

## GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY FORUMS AND POVERTY

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## INTRODUCTION

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In assessing, as this edition of the Yearbook does, how globally oriented, globally organised and globally active civil society affects poverty, one prominent subsidiary question is the role played by forums of global civil society. Contemporary history has witnessed a multiplication and growth of venues where citizen associations convene to deliberate about global affairs. These gatherings of civil society actors have become a regular and at times highly visible feature of global politics in the early twenty-first century. However, do these initiatives make an impact on the concrete conditions of people's lives, particularly in relation to poverty? That is the core concern of this chapter.

Global civil society forums have taken various shapes. For example, the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO, founded in 1948) provides a space of exchange and collaboration among the now more than 3,000 NGOs that have formal legal relations with the UN. The World Economic Forum (dating from 1971) brings civil society associations into contact with a thousand of the largest transnational corporations as well as a variety of state and supra-state agencies. CIVICUS-Worldwide Alliance for Citizen Participation (launched in 1993) convenes hundreds of civil society organisations in its biennial World Assembly. The World Social Forum (WSF, first held in 2001) has attracted hundreds of thousands of participants in local, national, regional and global meetings. Smaller endeavours to create global spaces for civil society gatherings include the State of the World Forum (started in 1995), the Montreal International Forum (1998), the Bridge Initiative (2001), and the World Forum of Civil Society Networks-UBUNTU (2001). Other civil society forums have addressed global affairs from a local or national position, including the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), active in Thailand since 1995, and the Peoples' Forum, which has convened in different towns of Mali since 2002 as a counterpoint to the annual summit of the Group of Eight (G8).

Several features give these forums a 'global' character. As already noted, the deliberations in these meetings frequently address issues of global scope, such as ecological degradation and social inequality. In addition the gatherings, including the more locally rooted Assembly of the Poor and Peoples' Forum, draw participants and supporters from across the planet. These delegates generally pursue their involvement in the respective forums using global infrastructure of transport, communications and finance. Many of the associations that attend have organisational networks that span several continents. The forums also often engage, directly and/or indirectly, global governance apparatuses such as the UN and the G8. Moreover, most of these forums and many of their participants draw on global sources of finance such as foundations and multilateral donors. Finally, many civil society actors participate in these forums in order to build and express global affiliations and solidarities with one another.

To assess the consequences of global civil society forums for poverty, this chapter convenes a 'forum about forums'. Leading figures in these initiatives reflect on the contributions as well as the limitations of their respective venues in regard to the politics of poverty. The six forums introduced above are examined in chronological order by their year of launch. First, Renate Bloem, President of CONGO, during 2000-07, evaluates the role of this oldest global civil society forum in connection with the UN. Next Richard Samans, Managing Director of the World Economic Forum since 2003, considers the contribution of his organisation, including its high-profile Davos gatherings. Then Kumi Naidoo, Secretary-General of CIVICUS, during 1998-2008, assesses the work on poverty of this NGO-convening group. Chantana Banpasirichote Wungaeo, a close academic observer of the Assembly of the Poor, explores the character and implications of this endeavour. Virginia Vargas, a member of the International Council of the WSF, looks at the influence of this alter-globalisation initiative on the politics of poverty. Finally Barry Aminata Touré, Coordinator of the Anti-Poverty Alliance in Mali, examines the Peoples' Forum in that West African country.

In their different ways the six authors address several main points. Each contribution opens with a brief description of the forum in question: its origins, organisational form, principal events, a general profile of the participants in those activities, and funding sources. Regarding the specific issue at hand, the authors indicate how the respective forums conceive of poverty and the poor. Each piece further considers how far the forum in question has helped to place and/or raise issues of poverty on the agenda of global politics. The various civil society organisers moreover assess in what ways and to what extents their respective civil society 'tents' have affected policies on poverty. Lastly, and broaching a matter of accountability within civil society, the authors evaluate whether and how their global civil society forum has expanded political space for poor people themselves.

Of course these short accounts cannot provide a definitive answer to the question whether and how global civil society forums have impacted on poverty. A full account of this issue would require much more analysis, including a carefully elaborated theoretical framework, systematically assessed empirical correlations, and counterfactual ponderings. However, testimonies such as those presented here, from people who have directly and deeply experienced the circumstances under investigation, also provide important evidence and can enlarge understandings of civil society involvement in the global politics of poverty.

What emerges from these accounts is a clear indication that global civil society forums have, in tandem with official venues, put the policy spotlight on poverty, particularly since the mid-1990s. Arguably poverty would not have gained as much attention in global public policy over the past decade in the absence of this persistent emphasis from these civil society quarters. To this extent global civil society forums have contributed to a general shift away from the neo-liberal 'Washington Consensus' that globalised markets would eliminate poverty without public policy interventions.

However, the global civil society forums are not of one mind in their conceptions of poverty and prescriptions to combat it. The World Economic Forum has generally highlighted the prospective benefits of corporate social responsibility and public-private partnerships to alleviate poverty. CONGO and CIVICUS have mainly endorsed and furthered the global discourses of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), aid effectiveness, and a rights-based approach to development. The AOP, the

Peoples' Forum and many participants in the WSF have tended to link the eradication of poverty to the transformation of deeper structures of the modern capitalist global political economy. With these diverse perspectives global civil society forums have fuelled and enriched debates about the causes of and suitable responses to poverty.

As the accounts below further indicate, global civil society forums have on various occasions also contributed to concrete anti-poverty programmes. For example, the World Economic Forum has sponsored multiple global initiatives *inter alia* on health, water and education. The Assembly of the Poor has convened committees to address over 200 cases in Thailand concerning infrastructure projects, trade policies, privatisation initiatives, and so on. The Peoples' Forum has put alternative development into practice with its Peoples' Market and has shaped a range of new laws enacted by the Malian Government.

For all these inputs to the global politics of poverty, however, the cases explored here show rather patchy involvement of poor people themselves in global civil society forums. In most of these circumstances the poor are takers rather than makers of policy. Direct participation by the impoverished is most evident in the Assembly of the Poor and the Peoples' Forum, yet even here much initiative has lain with professionally staffed NGOs. Meanwhile none of the six forums has devised systematic processes to account for their policies and programmes to their would-be beneficiaries among the poor. Hence much remains to be done before global forums for the poor also become global forums of and by the empowered poor.

### THE CONFERENCE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS IN CONSULTATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED NATIONS (CONGO)

**Renate Bloem**

The Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations in Consultative Relationship with the United Nations (CONGO) is the oldest assembly of NGOs operating in a formal connection with a global intergovernmental agency. This history makes CONGO a particularly interesting case when assessing the role of global civil society forums in campaigns against poverty. It is the more interesting for me to reflect on the question as a past President of CONGO during the period 2000-07.



This assessment begins with a brief description of CONGO. It then in turn considers the role of CONGO in speaking for the poor (through participants in its gatherings); impacting the conditions of the poor; and providing space for the poor themselves. Generally, the conclusion of these reflections is that civil society forums can be an initial and forceful step to advance the anti-poverty agenda, particularly since people living in extreme poverty are often untouched by official poverty alleviation programmes. However, bodies like CONGO need to take many more efforts to ensure the effective and meaningful participation of poor people and to build strategies that are based on their realities, experiences and efforts to overcome poverty.

### **A brief introduction**

CONGO was founded in 1948 as a membership association in order to safeguard the rights of NGOs in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Its establishment was based upon Article 71 of the United Nations Charter, which specifies that ECOSOC 'may make suitable arrangements for consultation with NGOs which are concerned with matters within its competence.' During the past 60 years, CONGO has actively promoted and facilitated the participation of civil society organisations in the work of the UN and its agencies. Today, with more than 500 members, CONGO reaches out to NGOs around the world to strengthen their efforts to deal more effectively with the important matters treated in UN fora. CONGO grants full membership to NGOs that hold ECOSOC consultative status and associate membership to NGOs that work in some other relationship with the United Nations.

The CONGO General Assembly is the highest body in the organisation. It establishes broad policies and programmes and elects the President and 20 member organisations to serve on the CONGO governing board. Until the mid-1990s CONGO functioned on the basis of voluntary contributions from members to cover the most elementary administrative work. The organisation first received external funding in 1995, when the Ford Foundation provided support to facilitate women's participation in the Beijing and Cairo + 5 processes.

