

## **Have the slaves left the master's house?: A Report on the Africa Social Forum**

Amanda Alexander and Mandisa Mbali

*The story of the poor goes round and round. But what about the story of the rich? The story not being told is that of the beneficiaries of slavery and colonialism. The story of exploitation that put us into this dispensation, commodified our own life for profit. They divided and ruled. Can we unite and live? Can we unite for the world that will be our world? Let us rise up and begin to tell this story... of why they continue to be rich, continue to plunder.*

- Wahu Kaara, Kenyan feminist activist speaking at the ASF opening plenary

### **Introduction**

At the opening plenary of the Africa Social Forum in Lusaka, Zambia (10-14 December, 2004), delegates from across the continent gave varied testimonies that coalesced around a single truth: re-colonisation is worse than slavery.

Activists noted Africa's history of injustices and oppression through colonialism, slavery and apartheid, but swiftly moved on to the injustices of present-day, post-colonial Africa: privatisation and cost-recovery, wars fought over Africa's natural resources, heavy debt burdens and conditionalities, unfair trade and disease. Contrary to dominant accounts of the continent as an almost biblically 'cursed' 'basket case' and Africans as helpless victims, delegate after delegate emphasised that Africa's poverty, wars and disease pandemics are causally related to a global economic system that is predicated on the poverty of the many.

"The world, it would seem, friends, is at the end of its imagination", Corinne Kumar of Tunisia and Indonesia told the assembled plenary. How much further can the tired mechanisms of domination and exploitation be stretched? Though they are continuously re-disguised, masquerading as World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) or Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) or Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), the instruments of oppression remain just as blatant for those attempting to access basic services like water, land, education and healthcare – with increasing difficulty.

Colonialism is a very old game, and is thus forced to maintain itself through substitutions – substitutions that activists are perpetually contesting. Substitutions of NEPAD for economic liberation, of incessant white tutelage for black independent praxis, of "efficiency" that benefits the few rather than the many, of a blameless past for a counter-hegemonic history, of the language of the powerful for localised terminology and stories, of dignity for the flat notion of "equality". Kumar's assertions were echoed by many activists throughout the Forum: it is up to the South – and Africa in particular – to champion notions of democracy that are not intrinsically tied to the

market economy; to find new notions of power that facilitate, transform, and enhance; to redefine Africa through a discourse of dissent – one that decentres, disrupts and interrupts all that is dominant.

At the ASF we observed that while African civil society is not uniformly strong across all regions, trade unionists, students, women and young people are increasingly resisting neoliberalism on the continent – against the current of their politicians. At a session on NEPAD, a Zimbabwean delegate argued that African leaders, by attending G8 meetings and producing a policy document endorsed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), are revealing that they “fear freedom, as former slaves who walk back to their masters, not yet ready to leave the master’s house”.

Along with their critiques of neo-colonialism and the lack of democracy in international policy-making, African activists were increasingly outraged at the lack of democracy within the Forum structure. The ASF often replicated prevailing socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities. In particular, despite the feminist tribunal at the beginning of the Forum, women were often not given sufficient space to participate and raise feminist issues throughout the conference. Plenary sessions and panel discussions were largely devoid of meaningful dialogue and debate. The sole exception, which will be discussed later as a promising alternative, was the Feminist Dialogue, where women arranged their chairs in a large circle to form the only space in the entire forum set up for the horizontal movement of knowledge in many directions.

### **Why the master’s tools will never destroy the master’s house**

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon predicted the exhaustion of third world nationalism as espoused by many African leaders (1965). Indeed, without civil society resistance Africa’s bourgeoisie and its nationalist leaders may end up becoming the ‘cheap jack’ to Western capitalism and imperialism. As one delegate argued, “the master’s tools [neo-liberal policies] will never destroy the master’s house [rich countries’ economic domination of Africa]”. Patrick Bond poses the question even more directly: will Africa aim to ‘fix’ the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank, World Trade Organisation (WTO) and IMF or ‘nix’ them (Bond, 2000)? Or, in terms of the central problematic posed in our report, will Africa merely substitute structural adjustments for ‘homegrown’ structural adjustments such as GEAR and NEPAD? Are the foreign overseers such as the Bank and the IMF increasingly confident that they can count on local overseers to carry out their work? Has the logic of ‘fiscal discipline’ become so normalised that Africa’s ruling class has yoked itself with fiscal *self-discipline*?

