

[re]connecting the World Social Forum

January 2007

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Introduction

As the 2007 World Social Forum (WSF) got underway on January the 20th in Nairobi, we completed the last in a series of discussions and workshops that have involved nearly one hundred people, mostly from around Maritzburg. We called this little project: 'Connecting the WSF' for a couple of reasons. Firstly, although people at the WSF talk about the problems and struggles of poor people around the world, little effort seems to be made to talk first with actual people who face these problems and take up these struggles. Instead what seems to happen a lot is that a sort of elite of 'activists' and people from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) attend these kinds of big meetings and speak about the problems and on behalf of the people and their struggles. Secondly, the WSF could be very important for those who really need to change the unfair and exploitative way that world works. But we suspected that, in practice, the work that the WSF does and the possibilities it might offer in these struggles are mostly unknown in the lives of ordinary people – it is not connected in any meaningful way. If what we suspected was actually true then some important questions arise: who's actual issues and agenda are being taken forward by those who attend the WSF from around here (and elsewhere too perhaps)?; and isn't it actually disempowering for ordinary and poor people when their lives and struggles are 'represented' by others, but their own voices and capacities are not the driving force?

These questions are also shared by some even within the NGOs and they thought they were important enough for them to support the idea of some sort of process to listen rather than teach, to learn rather than impose, to trust rather than provide direction. Using contacts within this group, our meetings were set up with 'ordinary' people from different places that the organisations had contact with. We were trying to use existing dominant civil society networks precisely to get 'beyond' them and to limit the distortions that can come from the interests and agendas of middle-class NGO-based (and other) activists.

This report shares some of the important things we have heard and learned over the past few months. We have tried as best we can to simply report faithfully what was actually said in the discussions by the people who came. By the end, nearly one hundred people had been part of these conversations. In each place where we talked with people, we used the same basic structure for our discussions. We wanted a workshop structure that might allow people to get at least some understanding of why the WSF exists and then to spend most time talking together about what poor people, especially in the different places where people were, might have to say to the WSF.

Talking about why the WSF exists, we started by noting that although the world now has the ability to make enormous wealth and to produce so many things that could make people's lives good, it is actually just a very small elite who have most of the wealth and who enjoy a good life. For the masses of people around the world, their lives remain shaped by poverty, degradation and powerlessness. We talked about how the systems of producing and selling, and the political systems of power and control that keep them in place, are more and more connected together around the world too.

But we also notice that the people do not simply accept what is wrong and unfair – often they organise, analyse and resist to fight for their rights and to change what is wrong and unfair in their worlds. Some of the things that allow the powerful rich elites to coordinate their actions, like communications technologies and international travel, have started to become available also to some involved in these struggles to change the world. This development has made it possible for some people involved in various struggles around the world to connect with each other, to learn about the different issues and ways of fighting against them, and to plan together where there are possibilities of acting together. As a result, some have talked about an emerging 'global justice movement'. One of the biggest examples of this 'global justice movement' is the WSF.

The first WSF was held in January of 2001. It was hosted by the city of Porto Alegre, in Brazil, where the municipality was experimenting with an innovative and democratic model for local government, combining traditional representative institutions with the participation of open assemblies of the people. Twelve thousand people from all around the world attended that first WSF. The WSF has met – and grown - every year since then. It provides a powerful space to challenge the ideas and plans of the powerful elites (political, economic, social, ideological) who effectively shape the world we live in – and who are responsible for the major injustices we face. In 2007, the WSF meets for the 7th time. For the first time in its history, it will take place in Africa. The event is bringing activists, social movements, networks, coalitions and other progressive forces from Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe and all corners of the African continent to Nairobi, Kenya, between the 20th and the 25th of January 2007. Organisers are expecting between 50 000 and 100 000 people to attend.

Almost all of our workshops took place in the neighbourhoods where people lived. In our discussions in the 'Connecting the WSF' process, we started with this question: “Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?”. After that, each workshop looked at the nine themes that the 2007 WSF organisers had chosen to guide the activities of this year's WSF [see box below] and participants did a voting exercise to select which of the WSF's themes they thought were most relevant or important in their places and their lives. After everyone in the workshop had voted, they could look at the votes to choose one or two themes that got prioritised by most people there. For the remainder of their time together, people opened up and analysed this theme (sometimes more than one theme) around the following question: “Think, then talk, about the way that that chosen theme is really felt and experienced by the poor and marginalised in your community or group. In other words perhaps, how does this issue confront you, and how does it make people feel? Why is it like that?”.

Themes for WSF 2007. In preparing for the 2007 'edition' of the WSF, organisers tried to get an idea of what issues and action people wanted to talk about. A special committee of the WSF then looked at all the submissions they received and they organised these into nine 'thematic axes' to guide the activities and discussions at the Nairobi WSF. In our workshops there was usually shocked amusement when grassroots people realised that the 'consultation' to get people's ideas, actions, and issues had been primarily done by inviting people to make submissions to the WSF website – thereby excluding almost everyone who took part in the workshops, and millions of others, who don't have access

to computers, phones, the internet and so on!

The level of language that was used in the WSF's own descriptions of the themes was very high. In our own preparation for the 'connecting the WSF' workshops, and in order to allow participants to say what they thought about them, we developed – together with an adult education specialist - a somewhat clearer and simplified list of these nine themes as follows:

1. Building a world in which there is peace and justice, where people behave in a fair and right way, and where there is respect for the different religious or spiritual beliefs that people have.
2. Fighting to free the world from the power that capital, especially big multinational companies and banks, has over the world.
3. Making sure that everyone can have and can use things that should belong to everyone, like air, and water, and that these things are used in a way that doesn't destroy them for the future.
4. Making sure that everyone can have meaningful information and knowledge they want and need.
5. Making sure that everyone is treated with respect, and that no-one is treated badly because they are different, or because they are a woman, or because of where they come from, and so on. Helping people see that differences between us are a good thing, not a bad thing.
6. Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights.
7. Building a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and rights of peoples, in other words, a world where people have rights and have the power to make decisions about and for themselves.
8. Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run.
9. Building real democratic political structures and institutions with full people's participation on decisions and control of public affairs and resources, so that people have control over the things that affect their lives.

The report that follows begins with comments written by the facilitator after completing all the workshops. This section brings together contributions from the different discussions under some of the most persistently recurring themes. After that, there are reports that were written about each workshop. We have included a report on “the workshop that didn't happen” because the discussion of failure seemed significant to us too.

To avoid wasting paper and the reader's time, the original reports have been shortened by:

- (a) not repeating the lists of participants' names (these have been put together at the beginning of the whole report);
- (b) not repeating, each time, the steps and questions that were built into the workshop structure that we used (and which are described in the paragraph above); and
- (c) not listing all the votes given to all nine WSF 2007 themes in each workshop, but only showing those that got the most votes and which become the subject for subsequent discussion.

At the end of the workshop reports (see the section: “Overall voting on themes from all the workshops”) we have summarised, and briefly commented on, the overall votes on all the nine themes.

Comments

Mark Butler

Introduction

As facilitator of the workshops, I had the privilege of listening to all of them. With that privilege comes perhaps the responsibility to highlight some themes that came up again and again and that seemed significant. What I have heard are not just people's testimonies about the brutal inhumanity of inequality, poverty and domination of poors in post-apartheid South Africa – though it certainly is that. What I have heard are the possibilities (and the challenges) of freedom and transformation in the hands and minds of those poors.

By drawing attention to major themes and issues in what people chose to speak about, I do not intend displacing the extraordinary and evident capacity of people to describe and theorise their suffering, and to imagine a better, humane and fair world that is possible only through their acting together. Also, let us not fall into the trap of a kind of romanticising of 'the poor' as if they are just a generic category whose sufferings can be generalised under themes we chose, and whose humanising political project can be deduced in an abstract way outside of the actual struggles and desires of real people in real places. Although this section of the report takes contributions from different workshops in different places together to build up general points, it is very clear that each place, each time, and each group of people is ultimately unique, and that the actual shape and texture of evil, and the course of the struggle for good, can only be understood and determined respecting that truth.

Nonetheless, there certainly were themes that came up repeatedly and cut across the workshops. People's elaboration and theorisation of these issues seems to me extremely powerful and I think that it should be taken seriously by others who consider struggles for decency, human being, and freedom necessary. Hopefully this section points to some of this material – and encourages reading the reports from each workshop from where the specific comments that we quote¹ here are drawn.

Being poor

Poverty most often seems to be written about as a condition 'out there' - some set of objective and measurable conditions that exist, and perhaps can be fixed. Conversation with poor people allows another articulation – the murderous scandal of poverty as human life and experience. It is also striking that talking about people's rights, as well as their experience of the treatment of their rights in the justice system, is often only meaningful in (and connected to) the context of talking about being poor.

¹ Note that all quotations in this section indicate that text has been selected from the workshop reports. The workshop reports were drafted by the facilitators based on notes taken during each one and then checked back as far as possible with others who had been in that particular workshop.

Being poor is an assault on being human and undermines self-worth.

“On that theme about treating everyone with respect, there is something important in the Holy Book about loving your neighbour. As poors and shackdwellers we have been mistreated, even in our families and also in schools and in so many places that are our world. In fact, in the world as it is now, we are treated as if we don't exist.”

“In the hospitals, unless you are rich and have medical aid, you are treated like shit. They just want to push us away, and the staff are really terrible in the way they treat ordinary poor people.”

“In the hospitals and clinics, the nurses don't treat people like human beings and patients – they act to us more like policemen who abuse and mistreat us. We think this is because they have money and we don't ... the nurses and professionals are rich and we are poor.”

“In our houses and neighbourhoods there is mud and poverty – so much that people won't even be comfortable to come in to our homes.”

Poor people see very clearly that rights that exist on paper only – for example, South Africa's world-renowned constitutional rights – are a cruel lie for the poor. Being poor means that the rights that people would actually want are not really available to them. Those rights that the poor can at least partly access, are compromised anyway because there is a clear difference in quality from what the rich can access.

“[T]he limitation of our rights is the problem. It's fine to say 'you have a right to food' – but when you go to the shops where there is food, the stuff costs money. The same with proper healthcare. If you are not rich you can't get better things or services. So our 'rights' are limited in the real world by the difference between rich and poor. This is true for all of our rights.”

“Thinking about the right to healthcare, although we are glad that we don't have to pay at our clinic, the quality of care is terrible. You go in with a sickness and come out with Panamor [generic Panado tablets] every time.”

“When we think about rights to things like healthcare and decent work, it has become very clear that we must keep focus on real quality – it's not just delivery and rollouts that you can announce in terms of numbers. Even 20 new hospitals in our place would not help if they are crap hospitals, 100 new jobs are no help if they are crap jobs. These things must respect human beings and make really human life possible and better. As to the right to food – well, people are starving now.”

“[W]hen some houses were delivered they have no toilets or taps, they are too small and their quality is too bad to be thought of as homes for real people.”

“Not nearly enough people have access to decent housing as it is, and the few government houses that are being built are insulting, they are too small for family life.”

“Also on the question of rights to these different things, it is very important to be clear about the **quality** of what we demand. Profit-making and a bad attitude to the poor combine always so that when we do get access to some of these things, the quality of what we get is completely different to the good quality that rich people can access. This is true for all of the

things listed in this theme as rights - food, healthcare, education and decent work – and it is not right. And at the end of the day, without money, the really poor do not have access.”

In the liberal fantasies that project and defend the post-apartheid miracles and freedoms, it is the justice system that should be an important part of the rights architecture. Being poor means seeing through this misleading ideology of the 'rule of law'; it means experiencing the justice system as an integral part of the architectures of old and new patterns of exploitation and violation.

“The WSF needs to hear how our so-called justice system works in our rural areas. When crimes are 'black-to-black', then there are arrests immediately but not when whites kill blacks. So, never mind the whole justice process, there are not even arrests which should be the first step. The judicial system still victimises blacks... In our struggles for justice in rural areas it is clear that we need assistance and funding especially for getting good legal services of attorneys and advocates. We feel strongly that there are many unresolved cases that must re-opened and properly dealt with.”

“We talked about whether the people should be closer to the police? The reasons why we ask ourselves this question include some of the following things: from time-to-time, the dead body of someone who has been killed is dumped and then found in our area. Maybe the reason for this is that the grass is allowed to grow high in shack areas and so it is easy to dump these things here. But then the outside people, and the police especially, get the idea that this is a bad place here and then they do not care about us. The police treat us badly here and they assume we are all criminals. But on the other hand, there are serious problems, like housebreaking and rape and drug abuse, that are affecting us very much and are the reason why we do need good policing. Perhaps they should choose, together with us, maybe 5 men and 5 women to be policing our area. Certainly we need a quiet, safe place to live in.”

“Because there is too much crime here, especially housebreakings and burglaries, we need to have a police station.”

“Crime is also a horrible problem that is affecting too many people here. We are especially concerned about rapes and abuse that is happening. It is made worse because our nearest police station, at Mountain Rise, is not functioning – if you ever call them for an emergency in the night they will never come – maybe sometimes they'll come the next day in the morning. Use of drugs is very high in our area too, and people are selling to our school-children. This is connected to the fact that so many school-leavers, even the ones who finish to Matric-level, have no jobs, so they are just around.”

“Crime is a problem that affects us here. And it also affects not just households and individuals but also our community life. For example, this hall that we are using tonight should have electricity but, as we can all see, there is none because vandals have broken everything². Another aspect of crime that affects everyone badly, and especially the poor, are things like fraud and corruption.”

Nonetheless, the idea of people's rights still has resonance and promise to motivate and justify ongoing struggle.

“We think that it is important to raise levels of awareness of people's rights, including some of those in the South African constitution, so that people can be encouraged to fight for them

² Note that the time we had to talk and work together in this workshop was limited because, after sunset, we had less and less light – and when we finished, it was completely dark.

in their actual lives and communities.”