During my time as president, CONGO operated under the motto 'Outreach, Dialogue and Training'. We organised regional conferences in an effort to implement our vision, to enhance the dialogue between NGOs and the UN, to connect with the wider NGO community,

particularly in the global South, to empower NGOs, and to improve global communications and services for our members. We also organised global meetings at the UN centres in New York, Geneva and Vienna with the aim of influencing UN meetings. Particular emphasis was given to the more development-oriented ministerial deliberations of the High-Level Segment of ECOSOC, activities that were supported by various development agencies, in particular the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

### **CONGO forums and the global poverty agenda**

What have the activities just described meant for poverty and the poor? All CONGO forums of recent years have aimed to raise awareness and build capacity for a rights-based approach to poverty eradication. The Millennium Development Goals, with their benchmarks and time-bound delivery measurements, have been a crosscutting theme in all of the regional and global CONGO gatherings.

It should be stressed at the outset, however, that CONGO forums were never designed to focus only on the poor and poverty eradication. Rather, poverty has been addressed in a multi-layered and multi-sectoral fashion. Thus, working through CONGO, NGOs have linked poverty questions with concerns, for example, about human rights, rural development, decent work, gender equality and climate justice. Arguably this approach has encouraged the UN to take a more systemic perspective to poverty questions.

In May 2000 CONGO and partners met to prepare input into the important Millennium Summit in September that year, where UN member states committed themselves to achievement of the MDGs. The outcome document of this NGO meeting underscored the impact of globalisation on the poor and urged that globalisation should be made to work for the eradication of poverty and hunger across the world. The Millennium Forum decried poverty as the most widespread violation of human rights and urged governments and the United Nations to make poverty eradication a foremost political priority. This it has become today.

During the 1990s a series of UN summits and conferences explored a range of pressing global problems, underlying which were issues of poverty and inequality. In the wake of the UN Millennium Summit, CONGO placed greater emphasis on the implementation of the MDGs, utilising the commitments made by member states at UN fora. Pressure exerted





at the regional level made fulfillment of these pledges more likely.

The first CONGO regional civil society forums took place in Asia in 2002 and 2004. Convened at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok, these meetings brought together more than 500 participants, many of them not accredited to the UN and experiencing an international NGO conference for the first time. We aimed in particular to reach grassroots organisations that are active at the local and national levels, to raise the awareness of Asian NGOs about the MDGs, and to assess their contribution to their implementation. Today we see knowledgeable and assertive civil society organisations from Asia coming to the UN with well-prepared positions. They particularly use the UN Human Rights Council to advocate for the realisation of social, economic and cultural rights related to poverty eradication.

Also in 2004 CONGO convened another regional seminar at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in Santiago, under the theme of 'Partnerships for a new Era: Implementing the Millennium Development Goals'. The 130 participants represented 120 local, national and regional NGOs from 23 countries of the region. The meeting produced a comprehensive plan of action focused on the first seven MDGs.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the gathering demanded that governments involve civil society in MDG reporting mechanisms to a greater degree.

In March 2007 CONGO convened a regional African Civil Society Forum at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in Addis Ababa. This meeting brought together more than 250 participants representing over 150 civil society organisations from 32 countries across the continent. Under the theme of 'Democratizing Governance at Regional and Global Level to Achieve the MDGs', the forum developed a practical framework for African civil society to formulate and advance their advocacy strategies at national, regional and global levels.

Alongside this regional work CONGO has since 2001 organised a Civil Society Forum ahead of the annual High-Level Segment of ECOSOC (HLS). Some of the outcomes and recommendations emanating from these forums have been incorporated into ECOSOC

<sup>1</sup> *The first seven MDGs target concrete obstacles to development (in the areas of poverty and hunger, education, equality, health and the environment). The eighth goal is to develop a global partnership for development (UN Chronicle URL).*

documents. Some have been appropriated by the World Bank, for example, the recommendations made at the 2003 CONGO forum on an 'Integrated Approach to Rural Development'. One of the themes of the 2007 ECOSOC HLS and the preceding 'CONGO Development Forum: Countdown to 2015' was pro-poor growth and poverty eradication. Across these annual CONGO gatherings we find recommendations to empower the poor and create new partnerships, to mobilise resources for poverty eradication, and to increase access to assets in a rights-based approach to development. At the close of the 2007 Forum, Sha Zukang, Under Secretary-General of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs said, 'Civil society brings great energy to ECOSOC. Please continue this involvement' (Zukang 2007).

### CONGO forums: a space for the poor?

In engaging global agendas on poverty, what has been CONGO's relationship to poor people themselves? In particular, has this important gathering place of global civil society promoted participation of the poor in the politics of poverty? It is CONGO's mission to bring the UN agenda to the people, and the voice of the people to the UN, but have 'the people' also included poor people? One can look at this issue as a glass half-full or as a glass half-empty.

Through its convening power, CONGO has brought together a wide and diverse community of civil society organisations to elaborate themes related to poverty for transmission to the UN. A key objective of the regional forums was to bring voices from the global South back to the UN to influence government decision making. The regional outreach also served to provide grassroots NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America with practical and innovative training about advocacy in the UN. Many participants in the global pre-HLS meetings also worked directly with the poor or were otherwise connected with the grassroots. These associations often used the opportunities given through CONGO forums and the following ECOSOC sessions to interact with their own governments, sometimes for the first time. Thus, CONGO forums had an empowering impact, opening up hitherto closed UN and governmental decision-making processes.

But there is more to do. Reflecting on my term as CONGO President and lessons learned, I would emphasize the need to help grassroots NGOs and civil society organisations working with the poor to



contribute more profoundly to policy processes, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Mechanisms should be developed to ensure that the poor are systematically invited to, and their voices heard at, local, national and regional levels, and at all UN tables where policies are formulated and decisions made which concern them. More focused interactions with the secretariat, governments and other stakeholders in the UN system could help to provoke much needed change. In this spirit a number of NGOs have proposed an amendment to the Draft UN Guiding Principles on 'Human Rights and Extreme Poverty: The Rights of the Poor', to the effect that 'the participation of persons living in extreme poverty should also be encouraged in matters concerning the whole society as their participation will enrich humanity as a whole' (UN 2008).

## THE WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

**Richard Samans**

Founded in 1971, the World Economic Forum (the Forum) is a non-profit foundation based in Switzerland with a mission to improve the state of the world through entrepreneurship in the public interest. Although it is a business membership organisation, the Forum is not a business representative organisation. It takes no position on behalf of its members and does not lobby for them as a group. Instead, the Forum is a global multi-stakeholder platform which aims to engage communities of leaders from business, government, academia, NGOs, trade unions, media and other elements of civil society in collaborative dialogue, thought, and sometimes action via partnerships.

Annual meetings of the Forum, held in the Swiss ski resort of Davos, bring together about 2,500 of the world's foremost leaders from the above groups. Slightly more than half of participants come from the business community. The Forum organises six to eight regional multi-stakeholder summits around the world each year. Each year it convenes a 'summer Davos' in China in cooperation with the government, focusing on 'new champion' companies, technologies and business models from around the world. About 300 of its 1000 member companies are engaged in ongoing dialogue and projects that aim to deepen their strategic insight or make a wider, collective contribution to society.

Reflecting its public interest mission and multi-stakeholder organising principle, the Forum's Foundation Board is composed of prominent people

from business, government, academia and civil society; the members of its small managing board have similarly diverse backgrounds; and its staff of over 300 is drawn from more than 50 countries.

With a substantial membership in emerging markets and longstanding, high-profile summits in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the Forum has seen a rising emphasis on poverty reduction in its meetings and other multi-stakeholder community activities. We encourage this in part by recommending that our member firms consider four major ways that they can promote faster progress on poverty alleviation: core business operations, multi-stakeholder partnership, philanthropy and public advocacy.

- **Core Business**

The most fundamental way businesses contribute to poverty alleviation is by creating successful enterprises that expand employment, provide valued products and services, and generate income. This includes but is by no means limited to creating new, base-of-the-pyramid business models to serve poor consumers. For example, companies can make a point of building supply chains that seek to buy from small producers. In addition, corporations have a particularly important role to play in upholding and advancing a number of core ethical and social values, irrespective of whether the national or local jurisdictions in which they operate have sufficient regulatory capacity to monitor and enforce such behaviour. The United Nations Global Compact, which was launched at the Forum's Annual Meeting in 1999, offers guidance for corporations on ten principles related to human rights, labour, environmental and anti-corruption practices. Some multinationals now also require and help their suppliers and distributors to adhere to these and other voluntary standards and business practices.