The social consequences of structural adjustment programmes have been evident in Africa for over two decades. The very real, human costs were evident as we walked through downtown Lusaka, where crumbling infrastructure includes the broken storm drains, clogged with garbage, that periodically become breeding grounds for cholera. The Lusaka-based Namibian human rights lawyer who showed us around mentioned that as a

result of cutbacks espoused in structural adjustments and a high proportion of the country's budget going toward debt servicing, patients attending the country's public hospitals must provide their own drips, medicine, bedding and food.

Indeed, IFI-advocated cost recovery is alive and well in Zambia: advertisements on Zambian television announced that cut-offs of electricity were imminent for defaulters over the festive season and that electricity company employees who assisted them to reconnect would be liable for prosecution. Jubilee Zambia informed us that this year just shy of a third of Zambia's budget will go toward servicing odious debt. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that Zambia's life expectancy has been reduced by AIDS and other preventable and treatable infectious diseases to a mere 35 years of age. The choices facing Africa's leaders are as stark as the slogans on t-shirts worn by activists from the African Friends Service Committee: "LIFE" or "DEBT".

The very real impacts of neo-liberal policies on ordinary African people's lives brought debates on how African politicians and civil society organisations should relate to IFIs into sharp relief. African politicians are already engaging with IFIs and G8 countries and it was clear to many delegates that NEPAD can be viewed as the product of such engagements. In this context, an important item on the agenda was African civil society's engagement with IFIs such as the World Bank and Bank-supported programmes like NEPAD.

On the second day, a session was held on views of "Civil Society Engagement with the World Bank" chaired by Kumi Naidoo of CIVICUS (an international umbrella body of NGOs). Naidoo outlined how CIVICUS's board had for an eighteen-month period "...embarked on a process of canvassing and documenting civil society views on engagement with the Bank". Naidoo described this as a "painful process" for which CIVICUS had received a great deal of criticism. Nevertheless, according to Naidoo, CIVICUS was powering ahead to hosting a "Global Policy Forum" in April 2005 bringing together the Bank and civil society, which would mark "the end" of its engagement with the Bank.

When the floor was opened, Console Tleane from the Freedom of Expression Institute of South Africa argued that CIVICUS was unfairly seeking legitimation for its engagement with the Bank at the Africa Social Forum. Tleane pointed out that the conversation seemed awkwardly placed in the agenda of the Forum – rather than scanning civil society views on working with the Bank, delegates were ready to strategize how to bring about the end of the bank by April 2005. Kenyan activist Njoke Njehu of 50 Years is Enough, a Washington DC-based NGO, argued that there have been three major civil society attempts to engage with the Bank, including the World Commission on Dams and the Extractive Industry Review – and they had all failed. The Bank's primary objective in trying to engage with civil society is to boost its public relations (PR) and lend a veneer of legitimacy and transparency to its opaque and undemocratic operations. Indeed, Njehu stated

that the Bank has a PR budget in excess of US\$20 million per annum and seventy staff devoted to improving its image. She went on to question who actually funded CIVICUS's engagement with the Bank and in fact whether the organisation was truly independent of the Bank and those who support its agendas.

A Senegalese trade unionist in the Higher Education sector argued that the World Bank's policies had destroyed African Universities through dramatic budgetary cutbacks and cost recovery. Similarly, a Nigerian activist explained that she had attended a meeting with the Bank on PRSPs as recently as a month before and gained the impression the Bank had already decided on what policies should be adopted in the country and was merely "going through the motions" of holding a meeting with civil society activists. Year in, year out this NGO representative had been to meetings with the Bank and had seen virtually no implementation of progressive civil society organisation's suggestions, except at the most cosmetic level.

Veteran South African anti-apartheid and social justice activist Dennis Brutus argued that CIVICUS was still actively engaged with the Bank and so it was disingenuous to argue that it was 'disengaging' with the Bank, but only after a big meeting in April 2005. Njehu went on to argue that the IMF and World Bank divided NGOs into pliant 'good' NGOs like CIVICUS that it could 'deal with' and critical 'bad' NGOs like 50 Years that it refused to have anything to do with. If the Bank was serious about hearing civil society perspectives it would be prepared to hear very critical perspectives – even those arguing for it to be boycotted by ethical investors on the Bonds market and ultimately closed down.

