

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES : ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE ONLY IF...

A Report on the seminar titled 'The Politics, Potentials, and Meanings of the WSF in Belém : The Significance for the World Social Forum of the Participation of the Indigenous Peoples of the World', held in Belém, Brazil, on January 29, 2009

Organised by CACIM (India) & NFFPPFW - National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (India)

Report prepared for CACIM by Anil Varghese, New Delhi, India
jv.anil@gmail.com

May 22, 2009

Introduction, by CACIM

The 2009 World Social Forum was organised by the WSF at Belém in Brazil because it is in Amazonia, which is under ecological threat, and because it is one of the world's last great locations of nature in all her abundance. Equally however, Amazonia is also symbolic at a world level of the existence and struggles of indigenous peoples – who have been colonised and exploited by settler societies for centuries and today remain under intense threat across the planet. For several reasons that we at CACIM (www.cacim.net) presented in a Concept Note (available @ <http://cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CACIMatBelem>), we believe that it was extremely important to also empathetically but critically look at, interrogate, and debate the Belém Forum itself, both as a concept and as practice, and specifically in terms of the interests, rights, and worldviews of indigenous peoples; and beyond this, also the implications for the Belém Forum and for the WSF as a world process of having amidst it indigenous peoples as an organised force, now that the WSF is today finally recognising indigenous peoples and inviting them in, and in Belém said it wanted to give them centre stage.

We also felt that this must happen from ahead and during the Belém Forum, and not merely after it, as a post-mortem (as happened in the case of the Nairobi Forum in 2007). All this because to us, it was not at all clear that the Belém Forum – either as a process or as an event - was fully respecting the specific and unique perceptions of such peoples, and we felt that this respect must not be taken for granted.

We therefore organised a process of debate before the Forum (ie during December 2008 - January 2009) on the WSFDiscuss listserv, and then at the Belém Forum itself, and together with the NFFPPFW - National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers (from India), a major Workshop during the Forum, where we invited several speakers, primarily indigenous activists and strategists from different nations in the Americas, to come and speak. (For details including the names of invited speakers, please see the Programme for the meeting, available @ <http://cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CACIMatBelem>).

As it turned out, our proposed Chair for the meeting, Lee Cormie, from Canada, had to leave the Forum and rush back to Canada on account of a death in his family; and although none of the invited speakers were able to personally be there, two of them (Roberto Espinoza, Coordinator of CAOI (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indigenas – Andean Coordination of Indigenous Organisations) and Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network) nominated and sent wonderful other speakers – respectively, Hugo Blanco (of the Confederacion de Campesinos del Peru, Lucha Indigena, and CAOI) and Adolfo Montero (of OIK - Organizacion Indigena Kanuama, ONIC - Organizacion Nacional

Indigena de Colombia, and CAOI), and Ben Powless (representing the Indigenous Environmental Network).

Although we sorely missed having the original speakers and our Chair, and in particular not having any women speakers as we had originally planned in order to get their specific and very crucial perspectives, we were nevertheless very privileged indeed to have speakers of such high calibre and such deep experience, and in all, forty-five participants from fourteen countries. (For details including contact details for the speakers, see the List of Participants posted at the same link given above.)

As we hope you will gather from the report below, the discussion, and the meeting of minds that took place, fulfilled many of our original objectives, and brought out clearly just how complex and sensitive this terrain is; and in short, the opinion of the speakers was that the Belém Forum did little justice to indigenous peoples, and that the WSF has to change a lot if it is going to be able to do so.

*

“‘The Americas discovered capitalism 500 years ago’, wrote Eduardo Galeano”, recalled Hugo Blanco. The conquistadors arrived in the Americas, so did the hitherto unknown individual and his greed. Till then, the indigenous people of the Americas had only known one way of living – of living for one another and in reverence for ‘Mother Earth’. Now, the ‘I’ shorn of the collective hunted down the people, and their forests above them, and the mines beneath them.

Five centuries later, the works of greed of the powerful few and the State continues unabated. From 2002-2009, one of the participants had seen 176 people of his community in Colombia lose their lives while resisting the building of a dam in one of its rivers.

Big dams that kill rivers and oil wells that could run out of oil any day have come to signify the modern-day greed. In its decade of existence, the World Social Forum has been making laudable attempts to fight this larger malaise afflicting world society – but it has failed to acknowledge that this fight was pioneered centuries ago by the indigenous peoples of the world, who are now being pushed to the margins of existence.

Even though large areas of it have already been devastated by 'progress', the Amazon basin remains one of the few regions in the world that so far has not been taken over completely by the capitalism-fuelled greed. The city of Belém, lying by the mouth of the great Amazon river, hosted the 2009 edition of the World Social Forum. Ashok Chowdhury from the National Forum of People and Forest Workers in India, Adolfo Montero, a Kankuamo Indian from Nevada Sierra of Colombia, and Hugo Blanco, an indigenous peasant from Peru, all welcomed this symbolic gesture – but they also strongly argued for a change in the WSF from within, beginning with the Charter of Principles that has shaped the participation and activities of the Forum over the years.