- **Partnership**

Partnerships involving business and other stakeholders, such as NGOs or governments, are a useful tool for mobilising the particular resources and competencies of business for broader social gain. Examples include the development and distribution of food products fortified with micronutrients, market price information systems that farmers can access by mobile phone, and water services that





are built by companies but designed and ultimately managed by the community. Many new and useful models of cooperation are emerging in this field, for example, 'co-investment models', where a corporation and a local government jointly set up and run health clinics or water treatment facilities.

- **Philanthropy**

Businesses can contribute to poverty alleviation through philanthropy in cash or in kind. Annual corporate grant making has already reached several billion dollars per year and is growing, but currently only a small portion of this total is directed towards developing countries. Corporate foundations have an opportunity to target more funds towards poverty-oriented programmes, and such philanthropy can also help to fill financial gaps – particularly for start-up and capital costs – that often constrain the growth of public-private partnerships.

- **Advocacy**

The Forum emphasizes to its members that they have a significant role to play in collaborative efforts to improve public governance related to poverty reduction and other economic, social and environmental problems. For example, stronger business advocacy efforts could help to generate greater public policy action on poverty at global, regional, national and local levels. Involving business in policy dialogues also enables stakeholders to work together more effectively on implementation of poverty reduction efforts. Finally, with media outreach and consumer education, business can help build public awareness and support for poverty reduction programmes.

The Forum views its role as a catalyst for deeper engagement by its members and non-business constituents in these four areas. Sometimes, it seeks to do so directly by organising specific projects engaged in 'thought leadership', awareness raising or on-the-ground action with respect to poverty reduction.

### **Thought leadership**

Over the years the Forum has organised a number of analytical and consultative processes related to poverty alleviation that combine the perspectives of different stakeholders, regions and intellectual disciplines. One

example is the Financing for Development Initiative, undertaken since 2004 in partnership with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. This initiative has facilitated a sweeping set of recommendations to reform multilateral development banks and bilateral donor agencies, aiming to improve donor performance in stimulating domestic and foreign private investment in poor countries, in line with the Monterrey Consensus that emerged in 2002 from the UN Financing for Development process. The initiative also produced a series of recommendations on how governments could do a better job of engaging companies more deeply in poverty alleviation by matching their core competencies (knowledge, equipment, supply chains, distribution networks and other assets) with public needs in such areas as health, education, hunger, water and sanitation.

Other collaborative thought leadership exercises have included the Global Corporate Citizenship Initiative, which since 2002 has issued a number of reports recommending frameworks for engaging the private sector in multi-stakeholder partnerships and exercises to improve public governance. The Gleneagles Dialogue initiative generated recommendations in 2007-2008 to increase clean energy investment in developing countries. In 2000, the Forum's Digital Divide Initiative recommended ways to scale up investment and capacity building in information technology in developing countries. The Forum also annually issues its Global Competitiveness Report, the premier benchmarking analysis on national economic competitiveness and development.

In 2008, the Forum launched a new initiative to enable greater intellectual collaboration across stakeholders, regions and disciplines via Web 2.0 information technology. In this programme, a wide range of Global Agenda Councils deliberate via a new interactive electronic platform, the World Economic Leaders Community, which has been assembled through a partnership of leading Forum members in information technology, telecommunications and media industries. Global Agenda Councils are being created on food security, climate change, water scarcity, humanitarian relief, and infectious and chronic disease for the purpose of enhancing international, multi-stakeholder cooperation and thought leadership. The academic, governmental, business and NGO participants in these Councils determine their own agendas of



collaboration, with the Forum providing technological and administrative support.

### **Awareness raising**

Leaders of various backgrounds have used their engagement in Forum summits to press for greater action on poverty alleviation. For example, at the 2008 Annual Meeting in Davos, heads of business, governmental, intergovernmental, non-governmental and religious organisations issued a joint Call to Action on the Millennium Development Goals. The document set a series of milestones for 2010, including: to lift 75 million more people out of extreme poverty in Africa; to place 25 million more children in school; to have skilled health personnel attend 35 million more births; and to improve access to water for 70 million more people.

The 2008 meeting also announced a series of international meetings throughout the year to identify what further needs to be done to meet the MDGs. This included a specific process to facilitate increased company investments in expanded economic growth and employment opportunities in poor countries. Nearly 80 such investments were announced at a subsequent meeting in London in May.

In recent years, incoming Presidents of the Group of 8 – including former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda – have urged greater action on poverty reduction in their speeches at the Davos meeting to outline their respective governments' priorities for the G8 agenda. Business leaders such as William Gates Jr. have encouraged their colleagues to engage more deeply on poverty issues by setting a positive example. For example, Gates used the Davos meeting to announce important initiatives such as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization.

Occasionally, the Forum has tapped into its community to shine a spotlight on inadequacies in the international community's response to endemic poverty. For example, between 2003 and 2006, the Global Governance Initiative, a diverse group of over 40 experts drawn principally from academia and civil society, issued report cards measuring the level of effort being expended toward the achievement of the MDGs. These annual analyses warned that governments, business and civil society were together exerting only one third of the effort necessary for the world to achieve the goals by 2015.

### **Action**

Although the Forum has undertaken important work in thinking about and advocating for poverty reduction, it has been most active in this field through its various action-oriented multi-stakeholder partnerships. These initiatives are designed to catalyse joint action by groups of companies in cooperation with governments, NGOs or other actors. Although the Forum does not normally see itself as a manager of development or humanitarian operations, it occasionally does take an active role in country-level activities in order to test and refine new frameworks of multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The Forum has spearheaded a number of action programmes that address MDG-related topics. For example, the Global Health Initiative works with over 170 companies and partner organisations to increase business efforts to tackle HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. The Water Initiative has disseminated good corporate practice and promoted market-based instruments for water and watershed management. The Global Education Initiative has catalysed three partnerships in Jordan, Egypt and India, as well as two global enabling initiatives aimed at stimulating support for the national Education for All plans of developing countries. In the energy sector a group of Forum member companies have formed an Energy Poverty Action Task Force to work with the African Development Bank and governments to address the links between poverty and lack of energy services. The Forum's Business Alliance to Combat Hunger is coordinating corporate engagement by multinationals and local firms in an effort to pioneer a multi-stakeholder model of cooperation to increase agricultural production, improve nutrition, and expand rural markets to reduce chronic hunger in western Kenya. On gender aspects of poverty in 2005 the Forum launched an annual analysis, 'Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Gender Gap.' Other Forum actions relevant for poverty reduction include the Partnering Against Corruption Initiative and the Humanitarian Relief Initiative.

### **Conclusion**

Across each of these modes of the Forum's engagement in poverty reduction – thought leadership, awareness raising, and concrete action – a positive dynamic is emerging that emphasizes the important contributions that the private sector can make to development. The private sector can help introduce new technologies, provide essential goods and services,



manage large-scale operations efficiently, and apply other core competencies. Applied in partnership with governments, NGOs and communities, these competencies can improve the reach and effectiveness of poverty reduction efforts.

At present the international community is falling far short of the progress that would be necessary to achieve the MDGs by 2015. The scale and complexity of this challenge implies that relevant resources need to be mobilised to a much greater extent wherever they exist within the international system, including the private sector. The World Economic Forum provides a conducive platform for catalysing some of the public discussion, collaborative innovation and collective action necessary to realize this shared aspiration.

## CIVICUS

**Kumi Naidoo**

### **CIVICUS: a global civil society forum**

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation was created in 1993 and is now based in Johannesburg, South Africa (see CIVICUS URL). The CIVICUS mission, to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world, underpins the three major objectives of the association, namely, to:

- *Promote Civic Existence*, by defending people's fundamental rights to organise and act collectively towards the public good
- *Promote Civic Expression*, by strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations to amplify the voices of ordinary people, and,
- *Promote Civic Engagement*, by fostering interaction between citizens, their associations and other institutions to ensure that public institutions are accountable to people.

