

WSF 2009: Dilemmas of Decision-Making on the Periodicity of the Forums

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The International Council (IC) of the World Social Forum (WSF) decided in its meeting in Parma on 10-12 October 2006 that the next coordinated worldwide WSF event after the Nairobi WSF in January 2007 will take place in 2009. This was not simply a minor logistical decision. The periodicity of the WSF events had been loaded with various kinds of political tensions, and the incapacity of the IC to make a decision on it had become a serious threat to the continuity of the process.

Even if there will be no traditional WSF event in 2008, not even in the polycentric format that was experimented in 2006, the process may have received new strength with the Parma decision. The movements that participate in the WSF process will have the possibility to focus on campaigns and struggles without the need to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to organizing in haste a new global WSF event that during the preceding years always seemed to come very soon after the previous one was over.

There will, at least in principle, also be more room for preparing regional, national, local and thematic social forums in 2008. As regards the WSF decision-making mechanisms, the Parma decision gives new hope for the possibilities to reach consensual positions through a learning process. Previous attempts to decide on the periodicity of the forums had resulted in a stalemate, contributing to the frustrations of many key participants of the WSF process.

In this text I will briefly explore the history of the periodicity question in the WSF process. I will also refer to some of my own experiences representing Network Institute for Global Democratization (www.nigd.org) in the International Council of the WSF over the past years.

Annual Beginnings

Already during the first WSF, organized in Porto Alegre in January 2001, the question of periodicity was posed by the organizers. The Forum was much more successful than even the most optimistic organizers had expected, and it soon became clear that it should not remain a one-off event. Some of the WSF organizers in Brazil were initially speculating on moving the WSF 2002 to another country. One of the reasons was that since Brazil was going to have federal elections in October 2002, they thought that the electoral context might compromise the nature of the WSF as an autonomous

process. It soon became clear, however, that an overwhelming majority of the WSF activists had found Porto Alegre a convenient site for the event and wanted to continue holding it there for the time being.

The International Council of the WSF was founded in São Paulo in June 2001. Even if there was no explicit resolution on organizing the main WSF event outside Porto Alegre in the future, the meeting concluded that “the representativity of the IC will result from its ability to take the WSF to the world level, and to give it roots, organicity and continuity”. In practice, for many IC members one of the most obvious mechanisms for “taking the WSF to the world level” was to organize the main WSF event outside Brazil. In lack of a better alternative, the WSF was, however, repeated in Porto Alegre in 2002 and 2003.

A significant decision for the process, made by the IC in January 2003, was to hold the WSF 2004 in Mumbai, India. A key aspect in reaching the formally consensual decision, subject to later confirmation by the Indian organizers, was to simultaneously decide that the WSF 2005 would be held back in Porto Alegre. It would have been very difficult to reach the decision on going to India in 2004 without at the same time agreeing that the WSF 2005 would take place in Porto Alegre.

Some IC members repeatedly expressed fears that if the WSF would leave Porto Alegre indefinitely, and the next venue(s) would not meet the expectations, the whole process might die out. Fixing the location of the 2005 forum in advance was considered a guarantee against the eventuality that the decision to move the Forum to India in 2004 would result in a failure (which it clearly did not).

One of the attempts to reach a compromise between contending positions was intended by the Brazilian Organizing Committee who during an interval of the January 2003 IC meeting formulated a proposal that in 2004 there would be no centralized World Social Forum but that the forum organized in India would have special importance among the various smaller-scale forums. It was, however, soon pointed out that it would be seen as arrogant if the Brazilian Organizing Committee pretended that once the WSF was organized outside Brazil it would not be a real WSF but simply one special event among many.

The idea to start holding the global WSF event every two years had already been proposed earlier and therefore the proposal of the Brazilian Organizing Committee should not be considered a move to specifically undermine the Indian WSF process, but in that context it could have been widely interpreted so. In any case, the annual periodicity of the WSF was thereby not seriously contested for the moment.

The Passignano Impasse

The question of periodicity of the WSF became a subject of heated debates in the first post-Mumbai IC meeting, held in April 2004 in Passignano, Italy. In that meeting, the original proposal of the Brazilian Organizing Committee was that centralized world meetings of the WSF should no longer be organized on an annual basis but every two years. The idea to change the periodicity of the WSF got support from some of the key social movements, especially from the influential *Vía Campesina* peasant coalition, whose representative actually advocated organizing the main WSF every three years.

