

FPIF Commentary: WSF Focus

## Another Forum is Possible

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**Corporate sponsorship? Soldiers with red berets and AK-47s? Adam Ma'anit argues that another Forum is possible.**

The conversations I've had with friends and colleagues about the WSF seem eerily similar to the kinds of things we'd say about some of the large music festivals we've attended in our lives. In this age of mega-concerts, we hark back to a golden age when you could still actually see the stage without the aid of a television screen the size of a small country; there weren't any cash machines or mobile phone top-up kiosks around; and you didn't need to know some concert promoter's cousin's dentist to get a ticket that sells out in three nanoseconds on the net.

But you know the story... over time, they get more and more popular, bigger and/or blander bands headline, corporate sponsors shout from all directions, the portaloos get fancier and now you can watch it all live on pay-per-view at home. Those of us who were 'there from the beginning' bemoan the loss of our cherished spaces that have lost their soul or sold-out totally, and then we look for some more obscure event to fill the void so we can "keep it real."

This is a bit like how it feels with some of the conversations about the World Social Forum at the moment.

It started out on a relative high-point for the global justice movement. It was a festival of anticapitalism, if you will, when those critical of corporate globalization, neoliberalism, militarism and the destruction of the environment were building stronger links with each other and uniting around some key issues facing people and planet. The World Social Forum captured the imagination of people within that movement. The now somewhat trite slogan of "another world is possible" sounded fresh and exciting back then. A real sense of alternatives and possibilities emerged, if not directly from the WSF itself, than certainly from the "WSF process" in which people met and exchanged knowledge and wisdom, shared ideas and developed a sense of common purpose. None of this was particularly new. But the emerging "global justice movement" was clearly seeking out opportunities to come together and draw strength from our diversity. The WSF has been one of the more successful expressions of that particular desire.

Six years on, quite a few low points were reached at the Nairobi WSF in January, aspects of which have manifested similarly in other world and regional social fora over the years. Corporate sponsorship (by the likes of mobile phone operator Celtel, Kenya Airways, and Brazilian oil giant Petrobras) literally put paid to the notions articulated in the Forum's Charter of Principles that: "The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations interests..." The patrols of red-bereted soldiers toting AK-47s hardly jived with the anti-militarist ethos of the peacenik participants. Worse still, the exclusion of the Kenyan poor unable to afford the hefty entrance fees and even more preposterous

food and drink prices in the venue, kept out with razor wire and police trailing menacing Alsatians on leads. WSF or WTF?

Fortunately, local Kenyan activists forced these issues to the fore and, with support from other participants, helped open spaces for these obvious contradictions to be challenged. In many respects the WSF itself is serving as the very laboratory in which we examine some of the highfalutin' maxims we claim to hold so dear.

Few of us are so deluded as to believe that the WSF should be a perfect utopian reflection of the world we want to create. We expect it to have flaws and imperfections, things that need to be improved upon and modified as circumstances change. This is, after all, what democracy looks like. But if people begin to feel that WSF is moving too far away from its core, that some voices are excluded in favor of others, then the WSF will lose its most important asset - the people. And that is what the World Social Forum is all about.

This therefore should be the benchmark by which the success or failure of the WSF should be measured. The primary metric: the degree to which activists from around the world feel that the WSF provides an inclusive, participatory, and democratic space for creating and nurturing alternatives. If it doesn't, if it continues down the path of music festival turned corporate hootenanny, then movements will discard it and seek out other spaces. Another forum is possible... and you won't find it on pay-per-view.

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**P.S.**

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