

The World Social Forum as a sub-political space for environmental justice: The case for South African grassroots empowerment within a network society

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Abstract: The World Social Forum (WSF) has provided an international stage for civil society from across the globe to share ideas, strategies, tactics and struggles for creating 'another world' against the failures of market inequalities. It attracts more than sixty thousand people pursuing the vision of 'Another World is Possible', with the event becoming a symbol of hope for environmental, social and economic justice. How effective has the WSF been in projecting the concerns of the grassroots against inequalities produced? Should new strategies and tactics be forged amongst civil society so that this international platform becomes more meaningful for the marginalised? Through empirical work conducted at the 2011 WSF in Dakar, Senegal, supplemented with previous empirical work with civil society conducted in Durban, South Africa, this paper points to challenges that need to be addressed by civil society if 'another world is possible.' Although there is an urgent need for local representative and civil society to mobilise social capital and include the grassroots into discussions in future WSF gatherings, the success of such an international platform is also influenced by historical, socio-economic and political contexts within countries influencing social capital within networks. Grassroots empowerment will help build more coherent actions that reflect the needs of those most affected by inequalities

Keywords: *World Social Forum, civil society, network society*

1. Introduction

There is widespread evidence that neoliberal policies have contributed to growing inequalities with worsening living conditions for the majority of the world's people (Lazzarato, 2009). Some reasons for inequality include placing public wealth into private hands, approving tax cuts for the wealthy, and pushing wages down for the non-elite, to name a few (Smith, 2012). Pick & Dayaram (2006) demonstrate that neoliberal development in India is characterised by ambiguity, contradiction and paradox - increasing inequality. Similarly, South Africa's democratic transition saw national liberation achieved when neo-liberal ideology was globally dominant (Fig, 2005) with poverty and inequality continuing to exhibit strong spatial and racial biases (United Nations South African Human Development Report, 2003). This has sustained disproportionately black people subjected to social and environmental injustices (Sparks, 2006). For example, the burdens of economic policy and planning and resultant environmental pollution in South Durban, an industrial hub in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa have fallen on local communities paying the price of regional and national wealth generation (Fig, 2005; Ballard et al. 2005). Communities are exposed varyingly to pollution across class and race lines (Barnett & Scott, 2007), with communities speaking out against environmental injustices (Leonard & Pelling, 2010). The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), a community based organisation in South Durban had been set up by residents to fight pollution in the area. Unfortunately, in line with its neoliberal agenda, the area has been highlighted by the African National Congress (ANC) as a Spatial Development Zone (SDZ) for continuing industrial expansion with substantial economic potential (Scott, 2003). While many sites around South Africa like South Durban witness communities exposed to environmental injustices to various degrees due to distributional inequalities, the richest 20% of South Africans earn just short of sixty-five per cent of national income (Hallowes & Butler, 2004). With such disparities in class structures and inequality, alternative visions of development that benefit the majority and take their concerns into account are required.

From its onset in 2001, the WSF has been upheld as an international umbrella representing grassroots people's organizations, committed to reversing the tide of the dominant neoliberal economic agenda (Chossudovsky, 2013). However, despite this vision of the WSF, levels of inequality are ever increasing (Hyatt, 2013). Against global flows of wealth and increasing inequality, the WSF attracts more than sixty thousand people pursuing the vision of 'Another World is Possible', with the event becoming a symbol of

hope for environmental, social and economic justice. The WSF was first organised in Porto Allegro, Brazil, in 2001, and provides a space for social and environmental activists globally to share ideas, strategies and tactics for creating another better world against the failures of neoliberalism. However, how effective has the WSF been as an international platform to support grassroots struggles against market inequalities, which continues to impact on marginalised citizens? Although the impressive diversity of the WSF is frequently praised, there has been little investigative work done on the degree to which the praxis of the WSF is enabling communicability across previously unbridged difference and how relations of power play out in this international arena (Conway, 2011).