CIVICUS occupies a unique place in global civil society. Its broad membership spans a variety of civil society organisations, groups, movements and individuals from 110 countries. It combines research and analysis with campaigning and advocacy. And it has achieved a much greater status and access than might be expected of a relatively small, modestly resourced organisation.

For its finances CIVICUS has relied predominantly on donors. Originally it was funded almost entirely by grants from private foundations in the USA. Gradually the funding sources have diversified to include

government agencies (for example, SIDA, NORAD, CIDA) and international development agencies, such as Oxfam International. CIVICUS also earns a small percentage of its income through consultancies, honorariums, donations and membership fees. Several programmes benefit from volunteer support and/or staff secondments from partners.

CIVICUS' work on poverty has focused on two complementary directions. First, it has provided the Secretariat for the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP URL). The issues of poverty and inequality unite most CIVICUS members and partners. Second, CIVICUS has a Participatory Governance Programme. Here it extends the 'engagement' aspect of its mission beyond 'holding public institutions accountable to people' to supporting civil society's increasingly vital role in confronting the challenges to humanity that governments and markets are failing to address.

### **Putting poverty on the agenda**

For CIVICUS, based on our membership and our experience with GCAP, poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, involving much more than income levels. In an effort to address a human development approach, we often use the Social Watch indexes (notably the Basic Capabilities and Gender Equity Indexes) and understand poverty as the absence of certain capabilities. We also understand poverty in terms of various types of social exclusion. But more essentially, we see poverty as being defined by social and political relations and being produced through social systems.

Civil society activists can take some comfort from the fact that poverty now stands prominently on the agenda of global politics. This outcome has resulted from various factors, amongst which CIVICUS has played a modest role. For one thing, since 1998, our weekly electronic newsletter, e-CIVICUS, has been highlighting questions of poverty and inequality. Readers of e-CIVICUS are mainly civil society activists, but the bulletin also reaches many decision makers in intergovernmental organisations and national governments.

An important push on poverty from CIVICUS has been our regular participation, since 2000, in the World Economic Forum. For me personally this is sometimes unfortunate, as my heart is usually not in Davos, but with the concurrent World Social Forum. For example, in 2007 I left the lively workshops of the WSF in





Nairobi to contribute to a panel at the World Economic Forum with then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, musician Bono, and South African President Thabo Mbeki. Panels at Davos are well attended and receive significant media coverage. Most civil society speakers at Davos have a tough time getting their message across to participants from government and the private sector; nevertheless over the years CIVICUS and other civil society colleagues have pushed for poverty and inequality to be high on the agenda.

Another CIVICUS influence on global poverty debates is to help coordinate among civil society organisations. Especially important in this regard is CIVICUS' support to GCAP. Since September 2004 CIVICUS has acted as Global Secretariat for this international campaign to meet the minimalist MDGs. For CIVICUS the MDGs are a convening point for civil society, a unifying structure to galvanise joint mobilisation and activism among social movements, trade unions, faith-based organisations and a broad spectrum of NGOs. By working together to advance these goals, civil society organisations obtain greater space to influence governance, policy and the delivery of services to the poor. While GCAP is not the only global civil society response to poverty and inequality, it is unique in form and focus. With consistent and concerted efforts, GCAP has successfully brought these issues into the mainstream agenda of global and national development debates. At the heart of this success is a three-pronged strategy of mobilising poor people to raise their voices using democratic spaces and policy forums; linking local with global; and influencing global, regional and national level policy debates. Mobilisation has played a strategic role in organising the political participation of marginalised people and created widespread support to defend and promote their entitlements and rights. In 2007, on 17 October, the UN International Day for Poverty Eradication, a historic 43.7 million women, men and children joined the Global Call, nearly twice as many people as in 2006 (23.4 million).

Lastly, CIVICUS has put questions of poverty on the global agenda through its work on aid effectiveness. In 2008 CIVICUS supported civil society engagement (including through a Parallel Forum) in the OECD High Level Forum III on aid effectiveness, held in Accra, Ghana (see Better Aid URL). As a result, the Accra Agenda for Action links an unprecedented alliance of development partners, including developing, donor and emerging country governments, multilateral

institutions, and civil society organisations. The Accra process has brought greater recognition of the role and voice of civil society in development aid policy compared to three years ago. Paragraph 20 of the Accra Agreement explicitly states that 'we will work with CSOs to provide an enabling environment that maximises their contributions to development' (see Third High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness URL).

Poverty campaigning requires energy, time and patience, but it works. For example, GCAP and Christian Aid held a rally in London on 14 September 2007 attended by 3,000 people, calling on the UK government to withdraw its funding from the IMF and the World Bank until those institutions stopped imposing damaging economic policy conditions on poor countries. The next day the then Overseas Development Minister, Hilary Benn, stated that the UK government would withhold £50 million of its contribution to the World Bank in protest against the organisation's continued use of economic conditions on loans to poor countries.

### **Linking poverty to wider global challenges**

In addition to raising poverty on the agenda of global affairs, CIVICUS has, together with its partners, emphasized the links between poverty and other global challenges, thereby promoting a more systemic approach to poverty questions. Three important aspects in this regard are the relations between poverty and climate change, the links between poverty and labour conditions, and the interconnections of poverty and human rights.

CIVICUS is active in highlighting links between poverty and climate change. At the last Live Earth concerts, on 7 July 2007, we stressed that the warming of our planet posed a new threat in the fight to eradicate poverty. The cruel truth is that those who will suffer most from climate change are those who have done the least to cause it and, without environmental sustainability, many of the poor will become still poorer. In fact, as the biggest polluters the rich must make the biggest efforts to cut emissions and at the same time provide sufficient financing for poor countries to adapt to climate change. To get world leaders to engage progressively on these matters, CIVICUS has urged people not to accept anything less than a comprehensive climate change treaty. To push this case, CIVICUS has engaged with various environmental organisations including Earth Charter International, WWF, Greenpeace, and Friends





of the Earth International.

With regard to links between poverty and labour conditions CIVICUS has supported the Call to Action for Decent Work, a citizens' petition launched under the leadership of the global campaign for Decent Work, Decent Life (ULR). This initiative rests on a basic premise that each person of working age has the right to freely chosen employment, to a wage that enables them to provide for themselves and their family, to social protection allowing them to cope with life's circumstances such as unemployment, ill health and the demands of child-rearing, and to the rights afforded by the eight Core Labour Standards championed through the International Labour Organization.

As for connections between poverty and human rights, CIVICUS has partnered with the 2008 campaign by The Elders for 'Every Human Has Rights' (URL). We are contributing to the campaign by highlighting poverty as a violation of human rights. This is also the mission of a key CIVICUS partner, ATD Fourth World (URL).

### Empowering the poor

Civil society organisations not only have a responsibility to put poverty on the agenda and to emphasize the interconnections between poverty and other global challenges, but also in the process to expand political space for the poor themselves. In this vein, CIVICUS served on the Board of Advisors of the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, one of Kofi Annan's last initiatives before he stepped down as UN Secretary-General. This global initiative sought to 'make legal protection and economic opportunity not the privilege of few, but the right of all' (see Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor URL). The Commission held various consultative workshops at the CIVICUS World Assembly in 2006 as it reached out to build a broad-based platform of advocacy and support.

The 2006-2008 CIVICUS World Assemblies, held in Glasgow in partnership with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, have attempted to give voice and space to the unheard under the theme of 'Acting Together for a Just World'. The focus of the 2008 Assembly on 'People, Participation and Power' illustrated how the poor can be involved and make change happen. Underpinned by two background papers that explored citizen engagement and justice (Just Associates 2006; see CIVICUS URL), the Assembly of 1,000 participants held lively debates on how people can be involved in governance.

### Conclusion

When one considers the CIVICUS experience, it becomes clear that strengthening civil society must be a key part of the overall struggle to end global poverty. Strong civil society organisations are needed to lobby for appropriate policies, to monitor the implementation of such policies, and to complement states on delivery capacity. Otherwise poverty will not be addressed with the impact that current global knowledge and affluence would permit.

