Reflections on the World Social Forum “Conversation on Race and Leadership”

By Baju Lal M.V., Richard Moore, Cidra Sebastien, Jennifer Dodge, Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, and Diana Salas

In January 2009, a group of social change activists and researchers organized a panel at the World Social Forum (WSF) in Brazil called “Conversation on Race and Leadership.” Participants came from the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA), the Women of Color Policy Network (WOCPN), the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SW Network), and The Brotherhood/Sister Sol. RCLA had supported a research project among activists and researchers of color – which included one each from the SW Network and The Brotherhood Sister Sol Inc. These leaders explored the obstacles and barriers related to race and racism they had experienced as leaders of progressive movements, and how they were overcoming them. WOCPN has been conducting policy research on the critical issues facing women of color across the United States. The goals for the panel were to bring together participants in this work to:

- disseminate ideas from this and other participatory research on the intersection between race and social change leadership, and to foster an exchange of ideas on this topic;
- reflect on the connection between race/racism and organizational sustainability;
- take steps toward democratization and decolonization of knowledge production processes; and
- reflect on the relationship between universities and practitioners in the social change community in “engaged scholarship.”

Another goal was to host a conversation back in New York with social change leaders and engaged researchers and students, to share lessons from the forum, and to continue the conversation. RCLA and WOCPN hosted this conversation with Richard Moore, Cidra Sebastien and students from NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service on April 30, 2009.

This article documents some of the ideas that were shared in these conversations. It reflects many voices. Participants who were at the WSF panel discussion come from India, South Africa, Canada, Brazil, and the United States, and work on a variety of social justice issues. We tried to capture their insights faithfully, and invited both presenters and other participants to write additional comments to deepen our collective reflections. Some agreed as you will see below. The panel provided a unique opportunity to share insights from local...
communities sprinkled across the globe about the tensions at the intersection between race and leadership, and in the relationship of activists and academics.

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Opening the Presentation

Cidra Sebastien (The Brotherhood/Sister Sol) and Richard Moore (The Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice) opened the panel “A Conversation about Race and Leadership” by describing their work with an inquiry group. The group focused on the obstacles and barriers related to race and racism in progressive movements in the US and the strategies they used to overcome them. It brought together ten people of color -- seven social justice activists and two researchers -- from across the US participating in the Research & Documentation Component of Leadership for a Changing World, a Ford Foundation program that recognized exemplary community leaders and organizations. 

Their inquiry has been documented in a report called, “Taking Back the Work: A Cooperative Inquiry into the Work of Leaders of Color in Movement-Building Organizations.”

Diana Salas (Women of Color Policy Network) presented her work doing policy research with women of color around critical policy issues and what she calls “ending the invisibility of women of color in public policy.” Jennifer Dodge (Research Center for Leadership in Action) talked about her research with Richard Moore and the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice that documents one of the organization’s working groups – the Environmental Justice Working Group – and its efforts to bring environmental justice policy to New Mexico.

The rest of this document covers key themes that emerged from our conversation.

Themes on Race and Leadership

Leadership work in communities of color and for leaders of color can be de-legitimized in a variety of ways. Cidra talked about two issues. First, funders will often argue that “organizations of color lack capacity” as a means to de-legitimize their work. Second, “community organizing” has become professionalized so that activists need a degree to be seen as legitimate. Yet, legitimate models of organizing in communities of color – that are not based in formal, professional training programs – have existed for a long time. This emphasis on professionalization serves to de-legitimize the ways of organizing that have developed within specific movements and communities throughout history. One participant at the forum also saw this happening in the Brazilian context in the Afro-Brazilian

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4 Co-inquirers included: Will Allen, Growing Power Community Food Center; Angie Chan (Facilitator), NYU’s Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service; Joyce Johnson, Beloved Community Center of Greensboro; Ricardo Martinez, Padres Unidos; Reggie Moore, Urban Underground; Richard Moore, Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice; Ai-jen Poo, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities; Linda Powell-Pruitt (Facilitator), Cidra Sebastien, The Brotherhood/Sister Sol.

5 For a copy of this report, please go to http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/files/TakingBacktheWork.pdf.
Movement. He said he believes that Afro-Brazilians need to recapture models of Black organizing that have been around since colonization of the Americas. Afro-Brazilian models are relevant and represent knowledge that has evolved within communities and movements, he said.

