-poverty activists. He may be right.

He makes good points about tax policy as the underpinning of both injustice and misconceptions about the "third world." The basic idea is very simple. Were transnational companies to pay anything close to fair taxes on their operations in poor countries, the impact on debt relief and corruption would be enormous.

As a result of tax evasion, aggressive tax avoidance, illegal arms trafficking, outright embezzlement, transfer mispricing (a practice that Wal-Mart and others use to evade taxes even in the US), counterfeiting and narco trafficking , transnational corporations deprive the governments of poor countries of needed revenue. That in turn makes them the more vulnerable to the loan dependency manipulations of the World Bank, the IMF and the corruption that comes with the whole range of dirty money schemes. The dirty money schemes are in turn facilitated by the squeaky-clean appearance of Swiss bank accounts, offshore tax havens, the absence of transparency in global financial transactions and other components of the global banking system. There are many points of darkness in the vicious circle of exploitation of the peoples and economies of the global South but the tax evasion strategies of transnational corporations, not to mention rock stars like Bono and the Rolling Stones are certainly among them.

So too the enslavement of debt service imposed by the World Bank and the IMF. Dennis Brutus, the South African poet who became well known to a whole generation of anti-apartheid activists in the US and elsewhere in the 1970's, eloquently addressed this issue. Speaking at a forum on radical reform of the World Bank, Brutus pointed out that the struggle to defund apartheid in South Africa has much in common with the struggle to defund the World Bank.

Whether you think the World Bank is a selfless force for economic development in poor countries or the agent of Satan, you probably think you don't have much to do with its funding. But you do.

Do you own any mutual funds? Do you know how your pension funds are invested? Unbeknownst to me and I suspect many others, the World Bank raises 80% of its funds from the sale of bonds to pension funds, universities etc. So, just as religious and campus activists helped to defund apartheid, a similar campaign can be waged to defund the World Bank. And in many countries, such campaigns are already underway.

This brings us back to the impact and the future of the WSF. From outside the US, it is far easier to see that the world is in the midst of a "Copernican" revolution. New York Times columnist David Brooks can try all he wants to persuade us otherwise but that does not change the reality. Attempting to rebut the view that Iraq and other factors will permanently reduce the global power of the US, Brooks wrote on February 1, "The hegemon will change. The hegemon will do more negotiating. But the hegemon will live."

Brooks is wrong. The time when all the world revolves around the United States is waning. It is true that the United States played a key role in defeating fascism and communism in the twentieth century. That era is over. Here inside the bubble, the fumes from that history may still be thick. But in Nairobi and most other places in the world today, those vapors are long gone.

It will take years if not decades but the hegemon is ending. From Nairobi it is possible to see the beginning, however faint, of a truly new world order. Another World is Possible. Another World is Necessary. Another World is Already Happening."

A good place to judge for yourself would be to attend the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, GA this coming June (June 27-July 1).

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