

Tilburg University

This is the time for action on inequality

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SOCIAL WATCH E-NEWSLETTER

Issue 23 - February 11, 2011

[Striking Parallel: Cairo-Berlin](#)



Mirjam von Reisen

The pro-democratic protests in the Arab world draw a “striking parallel” with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, according to Mirjam van Reisen. “Identical to the current crisis, the protests then were caused by social and political exclusion of the majority of people in their country, not as a reaction to the geo-political reality at the time,” wrote Van Reisen in an article for New Europe magazine.

[Read more](#)

[Young people, Internet and politics](#)

The protests in Egypt, like other mobilization initiatives involving large numbers of young people and the widespread use of new information and communication technologies (NICTs), “Have consequences and cause changes because they combine these technologies...” with traditional modalities including “the massive ongoing occupation of streets, squares and avenues”. This is the conclusion reached by the sociologist, Patrícia Lânes, a researcher for Ibase, the focal point of Social Watch in Brazil. She sees the youth camps of previous editions of the World Social Forum as one of the roots of this phenomenon.

[Read more](#)

[The Egyptian Youth Revolution](#)

Nawara Bilal talks about her experience in al Tahrir square, and explains how social networking started a revolution in Egypt. Bilal presented her testimony during the launch of the Social Watch report in Arabic at the World Social Forum, Dakar, 2011.

See Bilal's testimony at www.youtube.com/watch?v=COQI8lqBFP

See other videos from the WSF at www.youtube.com/user/Montevideo0

[LDC Summit in a deadlock](#)

The negotiations towards a new programme of action for the least developed countries (LDCs) are in a deadlock after the richest countries rejected to make strong commitments, diplomatic sources in New York told Social Watch. A world summit specifically aimed at analyzing the situation of the 49 poorest countries of the world will be held next May in Istanbul, Turkey. The richest countries reject the idea of increasing aid or make other binding commitments to ensure that by 2020 half of the members of the group “graduate” out of LDC status.

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[Food Prices: Remember 2008](#)

Food prices have shot up to record highs, even above the levels in 2008, and countries should act to counter the effects before there is more social unrest. Martin Kohr analyzes the issue.

[Read more](#)

[Feminism Redux? An Answer: Feminism for Real](#)

A new book, “Feminism FOR REAL: Deconstructing the academic industrial complex of feminism”, provides thoughtful, honest and unapologetic insight into how marginalized communities, including Indigenous and women of colour, sex workers, disABled, queer, Two-Spirited and trans youth define and relate to feminism; what it means to them—and more importantly, what it doesn't mean. Edited by Jessica Yee, founder of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, it contains 22 essays, stories and even poems. The book was published this month by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), a focal point of Social Watch.

[Read more](#)

[Social Watch Report in Arabic and French](#)

The Arabic and French versions of the latest Social Watch report were launched in Dakar, Senegal, during the World Social Forum 2011 last Wednesday 9th. More information on the next newsletter

[This is the time for action on inequality](#)

By *Mirjam van Reisen**

Social Watch Europe presented last week a report: "Responding to Poverty, Social Exclusion and Inequality in Europe and Beyond", with a subtitle: "Time for Action". The launch took place in Brussels as protesters in Tunisia, Egypt and neighbouring countries went to the street. The report identifies exclusion inside and outside Europe as the cause of frustration and social unrest, which in countries neighbouring the EU has been exacerbated by political exclusion. Within the Arab region 92 million people live in poverty.

The parallel with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is striking. Identical to the current crisis, the protests then were caused by social and political exclusion of the majority of people in their country, not as a reaction to the geo-political reality at the time. It demonstrated the failure of the military strategy (at the time of the Soviet Union) that underestimated the importance of bread and butter issues. In 1989 the heads of state in office were completely taken by surprise and were finding their feet step by step in the new reality, as we find is the case in the current crisis. All eyes were focused on (the old) President Bush and President Gorbachev of the then USSR – and the key question as to whether they would grasp the opportunity to end the Cold War. The question today is, will the opportunity be seized for a new order in the Middle East that could make peace in the region possible?

