

For a More Social World Forum

By Theresa Williamson

The third annual World Social Forum (WSF) was held from January 23-28 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This article focuses on the participation of a group of Rio's squatter settlement leaders at the Forum, the history of the Forum, and the possibility for enriching such encounters in the future.

The WSF was established to run concurrently with, and provide a critique of, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, a summit of global wealth and institutional power. The main objective of the WSF is the development of solutions to the world's most pressing social problems and the difficulties generated by current global economic trends. Since its inception two years ago, the Forum has grown to constitute an event worthy of notice in its own right, although it continues to share its dates with—and to critique—the World Economic Forum.

This year's World Social Forum brought together 100,000 participants including delegates, observers, journalists and activists from over 125 countries. The main financial supporters of this \$3.485 million event were the Porto Alegre city government and the State of Rio Grande do Sul. Registration fees were paid by the Forum's 20,763 delegates, and contributions were made by the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, Banco do Brasil and the Ford Foundation. The state and city contributions were offset by the \$20-50 million spent by visitors over the course of the Forum.

In an effort to espouse a non-hierarchical model and foster exchange among participants, anyone is able to register as a delegate and offer a workshop at the WSF. Thus, workshops range in content and approach; some are characterized by a lecture style, others by open debate. This year, over a five-day period, delegates offered 1,286 workshops. Topics included deforestation and ecological economics, Zen Buddhism, community food security, Brazil's democratizing trend towards citizen control over public budgets and human rights and water. Conferences were also held and testimonies provided by intellectuals such as Eduardo Galeano, Noam Chomsky, Leonardo Boff (founder of Liberation Theology) and Arundhati Roy. Some speakers drew audiences as large as 25,000.

At night, next to the campground housing approximately 30,000 youth, the open-air "Por do Sol" amphitheatre hosted Brazil's most famous musical

groups, ranging from hip-hop to samba, along with bands from Senegal and Uruguay. Brazil's newly-elected Worker's Party President, Luiz Ignácio da Silva (Lula), spoke to an audience of 140,000. As the only head of state to participate in both the Porto Alegre and the Davos Forum, Lula told an emotional audience about his struggles over the previous decades and what he felt was his current role. He spoke of the futility of an economic order where few people could "eat five meals a day (while) a great many spend five days on earth without eating at all." And he spoke of the importance of strengthening ties between Brazil, Latin America and Africa. The audience broke out in applause when he pledged to deliver the same speech in Davos.

Including the Excluded

A new friend and New York City political organizer commented to me during the Forum that it seemed like a "Club Med for leftists," implying that there was lack of representation at the Forum of the most excluded groups in society. The majority of conference delegates were professionals from large non-governmental organizations (NGOs), union members, academics, and others concerned with social issues, not necessarily members of those groups most negatively affected by global economic trends.

While a more concerted effort is needed to guarantee a greater presence of urban squatters, indigenous tribes, members of ethnic movements and other marginalized groups, some disenfranchised groups, however, did make their way to the Forum. Among them were a handful of youth involved in hip-hop in Seattle, Latina women living in housing projects in New York City, indigenous groups from various regions of Brazil and a group of unemployed picketers from Argentina. The organization I represented at the Forum, Catalytic Communities, secured funding to take a group of twenty-three *favela* (squatter settlement) leaders from Rio de Janeiro.

Participating in this year's Forum with the group, called CONGESCO (Community Managers Tribunal), heightened my awareness of what was missing from my previous Forum experiences. In prior years, I had returned from Porto Alegre in distress over the failure to develop solutions. The Forum has established a reputation for being a space for articulating complaints rather than

exploring its primary objective—seeking an alternative to the current pattern of development worldwide. In past years, this had left me with a sense that the Forum was a lot of talk and little action.

From Talk to Action

This year, however, I got a close view of what could be accomplished by incorporating disenfranchised groups into such an information-rich environment. My education started on the first day, when our group of twenty-three community leaders and five Catalytic Communities employees paid a visit to the information stands pavilion. For me, these stands provided opportunities to investigate some new initiatives and acquire useful contact information. To the community leaders, however, they presented valuable sources of information previously unavailable, and leaders thoroughly explored the stands, taking every piece of literature they could.

