

# Nairobi Reflections

By Maude Barlow

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The seventh World Social Forum was held in Nairobi, Kenya, January 20-25, 2007 and I had the honour of attending and speaking at the event. I was part of a great Council of Canadians delegation that included our international water organizer Anil Naidoo (Blue Planet Project), and board members Garry John and Leo Broderick as well as former board member Shirley Lord, who, with her partner George, has been serving with the Voluntary Services Overseas in Uganda.

Close to 50,000 people from all over Africa and the world attended this colourful, passionate and vibrant gathering. While sometimes criticized and disrupted by protests from local people who could not afford even the low-income entrance fee, this first-in-Africa WSF nevertheless was a great and resounding success.

We put on several workshops and strategy sessions on the right to water and I was a keynote speaker on a panel chaired by Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai. Because the water in Nairobi is not safe to drink, everyone, including activists, had to drink bottled water. The most popular brand is Coke's Dasani, and it is easily found everywhere. During one of my speeches, I held up a bottle of Dasani and said; "If another world is possible (the theme of the WSF), then another social forum without Coca Cola water is possible!" I got a great response to that!

For me, the shining moment came on the last day, when the African Water Network was born and I must admit to shedding some tears as the founding principles of this pan-African water justice movement were read out loud.

After participants voted on these principles, Chief Garry John, a Council of Canadians board member, sang and drummed a water warrior's song to celebrate the birth of this network.

From working with the wonderful people who made this happen, I know what a miracle this is. Many come from the poorest parts of Africa and are poor themselves. They are up against their governments, the World Bank and the big water transnationals. Nevertheless, they managed to pull off a coup, solidifying opposition to the theft of their water supplies.



*The stage is now set in Africa for the kind of fight-back we have been witnessing in Latin America.*

Sam Bozzo, a gifted young filmmaker from California who is making a major documentary on water privatization, also joined our delegation, along with George Ogendi, an environmental

scientist from Kenya, to film the realities of Africa and the lives of people without water.

We went deep into the Nairobi slum of Kebira, perhaps Africa's largest slum, where one million people live on two square kilometres of land. The average home in Kebira is six square feet and has five people living in it. Half of the population is HIV-positive. Water is so scarce in this vast slum that there is not a patch of green anywhere. Whatever people need, they must buy from water vendors located throughout the site. Six hundred padlocked pit latrines provide the "sanitation" here and residents must pay a fee to local thugs to use them. Kebira is only one of 200 slums in Nairobi alone.

The next day, we had a totally different, but in its own way, just as disturbing, experience, going deep into the huge foreign-controlled flower industry that is sucking the haunting Lake Naivasha dry. We went out first on a boat to see the lake, situated in the famous Rift Valley, and sat still in wonder at the serene beauty. We saw hippos, emus zebras, giraffes wildebeests, pelicans, gazelles and so much more. At one point I gasped, and said, "This looks like the film *Out of Africa*," to which our boatman replied, "That's because it is where the movie was filmed."

Then we filmed the vast fields of flowers behind locked gates and protected by armed gunmen. Scientists are predicting that this lake will be a "dirty puddle" in five years unless something is done. We left determined to do

something to save this lovely place and get the flower agri-business out of Africa!

As always, I reflected on the way home about the meaning of all I had seen and witnessed. The first and most important impression is again the terrible unforgiving differences between the lives of most of us and the majority of the population of Africa.



If ever there was an indictment of economic globalization, Africa is it. But, remembering the incredible speeches, the beauty of the culture, music and dance, and powerful commitments made to a different world that I witnessed in Nairobi, I felt a sense of great hope. That is the

role of the World Social Forum and its most important legacy. Hope is a moral imperative and it shone in Kenya for everyone who was there.

**Maude Barlow** is the National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, and the founder of the Blue Planet Project, an organization committed to supporting global grassroots struggles for the right to water. In 2005, she was awarded the Right Livelihood Award, which honours those "offering practical and exemplary answers to the most urgent challenges facing us today." Maude's latest book, **Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Fight for the Right to Water** will be published in the fall of 2007.

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