One of the main arguments of many social movements was that preparing for annual world events demanded too much organizational energy. At the same time many social movements expressed support for a suggestion, most clearly formulated by Christophe Aguiton, representative of *Euromarches* in the IC and strongly associated with a “radical” or “social-movement-oriented”

position, that in the years with no centralized WSF, the social movements should make another kind of event to protest against the World Economic Forum. This suggestion made some of the Brazilian Organizing Committee members change their position during the Passignano meeting. Their reasoning was that “if the social movements say that annual forums demand too much organizational energy, how come they intend to organize something else instead to fill the vacuum”. The conclusion was that not organizing an annual WSF might mean that “Aguiton and other radicals will organize their own forum and issue their own declarations to replace the WSF as the most visible event opposing Davos”.

The Passignano debates on this issue ended in one of the major frustrations of the IC decision-making process. Since decisions in the IC are supposedly made consensually, and it was impossible to reach consensus on this issue, the question was left hanging in the air. It also reinforced the perceptions that there existed a divide between mass-based social movements and non-governmental organizations. Even if a clear line between social movements and non-governmental organizations is often difficult to draw, especially those associated with the social-movement side of the divide felt that their demands - that represented the underprivileged majorities - were unfairly blocked by a few NGO types. These feelings resulted in growing frustrations and doubts that many major movements, such as Via Campesina, held about the future of the WSF process.

The Polycentric Compromise

As it remained obvious that there were no conditions for reaching a consensus, or even an overwhelming majority to practice supermajority voting camouflaged as consensus, it was decided that the periodicity issue would be decided during the IC meeting to be held in January 2005 in Porto Alegre. As one of the facilitators of the Passignano meeting remarked at one point, the opinions expressed in the discussion made it obvious that the issue was extremely divisive, and therefore it was not necessary to practice any kind of voting. In a majority vote system, a decision would probably have been reached, but the price might have been a significant rupture within the IC.

Since no consensus (or supermajority) emerged in the following IC meetings either, the compromise solution was to decide that the WSF 2006 would be held in a “polycentric” form in various localities and they would all be considered “real” World Social Forums and not simply regional events. Holding the three polycentric WSF events in 2006 in Bamako, Mali; Caracas, Venezuela; and Karachi, Pakistan was in many ways an innovative solution, but it did not resolve the contradictions and frustrations related to the periodicity issue.

The problems of the polycentric compromise became very evident to me in the Barcelona IC meeting held in June 2005. I had the not-so-pleasant task to facilitate the final debates of the final day of the meeting, and “WSF 2008” was one of the possible items on the agenda. As always, the most difficult themes were moved to the final hours of the meeting so that the frustrations of not reaching a consensual decision would not complicate the task of deciding on other issues. By that time it had already been decided in earlier IC meetings that after the polycentric events of 2006, there would be a centralized WSF event in 2007 somewhere in Africa.

Just before the session started I privately asked the representative of one of the most important social movements present how he might react if the question of what to do in 2008 came up. His response was very clear: “Nothing, nothing, nothing at all. We were already opposed to holding a centralized WSF in 2006, and now as a result of this so-called polycentric compromise we have three different world events in 2006, instead of one. This consumes too much energy of the movements. So

there should definitively be no centralized WSF in 2008, and hopefully also not in 2009.”

As other complicated issues, related to the expansion of the International Council, dominated the remaining debates in Barcelona, the question of 2008 remained in the air by the time the interpreters had to leave the room and the lights were switched off.

Regional Dilemmas

Even if the periodicity question was not put on the meeting table in the Barcelona IC meeting in June 2005, a related question was hotly debated. One of the main reasons for the doubts many movements had about the annual rhythm of the global WSF events was that the process had mushroomed into various regional, national, local and thematic forums, some remaining single events and others with active organizational continuity. Since many of the movements dedicate energies to organizing and participating in the other forum processes, they tend to consider the annual frequency of the WSF excessive.

The relationship between the WSF, especially its International Council and the mostly-Brazilian-based Secretariat (the nature and even the name of the latter is today a complicated issue), and the other Forum processes has from the beginning been ambiguous.

Many official declarations and guidelines of the WSF have pointed to the importance of other forum processes and events than the huge annual meetings. Not all of these other forums have, however, been considered equal. One of the problematic issues in the expanding WSF process has been how to define what processes and events are organically or officially part of the WSF. There existed a mechanism for selecting some thematic and regional forums as officially belonging to the WSF family of events. It has never been wholly clear what the procedures and criteria for obtaining this status are.

The official WSF web site has given a special status to regional and thematic forums that are “part of a process of construction and universalization of the World Social Forum”. These forums have formed part of the semiofficial forum calendar maintained and controlled by the WSF Secretariat in São Paulo and, more indirectly, by the International Council. On the other hand, “national” forums have been listed under the category of “mobilization agenda”, specifying that they are not the responsibility of the Secretariat or the IC. In various IC meetings, such as the Miami one in June 2003, there have been intense debates on whether or not the IC should give a stamp of recognition to certain regional or thematic forums.

