

Civil Society must re-strategise on the World Social Forum

By Douglas Ngwenya

There is growing need in the civil society sector to constantly seek lobby and advocacy platforms that provide opportunities to effectively impact on their target audiences and yield the desired paradigm shift in their area of specialty. It is this desire that culminated in the World Social Forum (WSF) in January 2001.

“The impact of the annual gathering that has brought together thousands of civil society groups since its first edition in January 2001 has grown enormously... as a platform for catapulting social issues onto the global agenda,” notes IPS¹.

The WSF has since grown to be a big open space for participants to freely air their views. The Charter of Principles adopted by the WSF and freely adopted and adapted by the smaller regional and national social fora states that the Social Forum shall remain an “open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action” against the neo-liberal, free-market economic model, that does not intend to be “a body representing world civil society.”

The WSF, which attracted over 155 000 participants from 135 countries in the year 2005 has its own limitations. Firstly, when evaluated from one year to the other, the gathering can be best described as the same people, coming from the same organisations, taking the same issues to the same platform in the same manner in the hope that the clichés will yield different results each time.

Secondly, the WSF has dismally failed to be an instrument for action, as noted by IPS.

“Many activists and participating intellectuals would like to see the WSF choose three or four main themes at the most, in order to concentrate the global meet's efforts. They argue that such a broad range of ideas and proposals stands in the way of making the WSF more effective.”

The diversity of topical issues at the WSF taking place simultaneously has tended to thinly spread audiences across discussion sessions, thereby robbing the forum of any significant impact. The idea of holding parallel sessions in key regions of the world such as Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe will further compromise impact. More so, participants are prohibited from adopting positions and claiming that those positions reflect views of the entire forum.

“It is the participating social movements, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and activists who should join together in umbrella groups or networks to adopt decisions, rather than the Forum,” the organisers argue.

Participants at the WSF will never be called to take positions as a body. This therefore means that there will be no concrete message coming out of the forum intended to influence positive changes in the world economic and political order. The tags razzmatazz and jamboree spring to mind when one pictures this annual kaleidoscope of protests and debates under the same tree.

If the activists have to fly all the way to Porto Alegre, Brazil just to adopt decisions, as per the recommendations of the WSF organisers, yet this can be done in the office via the Internet, one cannot help but question the sincerity of the NGO leadership in the effective utilisation of resources and quest to serve the interests of the needy.

Moreover, the WSF is misplaced. Since the WSF is intended to counter and influence the views of the political elite and celebrities at the World Economic Forum (WEF) which normally takes place

in Davos, Switzerland, the simultaneous occurrence of these events at the two opposite ends of the world renders the civil society gathering ineffective. We have the political elite, whom the civil society intends to influence, talking amongst themselves on one end, and civil society activists chanting slogans and recycling clichés to one another on the other end.

The WEF defines itself as “an independent international organisation committed to improving the state of the world. The forum provides a collaborative framework for the world’s leaders to address global issues engaging particularly its corporate members in global citizenship.”²

From this definition, it sounds like the WEF is a space for world leaders and transnational corporations to delve into corporate social responsibility issues, and one would not expect the platform to tackle the Third World debt crisis. According to *50 Years is Enough*, those civil society organisations that decided to take their debt and development issues to the WSF at Porto Alegre, instead of the WEF at Davos in Switzerland were in for a surprise.

“African debt campaigners meeting at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil learned with great interest of the high-profile panel on Africa and its debt burden at the World Economic Forum, the gathering of power elites held in Davos...”

The panel of power elites included the U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, South African President Thabo Mbeki, former U.S. President Bill Clinton as well as the world’s richest person, Bill Gates.

“We are tired of hearing noble speeches about our continent... fine words in the absence of firm action will placate some, but consign our needs to a heap of hypocritical and forgotten promises,” said Demba Moussa Dembele of the Forum on African Alternatives, challenging world leaders for concrete action on Africa.

“Our continent (Africa) has been exploited and abused by powerful outsiders for centuries. After slavery and colonialism, the latest tool for imposing foreign interests on us is the lethal combination of debt and the economic conditions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. We can no longer tolerate a system that demands the most impoverished to continue to pay the wealthiest for the privilege of struggling to eat, to breathe, to live. We demand justice!” added Njoki Njoroge Njehu of Solidarity Action Network in Action.

The African participants affirmed their demand for total and unconditional debt cancellation at the WEF. The WEF, which received extensive media coverage, gave the platform to President Jacques Chirac of France, who urged other world leaders to support the youth in Africa, Asia and Latin America in their quest for sustainable development.

If the WSF had taken place within the proximity of the WEF, the civil society activists would have had a chance to talk to the people they have been meaning to talk to – the political elite from the wealthy nations. And those activists who believe in disrupting such meetings or sitting in so as to get their message across might have had a chance to do so. Peaceful demonstrations and marches near the WEF venue by WSF activists would have driven the point home. Brazil is not a strategic location for serious civil society organisations intent on realising positive policy changes to address third world poverty issues by influencing the elite. If the two Fora were held close to each other, the media would have easily juxtaposed the conflicting messages coming from both the WEF and the WSF, much to the advantage of the latter. As it were, the WEF was brought to the limelight while the WSF remained in the periphery of media coverage.

IPS revealed that the media had a hard time selecting and covering deliberations out of 2500 events lined up at the WSF, some of which occurred concurrently at different tents, with audiences

wandering from one tent to the other. Media coverage of the WSF was a challenge because there was neither a press office nor a single spokesperson or representative to liaise with the media.

“The WSF is not conceived in such a way as to facilitate an overview of what takes place there, yet reporters typically attempt to approach the meeting from this perspective, or present it to their audience as if they had,” notes IPS.

Juxtapose that with the formal structure of the WEF. The well-paid and well-oiled mainstream media covering the WEF has an avaricious appetite for news, and the razzmatazz of the WSF would present a delectable menu for them. On one hand you have world leaders attending an annual, well-funded conference, to which they each bring a large team of experts and spin-doctors. Chances are, anything said to or among each other will be out in all the world’s media hardly a full breath afterwards, courtesy of the spin doctors and their multitudes of loyal media. In other words, should a media person miss the WEF session – no sweat – it is already in the Press kit.

Following allusions to the fact that next year’s WSF will be decentralised and held simultaneously in different continents, and the idea of having more than one fora in one continent being possible, the coordination of media coverage by the mainstream media will be a huge challenge. Let alone the possibility that there will be the intended audiences in each of these gatherings. Moreover, activists participating in some these fora risk lack of coverage by the media who, apart from having limited human and material resources, have to choose among competing alternatives for limited space or airtime.

Decentralising the WSF next year means thinly spreading civil society activists across the world, and driving a wedge between them and the political elite whom they seek to influence. The WSF organisers need to revisit the venue of the WSF, and consider the implications of decentralisation, as this is tantamount to destroying the civil society struggle for a better world.

¹ <http://www.ipsterraviva.net/tv/wsf2005/>

² <http://www.weforum.org/>