

The World Social Forum¹ : A process worth engaging in? Some reflections² on the road to Nairobi by Ruby van der Wekken (NIGD)³

The answer might seem evident to some yet absolutely not to others. It seems that everyone agrees that the WSF process is with room for improvement. But the interesting question is : Why should one engage in the WSF process? This process, which started in January 2001, has now seen six WSF editions as well as a large spread of thematical regional, national and local forums geographically, and it involves an increasing amount of organisations of the global social justice movement. Today the process faces serious questions as to result and the basic cost-benefit calculations made when wondering what to do now in preparing for WSF 2007 in Nairobi. Do we have political clarity on the significance of the WSF? Do we need such political clarity?

Globally Democratic Dialogue

What is the WSF? This is one way to put it : The WSF today is an example of an open space offered for democratic dialogue with a global scope. In this open space, currently marginalised voices can share and learn, to affect and influence a global agenda in response to global processes currently impoverishing the majorities of people. The WSF provides equal access to the public space for this dialogue, and equal opportunity for all to shape this process. Looking at the WSF in this light does provide for some a responsibility to recognise and support this space, its inclusiveness and its access.

For some then, in its extent and reach, the WSF process can be called singular in its organisation of global civil society working for “another possible world”. We have no similar process as such today and it is for the first time in history such a process is taking place. The WSF is also a new process, which keeps growing both if measured in terms of numbers of participants and events and geographically. A boat not to be missed.

Ownership

A process needs ownership in order for it to develop. An important question then seems to be : Do social movements, civil society actors, we as peoples feel ownership of the WSF process? Political clarity is an important dimension to feel ownership. But, also, who do we feel currently owns the WSF process? The WSF is at times accused of being an elitist process, run by coopted consortiums of foreign funded NGO's serving more as ornaments to foreign policy of first world countries. Specifically the African process is viewed in this way.

Bhuvan Patak⁴ explained that the WSF process in India is increasingly going “grassroot level”. There was much debate on ownership of the WSF process at the Mumbai Resistance camp opposite the WSF grounds in Mumbai, India, at the WSF IV in Mumbai. However, today it is not just NGO's but civil society at large occupying ther space. NGO's are now increasingly involved in a political process. On a state level, Friday is WSF day in Delhi. Without invitation, people now increasingly know the time and place to come to discuss the WSF process on a Friday, since 3 – 4 years.

1 See the WSF official website at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>

2 The reflections are based on the discussions during meetings held at Siemenpuu (31 March and 01 April 2006) and Kepa (3 April 2006) around the visit of Oduor Ong'wen, (SEATINI, WSF Nairobi 2007 organising committee), and Bhuvan Patak (SADED, India) to Helsinki, 31 April - 3. April 2006.

3 The writer has participated in most of the WSFs as well as in several other social forums and has participated several WSF IC meetings as representative of NIGD.

4 03 April 2006, Kepa meeting.

Oduor Ong'wen¹ says the WSF has not yet even arrived to Africa². Indeed, as the critics put it often, ownership of the WSF today is not in the hands of grassroots movements. However, the character of the WSF process is changing all the time. For instance the Bamako process was very important for West Africa. It is exactly this challenge of popularising the WSF which the Concept paper for Nairobi 2007 puts as one of the main challenges in the WSF 2007 process.

Oduor believes it is our mistake to look at civil society in Africa as weak or young, voluntary organised action has been present for such long time. Ngo-ism is young and manipulatable. Civil society can have a first enemy in the state, stifling civil society, and a second enemy in the middle class who survives on the back and sweat of social movements. But the WSF can be exactly such the opportunity to visualise the struggles, to stimulate the acting together, if correctly approached. The WSF is not an event, but an empowering process for the unheard voices. Importantly WSF 2007 will have an emphasis on the role of culture not as show but as strategy.

Furthering the mobilisation objective, plans are put in place for Nairobi as caravans from South Africa, Bamako (Mali) and Mogadishu (Somalia, a peace caravan) to Nairobi with stops on the way for people to engage in political work locally around the WSF process so that those who can not make it to Nairobi physically can nevertheless be part of the process. For the Nairobi committee also the choice to have a certain set of centrally organised events giving visibility to different struggles within and between movements on a given set of issues has to do with facing the power struggles present in the open space of the WSF process in which those with funds can buy themselves more visibility and media attention. As in the world outside of the open space of the WSF process, there is no invisible hand bringing equality on the terrains of the WSF. Certain criteria will be put on these organised events as a percentage being African, and a percentage organised by marginalised movements.