Civil society organisations must also carefully examine their own methodology of work. Unless we engage with the poor as full citizens, who ultimately should have the power and ability to speak for themselves and to hold their governments to account, we are failing to lay down a sustainable path out of poverty. For this reason it is critically important for CIVICUS to intensify its efforts to protect the space for civil society and in particular space for the poor themselves to convene, coordinate and shape the production of knowledge pertaining to the challenges that hinder the quest for a just world.

### THE ASSEMBLY OF THE POOR\*

**Chantana Banpasirichote Wungaeo**

Four of the six contributions to this chapter examine civil society forums that are global in the reach of their organisation and membership. In contrast, this contribution looks at a gathering place of civil society that – while engaging global issues, confronting global forces and enjoying global support – is very much local and national in its participation. Does such a more 'rooted' approach affect the kinds of issues that a civil society forum addresses, and how they are addressed? Does approaching globalisation through local and national solidarity in civil society create more space for poor people themselves to act?

### The political innovation of the poor

In the mid-1990s Thailand appeared to enjoy an economic boom, with GDP growth running to two digits for the first time in the country's history. It was widely believed that poverty was vanishing. The appearance of the Assembly of the Poor in 1995 shattered the myth of an economic miracle in Thailand. The Assembly of

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the Poor (AOP) describes itself as:

*a network of the people affected by mainstream development approaches that have created wars over natural resource...exploitative international trade agreements, and [development] projects threatening people's livelihood and destroying diversity of their cultures. The poor people in this network share their experiences in resolving their immediate livelihood problems and aiming toward policy change, legislation and social structure reform for social justice, sustainable resources and environments. (1997:23)*

The AOP developed out of several collective actions during the early 1990s against government policies and projects. The Assembly of Northeastern Peasants and the Assembly of Dam-Affected People both asserted the role of poor people in policy advocacy and opened up a people's agenda for alternative development. The first movement reacted against mass evictions of people from community forests in the name of conservation. The second movement opposed dam construction on the Mun River for urban electricity. Both mobilisations expressed local people's frustration and discontent over the state's domination of development agendas.

Participants in these movements learned that, by operating separately, popular actions would not be able to address the fundamental issues underlying their immediate concerns. Thus, after a number of meetings and facilitations by NGOs, the Assembly of the Poor was set up as an umbrella structure (Pintobtaeng 1988; Karn-ornsri 2002). It was launched in 1995 at Ban Hua Haew, the site of Pak Mun Dam. By 1998 the AOP covered people from seven major groups, namely, people affected by dam projects, people affected by government projects, landless people and people displaced from forests, slum dwellers, workers with occupational and environmental diseases, small fisherfolk, and farmers in alternative agriculture.

With constant public protests during its initial years, the AOP became widely known and turned vulnerable individuals into a meaningful political entity without resorting to violence. On several occasions the movement camped in front of Government House in Bangkok. The longest of these protests lasted 99 days, from 25 January to 2 May 1997, and mobilised 25,000 supporters (Prasartset 2004; Pintobtaeng 1998). The AOP has also organised several protests in the provinces and a long march to Pak Mun Dam.

The people of the network recognised that their only power lay in their feet. Protest to open up negotiation therefore became the prime tactic of the movement. 'Politics on the street', as Prapas Pintobtaeng calls it (1998), saw the people take back political agendas from their electoral representatives and break the myth of the passive poor.

The AOP makes its demands based on pressing problems, such as the impacts of dam construction, land acquisition, occupational diseases, and so on, which are raised by different constituencies or networks. In its 12-year existence, the number of cases AOP has dealt with has risen to 205, which together affect approximately 180,500 people from over 35 provinces across Thailand (Pintobtaeng 1998). Each problem has its own constituency. Each constituency sends one representative to sit in the *Poh Krua Yai* (literally, Master Chef), the main AOP consultative body where collective decisions are taken. The *Poh Krua Yai* is assisted by several working groups called the *Mae Krua Yai* (literally, Second Chef) that prepare details of each case (Karn-ornsri 2002).

The AOP has so far lived and struggled through six governments of Thailand. In a development that is unprecedented in Thai political history, the movement has succeeded in joining numerous official committees to investigate pending problem cases and to settle demands. In 1997 alone, under the Chawalit Government, 121 cases were addressed in 38 rounds of negotiations, 11 joint working committees, and nine cabinet resolutions (Karn-ornsri 2002).

The AOP involves more than grassroots people. NGOs have played a crucial role from the beginning. It was NGOs that brought small people's organisations together to form the Assembly. NGOs have supported the AOP as Advisors (*pi lieng*),<sup>2</sup> the Secretariat, and the Alliance of the Poor (*pantamit*) (Ondam and Verawongs 1999). This close collaboration of grassroots people and NGOs is considered another important innovation of the AOP.

Although the AOP is a new social movement in which the poor express their collective identity, it is also a classic case of resource mobilisation. In part, the resources for the AOP have come from the poor

<sup>2</sup> Key NGOs acting as AOP advisors include Friends of the People, Human Settlement Foundation, Project for Ecological Recovery, Thai Network on Community Rights and Biodiversity (BioThai), NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (NGOCOD), Southeast Asian Rivers Network (Searin), and Mae Mun Mun Yuen Village.





themselves. To sustain long protests in Bangkok, people have stocked rice and other food. Members have also contributed modest dues to the AOP Fund. While camping in Bangkok, many AOP participants ran small shops and engaged in temporary hired labour (Pintobtaeng 1998).

Other resources for the AOP have come from outside the movement. For example, well wishers in the urban middle classes have given donations, as much as nearly two million Baht for an event at the height of the AOP. The NGO-run Secretariat raised funds from foreign agencies for capacity building projects (Banpasirichote and Sirisoonpornpaiboon 1998). NGOs in the advisory group and the Alliance of the Poor also received funding support from outside Thailand, since government and private contributions to social activism are not well established in Thai political culture.

The AOP has had important impacts. Projects for new dams were postponed and stopped, and some compensations were exacted for the consequences of those dams already constructed. New bills were drafted for the Community Forest and for Industrial and Occupational Safety. The cabinet approved a sizeable budget of about 600 million Baht for realising alternative agriculture, not to mention the beginning of the reform of development impact assessment (Chiengsen 2007). People's movements also obtained important clauses in the 1997 Constitution related to community rights, consumer and environmental matters, and the establishment of a national human right commission.

Since the introduction of populist policies by the Thaksin Government in 2001, the participatory democracy of the AOP has gone into retreat. New official policies of improved access to credit and social services offered people a shortcut to wellbeing. Nevertheless, a decade of collective actions by the AOP has created many activist associations, and a number of members of the AOP network, such as the urban poor and the community rights groups, have managed to continue their struggles outside the umbrella of the AOP (pers comm. Chairat 2008).

### Redefining poverty

The AOP has reacted against the mainstream development tradition that takes GNP as the prime indicator of wellbeing. According to official figures, the incidence of poverty in Thailand has declined from 47 per cent in 1988 to 6 per cent in 2006 (Office of the National Economic and Social Board URL). Yet through

the AOP people have demonstrated the vulnerabilities and disadvantages connected with government development policies and projects. The Secretariat reiterated the complexity of poverty in the seven-year self-assessment of the AOP in 2002, noting that:

*Poverty today is caused by [social and economic] structural problems and certain development policies...The cash crop production promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives has rapidly destroyed the foundation of community self-reliance....The fertility of soil, water, forests and genetic resources have been extracted by the state for the sake of urban growth and the stability of the capital, industries and transnational companies... the people's production, economy, culture, and community resource management systems have collapsed...People have been displaced, migrating for survival, becoming workers in big cities with low quality of life. These all have constituted poverty. Poor people are therefore deprived of their rights, opportunity, income and power. (Karn-ornsi 2002)*

For example, along the Mun River in Ubonrachatani Province people lived a comfortable life until the Pak Mun Dam was constructed. Paradoxically, people became impoverished in the process of development. Given this analysis, opponents of the AOP have characterised it as an 'anti-development' movement.

