

Can the Davos elites sleep easy?

Friday 2 February 2007, by [WAINWRIGHT Hilary](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2007).

As they sipped 'Climate Change Night Caps' in a plastic igloo, networked over a classic claret dinner' and, behind the showpiece discussions, got down to the real business of trying to restart failing world trade negotiations, did the corporate and political elites gathered at the World Economic Forum have anything to fear from the global justice activists gathered in Nairobi for the seventh World Social Forum (WSF)? At first glance, the answer would seem to be 'no'. The Kenyan WSF organising committee, with its failure to reach out to those on its doorstep who suffer most from the Davos deals, at times seemed more interested in meeting the Kenyan government's desire to promote Nairobi as a conference centre than it did in providing a crucible for a movement for global resistance. This is far from the whole story, though. The WSF can be chaotic at times, as I recalled on a first day spent stumbling around looking for seminars that didn't always exist, but it is also a space for immense creativity. Its initiatives move forward independent of any central will - be that the national organising committee, or the forum's International Council. Nairobi was no exception here, as it again allowed space for the resilient and steady momentum of network building and campaigning. Looking back over the past seven forums, and seeing in Nairobi the roots that the participating networks had put down in Africa - against hugely difficult odds - it is clear to me that here is a social movement in the deep sense: encapsulating a powerful social trend, a social force with no identifiable single subject, and which results is far more than the sum of its parts or individual participants. The WSF, which belongs to no one, is a space to which thousands of people working against global injustice in very diverse ways are drawn. When Nairobi's poor, led by a 23 year old woman Wangui Mahabi, rallied at the gates demanding to be let in for free, they received immediate and unstoppable support. When a group of trade union leaders from Italy, Brazil and elsewhere joined with organisers of informal workers, primarily from Africa, to tentatively propose a new global labour network, they found themselves facing a room filled to capacity with trade unionists, social movement organisers and the representatives of a very significant range of organisations. When Latin American and European activists against water privatisation came to Nairobi, they found that hundreds of activists from water campaigns in Africa were eager to use the moment of the Forum to set up an African Water network, and engage with other movements to build a global water justice campaign. These successful initiatives on water and labour were mirrored by new developments on the trade front, upon which the WSF most directly conflicts with the agenda of the Davos elites. Trade negotiations can sound bland, but they directly concern most of the conditions of daily life: natural resources, public services, labour and livelihood issues, the environment and habitats. Towards the end of the WSF, I bumped into an enthusiastic Ronnie Hall, co-ordinator of the trade programme of Friends of the Earth International: 'The first WSFs were mainly about analysing what was going on. Then we used them to mobilise international action. Now we're

planning actions and strategy over the long term and building strong networks across all the boundaries that traditionally divide us. With African involvement, this has been the best Forum so far.' This bodes ill for the likes of Peter Mandelson who, as EU trade commissioner, was working intensely in Davos to rescue the World Trade Organisation trade negotiations (known as the Doha round) that collapsed in Geneva last summer. Hundreds of billions of dollars of new trade are riding on the Doha round, he said at Davos, cautioning that there are 'systemic implications' if the talks failed. What Mandelson, Susan Schwab (his US counterpart), and the corporations whose interests they promote want is access to Southern markets for Northern manufactured goods; secure access to the natural resources of the South; access to the new government procurement markets created by privatisation; and the liberalisation of foreign direct investment. In exchange they are willing to negotiate some opening of their markets to agricultural products from the South - although there are disagreements between the US and EU, as well as serious internal differences too, on the extent of these concessions. The US and EU are not the only actors in this process, however. Southern governments walked out of WTO talks in Cancun in 2003, displaying a new willingness to challenge the biases of a system dominated by Northern negotiators cutting secretive backroom deals. Since then, a variety of alliances between Southern governments have emerged with a view to rebalancing power within trade and investment negotiations. Central to this process, especially to the way that Southern governments, in all their variety, have stiffened their independence and resolve within WTO negotiations, has been the impact of the campaigning movements that gather strength through the WSF. The global reach of these networks, most notably Our World Is Not For Sale (OWINFS), means that they can effectively monitor the strategies and tactics of the US and the EU. They provide Southern governments with information essential to developing strong negotiating positions, as well as helping to thwart divide and rule tactics. This same research and organisation capacity is now being applied to the bilateral trade and investment deals that are becoming increasingly important in light of the stalled WTO talks. Until now, however, these social movements and trade networks have had weaker roots in most of Africa than elsewhere. The work that went on in Nairobi, by all accounts, has gone a long way towards bridging that gap. This is crucial because these movements only have an impact if they are rooted amongst the mass of voters, consumers and workers on whom the elites ultimately depend. With this in mind, another impressive new initiative launched in Nairobi was 'Regain Control of the Commons', bringing together local community campaigns defending rights over forests, water, energy sources, minerals, fish, from all over the world. Forest people in India, who are trying to take a protective law through the Indian parliament, exchanged information and analysis with communities in the Philippines, which are using legal and direct action to resist multinational mining companies. African communities joined up in large numbers, including many who have no access to e-mail.