Housing, Land, Services

Deep anger simmers at boiling point when poors speak about the absolute basic necessities of shelter and services. It is hardly surprising that these have so often been the spark for rebellion and protest in townships and shack settlements across the country in recent times. These are the personal, familial and communal spaces where the dramas of betrayal of the struggle, of the serial lying by politicians and political parties about a 'better life for all', are perhaps most present.

Housing

“People are crying for houses. The basic services that people need for living (like water and energy) are either not there at all, or they are too expensive for people to afford, so there are more and more disconnections, rates arrears evictions, cut-offs and so on.”

“The politicians make promises only to get our votes. ... We question whether there is any real intention, except for lying to us perhaps, behind all the 'mission statements'. ... [W]hen some houses were delivered they have no toilets or taps, they are too small and their quality is too bad to be thought of as homes for real people.”

“There is also a crisis in housing. Not nearly enough people have access to decent housing as it is, and the few government houses that are being built are insulting, they are too small for family life.”

“For us who are living in the shacks, they must bring us in a house. When we talk about a house we mean to include also water, electricity, a toilet. For this we need land – land where we are living, because we will not be made to move away from here.”

“For us, some of the things that affect us daily are issues like toilets, evictions, land, housing, unemployment and indeed all the social problems that we endure as poors.”

Land

“Some of those who own vast lands do not want to share what they have with the people.”

“The question of land ownership is critical. Many, especially poor, people do not have land and yet there is much vacant and unused land which is privately owned. This land should be accessed and used productively. We are not sure that giving such land to the government is a good idea because this can be abused and corrupted, but perhaps government can play a role to facilitate people's access.”

“The question of land is very important because, when we want to build these different things for our communities, we find that the land is not available because somebody owns or controls it.”

Services

“Water is so important and we must deal with questions of access and affordability. Under current policies, even where people have 'access' this is blocked by unaffordable water tariffs – which means again that the poor really do not have access.”

“Another thing that is affecting our community life and our shared spaces is the problem of waste and litter. All sorts of things, even dead animal carcasses, are dumped around here because there is no waste collection or waste disposal system. And of course, without these services the dirt stays and piles up.”

“There is no system to remove the dirt and rubbish from our place.”

“[T]he shack settlement is not a quiet place! Maybe you could call it a problem of noise pollution. For example, if you are studying, you are not taken seriously and can't do your studies because there are loud radios and music going on in all the neighbouring shacks. There is no respect for space and this makes family life or looking after growing children very hard.”

If we expand 'services' to include those for education, health and youth, then these emerge as important recurrent themes too. Perhaps it is hardly surprising to hear from poor people such perspectives as the dearth of facilities and poor service quality. But, as always, the ways in which different elements are understood to come together to shape the particular experiences, and people's analysis of how their experiences are in turn connected with much deeper problematics, is rich and insightful.

Learning and education

“Schooling has many difficulties. There is no school in our place so the children have to travel, usually for at least an hour. For this, they need transport which costs money and so the poor are excluded from the schools by these kinds of expenses. Also the travelling exposes our children to the dangers of accidents which leaves them disabled. And learning is very hard when you are hungry. Too many children leave home for school without eating and then they are sleeping in class - and you are not really getting an education this way.”

“Education is another problem. Perhaps it should be 'nationalised' so that the fees and other costs can be made lower. At the moment, increasing costs are excluding more and more poor people from education. But there are other aspects to the education problems. For example, even those who graduate from the education system don't get employed when they are finished – most seem to join the growing numbers of unemployed. So we need to really re-think what is being learned and taught; we need to connect what we teach with what is actually needed in our communities, especially what is needed to be productive. This is not the same as what is happening now when big business and its friends tell government and educators what *they* need and how education should respond to *their* needs in terms of workers and managers.”

“What would also be important is a youth centre, with computer facilities, and ABET [Adult Basic Education and Training]. Different skills are important for the youth who are growing up in the world today. And our older people are not well educated and this affects them badly in life.”

“We also think that education and the lack of skills is very problematic – there are not enough schools for our children here.”

“The lack of schools and good education in rural areas is also a problem. It adds to the problem of illiteracy. Illiteracy in our areas can be very dangerous. For example, when black workers cannot understand clearly the instructions of white bosses, they are likely to be beaten. Farm workers are also expected to work with dangerous chemicals and machinery, but when you are illiterate the danger of being injured by these things is greater.”

Health and HIV/AIDS

“On HIV/AIDS we must make clear that there must be no more endless talking about this thing and no more funding to NGOs who have made an industry out of this issue. Now we need resolution; we need genuine, real action to change the situation, and we need accountability of NGO funding on HIV/AIDS.”

“HIV/AIDS is a very important challenge. Its spread is connected with many of the social and economic issues we have already been discussing as well the failure of government to deal with it properly. The role of some of our traditional healers has been negative when they have claimed that 'traditional' medicines can cure this disease and so, as a result, people have not taken other precautions that would help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps there should be an internationally-agreed UN plan that forces implementation in all the countries of the world.”

“There are also important health issues, like HIV/AIDS and TB that are affecting many people. And access to government clinics is not good because they are far away from where we live.”

Youth

“For our children here, we need to have schools and a crèche as well. There is no recreation place for our children and young people either.”

“Young people need sport fields too for different kinds of sports that would help to keep them busy.”

“Poverty and the lack of jobs is bad and affects the youth especially. There is more and more drug use, and young people are also involved in crime. Many young people are orphans as a result of violence in the past and also because of HIV/AIDS.”

Being made poor – the economy

What might be thought of as 'fundamental' depends on who you speak to, or whose side you're on. So many anti-poor policies and measures have been unleashed on the people since 1994 in the name of getting the 'economic fundamentals' in place. Usually this means creating the conditions for investment, capital accumulation and profit-making by business elites, here and globally. For those outside the elites, these fundamentals don't just ignore their interests – they actually intensify the rates at which they are exploited; they condemn growing numbers to precarious employment and unemployment; they magnify the already scandalous gap between rich and poor; they drain resources from poor to rich; they place basic necessities and services out of reach for more and more people. The economy is experienced as parasitic, cruel and dehumanising – and fundamental to the creation of poverty. No wonder so many people spoke about the need to change economics so that people came first, not profits and money. It is also clear that the power of economic forces, and the aggressively dominant ideologies that buttress it, are such that it is hard for people to really imagine what a radically different alternative could be like – but this imagination is absolutely necessary too.

“We think the WSF should hear about poverty and the lack of jobs in our place. Somehow these things, and especially the gap between richer and poorer, are behind many of the problems we face.”

“Some of us would say that fighting capitalism must be first and in fact if we make that the priority, then the others, even the other two themes our group has prioritised, become irrelevant. This is because all of these other things, like the rights we are denied and the unfair treatment we get, are the result of a system. In that capitalist system, a few rich keep all these things away from the poor – even the possibility of respect and dignity. This is because, if there is no food in the stomach, a person becomes like a wild thing and acts in a way that the rich can't think of as being dignified. ... [C]hanging the economy to put people first, and not money and profit, is especially important. In the history of Abahlali baseMjondolo, our struggle broke out when land that had been promised to us for housing was given to a capitalist industry to make profit there instead. This angered the shackdwellers very much and was the spark for the first march by Kennedy Road residents.”

“We think the WSF should hear about unemployment here. The high levels are not because people are 'lazy' and nor is it because people lack 'capacity' – there really are not enough jobs for the people. There are all sorts of reasons for this, including the trade policies of our government and the profiteering of companies, but we also see how technologies are killing us as machines and computers replace workers. We are not sure whether government can create jobs or what is to be done about this crisis.”

“When we begin to see the links between these different issues – like land, water, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, housing - we also see that there is a pattern behind them, a pattern that has a lot to do with race and with class. And we also see that behind this pattern is the power and interests of multi- and trans-national capital which has even affected the policies of government.”

“The casualisation of labour is affecting people in the townships a lot, especially women.

When you look at many of the employers, like at Checkers and Pick 'n Pay, they are only asking people to work for certain hours at a time and not giving full employment anymore. This undermines people in all sorts of ways, for example, their employment benefits are cut, their job security is gone, the wages are less, and organising into trade unions that could fight for workers rights and better conditions is made much harder.”

“The high, and increasing, prices of staple foods is affecting everybody but of course this especially affects the poor.”

“When I sit at home and think about how putting profits before people affects us, I wonder about these annual events like Christmas, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day. The way that businesses use these events to seduce ordinary people into spending lots of money really has an effect. And most of this money is spent on silly things that have little to do with any real or good meaning that these annual events could have. It seems to us that the pressure of consumerism – which is there to make profits for the businesses – makes it happen that, those with little spend a lot, but those with more money save and spend more wisely. Perhaps it's also just that the rich are more greedy and hoard their money! But the effects of these pressures on the poor is really bad.

A really powerful example of this is the Lotto. The actual effect of the Lotto is to drain the pockets of the poor who buy these lottery tickets again and again, hoping it'll be like some magical investment turning R10 into millions for them. For the poor this seems like perfectly rational behaviour – so, if I don't win today I go hungry for a day, but I'll try again and again. It also becomes addictive – it's like gambling. Actually, it's like another tax on the poor. We remember that when the Lotto was set up, government said it would raise money for 'development' for the poor. This gave government the excuse to carry on cutting spending on social services and benefits while the poor paid for it themselves by buying the Lotto tickets (and even then, we don't see the money that is being raised really benefiting the poor).”

“Saving your money is maybe a good thing that more people should do but, if you are really poor and without proper employment, just making maybe enough money to get through a day at a time, then obviously this is impossible. Not all of us here are in that position. Even among those blacks who work, there are big differences – some are not paid enough to save any money over and above surviving the cost of living. When we realise that some can save but others cannot, we see that there are class divisions and differences among black South Africans now.”

“Another economic thing that really drains people's earnings is credit. Our people are pushed by all sorts of pressures and offers to open accounts with all the 'big brand' shops where you can buy fashionable clothing and stuff. Even if they can't really afford it, they get more of these credit cards and then have to owe money and interest. Behind these credit cards are the profits of the big banks and financial institutions. But these profits are at the expense of the poor who find themselves owing money and having to cut spending on perhaps food, medicine or schooling to pay it back. An important part of the pressure to use these credit cards and spend in this way has to do with the way we are made to feel - that we must look to a higher class where we actually don't belong. You can't just be yourself anymore, and there's real shame in being - or even looking – poor. And the pressure is relentless – there's always a new fashion, an upgraded cell phone model, or the latest car – so you can never really win, but you can keep on spending your money – and helping to make profit for someone else.”

“On the theme about changing the economy to put people first, when we think about what it means to make our economy something that lasts, it is clear that most of our people are not well taught about handling money. Look at our parliamentarians and the corruption they are swimming in. They can't see that creating wealth shouldn't be just about helping themselves only. But this is a general problem among our people - that they don't handle money wisely. This is not good and it means that even when wealth is created it just creates stress and even death. This need for training and proper thinking about money is important. South Africa is a rich country really, but our wealth is not being handled well, from the top to the bottom. In rural areas we do not even know how to write a proposal for projects, we only know about stokvels. We notice that when we talk about 'the economy' we think of money. But we were rich before this money thing was introduced. We had cattle, land and property. Now we are landless and poor.”

“About [the right to] decent work: our experience is that unless you have relatives with good jobs or money to pay in bribes, you don't find a way to get a decent job. This is bad, and also means that the small group of rich people keep on getting richer and the poorer people are pushed out, even over generations.”

“Perhaps we have to focus on jobs first so that people have money to access their rights. But then it is very important that we need decent work and not just any job where you are exploited.”

“When we think about changing our economy so that people come first, and not profits, then we say again that everyone must have enough money for all the things in life – but there are not jobs for the people. Things are selling for too much money and so ordinary people are not getting any profit. We can try to find a place to make a garden where we can plant food to sell, and we can try to start our small businesses, but always the costs of making this happen make it so that there is not profit at the end of the day. We talked about the many different kinds of small businesses and development projects that we have done to try and make some money. But always, the economics does not work for us, and any money we have or that we make in the first stages, gets used up trying to keep it going. We just cannot make it work against the big businesses who can sell many things at cheaper prices and who make the real profits.

... We wondered how it could be different if, really, people were put first and if we shared things more fairly rather than the big businesses and powerful entrepreneurs making lots of profit. ... Even though we have democracy, these things have not changed. The big businesses and the people high up have the benefits and the power. Obviously this system is working for them and they will not be the ones who will want to change it. We, at the bottom, want to go up and so we at the bottom must come together and make our plans. Maybe even if we just plant gardens for food so the rich can buy from us? But the big business people know where to get the cheapest things to sell for profit – and the small ones don't know about this. These are hard questions about how to change the economy!”

“But the pro-capitalist policies that government has chosen are also the result of the big and powerful international forces – represented by things like the World Bank, the IMF [International Monetary Fund], Bush, etc.. This is why it is not just South Africa that has chosen these kinds of capitalist policies but most African countries and elsewhere in the world too. But then the question comes back again: how can we really act to change this and to put people first instead?”. “We think it is a hard question – really how to put people first instead of profits.”

Being women

Politically correct and developmentalist languages and approaches have so emphasised the need to 'mainstream gender' that the urgency and brutality of what it means to carry the multiple burdens of oppression that black, poor women shoulder is paradoxically getting lost in mainstream representations of post-apartheid South Africa. When the heads on those shoulders speak, though, they articulate a truth that's hard to miss.

“[W]e know that in all these problems that we have been discussing, it is women who are bearing the brunt. We are poorer, always. We are more excluded, always. We are more exploited, always. We talked about whether it might help if there was a woman leader at the top of the system who could change things – but we don't think so, we think these problems are much deeper and are built into the system. And so we face the questions about how we would re-build from the bottom-up to get what we really wanted, and why things have not gone right even after we thought we defeated apartheid. We ask ourselves why blacks and black men are reproducing the same system that abused them. Perhaps, as women, we know something about this - about how patterns of abuse affect everyone that is touched by them, and can make them to carry on with the same patterns.”