This dichotomy between the “officially recognized” regional and thematic forums and other forums seems to have partially evaporated over time. The ambiguities and tensions, however, still exist. In the Barcelona IC meeting of June 2005, the key debate was about the request of some regional forums to be recognized as official members (and not simply observers) of the IC.

The majority of the IC members present in Barcelona seemed to have a favourable opinion toward the request. During the debates on the issue, however, enough doubts were raised so that it was impossible to make a consensual decision. The request was made most emphatically by people who were also active in the European Social Forum (ESF) process. The organizational tension between the different forum processes has been particularly pronounced between the WSF and the ESF. Those active in the latter often accuse the WSF of making decisions in a closed club, such as the International Council, whereas in the ESF decisions are made in an “open assembly” that they consider much more democratic and participative. Between, for example, the Americas Social Forum and the WSF there exists less tension, since the Hemispheric Council of the Americas was

established as some sort of miniature copy of the WSF IC, with heavily overlapping membership and similar internal structures.

The inability of the Barcelona IC meeting to decide on the inclusion of the regional forums was considered a major frustration by many of the ESF activists. They argued that it will be very difficult for them to explain why the IC did not want to include them and the result would probably be the strengthening of the already existing feelings that the IC is a closed, bureaucratic and antidemocratic body with questionable decision-making habits.

One of the objections to the inclusion of the regional social forums in the IC was that it would bring the logic of territorial representation into the WSF decision-making. Representation, especially of the territorial kind, has traditionally been considered something that belongs to the “old habits” of the traditional organizations, and the WSF should seek a different political culture. The dilemmas of creating a “non-representational” way of making decisions have been apparent in many other aspects of the process, but going into more details would be beyond the point here.

An important dimension of the question in Barcelona was that the ESF is often considered more “radical” than the WSF, either in the sense that “real social movements” have a bigger role there or in the sense that traditional left parties have come to dominate its decision-making, sometimes behind the curtains and often quite openly. It could be debated to what extent each of these affirmations corresponds to reality, but the political subtext of the decision was perceived by some as confirming that the IC consists of too many non-radical NGOs that simply do not want take the social movements’ demands into account.

In sum, to understand the tensions related to the inability of the International Council to decide on the periodicity of the forums it is important to take into account the more general context in which a perceived (and thereby often real) divide between the more radical social movements and the less radical NGOs has been produced and reinforced. This divide should never be interpreted simplistically. For example, there are many organizations that are formally NGOs but participate actively in the Assembly of Social Movements, which is often considered the embodiment of the social-movement positions inside the WSF process. Organizational forms, ideological orientations and personal networks influence the way this issue has been experienced in the WSF. But even if the divisions are in many ways fuzzy, serious frustrations with the process have become increasingly evident.

The Parma Decision

My initial impression at the beginning of the meeting of the International Council in Parma on 10 October 2006 was not very promising. First of all, the evident lack of a coherent agenda seemed to indicate that even if it had been agreed time and again over the past years that we need to structure the meetings more carefully, not much learning had taken place. When we stop learning, we die out. I also noted with concern the absence of some key persons and organizations, even though many of them fortunately appeared by the second day.

The thing that particularly annoyed me was why the debates of the IC meetings were once more not made available through the Internet (preferably both in audio and written form). When I mentioned this publicly at the beginning of the plenary meeting, Roberto Savio, representing Inter Press Service, pointed out that such proposal was formally accepted in the last IC meeting.

The IC has been criticized of not being sufficiently transparent. Making the debates publicly available through the Internet may not resolve all the transparency problems, but not having

implemented this small proposal was truly a shame, especially if it had already been formally accepted and the technological means for implementing it would be easily available and demand no huge investment. As far as I know there exist no detailed minutes of any of the IC meetings that have taken place over the past five years. I am not sure what the importance of this question is in the frustrations of the different movements and persons who consider the IC a closed club with little transparency, but for me at the beginning of the Parma meeting it certainly reinforced that impression.

One of the perennial debates about the WSF is whether it should be seen as a “process” or as an “event”. A slightly different and more practical question is to what extent the organizational efforts should focus on the future process with various events, or on the immediately following event. In Parma, this question was repeatedly raised when the agenda of the meeting was gradually constructed during the meeting.

Some argued in Parma that since many immediate logistical and political questions of the Nairobi WSF remained unresolved, we should not let other questions such as the future periodicity of the process consume precious meeting time. My publicly expressed position was that it would be useful for the Nairobi process if we could make a decision in Parma on the periodicity question that had haunted our work for years. Resolving that question and moving beyond the impasse could inject new energies and enthusiasm for the process, and in this context it would be easier to focus on organizing the Nairobi WSF.