The WSF, an elitist process? Perhaps. But the open space is not an illusion. This space can be utilised and be made less elitist. Lets turn the question upside down and look at it from the angle of another viewpoint which says that perhaps it is elitist to stand outside of the process, finger point and deny own ownership of the WSF process. We are the WSF and its democratisation is a task for all of us.

Ownership, not solidarity!

Organising African voices strongly put forward that WSF 2007 in Nairobi is not about solidarity for Africa. Instead we are asked to take ownership of the process and mobilise ourselves and our struggles in the process towards the forum. Oduor did see 'ownership' at the Finnish Social Forum in Helsinki, which he said gave him a different perspective on the European Social Forum process. At the London ESF two years ago, he said to have been disappointed in noting the strong presence of the concept solidarity framing global struggles. Slogans were framed along the lines of We, people of Europe must stand in solidarity with the people of Iraq, with the poor in Africa, etc. The two days in Helsinki he perceived as opposite to this process. Neo liberalism surely adversely affects the South,. But also in the North its affects are felt and he saw how Fins were addressing their own problems with the welfare state. Global warming was treated as of direct local yet also global importance, similarly the European Constitution. This is ownership.

1 01 April 2006, Siemenpuu meeting

2 "The Global Social Forum movement remains biased towards Western activists and agendas. Based on attendance at, and interviews with, participants in Southern African Social Forums, it is argued that whilst the influence of Africans on the global social justice movement remains limited, Southern African social movements are utilising the Social Forum model to strengthen their own struggles, " summarises Miles Larmer (University of Pretoria, South Africa), in his article 'More Fire' Next Time? The Southern African Social Forum as a locus of social protest, 2003 – 2005, which will appear sometime later this year in the Journal of Asian and African Studies (Vol 41).

It is however dangerous when certain groups are perceived as controlling the process of a social forum. This can be effectively be shadowing the interpretation of the WSF process.

Ways of engagement

Once the “added value” of the WSF process has been determined, there are ofcourse different ways of engaging in the WSF from a funders perspective. Whether or not once decided to organise events at the WSF, it seems that feelings of ownership of the process is a must, as well as political clarity and once this is achieved, a funders role already goes beyond funding.

Whereas promoting grassroots participation and thus ownership of the open space of the WSF process can be a main objective for many a funder, it must be acknowledged that one can not bring people to participate a space which does not exist. As such also supporting the WSF itself, the event whether on global regional or national level is important and must not be put aside as mere institutional support not befitting to a funders character.

Engagement is also important in a process. The WSF is a process, not an event. Its benefits are mainly felt if one engages in the process, not if one must goes through intense strains to produce on short notice at high cost in January. This seems to have already effectively lead in some corners to a fatigue of the WSF and consequently a disengagement. At time the movements point out that their won work requires input and they can not prepare for large WSFs on an annual basis.

A frequent critique regards the experience of workshops not being held whilst in the program. However, whilst getting out a program is an immense task for an organising committee (not in the least also to our own late readiness with the program itself, what we do and not do is afterall the program of the WSF!), the database of the WSF allows one to very well search for interesting initiatives one potentially would want to look out for (program permitting) and make contact in advance, if only to confirm the holding of an event - yet also to work together, exchange contacts, results, works and material. This is an important feature of the methodology of the WSF process, which seems to be often unused.

From resistance to proposals for social transformation

The African proposal for WSF 2007 is clear : The WSF is not an event, is not a jamboree, Nairobi 2007 is an important watershed and some clear directions must come out of it. The Regional Council of the African Social Forum process together with the Nairobi organising committee says to be striving at exactly that. Methodologically there are a few tools envisioned to fascilitate this.

The WSF is a tool for social transformation and in order to be so WSF 2007 will

- promote the participation of marginalised groups in the open space
- address policies as on debt, the WB
- promote collective actions and convergences. Certain methodological changes will accompany this as a registration process which will open in a few weeks on a new site serving as a tool to fascilitate a possible cooperation and deliberation of joint plans. Also,for instance thematical gatherings will be promoted on the African continent to prepare in the Nairobi process.
- Create spaces for dialogue and controversies, in order to address political parties, institutes as the UN, WB and agreements as NEPAD
- Further learning from previous WSF a for instance in the form of the grounds of the WF in Nairobi being one area, including the premises for the youth camp which characteristically and critically has been seperated from the main grounds.