The AOP has expanded not only the connotations of impoverishment, but also the circle of people who could be labelled as 'poor'. The AOP has constituted a new social class called 'the poor' encompassing rural peasants, workers, urban poor, and hill tribes. At the same time the AOP is a cross-class movement with strategic allies in the middle classes (Prasartset 2004). Thus the concerns of poor people are shared and fought for by the economically non-poor. Tantiwithyapitak notes that part of the middle classes expect the poor to generate proposals for an alternative society (Tantiwithyapitak 1998). Environmental impacts of 'development' appear to have captured the sentiment of some in the middle classes.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *I have argued that there is a limit to the middle classes' participation in the poor people's movement. The dividing issues are on social justice, while environmental concerns are similar. The cross-class movement cannot be interpreted entirely as classes cohering. It is best to view the middle classes in AOP as a progressive strategic-group component.*





Finally, the AOP has redefined poverty by ascribing it to international as well as national causes. For instance, the AOP campaign against large dams addressed the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund of Japan. The people's analysis has furthermore identified certain practices of transnational corporations in monopolising plant seeds and animal breeds, as well as unsafely experimenting with genetically modified organisms. The AOP has also denounced undemocratic and non-transparent processes in the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Karn-ornsri 2002).

Alert to these international dimensions of poverty, the AOP deliberately timed its launch in December 1995 to coincide with the summit in Thailand of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The AOP reiterated its position again at another international event, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in March 1996. The movement judged that the Thai government would be more compelled to listen when there was an international presence.

### **Solidarity of the poor: grassroots and international networking**

In Thailand as elsewhere, civil society knows no boundary. The poor seek to empower themselves by reaching out to the wider world and revealing truths about social injustice. The AOP has related to international NGOs and poor people's networks in two main ways: to build solidarity and legitimacy, and to frame the global agenda.

In fact, the AOP was conceived at an international gathering, namely, a seminar facilitated by the Asian Cultural Forum on Development. Participants from 10 countries in Asia joined Thai colleagues in the adoption of the Pak Mun Declaration and the launch of the AOP (Butwatt 2001). The idea of poor people connecting across borders was inspired by the international peasant movement *Vía Campesina* which was then active, especially in Latin America. Most grassroots movements and NGOs in Thailand have moreover sought to increase their legitimacy by appealing to universal values like democracy, human rights, and environmental protection. The AOP has also joined larger alliances of the poor in international protests in Chiang Mai against the Free Trade Agreement with the USA and in Hong Kong against the WTO (pers comm. Trikaeo 2008).

The AOP has had a continuing interactive relationship with regional and international NGOs and movements. Examples include *Vía Campesina*, International Rivers, and Focus on the Global South. These international NGOs have been at the forefront of raising critical issues about the effects on common people of, for example, the existing international trade regime, the food crisis, large dams, and privatisation policies. Following pressure from International Rivers and its Southeast Asian River Network, international funding agencies seriously reassessed the issue of large dams, particularly through the World Commission on Dams (WCD URL). The WCD took Pak Mun Dam as one of its case studies and made recommendations that have changed international perceptions of how large dams should and should not be constructed. With *Vía Campesina*, meanwhile, the AOP has contributed by sharing analysis of local situations in Thailand with the international alliances.

In sum, the AOP is a locally grounded forum of the poor with strong regional and global links. Poverty must be solved on the ground, but at the same time the poor people's movement must transcend local and national politics. International NGOs can exert substantial influence in a national polity that cannot realise poverty alleviation on its own. Equally, however, poverty cannot be solved if local people remain passive. With national and international networking, the AOP has achieved solidarity and empowerment for the poor in Thailand.

## **THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM**

**Virginia Vargas**

### **Introduction**

Started in 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) is by its Charter of Principles meant to be a space for democracy, new ideas and networking between movements from across the globe. The initiative began out of a collaboration of organisations and movements in Brazil, together with associations in Europe such as ATTAC. Overall facilitation of the WSF process now lies with an International Council of delegates from around 150 NGOs and social movements. Organisation of each edition of the WSF occurs through a Local Committee drawn from the country or region where the event is held.

The WSF has a non-denominational, non-governmental, non-party and non-violent character. As stated in the Charter of Principles, it is an arena where different political approaches are accorded equal





respect. Across this diversity, however, participants in the WSF generally share a rejection of the currently prevailing neo-liberal, productivist, techno-scientific capitalist model of development. Instead, they pursue the construction of alternative paradigms based on the recognition of environmental, social, economic, political, sexual and cultural rights. The establishment of a planetary citizenship is generally promoted as a key means to eliminate all forms of social discrimination and inequality created by capitalist globalisation.

The World Social Forums held so far have convened in different regions. The first three WSFs (2001-2003) met in Porto Alegre, capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. The fourth Forum took place in Mumbai, India in 2004. The WSF returned to Porto Alegre for its fifth session in 2005. The next year a so-called 'polycentric' approach was adopted, with venues in Bamako (for Africa), Caracas (for the Americas) and Karachi (for Asia). The seventh edition was held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007. For 2008 it was decided to move to biennial rather than annual meetings of the WSF. Instead of convening in a single place, the WSF promoted a Global Day of Action and Mobilisation on 26 January 2008, with hundreds of local events around the world. In 2009 the WSF returned to Brazil, but this time to the northern city of Belém in the state of Pará, where pan-Amazonian contents and participation from all countries of the Amazon basin were emphasized.

Along with these annual global meetings the WSF has also developed a series of regional and thematic forums. Some regions such as Europe and Latin America have developed this aspect more than others. The commission in charge of the Forum's enlargement has put considerable effort into expanding to other regions, in particular creating three working groups to focus respectively on Asia, the Middle East and Russia. Still other social forums have convened on a national and local basis.

As regards financial matters, participants in the WSF generally fund their involvement with the support of cooperation agencies. To run the forums the International Council and Local Committees have obtained financing from public and private development agencies as well as municipal and provincial authorities. On no occasion have these funds had political conditionalities attached.

### **WSF perspectives on poverty**

For the WSF the struggle against poverty occurs in the context of the Forum's broader strivings to build another world beyond neo-liberal capitalist globalisation. The meetings have not adopted a single definition of poverty. Each session of the WSF has pursued its own objectives and understandings of the issue. However, it is possible to trace some general themes, including universal access to material and natural goods, human dignity, the elimination of all forms of discrimination, and promotion of an economic system that benefits all peoples.

Struggles against poverty and exclusion were a headline theme in the 2001 and 2002 sessions of the WSF at Porto Alegre. In the 2003 WSF questions of poverty were subsumed under other themes. At Mumbai in 2004 concerns about poverty were couched in discussions of discrimination, dignity and rights. The polycentric forums of 2006, particularly those in Bamako and Karachi, again made struggles against poverty an explicit theme. At Nairobi, poverty issues were addressed in the context of strivings for economic, social, human, cultural and environmental rights.

Not only has the place of poverty on the WSF agenda shifted from one meeting to the next, but disputes also occur among participants concerning the definition of poverty. Although the WSF has provided fertile ground for the construction of broad political alliances, it has at the same time been a space of power struggles between those pursuing different emancipatory projects. With regard to poverty, some participants have argued for a more narrow economic understanding, while others have advocated a multidimensional understanding. Some groups have seen poverty as a challenge within the existing social and economic order, while others have insisted that the struggle against poverty cannot be separated from a larger struggle for social change. There are also significant disputes among those who take a more structural and transformational approach.

For example, some discourses at the WSF overlook the deeply androcentric (i.e. human-focused) and patriarchal roots of poverty within capitalism. After all, tensions between production and reproduction systems in capitalism constitute one of the most important forces in the perpetuation of poverty, especially for women. Also often ignored are the links between poverty and rape, deaths in illegal abortion clinics, and repression of sexualities. Such considerations allow one to build a broader and more effective framework to counter poverty and advance justice and solidarity.





### **WSF impacts on the politics of poverty**

The WSF involves not only the participants and processes of each meeting, but also the struggles of everyday life that are brought to this space and to which the participants return afterwards. The movements and organisations that attend the WSF are generally very militant in their home countries and in global arenas. They bring with them different experiences of dealing with poverty, exclusion, gender, ethnic and sexual repression. Out of this diversity they draw on the WSF process to forge global networks and campaigns that have significantly shaped the politics of poverty, particularly by opposing official policy lines.

One important example in this regard is the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP), which gained considerable momentum at the WSF in 2005. GCAP has become an important global mobilisation against poverty at a number of official meetings such as the World Summit of 2005 and the annual gatherings of the G8. Mobilisations against unfair economic accords and trade agreements have also grown through WSF gatherings. The WSF has strengthened mechanisms of citizen control over policies on poverty, such as Social Watch and the Eurolat Observatory. Furthermore, the WSF has facilitated intense networking in several feminist groups with a clear anti-poverty/exclusion agenda, such as Feminist Dialogues and the World March of Women.