Many observers of previous WSFs have observed a continued trend of lack of grassroots representation and domination of the forum by middle-class activists. Cock (2004) refers to the WSF striving for political action, and which advocates for participatory democracy and the rejection of leaders and hierarchies, yet it is dominated by 'big men' who are white and middle aged. According to Cock, few Africans, Asians, Arabs or Afro-Brazilians have been present at WSF gatherings. Wilson (2007) notes that the integration of feminism into the WSF has always remained uneven. Taylor and Naidoo (2004) note, the 2004 WSF had less than one per cent African representation. There has been a growing dominance of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over people's movements and local grassroots participation. The 2013 WSF was also said to be dominated by big NGOs and local leaderships over the grassroots directly affected by environmental injustices (Hyatt, 2013). Many of the social movement leaders (e.g. anti-war coalitions, environmentalists and the anti-globalization movement) were said to have betrayed their grassroots constituencies. Additionally, since events are self-organised, this compartmentalized structure has been one of the obstacles to the development of a meaningful and articulate mass movement (Chossudovsky, 2013). This questions whether a space is provided for grassroots to shape alternatives to globalisation from above, and whether coherence is actually growing within the WSF movement and from the local to the global levels to inform WSF debates on strategies and tactics against inequality. Should new strategies and tactics be forged amongst civil society so that this international platform becomes more meaningful? This paper presents observations and empirical work from interviews conducted with key civil society activists during the 2011 WSF, held in Dakar Senegal, supplemented by empirical work with civil society in Durban, South Africa in 2007. It attempts to access some of the challenges posed by such international events, including at the local Durban level for civil society in advancing the needs of the marginalised and to connect with such international platforms. Results are presented before engaging in discussion and conclusion.

2. The network society, sub-politics and social capital

Theories of network society, sub-politics and social capital are used to frame this analysis of the relational spaces shaping collective actions for environmental justice at WSF events. According to Castells (2000), the network society is the social structure made of nodes composed of individuals, organizations, or movements. These nodes may be united due to certain characteristics (e.g. values, ideas, visions). In the network society, policies and decisions are shaped not only by government but also by other interest groups who are 'in the network' (e.g. communities, social movements, industry). There are also inequalities within the network society (as highlighted above) due to market disparities. This paper is interested in the extent to which civil society actors have been able to organise themselves (and grassroots actors) to have influence in this network society via the WSF. However, the most fundamental mechanism of domination by government and industry within the network society is the exclusion of grassroots from fully integrating into decision-making networks, with power operating by exclusion and inclusion. For example, Hallows & Butler (2005) refer to industrial processes in South Africa (and Africa generally) as being institutions of the market. They note that these institutions are also designed to remove decision-making power from civil society (and government) and exclude people from wealth while the grassroots carry the externalised costs of production (i.e. industrial risks) through contamination of the environment and health effects.

The WSF as a sub-political sphere provides a space for civil society and especially the grassroots to have potential influence in the network society against inequalities and domination. Sub-politics refer to politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of the nation-state. It is individual participation in political decisions, bypassing the institutions of representative opinion formation (i.e. governments, political parties, parliaments) (Beck, 1999). Communities, NGOs and environmental campaigners act as a new force in society against domination (Matten, 2004). These groups gain political momentum and broad support with a network society from the visible gap between

the demands of the citizenry and their representation in the spectrum of political parties (Beck, 1992). Sub-politics appear to offer people structures of political action against market forces, which have diluted state controls. Beck proposes a need for a whole range of new institutions, strategies and actors (i.e. citizen's initiative groups and social movements) against inequalities produced.

Social capital can assist in understanding the WSF as a space for environmental justice for the creation of sub-politics in a network society to challenge inequalities produced by the market, including for the emergence of alternative development frameworks. While it is acknowledged that there is ambiguity regarding the definitional aspects and types of social capital (see Radcliffe 2004, Mohan & Mohan 2002), the aim is not to cover this literature extensively but rather examine the various social capital relationships to explore the WSF as a space for environmental justice. Social capital is interpreted as a determinant of social relations and networks building on cultural norms (Trigilia, 2001), and in this way as a feature of social life-networks, norms and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively and potentially more inclusively, to pursue a common agenda (Wakefield et al., 2005). Social capital is also a product of repeated social interactions between individuals and groups over time developing experience, personal trust, social norms, and can lead to strengthened co-operation and reciprocity (Power & Willmot, 2007, Lee et al., 2005), which can assist communities in reaching mutual goals in responding to crises (Farquhar et al., 2005). Through these repeated interactions between individuals and groups over time, social capital can accrue as societal social capital (i.e. supporting collective action for collective gain) or as an individual good (social capital used to further the interests of individuals at the expense of wider society) (Stolle & Hooghe, 2003). It is also recognised that social capital can be exclusive leading to differentiated groups in society and fostering conflict and inequality as well as cooperation. Portes (1998) also refers to the negative consequences of bridging social capital, which leads to the exclusion of certain groups. As Fine (2003) notes, the effects of social capital are just as liable to be negative as positive. Since social capital encompasses a wide range of social phenomena, it can be selective in practice subjecting it to weaknesses.

