

NGO factor at WSF worries activists

NGO 025

Drawn
14-2-04

By Humeira Iqtidar

In the third week of January, close to 90,000 people from around the world gathered in Mumbai as part of the fourth World Social Forum (WSF). The level of organization and sheer number of activists and intellectuals who participated in this event reflected the growing intensity and momentum of the anti-globalization movement.

Discussions that began in earlier forums were taken further in Mumbai. Similarly, organizations of participants, which had their genesis in earlier meetings, strengthened and expanded in the Gurgaon's setting of the meeting. The process of understanding the injustices and contradictions of the new world order, and looking for alternatives to the oppression perpetuated by it, continued with increased vigour.

Perhaps, rather predictably, the mainstream media coverage of WSF portrayed it as a one-of event. If that were indeed the case, its importance would be relatively marginal. However, that is not the case. The WSF represents a process rather than an event. Each of the four WSFs so far has been followed by a continuous process of mobilization involving ever larger number of people.

Moreover, it has expanded with local social forums being held in all the regions of the world, including Europe, Latin America, North America, Asia and Africa. It is this process of mobilization that has led to millions of people joining the various social justice protests and anti-war rallies in the world during the period 2002-2003.

The WSF has provided a focal point to various resistance movements. The increasing credibility of the threat it poses may be discerned by the fact that the very people it opposes are now trying to gain access to it. The president of World Bank, Mr. Wolfensien, reportedly requested the organizers to let him speak at the WSF 2004. Given that mainstream media already devotes too much time to his view of the world, thankfully he was denied further airtime at the WSF. But his request to speak at WSF represents an important milestone for the anti-globalization movement. No longer can the powers that rule the world afford to ignore the WSF. Speaking at the World Economic Forum is not enough any more. In order to gain any legitimacy among their constituents, they need to co-opt the budding worldwide movement which is threatening to bring down what they have so painstakingly erected.

Just as the WEF provides a forum for the powerful elites from around the world to take stock of their achievements, the WSF provides a key rallying point for activists who refuse to assimilate in the global corporatist agenda. WSF is enormously useful to reaffirm their resolve to fight against the tyranny of free trade engendered by powerful multinationals. It is also valuable in drawing the world's attention to the process of politicization that is gaining strength globally. Finally, it is a great show of people power, a resonating denunciation of imperialism and of the anti-democratic forces embedded in corporate globalization.

At the same time, as about 90,000 of us trooped off in Mumbai for a whirlwind of discussions and debates it seemed pertinent to ponder the extent to which the highly decentralized anti-globalization movement,

Funding for the NGOs is often conditional on their apolitical stances. This process has been amply documented by various researchers in the countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Perhaps the most well known and eloquent exposition has been Ferguson's. In his book, *The Anti-Politics Machine*, he has exposed the depoliticizing impact of 'development' aid to Lesotho in Africa.

As soon as the activists become dependent on aid they are forced to break the link with politics. In the NGO world politics becomes a taboo word, and all energies are focused on framing problems as essentially and entirely 'social.' The artificial divide between the social and the political is ultimately the key reason why the impact of many NGOs in terms of achieving their stated aims has been marginal, not just in Pakistan but around the world.

'Social' problems are further categorized

There was an interesting development this year. While a large number of participants from the developed countries were political activists who had funded their travel themselves, most of the delegates from developing countries like Pakistan were members of NGOs (often with international affiliations) which had funded their travel. The substitution of activists with NGO workers will have a significant impact on mobilization at the mass level in developing countries.

as if these problems could be solved in isolation, without fundamental structural changes. Not only are they forced to carve out increasingly narrow identities for their subjects (e.g., oppressed or unskilled women or child labourers), once the donors decide to move on to environment or governance or civil society, it becomes almost impossible for the whole chain of NGOs dependent directly or indirectly on aid to not follow suit.

David Hulme of the University of Manchester in a recent book has written about the change in many Southern NGOs (SNGOs) over the last decade. He writes, "Talk with field managers nowadays and you are much less likely to hear of ideas of mobilizing the poor. North American management gurus such as Stephen Covey and Peters and Waterman are more likely sources of inspiration, despite the fact that their writings are more about making profits and organizational survival. But that, per-

haps, is what NGOs are about nowadays!"