This need constantly to renew and extend the roots of the movements for global justice is perhaps the biggest challenge for those who gather at the WSF. Today's activists have developed capacities to network - that is, to organise across regions, issues, expertise and organisations in order to build common campaigns without losing their individual or organisational autonomy. This gives our campaigns a remarkable flexibility and ability to share knowledge, quite beyond anything that the Davos crew, with all their well-resourced 'networking opportunities' can ever manage,

since realpolitik and competitive realities severely limit their capacity to collaborate openly. Extending global justice networks and the organising into poor communities, and to the mass of people in whose hands the possibilities of social transformation lies, is not yet always a sufficient priority. Yet it is here, if the slums of Kenya are anything to go by, that a new wave of the social forum movement is about to break on to the scene, in its own particular and as yet unknown ways. If there was a World Social Forum every day it would have a real impact in Kenya and everywhere' said Stanley Kai from Wasanii, (Swahili for artists in the hood') an umbrella group of hip hop musicians, graffiti artists, dramatists and dancers using art as a means to bring about social change. 'We are writing music not to impress but to have an impact; to change society. We have a need to look at other people, to what's happening to them, to expose the problems; to share the knowledge, to make people aware,' said rapper Kevin Ovito. I'd come from the Forum to sit in on Wasanii's weekly meeting in Kengani, one of Nairobi's many poor communities, and not the worst by any means. In a sense it was a political meeting, but of a very unusual kind. They had total contempt and hatred for 'the old turks in parliament'. Indeed, one of the main purposes of their music was to alert people to 'the lies of the politicians, who come to the ghetto with promises and bribes'. Energetically and creatively they are reinventing politics. They are warily opening their meetings to young people who want to stand for election to campaign for their needs. But, they ask pointedly, 'what makes you different from the others, why should we expect you to deliver?' They were also sceptical about some of the NGOs that occupied a lot of space at the WSF. They talked with disgust about how these groups offer individuals money to go to the Forum, buying themselves some credibility but doing nothing to strengthen community organisations. That's not the kind of involvement they want. They would have been keen to go directly if it had been free and the food was cheap. They want funding but on their own terms - not as victims but as artists for change, as creators of revolutionary art', as they put it. 'We know people are sitting on us. We can't sit back. We know we have to have power. We believe we can get this by drawing people together through music and then they can bring about change. In Kangemi, music has changed people,' says Ovito.

If the WSF can provide the space for both networks like Our World Is Not For Sale, the emerging network of organised and precarious labour, and the Wasanii's of this world, then Peter Mandelson and his ilk should have good cause to be sounding a little desperate.

P.S.

* From the TNI website.

* Hilary Wainwright is co-editor of Red Pepper and Research Director of the Transnational Institute's New Politics Programme.