

Youth Activists at the 2007 World Social Forum

Rachel Brewer and Ewa Cerda

For the first time in its seven-year history, the World Social Forum was held in Africa. Activists, social movements, networks, coalitions and other progressive forces from Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe and all corners of the African continent converged in Nairobi, Kenya from January 20th to the 25th. Workshops, panels, films, and art vigorously critiqued the destructive forces of neoliberalism, with cultural events and song serving as a celebration of the growing strength of social movements and civil society. As young activists we bring a unique perspective to the Forum, an event that since its inception has tried to initiate a political space for young people to creatively express their struggles and propose alternatives.

Youth Involvement

At the last global-level WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the youth camp had over 30,000 delegates. In Nairobi, there were only 250 participants in the youth camp set up south-west of the Moi Stadium venue. Unfortunately, this fits in with past criticisms that year after year the WSF manages to somewhat neglect its future generation. Although this year's theme was "People's Struggles, People's Alternatives", the struggles that young people face around the world were severely underrepresented - and were too often articulated by those other than youth.

Although in past years youth may have been well represented at the WSF, in Nairobi this was not exactly the case. There was a separate zone established for youth events - but it was on the outskirts of the venue grounds, and thus felt somewhat detached from the rest of the proceedings. Could the youth zone not have been more centrally located so as to make it seem part of the rest of the Forum's activities? The importance of establishing a designated area for youth at the WSF cannot be de-



nied - but in this case, it created a feeling of disengagement and separation from the rest of the events.

Younger activists also seemed to be in short supply at the WSF in general - a fact that was noticeable when walking around the Forum grounds. There also did not seem to be a high number of youth from Kenya - which is unusual for a country where 60% of the population is between 18 and 30 years old. The reasons for the under-representation of Kenyan youth are many. Perhaps it points to the inability of

the national Organizing Committee to make the inclusion of this important group a priority. Reports of participants from Nairobi's poorest communities being charged exorbitant entrance fees to the Forum grounds may explain the low levels of youth in attendance. Although the organizing committee dropped the fees after a few days, and Kenyan residents were allowed in free of charge - it should be noted that the event was already well under way at this point.

There were a number of youth-focused

events on offer in the program as well – although many of these were cancelled at the last minute. Many of the youth seminars and workshops we attended were dominated by large NGOs, both local and international, where young activists seemed to be ‘spoken for’ rather than given a visibly prominent place on panels. Admittedly, the activities at the Forum are self-organized, so there is the potential for youth-run groups to design their own events, but the costs involved in holding a workshop created an extra barrier for young participants. For us, this sometimes created a feeling that we were there as observers rather than as full participants in the WSF process. However, there were some excellent youth-focused events – one particularly significant experience we had was a guided tour of several community projects in the Korogocho slum settlement near the WSF grounds, organized and facilitated by a local youth group (in spite of strong government opposition to visitors being allowed to see these communities). On the whole, it would be fair to say that

youth issues and concerns did not seem to be adequately represented at this particular Forum – this is alarming for an event that has historically seen high levels of youth participation.

Moreover, the lack of resolute and ongoing inter-generational dialogue is what may prevent the strengthening of the WSF process and global movements in the future. To prevent this from occurring, perhaps the Organizing Committee should explore ways to facilitate more inter-generational exchange in many of the central sessions.

Youth and Social Justice

The political importance of young people’s involvement in the WSF process can not be emphasized enough. Because it is a space where we are able to re-think and re-imagine the system we live in, young people must be a part of the process and mechanisms that are envisioning our future. There must be a conscious effort on

behalf of established activists to share their experiences and help build a future generation that will continue their work. One of the issues continually touched on throughout the Forum is that of sustainable development. But what about the sustainability of our movements?

Although the Forum is far from perfect, it is nonetheless rejuvenating to be a participant in such a dynamic event as it grows and changes. Seeing the process quench even part of the thirst movements and civil society express for democratic and inclusive space is inspiring. It is an example of an overall success: a political space that is serving a global purpose that has been created and propelled by the sector it was originally designed to serve. It only reaffirms our belief that the World Social Forum is desperately needed as a worldwide platform to serve a dissenting majority. **R**

Rachel Brewer and Ewa Cerda work for Students for Social Justice at the Centre for Social Justice in Toronto.

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