The final parallel is the momentum that the change in the East gave to Europe itself, which under the leadership of President Jacques Delors seized the momentum for an assertive approach to strengthen the European Union's global role, foster democracy in eastern Europe and bring prosperity to impoverished countries in the region, by uniting the continent of Europe under the political flag of the European Union. Enlargement increased the European market and brought political stability in the Europe-wide region.

The crisis at the Southern border is of equal significance and the following key aspects need to be fully integrated in Europe's response:

1. The current social-economic policy based on a raw version of extreme neo-liberalism in the Arab region can no longer be sustained. Apart from its ethical dimension in which such policies have maintained corrupt, dictatorial regimes at the expense of the their people, it can no longer sustain a policy that seeks stability in the region – a review of the economic policies in the region is therefore most urgently needed;

2. The extensive aid provided by the EU to regimes that lack key institutions of democratic governance leads to unbridled corruption that does not trickle down to the majority of the population – aid to foreign governments which lack democratic institutions and adherence to international law must be stopped.

The second point also requires a complete overhaul of the EU policy to Israel, which enjoys economic and military support from the EU while it systematically ignores international law in its approach to the Palestinian people. The political exclusion of the Palestinian people in the Israeli governance system which creates apartheid based on religion and ethnicity also needs to be addressed. Unless Israel operates within the boundaries of international law and democratic governance all EU aid to the Israeli government should be stopped immediately and without reservation.

The report also asks that independent civil society is supported in Israel and in the Arab region. The Social Watch report points to instability emerging inside the European Union as a consequence of the lack of financial controls on speculation in the international system. Pointing to the crisis in Ireland which has a debt of more than 100% of GDP accrued by the banks but which the government agreed would be repaid by the Irish tax-payers accompanied with the harshest of measures in social cuts, the authors warn that the European Union itself might not remain immune to political instability.

The report asks for "a model that faces up to the private sector – which is led by a financial sector that socialises losses while privatising profits." The report warns of the danger of credit taps being completely turned off for families and small businesses. The report asks that the commitment adopted by the UN to establish a universal 'social floor', which the EU itself promoted, is implemented. To be consistent this would require a common 'social floor' for the EU. The authors of the report further call for progressive tax reform and an effective clampdown on tax evasion in Europe and beyond, warning that the European Union itself might not be immune to a popular response if inequality is allowed to increase.

** Mirjam van Reisen, Professor International Social Responsibility, Tilburg University, member of the Coordinating Committee of Social Watch*

New technologies and social mobilization

*By Patrícia Lânes**

The demonstrations in Egypt raise the question of the use of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in social movements, above all those that are large scale.

Some young people in Egypt say that the demonstrations have been brewing for more than a year on social networks on Internet, while other people believe the population would have taken to the streets with or without Internet. In any case, the web has served to show the demonstrations to the world and to attract new supporters. As the Egyptian journalist and blogger Hossam el-Hamalawy said in an interview with Professor Mark LeVine of the University of California, "Internet plays a role in disseminating in words and images what happens on the ground. We do not use Internet so much to organize as to show what we are doing on the streets, in the hope that others will join us."

The messages channelled through NICTs (mobile phone texting, Internet in general and in particular social networks like Facebook and Twitter) could never be the only reason why thousands of people would join together to struggle for a cause. However, recent events (and what has been happening in Egypt is the most obvious example and a paradigm case) show that the use of these technologies cannot be regarded as merely a secondary aspect of mass mobilisation, and there is always debate about the connections between NICTs, spaces for expression and young people.

The children and teenagers who were reared on these new technologies were born since the mobile phone and Internet with its many facets emerged, and they are better able to use these technologies and exploit them in new ways. These technologies have been widely criticized because very often they are employed with no respect for personal privacy and because they contribute to propagating an individualistic and consumer-oriented ethos in society. Be that as it may, these means of communication do create possibilities, and their use is geared to action and ideas that are already present in society.