“On that theme about treating everyone with respect, the abuse of our women should be raised. They are treated by men as slaves and servants. It's true, even among the farm dwellers, there is not respect for women – so this is a problem in all sectors. We had an experience during a protest march in Pietermaritzburg when a youngish girl, who was standing away from the crowd who were marching, was beaten and hit by an Indian policeman and four African policemen – it was clear she was treated like this just because she was female. This reality, and many others, make us to know that there is no democracy in KwaZulu-Natal, it is only something we hear about. Black people are sexually abusing - no let us be explicit: they are raping - women, including older women. Are we no longer human beings anymore? Not even animals do this. What has happened to our sense of humanity?”

“For many young women, these pressures [of consumerism] have the effect of making us look for a rich boyfriend (and this also connects with some of the ways that HIV/AIDS is being spread.). We can't find employment easily but there is pressure to look good and fashionable, and so this is seen as the only way.”

Being black

Some left-wing approaches and traditions have often emphasised economic class as almost more important than race in analysing the South African situation. In the post-apartheid era, where a small but important black middle-class has become central to the re-organisation of systems of power and money, this tendency has sometimes become even more pronounced – for example, some analysts speak of a change from racial apartheid to class apartheid. Obviously there is an important point being made in this kind of analysis but it can become patently ridiculous in the face of the racially-structured relations of domination and exploitation that still so powerfully shape the material, intellectual and symbolic universe of the people.

In our current context of the utter betrayal of promised fundamental transformation, whiteness continues to be mostly synonymous with the power and force of the status quo, and blackness for the most part describes being the target of abuse and predation. People confront the truth of collaboration by the black elite³, economic and political, with pain and new awakenings to the capacity of everyone for bad – and for good.

In a sense, the overlay between race and class that structures life in South Africa was implicit throughout the discussions.

“When we begin to see the links between these different issues – like land, water, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, housing - we also see that there is a pattern behind them, a pattern that has a lot to do with race and with class.”

But the racial character of life for poors was perhaps most explicitly and insistently expressed in a workshop with people from rural areas and white commercial farms. For activists emerging from the struggles in these areas, the structure of power and violence remain very starkly racialised.

“The whites, and the white system, abuses us blacks in our own places. Even blacks who are employed by whites abuse us. For example, black farm workers carry out abuses against us living in rural areas. They do this because of the relationship they have to the white farmers which makes them very vulnerable and dependant because they have absolutely no alternatives to doing what they are told to do. Evictions and murders by whites are continuing. Assaults on farm-dwellers and rural blacks by whites are continuous and nobody seems to care. ... People should also hear about how black people's cattle continue to be impounded and sold. Also remember that black farm workers receive no employment benefits like pensions or medical aid. These things are not right and they make poverty worse. Black people continue to be murdered by boers [white farmers] as if we are nothing, as if we are animals.

Also, people with HIV/AIDS are treated badly in our areas and the whole problem of HIV/AIDS is seen as a problem caused by, and affecting, blacks. There are many examples but we saw this clearly when the blood transfusion service banned blacks from donating blood. What this said was that black people's blood was not good enough to treat white people - it is seen as somehow dirty and tainted. ...

To understand how it can be that, even though we have had twelve years of 'democracy', things are pretty much the same for black South Africans, we must remember that many of the people who were in charge during apartheid are still there, still in charge. In this sense, blacks are in power but only in name, not in reality. But it is also true that now a small number of blacks are benefiting out of the system that has not changed much. This group is getting stinking rich and so they won't or can't speak against the system. Also, things like the property clause in our Constitution have kept the old system in place because it means that white farmers can do what they like on their property and the government cannot interfere.”

Being led

When poors speak about any number of the struggles they confront on a daily basis, conversation

³ Further related aspects are discussed elsewhere in people's reflections about the nature of politics after apartheid.

invariably turns to the political and governance framework within which these dramas are unfolding. Their experience of 'democracy' in the post-apartheid era yields some of the most passionate anger at the ways in which they are treated with utter contempt by politicians and councillors; their analyses of the processes and mechanisms that try to keep them obedient, silent, and powerless are savage and insightful. Politicians and parties that had been warmly regarded as vehicles for the liberation of the people have become instruments of insult and mechanisms of enrichment for a few. That they continue to (ab)use the promises of freedom and a better life to periodically solicit votes from the poor, only adds insult and has completely hollowed-out cherished dreams of democracy. People's most immediate experiences of this charade of lying and contempt are chiefly local, in the spheres of local government, local councillors and party structures, but it is very clear that much more fundamental questions are being raised about politics and democracy as such.

“We live in a democratic country but democracy does not exist.”

“It is clear to us, twelve years after apartheid, that democracy in South Africa is something for the rich and the powerful; it is for the MECs, the parliamentarians and the rich elite. For us it is a mess. But when you've got money, you can do anything and everything. We have moved from apartheid to a new apartheid where the rich have power and the middle-class and the stinking rich still do the same as they did before. Money talks.”

“[T]he elected politicians are actually after money, fame and selfish power, and they have no love for the people. And this is true from the top to the bottom of the political systems. If this wasn't true then there would follow up on the promises they make to us, there would be resources, and life would be getting better.”

“We need to talk about – and others should hear - that we no longer trust those who have power now in South Africa.”

“The poor especially, are complaining that the politicians make these meetings only happen when it's coming time to vote. Then they will have meetings, make promises, supply people with breyani, and do the whole 'Rajbansi show'. But once they're in office, 'to hell with you'.”

“Accountability has gone. Even in the times when there are going to be elections, the people don't choose the candidates we can vote for. The parties impose them on us and we don't know these people – only we know their faces from the posters. So we see that the political parties have actually taken away from the people our power for accountability and they have given it to themselves. The system has abandoned the ordinary people – but it looks after those at the top who actually benefit from this system.”

“It is painful but true that there are also blacks who do not treat other blacks fairly or well. It seems that all people can become exploiters and oppressors.”

“We think it is a hard question – really how to put people first instead of profits. Maybe the starting point must be with a new politics.

In politics now, people only really matter once every five years when it is time to come and get their votes. At this time, all sorts of tricks are rolled out to make people think they matter, and the politicians have all sorts of imbizos and come to people's places and

make all sorts of promises to them. But other than that, the poor people are actually just pushed aside in politics. Maybe it would help if the 'term of office' that politicians held power for was made much shorter than five years. If they were only elected for two years at a time, then perhaps there would be more pressure to actually deliver what they promise. But it is very clear that we need to really re-think democracy and find ways of building real community-based involvement. In the system of politics we have now, many are just losing interest and don't feel commitment to this kind of so-called democracy. Yes, government must change politics completely. It should be a system that is not just for the politicians to think of themselves but for everyone. There is a connection between this politics and the BEE class. These BEE's come from our communities. We elect these local councillors, and then they move away from the townships and into the rich suburbs and they use the political system to become BEE's themselves. It might help if there was a penalty, like an extra tax, on elected leaders who move away from their areas. We know of a very few councillors - and even one mayor - who has stayed in the area and in the house where he used to live, and this is better. But when we talk about this we realise also that just staying in your place might help but it is not a guarantee of anything really."

"[M]aybe we should think more carefully about how we vote in the future - we can vote with our heart, or we can think before we vote. Now, we don't think before we vote and the politicians just make promises that they will deliver - but they don't. We should understand and interrogate the different Manifestos of the political parties. Now, we vote for our parties because we like them from the past, but we shouldn't do this anymore. Maybe we really should vote differently."

"[W]e blame these sorts of unfair things on bad councillors. Many of them are drinkers and womanisers who sleep in the meetings - and we suspect they are abusing money."

"And yet we are the ones who are voting for them and putting them there in power over us. Sure, these people are democratically elected, but those people in high places don't understand about poverty - they're sleeping in nice houses now. Once we elect them, they move away from our areas. We never see our councillors after we have voted for them. When we have needs or problems, we cannot reach them - they lock their gates and they have a 'not available' message on their phones."

"Our previous councillor here was bad. He was uneducated and didn't want to listen to the people. This new one is better and has a better relationship with the people. He has invited us to raise our problems with him - as he says, he is not a sangoma who can prophesy these things, he needs to hear about them from the people. Even so, there is another problem with the politics here that is about 'chema' - what this means is that if the councillor is ANC then development will only go to ANC areas; you must be a card-carrying member of the political party and so now people are 'encouraged' to join. This feels bad but there is nothing we can do about it."

"Those who are rulers and in government do not seem able to look after the needs of poor people in our communities. Even when people report their problems and their needs to the government, there is no support that comes, and we are never directed to someone who can actually help or solve the problems.

But actually the government knows about the problems of the people and yet the problems remain - why is this? Well, our previous councillor for the area always squashed our concerns down. We have a new councillor after the last elections and, the way he talks,

sounds like it will be better. He listens to us, he doesn't reject our opinions and he acts on the people's concerns. For example, he listened about the problem of delivery of RDP housing and now there is going to a meeting about this on Sunday that the councillor has arranged."

"Up till now our experience has been that the politicians and councillors do make these sorts of promises but do nothing to really change things. This is very depressing for us because then we didn't know where to go next. They abuse the people's ignorance – there is so much that we don't know and that helps them to get away with this behaviour to us. And we know that if there isn't action to deliver these things (like housing) then the government money goes back to the central government and so we don't benefit.

This is our third councillor – all the others promised lots and we never saw anything. But we do notice that the ones who make the promises are themselves getting these things and benefiting!"

"All we have is the councillor who should fight these fights for us."

"We do see that in general, the politicians and councillors quickly seem to become part of the elite that holds onto power and resources and does not share them."

"But then we asked ourselves about the question: 'who can protect our rights?'. The government is not doing this and does not seem to care about the people. Government is too far away and forgets the people."

"Our experience of 'democracy' in South Africa is that actually this 'democracy' is used for purposes of domination by a few and exclusion of the majority. The time we are in now does not seem to us to be a real transformation of South Africa, and it is becoming clear to us that if we really want transformation, we will probably only find the answer in this idea of participatory democracy – which means that it is in our hands."

Being talked at, talked for and talked about

The 'political' system is not the only one that functions to suppress and distort the voices of poor people. So many structures of civil society, and NGOs in particular, are seen as deeply complicit in this project too. What the people see is that NGOs secure funds, resources, and jobs based on speaking about the problems of the people. But the power to articulate, analyse and represent those problems is held by the NGOs – not the people or their movements. To pull this off, NGOs function like ventriloquists – and the people are crafted as the ventriloquist's dummy providing a cover of legitimacy and the 'experiences' and data for NGO reports to donors and other publics whose approval they need. As the work of the NGO unfolds, it is experienced as the repeated imposition of others' projects on groups of people whose voice, agency, creativity and capacity have been sidelined to facilitate the NGO project. And people said too, that the NGO project/s seldom re-connect with the grassroots in any practically helpful way in any case⁴.

Over the series of workshops, one of the most striking differences between groups was how much

⁴ Note that we have already seen what some said about NGOs who have made an industry out of the HIV/AIDS issue specifically: "On HIV/AIDS we must make clear that there must be no more endless talking about this thing and no more funding to NGOs who have made an industry out of this issue. Now we need resolution; we need genuine, real action to change the situation, and we need accountability of NGO funding on HIV/AIDS."

more able and ready some were to think critically, for themselves, and to connect critical reflection with possibilities of self-initiated action. At the end of the day, all oppressed peoples are of course capable – and this capacity is a necessary condition for their liberation. But it seemed very clear that, where people have been subjected to fairly long periods of NGO intervention and 'capacity building', many have lost any confidence in their own capacities to go beyond listing the problems they face and to explore and articulate their own sense of why these problems exist and persist. The pattern has been well established that 'workshops' in these spaces are attended by grassroots people in order for them to be mute and obedient learners of outsiders' wisdoms, analyses, and programmes of action. The refusal of the facilitators in this project to play to this script was experienced by some as quite disturbing. It confounded a well-learned expectation that the outsiders would fill any embarrassing silences and provide a way forward. Well, I think – on the contrary – that silence can be good; I think acknowledging the hard questions to which no ready answer has already been given by someone else can be productive; I think that working with oppressed and poor people in spaces that value also silence, reflection, and an openness to questions is precisely necessary for liberation; I think that from these spaces, and only from these spaces, comes truly humanising and revolutionary action and transformation. In those constituencies where people are engaged in self-initiated processes of struggle, the difference was almost tangible. I was reminded of the radical Brazilian educator/activist, Paulo Freire's comments about 'instruments of domestication':

"Some of the dominant classes join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Theirs is a fundamental role and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. However as they move to the side of the exploited they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin. Their prejudices include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know. So they run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as harmful as that of the oppressors. Though they truly desire to transform the unjust order, they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his [sic] trust in the people, which engages him [sic] in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour, without that trust. To substitute monologues, slogans, and communiques for dialogue is to try to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication... At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must themselves as people engaged in the vocation of becoming more fully human. Reflection and action become essential. True reflection leads to action but that action will only be a genuine praxis if there is critical reflection on its consequences. To achieve this praxis it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. Whoever lacks this trust will fail to bring about, or will abandon, dialogue, reflection and communication, and will fall into using slogans, communiques, monologues and instructions."

Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Freire is right. But he is also right that it is possible to break with these practices and to allow for people to speak – even about the projects of others to silence them:

"The poor are voiceless. Although we know very well what makes us suffer – we know this better than those who do not suffer – our voice is silenced."

