

'It is time to aim beyond capitalism'

Wednesday 11 February 2009, by [BELLO Walden](#), [KIRK Alejandro](#) (Date first published: 26 January 2009).

The World Social Forum has an urgent and crucial task: battling the social democratic response to the global crisis of capitalism now under way, and push for a democratic control of economy and state, worldwide, Filipino academic, author and activist Walden Bello tells TerraViva's Alejandro Kirk at an interview.

In the context of the current global crisis, what is the WSF's most relevant task?

Walden Bello: We are at a very critical historical junction in which neoliberal capitalism unravels and I think that the WSF is a site where very serious discussions should be taking place, in terms of both anticipating what is the likely response of global capitalism as well as pushing forward alternatives to the current crisis. We must really put the task of WSF in the context of the really massive global crisis.

So Belem is to be a crucial stage for the WSF's future.

Yes, definitely. It would be extremely critical for global civil society at this point to respond to this crisis beyond the kind of stabilizing solutions you are beginning to see in Europe and the United States. The capitalist elites are in many ways already going beyond neo-liberalism, so I think on the one it is really important in Belem to come to a consensus about the crisis of capitalism and we ought to have very serious discussions on how to go beyond (such) solutions. I think we need to contend alternatives from within the system, like an expansion of social democracy for instance.

How can the WSF come out with such a response and how could it possibly implement it?

What you really need to look at seriously, in Belem, is identify not just a crisis of neo-liberalism but a crisis of capitalism. We're talking about the roots of the crisis being dynamic at the capitalist mode of production. The alternative to that is something we need to seriously come to grips with. We really need to frame our responses in terms of common universal values, like the question of justice, the question of equity, creating an alternative that really cares for the welfare of people. I think the discussion in Belem will really be very critical in terms of framing the alternatives. As for implementation, you really need to be quite innovative. We need to be looking at solidly linking our movement across different countries, interacting with respects to the alternatives that are being pushed. It can't be easy, but this kind of sharing experiences, creation of networks, the sharing of ideas, I think this is something that the forum will play a very critical role at.

In your writings you seem to avoid classical terms such as socialism, revolution and the like, to describe the kind of society the Forum should be looking forward to.

I do not so much shrink from articulating the alternative. We are looking at democratizing the ownership of means of production. Whether you call that socialism or people's democracy, or

democratic socialism, what you are really talking about is democratic control of the economy. We need to be looking at the possible articulation of mixed economies, with different systems of ownership within the economy, which will probably include social enterprises, cooperatives, private enterprises, state enterprises. That's one dimension. Another dimension is the question of refocusing on the internal economy, the domestic economy instead of exports markets, national economic development. We would be talking about the critical importance of equity, fairly strong mechanisms of income and redistribution. And an ecologically sustainable alternative. I don't want to use the term socialism because there are certain connotations of what socialism is all about, that bring up the image of Eastern Europe.

Is something like this actually happening anywhere in the world right now?

I think what we are seeing is efforts along this line in a number of countries, certainly in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. I mean, of course each process has its own particularities, each own dynamics. I would say that as the crisis deepens and I think we are at the beginning stages of this crisis, peoples' struggles are going to go beyond the very traditional mechanisms of stabilization now under way. So I would imagine that we will see more and more of this efforts, for democratic control and participation as the crisis deepens.

In this process developing countries take the lead and the North stays behind?

I wouldn't say that. I think people are still stunned by the crisis, especially in the United States, Europe and Japan. The crisis is moving very quickly. I would not discount the emergence of popular movements in these areas of the world.,

There is also the risk of radical right-wing reactions such as those of France and Italy.

That is definitely a possibility. What we are going to see is three possibilities: one a radicalization to the left, radicalization to the right -this a great danger in the North, in places like Italy and France, and the third is just paralysis. So there is no guarantee that progressive alternatives are going to grow. Progressives, with their knowledge of society and their strategy, must fight for hegemony.

The German Left party seems to be an exception to the rule.

I think that Die Linke in Germany is very a good example of trying to innovatively grappling the situation, moving from denouncing to pushing beyond social democratic responses to the current situation. Creating a situation to move towards people power, participatory democracy in both the economy and the state.

You have recently written that the global balance of power is shifting to the South.

What I mean is that what we've seen over the last decade has been the weakening of the traditional center economies. We saw that the US went into this consumption, finance-driven form of capitalism, financed by China. Chinese credits have kept the US economy going. In the last 10 to 15 years countries like Brazil, China and India have become relatively stronger economic actors with the shift of jobs and capital; they have become the creditors of the North. That's what I mean in terms of balance of power. I'm not saying they have become the new center or hegemonic. Hegemonic power continues to be the North, especially the United States.

Is this positive for the kind of struggle you call for?

It depends. Overall, the less hegemonic countries of the North become, and the more power is defused to the global system, I think it is a positive development. On the other hand you must realize

that these countries (of the South), these economies are controlled by for all purposes by a capitalist elite and in many ways, for instance in the case of China, you have that it is less accountable than, say, the elite in the US. So on the one hand the positive thing is a defuse on of power, on the other we are also talking about these new economy actors that are making a big difference, they are under the domination of a developmental elite. I think the challenge in the North is really for progressive movements to push their agenda which is more participation and more democratic control of the means of production, of the economic decision making. The agenda is the same for movements both in the North and the South.

In this context, how do you see the Israeli aggression on Palestine?

I have held all along that there are certain key struggles that the WSF must take a very strong stand on. Definitely, the Palestinian issue is one of them. The WSF should take a very strong stand condemning Israel and supporting the right of Palestinians to their own state, and support the right of return of Palestinians to what is now Israel. I really feel the WSF can no longer can say that we just want to provide a roof for discussions to take place. I have always say that that kind of academic posture will eventually dissipate the spirit of the WSF and I think that has already happened to some extent. To really reinforce its soul and continue to provide a strong kind of energy in support of civil society movements, the Palestine issue, and Afghanistan, the issue of capitalism really, these are issues in which the WSF must take a very strong stand.

Such approach demands a permanent structure.

Yes, I think that we should find ways of really making the International Council a more accountable body. The problem now with the IC is that it is mainly a discussion group rather than a body with real effective powers to move the struggle on.

Should the IC be an elected body?

We can't be tied to forms, but we really need an International Council that is accountable, that is representative, so to speak. There are various kinds of formal mechanisms. I feel also that we should probably have a more effective kind of Secretariat that is there not organizing the next forum but to ensure the implementation of resolutions and the accumulation of lessons. One of the problems of the WSF has been that there is no sense of accumulation of lessons from one WSF to another, so accountability, accumulation of lessons and a decision-making that is democratic, this is the challenge of the WSF. Having said that, despite all the unevenness and weaknesses of the WSF. it is still a very important mechanism for global civil society to be able to influence the course of global events.

P.S.

* From Walden Bello website. Interview conducted by Alejandro Kirk/IPS TerraViva.