A recent study by Ibase, Pólis and academic institutions in various countries in Latin America, and with support from the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC), makes it clear that in the last ten years new information and communication technologies and the media (commercial and also alternative) have played an important part in many public movements and demonstrations led by young people. The youngsters behind much of what takes place in these movements use these technologies to make themselves heard and let themselves be seen by the rest of society, and thus to mobilize people to put pressure on governments and enterprises. In this context, the means of communication involved are crucially important.

In 2006 in Chile, thousands of secondary schoolchildren took part in the so-called Penguin Revolution (a reference to their school uniforms) and occupied their study centres in protest against the government's education policy and to call for education that is public, free and good quality. But as well as occupying physical spaces they set up blogs and fotologs which helped to attract 800,000 young people throughout the country and make the initiative nation-wide and decentralised to such an extent that the protesters even refused to designate a spokesperson to represent them.

In these youth movements, Internet and the new information and communication technologies are combined with "traditional" protest methods, and the combinations that are possible give us a clue to the particular way that these new generations do politics.

Another outstanding example is the Campamento Internacional de la Juventud (International Youth Camp) that was organized during the Brazilian editions of the World Social Forum, especially in Porto Alegre. In that context new forms of communication and of producing information were invented and practised, forms that broke the barriers between different media and created spaces for dialogue and interplay among radio, television, Internet, cinema and the most varied kinds of art, and these methods are coming fast into everyday use.

In this case in particular, experimentation with means of communication was linked to a denser and more complex technology debate about self-management, production, reproduction and dissemination that included the question of free software.

As the recent events in Egypt clearly show, new information and communication technologies are more closely integrated into young people's daily lives than ever, and on a greater and greater scale, in centres and on the periphery not only in Brazil but all over the planet. This ease in the use of technologies naturally forms part of young people's social skills, and it also features in their protest movements. Young people are not the hostages of technology; local cultures and more or less traditional ways of doing politics are still employed, but movements can prosper with the help

of networks like Orkut, Facebook and Twitter. And, as recent events in the Middle East have made abundantly clear, the occupation of public spaces keeps paving the way for social and political changes. The Egyptian street demonstrations were filmed on mobile phones and uploaded onto Youtube for all the world to see. But the NICTs are only effective and can only bring about real changes because they are combined with massive ongoing public demonstrations in the streets and the squares and the avenues.

According to research published in the Libro de las Juventudes Sudamericanas (Book of South American Youth - Ibase, Pólis, 2010), "While it is true that this is the 'techno-social' generation, we should not overlook the interconnection between NICTs and various agents of socialisation like the family, the neighbourhood, school and the Church. The socialization of any given segment of young people is always the fruit of different combinations of socialization spaces because what is 'current' is made up of a variety of mixes of tradition and innovation that affect young people's lives. If we do not take this into account we run the risk of regarding young people as a single group that are all the same, which they certainly are not. When we grasp the fact that there are different dynamics in the use of technologies we can overcome obstacles that impede so-called 'active minorities' (young people who participate in groups, networks and movements) from moving closer to the reality of most young people in each country."

The recent events in Egypt, in which a large segment of the young people in the country took part, are a good example of this.

** Ibase sociologist and researcher
Source: Ibase*

[Richest Countries Reject Commitments on LDCs](#)

The negotiations towards a new programme of action for the least developed countries (LDCs) are in a deadlock after the richest countries rejected to make strong commitments, diplomatic sources in New York told Social Watch after the end of informal consultations last February 8. A world summit specifically aimed at analyzing the situation of the 49 poorest countries of the world will be held next May in Istanbul, Turkey. The richest countries reject the idea of increasing aid or make other binding commitments to ensure that by 2020 half of the members of the group "graduate" out of LDC status.