Tleane argued for activists who did not agree with such engagement to protest at such meetings in a way similar to the "Not in My Name" campaign launched by left-wing South African Jews opposed to Israeli President Ariel Sharon's policies in relation to Palestinians. One of the authors of this paper argued for 50 Years to demonstrate outside the meeting to show that not all civil society actors are in agreement with engagement with the Bank. South African Anti-Privatisation Forum activist Virginia Setshedi then led participating delegates in a protest song against collaborating with neo-colonial forces. Indeed, in an article entitled "No to World Bank-Civil Society Relations", the *African Flame*, the daily ASF newspaper, reported on the session as follows:

Without a single dissenting voice, participants rejected any dealings with the Bank. The Bank's bad record on the continent and the tonnes of evidence that indict it for the continued poverty of the African people were cited as the main reasons why any engagement will not be meaningful. The message was clear: there...[was] no way that the ASF would entertain any dealings with the Bank.

Activists in the NEPAD session came to the same conclusions on the potential of neo-liberal institutions and policies. Senegalese economist Demba Dembele's rejection of NEPAD is based on two fundamental assumptions: that the West will never develop Africa and that most African

leaders do not care about the welfare of their citizens. Pointing to the fact that NEPAD is premised on the extraction and export of Africa's prime resources and the opening of the continent to exploitative foreign direct investment (FDI), a Zimbabwean economist characterised NEPAD as "creating a Bill of Rights for trans-national corporations". Thus, he concluded: "our engagement will mean nothing".

### **Finding our own tools: Feminist Dialogue**

In breaking with the structure of other Forum sessions in which two or three panellists (usually male) addressed an audience for roughly two hours and finished by fielding a handful of questions, the feminist dialogue was constructed as an actual conversation – open to dissent and debate and allowing ideas to build off each other. Chairs were arranged in a large circle and, by the end of the session, nearly every woman and man present had spoken their mind. Unfortunately, discussion revolved around gender and feminism in our societies (of women in power having become 'patriarchs' and of the need for better, context-specific understandings of gender and feminism in order to avoid negative labelling, for example), but did not touch on feminism and the role of women within our own movements. The participatory form of the conversation embodied a dissent against the structuring of the ASF, and yet the critique must go further.

We know that women fuel our movements (and more isolated moments of resistance) across Africa, but they were in the minority at the Africa Social Forum because the leadership of organizations and movements (i.e. those likely to represent organisations at international forums) are men. We know that we will go back to our meetings and some women may not feel free to speak up. Essentially, we know that patriarchy and other forms of dominance are being re-inscribed within our movements for resistance.

As Shallo Skaba, an Ethiopian coffee worker stated at the Africa Court of Women, "No one is looking for women's problems. No one considers all that women are doing". If movements go on as they are, women's problems *will not* be looked for, much less effectively organized around. One woman suggested in the dialogue that feminism is a political consciousness around power and power inequalities. Let us, then, apply that critical consciousness to the society we resist against *and* to the vehicles of resistance that are propelled by our energy, our sacrifices, our limited resources, our courage – but too often not by our decisions and the wisdom of our experiences as women.

Again out of character with much of the Forum, several action items were decided upon. These included gathering and sharing feminist literature from across the continent over an email discussion list and in existing publications such as *Feminist Africa*, the Centre for Civil Society website and research reports, and *WeWrite*. Feminist dialogue must be wrestled back from the (mostly Northern) academic spaces which have co-opted and subsequently come to define (and confine) debate.

Those present also strategised ways to hold women who are elected into office accountable. This is gravely needed, as demonstrated in South Africa, where Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang has consistently pushed forward policies that have worsened – and ultimately taken – the lives of poor, black, HIV-positive women. In Tanzania, Fatima Alloo explained, women activists meet with each female politician upon assuming office. From the very beginning of her term – and often beforehand, during her campaigning – women activists attempt to become these politicians’ primary network and base. Since women so often identify with a system that will “protect” them, the moment that they say ‘No’, they are persecuted. Women activists can thus form alternative forms of protection, and women in high office can draw their power not from the prevailing system of patriarchal control, but from those who understand power’s underbelly.

Finally, activists called for further strategising on helping to make women economically independent. As one activist from the Gambia remarked, we must make it possible for women to get a divorce if necessary, to have some measure of financial independence. In a global economy where women produce over 80% of resources, and yet own less than 20% of them, the battle for economic sovereignty for women will be long and difficult. However, we will work to assure that women are not further exploited by our own movements, and that we create means for economic independence as we can.

### **Are our tools sharp enough?**

Across several sessions, a number of participants asked similar questions: what are we doing to take the debates here back to the grassroots in our own countries? People are dying of AIDS in my country, aggressive cost recovery means that water and electricity are being disconnected, trade negotiations are taking place which may ruin livelihoods, how will this Forum take our struggles forward?