“The role of NGOs must be seriously discussed. We have had some good experiences with a small number of NGOs who do not impose on us but listen to, and support, the agenda that the movements of the poor themselves define. But many NGOs do not work this way. Instead they impose other agendas on us, and they do not respect our own capacities. There is more discussion needed on this issue – and it really affects issues of the WSF where so many people speak about the poors but do not allow the movements of the poors to speak for themselves.”

“We at the grassroots are the ones who really experience the injustices. But it is always others, including the politicians, the NGOs, and the academics, who speak for us – and we keep suffering, nothing changes.”

“Even to build real democracy, information and knowledge is necessary. But definitely, we need to have real participation in decision-making – and even in the implementation of things. What it is absolutely necessary is for us to tell people what we want, and not for them to tell us. It is always that other way round – outsiders come here and they just want to bring their projects to us.”

“As movements of the poors, we insist that we must take part in the discussions and policy- and decision-making processes. It does not work to talk about us but not to us or with us. But for that participation to be correct, it has to include mass participation, and there must also be real accountability and transparency.”

“After many meetings, the actual problems we face are still there and nothing is sorted out - we are not getting actual assistance from anyone for the problems we raise. Although this is important and frustrating, some of us feel that it is a mistake to simply blame NGOs for these kinds of problems – there is also a lack of funds and resources to act effectively. But still, it is very important that the anger and the pain of the real victims continues to drive us forward to take action against injustice – and that it must be the victims, those who are affected, who decide and lead.”

“We get very angry that the NGOs raise money on these issues that affect us. They come here time and again and take lots of photos of our shacks and our children, they write their reports to their donors – but they do not consult and work with the people; we never see them again. This is a kind of exploitation and it is frustrating because they could have the information and knowledge that we really need.”

Once people had learned a little about the World Social Forum and its intentions and claims, this too became a focus of critical debate. It became very clear that awareness of the WSF at the grassroots is effectively non-existent. After the first couple of workshops, we decided to specifically ask who had heard of the WSF before that day. Of all the grassroots participants in all the workshops, one person thought they might have heard something about it - but no-one else had. For a space where people get together to discuss the crises and struggles of the masses of ordinary poors, this is more than just ironic. On the other hand, quite a number of activists and NGO workers from around here do attend the WSF and similar meetings. This was read as eloquent testimony to the subtle patterns of domination, exclusion and disempowerment by so much of civil society.

“If we were to talk about 'rights' we would definitely have put land and housing in front⁵. It shows us that the people who came up with these themes are effectively irrelevant to us. They are the kind of people who always impose various conditions and instructions on the poor. Their irrelevance to us also makes it almost impossible for us to influence them. The WSF seems to be a platform for the confused -and a platform where we are not heard. This pattern is repeated again and again. Some of us went to the Southern African Social Forum. Land and housing were not there either and we hotly debated this. We have had to take action again to try and raise the issues of poor people again recently at the Social Movements Indaba meeting. Perhaps we will have to repeat these actions at the WSF in Nairobi so we can take the world stage on our issues.”

“When we hear that the WSF has been meeting every year since 2001, and that some South Africans have been going there too, we feel very angry. They have changed nothing for us. Do those who go to the WSF feel the pain of what is affecting us? They come from the cities and the good jobs.”

“Some of us are getting impatient with meetings and discussions where we always come up with ideas and resolutions. We need concrete resolution and implementation of what is proposed. If there is a delegation to the WSF they must *know* who the victims of injustice really are and they must note the views and ideas of the victims themselves. It must not be that what is said at the WSF is said by people sent by the NGOs only. In anything that is done there at the WSF, the victims must be represented and they must be heard, even by the media.”

“There will be quite a few organisations and activists going to the WSF from here, but what difference will this make, and how can this influence the situation? Partly it depends on the cadres who go to the WSF. When they return they should report back to meetings of ordinary people at grassroots level. Then we can strategise together on the relevant issues coming up from the ground. When they go the WSF, if they are claiming to represent the struggles at grassroots, then when they return it will be fruitful to for them to come together with the grassroots and to think about how to strengthen the people's voice and to shout it louder - to government, and to the media (including the international media).

But the NGOs have been going to this WSF before, and maybe they write their reports but it usually just ends there and they don't take these things forward. The problem is that there isn't a connection with grassroots people, and also that there are not strong movements and structures of grassroots people that really are led, and democratically controlled, by the grassroots instead of by NGO-types or academic activists. In our experience, even those NGO-types who go the WSF, and speak there about the issues and struggles of the grassroots, do not prepare their papers in such a participatory way as we are trying to do here in this discussion. So we need to do much more of exactly this kind of work and organising in the different places where the poor are living so that their voices can be heard and their movements strengthened. The people should really know about the WSF. We should be actively building platforms that are really community-driven, not NGO or funder driven, where the agenda is really that of the masses of the poor and not someone else's agenda.”

⁵ This was said in reaction to the list of 'rights to...' that featured in one of the WSF 2007 themes and which did not include rights to land and housing.

Leading, speaking, acting

In light of their observations and analysis of the ways in which spaces for action to change the world are shut down and turned against them, people faced the daunting question: what is to be done, by us? We have already heard one group saying:

“The time we are in now does not seem to us to be a real transformation of South Africa, and it is becoming clear to us that if we really want transformation, we will probably only find the answer in this idea of participatory democracy – which means that it is in our hands.”

Activists from Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Anti-Eviction Campaign said: “a question we would bring to the WSF is a practical one: how to make the masses rise up?”

Those speaking from within actually-existing movements of the poor reflected that it is in and through their action that humanity is reclaimed, restored:

“We have found from some of our campaigns and actions, that taking direct action as a movement, for example to get housing back that we were evicted out of, is very much connected with reclaiming our dignity too – in other words, it is through these actions that we reclaim our dignity.”

But people know too that there are daunting challenges that they must confront to realise this possibility. There is awful irony in the fact that some of these obstacles are produced by the apparatus of 'democracy':

“People living in our area need better access to information - especially information about the assistance from the government that could be available to poor communities. People do not know about these things enough and for this reason, they cannot get this assistance.”

“[I]f we are going to fight together as the people who are affected then it is not easy to challenge the government, and some of councillors are bad and violent against the people and can shoot us.”

“[I]t is hard to organise and build the power of the community to act together and to hold these leaders and councillors to account. One thing that makes this hard is a kind of bribery that happens. If we, as ordinary residents, got together to do this and to plan and organise collective action, some small group will always go off and inform on our activities to the councillor. For this spying they are rewarded with temporary jobs (for example at the council), food, and money. The councillor has money and power to stop independent organisation and dissent. These things make it hard to organise and to actively involve people in the issues that affect us. It is ironic that the izimpimpi [spies] undermined our space for real democracy during the struggle against apartheid and the same is true now, even though we have a 'democratic' system in South Africa.”

“We can fight .. and march in [the places we come from], but as we develop our struggles, we discover the likes of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund having such big power around the world and affecting our places – but they hear nothing of our actions really. Are we just playing here?”

But, faced with the twin realities of worsening inequality and poverty on the one hand, and the patent abandonment of the poors' interests by anyone with real levers of power, people see clearly that the daunting but absolutely necessary and beautiful task of making another world possible is, indeed, in their hands. This is hopeful:

“Could things be better? Of course, definitely yes. Somehow it can come about through the people's participation - and by the people's participation beginning to change the way this system of politics, councillors, and power all works together.”

“We would emphasise that each problem must have a strategy to deal with it. Our problems are human-made, and strategies for the solutions are humanly possible too.”

“Hopefully these discussions are the beginning of us, as ordinary people, as poor people, as women, taking charge. Don't give up – fight and fight.”

“Our voices can be heard, even at the grassroots. And this work that we will do there can bring maybe small changes at first but they are the important changes that will make for bigger change.”

“[T]he answer about who can protect these rights must be US – we have to fight. It is us, as the people who are affected, who should be organising ourselves so that we know what is our rights, and to demand these rights.”

“So the solution is probably to build the power of the people to change these things.”

“[W]e feel strongly that we can and we must tackle these things and we can act together. So we made concrete plans to call a meeting with the people about these issues for next week. The power to change these things must come from the people.”

“If there are those who will be attending the WSF from 'Maritzburg, then they should be at least taking the grassroots people with them so we can speak for ourselves. If they don't do this, then perhaps at least they can report back and account about what they have learned that could be of benefit to us because all of these things are meant to be changing people's lives. So the idea of the an event in 'Maritzburg after the WSF would be good – and it would especially important to invite and involve the youth.”

Reports from the workshops

Workshop with 'Justice and Women'

The group were all women, all connected with the great work that JAW do, and all sharing in common experiences of abuse, domestic violence, and the fight for maintenance.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

We think it is important to talk about the things that are really affecting the poor, especially our old people and young children who have special vulnerabilities. These would be such things as housing, by which mean *proper* housing; hunger; access to water, to medical services, and other services to help with problems like rape, school-girl pregnancies, drug abuse and crime; and shelter and protection from abuse.

Creating jobs is important, but these must be more like sustainable livelihoods and should be supported by the government in a way that builds development for the country. For this to happen, the education system needs real attention and it also requires better levels of cooperation within our communities.

Some of our local problems are very much affected by the policies and decisions of governments – like how Chinese imports from the world economy are destroying jobs in the shoe factories here that used to employ many of our people; and also how government spending on militarisation takes public money away from the needs of the people. We should have the right to be heard and consulted.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 2 most chosen: Building real democratic political structures and institutions with full people's participation on decisions and control of public affairs and resources, so that people have control over the things that affect their lives. And: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights.

There is frustration in Woodlands. We have problems there, and especially for the people in the 2 shack settlements, there are problems. But we don't feel like we are really informed about, or encouraged to participate meaningfully in, public meetings when they do happen from time-to-time. We often do not hear about the meetings at all. But even if you go, the number of questions you can ask is strictly limited, and the political leaders select the people that they invite to ask questions. So now some of us don't even attend because we know we are not going to be heard anyway.

We seem to have earned the right to vote, but not to be heard.

The poor especially, are complaining that the politicians make these meetings only happen when it's coming time to vote. Then they will have meetings, make promises, supply people with breyani, and do the whole 'Rajbansi show'. But once they're in office, 'to hell with you'.

People are crying for houses. The basic services that people need for living (like water and energy) are either not there at all, or they are too expensive for people to afford, so there are more and more

disconnections, rates arrears evictions, cut-offs and so on.

The politicians make promises only to get our votes. Like in Caluza, we were promised that water and housing were coming, as well as security at the schools – but nothing.

We question whether there is any real intention, except for lying to us perhaps, behind all the 'mission statements'.

In Hopewell too, we were promised to get roads and houses. But when some houses were delivered they have no toilets or taps, they are too small and their quality is too bad to be thought of as homes for real people. We see this is also in Imbali Phase 3 where houses made with wire frames were given to us but already they are falling apart and cracking everywhere.

We think these are happening because the elected politicians are actually after money, fame and selfish power, and they have no love for the people. And this is true from the top to the bottom of the political systems. If this wasn't true then there would follow up on the promises they make to us, there would be resources, and life would be getting better.

Accountability has gone. Even in the times when there are going to be elections, the people don't choose the candidates we can vote for. The parties impose them on us and we don't know these people – only we know their faces from the posters. So we see that the political parties have actually taken away from the people our power for accountability and they have given it to themselves. The system has abandoned the ordinary people – but it looks after those at the top who actually benefit from this system.

When we think about rights to things like healthcare and decent work, it has become very clear that we must keep focus on real quality – it's not just delivery and rollouts that you can announce in terms of numbers. Even 20 new hospitals in our place would not help if they are crap hospitals, 100 new jobs are no help if they are crap jobs. These things must respect human beings and make really human life possible and better. As to the right to food – well, people are starving now. So there's a need for immediate help but more important is to think about why there are still starving people, and what needs to change so that this problem really goes away in the longer term.

In the hospitals, unless you are rich and have medical aid, you are treated like shit. They just want to push us away, and the staff are really terrible in the way they treat ordinary poor people. We shared many stories that have happened to us and our families about the shocking attitude of rudeness, contempt, disrespect, laziness and more that we experience in the so-called health-care systems.

Also, all the public systems are thoroughly messed up and corrupt, and everyone who works there wants bribes for everything. And so sometimes this forces us to become 'corrupt' too because there is no other way to access the services we need.

The other way that we see this corruption is in how jobs are allocated to friends and political-party favourites. Even though we try by all means to get our children educated, there are no chances of jobs for them because of the nepotism.

And even though we as the poor people have all of these strong questions and criticisms of the systems, the politicians and the powerful people in the system always have clever answers that they give out, even though they do not ever actually answer us really. We wonder if the politicians go to special schools where they learn to say these things.

Our experience of 'democracy' in South Africa is that actually this 'democracy' is used for purposes of domination by a few and exclusion of the majority. The time we are in now does not seem to us to be a real transformation of South Africa, and it is becoming clear to us that if we really want transformation, we will probably only find the answer in this idea of participatory democracy – which means that it is in our hands.

And we know that in all these problems that we have been discussing, it is women who are bearing the brunt. We are poorer, always. We are more excluded, always. We are more exploited, always. We talked about whether it might help if there was a woman leader at the top of the system who could change things – but we don't think so, we think these problems are much deeper and are built into the system. And so we face the questions about how we would re-build from the bottom-up to get what we really wanted, and why things have not gone right even after we thought we defeated apartheid. We ask ourselves why blacks and black men are reproducing the same system that abused them. Perhaps, as women, we know something about this - about how patterns of abuse affect everyone that is touched by them, and can make them to carry on with the same patterns. Also, these deep patterns of hurting and abuse can only be changed when they are faced and talked about honestly. The people at the top tell lies, and there are still many questions about our past in South Africa that have not been talked about democratically and honestly.

After this discussion, we sat and thought about what felt to us to be most some of the most important things that we have talked about here today. When we talked about this, the following things came up:

It is striking how participatory democracy is fundamental to anything we discussed.

