

Report
The African Social Forum, Bamako, Mali, 5-9 January 2002
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In 2001, a group of civil society organizations launched the 1st World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre (Brazil). It was organized in reaction to the World Economic Forum, which is organized each year in Davos (Switzerland) by the richest countries and the biggest companies in the world. The first WSF was an encouraging success and decision was made to organize one each year. Nevertheless, in spite of a spectacular number of participants (more than 12,000), only 30 were Africans. As local, national and international groups started the preparatory process, the international committee for the WSF decided that Africa as a region would organize its preparatory forum.

The African Social Forum (ASF) took place in Bamako, Mali, early 2002. It was organized by two African non governmental organizations : the Centre Amadou Hampate Ba, Mali, headed by Ms Aminata Traore and by ENDA Tiers Monde, under the responsibility of Mr. Taoufik ben Abdallah. Under the motto "Another Africa is possible", the ASF brought together more than 200 African organizations from all around the region. All kinds of issues were represented : debt cancellation, social equity, agriculture, etc. Among the major objectives, were included :

- to reinforce analytical capacities in order to allow social movement organizations to play their role
- to build an African space for the conception of alternatives to the neoliberal globalization
- to define strategies for social reconstruction

Although 12 thematic areas to be discussed both in plenaries and in workshops were proposed to participants, only one on "gender and equity" was devoted to women's issues and related matters. This workshop was retitled "women's talents and creativity" for the second workshop, which resulted in a drop of attendance of 50% (from 30 men and women in equal numbers to 15 women and a man). Although during a plenary session, women and youth were identified as the two vulnerable groups constituting the majority of the African social movement, none of these groups was highly represented (youth was nearly absent). Major African women's organizations were neither present nor represented. What's more, out of the broad thematic areas, none concerned specifically health issues. As a result, reproductive and sexual rights and health were not on the agenda.

The "gender and equity" workshop led to the adoption of recommendations :

- to ensure the involvement of women's organizations in policy making, at local and global levels, particularly during the negotiations taking place at big international conferences
- to ensure a bigger involvement of women in the social movement (for instance in the trade unions)
- to analyse and take advantage of new social dynamics such as popular economy in which women play a leading role

The "women's talents and creativity" workshop adopted two major strategies :

- the creation of an African network for the promotion of local economic dynamics and popular economy
- the creation of a women's tribunal against poverty and economic crimes

During a plenary session on the strengthening of the African social movement, discussions were held on important issues such as the definition of a forum as a space for the defence of common values, the composition of a forum (broad and open to diversity), etc. Identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the African social movement revealed that :

- as far as strengths are concerned, the movement could count on a strong commitment from its leadership, its diversity, the existence of skilled human resources
- as for weaknesses, the link between the civil society organisations and the broader population is often very thin, the movement is too fragmented, unable to implement long term strategies and to contribute efficiently to policymaking at national level. The movement is also too dependent on foreign structures or national governments.

The participants reached a consensus on the follow-up activities. Although the forum is not a structure, there is a need to disseminate the African Social Forum at all levels (national, sub-regional and regional). Also, African civil society organizations should structure in thematic networks (on education, trade, debt cancellation, health, etc).

Therefore, appears clearly the opportunity for African women's organizations to play a major role in the ongoing development of the African Social Forum. As for the African reproductive and sexual rights and health organizations, links should be established between the African Social Forum and another major social movement, the People's Health Movement (PHM). Interestingly, the PHM also arose from a forum (the people's Health Assembly) and is now undergoing the process of reinforcing its ownership by organizations at all levels. Vertically, the PHM is promoting the creation of local, national and regional groupings of organizations while horizontally, working circles involve people concerned by a common issue (for instance macroeconomic policies and health, World Health Organization, etc.) The Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR) has created a working circle on women's health with women's groups in several regions of the world.

In linking up with these broader social movements, African women's organizations will face the same challenges as most African organizations. They will have to define their focus, priorities, scope of activities, while conserving their autonomy. Most of all, they will need mutual empowerment. Although dealing on a daily basis with the negative effects of the economic policies promoted by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization as well as by bilateral agreements, how many African women's health and grassroots organizations feel related to an "anti-neoliberal" movement? Only a deeper collaboration between researchers and analysts, from the academic world, activists and women's grassroots organizations can allow different kinds of knowledge to flow and inform common analysis and strategies.

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