

The 7th World Social Forum – January 2007, Nairobi, Kenya Personal Reflections

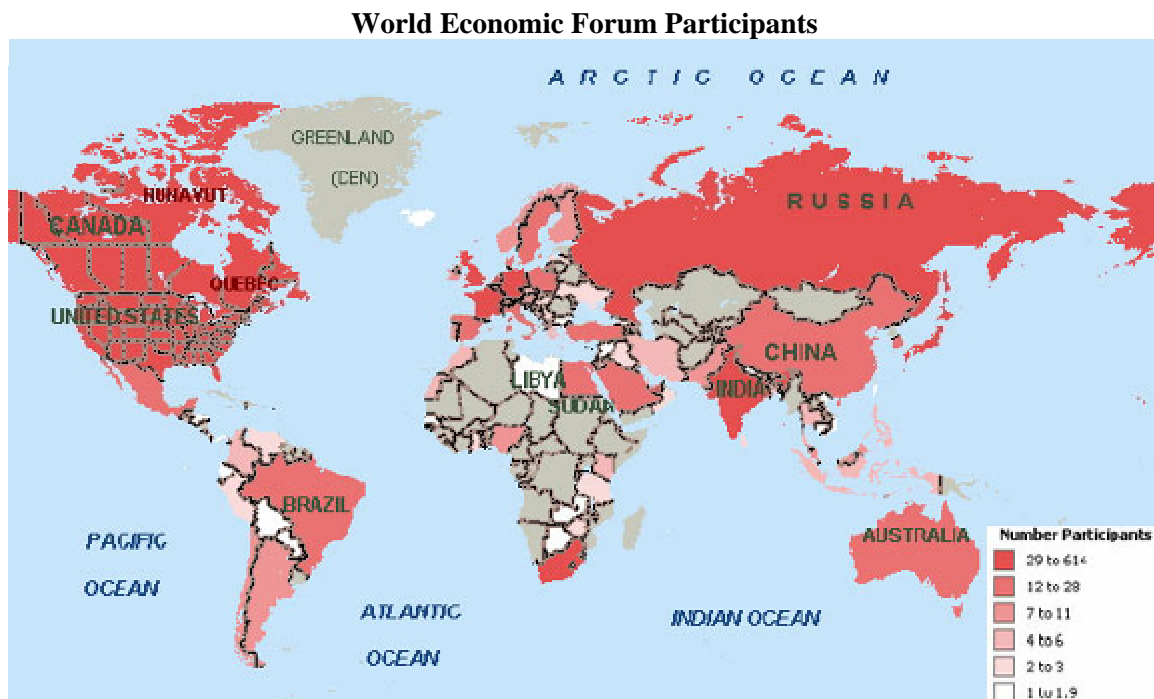
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As the Marianist NGO representative at the United Nations, I had decided that I wanted to attend this year's World Social Forum to experience firsthand what has become a significant grassroots event and process toward a more just global society. The World Social Forum began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001. According to its website,

“The World Social Forum is an open meeting place where social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital or by any form of imperialism come together to pursue their thinking, to debate ideas democratically, for formulate proposals, share their experiences freely and network for effective action. Since the first world encounter in 2001, it has taken the form of a permanent world process seeking and building alternatives to neo-liberal policies. This definition is in its [Charter of Principles](#), the WSF's guiding document.”

From the beginning it was seen as an alternative view of the neo-liberal globalization promoted at the World Economic Forum which occurs each year at the same time in Davos, Switzerland and attended by mainly the wealthier countries of the North. Unfortunately, there was some criticism at the WSF that too many participants were also from the richer countries.

(<http://www.ipsterraviva.net/TV/Nairobi/en/viewstory.asp?idnews=819>)



I knew I could stay at one of our Marianist communities in Nairobi and I also wanted to involve some of our African Marianists if possible. Bro. Charles Kimeu, SM, who works at the Marianist Development Project in Mombasa, was able to accompany me during the Forum. (He has written his own reflections about the Forum.) I also made arrangements to give presentations about the ministry of Marianist NGO at the UN to the novices and aspirants of the region.



Prior to the beginning of the Forum the press was calling for more than 100,000 participants to attend. However, by the end of the 5 days the actual figure was down to about 50-60,000. The opening and closing ceremonies were held in a big public park in downtown Nairobi, Uhuru Park. Kenyan pop star, Eric Wainaina sang his hit song about anti-corruption in the government. American actor Danny Glover called for an end to extravagant military spending instead of needed social programs. Former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda spoke on the HIV/AIDS pandemic in his country.

The venue for most of the week's workshops and seminars was the Moi International Sports Complex. The Forum organizers had divided in the stadium into 48 smaller meeting spaces and also set up a number of large tents. The list below indicates some of the topics which were attended by either myself or Bro. Charles:



1. Cut Funding to the World Bank – How to Bring About Radical Reforms
2. Child Trafficking in Africa
3. Non-governmental Public Action: Opportunities and Challenges
4. Global Call to Action Against Poverty – Workshop
5. Access to Quality Education for All
6. Influencing Government Budgets
7. Faith, Human Rights, and Justice
8. Churches Speak Out on Odious Debt
9. Strengthening Civil Society Capacity to Engage



- Governments on Education Policy
10. CSO Accountability
 11. Sustainable Solutions to Street Children Problems in Kenya
 12. Multinationals: Delivering Decent Work?
 13. Youth as Actors of Change
 14. UN Reform: Advocacy Strategies of NGOs and International Networks
 15. Civil Participation and Poverty
 16. Students Facing the Damages of Globalization



The World Social Forum was an important opportunity to network with other civil society organizations, some of whom I have worked with at the United Nations during recent years, e.g., the International Movement of Catholic Students, *Pax Romana*, ATD 4th World Movement, Caritas International, GCAP(Global Coalition Against Poverty), Vivat International, Jubilee Justice USA, and CIVICUS.

For me one of the drawbacks to the event was the fact that there was no effort to reach some consensus agreement on some of the pressing international questions. But, as stated in the WSF 'Guiding Principles':

The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No-one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body.

I believe this weakens the potential impact the Forum could have as the voice of global civil society. The leaders gathered in Davos for the World Economic Forum presume to make decisions impacting global finance, trade and security. If the WSF is to be an alternative I feel we need to try and have a unified voice on some issues, e.g. human rights, gender equality, child labor, etc.

As the motto of this year's World Social Forum states, "Another World is Possible." But unless civil society tries to address some of these pressing global problems by sending a consensus voice to the various governments I will reluctantly remain skeptical as to whether a world based on justice and equality is very "probable" in the near future.