Values are very important. They should be treasured and they should guide us.

Unity and a strong, united voice is important. If we can be together and talk, we can survive.

Learning to help others.

Talking about the problems at the schools, the hospitals and with the local councillors was very important to everyone.

We got a lot of knowledge from this discussion, and we want to unite and make our voices heard.

We live in a democratic country but democracy does not exist.

Hopefully these discussions are the beginning of us, as ordinary people, as poor people, as women, taking charge. Don't give up – fight and fight.

It was very interesting and noticeable to hear the anger of people about the problems we have in our various communities – and especially with those who are high up.

Our voices can be heard, even at the grassroots. And this work that we will do there can bring maybe small changes at first but they are the important changes that will make for bigger change.

Workshop with Abahlali base Mjondolo and Anti Eviction Campaign

Thirty participants, all grassroots activists of the two housing rights movements.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

We would talk about the things that **really** affect us and the causes of those things. For us, some of the things that affect us daily are issues like toilets, evictions, land, housing, unemployment and indeed all the social problems that we endure as poor. We have found from some of our campaigns and actions, that taking direct action as a movement, for example to get housing back that we were evicted out of, is very much connected with reclaiming our dignity too – in other words, it is through these actions that we reclaim our dignity.

We would emphasise that each problem must have a strategy to deal with it. Our problems are human-made, and strategies for the solutions are humanly possible too. As movements of the poor, we insist that we must take part in the discussions and policy- and decision-making processes. It does not work to talk about us but not to us or with us. But for that participation to be correct, it has to include mass participation, and there must also be real accountability and transparency. For us, we face two challenges simultaneously: how to get development from the government?; and how to develop ourselves?

The role of NGOs must be seriously discussed. We have had some good experiences with a small number of NGOs who do not impose on us but listen to, and support, the agenda that the movements of the poor themselves define. But many NGOs do not work this way. Instead they impose other agendas on us, and they do not respect our own capacities. There is more discussion needed on this issue – and it really affects issues of the WSF where so many people speak about the poor but do not allow the movements of the poor to speak for themselves.

The poor are voiceless. Although we know very well what makes us suffer – we know this better than those who do not suffer – our voice is silenced and needs to be given more weight. We notice instead, that the voices of the political parties and powerful interest groups seem very strong and they have the immediate attention of the media.

We think that it is important to raise levels of awareness of people's rights, including some of those in the South African constitution, so that people can be encouraged to fight for them in their actual lives and communities. But in addition, and remembering how unjust the world today is and how the poor majorities all over suffer, a question we would bring to the WSF is a practical one: how to make the masses rise up?

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 3 most chosen: (1) Making sure that everyone is treated with respect, and that no-one is treated badly because they are different, or because they are a woman, or because of where they come from, and so on. Helping people see that differences between us are a good thing, not a bad thing; (2) Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights; and (3) Fighting to free the world from the power that capital, especially big multinational companies and banks, has over the world.

On that theme about treating everyone with respect, there is something important in the Holy Book about loving your neighbour. As poor and shackdwellers we have been mistreated, even in our families and also in schools and in so many places that are our world. In fact, in the world as it is now, we are treated as if we don't exist.

If we were to talk about 'rights' we would definitely have put land and housing in front. It shows us that the people who came up with these themes are effectively irrelevant to us. They are the kind of people who always impose various conditions and instructions on the poor. Their irrelevance to us also makes it almost impossible for us to influence them. The WSF seems to be a platform for the confused - and a platform where we are not heard. This pattern is repeated again and again. Some of us went to the Southern African Social Forum. Land and housing were not there either and we hotly debated this. We have had to take action again to try and raise the issues of poor people again recently at the Social Movements Indaba meeting. Perhaps we will have to repeat these actions at the WSF in Nairobi so we can take the world stage on our issues.

Also on the question of rights to these different things, it is very important to be clear about the *quality* of what we demand. Profit-making and a bad attitude to the poor combine always so that when we do get access to some of these things, the quality of what we get is completely different to the good quality that rich people can access. This is true for all of the things listed in this theme as rights - food, healthcare, education and decent work – and it is not right. And at the end of the day, without money, the really poor do not have access.

Some of us would say that fighting capitalism must be first and in fact if we make that the priority, then the others, even the other two themes our group has prioritised, become irrelevant. This is because all of these other things, like the rights we are denied and the unfair treatment we get, are the result of a system. In that capitalist system, a few rich keep all these things away from the poor – even the possibility of respect and dignity. This is because, if there is no food in the stomach, a person becomes like a wild thing and acts in a way that the rich can't think of as being dignified.

Looking at all the themes, maybe the one about changing the economy to put people first, and not money and profit, is especially important too. In the history of AbM, our struggle broke out when land that had been promised to us for housing was given to a capitalist industry to make profit there instead. This angered the shackdwellers very much and was the spark for the first march by Kennedy Road residents.

But even some of us who vote for the theme of fighting capitalism still have hard questions. We can fight here in Kennedy Road, and march there in Cape Town, but as we develop our struggles, we discover the likes of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund having such big power around the world and affecting our places – but they hear nothing of our actions really. Are we just playing here? Actually, as we are talking I think maybe now I might choose the themes of (1) information and knowledge, and (2) building real democracy. If I have good relevant information, you can't take that away from me. And building real democracy is what we are doing in struggle, and what we are doing right here and now in this process.

We can discuss what is important in the themes that have been chosen by the organisers of the WSF but they are not our priority issues. Our real issues and priorities are what we raised at the beginning when we talked about the question: "Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?". These are what we take to Nairobi.

Workshop with members of the 'Land Matters' Rural Justice Network

Nine participants, all grassroots and local church-based activists from rural areas in kwaZulu-Natal focussing on cases of injustice affecting families and communities.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

The WSF needs to hear how our so-called justice system works in our rural areas. When crimes are 'black-to-black', then there are arrests immediately but not when whites kill blacks. So, never mind the whole justice process, there are not even arrests which should be the first step. The judicial system still victimises blacks.

The whites, and the white system, abuses us blacks in our own places. Even blacks who are employed by whites abuse us. For example, black farm workers carry out abuses against us living in rural areas. They do this because of the relationship they have to the white farmers which makes them very vulnerable and dependant because they have absolutely no alternatives to doing what they are told to do.

Evictions and murders by whites are continuing. Assaults on farm-dwellers and rural blacks by whites are continuous and nobody seems to care. Certainly the legal system does not care about this but we see this same attitude in all of the systems too. For example, in the health system – the hospitals do not care properly for victims of this abuse. There is a kind of corruption of (and in) the official systems which makes them not work for the poor. Again and again we find that, in the cases of abuse by whites against blacks, there are family and political connections between the whites' lawyers, and the police bosses, and the prosecutors or the magistrates – and as a result, the cases are not properly dealt with.

People should also hear about how black people's cattle continue to be impounded and sold. Also remember that black farm workers receive no employment benefits like pensions or medical aid. These things are not right and they make poverty worse. The lack of schools and good education in rural areas is also a problem. It adds to the problem of illiteracy. Illiteracy in our areas can be very dangerous. For example, when black workers cannot understand clearly the instructions of white bosses, they are likely to be beaten. Farm workers are also expected to work with dangerous chemicals and machinery, but when you are illiterate the danger of being injured by these things is greater.

On HIV/AIDS we must make clear that there must be no more endless talking about this thing and no more funding to NGOs who have made an industry out of this issue. Now we need resolution; we need genuine, real action to change the situation, and we need accountability of NGO funding on HIV/AIDS.

In our struggles for justice in rural areas it is clear that we need assistance and funding especially for getting good legal services of attorneys and advocates. We feel strongly that there are many unresolved cases that must re-opened and properly dealt with.

It is clear to us, twelve years after apartheid, that democracy in South Africa is something for the rich and the powerful; it is for the MECs, the parliamentarians and the rich elite. For us it is a mess. But when you've got money, you can do anything and everything. We have moved from apartheid to a new apartheid where the rich have power and the middle-class and the stinking rich still do the same as they did before. Money talks.

When we hear that the WSF has been meeting every year since 2001, and that some South Africans have been going there too, we feel very angry. They have changed nothing for us. Do those who go to the WSF feel the pain of what is affecting us? They come from the cities and the good jobs.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 2 most chosen: (1) Making sure that everyone is treated with respect, and that no-one is treated badly because they are different, or because they are a woman, or because of where they come from, and so on. Helping people see that differences between us are a good thing, not a bad thing; and (2) Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run.

On that theme about treating everyone with respect, the abuse of our women should be raised. They are treated by men as slaves and servants. [Note that this was raised by a man, and then discussed collectively.] It's true, even among the farm-dwellers, there is not respect for women – so this is a problem in all sectors. We had an experience during a protest march in Pietermaritzburg when a youngish girl, who was standing away from the crowd who were marching, was beaten and hit by an Indian policeman and four African policemen – it was clear she was treated like this just because she was female.

This reality, and many others, make us to know that there is no democracy in KwaZulu-Natal, it is only something we hear about. Black people are sexually abusing - no let us be explicit: they are raping - women, including older women. Are we no longer human beings anymore? Not even animals do this. What has happened to our sense of humanity?

As black poors from rural areas, we are treated badly. To try and understand how this is happening, we could talk about the changing meaning of the word "uAunti". It used to be a good and friendly name we could use for women relatives who might stay with a rural family especially and help in the household. But it has become a derogatory word, a contemptuous word. Now 'uAunty' is used in general as a derogatory label to describe someone – a woman - who works in a household but who doesn't talk back; who has no money or wages; who must just listen and do what they are told by the boss – it's like a slave who is badly treated.

Also, black people continue to be murdered by boers [white farmers] as if we are nothing, as if we are animals.

Also, people with HIV/AIDS are treated badly in our areas and the whole problem of HIV/AIDS is seen as a problem caused by, and affecting, blacks. There are many examples but we saw this clearly when the blood transfusion service banned blacks from donating blood. What this said was that black people's blood was not good enough to treat white people - it is seen as somehow dirty and tainted.

Another thing that is very hurtful to us, and which has happened again now in Richmond, is that farmers plough over the graves of our ancestors and plant crops there - this time it was sugar cane.

To understand how it can be that, even though we have had twelve years of 'democracy', things are pretty much the same for black South Africans, we must remember that many of the people who were in charge during apartheid are still there, still in charge. In this sense, blacks are in power but only in name, not in reality. But it is also true that now a small number of blacks are benefiting out of the system that has not changed much. This group is getting stinking rich and so they won't or can't speak against the system. Also, things like the property clause in our Constitution have kept the old system in place because it means that white farmers can do what they like on their property and the government cannot interfere.

Some of us are getting impatient with meetings and discussions where we always come up with ideas and resolutions. We need concrete resolution and implementation of what is proposed. If there is a delegation to the WSF they must **know** who the victims of injustice really are and they must note the views and ideas of the victims themselves. It must not be that what is said at the WSF is said by people sent by the NGOs only. In anything that is done there at the WSF, the victims must be represented and they must be heard, even by the media.

After many meetings, the actual problems we face are still there and nothing is sorted out - we are not getting actual assistance from anyone for the problems we raise. Although this is important and frustrating, some of us feel that it is a mistake to simply blame NGOs for these kinds of problems - there is also a lack of funds and resources to act effectively. But still, it is very important that the anger and the pain of the real victims continues to drive us forward to take action against injustice - and that it must be the victims, those who are affected, who decide and lead.

On the theme about changing the economy to put people first, when we think about what it means to make our economy something that lasts, it is clear that most of our people are not well taught about handling money. Look at our parliamentarians and the corruption they are swimming in. They can't see that creating wealth shouldn't be just about helping themselves only. But this is a general problem among our people - that they don't handle money wisely. This is not good and it means that even when wealth is created it just creates stress and even death. This need for training and proper thinking about money is important. South Africa is a rich country really, but our wealth is not being handled well, from the top to the bottom. In rural areas we do not even know how to write a proposal for projects, we only know about stokvels.

We notice that when we talk about 'the economy' we think of money. But we were rich before this money thing was introduced. We had cattle, land and property. Now we are landless and poor.

Even when some of us get land through the land reform, we are not trained how to use it productively or how to look after it well, and we do not have the money that is necessary to manage farms. These problems create failures and more poverty. Without training and knowledge we are nothing. Some of us have had the experience that, when farms are given through land reform, it is necessary to use fertilisers to get the right amount of crops produced and so we are forced to use these expensive things. Before, we used to use kraal manure for our fields. Some of us had a training from a rural development NGO about making compost, but this does not work on the big scale type of farming that we are expected to do now. So the actual problem behind these experiences is a bigger system that the government is imposing.

In this system it is almost as if the change to the economy is nothing more than replacing white farmers with black farmers but without really changing anything else about the system. We still need to think more about what it would really mean to put real South African people first. Some of

those who own vast lands do not want to share what they have with the people. Some of us despair that elements of our community are so corrupt and not trusting that maybe we will always need others to help us with things in the economy. The way things are set up now, if blacks were really put first in the economy it wouldn't work. If nothing else, these challenges mean that all of us, white and black, must work together. It is painful but true that there are also blacks who do not treat other blacks fairly or well. It seems that all people can become exploiters and oppressors. You can even see this in other systems – like in the hospitals where we find that black people are working there but they also don't treat their fellow blacks with respect. But when a white person arrives they get respectful treatment, or when an Indian person is there, they don't wait in queues.

In South Africa we have many farms and yet we have a scarcity of food and many people are hungry. This is why we must change the economy and put people first.

In the system we have now, if you don't have a title deed to land, you have no property even though it is yours and you are living there. Who's system is this because it is not really the african way of thinking about these things?

There is a new form of evictions that is affecting too that comes from setting up game reserves and the business of tourism.