Shortly thereafter we entered the Forum's opening protest march. The CONGESCO community leaders created fifteen chants throughout the march and attracted the attention of various TV and print journalists. "The march was really good, we sang protest songs against the social exclusion that affects people who live in poverty, the absence of education and health care, basic sanitation, unemployment," one community leader said. "During the march our movement caught the attention of national and international journalists and magazine photographers and also the mass of people who were watching from the sidewalks. We saw the shocked look on the face of curious people reading the banners we carried, who applauded and gave us a thumbs up. Others joined our movement and sang with us. It was a success, we were happy because we did not think there would be so much support for us."

Low-income community activists outside of Brazil are often unaware of the World Social Forum. When they first learn about it they assume it is yet another event organized by and for elites working on issues, such as poverty, that mostly affect people like them—a "Club Med for leftists," if you like. These activists therefore arrived at this Forum expecting to experience a certain level of alienation and hostility. Instead, it became clear that there was a desire on the part of those present to include those people directly affected by social policies. To their surprise, the community leaders experienced widespread support throughout their week in Porto Alegre.

The next few days continued to make lasting impressions on the community leaders. They met

with the current minister of social development and ex-governor of the State of Rio, Benedita da Silva, the first Afro-Brazilian woman to govern a Brazilian state. They spent a morning with Workers Party Senator Eduardo Suplicy from São Paulo to discuss the difficulties associated with community work. The community leaders' involvement in the Forum also brought them into contact with two independent filmmakers who are producing a documentary, to be launched in New York in May, about the participation of this particular group of leaders in the Forum.

Workshops with Community Leaders

Community leaders made presentations during two workshops organized by Catalytic Communities. In one of these workshops,



Photo by Theresa Williamson

Henrique Monteiro, who operates a youth arts program in one of Rio's most dangerous *favelas*, met a Dutch book publisher who became very interested in Henrique's project. Ten minutes into the presentation, the Dutch gentleman opened his wallet and presented Henrique with 500 Euros to help him realize his long-term vision: to buy a house in the *favela* to operate as The Art House. The Art House would serve as a cultural center within Jacarezinho, a community deprived of cultural resources.

The second workshop attracted a group of North Americans, including representatives of foundations and the Center for Social Justice in Seattle, and Brazilian university students. The dialogue that resulted from this encounter was extremely rewarding. The Seattle representatives were ⇒

interested in learning more about CONGESCO's success in developing such a united group. CONGESCO, in turn, began to learn about the experience of activists and low-income groups in North America.

This exchange became even more valuable the following afternoon, when the Seattle organizers introduced CONGESCO's leaders to members of the New York-based not-for-profit Community Voices Heard. The New York grassroots activists sat with CONGESCO members in an open-air courtyard and spoke for several hours about their expe-

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periences fighting for social services in New York. After listening to one of the New Yorkers describe the state of welfare in the US, one of the youth leaders from Rio exclaimed, much to my surprise, "I'm embarrassed to talk about my problems!"

Another World Is Possible

Not until this third Forum was I able to leave with a sense of fulfillment, bringing me closer to feeling that indeed "Another World is Possible," as the WSF slogan tells us. That world, it became clear to me, would be the result of empowerment and network-building between the most marginalized groups in society and the well-intentioned groups that claim, but often fail, to represent them. These individuals are ready and willing to debate with community representatives, but often lack the space to do so.

Perhaps an even more important connection to be made, however, is among disenfranchised groups, as occurred during the meeting of Rio's community leaders and those from New York City's housing projects. Praise and encouragement should be granted to groups such as the Panta Rhea Foundation who, in recognizing the importance of community dialogue at the Forum, used their WSF funds to send grassroots organizers rather than their own representatives.

Finally, encounters between people from diverse places and ways of life are of critical importance in establishing this other world. In this new world we

will no longer blame another culture ("Islam," "the Americans," etc.) for the world's problems. Instead, through contact with people from cultures other than our own, all of us will grow to understand that, despite cultural differences, those "masses" elsewhere are rather like ourselves. We can then collectively get on with the more difficult task of working together to counter what truly poses a threat to a better world—existing institutional forms, lack of creativity and power concentrated in a few hands.