Three important policy impacts of these WSF-inspired activities can be discerned. First, the WSF and its resistance to neo-liberalism has drawn some attention away from the World Economic Forum. The WSF was deliberately set up as a counterpoint to this annual gathering at Davos. Some leaders of international institutions – including the former President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn – have conceded that the WSF provides a good platform for approaching poverty and social exclusion. In some cases the World Economic Forum and other capitalist institutions have appropriated poverty issues brought forward by the WSF, albeit using them for their own benefit and often draining them of radical content.

Second, movements associated with the WSF have created, particularly in Latin America, a strong backlash against North American capitalism and free trade agreements. The failure of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) attests to this. Domination strategies in North America remain, but they are now concerned with other matters, such as bio-energy production.

Third, the WSF has provided a space for social movements and networks to position themselves critically in relation to certain initiatives such as the 'Decent Work' strategy of the International Labour Organization and the poverty eradication framework prioritised by the UN. Some of the assembled social movements have developed alternatives to the MDGs, given that these targets are often lower than the goals established in other summits and conferences. When these movements position themselves critically against inter-state interests, they are guided by principles of human rights, human diversity and strong resistance to military and fundamentalist practices.

These accomplishments – challenging discourses of the World Economic Forum, opposing neo-liberal trade agreements in the Americas, and pushing the UN in more ambitious directions – are providing new and more radical content for global debates on poverty. The WSF has cracked the façade of neo-liberal hegemony, although it has yet substantially to transform the prevailing world order. However, given that the WSF has existed for only eight years, this process of change is just starting. The power of the WSF lies in its ability to encompass a vast array of different movements and link them in alliances to fight poverty.

### **The poor at the WSF**

What of the role of poor people themselves in the WSF? Many of the movements that engage in the WSF represent the poor. They are mostly global networks with a strong local presence that informs their proposals. Examples include movements of indigenous women, peasants, the homeless and waterless, and movements embracing sexual diversity. WSF participants are mostly people who join together to challenge their situation of exclusion, to express their lack of rights, and to develop various strategies to achieve them.

However, the most vulnerable populations remain under-represented at the WSF and many voices remain unheard inasmuch as their lack of resources precludes attendance. Each edition of the WSF has attempted, to varying degrees, to extend the Forum's spaces to those less powerful and with fewer resources to participate. The Mumbai Forum in 2004 has had the most significant impact in this regard, with the presence of thousands of Dalits and other movements of the poor. The local committee of the Mumbai edition kept fees low for local people and encouraged the active





collaboration of Dalit and shantytown movements. Less successful was the Nairobi Forum in 2007, when a lack of flexibility on the part of the organising committee, along with the outsourcing of the Forum's services, provoked confrontation between the Forum's spaces and local poor communities attempting to participate. This experience influenced the organising committee for the Amazonian Forum in Belém in 2009, which was committed to increasing the participation of Afro-American and indigenous movements. The outcomes of Belém will show how much progress the WSF has been able to make in becoming a space for the poor themselves.

## THE PEOPLES' FORUM IN MALI

Barry Aminata Touré

### Introduction

Like the Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, the Peoples' Forum (le Forum des Peuples) in Mali is a nationally organised gathering that focuses on local livelihoods. At the same time the Peoples' Forum analyses its problems in a global context and also has important regional and global links. The question arises whether this form of mobilisation is effective in countering poverty and giving voice to the poor. From my position of being one of the principal mobilisers of the seven annual editions of the Peoples' Forum since its launch in 2002, I would say yes.

### The Peoples' Forum initiative

The Peoples' Forum is a space of popular education and political analysis that aims to promote citizen expression, the construction of alternatives to socio-economic injustice, and disengagement from policies that have victimised Africa. The Forum in Mali is an opportunity to sensitise African populations to international political and economic mechanisms that constrain the national development policies of countries of the South. The Peoples' Forum permits local actors to reposition themselves in the national and international context. The initiative moreover consolidates the contribution of African peoples to reflections and debates on development. The ambition is to create a large citizen movement that will push African governments to promote the vital interests of their populations in international venues.

The Peoples' Forum meets around the middle of each year as a counterpoint to the summit of the G8.

This gathering of largely poor African people in Mali proclaims a 'people's consensus' in contrast to the great power consensus of the G8.

The first two editions of the Peoples' Forum, in 2002 and 2003, convened in Siby, a village 50 kilometres west of the Malian capital, Bamako. Subsequent meetings have been held in other outlying towns of Mali: Kita (2004), Fana (2005), Gao (2006), Sikasso (2007) and Koulikoro (2008). Attendance has ranged from 400 persons on the first occasion to 1,500 participants at Fana. The average attendance of the annual meetings has been around 800 people.

The Peoples' Forum has been an initiative of the African Coalition for Debt and Development Alternatives (*la Coalition des Alternatives Africaine Dette et Développement*, CAD-Mali). Created in 1998, CAD-Mali groups more than 70 civil society organisations in the country, including community associations, labour unions and NGOs. It is a popular movement for the defence of people's rights in Mali, Africa and the world. The movement resists neo-liberal policies and perverse effects of the market economy and proposes alternatives for the construction of a world of justice and solidarity. In this way the Peoples' Forum in Mali is close in spirit with the World Social Forum.

Indeed, the Peoples' Forum in Mali can be seen as part of a wider global movement. Similar social forums have been held in other West African countries, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Senegal and Togo. The struggles of the Peoples' Forum and CAD-Mali have reinforced sub-regional initiatives such as the *Réseau Ouest Africain pour le Développement* (ROAD, West African Network for Development) and the *Réseau Ouest Africain de Plaidoyer sur les Droits Humains* (ROAPDH, West African Network for the Promotion of Human Rights). Beyond that there are continental initiatives such as the African Social Forum and the Francophone Group on the Cotonou Agreement, as well as global groupings such as Jubilee South and the *Comité International pour l'Annulation de la Dette du Tiers Monde* (CADTM, Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt). And then there is the World Social Forum, which convened one of its 'polycentric' meetings of early 2006 in Bamako, attracting some 20,000 participants.

The duplication of the social forum model in other countries, and networking activities among these similar initiatives, gives strength to the Peoples' Forum in Mali. A website attracts increased participation in the Forum





and disseminates its proceedings across the world (Peoples' Forum URL). Greater numbers of people from new countries have joined the Peoples' Forum over the years. In addition, the presence of multiple national and international press organs has given the Peoples' Forum media attention on a worldwide scale.

### Our perspective on poverty and the poor

Poverty is a leading issue at the Peoples' Forum. The movement creates spaces both within and outside its meetings for populations to discuss and to understand the causes and consequences of poverty, as well as to envision ways to reduce it. In terms of manifestations of poverty, discussions at the Forum address issues such as peasant agriculture, peasant debt, privatisation of state companies, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), the pillage of natural resources, food sovereignty, land rights, and access to basic social services. All of this gives a spectre of growing poverty in countries of the global South.

As regards the causes of poverty the Forum treats issues including: conflict and war; debt and its impacts on human rights; trade policy and its destabilisation of the world market; selective and repressive immigration policies; and false promises of increased official development assistance. Particular emphasis is given to the adverse consequences of external debt. It is important to stress that every sum of money spent on repayment of debt is cut from budgets intended for the struggle against poverty, illiteracy, AIDS, and other diseases that would otherwise be easily curable.

With respect to policy responses to poverty the Peoples' Forum sets itself against programmes of structural adjustment. The triumph of globalised finance capital that marks our epoch has transformed countries of the South into lands destined for exploitation. The ideology of neo-liberalism lays the ground for economic, social and political domination. In this perspective the different editions of the Peoples' Forum have highlighted the role of policies of the World Bank, the IMF, the European Union and the USA. Structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the IMF have contributed to drive the economies of multiple African countries into a deep crisis. The policies have caused poverty and social inequality. For this reason civil society in Mali has denounced the national government and its partners.