Workshop with activists from some Maritzburg townships

Eight participants, all grassroots and mostly youth from Dambuza, Imbali, Eastwood, and Ashdown.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

We think the WSF should hear about unemployment here. The high levels are not because people are 'lazy' and nor is it because people lack 'capacity' – there really are not enough jobs for the people. There are all sorts of reasons for this, including the trade policies of our government and the profiteering of companies, but we also see how technologies are killing us as machines and computers replace workers. We are not sure whether government can create jobs or what is to be done about this crisis.

The question of land ownership is critical. Many, especially poor, people do not have land and yet there is much vacant and unused land which is privately owned. This land should be accessed and used productively. We are not sure that giving such land to the government is a good idea because this can be abused and corrupted, but perhaps government can play a role to facilitate people's access.

Water is so important and we must deal with questions of access and affordability. Under current policies, even where people have 'access' this is blocked by unaffordable water tariffs – which means again that the poor really do not have access.

We need to talk about – and others should hear - that we no longer trust those who have power now in South Africa. There is much corruption at this level too.

HIV/AIDS is a very important challenge. Its spread is connected with many of the social and economic issues we have already been discussing as well the failure of government to deal with it properly. The role of some of our traditional healers has been negative when they have claimed that 'traditional' medicines can cure this disease and so, as a result, people have not taken other precautions that would help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Perhaps there should be an internationally-agreed UN plan that forces implementation in all the countries of the world.

Education is another problem. Perhaps it should be 'nationalised' so that the fees and other costs can be made lower. At the moment, increasing costs are excluding more and more poors from education. But there are other aspects to the education problems. For example, even those who graduate from the education system don't get employed when they are finished – most seem to join the growing numbers of unemployed. So we need to really re-think what is being learned and taught; we need to connect what we teach with what is actually needed in our communities, especially what is needed to be productive. This is not the same as what is happening now when big business and its friends tell government and educators what **they** need and how education should respond to **their** needs in terms of workers and managers.

There is also a crisis in housing. Not nearly enough people have access to decent housing as it is, and the few government houses that are being built are insulting, they are too small for family life.

When we begin to see the links between these different issues – like land, water, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, housing - we also see that there is a pattern behind them, a pattern that has a lot to do with race and with class. And we also see that behind this pattern is the power and interests of multi- and trans-national capital which has even affected the policies of government.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 2 most chosen: (1) Fighting to free the world from the power that capital, especially big multinational companies and banks, has over the world; and (2) Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run.

We have a question though: if the kind of people gathering at the WSF are against the capitalist agenda, then who listens to what they have to say, assuming that the capitalists are not there (but in Davos at the World Economic Forum)?

The casualisation of labour is affecting people in the townships a lot, especially women. When you look at many of the employers, like at Checkers and Pick n Pay, they are only asking people to work for certain hours at a time and not giving full employment anymore. This undermines people in all sorts of ways, for example, their employment benefits are cut, their job security is gone, the wages are less, and organising into trade unions that could fight for workers rights and better conditions is made much harder.

The high, and increasing, prices of staple foods is affecting everybody but of course this especially affects the poor. The same is true of the ongoing hikes in interest rates which affects the debts of poor people much more than the rich – including the BEE [Black Economic Empowerment elite]. But this approach of increasing the interest rate seems to be agreed upon between Mboweni [Governor of the South African Reserve Bank] and Manuel [South Africa's finance minister].

When I sit at home and think about how putting profits before people affects us, I wonder about these annual events like Christmas, New Years Day, Valentine's Day, Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day. The way that businesses use these events to seduce ordinary people into spending lots of money really has an effect. And most of this money is spent on silly things that have little to do with any real or good meaning that these annual events could have. It seems to us that the pressure of consumerism – which is there to make profits for the businesses – makes it happen that, those with little spend a lot, but those with more money save and spend more wisely. Perhaps it's also just that the rich are more greedy and hoard their money! But the effects of these pressures on the poor is really bad.

A really powerful example of this is the Lotto. The actual effect of the Lotto is to drain the pockets of the poor who buy these lottery tickets again and again, hoping it'll be like some magical investment turning R10 into millions for them. For the poor this seems like perfectly rational behaviour – so, if I don't win today I go hungry for a day, but I'll try again and again. It also becomes addictive – it's like gambling. Actually, it's like another tax on the poor. We remember that when the Lotto was set up, government said it would raise money for 'development' for the poor. This gave government the excuse to carry on cutting spending on social services and benefits while the poor paid for it themselves by buying the Lotto tickets (and even then, we don't see the money that is being raised really benefiting the poor).

Saving your money is maybe a good thing that more people should do but, if you are really poor and without proper employment, just making maybe enough money to get through a day at a time, then obviously this is impossible. Not all of us here are in that position. Even among those blacks who work, there are big differences – some are not paid enough to save any money over and above surviving the cost of living. When we realise that some can save but others cannot, we see that there are class divisions and differences among black South Africans now. And also that, connected perhaps with these differences, different values are being learned by some – like an understanding that individual savings is something important to prioritise.

Another economic thing that really drains people's earnings is credit. Our people are pushed by all sorts of pressures and offers to open accounts with all the 'big brand' shops where you can buy fashionable clothing and stuff. Even if they can't really afford it, they get more of these credit cards and then have to owe money and interest. Behind these credit cards are the profits of the big banks and financial institutions. But these profits are at the expense of the poor who find themselves owing money and having to cut spending on perhaps food, medicine or schooling to pay it back. An important part of the pressure to use these credit cards and spend in this way has to do with the way we are made to feel - that we must look to a higher class where we actually don't belong. You can't just be yourself anymore, and there's real shame in being - or even looking – poor. And the pressure is relentless – there's always a new fashion, an upgraded cell phone model, or the latest car – so you can never really win, but you can keep on spending your money – and helping to make profit for someone else.

For many young women, these pressures have the effect of making us look for a rich boyfriend (and this also connects with some of the ways that HIV/AIDS is being spread.). We can't find employment easily but there is pressure to look good and fashionable, and so this is seen as the only way. We all, poor and not-so-poor, share the same town and so poorer kids see us who have more money and think 'that looks nice' – and so they feel the pressure to have these things.

We think it is a hard question – really how to put people first instead of profits. Maybe the starting point must be with a new politics. In politics now, people only really matter once every five years

when it is time to come and get their votes. At this time, all sorts of tricks are rolled out to make people think they matter, and the politicians have all sorts of imbizos and come to people's places and make all sorts of promises to them. But other than that, the poor people are actually just pushed aside in politics. Maybe it would help if the 'term of office' that politicians held power for was made much shorter than five years. If they were only elected for two years at a time, then perhaps there would be more pressure to actually deliver what they promise. But it is very clear that we need to really re-think democracy and find ways of building real community-based involvement. In the system of politics we have now, many are just losing interest and don't feel commitment to this kind of so-called democracy.

Yes, government must change politics completely. It should be a system that is not just for the politicians to think of themselves but for everyone. There is a connection between this politics and the BEE class. These BEE's come from our communities. We elect these local councillors, and then they move away from the townships and into the rich suburbs and they use the political system to become BEE's themselves. It might help if there was a penalty, like an extra tax, on elected leaders who move away from their areas. We know of a very few councillors - and even one mayor - who has stayed in the area and in the house where he used to live, and this is better. But when we talk about this we realise also that just staying in your place might help but it is not a guarantee of anything really.

But the pro-capitalist policies that government has chosen are also the result of the big and powerful international forces - represented by things like the World Bank, the IMF [International Monetary Fund], Bush, etc.. This is why it is not just South Africa that has chosen these kinds of capitalist policies but most African countries and elsewhere in the world too. But then the question comes back again: how can we really act to change this and to put people first instead? How can the meeting of the WSF, and even our discussions here, really help us change these things in South Africa? There will be quite a few organisations and activists going to the WSF from here, but what difference will this make, and how can this influence the situation?

Partly it depends on the cadres who go to the WSF. When they return they should report back to meetings of ordinary people at grassroots level. Then we can strategise together on the relevant issues coming up from the ground. When they go the WSF, if they are claiming to represent the struggles at grassroots, then when they return it will be fruitful to for them to come together with the grassroots and to think about how to strengthen the people's voice and to shout it louder - to government, and to the media (including the international media).

But the NGOs have been going to this WSF before, and maybe they write their reports but it usually just ends there and they don't take these things forward. The problem is that there isn't a connection with grassroots people, and also that there are not strong movements and structures of grassroots people that really are led, and democratically controlled, by the grassroots instead of by NGO-types or academic activists. In our experience, even those NGO-types who go the WSF, and speak there about the issues and struggles of the grassroots, do not prepare their papers in such a participatory way as we are trying to do here in this discussion. So we need to do much more of exactly this kind of work and organising in the different places where the poor are living so that their voices can be heard and their movements strengthened. The people should really know about the WSF. We should be actively building platforms that are really community-driven, not NGO or funder driven, where the agenda is really that of the masses of the poor and not someone else's agenda.

We notice very much that, although we have come from some different areas around Pietermaritzburg, our issues are very much the same and very much connected with each other.

Workshop with people from areas around Gezubuso

Fourteen participants, all grassroots and mostly youth involved in development forum structures from areas in Gezubuso, as well as some from Trustfeed outside Pietermaritzburg.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

There are some things that would be important for us to have in this area. The first that we mentioned was a 'drop in centre' to help to care of kids affected or infected by HIV/AIDS. A clinic needs to be set up nearby too. Our people are dying and a clinic can be a source of everything for those who are sick – again, especially those affected by HIV/AIDS.

On the roads in this area we need to have speed bumps and a pedestrian bridge because people are dying as they cross the road.

What would also be important is a youth centre, with computer facilities, and ABET [Adult Basic Education and Training]. Different skills are important for the youth who are growing up in the world today. And our older people are not well educated and this affects them badly in life.

Because there is too much crime here, especially housebreakings and burglaries, we need to have a police station.

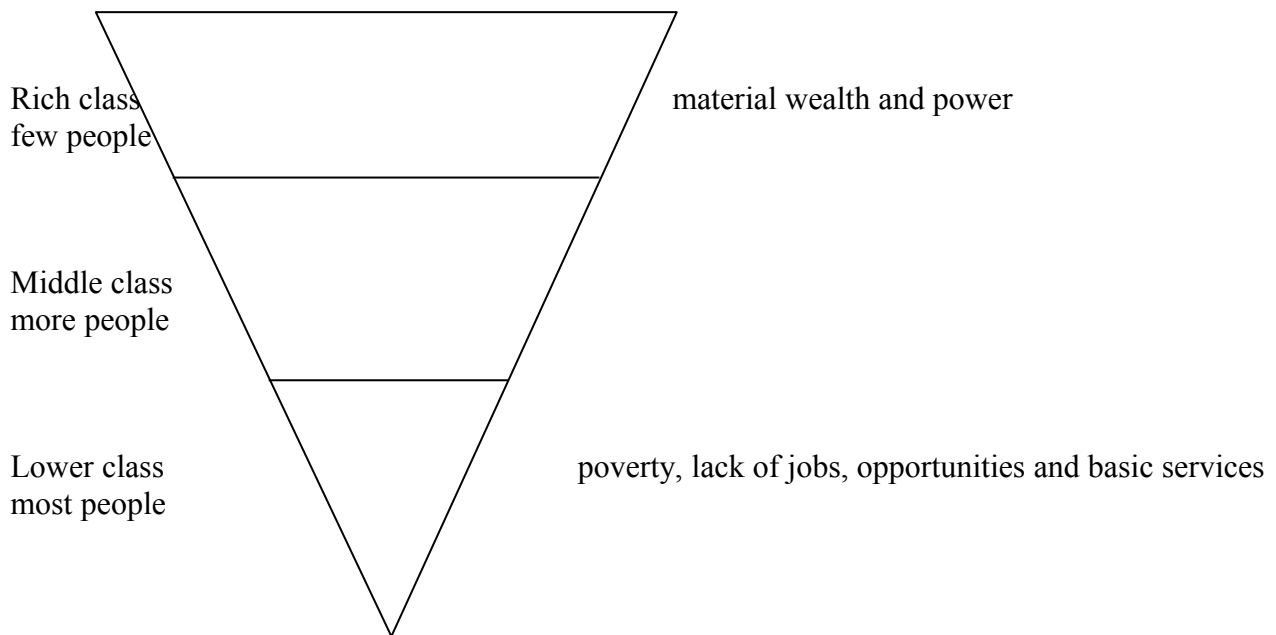
Young people need sport fields too for different kinds of sports that would help to keep them busy. There is only high school in the larger area and this is not enough either.

Poverty and the lack of jobs is bad and affects the youth especially. There is more and more drug use, and young people are also involved in crime. Many young people are orphans as a result of violence in the past and also because of HIV/AIDS.

The question of land is very important because, when we want to build these different things for our communities, we find that the land is not available because somebody owns or controls it.

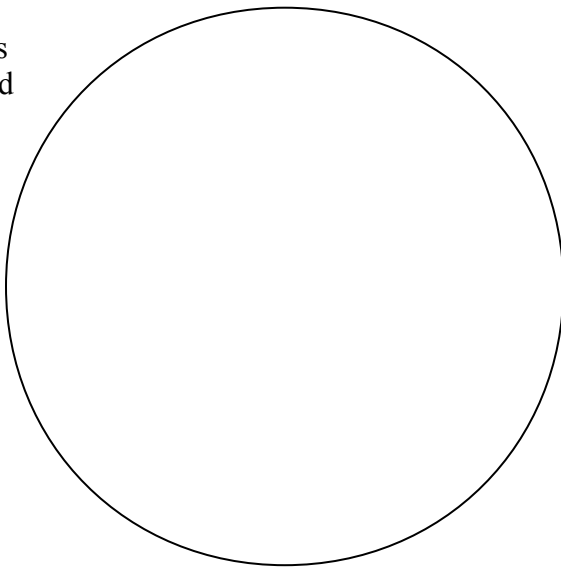
Some of us drew a diagram to talk about the way world is now, and how it should change. The WSF should be focused on making plans to achieve this change.