Since the Forum, there is evidence of change in the CONGESCO community leaders. Mostly unpaid volunteers, leaders are each responsible for local community programs that provide necessary public services in their various communities—after-school sports programs, literacy training for the elderly, fieldtrips for youth. The expiration of public funding has resulted in a monthly meeting that often resembles a support group, enabling leaders to cope with the lack of public support for their initiatives. While the city of Rio continues to build capacity for leadership across the city's communities through a community management course, it fails to provide continued support to initiatives after course completion.

Today, CONGESCO meets to discuss how to claim the public services their communities are entitled to—sewerage, electricity, water, health, education and leisure for youth. Presently they are in the process of preparing a strategic plan to build a community movement through which local leaders can claim their rights.

As the case of CONGESCO community leaders illustrates, the resources made available by the WSF—knowledge, networks and solidarity—are important tools for grassroots community organizers. With next year's Forum scheduled to take place in India, I hope that the spirit of grassroots participation becomes strengthened. The 2004 WSF must foster the involvement of those whose needs it is concerned with—those populations most negatively affected by current approaches to development.

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To read President Luiz Ignácio da Silva's speech, visit www.brazil.org.uk/page.php?cid=1539.

For more information on the 2004 WSF, visit www.wsfindia.org.

Hyderabad, Indian: The Asian Social Forum

By Penelope Duda

In January 2003, over 15,000 delegates from South and Southeast Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America gathered in Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh, India, to forge an international social movement based on the belief that another world, and another Asia, is possible. Hyderabad was an excellent choice for such a gathering, and not only because the weather is eighty degrees *Fahrenheit* in January. Hyderabad is both the hub of foreign direct investment in India and the historical center of the country's anti-feudal struggle.

The Nizam College Grounds in Hyderabad were transformed into a powerful scene of spontaneous marches and protests, international networking and micro-commerce, as activists from Indian tribal and *dalit* ("untouchable") communities mingled with Indian and foreign intellectuals such as Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Jean Dreze and Walden Bello. Hundreds of social organizations set up booths and sold books, pamphlets, cooperatively-produced clothing and soaps, and shared their work and ideas with visiting activists.

The Forum got off to a slow start, as panel discussions started several hours late and microphones malfunctioned. Yet the mix of speakers and high energy levels made for a stimulating atmosphere. One of the opening forums on Peace and Security featured a Japanese *Hibakusha*, or atom bomb survivor, sharing the stage with a Canadian peace activist from Greenpeace and a Pakistani women's rights activist and academic. While the forum organizers took care of logistical problems, a group of *dalit* women from rural Andhra Pradesh held a march around the grounds calling for an end to globalization and American imperialism.

The Asian Social Forum is an extension of the World Social Forum and it was held in India to provide a venue for Asian activists who were not able to participate in the Porto Alegre conferences. Hyderabad is a fitting venue since it has become a center of neoliberalism in India. Andhra's chief minister, Chandrababu Naidu, has earned an international following among multinational corporations and international financial

institutions for his commitment to hi-tech development, including the construction of the "Hi-Tech City" on the city's outskirts (earning the city the nickname "Cyberabad"). His government has undertaken several internationally-financed beautification and infrastructure development projects to attract tourism and economic development to the city. These projects, however, have led to the mass evictions of informal settlement

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Inasmuch as Hyderabad's status as a laboratory for World Bank and IMF development projects makes it an excellent place to organize against neoliberal policies, Andhra's history as a site of intense anti-feudal struggle makes it even more significant. During the 1940s, peasants from the Teleganna region of what was then the Hyderabad state waged the largest guerrilla war in India's history to end bonded labor and landlord atrocities, as well as to achieve national liberation.

During the five days of the Forum, the legacy of this struggle continued, as people throughout Andhra, India and the world came together to strategize for the creation of a world in which peace, social and economic justice and genuine democracy could reign supreme. The 2004 World Social Forum will be held in India. Although the exact location has not yet been announced, India's history of people's movements and the present struggle against foreign investment should ensure a dynamic and productive event.

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