This same participant from Brazil put into context the situation of Afro-Brazilians. He said, “On the situation of Blacks in Brazil, we are officially about 55 percent of the population; and the level of participation among Afro-Brazilians is pretty much equal to [what it was in] the United States in the 1960s. ...At the same time Brazil has a long tradition of Black activism, and church-based, grassroots work.”

Within this context, leadership training offered in Brazil often does not include the perspectives of people of color even though Afro-Brazilians make up 55 percent of the population. He said, “Given the main topic of the conference on race and leadership, leadership training has been a great concern of grassroots work in Brazil. Sometime it includes Blacks, sometimes it includes indigenous people, sometimes it includes women, but it never includes their specific problems. It generally means taking those people who are ‘natural born leaders’ and you work on their skills. ... It generally excludes the point of view of Blacks, of indigenous people, and of women.... It’s hard to disguise that there are Black people or women among social movements but it’s very easy to disregard their specific point of view and problems as [those of] Black people and women. So this is one of the problems that we have to deal with.”

He talked about two additional issues that de-legitimize Black leadership from his perspective. First, he explained that “In the last ten years, the Black movement in Brazil has raised affirmative action. [But some groups in] academia came out against us.” He said that the arguments academics used to block affirmative action were that the movement would raise civil unrest, war, or terror. They argued that “your social movement is breaking your country apart.”

Second, he talked about how the Afro-Brazilian movement is really two to three different national movements with different agendas and ways of organizing, but this plurality is often not recognized. Instead people will point to a lack of unity in the movement. He notes that this “lack of unity” is often tolerated in governments or mainstream organizations, but people are quick to use this critique to de-legitimize the work of the movements. Rather than offering constructive criticism, it creates tensions within the movement and obstructs progressive change.

One of the key strategies that people talked about to deal with these issues was to ensure that people impacted by social problems are the ones taking the lead in addressing them.

One of the participants from India, Biju Lal, explained the situation among “tribals” and

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6 Biju Lal came to the WSF as part of an Indian delegation called SAPI, which was representing the Human Rights and Law Unit of the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. He has worked with the Chengara land struggle in Kerala, which for him reflects common struggles of “tribals” and “dalits” (untouchables) throughout India. He argues that while the tribals and dalits have a “culture of living in harmony with nature and soil, and... respecting the earth... both [also] have histories of how the non-indigenous have betrayed and brutalised them to capture land. In India you have hundreds of examples in mythology, epic, colonial and post-colonial
“ex-untouchables” in India. He says that among “indigenous people in South Asia there are two groups. One is the tribes – or tribals as we call them – and the other one is the ex-untouchables. I call them ex-untouchables because the constitution of India does not allow untouchable-ness to be practiced. It is practiced, but legally it is not [allowed].”

Within this context, his work is to ensure that these groups take leadership to find their own solutions. He said, both “communities have been represented in the democratic decision making process [of India]. But the constitutionally-laid human rights guarantees are sidelined or scuttled through parliamentary processes. New leadership among these communities has often questioned the welfare and industrial state for its intentions to further displace them from their resources, opportunities and dignity.” However, he noted that their leaders have been “branded as law breakers and there is widespread use of ‘black laws’ to stop the new leadership from emerging and/or strengthening.”

Furthermore, he explained, “Often there are big NGOs, civil society organizations, including the World Bank and UNDP that do research on [these groups], or on behalf of them. And how do you get [ex-untouchables] recognized, acknowledged, or as you say, validated? Often the policy changes are outdated in Delhi, and therefore there is a tremendous amount of effort at the grassroots level that [the ex-untouchables] participate in the policy changes they want to bring about, and their voices are heard. So there are various networks now that have been created among the tribals.... Also there are efforts to push the agenda of indigenous people by [indigenous people].... Their leadership is there, not someone else takes the leadership for them. And therefore there are slogans: ‘it’s our problem, and therefore our leadership.'”

Richard Moore commented that these experiences are not unique, but are common across borders. Diana Salas noted that, “The reality is that [the people] affected aren’t necessarily considered the experts to find remedies. So although leadership should come from the ground up, the structures in place do not recognize them. Marginalized groups in the US face this hurdle. Social policies are aimed at solving the issues that disproportionately affect low-income people of color yet [low-income people of color] are often left out of the policy discourse. The consequences of this are dire because the policy responses are developed in a vacuum.”