The way the world is now



The plan of God for the world

Share resources
in common, and
plan together.



Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 1 most chosen: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights.

About [the right to] decent work, our experience is that unless you have relatives with good jobs or money to pay in bribes, you don't find a way to get a decent job. This is bad, and also means that the small group of rich people keep on getting richer and the poorer people are pushed out, even over generations.

Thinking about the right to healthcare, although we are glad that we don't have to pay at our clinic, the quality of care is terrible. You go in with a sickness and come out with Panamor [generic Panado tablets] every time. The nurses don't take us or our sickness seriously. Sometimes it seems like there is a shortage of doctors because at our clinics there are only nurses and no medical examination is done.

But the limitation of our rights is the problem. It's fine to say 'you have a right to food' – but when you go to the shops where there is food, the stuff costs money. The same with proper healthcare. If you are not rich you can't get better things or services. So our 'rights' are limited in the real world by the difference between rich and poor. This is true for all of our rights.

In education too, if you don't have something you can go to the Department but there is no serious thing from somebody that you get if you are poor – you just stand in long queues. In the schools, if you can't afford the fees, you are pushed out of the school even though that is not meant to be the law. Some of us think it is embarrassing to find, at the bank for example, that our parents can't even write their names.

But then we asked ourselves about the question: 'who can protect our rights?'. The government is not doing this and does not seem to care about the people. Government is too far away and forgets the people. Some of us thought that the answer about who can protect these rights must be US – we have to fight. It is us, as the people who are affected, who should be organising ourselves so that we know what is our rights, and to demand these rights and to lobby for them from the municipality. Others thought that maybe we should think more carefully about how we vote in the future – we can vote with our heart, or we can think before we vote. Now, we don't think before we vote and the politicians just make promises that they will deliver – but they don't. We should understand and interrogate the different Manifestos of the political parties. Now, we vote for our parties because we like them from the past, but we shouldn't do this anymore. Maybe we really should vote differently.

Perhaps we have to focus on jobs first so that people have money to access their rights. But then it is very important that we need decent work and not just any job where you are exploited. We can also get some of our rights – like to food – on our own but there are obstacles. For example, if the Department gives us seeds, we can plant them to grow food but we don't have enough land to live on. So the government should facilitate access to land by the people.

In the hospitals and clinics, the nurses don't treat people like human beings and patients – they act to us more like policemen who abuse and mistreat us. We think this is because they have money and we don't. They should re-think how they hire these people and stop taking people except those with the right qualities for nursing and how to treat people properly. When we think about how these problems could be changed we talked about two things. Firstly we realise that things will only change if we fight and complain together. We could use the 'suggestion boxes' but actually we know that these are not for real change – they are really designed to stop us fighting effectively for our rights. And second, we also realised that changing who is hired for work in the health system does not deal with what we said was the real reason for the problems we are facing there – we said that the real reason was that the nurses and professionals are rich and we are poor.

But if we are going to fight together as the people who are affected then it is not easy to challenge the government, and some of councillors are bad and violent against the people and can shoot us.

We have a new local councillor elected earlier this year and we are willing to give him some time to deliver on some of these problems we are facing. Through our development forum we will be calling him to a meeting early next year and then we'll see if he's coming with empty promises. We laughed when we asked ourselves how we would test this because it's true that this is hard. But we will put timeframes on our demands and, if there is nothing in that time – we think that 2 to 4 months is enough - then we will call a community meeting to discuss this and what to do next. Our previous councillor here was bad. He was uneducated and didn't want to listen to the people. This new one is better and has a better relationship with the people. He has invited us to raise our problems with him – as he says, he is not a sangoma who can prophesy these things, he needs to hear about them from the people. Even so, there is another problem with the politics here that is about 'chema' – what this means is that if the councillor is ANC then development will only go to ANC areas; you must be a card-carrying member of the political party and so now people are 'encouraged' to join. This feels bad but there is nothing we can do about it.

NOTE: When some of the facilitators were talking together after this workshop we noticed that it had been very hard for the people to feel confident to speak their own ideas. We thought this was because this constituency is used to NGO workshops where the main intention is to teach people, not by listening to their own views but by bringing outside 'expertise' that they are expected to passively listen to. It takes discipline, trust in the people, and a commitment to real democracy to break this habit that disempowers people and that keeps power in the hands of the outsiders and NGOs. It was very noticeable that one NGO worker especially, who was not part of the facilitators but had joined this workshop, would fill every silence with his own voice and his own ideas and analysis.

Workshop with residents of Peace Valley

Seven participants, all grassroots, but including for the first part of the discussion, the newly elected councillor, from the Peace Valley settlement near Plessislaer in Edendale.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

We think the WSF should hear about poverty and the lack of jobs in our place. Somehow these things, and especially the gap between richer and poorer, are behind many of the problems we face.

There are also important health issues, like HIV/AIDS and TB that are affecting many people. And access to government clinics is not good because they are far away from where we live.

Housing and shelter are a real problem. There are not houses for the people here even though people really need shelter and we have been promised RDP housing for many years. The housing problem also includes the problem of sanitation – in our area, there are still 'long drop' toilets which are not good, and which are outside of the houses.

We also think that education and the lack of skills is very problematic – there are not enough schools for our children here.

In some other areas, like Ashdown, there is a group that arranges to deliver food to desperately poor people. They arrange to get left over food from the big supermarkets and bring it in a bakkie.

Something like that is definitely needed here too because the poor are starving.

Our communities used to be involved in some sort of agriculture and we should think about this and at least do some agriculture to produce food for households.

People living in our area need better access to information - especially information about the assistance from the government that could be available to poor communities. People do not know about these things enough and for this reason, they cannot get this assistance.

There is a real need for more sports facilities for our community. For example, a number of years ago, there was a request from the community for basketball grounds, but nothing happens.

Crime is a problem that affects us here. And it also affects not just households and individuals but also our community life. For example, this hall that we are using tonight should have electricity but, as we can all see, there is none because vandals have broken everything⁶. Another aspect of crime that affects everyone badly, and especially the poor, are things like fraud and corruption.

Another thing that is affecting our community life and our shared spaces is the problem of waste and litter. All sorts of things, even dead animal carcasses, are dumped around here because there is no waste collection or waste disposal system. And of course, without these services the dirt stays and piles up.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

In the time we had available, we focused on the one most chosen: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights.

Because there are so many problems with the system of education, we do not really have our right to education even though it is so important. For example, we are at the beginning of the school year right now and there are always problems with stationery and books arriving late, sometimes only towards the end of the year. Obviously this affects learning very badly. We think that the problem of so many people not having jobs and money is behind all this. These issues are all connected together because accessing and benefiting from the schools needs money, and without money nothing else becomes possible. There are many costs with schooling. Not only the fees but everything costs – like school uniforms, or providing food for your children while they are at school. These things make it is so that the poor do not have their rights.

Those who are rulers and in government do not seem able to look after the needs of poor people in our communities. Even when people report their problems and their needs to the government, there is no support that comes, and we are never directed to someone who can actually help or solve the problems.

But actually the government knows about the problems of the people and yet the problems remain – why is this? Well, our previous councillor for the area always squashed our concerns down. We have a new councillor after the last elections and, the way he talks, sounds like it will be better. He listens to us, he doesn't reject our opinions and he acts on the people's concerns. For example, he listened about the problem of delivery of RDP housing and now there is going to a meeting about this on Sunday that the councillor has arranged.

⁶ Note that the time we had to talk and work together in this workshop was limited because, after sunset, we had less and less light – and when we finished, it was completely dark.

Up till now our experience has been that the politicians and councillors do make these sorts of promises but do nothing to really change things. This is very depressing for us because then we didn't know where to go next. They abuse the people's ignorance – there is so much that we don't know and that helps them to get away with this behaviour to us. And we know that if there isn't action to deliver these things (like housing) then the government money goes back to the central government and so we don't benefit. This is our third councillor – all the others promised lots and we never saw anything. But we do notice that the ones who make the promises are themselves getting these things and benefiting!

We do see that people in other areas seem to get delivery of housing or sanitation or roads and we blame these sorts of unfair things on bad councillors. Many of them are drinkers and womanisers who sleep in the meetings – and we suspect they are abusing money. Even though we feel and we know these things, it is hard to organise and build the power of the community to act together and to hold these leaders and councillors to account.

One thing that makes this hard is a kind of bribery that happens. If we, as ordinary residents, got together to do this and to plan and organise collective action, some small group will always go off and inform on our activities to the councillor. For this spying they are rewarded with temporary jobs (for example at the council), food, and money. The councillor has money and power to stop independent organisation and dissent. These things make it hard to organise and to actively involve people in the issues that affect us. It is ironic that the izimpimpi undermined our space for real democracy during the struggle against apartheid and the same is true now, even though we have a 'democratic' system in South Africa.

We thought about the fact that, although some townships have got some development and some (like us) have not, there is an even bigger gap between all of these areas (where most people live) and the rich suburbs of Pietermaritzburg – and that gap has not changed much after apartheid. This is sad and we feel like there is nothing we can do. In our houses and neighbourhoods there is mud and poverty – so much that people won't even be comfortable to come in to our homes. All we have is the councillor who should fight these fights for us.

So where do we go for solutions? Well, we will give this new councillor a chance but otherwise we will act. We do see that in general, the politicians and councillors quickly seem to become part of the elite that holds onto power and resources and does not share them. So the solution is probably to build the power of the people to change these things.

Workshop with Development Trust members from Nthuthukoville

Just three participants, but a great conversation⁷ with grassroots members of the Nthuthukoville Development Trust.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

We at the grassroots are the ones who really experience the injustices. But it is always others, including the politicians, the NGOs, and the academics, who speak for us – and we keep suffering, nothing changes. If there are those who will be attending the WSF from 'Maritzburg, then they should be at least taking the grassroots people with them so we can speak for ourselves. If they don't do this, then perhaps at least they can report back and account about what they have learned that could be of benefit to us because all of these things are meant to be changing people's lives. So the idea of the an event in 'Maritzburg after the WSF would be good – and it would especially important to invite and involve the youth.

We think the WSF should know about the real problem of shelter for the people. We are staying in muddy houses here that are not good for living in. The reason for this settlement to be here was that many of us had to flee from different areas when there was so much political violence in the region. We had occupied land and built shacks here by the early 1990s. We did have some form of development here after that. We were organised and were the first community to access the housing subsidies in 1994. But the problem is that at the time, the subsidy was very small and it was only for some infrastructure not for building proper houses. Nowadays, the subsidy is bigger and it is used to build a proper house. So people here are not satisfied. Also, when there is infrastructure, it should be maintained properly by the local government. But in our place there is no system to maintain the infrastructure – especially in shack areas. Our storm-water drains keep blocking up, there are not proper roads, there is dumping of rubbish everywhere and so on. Government must deliver - but here, where they started to deliver, it's not good enough.

A big issue is the poverty and how to alleviate it.

What is annoying me the most is that the government seems to be focussing on the big cities and forgetting those of us outside. And yet we are the ones who are voting for them and putting them there in power over us. Sure, these people are democratically elected but those people in high places don't understand about poverty - they're sleeping in nice houses now. Once we elect them, they move away from our areas. We never see our councillors after we have voted for them. When we have needs or problems, we cannot reach them – they lock their gates and they have a 'not available' message on their phones.

Crime is also a horrible problem that is affecting too many people here. We are especially concerned about rapes and abuse that is happening. It is made worse because our nearest police station, at Mountain Rise, is not functioning – if you ever call them for an emergency in the night they will never come – maybe sometimes they'll come the next day in the morning. Use of drugs is very high in our area too, and people are selling to our school-children.

⁷ Note that time was quite limited as participants had other matters to attend that night as well.

This is connected to the fact that so many school-leavers, even the ones who finish to Matric-level, have no jobs, so they are just around.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

In this workshop, it was clear that there was not just one or two themes with a lot of votes. There were six themes that participants felt were important. So in the time we had available, we just decided to have an open discussion with all these important issues and themes in mind: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights; Building real democratic political structures and institutions with full people's participation on decisions and control of public affairs and resources, so that people have control over the things that affect their lives; Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run; Building a world in which there is peace and justice, where people behave in a fair and right way, and where there is respect for the different religious or spiritual beliefs that people have; Making sure that everyone can have meaningful information and knowledge they want and need; Making sure that everyone is treated with respect, and that no-one is treated badly because they are different, or because they are a woman, or because of where they come from, and so on. Helping people see that differences between us are a good thing, not a bad thing.

In some ways, information and knowledge is fundamental to all these. At the grassroots we need to learn from those who have the information about these things, and about how to live with people. In these days, technology is very high and is becoming very important. So we, and especially the young people, need information about this, including things like computer technology. In our areas we have no computers.

Even to build real democracy, information and knowledge is necessary. But definitely, we need to have real participation in decision-making – and even in the implementation of things. What it is absolutely necessary is for us to tell people what we want, and not for them to tell us. It is always that other way round – outsiders come here and they just want to bring their projects to us.

When President Mbeki talks, he often speaks about the people of South Africa and that they must come first – 'batho pele'. He has made strong warnings against those people who want to use the organisations to get money and to make themselves rich. In this aspect we agree with the President and that is why also chose the theme about changing the economy to put people first. People are joining and using the organisation (ANC but also government posts and systems) to make money and they forget us down here.

But we don't just think it is about the poor people being given things or money. We must 'learn how to fish' not just be given a fish to eat for a day! Part of this is to get information and knowledge about these things, and about how to get what has been allocated for the poor people. At the grassroots, we are neglected by those who are educated and who know about these things. Instead, they use that allocated money for themselves.