They want instead the emerging economies, like China and Brazil to formally accept some responsibilities towards the poorest countries.

The Finnish chair of the Preparatory Committee, Ambassador Jarmo Viinainen, produced a document that he thought reflected the views that had been expressed so far. Argentina, on behalf of the G77 (the group of developing countries) criticized the rich countries, called "development partners" in the document, for the low level of their commitments. But the European Union, The United States and Japan rejected the request for increases in their official development assistance (ODA) and did not agree with the structure of the proposed document, that specifies for each issue, the responsibilities of developed countries and of the LDCs.

Nepal, as chair of the LDC group, explained that this division was already there in the Brussels Programme of Action, agreed a decade ago and now going to be substituted by the Istanbul agreement, and nobody had objected to it in the first meeting of the preparatory committee. The principal goal of the next Programme of Action, Nepal argued, is to see half of the LDCs graduate from LDC status by 2020 through structural transformation of the countries' economies. For this to happen, the LDC group envisions a new International Support Architecture and a new long-term vision separated from the Millennium Development Goals that "expire" in 2015.

Ambassador Viinainen tried to lead members to a constructive discussion of specific differences, and he explained that in order to ensure the participation of presidents and prime ministers in Istanbul, the outcome of the conference to have been essentially finalized by the end of the first week of April. Yet, the consultations were adjourned until February 22 without even a basic document to discuss.

A hearing with civil society will take place in New York on April 1, with participation of several members of the LDC Watch and Social Watch networks.

[High food prices cause for concern](#)

*By Martin Khor**

Food prices across the world have soared to their highest ever level, even exceeding the previous peak levels in mid-2008 before the recession caused by the global financial crisis dampened the prices.

The food price inflation is causing concern in many countries, as access to food is important for social stability.

The last time prices shot up to such high levels, in 2008, there were riots in many countries.

The soaring prices also contributed to the discontent that led to the current protests in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, according to the World Food Programme.

"In many of the protests, demonstrators have brandished loaves of bread or displayed banners expressing anger about the rising cost of food staples such as lentils," said its executive director Josette Sheeran.

In January, the average price of food items globally rose to its highest ever recorded level, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

The FAO's food price index increased for the seventh month running, up by 3.4% from December 2010.

Prices of almost all the commodity groups jumped in January compared to December.

The cereal price index was 3% above December and the highest since July 2008, though still 11 percent below its peak in April 2008.

The oils and fats index rose by 5.6%, nearing the June 2008 record level.

The dairy price index shot up 6.2%, and the sugar price index by 5.4%. The meat price index however remained stable.

The soaring prices are caused by several factors, as pointed out by speakers at the Global Commodities Forum at UNCTAD (the UN Conference on Trade and Development) in Geneva last week.

First is the growing demand for food. This is due to population growth AND also the revival of economic growth following the 2008-2009 recession.

Second is the weather and other factors that affected supplies of some crops.

Wheat production was severely affected by the drought in Russia. The benchmark US wheat price averaged US\$340 (RM1,035) per tonne in January, 59% higher than a year earlier.

Third is the competition for land to produce certain crops that are used both for food and for bio-fuels.

In the United States, maize and soya beans are produced to make ethanol, and this contributed to rising prices of the two products used as food, according to the executive director of the International Grains Council.

Fourth is the growing investments placed in commodity markets by investors in the current situation of low interest rates and excess liquidity.

According to a senior official of the International Sugar Organisation, the recent soaring of sugar prices (now at a 30-year high) is due to fundamentals. "But the financialisation of commodity markets magnified the price surges."

Other commodities besides food items have also been increasing rapidly, including oil and cotton.

In China, prices of the main staples rice and wheat have been rising in the last months.

Prices of rice have increased markedly in the second half of 2010, in particular those of the Indica variety, the most consumed by the low income population.

In Bangladesh, prices of rice reached a new record high in January of 36 taka (RM1.55) per kg, 33% higher than a year ago.