Themes on Research, Activists and Academics

Many of these issues of race and leadership also enter into the relationships between academics and social change practitioners, and this topic became a significant part of our conversation. Several presenters and participants talked about the purposes of research, and the importance of connecting it to social change work. Cidra said that often “We [organizations of people of color] get studied but the research is of no benefit to us, something gets published, but it’s of no use.” A participant from India who is a researcher with strong connections to his community stopped doing what he described as ‘nonsense’
research, by which he meant research that had no social purpose. He argued that research needs to be connected to human rights; “otherwise it’s taking from life.”

Diana, speaking from the context of her organization’s work doing policy research with women of color, talked about the importance of discussing how the knowledge is going to be used: researchers need to show integrity; they can often misrepresent or misdiagnose the problem, which ultimately works against community goals. She noted that researchers can have different levels of commitment to social change.

This idea is linked to who owns the knowledge represented in research, and who will make decisions about how the research will be carried forward. Cidra and Richard talked about this question in terms their choices to participate in the research project on race and leadership. The fact that the research was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, and hosted by researchers at the Research Center for Leadership in Action, is important context for understanding the choices they described because it shapes who might feel ownership of the knowledge produced and for what purposes it is used. Cidra asked, “What are the rights of the community in terms of what gets published?” And Richard asked, “How will the information be shared; because the knowledge is owned by the movement.” He also talked about how decisions are made and what the role of the researchers in the project would be (they were also people of color); and “we decided that they would be active participants in the process [rather than merely facilitators]; this was important.”

One of the challenges that both presenters and participants in the conversation talked about related to issues of access to resources to do research, including access to the corridors of academia. Building on his discussion of the political exclusion of Afro-Brazilians, the participant from Brazil said that, “When it comes to academia… Afro-Brazilians' [participation is] even worse... We do not have any participation whatsoever on how research is done, especially with how research is done on us.” He continued, “We have a long tradition of being studied, but we have also been kept out of academia for a long time. Now some of us are coming in, and trying to come together and come up with a basic point of view from which we can argue against - I’m not even talking about something theoretical - just argue against the knowledge that is being written about us. We’re going through this process of criticizing everything that has been written about us since the late 1930s and last century... Even people who wrote on our side wrote things that today we disagree with very much.”

There was a sense among those present at the session that it is important for activists to enter academia to ensure that research with a social purpose, particularly from a movement point of view, is carried forward. Participants and speakers viewed it as a means for fostering research that remains connected to a social movement. However, the decision to do academic work for activists, and the reality they confront when entering academia, is fraught with challenges. A couple of people talked about barriers to accessing research resources. Diana talked about how advocates can partner with institutions on research, but some groups don’t have this kind of access. Richard said that the university can be “a glass castle,” meaning that “they only want us [people of color/activists] to do the landscaping.”
A participant from India talked about how “academic work asks that you cleanse the social class you come from – it’s the only way to get [into the] academy.” For the group, this is one of the pressures that activists can face once they make the choice to do research within the context of the university. As a counter point, this participant discussed the importance of staying connected to your activist roots. He said, “you have to stay connected” to where you’re coming from. The participant from Brazil also talked about the importance of “staying connected to the movement over time.” He described the kind of research that remains connected to one’s social movement as “activist scholarship.”

There are positive models of academic research that serves a social purpose. For participants, research that serves a social purpose is connected to progressive social movements. The participant from Brazil talked about the Black Researchers National Association funded by Oxfam as one example. The Cooperative Inquiry process that Richard and Cidra participated in with the Research Center for Leadership is action is another model because it democratizes the research process and addresses head-on research purposes, knowledge ownership, and agency in carrying out and gaining access to research.7 Finally, Jennifer and Richard made a written memorandum of agreement when they were negotiating to do a piece of research together that discussed many of the issues that arise between activists and academics that were raised in this panel – from who owns the knowledge that is represented in reports, to what the commitments of each participant will be to the other, and so on (see Appendix B). This kind of agreement can help activists achieve their movement goals through research, and help academics do grounded research that still meets the demands of the academy.

