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Two Global Solitudes Must Unite

By Zack Gross

Two world conferences take place every January to focus on the issues facing humanity, one called the World Social Forum (WSF) and the other the World Economic Forum (WEF). Even though these events, which have just wrapped up for 2007, delve into the same issues, they each do so with very different groups of participants and brands of ideologies.

The World Economic Forum is a gathering of leading businesspeople and politicians. It was first held in 1971, the brainchild of a Swiss professor, and has always been held in Davos, a Swiss mountain resort. Corporate heavyweights, such as Bill Gates of MicroSoft, the founders of Google, the heads of Coca-Cola, Intel, Volkswagen and British Petroleum, along with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and South African President Thabo Mbeki are part of this year's line-up, from January 24th to 28th. In all, 2,400 delegates from 90 countries are debating issues such as climate change, terrorism, globalization and technological innovation from a business point of view, under the title of "The Shifting Power Equation." Some sessions are set up to help CEOs guide their companies through today's choppy economic waters.

The 2007 World Social Forum has just taken place in Nairobi, Kenya from January 20th through 26th. First held in Brazil in 2001, the Social Forum is seen as an annual "people's" gathering, coinciding with and juxtaposing the "market-friendly" WEC. More than 80,000 people gathered for the opening ceremony and promptly marched to Nairobi's largest slum area to protest globalization policies that they say hurt the poor. According to the event's website, this Seventh WSF will showcase "Africa and her unbroken history of struggle against foreign domination, colonialism and neocolonialism."

At least 700,000 people, one-third of Nairobi's population, live in Kibera, aforementioned square mile of slum, with little access to running water and other basic services. Children loiter on the streets sniffing glue and beggars ask for food and money. Former Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda addressed the slum rally, calling for an end to poverty and for food to be readily available on ordinary people's tables. People held banners criticizing US foreign and trade policy, local poverty and gender discrimination.

One of the speakers at the World Social Forum was Wangari Maathai, who last year received the Nobel Peace Prize for her worldwide tree planting campaigns. Professor Maathai focused on the \$1.5 billion spent by Kenya last year to service its global debt, rather than putting those funds into development programs. Another speaker, Venant Williams of Tanzania, talked about the need for economic opportunities for young Africans, saying: "Youth unemployment is a time bomb!"

One of the industries that cause hunger and environmental damage in Africa is the production of cut flowers. While this is now the second largest industry in Kenya after tourism, lakes and aquifers in the Great Rift Valley are being emptied to grow the flowers, ultimately bound for shops in Europe, while desertification inexorably results. As well, good land that could be used to grow food for local consumption is being given over to export agriculture of an inedible product and the lowering of lake levels is affecting fish stocks which used to create jobs and feed local people.

Participants in the World Social Forum went out to Lake Navisha near Nairobi and met with community activists working on wetlands preservation projects. These groups are forming partnerships with communities and employers to facilitate better natural resource management while not hurting jobs. Currently, flower workers receive only \$60 per month while working ten six-hour days per week. There is no compensation for overtime, little sympathy toward maternity leave, and much plastic garbage left behind on the fields.

One of the links between global business and poverty activists in recent years has been the support of celebrities for the poor, for example through the Make Poverty History campaign. It is notable that the stars have not been invited to Davos this year, although Bono, the ever-present campaigner, is there and appeared in photos with Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor and Chair of this year's World Economic Forum.

In Canada, we have often called the English and French sides of our culture as "The Two Solitudes." Globally, we need to bring the solitude of business together with that of community activism, the world of big economics together with small community groups often called "civil society." Otherwise, annual world conferences will not bring us the peace and prosperity for all that we desire.

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