To stabilise prices, the Government announced plans to import nearly 900,000 tonnes of rice.

Prices of imported wheat surged in August and September and increased further in January to 34% above a year ago.

In Indonesia, rice prices also reached new record levels.

In December 2010 the national average rice price was quoted at 9,082 rupiah (RM3.08) per kg, 31% above a year earlier.

In late December, the government suspended import duties on rice until the end of February in an attempt to counteract the increase in prices.

In India, prices of the main cereals rice and wheat remained high in January, after increasing during 2010.

Prices of onions skyrocketed in the second half of last year, and by January were double the level of June 2010.

Malaysia has had only moderate inflation overall (1.7% in 2010), but there are significant price increases in some food items, according to Statistics Department data.

In December 2010, food prices were on average 2.8% above the December 2009 level.

The increases on some items were: sugar, jam, chocolate (20.6%), fruits (4.6%), vegetables (3.6%), milk and eggs (3.4%), meat (3.1%), fish and seafood (1.8%) and rice and bread (1.1%).

There were hefty price jumps in December 2010 compared to a month ago for onions (17%), sugar (10%), spinach (7.4%), eggs (3.6%) and choy sum (2.4%).

But prices also fell for tomato, cucumber and chillies.

In the weeks ahead, governments would be wise to pay close attention to inflation and especially food prices, and work towards solutions, which in the medium term should include a boost to local food production.

** Executive Director of the South Centre, intergovernmental organisation of developing countries based in Geneva
Source: The Star of Malaysia*

Feminism FOR REAL

When feminism itself becomes its own form of oppression, what do we have to say about it? Western notions of polite discourse are not the norm for all of us, and just because we've got some new and hot language lately in equity-seeking movements like feminism —such as “intersectionality”— to use in our talk, it doesn't necessarily make things change in our walk (i.e. actually being anti-racist).

Confronting the sometimes uncomfortable questions feminism has made us ask about what's going on FOR REAL paved the many paths that brought the contributors of this book together to share their sometimes uncomfortable truths, not just about feminism, but about who they are and where they are coming from.

Against a backdrop exposing a 500+ year legacy of colonization and oppression, Feminism FOR REAL explores what has led us to the existence of “feminism”, who gets to decide what it is, and why. With stories that make the walls of academia come tumbling down, it deals head-on with the conflicts of what feminism means in theory as opposed to real life, the frustrations of trying to relate to definitions of feminism that never fit no matter how much you try to change yourself to fit them, and the anger of changing a system while being in the system yourself.

Jessica Yee, the editor of the book, is a self-described “Two Spirit multi-racial Indigenous hip hop feminist reproductive justice freedom fighter”. She is the founder and Executive Director of the Native Youth Sexual Health Network — the only organization of its kind in North America that works within the full spectrum of sexual and reproductive health by and for Indigenous youth across the continent.

The contributors are Krysta Williams, Erin Konsmo, Shaunga Tagore, Latoya Peterson, Louis Esme Cruz, Nimikii Couchie, Asqazine Collective, Shabiki Crane, Robert Animikii Horton, Megan Lee, Jessica Yee, Andrea Plaid, Theresa (TJ) Lightfoot, D. Cole Ossandon, Robyn Maynard, Cassandra Polyzou, Peggy Cook, Diandra Jurkic-Walls, Jocelyn Formsma, Krysta Williams, Ashling Ligate, Lisa Mantia and Kate Klein.

These are some links to know more about the book:

[Table of contents \(PDF\)](#)

[Introduction by Jessica Yee \(PDF\)](#)

[A Slam on Feminism in Academia, by Shaunga Tagore \(PDF\)](#)

[Maybe I'm not Class-Mobile: Maybe I'm Class-Queer, by Megan Lee \(PDF\)](#)

[Medicine Bundle of Contradictions. by Louis Esme Cruz \(PDF\)](#)

To pre-order the book:

www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/ourschools-ourselves/feminism-real

Source: Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives

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