

Social Movements Set to Assert Their Presence at WSF Nairobi 2007

Onyango Oloo



Onyango Oloo is the National Coordinator of the Kenya Social Forum. He was one of the lecturers at the "Training of the Trainers- workshop on the WSF in Nairobi, 3-5 July 2006 (in the picture by MB above), which is covered elsewhere in ISC Number 24. This article by Oloo has also been published in *Pambazuka News* (www.pambazuka.org), 21 December 2006.

The clock is winding down. With barely a month before the commencement of the 6th World Social Forum (WSF), social movements from Africa and around the world are gearing up to make their presence felt in the Kenyan capital where the annual event is scheduled to take place from January 20th to 25th 2007.

Indeed, there has been a flurry of activities in the host country itself. At

the end of November, a bevy of organizations and movements representing various pastoralist and minority groups converged at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre to celebrate the Kenya Pastoralists' Week. In contrast to previous outings, the 2006 edition was devoted to building up support and mobilising for the World Social Forum. Impatient with their stereotypical image as cultural artefacts used to drum up foreign exchange earnings from tourism, members of the Maasai, Samburu, Turkana, Rendille, Pokot, Yiaku, Njemps, Ogiek, El Molo and other marginalized groups (many of them from the historically ignored and systemically impoverished northern limits of Kenya) resolved to bring to the global audience offered by the WSF space, issues more relevant to their lived experience.

Among these issues are colonial era land edicts and policies which dispossessed their communities; the impact of mining and extraction activities on the environment and human livelihoods; discriminatory policies by successive governments that have guaranteed the stubborn survival of pre-colonial conditions of poverty and underdevelopment among many pastoralist and minority communities; the arrogant disregard for the concerns raised by (for example) Samburu women raped over the years by British soldiers dispatched on military exercises in those Kenyan communities; proposals on ending conflict and creating conditions for sustainable growth; the role of youth; tensions persisting with neo-colonial era settler farmers and indigenous Kenyan comprador businessmen in hiving off thousands of hectares of land while the pastoralists and minority communities are targets of state terror, evictions and denunciations and other related concerns.

The WSF 2007 may also serve as an occasion to celebrate recent victories by some of the above marginalized groups. In Botswana, the San people made global headlines in December 2006 after a court affirmed their legal claim that they were wrongly forced off their ancestral lands by the Botswana government and that they had a right to return to their homes in the Kalahari Desert. Hot on the heels of that decision barely a week later, another court this time in Kenya, agreed with lawyers for the minority Njemps community that they had a right to a parliamentary representative from their own community given the decades of exclusion and marginalization by successive Kenyan regimes, both colonial and neo-colonial.

On the other side of the coin, members of the Digo community on the Kenyan coast are fuming after a High Court judged ruled in favour of the Toronto-based Tiomin company and against seven local farmers who are opposed to the paltry compensation packages the firm was offering for displacing members of the community from the site of proposed titanium mining operations. The court also ruled that the Kenya government could immediately proceed with forceful evictions of all farmers opposed to the displacement and proposed compensation. The Tiomin issue has been a lightning rod that has led to national and international coalitions and solidarity campaigns bringing together activists in Kenya, Canada, the United States, Italy and other parts of the world.

The Yiaku people have been also quite involved in the plans for the World Social Forum 2007. They have at least two representatives sitting in the Organizing Committee itself and active in the Social Mobilization Commission.

Theirs is a unique case for cultural survival: in the 1930s, they were forcibly assimilated into the larger Maasai cluster and over a period of decades, they have effectively lost their language with less than 10 people (mostly greying elders) able to communicate in the Yiaku tongue. Today they are confined to the inner reaches of the Mukogodo Forest on the outskirts of Nanyuki town in the Laikipia District of central Kenya. But in a testimony of their grit and resolve to fight for their right to self-determination, they have joined up with other marginalized and endangered peoples in Africa and around the world and no doubt they will have compelling testimonies to share during the January global event in Nairobi.