Weak bonding ties in a community and amongst social networks are more conducive for broader mobilisation and large-scale protest action than strong bonding ties. Weak bonding ties are more likely to link members of different groups than strong bonding ties, which tend to be concentrated in particular groups, and which restrict social networking and curb popular mobilisation. It is through the trust and reciprocity of social relations that social capital between individuals is maintained, mobilised and utilised (i.e. for protest action) (Lee et al., 2005). Limited results in addressing problems will occur if only a few individuals engage in mobilisation and protests. However, if through dialogue a consensus is reached amongst a critical mass of people who take action together, then long-term solutions are possible (Figueroa et al., 2002). The examination of the WSF as a sub-political form of networking to attain environmental justice through the social capital lens involves a unique set of relationships for analysis within civil society with spatial networks of bridges and linkages to be potentially developed.

3. Methodology

Interviews were conducted with key civil society activists during the 2011 WSF, held in Dakar Senegal, supplemented by empirical work with civil society in Durban, South Africa in 2007. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from social actors (i.e. CBOs, community leaders, NGOs, academics, international civil society actors). Data analysis employed grounded theory and open coding to identify themes. This paper focuses generally on findings and across themes.

4. Results

Middle-class activists had more hold on the direction of the 2011 WSF without including the attendance and concerns of those most affected to increase social capital within a network society. Middle-class activists therefore did not necessarily engage in societal social capital for the WSF to have influence in a network society. Siziwe Khanyile (personal communication, 2011), Air Quality Co-ordinator of groundwork, South Africa noted, with reference to the climate change discussions:

"Africa is one of the worst affected by climate change...I don't know how many [local] people [are] part of the discussions. It would be nice to have a stronger African presence... It is more of the people you work with; there aren't any new people...people who have the funding have been able to come"

The above indirectly suggests that donors (e.g. national government, United Nations, northern NGOs) have been biased in favour of NGOs (and CBO leaders) imagining that they are representative of the grassroots. Unfortunately NGOs did not engage in wider social capital for the WSF to have influence in the network society. In addition to class and representative imbalances at WSFs, there are clearly also gender imbalances which limited social capital. For example at the 2011 WSF, many of the Southern NGOs and representatives, most funded by Western donors (as above), were mainly men, with a limited attendance by women leaderships, particularly those women who are normally at the frontline of social and environmental injustices at the household level. Unfortunately strategic leaderships building momentum at the grassroots was lacking in countries to bring those affected to WSF platforms. This also questions whether the WSF as an international platform assists in uniting social movements across the globe struggling against the forces of neoliberalism, while seeking a world order based on justice. Desmond D'Sa, leader of the SDCEA in South Durban highlighted the urgent need to mobilise grassroots within nations and communities if local voices are to shape WSF events:

"...I haven't seen ordinary people active in most of the [WSF] stuff...it also starts in home countries where civil society is fragmented and because of the fragmentation, it leads to individuals taking the lead...they are accountable to nobody...people [grassroots] taking the lead and being active in the [WSF] process...does not happen...more women need to be at the forefront...in the leadership..."

However, corporate funding of some environmental justice community organisations at the local level also hindered collective engagement with other local organisations and with the grassroots for collective engagement. This indirectly influenced social capital at the WSF for more coherent actions. For example, within South Durban, dispute remains between some CBOs accepting corporate funding and the local SDCEA CBO which does not. For example, corporate funding from industry by the local Merebank Residents Association (MRA) CBO put strain on the relationship between itself and the SDCEA and grassroots to collectively address local concerns. Farhida Khan (personal communication, 2007), Administrator and Air quality assistant, SDCEA noted:

'SDCEA and community members have seen MRA accepting money from Mondi, from SAPREF, from Engen. Because of that, it has hindered the relationship [between] MRA and SDCEA.'

However, the lack of grassroots participation at WSF events was more complex than suggested above; fragmentation at the local level in South Africa was partly due to leadership ineffectiveness due to the transition to democracy when most civil society leaders moved into government causing a vacuum in effective civil society leadership. As a result new leaders due to lack of experience were unable to engage in grassroots mobilisation. This has also indirectly influenced grassroots engagement at WSF gatherings. According to Brij Maharaj (Interview, 2007) Head: Department of Geography, University of KwaZulu-Natal, noting for demobilisation of civil society leadership during the transition,

"...The state was worried about the high level of mobilisation by civil society up to 1994. The new ANC government was well aware that they could not deliver...there were heightened expectations, so it demobilised civil society...The leaders of civil society got co-opted into government structures at different levels"

The extraction of effective leadership's from civil society organisations and moving to government structures, disintegrated leadership's mobilisation of the grassroots for collective actions against environmental injustices. As a former employee, Bobby Peek (Interview, 2007), director of environmental justice NGO groundwork noted, referring to the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF), a nationwide umbrella organisation formulated in 1992 before the democratic transition to bridge the social, economic, environmental and political issues to reverse and prevent environmental injustices affecting the poor:

"EJNF...started in a pre-democratic...active process in the early 90's were a lot of those that are in government now and...big business...were in civil society...These people...started these very good organisations and then left, and as generations went and came...the leadership...started suffering...you were getting less articulate, less visionary people involved...What was important for them [new leaders] was no more the collective..."

