

The WSF Has to Agree On Common Actions Against Common Enemies

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Q&A: 'The WSF Has to Agree On Common Actions Against Common Enemies' Interview with Joao Pedro Stédile.

RIO DE JANEIRO, Jan 24 (IPS) - Joao Pedro Stédile thinks that the World Social Forum (WSF) should remain a debating arena for civil society, because with all its breadth and variety, to attempt to agree on resolutions is "an illusion."

The Brazilian landless movement activist is also in favour of holding the WSF every three years, instead of annually, he said in an interview with IPS correspondent Mario Osava.

A member of the group that founded the WSF in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 2001, Stédile is regarded as one of the main theorists of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST), and he belongs to the local chapter of Vía Campesina, an international non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The 54-year-old economist is a national coordinator for the MST, and a staunch defender of food sovereignty and the right of farmers to produce their own seeds. Conversely, he is a radical opponent of genetically modified crops and of monoculture forestry, especially of eucalyptus.

IPS: Do you think it was a good idea not to hold an international WSF meeting this year, but instead stage local actions all over the world? Doesn't this pose the risk of dispersion, loss of identity and loss of momentum in the coming years?

JOAO PEDRO STÉDILE: Vía Campesina has always said in the WSF International Council that the global Forum should be held every three years, so that local and regional activities could take priority. We cannot spread our resources and energy so thinly. The future of the movement depends on creating spaces for more people to participate.

IPS: Some members of the International Council are in favour of the WSF assuming political positions based on consensus. They say that if it remains only an open forum, as others want it to, it will stagnate and lose direction. What do you think about this dilemma?

JPS: The WSF is an arena for debates, exchange of ideas and reflection. It is illusory and utopian to think that it could take more practical resolutions or adopt more united ideological platforms. That could disperse energy, and we could get stuck in a purely ideological struggle.

We believe the WSF should only be a place for presenting ideas. This is an important role at this moment in history, when activism is declining in the world. We need spaces for sharing and discussing ideas so that we can at least consolidate our common visions in opposition to free-market

economics and imperialism.

IPS: Isn't there a problem of representation and even democracy within the WSF, since social movements made up of millions of activists in many countries have the same right to speak as local NGOs with only a few members?

JPS: There is no problem with representation or democracy if we understand the WSF as a space where every participant is invited to express him or herself. It's a place for reflection, not for reaching decisions or developing action plans, so we don't need to be overly concerned about strict delegation or how representative we are.

IPS: Climate change has become an enormously high-profile issue. Doesn't this oblige the WSF to modify its priorities and central themes?

JPS: Our main concern now is to stick to our agenda of struggle against free-market economics and imperialism. And of course climate issues and the destruction of the environment are directly related to the development model espoused by the centres of global power.

The amount of time and concern devoted to the issue of climate change is bound to increase from now on, because its social and environmental consequences are clearer than they were three or four years ago. So it is not a question of priority, but of focus.

IPS: The impact of the WSF seems to have declined after the novelty of the first few meetings. What will it take for the Forum to exert greater influence on politics, people's lives and societies?

JPS: What has declined is the impact of a world forum that had the audacity to set itself up in opposition to Davos [where the yearly meeting of the World Economic Forum is held]. It's true, the novelty value has worn off.

Back in 2001 [when the civil society forum began], no one commanded any media attention if they were against the neoliberal free-market economic model.

So the WSF managed to break the ideological hegemony in the media of uniform approbation of neoliberalism. But now we need to generate debating spaces that are closer to the movements, the people, the research centres, and universities.

IPS: Over and above its continued existence and becoming stronger, what are the achievements of the WSF? Has it had any influence at all on changing the model of globalisation?

JPS: I think its main achievement has been to get intellectuals and social leaders together from all over the world, to reflect on the limitations and consequences of the neoliberal and imperialist economic and political models. Don't forget that a broad sector of the left, especially political parties, once even supported certain free-market ideas, and others remained silent.

In Europe, and in Latin America as well, so-called socialist parties in government applied free-market economic programmes which served the interests of international financial capital. So it was very important that we were able to create an anti-neoliberal culture, and an opportunity for reflection, so that social movements could clarify their ideological confusion.

IPS: What do you think are the limits of the WSF? How much can it contribute to the social change it proposes?

JPS: The limits of the WSF are clear. It cannot aspire to be a workers' international, because that's not what it is, nor can it be a central committee that dictates political guidelines for everyone else to follow.

But the challenge is for the social movements and all the different people's organisations to use the WSF as an opportunity to build mass actions. I think it is essential that sectors with a social base and influence in society should move on to the next stage — which is to carry out coordinated mass actions on a global scale.

The ideological unity we have is small in scope, but extremely important. We are all against imperialism, war, and neoliberal economics, so based on this minimum degree of unity, we must plan actions against transnational corporations and multilateral bodies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the free trade agreements.

Street demonstrations were, and still are, important as a means of airing ideas in public, but they cannot stop free-market policies. Now we have to advance and agree on common actions against our common enemies.

IPS: Studies of the participants' profiles have shown that the WSF is composed of an intellectual elite, with a majority holding university degrees and belonging to the middle classes. Doesn't that contradict the ideals of social inclusion and changing the world?

JPS: It's natural that this should be the case. When you look at the WSF as a global meeting to discuss ideas, it obviously takes economic resources and a certain level of intellectual development for people to attend. That's why we advocate reducing the frequency of the forums, and prioritising local and regional activities.