While I had previously had difficulties to take a clear stand on whether the main world event should continue to be organized every year or whether it should be organized every two (or more) years, it now seemed clear to me that insisting on an yearly event could imply a very serious break within the WSF process. My impression was that a similar learning process had taken place among many others present in the meeting. Compared to earlier debates on the issue, the clear majority of those who spoke about the issue were in favour of not organizing a traditional WSF world event in 2008 but only in 2009. The emerging consensus was also that the polycentric format that was experimented in 2006 in Caracas, Bamako and Karachi would not present an adequate solution for 2008. Instead of organizing a coordinated polycentric forum, the idea was to give room for regional, national, local and thematic forums, with their autonomous organizational dynamics, during 2008, and then have a coordinated “world” World Social Forum in 2009.

One of the main doubts about such proposal, that during the second day of the meeting seemed to be emerging as a consensual position, was whether it would imply some kind of vacuum. The fear was that if we would not organize anything in 2008 during the meeting of the World Economic Forum that is held every January in Davos, the media could interpret it as a failure.

Some of the people who had traditionally defended maintaining the annual rhythm of the main world event also expressed, mostly in informal discussions outside the plenary, that there continued to exist a risk that “certain groups” would fill the space during the traditional WSF days in January if no coordinated WSF event took place. These groups were generally associated with the Assembly of Social Movements, and previous fears of a “radical” (or “Trotskyist” or something similar) conspiracy were still sometimes mentioned.

It seemed, however, that on both sides of the traditional divide that the IC had had on this issue (and now I am simplifying since the positions could not be reduced to two clearly defined sides), there existed an increased willingness to reach a solution that would somehow take these fears into account, for example by proposing worldwide locally organize actions in January 2008 even if no centralized WSF would take place. By the end of the second day of the meeting it seemed that time might have become ripe for reaching a consensus on this issue, though decision-making was

postponed to the third and final day of the IC meeting.

The third day started in a wonderful way. Chico Whittaker, one of the “founding fathers” of the WSF, read a short declaration that had been formulated by him and some other people during the previous night on the future of the World Social Forum process. The frustrations of the beginning of the meeting and the feeling that decision-making is so complicated were washed away by the applause after each point that Chico read. This was consensus-building at its best. And, most importantly, we seemed to have gotten beyond one of the most complicated issues of the recent history of the IC.

The key thing decided through the applause was that the next coordinated worldwide World Social Forum event after Nairobi will take place in 2009. This way, the demand of an increasing number of organizations was finally expressed in a formal decision. Even if there will therefore be no centralized WSF event in 2008, it was also decided that there will be various kinds of mobilizations in different parts of the world around the time of the World Economic Forum in 2008 (in January, if the WEF timetable continues as before). The themes of these mobilizations in 2008 would not be coordinated centrally by the International Council or anyone else. It would be up to the local organizations and their networks to decide whether and how they should organize.

My impression, and I hope I am not being overly optimistic, is that having finally reached a consensus on this issue may give a significant boost to the WSF process. The decision shows that there has been a learning process among the IC members. Over the past months and years, positions on this issue became more flexible and common ground was constructed. The perceived decision-making capacity of the IC was thereby strengthened.

Secondly, my understanding is that the decision expresses the long-held position of various large social movements and their networks. Some of them had become increasingly frustrated with the WSF process, partially because they felt that the process was too much driven by NGOs that did not sufficiently take into account the struggles of the movements..

The decision to call for mobilizations around the dates of the World Economic Forum is an important challenge for the WSF process. It may give some new answers to the question of how the WSF could become politically more useful. Ideally, it will help us move beyond the space/movement dilemmas that have haunted the process. On the one hand, in principle there will be no central coordination or prioritization of different campaigns and struggles, as long as they are in accordance with the WSF Charter of Principles. In this sense, the mobilizations will not violate the principle that concrete political mobilization is something that the WSF participants are encouraged to do, but that particular campaigns should not be taken up as political priorities of the WSF.

On the other hand, this decision may contribute to transforming the WSF process into a platform that can be considered more useful for the concrete struggles and campaigns of the movements. Various challenges related to this decision remain, and some of them will be taken up when the IC meets next time immediately after the Nairobi WSF in January 2007.

P.S.

* From NIGD website.

* Teivo Teivainen is Director of the Program on Democracy and Global Transformation at the San Marcos University in Peru and Professor of World Politics at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He represents Network Institute for Global Democratization in the International Council of the World Social Forum.