Dwellers of the so-called "mitaa ya mabanda" or informal settlements in Kenya- from the sprawling slums of Kibera and Mathare to the lesser known Huruma, Korogocho, Mukuru, Kondele, Chaani and other slums are quite in the thick of things. The Kutoka Network is working closely with these communities to ensure a massive presence of the inhabitants of these settlements at WSF 2007. One of the highlights of their activities will be a marathon that will snake its way through the Nairobi slums to historic Uhuru Park - the venue of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Hawkers, who have of late borne the brunt of municipal government and state terror in the Kenyan capital, are also organizing to participate, partly to correct the media misperceptions that they are nothing but a bunch of hoodlums working in cahoots with organized criminals to desecrate the central business district of Nairobi.

Women in Africa and around the world are busy organizing their presence at the WSF 2007 with the Nairobi-based FEMNET and the Kampala-based AWEAPON taking a very conscious lead in hooking into encounters like the Feminist Dialogues to ensure an effective participation by women.

The Kenyan trade union movement walked into the WSF process rather late in September 2006, and found their way around after a couple of hiccups. At first, it was a major battle to get the phrase "right to decent work" inserted into the major principles guiding the WSF 2007 meeting because some WSF veterans objected to incorporating the name of a specific ILO campaign into a broad platform such as the WSF. At the end of the day, there was a compromise and the phrase was adopted after protracted behind the scenes discussions.

More recently, a press conference organized by the Kenyan trade union leadership cast wrong aspersions at the Nairobi-based WSF 2007 Secretariat and this created some bad blood, which was once again overcome after face to face meetings with representative of the two bodies.

Even before the arrival of COTU (the Kenyan trade union confederation) on the WSF scene, workers and their issues were very much part of the WSF process with South Africa's COSATU part of the International Council of the WSF and OATUU head Hassan Sunmonu one of the most familiar presences at the African Social Forum council meetings. Elsewhere around the world, bodies like the Canadian Labour Congress and other trade union formations have been longtime supporters of the WSF process since its very inception.

In Kenya, bodies like the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) have worked for a long time to highlight the plight of export processing zones (EPZ) wage slaves and flower farm workers. The KHRC recently organized an international forum for shopstewards from Thailand, Indonesia, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and other parts of the world to talk about the issues workers would be bringing to the WSF 2007.

The Kenya Land Alliance, one of the constituent bodies of the Kenya Social Forum and a member of the WSF 2007 Organizing Committee has for the last year been mobilizing peasants, squatters, fisher folk, pastoralists and other rural folk to bring their issues on land and livelihoods to the WSF event. KLA has supported regional forums such as the Western Kenya Social Forum, the Coast Social Forum and the Central Social Forum, materially and otherwise.

Other dynamic bodies in the WSF 2007 Organizing Committee such as the Shelter Forum, Citizens Assembly and Haki Jamii have mobilized evictees, urban dwellers, the poor, the youth etc to articulate social and economic problems and suggested alternatives.

On a global scale, the World Assembly of Social Movements has held a series of meetings and exchanges on how best to use the WSF space to galvanize social movements. At the continental level, the South African based Khanya College and the newly founded Sankara Centre for Social Movements in Kenya are determined to see that the WSF 2007 event is an occasion to network and map out joint actions with other social movements from around the world.

In the same vein, an initiative coming out of Asia and Africa will be a prominent feature of the WSF Nairobi encounter, as activists from the two vast continents map out the elements of Africa-Asia Solidarity. A similar process is underway involving Latin America and Africa.

At the formal organizing level, all these initiatives, encounters and proposals have been concretized in an International Council of WSF (supported by the local organizing committee and the African Social Forum) decision to devote the fourth day of the WSF event (January 24, 2007) to solidifying joint actions and campaigns, partly to stave off lingering criticisms and perceptions that over the years the WSF has become little more than a talk shop.

With just weeks before the WSF 2007 event, it is clear that the WSF process itself is a contested ideological terrain. Some of the more activist

types are struggling to ensure that WSF events transcend their depiction as annual NGO jamborees with the usual high flying suspects flitting from one seminar to the other workshop before jetting back to their familiar civil society lairs.

Social movements, including dozens in Kenya, want to see the WSF being transformed into a space for organizing and mobilizing against the nefarious forces of international finance capital, neo-liberalism and all its local neo-colonial and comprador collaborators.

Whether this will be realized is a practical question which will be put to the test in Nairobi this coming January.