Ben Powless, from Canada, and representing the Indigenous Environmental Network,

presenting his observations from the few days he had till then spent at the Belém Forum, rued that tokenism underlay the participation of the thousand-odd indigenous people who were there, “many of them who had travelled on boat for days from their homes in the interiors of the Amazon, to reach the venue” – putting on hold attending to their daily needs. He felt that there was little effort at the Forum to bridge the divide between participants from the more traditional civil society and the indigenous people. Indigenous people were encouraged to showcase their culture, and perform their dances, while the rest of the participants watched from a distance. Their costumes and colour made for good pictures but, with no translators around – because most of them didn’t speak Portuguese – and without being able to share with the rest of the world stories from their everyday battles, the Forum remained meaningless to them. While the nationalist movements from Venezuela and Cuba made themselves heard, and five heads of state from Latin America – Lula (Brazil), Chavez (Venezuela), Morales (Bolivia), Correa (Peru), and Lugo (Paraguay) – were present, they were marginalised as they would have been anywhere outside the Forum. Powless stressed the need for these spaces to be challenged to make room for the indigenous people.

Ben went on to say that this was the first time an indigenous people had been represented in the organising committee of a World Social Forum. Yet, there was little to show for this, at the event itself. This, for instance, was what Powless saw : An indigenous people’s group was supposed to take part in an event in one of the camps. They were told that the space was not ready. They then found another space for their event, and were in the middle of a speaking event when one of the organisers came up and unplugged the cord to the microphone. There were also times when the food had run out, forcing them to skip meals. Not a hint of respect or even consideration was found where it was due. “The idea of indigenous people is a highly romanticised one – of them living in harmony with nature and possessing a solution to a lot of today’s problems. It is important to understand that they live a complex experience. They have social issues in their communities that they have to deal with before they can contribute as expected by a lot of other groups,” warned Powless. Thus, the people who were supposed to hold centre-stage in the Forum were treated as outsiders – as mere objects of fascination for the rest of the world.

Adolfo Montero, of OIK: Organizacion Indigena Kanuama (the Kanuama Indigenous Organisation), ONIC : Organizacion Nacional Indigena de Colombia (The National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia), and CAOI : Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indigenas (Andean Coordination of Indigenous Organisations) agreed. “We have been excluded”, he said. “We were only invited to do cultural presentations. We are looking for some space in the Forum. We need a lot more change.”

Ashok Chowdhury of NFFPFW traced the evolution of the Forum through the years. The Mumbai Forum in 2004 brought in substantial changes to the way the event was

held, and showed that the Forum is more successful in the streets than inside a hall. On the other hand, civil society organisations and donor agencies ensured a “massacre” of the Nairobi Forum in 2007 – where the indigenous Africans were hardly represented. Belém offered hope in this area, but he felt that the very structure of the WSF – perceived or real – needs an overhaul. The way the Forum has been organised in the past was found to be very oppressive by the people who attended it, recalled Ashok. Too often the civil society assumed the position of the benefactor treating the indigenous people as beneficiaries. “We are never allowed to table our own agenda. Instead, declarations are made and programmes announced by the aid agencies. The Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations is a case in point,” he quipped.

In his opinion, the Forum needs to operate outside the framework of the nation-states if it is serious about “creating a new world” – a world which the “indigenous peoples alone” can envisage at the moment. As the dominating elite in the nation-states however, the civil societies – which are born out of the same dynamics – run the show in the Forum. The Forum needs to learn to think beyond the modern-day international boundaries if it is to be the space for movements from across the world to build alliances and exchange ideas, as mentioned in its Charter of Principles (CoP). Issues pertaining to regions and not necessarily countries gave rise to movements.

Ashok cited another clause in the CoP that keeps a number of grassroots movements out of the Forum. Movements turning to arms to resist violation of their constitutional and basic human rights have been termed ‘military organisations’ in the Charter and, in keeping with the CoP, they are prohibited from participating. But it is the military might of the state that forces these movements to move from taking up real issues to resorting to arms, he averred. Therefore, it is high time that the WSF cleared the air of ambiguity that surrounds its use of the term ‘military’ and articulated non-violence in consonance with ground realities.

Hugo Blanco of the Confederacion de Campesinos del Peru (Confederation of the Peasants of Peru), Lucha Indigena (Indigenous Struggle), and CAOI felt that the WSF needs to change its stance if it is to embrace movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico – which, ironically, is said to have inspired the global justice movement and therefore also the WSF. Blanco offered a peek into the realities in Mexico. The Zapatistas had always striven to maintain a distinction from the local guerrilla outfit, the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR – Ejército Popular Revolucionario). It had been 15 years since they first took up arms but they were yet to use them. They had a government, elected by the people, which had the charge of the armed faction. Theirs was a dignified rage against the injustice wrought by neoliberalism. Yet, there was so little that the WSF participants knew about the Zapatistas and there were very few talking about the real issues facing the indigenous communities. Instead the WSF tended to dwell on the worldwide financial and the ecological crises.

