

WHITHER THE AFRICA SOCIAL FORUM?

Charles Mutasa

Introduction

The World Social Forum is one of the most significant civil and political initiatives of the past several decades. Since the first World Social Forum (WSF), held in Porto Alegre in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland, its call for alternatives, "Another World is Possible!" has echoed in almost every part of the world. Alternatives that challenge the hegemony of the neoliberal capitalist paradigm of globalization that seems to have seized the world and got it in its vice-like grip, are being considered through dialogue and information exchange at WSF meetings.

This year's World Social Forum gathering was the fourth edition and was held in Mumbai, India, 16th to 21st January 2004. Official statistics estimate that about 80 000 people, represented by 2 660 organizations from 132 countries, participated in this fourth edition of the WSF. Others put the number of participants at 150 000. If official statistics are anything to go by, this year's attendance was a bit less compared to the 2003 edition in Porto Alegre that attracted over 100 000 participants drawn from 717 organizations across 156 countries.

Background

The Mumbai gathering was different from the previous World Social Forum gatherings. First, Mumbai as a venue is no place to romanticize about poverty and all that is associated with the plight of the masses that suffer because of the neoliberal policies in the world. Unlike Porto Alegre, where poverty may not be seen if you dare not to, Mumbai, despite the fact that it is India's financial capital, two-thirds of Mumbai's people live in indescribably dirty shantytowns, where there are no water taps or toilets in most homes. In Mumbai, at the NESCO grounds in Goregoan East, the venue of the meeting, one could evidently see the poor and the needy, beggars and many from the underprivileged society of India around, anxiously waiting for another world of equity and justice that has been denied them since time immemorial.

Taking a walk through Mumbai, one could not afford to ignore the signs of a sick economy with poverty which is evidently seen by the ever-increasing number of the homeless and so many slums inhabited by people who bath by the highway sides and children defecating everywhere in the streets of Mumbai. For them primary health care is a fantasy and housing for all is a dream that may never come true.

Secondly, bringing the World Social Forum to India afforded an opportunity for most poor Asians who could not in the past meet the cost of flying and living in the rather posh Brazilian city of Porto Alegre to have a feel of what happens in such world jamborees. Indeed, without waiting for statistical backing one can safely say the majority of those who attended were from India and its neighbouring countries. Besides the usually refined criticism about the lack of transparency and democracy in the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank that characterize these meetings, this time the majority, mostly Asian delegates came, spoke, sung, danced, marched and denounced problems associated with the caste system, war, cultural imperialism, deep social and economic injustices, capitalism, condemned the "Bushes and Blairs" of this world for the allied forces' presence in Iraq, hailed socialism/communism and condoned Dalitism as well as denounced the apartheid regime of Israel.

Issues about dwelling rights and liveable cities, the caste system and "untouchable" Indians, the unsustainable situation of debt in poor countries of the world, and the coercive use of force by

governments, multinational corporations and international financial institutions dominated the discussions. The Mumbai edition was well balanced between the formalised discussions and the street activities on a daily basis. The street activities ranged from women calling for the recognition of sex work as a legal profession to those calling for the resolution of the Tibetan problem. Much rejuvenation of the movement came from the understanding that it is such resistance that led to the victory over the WTO in Cancun.

Thirdly, what was **the African Social Forum Scenario**, which to many had different interpretations? But, of prime importance this time around, Africans whether by default or by design made a break-through in terms of their numbers at the World Social Forum. Compared to the past three editions I attended, the Mumbai edition recorded the highest attendance of African civil society activists in the history of the WSF. I think around 350 to over 400 Africans residing and working in Africa were in Mumbai, the majority notably under the sponsorship and banner of Action Aid (UK), HIVOS and others under the banner of the African Social Forum.

This was a big enough group to put the continent 's problems across to the world without much ado. Those who managed to do so did so via many workshops and seminars and even cultural events. The African Social Forum under the leadership of its secretariat of ENDA in Senegal managed to produce a daily paper Africa Aflame that captured and took into consideration Africa's uniqueness and issues. However, here and there, we do forgive the journalists and leaders who were supposed to capture news and related African events but instead became the center of news themselves.