There was broad consensus among the group that research is a political activity. Diana Salas argued that, “Research is a political tool because knowledge informs policy and who owns and disseminates knowledge becomes part of the policy discourse. Rarely are persons affected invited to the policy tables; the experts are invited. How do you become expert? It’s not by living the problem it’s by doing extensive, scientific inquiry on the subject. It’s important for researchers to understand their power because often they develop frameworks used by institutions that can either hurt or move a policy agenda.” As an example, she discusses research on welfare reform of 1996, which “focused solely the need to put women to work, under the operating framework of personal responsibility.” This underlying idea resulted in legislation with policy ideas based on assumptions that did not reflect women’s experience on welfare. Diana describes these policy ideas and their underlying, false assumptions:

- time limits - women do not want to work but prefer to stay on welfare
- work mandates –women do not want to work
- fatherhood initiatives – poor single mothers would cease to be poor if they married their baby’s fathers
- reducing pregnancy rates –children are making the women poor.

7 For a description of this model go to http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/publications/files/CILearningConnectedness0408.pdf.
Instead of these policy ideas, Diana noted, “The legislation could have focused on reducing poverty and/or on increasing social responsibility towards the poor, but it did not.” This example for Diana illuminates the deeply political nature of research. She said, “Researchers have ideologies. What we choose to research and how we choose to do that reflects our ideologies.”

April Follow-Up

On April 30, 2009, RCLA organized a follow-up conversation to the WSF meeting at NYU Wagner. We wanted to provide an opportunity for students at Wagner to learn about the events that took place at the World Social Forum. We organized the conversation around the idea of “global conversations,” drawing on participants’ experiences at the WSF to illustrate the importance of activists, academics and students making connections with their counterparts outside of their own national borders. As Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, deputy director at RCLA put it, “We understand that today’s social issues – poverty, human rights, the environment, and so on – are issues that have to be articulated and understood both at the local and global levels.” Furthermore, she says, “RCLA is interested in nurturing worldwide leadership, a kind of leadership that connects the local with the global, and finds ways to open communication to understand the world in which we live beyond our immediate community.”

During this conversation, participants talked about several reasons why participation in these global conversations is important. First, global conversations allow people to build connections with others doing similar work. In some cases, this can lead to further collaboration. For example, Diana Salas had spent several days prior to and during the WSF meeting connecting with other activists that work on women’s issues. She met with an Afro-Brazilian women’s group that developed a cooperative in the favelas of Rio. The women in the cooperative make clothing, sandals and bags for sale. Cidadao Global – a NYC-based NGO working on the human rights of Brazilians in the US – buys their merchandise to sell to people in the United States and sends the proceeds back to the cooperative.

In another example, Cidra Sebastien networked with several activists who work with youth. Because her organization is bringing a group of youth members to Brazil this summer through its International Study program, she wanted to develop these connections so her organization’s youth groups could learn from their work. These connections could enrich their experiences allowing them to learn about their counterparts in another country. Another key connection for Cidra’s youth work was learning from people who were sharing their experiences organizing communities around issues such as land rights, access to

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8 Participants included Cidra Sebastien (The Brotherhood/Sister Sol); Diana Salas (Women of Color Policy Network); Richard Moore (Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice), and Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla and Jennifer Dodge (Research Center for Leadership in Action), and five students from NYU Wagner (where RCLA is housed).
water, and women’s rights with an international perspective. She plans to share what she learned with the youth she trains to become activists and community organizers in Harlem.

Second, attending the WSF provided inspiration and a sense of solidarity that were important for rejuvenating participants’ commitment to the work. For example, Cidra talked about how inspired she was with a group of Afro-Brazilian women who had beaten the odds to raise money to participate in the WSF selling their handcrafts for weeks prior to the forum, and who chose to lodge in a commune at a local elementary school specifically dedicated to provide inexpensive lodging for women participants, Casa Feministas. Also, the WSF opened with a march to kick off the meetings. For all participants the march was a powerful reminder that there are many people across the world who are tackling similar social issues, and who are committed to justice and equality.

Richard talked about how his organization, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, had been doing work across borders for many years. His organization has a membership that comes from the southwestern states in the United States and border states in Mexico, and several of their campaigns involve cross-border collaboration. His organization sees these kinds of benefits – of making connections and building solidarity – on a regular basis.

The meetings were also important places to learn about interesting models of social change. For example, Jennifer Dodge met several researchers who served as models of “engaged scholars.” She, along with several other participants, attended a panel called Indigenous Peoples Energy and Climate Justice. A researcher from the Durban Group for Climate Justice explained her core principles as a researcher: to fully disclose her research purposes to impacted communities and to be transparent with information. This means that researchers should not use technical language that is incomprehensible to people who are impacted by policies but who might not have technical backgrounds.