“The media has very little on climate change because the ones who own the media are the very people who are responsible for it. Yet, the indigenous people don’t need the media to tell them that the climate is changing. The receding snowlines, forest-cover, and diminishing water sources hit them first and has meant death for them,” observed Hugo. So they had struggled against the miners, loggers, corporations, and States that sucked their rivers dry knowing fully well that theirs was a struggle not merely to protect themselves but to protect humanity.

Benjamin Bunk from Germany pointed out that at the WSF, issues were viewed purely from an economic standpoint. This, along with the concept of revolution, was completely alien to and interfered with the cultural identities of the indigenous peoples. As these peoples had begun to articulate their understanding of the issues, it was time for the other participants to make a serious effort to understand and imbibe their worldview, because it was here that the alternatives to the destructive neoliberalism and capitalism have existed.

As a teacher from a local school in Belém and Ron Rousseau of the Canadian Postal Workers’ Union – himself from a First Nations (indigenous) community – observed, for indigenous peoples themselves, it made sense to come together at the WSF and build alliances because, although they spoke different languages and belonged to different cultures, they were fighting a common enemy. Rousseau, who said he was outside North America for the first time in his life, said that his world had become bigger from the resemblance he felt in what everyone was saying. For even in Ron’s Canada – where the rule of law holds sway and where development is at its most advanced stage – it is the land belonging to the indigenous people that is being dug up to meet the neighbouring USA’s boundless oil needs. It didn’t matter where the indigenous people hail from – Canada, or a much poorer Colombia, Brazil, or India. All of them were fighting in defence of the resources Mother Earth has bestowed on them against the ruthless assaults of capitalism and neoliberalism.

“Another world is possible,” quipped Adolfo Montero. “Towards that end, we have decided on a mobilisation of indigenous people worldwide in defence of Mother Earth on October 12.” He stressed the need for unity among the indigenous peoples of the world at a time when governments with their social and economic policies have declared war on them.

'Progress', as neoliberalism defines it, has been poisoning rivers, using agrochemicals, practising monoculture, and killing Mother Earth. Because for multinational companies, gobbling up resources remains the easiest way to accumulate wealth. Remarked Hugo, “Progress here is merely guided by the economics of it. We, on the other hand, have a collective mentality. We oppose this idea of a society being for the benefit of a few. If

all of society participated in deciding whether an industry should be set up, global warming would stop.”

So that this did not end up being just another declaration, and so that “discussions lead to some kind of a change” as Tord Björk, chairperson, Friends of the Earth, Sweden, put it, the WSF had to engage with indigenous peoples on equal terms. So that the indigenous peoples didn’t merely end up in photos and videos, financial commitments needed to be forthcoming prior to a Forum, to take care of their travel and accommodation – to ensure adequate participation. Translators had to be made available. In effect, they had to have a role as important as anyone else attending the Forum.

In response to requests for clarifications and information from the audience, Jai Sen of CACIM in India explained that as according to the WSF’s official websites, pan-Amazonian consultations had gone on for several months leading to Belém 2009, to urge indigenous peoples to attend the Forum. A solidarity fund had also been constituted to take care of the logistics. From CACIM’s side, Jai said that of the 100-odd organisations of indigenous peoples that it had contacted and encouraged to attend the Forum, about 15 responded and where all of them without exception cited a paucity of funds as the major reason why they did not think they would be able to take part. He added that CACIM had forwarded all their letters to the Belém Forum organisers as applications for funds from the Solidarity Fund, but had not then heard any more about this from them; and that even as prominent an indigenous leader as Marcos Terena of Brazil had not been able to attend this seminar because funds that CACIM was about to offer him, to cover his fare, were not adequate – given the very high costs of travel in Brazil. Given this record, he felt that the outcomes – participation, rejection, criticisms – of the pan-Amazon consultations and the expenditure of the Solidarity Fund should be made public.

To gauge the full extent to which the present world order is oppressive, one needs a vantage point outside of it. The extent to which our rights have been taken away by the State will only become clear once we posit the lives of the indigenous people against our lives – the products of the State. To rediscover a reverence for land and nature and to arrive at “fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth” (as mentioned in the CoP), Jai argued, the WSF, in the way it engages the remaining precious few indigenous peoples, needs – as the African-First Nation author John Brown Childs has said – “to move from a politics of conversion to an ethics of respect”.

CACIM

www.cacim.net, cacim@cacim.net
 A3 Defence Colony, New Delhi, India
 Ph +91-11-4155 1521