Besides leadership ineffectiveness, fragmentation at the local level was also due to socio-economic issues of poverty to engage in social and environmental justice concerns for wider social capital relations. A failure by the South African government to deliver basic needs weakened grassroots engagement on ways to tackle inequalities due to neoliberalism and alternative development paths. As Brij Maharaj (Interview, 2007) noted:

"A lot of people are engaged in basic survival. I don't think they have the time or the resources to actually engage in these things [debates and actions on inequalities in society]..."

However, the poor socio-economic status of the grassroots was used by neoliberal market forces (i.e. multinational corporations), which the WSF works against, to strategically divide local community groups. This indirectly has had an influence on grassroots representation and projecting of local concerns at WSF events. The tactic of corporations dividing the grassroots was noted by Farhida Khan for South Durban (personal communication, 2007):

"...they [industry] will call an organization that they know is financially burdened, and say to them we'll give you ten thousand rand to do a survey for us, but just remember SDCEA is bad mouthing us...so the hypocrisy of that just doesn't gel well..."

Besides fragmentation of civil society actors at the national and local level in South Africa, and neoliberal forces (i.e. corporations) role within this, fragmentation between civil society actors did exist at the 2011 WSF between environmental organisations. This was more so between some big international NGOs and the smaller environmental groups. Some international NGOs had divergent ideologies from activists and community organisations engaging in discussions to strategize against the destructive effects of globalisation and climate change. As Phil Thornhill, who works on climate change and is the National Co-ordinator of the Campaign Against Violent Change in the United Kingdom noted:

"...the green movement is divided...[although] more people have gotten interested in climate change and become active...[however], people bring in a lot of political agendas, and sometimes these political agendas tend to dominate...there is also a role for a kind of big tent bringing all kinds of people together...[but] the big NGOs bring their brands...and they want to dominate the agenda..."

The above statement suggests that even if civil society in South Africa (as one example) were to effectively coordinate local grassroots mobilisation and input into international platforms such as the WSF for increased social capital, there would be no guarantee that such local voices would be heard, since domination of bigger international NGOs may be at play to silence local voices and hence local social capital. This may suggest a need for a more co-ordinated bottom-up approach within countries (and between grassroots movements) to influence WSF events. Nevertheless, besides issues of class and gender imbalances, lack of grassroots presence, individualised leadership, corporate influence of grassroots, divergent ideologies and domination between some groupings, the forum's strength is in bringing together activists and groupings from across the globe to potentially engage in common struggles for social and environmental justice and increase social capital that would not have otherwise occurred. Thus, activists are potentially able to make connections between the different struggles globally, hinting at how the WSF event has advanced since its inception at Davos from just criticising market forces. Since its inception discussions at the WSF have expended and centred around international migration, the exploitation of land and natural resources, and land grabbing and biofuels to name a few (evident at the 2011 WSF), showing the WSFs role of providing potential solidarity. According to Siziwe Khanyile (personal communication, 2011) from groundwork:

"The WSF, in spite of whatever the problems are, is also a place to let the world know what we are planning...and how we can link with them and develop positions...we are calling for a move away from fossil fuels...we are going to make sure that our grassroots are aware of the climate issues and how it affects them..."

5. Conclusion

There is an urgent need for civil society organisations to reconsider how the WSF is supposedly used as a space for empowering the marginalised that bear the most impact due to market inequalities. While WSF events do provide an ideal international platform to connect with activists within a global network to

increase social capital, delegates (especially civil society leaders of the global South) would achieve more by mobilising and including the grassroots into discussions in future WSF events. Thus, weak bonding ties would also be effective in bringing in the voices of the marginalised as opposed to middleclass activists. Such actions will help build a more progressive civil society that can provide solutions that reflect the needs of the grassroots most impacted by inequalities in society. However, it is important for local communities to mobilise collectively against neoliberal market forces which strategically divide local groups by offering funding to financially burdened organisations. This indirectly has influenced grassroots representation and projecting of local concerns at WSF events. It is acknowledge that local community groups do require funding to engage in social upliftment projects, how funds should be channelled to a central community fund and administered accordingly with appropriate checks and balances on how funding is used. This will assist in resolving some of the fragmentation caused by multinationals and local groups within the network society. Nevertheless, future WSF events will have to be sensitive to class and gender imbalances with more representative leaderships if 'another world' is to be achieved. The aim must be to move from the 'possible' to 'another world is here', but this transition can only be accomplished by mobilizing those most affected to be included in discussions and actions for world change.

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