Students attending this presentation suggested that the World Social Forum could be a great opportunity for them and other students to develop an understanding of pivotal issues in a global way and to get a global perspective on key social issues that they are working on or hope to work on in their own countries.

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10 She talked about her research on “carbon trading” as an example. She said that rather than offsetting carbon, what actually happens in carbon trading is that companies use carbon offset contributions to plant eucalyptus plantations in old growth forests on indigenous lands. The people often lose their land because the legal documents are cast in an incomprehensible language, which blurs the distinction between who owns the land and who operates economic development projects on it. She described these carbon offset programs as tools to create the illusion that governments are doing something about climate change, when in fact they are highly destructive.
Appendix A: A Brief Overview of the World Social Forum

The World Social Forum began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 when more than 15,000 activists from around the world gathered, united by the slogan “another world is possible.” The forum started as an effort to protest against the World Economic Forum in Switzerland and to develop a shared vision of alternatives to the predominant market-based model of globalization.

The free market models of globalizations are premised on the idea that if the government enacts policies to encourage international trade and economic growth for corporations, the benefits will “trickle down” to all sectors of society. Many proponents see the WSF as crucial process to offer an alternative to this vision -- one in which a global civil society helps to democratize the global political and economic order. It emphasizes the need to include the voice of civil society in economic, social and political decision making.

The first gathering of the World Social Forum was the culmination of many years of activities. In the 1970s and 1980s protests against the lending policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) emerged in the global south. By the late 1990s, tens of thousands of protesters were gathering wherever the world’s political and economic elite met, raising criticism of global economics policies and calling for more just and equitable policies. These protests were focused on the IMF, The World Bank, The World Trade Organization and the G8.

Since its first meeting in Porto Alegre in 2001, the World Social Forum has taken place in other cities of the global south including Mumbai, Caracas, Bamako and Nairobi. The meetings today attract more than 100,000 activists. Since 2001, the WSF has become the largest political gathering of grassroots activists and is a major focal point to promote an alternative vision of global integration and the construction of a democratic global economic and political order.


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Appendix B: Working Agreement

This agreement is made by and between Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) and the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA), who agree as follows:

A researcher from RCLA, Jennifer Dodge, will visit SNEEJ to document the policy campaign of the Environmental Justice Working Group through group and individual interviews, and if possible will attend a meeting or event to see the work in action. The purpose of the research will be to 1) document the history of the EJ Working Group and its work, 2) to compare it with three other organizations that work on environmental policy, and 3) to contribute to the Research and Documentation component of Leadership for a Changing World.

The products of this work will include:
- a narrative of the history and work of the EJ Working Group that will be returned to SNEEJ for its own use. (e.g., post on the website, share with foundations, distribute within the network, etc.)
- a dissertation that will be authored by Jennifer, that will include a version of the above narrative, as well as chapters that compare the different practices of the four organizations in the study
- an academic article co-authored by members of the RCLA research team

Other publications based on this project may be issued, for example:
- other academic journal articles
- a book
- chapters in edited books

RCLA will inform SNEEJ of any publications that identify SNEEJ before they are submitted for publication.

Before making public material where SNEEJ is identified, SNEEJ will have the opportunity to comment on the sections where SNEEJ is identified, and if needed will work with RCLA to edit the material to make sure that it accurately represents the organization, and that it will not harm the organization or its work. RCLA researchers may make theoretical arguments and draw conclusions that SNEEJ does not agree with. In the review process, we will have mutual consideration of timelines.

Once materials become published, they are in the public domain, and may be quoted without informing SNEEJ.

Knowledge ownership:
- All publications will acknowledge that the work is based on the knowledge of the people who participated in the research.
- Findings will represent the understanding of the authors.

Authorship:
- Jennifer will author the dissertation.
- In general, RCLA researchers will author academic journal articles and academic books, and will acknowledge that the work is based on the knowledge of the people who participated in the research.
- Member(s) of SNEEJ and RCLA may make agreements to work together on writing publications (academic or non-academic) if one or the other expresses an interest. Authorship will be based on who participates in writing.

Issues of knowledge ownership between communities and academics are difficult issues. We acknowledge this, and agree to be transparent about our process, open about our concerns, and willing to engage in ongoing discussions about these issues as needed.