However, being many may also mean confusion; in-fights and struggles within the struggle against neo-liberalism. The heavy presence of Africans at the World Social Forum in Mumbai was also taken by others to be a time to put their African Social Forum house in order. Although they knew that they need not wash their linen in public especially in a strange land like Mumbai, they equally felt that the African Social Forum secretariat, without pressure, will never change its unbecoming behaviour if left to itself every time. Thus, the African Social Forum workshop, instead of being a venue to deliberate on issues degenerated into a place of confrontation between the secretariat and those who often than not dominate the African Social Forum events and talkshows with the same tautologies annually on one side and those who demanded the space to be democratised on the other.

What made issues tense for the African Social Forum camp was not the lack of brilliant and contemporary issues to talk about. It was the mere absence of good organisation and recognition of various talents among colleagues. The failure by the secretariat based in ENDA, Senegal to host a regional African Social Forum meeting prior to Mumbai was itself a blunder. It not only left the camp disorganised but also exposed the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the secretariat and the non-functioning of a Steering Committee supposed to check on the secretariat. The African Social forum secretariat proved to be operating in a rather more opaque way than the World Bank itself. Although, the secretariat managed to send some delegates to Mumbai, there was no transparent and accountable means of selecting the delegates. Mostly, it was the usual old friends/faces coming along, in itself a sign of retrogression, not progression.

The workshop speakers have been the same since the first meeting in Bamako, thrice in Porto Alegre and once in Addis Abba. Quite fascinating and ironical is the fact that the speakers keep recycling the same lectures and notes to the dissatisfaction of their colleagues who fail to understand why the speakers still have the guts to repeat themselves when others have better presentations to make. Organisations such as Action Aid who were in earlier times blamed for sending delegates to the World Social Forum outside the auspices of the African Social Forum secretariat can be justified on these bases.

Besides the razzmatazz at the African Social Forum workshop, Africans were able to make their presence and brilliance evident by participating in many events that concerned them. What was and is still mind-boggling is the pessimism among colleagues that Africans cannot host the World Social Forum in 2006? This of course emanates from some quarters where people feel that there are more cracks within the African camp than necessary. There are those who feel they fathered or mothered the movement among colleagues and even if they do not have the energy they still need to be in the forefront, but of course having nothing new to offer or build the movement with.

The African Social Forum Steering Committee has not been very active in mobilising regional and national meetings in the continent. Being a Steering Committee member has been a guarantee to get an air ticket to attend the World Social Forum meetings rather than a sign of hard work and commitment on the ground. If regional and national meetings are popularised, it will be very easy to lay off the self-proclaimed seniors in the movement. The secretariat itself may need relocation if another Africa is to be possible. It is time that Africans in CSOs realise that they cannot afford to behave like their political leaders or be worse than them.

Needless to say, the African Social Forum needs to have its priorities right and needs a legitimate leadership not prone to elitism, power abuse, egotism and megalomaniacs. There is a lot of opportunity for social movements to push for political and economic changes in Africa that many of us believe they will not come on a silver plate. Whoever thinks that he has Africa at heart in the African Social Forum must lead by ensuring that national forums and regional forums are the bases upon which the voice of the voiceless is heard. If governments and international financial institutions have failed people, civic society needs not do the same.

It is true that the mass movement struggle for social justice, access to natural resources – land, water and seed - human and citizens' rights, participative democracy, the rights of workers of both genders as guaranteed in international treaties, women's' rights, and also the people's right to self-determination is something that the Big Capitalist world cannot afford to ignore. As an escape from its crisis of legitimacy, global capitalism is using force and war in order to maintain an anti-popular order. The mass movement demand for governments to stop militarism, war, and military spending cannot be ignored forever. Imagination is more important than knowledge, so another world is possible. "We strongly demand the total and unconditional cancellation and rejection of the illegitimate debts of the Third World. As a preliminary condition for the satisfaction of the fundamental economic, social, cultural and political rights, we also demand the restitution of the longstanding plunder of the Third World." So says the declaration.

Contact details:

Charles Mutasa
African Forum and Network on Debt and Development (AFRODAD)
207 Fife Avenue
Harare, Zimbabwe

Phone: 263-4-702093
Fax: 263-4- 702143
Cell: 263-11-735328

e-mail: charles@afrodad.co.zw