He goes on to talk about the documented cases of Central American SNGOs especially Bolivia and Chile where NGOs have essentially been used to mitigate the effects of structural adjustment plans and instead of mobilization are now predominantly service providers or implementers of welfare projects.

The energies of activists who could have lobbied in political parties or been involved in mass mobilization against structural adjustment plans themselves, against the privatisation of health care, education and other public services, were effectively diverted in providing relief to a smaller subsection of the society. Ultimately, NGOs seem to be evolving to be, to quote Hulme 'too close to the powerful, too far from the powerless'.

When this fragmentation, this artificial division between the political and the social is resisted, active coercion follows. The example of Honduran NGO IDEPH whose foreign donors refused to support union leaders training and networking workshops that strengthened a joint front is unfortunately not an aberration but rather the norm.

Interestingly, almost all of the NGO heads or managers that one speaks to in Pakistan believe that although this cooption certainly works in the case of other NGOs somehow their own NGO has escaped these constraints.

There is no doubt that many who work in NGOs are motivated by a desire to do something useful for society. That their work is easily subverted and its impact negated by the very structure of the industry they work in is a reality they must be ready to face. And yes, I did use the word, industry. In fact, NGOs are among the key industries in developing countries.

When David Lewis commented that during the 1980s, "Only two institutions consistently flourished in the Central American crisis: the military and the NGOs" he could have just been talking about Pakistan or many third world regions.

As the public sector contracts, industrialization stagnates, and employment opportunities shrink in the developing world, the NGO sector has emerged as a key employer. The majority of those who depend on aid money for their livelihood are unlikely to organize against US hegemony, World Bank dominance of Pakistani policy making or for fundamental political changes.

The situation is, of course, not uniformly bleak across the world. Many activism-oriented NGOs have managed to uphold a consistently political outlook. As a general trend, however, that has been the case in countries where the tradition of progressive politics has been relatively strong.

The anti-globalization movement can only continue its remarkable progress if the socially progressive participants are politicized. If it becomes a giant NGO forum, sponsored by rich donors, it can easily lose its effectiveness. At the same time, the focus of WSF mobilization should increasingly be in the developing countries. Perhaps the same energy and resources spent on the world event now need to be diverted towards strengthening the social forum in African and Asian regions in particular through a support for local activists. ■

can continue to sustain meaningful interaction among the people.

Growing dissatisfaction with the influx of a great number of NGOs, many of which only marginally share the core objective of the initial movement, is visible. This year, for instance, an alternative to WSF, called Mumbai Resist held its own meeting across the highway from the WSF. It was organized by some who felt that in trying to accommodate increasing number of perspectives, the WSF line on international politics was too ambiguous to be of much practical use.

There is nothing that the corporate media loves more than to offer a distorted version of this image, depicting the WSF as a hodgepodge of hippies and confused young people who have not thought through the issues they come to discuss. Or as Tony Blair likes to call it: 'The travelling circus of anarchists'. While such a view is of course nothing but a distortion of the truth, it is important for the movement to subject itself to a process of self-examination, so that it maintains its strong growth while retaining its core philosophy.

In this regard, there was an interesting development this year. While a large number of participants from the developed countries were political activists who had funded their travel themselves, most of the delegates from developing countries like Pakistan were members of NGOs (often with international affiliations) which had funded their travel. While one must realize that it is much more expensive for the activists from developing countries to finance international travel, still the substitution of the activists with NGO workers will have a significant impact on mobilization at the mass level in developing countries.

For one, it will have an effect on the level of politicization of the movement. Movements derive their strength from the politicization of their members. Politicization allows each participant to understand the links between seemingly disconnected events or groups and his/her own position within the larger phenomenon and movement. A common understanding serves as glue within the movement, allowing automatic coordination of remote actions.

In this respect each participant comes to embody the movement and becomes a leader in his/her own small circle of influence. In addition, this understanding allows prediction, and prediction allows proactivity. The higher the level of politicization, of a holistic understanding of fundamental structures that need to be confronted, the stronger grows the movement.

Over the past forty or so years, mainstream intellectual discourse has tried to systematically marginalize the importance of politics and politicization of the masses. A physical manifestation of this agenda has been the growing proliferation of the NGOs.