On the question of rights to things like food, it is clear to us that without knowledge and skills, we cannot have these things. For example, without knowledge and skills in agriculture, you can't grow food at the household level. And the information and knowledge that is needed is also about knowing which doors to knock on for them.

Poor people, especially those of us who have come from the rural areas, don't know about our rights

to education. Because of this, when we can't afford school fees, our kids are turned away from schools even though we hear on the news that this is not the right policy and that it should be that everyone has the right to education, even if they are poor.

We get very angry that the NGOs raise money on these issues that affect us. They come here time and again and take lots of photos of our shacks and our children, they write their reports to their donors – but they do not consult and work with the people; we never see them again. This is a kind of exploitation and it is frustrating because they could have the information and knowledge that we really need.

Even more than pointing fingers at outsiders (like the NGOs and the government) we also know that there are problems within our communities. In our experience, the people do not want to listen even to those from **in** the community who have some information and skills. The people undermine each other and we think that maybe it needs an outsider to help to change this problem with us. For example, we are members of the Trust here in Nthuthukoville which demands a lot of volunteer time from us. But many people in the community now think that we must be getting some money or something out of this work and so they won't support us or work with us. This has been very discouraging.

The councillor is the one who is meant to organise, unify and teach the people, and to encourage the spirit of ubuntu among us. But where are these councillors? - they have moved away to richer areas. Here, where the people are, we are staying surrounded by mosquitoes, rubbish dumps where our children play and there is so much sickness – and yet we have a councillor!

Could things be better? Of course, definitely yes. Somehow it can come about through the people's participation - and by the people's participation beginning to change the way this system of politics, councillors, and power all works together.

Workshop with residents of Ash Road shack settlement

Eleven participants, all women living in the shack settlement at Ash Road, Maritzburg.

After talking a little about the history and intentions of the WSF, the group shared their responses to this question: Thinking about the places where you are from and the struggles that you face there, what would be the most important issues that you think people at the WSF should talk about?

For us who are living in the shacks, they must bring us in a house. When we talk about a house we mean to include also water, electricity, a toilet. For this we need land – land where we are living, because we will not be made to move away from here.

There is no system to remove the dirt and rubbish from our place.

For our children here, we need to have schools and a crèche as well. There is no recreation place for our children and young people either. And for our old people, there is no safe home or place where they can be looked after properly without being abused.

There are many health needs here but there is no clinic or specialist doctors for the problems that affect people living in the shacks.

Too many people do not have official documents, like birth certificates and identity books. It is necessary to have these things to access government grants and other assistance that might be available for the poor.

And we also need to have good information about ourselves as a community – information about things like: who is here?, how many of us are there?, what do we have and not have, and what are our needs?. This information will be important when we have to ask the government for the things we need and will demand to have.

It is clear that we need to have projects that can really help for the development of the people in our place.

Voting on WSF 07 themes:

The workshop focused on the 2 most chosen: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights; and Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run.

The following questions guided the group's conversation about these themes: Think, then talk, about the way that that chosen theme is really felt and experienced by the poor and marginalised in your community or group. In other words perhaps, how does this issue confront you, and how does it make people feel? Why is it like that?

Here in the shacks, the problems of not having health-care affects us. Because people here can be coming to the city for the first time, they do not know others, and people do not know them either. They can get sick here in the shacks but no-one knows them and they die, alone in their room without care.

Actually we need to develop a funeral service here that everyone can contribute to. The people here come from all different places, sometimes very far away. When they die, the burial costs can be very high because it must be arranged that the body is taken home – which can be a far away place like Botswana. This is an issue that especially affects the shack settlements because people have come together here from all over.

Schooling has many difficulties. There is no school in our place so the children have to travel, usually for at least an hour. For this, they need transport which costs money and so the poor are excluded from the schools by these kinds of expenses. Also the travelling exposes our children to the dangers of accidents which leaves them disabled. And learning is very hard when you are hungry. Too many children leave home for school without eating and then they are sleeping in class - and you are not really getting an education this way.

For all the things in life – like food, transport, decent housing – you need to get money and, for that, you need to have a job.

We talked about whether the people should be closer to the police? The reasons why we ask ourselves this question include some of the following things: from time-to-time, the dead body of someone who has been killed is dumped and then found in our area. Maybe the reason for this is that the grass is allowed to grow high in shack areas and so it is easy to dump these things here. But then the outside people, and the police especially, get the idea that this is a bad place here and

then they do not care about us. The police treat us badly here and they assume we are all criminals. But on the other hand, there are serious problems, like housebreaking and rape and drug abuse, that are affecting us very much and are the reason why we do need good policing. Perhaps they should choose, together with us, maybe 5 men and 5 women to be policing our area. Certainly we need a quiet, safe place to live in.

And the shack settlement is not a quiet place! Maybe you could call it a problem of noise pollution. For example, if you are studying, you are not taken seriously and can't do your studies because there are loud radios and music going on in all the neighbouring shacks. There is no respect for space and this makes family life or looking after growing children very hard.

When we think about changing our economy so that people come first, and not profits, then we say again that everyone must have enough money for all the things in life – but there are not jobs for the people. Things are selling for too much money and so ordinary people are not getting any profit. We can try to find a place to make a garden where we can plant food to sell, and we can try to start our small businesses, but always the costs of making this happen make it so that there is not profit at the end of the day. We talked about the many different kinds of small businesses and development projects that we have done to try and make some money. But always, the economics does not work for us, and any money we have or that we make in the first stages, gets used up trying to keep it going. We just cannot make it work against the big businesses who can sell many things at cheaper prices and who make the real profits.

We thought about where the real profits do go – because even when we make our small businesses, our own money gets spent paying the big business people – for example, to buy the things we want to sell, or for the transport to bring things to our place etc..

We wondered how it could be different if, really, people were put first and if we shared things more fairly rather than the big businesses and powerful entrepreneurs making lots of profit. We talked about the fact that, even in our own buying and selling here, we do not work together and plan together and share. Instead we get into competition with each other and this kills off our chances of succeeding. But maybe from now on we could come together and plan these things. Even though we have democracy, these things have not changed. The big businesses and the people high up have the benefits and the power. Obviously this system is working for them and they will not be the ones who will want to change it. We, at the bottom, want to go up and so we at the bottom must come together and make our plans. Maybe even if we just plant gardens for food so the rich can buy from us? But the big business people know where to get the cheapest things to sell for profit – and the small ones don't know about this. These are hard questions about how to change the economy! But if we go back to our burning issues that we talked about at the beginning, we feel strongly that we can and we must tackle these things and we can act together. So we made concrete plans to call a meeting with the people about these issues for next week. The power to change these things must come from the people.

The workshop that didn't happen

One of the workshops we planned to have to talk about the World Social Forum failed to happen. This is a pity because all of us involved in them have been learning a lot from each one that has happened. But some of the discussions in the group of 'town-based' activists who went out there and talked about this failure were actually about very important things, so we thought we would try and make a note of some issues that came up anyway. We will write these down in a way that does not mention the actual structures and places involved because we thought the issues we talked about are relevant to many organisations and situations.

What happened? Basically the preparations had been done through a couple of activists who work for an NGO. This NGO has been committed to the whole idea behind these workshops, including the ideas that are critical of some of the ways that NGOs have worked in relation to the WSF and the grassroots. This NGO also has had a long presence in this particular area where we were going to run the workshop. So they were actually confident that, through the contacts they have built up over the years, we would have a good and energetic discussion with ordinary people from this area.

The workshop was to happen in a rural settlement that is quite close to a farming town surrounded mostly by white commercial agriculture. The plan, suggested by a local contact person, had been to use the clinic building in the settlement for our meeting. When the small group of 'town-based' activists arrived, we found the clinic grounds locked up, and we couldn't really see anyone gathering around ready to have a workshop. We went to a building just outside the settlement where there is a local development project which has employed one of the NGO's key local contacts. He said he couldn't come to workshop because he had reports to write for the development project but that someone would sort out a key for the clinic building so we should go back there and could begin soon. When we got back to the clinic building, we spoke with some people who were indeed trying to get the key. After perhaps half an hour they returned saying they had found the person with the key but that they still didn't actually have it. This was because the man with the key insisted that we needed to speak to the local councillor about our planned workshop first so that the councillor could phone the man with the key and specifically authorise letting us use it. By this time, we were probably about 3 hours behind schedule. Also, it was clear by now that there were not any significant numbers (perhaps two people) who were actually willing and ready to come to the workshop that had been proposed. So an alternative plan was made with those two people to include them in a later workshop elsewhere and eventually, we left the settlement.

These events led to several areas of discussions among the group that had gone out together to help run the workshop.

Some of the main points in our discussions were the following things:

We talked quite a lot about the fuss concerning the key to clinic building. We were struck by the insistent exercise of power by local elites to try and control what is allowed to happen and what people are allowed to do and discuss politically in 'their' areas. We have definitely noticed this pattern in all sorts of other places around as well and it seems that it is quite a generalised problem at local level in 'democratic' South Africa. It happens in all sorts of ways but a very common experience is how especially how local councillors and their own structures (like ward committees, and local branches of the political party) will not tolerate any independent and/or popular organisation, let alone mobilisation.

Although this power is often carried out using the language of democracy, its effect (and its real intention) is making actual life fundamentally undemocratic - people feel that they have no right to call open meetings and there is real intimidation against any voicing of criticism against the local power elites.

Some of the NGO activists were annoyed and frustrated by this almost tyrannical behaviour. They said that maybe they should start over-riding these kinds of power plays and simply going ahead and calling meetings to allow people space to talk and act independently because that should be their democratic right. But then we also talked about how appropriate this would actually be. We realise that is easier perhaps to take on this righteous role – but city-based and NGO-employed activists would usually go back to their safe homes in their cars afterwards, and local people would be left vulnerable to the power and actions of the local elites – they would be marginalised, demonised and often under physical threat and danger. While resistance against local tyranny is absolutely necessary for democratic struggle and politics, it must emerge from within each different place and it must be led by the people who suffer there. This means that the actual shape and direction will not usually fit neatly into the imagined fantasies that the city-based and NGO-employed activists would have in their minds. It also means that usually these must be slow and careful processes that require very careful, supportive and patient roles for outsiders - if indeed there is any role for them. And it requires extraordinary bravery by local people who take on the task of challenging undemocratic practices and building and nurturing democratic ones instead.

Talking in this self-critical way about the role of outsider activists and agencies is very important, and it led us to reflect on the actual practice of the NGO in this place over the last years. Those who have been involved recognised that the work of their colleagues and the NGO as a whole in this place had had good intentions but might have had real problems in practice. In particular, we talked about how this work has effectively built up a very small group who now exercised quite a lot of power in this place and who had secured personal advantage (like employment) and political prestige and power in a way that might not be very democratic or empowering for the people as a whole.

And why the relationship had changed? The fact that almost no-one arrived for the workshop signalled a problem. It seemed clear that the political network controlled by the elite created through dependence on the NGO had blocked/discouraged participation. Perhaps this was connected with the signal recently sent by this NGO that they were not going to be able to give same levels of support as before and needed to have a full discussion about future relationships and roles between local people and the NGO?

Overall voting on themes from all the workshops

Table showing how people voted for themes in each workshop

Theme	Workshop							
	JAW	AbM&AEC	'Land Matters'	Pmb townships	Gezibuso	Peace Valley	Nthuthuko ville	Ash Road
Rights to food, healthcare, education and decent work	5	6	1	1	10	4	1	10
Economy: put people first, not money and profit	4	5	6	4	3	1	1	9
Building real democracy	5	4	2	2	4	1	1	0
Treat everyone with respect	4	7	5	1	1	0	1	1
Change world politics	3	4	1	1	2	3	0	0
Fight the power of big capital	1	6	1	4	2	0	0	2
Meaningful information and knowledge	1	5	1		5	0	1	2
Peace and justice	3	1	1	0	1	0	1	5
Have and use things that should belong to everyone, like air, and water	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0

Total votes from all the workshops for all the themes:

38 voted for: Giving everyone the right to food, healthcare, education and decent work, and protecting their rights.

33 voted for: Re-organising the economy to make sure that people come first, not money and profit, and making sure the economy can last for the long run.

20 voted for: Making sure that everyone is treated with respect, and that no-one is treated badly because they are different, or because they are a woman, or because of where they come from, and so on. Helping people see that differences between us are a good thing, not a bad thing.

19 voted for: Building real democratic political structures and institutions with full people's participation on decisions and control of public affairs and resources, so that people have control over the things that affect their lives.

16 voted for: Fighting to free the world from the power that capital, especially big multinational companies and banks, has over the world.

15 voted for: Making sure that everyone can have meaningful information and knowledge they want and need.

14 voted for: Change world politics: Building a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and rights of peoples, in other words, a world where people have rights and have the power to make decisions about and for themselves.

12 voted for: Building a world in which there is peace and justice, where people behave in a fair and right way, and where there is respect for the different religious or spiritual beliefs that people have.

3 voted for: Making sure that everyone can have and can use things that should belong to everyone, like air, and water, and that these things are used in a way that doesn't destroy them for the future.

Comment

The voting exercise we did during the workshops was not meant as a scientific poll and we would not claim to be able to scientifically extrapolate results. Nonetheless, a couple of patterns are very obvious.

What were overwhelmingly prioritised were, firstly, people's rights to some basic necessities of decent life (specifically food, healthcare, education and decent work)⁸ and secondly, changing the economic system to put people first, and not profits and money⁹. What emerges as by far the lowest priority are environmental concerns about the “things that should belong to everyone, like air, and water, and that these things are used in a way that doesn't destroy them for the future”¹⁰.

It was also notable that, especially in discussions with shack-dwellers, after talking about the WSF's chosen themes, people returned to matters of land and shelter that they had prioritised themselves and which did not seem to them to have been priorities for the WSF at all and which they were committed to taking action on.

⁸ With 38 votes.

⁹ With 33 votes.

¹⁰ With 3 votes.