

The WSF process in 2008 and 2009

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After seven years of its inception, the World Social Forum (WSF) faces quite a distinct situation from the time of its birth. First held in 2000, following on the Seattle events—a moment in which neo-liberal globalization had on a more multilateral facade and a burgeoning social movement confronted globalization's institutions for an alternative world—the WSF, initially anchored in Porto Alegre, Brazil's southernmost capital city, offered an important contribution to turn around an ideological landscape then dominated by a monolithic thought. Furthermore, the WSF became the most strategically relevant arena for coalition-building, dialoguing, debating, mobilizing and campaigning around the makings of an anti-globalization movement. Under the slogan “another world is possible,” the WSF events allowed for the self-organization of what the world press has once called “the other super-power.”

Since then, the pathways of the WSF have been mixed, as one would expect, with those of the global civil society and its resistance movements, of all the peoples battling neoliberalism, militarization and the planet's destruction. The WSF has equally suffered from the fact that anti-globalization movements have been greatly impacted lately by the militarization of international relations generated by the Bush government, mainly after the 2003 Iraq invasion. This re-organization of the terms of political disputes in the planet has raised the confrontation between the establishment and alternative propositions to a level we were not, at that moment, capable to cope with. No other social movement was capable of occupying the place held by the anti-globalization mobilizations between 1999 and 2003.

From then on, the several editions of the WSF have become more international and widespread, helping forge a new citizenship political culture. But they have also lost some of their momentum—which should have been reasonably expected. From Mumbai to Nairobi, and back to Porto Alegre, passing through Caracas, Bamako and Karachi, open arenas have been established, some more successful and distinguished than others, and used for dialoguing, meetings and the convergence of resistance and alternative-searching initiatives.

In this structural framing of political forces, it was expected that dispersal-inducing trends would emerge and nationwide or sector-based social movements would gain more centrality than in previous moments. It was also predictable that each component of the “movement of all movements” being confederated would go back to celebrating their historical traditions and own political concepts—be they state-like trends, anti-state trends, leanings towards partisan politics or civil-society and grassroots politics, or the favoring of either pyramidal or networked structures. It is very difficult to develop a counter-power and a counter-hegemonic strategy, especially in a global conundrum, when going through a moment of dispersal in which different, particularized projects seem to have set their priorities on their own protagonism.

2008 global mobilizations and the latest contradictions

It can be agreed that this defensive scenario, still back in 2006, has defined our proposals to be carried on through 2008. The WSF process, as steered by its International Council (IC), is relatively slow, which can be attributed to the multiple actors it involves and its global reach. Nevertheless, certain decisions at the IC can be made rather quickly and in a flexible manner. Key decisions must be made at least two years in advance

Based on the proposal that calls for global mobilizations in 2008, we have made an effort to multiply initiatives, to make diversity visible and to demonstrate reach, and to identify our strength as we search to break away from the paralysis caused by the latest period's dispersal of critically savvy social movements and progressive sectors of society.

It is important that we can work efficiently in the mobilization process set for 2008 in order to ensure—in different regions of the planet, in all multiple forms, and in various activities—the organization of a series of events, demonstrations, protests, cultural gatherings, and highly visible days of action capable of communicating to the world's opinion makers a sense of collective achievement.

But we also should make the 2008 WSF process a forward-thinking, strategic strength-gathering activity. New and sharp contradictions set in motion by neo-liberal globalization have grown in the past few years. There has been a change in the ideological and political scenarios, which can foster fresh thinking and allow for the generation of gathering-inducing political actions, provided that we can pinpoint the path towards bridging the expectations from different sectors of the social movements.

In the past few years, the national resistance to the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan has grown considerably. President Bush's imperial, portentous politics has lost some of its legitimacy within his own country, although it continues to be pushed forward. Progressive governments, mostly in Latin America, have shown that winning over elections does not necessarily mean accommodating to the interests of corporate globalization and transnational elites. Important processes stemming from progressive social transformations are ongoing worldwide, even though they cannot translate, at the moment, an alternative capable of bringing together the world's hopes. Nevertheless, institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, partly because of these processes' impacts, have lost much of their previous legitimacy.

Perhaps the issue that has emerged most strongly is the greater perception of neo-liberal globalization's destructive effects, which not only increases inequalities, but also generates an ecological crisis that, when seen in perspective, challenges Western civilization and its brutish models of market profitability. The fast worsening of the planet's climate warming is simply the most visible problem in the roster of environmental issues connected to the existing establishment, and which has gained more evidence lately.

2009 challenges

The new political scenario demands from the WSF an equally renewed answer and the ability to reinvent itself, to "freshen up." It also offers a more favorable setting for gathering-inducing initiatives that can support a vigorous comeback to highly visible movements, such as those that impacted the last decade's final years, if the WSF can capture the aspirations that bind people and ideas together.

It is crucial to build the 2009 WSF as a moment of gathering and convergence, with proposals that can draw in the largest possible number of those struggling for another world. In this sense, we would like to share the proposition, to us rather timely and presented by the Amazonian Working Group (GTA) to be discussed in the forthcoming IC meeting, that the 2009 centralized event be held in a large city of the Amazon region—to be determined by the Pan-Amazonian Forum.

Given its symbolic potential, possibility for logistical and organizational success and the opportunity it offers for presenting an effective counterpoint to the neoliberal answers to the environmental crisis and the Western civilization model, we believe that holding the 2009 WSF under such premise can renovate our anti-globalization movement with a gathering momentum. We believe that, in preparing this event, we can utilize the positive and negative experiences learnt from previous WSFs about polemic subjects (such as the relationship with governments, large corporations and international agencies, the WSF sustainability, and the protagonism of grassroots and popular movements within the WSF) and organize a qualitatively different WSF event in its process. We believe that it can establish a dialogue with the most forward experiences in Latin America and bring back the debate about alternatives, but to a new plateau.

Lastly, we believe that it is through the organizing model of an “open arena”—which seems to us the best yet in the last decades in terms of method for promoting political-democratic action—that we can build a shared understanding about the disastrous situation in the planet and the necessary tasks to overcome it. A different format to this method would be to break the broad coalition and practice of sharing experiences that have given a peculiar shape to the WSF and return to the competition among initiatives based on particularized experiences, a path we fall into sometimes due to the natural impatience in all of us seeking to change the world—a path that is, however, incompatible with the historical challenge we have set for ourselves.

In closing, we want to conceive the key events in the WSF process during 2008 and 2009 as a cohesive process, capable of re-establishing a movement of convergence and display of efforts from all those struggling for another world, still possible, and more than ever, urgent.

Good wishes

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