When we asked different delegates how the ASF meetings were organised, they could only answer with even more questions. How, for instance, were the meetings financed? How was the organising council constituted?

Activists from South Africa’s Social Movements Indaba (SMI) questioned the structure of the ASF (an un-elected, self-appointed, ‘unrepresentative’ council) and its ‘lack of political direction’. The SMI activists said they viewed the council and the ASF as biased toward NGOs, as membership of the council did not entail representivity and members of the council had to pay their own way to council meetings. A statement issued and circulated by the SMI expanded this critique:

The underrepresentation of social movements in relation to NGOs is reflected in the political content of the forum. It manifests in the persistence of the notion that the Africa Social Forum is nothing other than a space, in contrast to the perspective that it should have a programme to advance our struggle against neoliberalism (1).

The SMI then went on to argue for a plenary to allow for collective decision-making on the structure and functioning of the ASF and develop a declaration and a programme of action.

These problems are not unique to the ASF. Other social forums have been critiqued for not culminating in sufficiently concrete political outcomes that would advance the struggles of social movements. For instance, in discussing the Boston Social Forum, Peter Marcuse recently argued that there was insufficient participation of ‘grassroots activists’ (activists who were very poor, on welfare, etc.) (Marcuse, 2005 forthcoming). In general, there was an expressed need to link the BSF and other Social Forums to “action” with “concrete results” (*ibid*, 3). As Marcuse argues, while such forums might offer the future “nucleus” of a global social movement it is too early to speak of a global social movement focused on limited objectives and dealing with broader issues of power and social justice (*ibid*).

Similarly, an activist writing for [schnews.org.uk](http://schnews.org.uk) on the 2004 European Social Forum held in London argued that: “[Activists] came to see if ‘another world is possible’, yet as expected [the ESF] was hijacked by people whose vision seems seriously at odds with many people involved in grassroots politics”. Many ESF activists questioned the wisdom of replacing one set of unaccountable political cronies for another.

### **Building our own house: From undemocratic ‘space’ to action?**

In order for the Social Forums to continue to have legitimacy with social movement activists they must cease to be undemocratic ‘spaces’ for stifled debate about ‘other possibilities’ for the world and, instead, move towards forums for sharing experiences and debating strategies, tactics and common campaigns. In essence, there seems to be a struggle for the soul of the Social Forums: will they be ‘talk shops’ or ‘think tanks’ or ‘arenas for planning action’, ‘campaign launch pads’ or ‘strategy and tactics seminars’? As the feminist session of the ASF showed, making sessions more participatory and inclusive could be an important step in allowing legitimate critiques of the Social Forums and their constituent movements to emerge. In turn, this could allow for more focussed political discussions and outcomes at the Forums.

The stakes are high in this debate. As Setshedi argued: “people are being disconnected at home, what am I doing here if it doesn’t advance their struggle?”. Or as an HIV-positive feminist activist from Zimbabwe argued, “people are dying of AIDS at home, we need to think of a common platform to campaign to improve their access to treatment”. Such activists argued that it takes precious time and resources to attend Social Forums and that they must have something to show for attending such forums.

ASF delegates rejected engagement with the Bank and NEPAD, however, it should not be forgotten that indirect approaches urging such engagement were made through civil society intermediaries. This shows that capturing Social Forums and blunting their impact is a tantalising outcome for the Bank and ‘third-way’ politicians, which only adds a further sense of urgency to debates about the political direction and future of the Social Forums in

advancing the aims of social movements for socio-economic justice. It is clear that social movement activists around the world increasingly wish to 'jealously guard' (SMI, 2) the Social Forums against de-politicisation and an inching towards irrelevant abstraction. Such activists recognise that if they exhaust themselves attempting to debate in undemocratic 'space', they will not seriously threaten the agendas of the Bank or the other IFIs. And the blunter the tools of the Social Forums get, the greater the chance activists will simply dispense with them entirely.

Amanda Alexander, a member of the WeWrite collective, is a Visiting Researcher at the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Mandisa Mbali is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

### **References**

Bond, Patrick (2003). *Against Global Apartheid: South Africa meets the World Bank, IMF and International Finance*. London: ZED Books.

"Endless Shit Flinging" (2004). [www.schnews.org.uk](http://www.schnews.org.uk). 22 October.

Fanon, Frantz (1965). *The Wretched of the Earth*. NY: Grove Press.

Marcuse, Peter (forthcoming). "Are Social Forums the Future of Social Movements?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

Social Movements Indaba (2004). Statement distributed at the Africa Social Forum. 12 December.