As a concrete alternative to neo-liberal structural adjustment, the Peoples' Forum has promoted a

Peoples' Market as one of its important activities. Thus alongside its debates the Forum has hosted a market where local producers offer their goods. The Peoples' Market shows that local people can produce and consume their own materials and that local development is connected in large part to the valorisation and promotion of these products. The government should therefore adopt policies that take into account local development. With the Peoples' Market the Peoples' Forum achieves education, raised consciousness and mobilisation against the aggressions of subsidised imports from the global North. The initiative puts into practice the principle of South-South trade.

Also with a focus on local communities the Peoples' Forum (and CAD-Mali within it) has encouraged the growth of associational funds. These initiatives of community finance can provide small credits to women and reinforce the capacities of organisations with women at their core. With the same concern these funds can support groups of men (artisans and social workers) who lack sufficient means required to undertake their professional activities.

### Influencing policy to combat poverty

As actions such as the Peoples' Market and microfinance schemes demonstrate, the Peoples' Forum is not a trivial affair. Nor is it a show. The aim is to shape policy and improve the lives of the poor. To this end the declarations of each edition of the Forum are put before the national authorities and civil society organisations.

Given the relevance of the themes of the Peoples' Forum, the Malian state has developed a greater willingness to facilitate this annual meeting of the social movements of the country. Moreover, a number of the civil society associations that participate in the Peoples' Forum sit on various working groups of the Malian state. In this way the government takes account of alternative propositions made in the recommendations of different editions of the Peoples' Forum.

To take one example, the adoption of the Agricultural Orientation Bill (*Loi d'Orientation Agricole*) was the fruit of the meeting of peasant organisations at Kita in 2004 and Fana in 2005. The peasants expressed their wish that Mali pursue agriculture with a priority on familial units, the nourishment of the people, and the assurance of food sovereignty. Likewise, the debate on agriculture at the Fana Forum – and in particular the living conditions of farmers in the cotton zone of Mali –





resonated in national politics with the decision in 2007 to put 700 machines at the disposal of the cultivators. In these ways the ‘peasant space’ at the Peoples’ Forum has created possibilities to discuss peasant experiences of neo-liberal globalisation.

The Peoples’ Forum has also encouraged a number of citizen mobilisations to monitor government actions in Mali. One such initiative has undertaken an audit of Mali’s bilateral and multilateral debts. In addition, a national observatory has been created to monitor loans to the health sector. Meanwhile citizen surveillance of the water and sanitation sector has been put in place in four regions of Mali. Further citizen watch committees have been established to monitor the budget in four other regions of the country. In these ways the Peoples’ Forum has made significant advances in raising citizen awareness of the need for sound and accountable management of public funds

For the rest, the Peoples’ Forum has had important effects in raising citizen awareness of actions and policies in the struggle against poverty. For example, CAD-Mali has held popular education weeks on the subjects of debt and human rights. Other such campaigns have addressed universal access to drinking water and electricity. In these ways and more the Peoples’ Forum has put poverty (particularly as it affects peasants and women) at the centre of the preoccupations of civil society. This increased attention should reduce poverty itself.

### Including the poor

In this mobilisation for social and economic justice a distinctive feature of the Peoples’ Forum in Mali is that it identifies and invites into the debate the social circles most affected by poverty. In this way the poor themselves can exchange views with national and international social movements. The experiences, analyses and reflections of the poor can then be incorporated into strategies for the realisation of justice and solidarity in the world.

Four types of social actors in Mali are key to development in this regard. The first involves workers who were victims of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, when the privatisation of state enterprises left masses in unemployment and involuntary early retirement. The second group comprises peasants who are heavily indebted to banks and microfinance institutions. The third comprises women, who have become the principal providers for households following

the loss of employment by the men. The fourth key social group affected by poverty is the large numbers of unemployed youth in Mali.

The Peoples’ Forum has made particular efforts to involve peasants in its meetings. Apart from the fourth gathering at Fana, when some 45 per cent of the participants were peasants, the different meetings have consistently attracted some 60-70 per cent of attendees from peasant circles. This involvement has greatly enriched the quality of debates and has furthered the aim of reinforcing the capacities and power of Malian and African social movements. Greater political consciousness, and mobilisation in diversity to achieve common objectives, will help to resolve the problems that drain Africa.

### Conclusion

The Peoples’ Forum has produced flowers of which the fruits are beginning to ripen. All these energies are used to make the planet more liveable. The Peoples’ Forum has given hope to poor peasants and herders in the villages of Africa, Asia and the Americas. The fraternal engagement of all social categories in the Peoples’ Forum – across all age groups and perspectives – makes for a more humane, equitable and prosperous world where the poor write their own history.

### CONCLUSION

**Chandan Sengupta**

Global civil society forums are spaces for global political responses to the problems of the globalisation regime. These forums are organised at the local, national, regional and global levels with a puzzling variety of agendas to deal with issues of global significance. In the maze of activities conducted by the various civil society forums across the world, some issues emerge as common concerns and global poverty is one of them. State policies on poverty are largely defined in terms of a host of poverty alleviation measures constructed mainly within the framework of proximate factors such as lack of minimum income for survival. In contrast, civil society initiatives to raise issues of poverty and the plight of poor generally have gone beyond the mere income dimension of poverty and have often extended the debate to the realm of political economy of development and basic rights as ultimate causal factors. Several such initiatives by non-state actors in many countries have helped to deepen the democratic





process by accommodating the voices and demands of the poor and the disadvantaged. A concrete outcome of all this at a global level is the time-bound strategy of halving poverty in poorer economies that is set as a critical yardstick of development by the MDGs.

Not all civil society forums however, have the same focus and strategies even while dealing with the common agenda of global poverty. Some forums are concerned with raising awareness about capabilities or rights-based approaches to poverty and have called for wider debates on human rights, gender equality and social justice perspectives; others, such as the high profile World Economic Forum, have emphasized better business advocacy for pro-poor action through broad-based partnerships among various stakeholders. A number of forums have also drawn our attention to the politics of poverty and pleaded for the mobilisation of poor for direct action and participation in the anti-poverty programmes of the concerned states. The various approaches raise a pertinent question: to what extent these forums can be termed 'global' or, to put it slightly differently, how does poverty become a global issue?

The first Global Civil Society Yearbook recognized the complex and multidimensional nature of civil society actors and pointed out the reality of the emerging supranational sphere of citizens' social and political participation (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001: 4). On the specific issue of the global dimension of poverty, the sheer magnitude of poor people in the world is illustrative: some 1,089 million people lived below USD 1/day poverty line in 2001 (Pogge 2007: 212). Further, global inequality is on the rise with some recent evidence showing that the richest countries have per capita income that is 20 times higher than the poorest regions (Basu 2006: 1363). This is perhaps the most starkly pronounced negative fallout of economic globalisation. The biases of the new global economic order against the poor are essentially shaped by global institutions that do not consider them as part of their mandate in international negotiations and agreements (Pogge 2007:215).

In addition, in more specific contexts, some forums discussed in this chapter, such as CONGO and the World Economic Forum, have been able to turn local poverty concerns and advocacy initiatives into a global issue by using the global bodies like UN and Davos assembly.

But most important in viewing the forums as global initiatives impacting the conditions of the poor around

the world are: first, the creation of opportunities for the voices of the poor themselves to be heard at global gatherings; second, global recognition that poverty is not simply a local problem but is shaped by the global economic order and third, the promotion of civic engagement by building partnerships among citizen groups and organisations working on hunger, and related problems.

Of course the battle against poverty involves struggles on many fronts: inequality, exploitation and injustice. All these have deep moral and political connotations. Poverty has local roots but there are strong global forces aggravating those conditions. Any course of any action should thus be multi-layered. Left to themselves, the poor around the world are busy with innumerable survival strategies to eke out a living from whatever sources are available to them. However, they are often too weak to launch a united fight against the many factors and forces responsible for their conditions. The forums in question in this chapter, or any other forums for that matter, may not have all the sinews of war on global poverty; in fact poverty forums that are actually run by the poor themselves are few and far between. Yet, by creating interconnected spaces for open dialogue on various aspects of global poverty, including action plans, the forum gatherings have raised awareness about global poverty and its miseries at a significantly higher level of global space than previously. Moreover, for those millions of poor who are yet to join these forums, such gatherings provide critical spaces for vicarious inspiration to unite with the global movement to combat poverty in all its forms.



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