World Social Forums

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Contents

The World Social Forum, founded in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was created as an open forum for groups and movements dedicated to resisting globalization. According to its charter of principles, the Social Forum is "an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centered on the human person."

A Rare Dynamism

The World Social Forum was fueled by movements coming from all continents, especially Latin America and Southern Europe, and expanded rapidly. The year following its Brazilian launching, the first European Social Forum was held in November 2002, in Florence, Italy. The first Asian Regional Forum met in Hyderabad, India, in January 2003. One year later, after three sessions in Porto Alegre, it was the World Social Forum itself which migrated out of Brazil to India (Mumbay) [1]. By the fourth meeting, the number of participants had grown to 130,000, and a year later 155,000 people came from 135 countries to attend. This growth occurred at a time when people were predicting its decline. , due partly to the move from Mumbai back to Porto Alegre.

The particular success of the fifth World Social Forum (WSF) can partly be explained by the Latin American context: the scale of neo-liberal attacks coupled with the aggressive policy of "preventive" intervention and so-called wars that result are creating profound instability and new phases of politicization. Demonstrating this politicization, the debates over questions of orientation and strategy were particularly well attended at the WSF. It was apparently the first occasion for many Brazilian activists, in particular young activists, to engage in broad and disparate discussions to challenge government policies.

In 2006 the WSF was less centralized, meeting on three continents and each gathering with a unique focus. The choice of Caracas, Venezuela, represented another small revolution in Latin America: after the Brazil of Lula, the Venezuela of Chávez. In Bamako, Mali, the process of the social forum truly began to take shape in Africa, since previous African meetings had been much smaller. In Karachi, Pakistan, a world forum met for the first time in a Muslim country under military rule.

Each year local, regional, and national forums are held in many places, to varying though often noteworthy degrees of success. The process of social forums has spread and even resisted the ideological countershock of the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as repression.

Elements of Continuity

Logically enough, the numerical scope of the social forum depends on the host country (in Europe, for example, the forum was smaller in London than in Florence or Paris). Since 2001, although by no means uniform, forums have been much more consistent and vary less in social scope than other social or anti-war mobilizations [2]. They have succeeded in situations both favorable and unfavorable for social movements; in defensive as well as offensive situations [3]; in very different cultural areas; and in countries with varied political regimes.

The WSF in Karachi in March 2006 illustrates this point well. The forum was held in a country subjected to military rule and the pressures of religious fundamentalist movements and fragmented social movements. It had to be deferred three months, and militant energies and financial resources were entirely absorbed by efforts to help the victims of the terrible earthquake that had struck Kashmir and the north of Pakistan. Despite this, and the stakes involved (meeting in one of the largest Muslim countries in the world), it made the most of what little international support it had.

The design of social forums emerged out of the characteristics of the period. Defensively, they provided a means for regrouping in the face of the universal nature of neoliberal, anti-democratic, and militarist attacks, while offensively they gave expression to an alternative embodied by new generations of activists. They provided a model for building links of solidarity and ensuring convergent approaches between various sectors of society, as well as offering much more varied fields of mobilization than in the past.

Indeed, conditions of solidarity had changed since the 1970s. In some countries the trade union movement may still play a key unifying role (for example, the KCTU in South Korea), but overall many movements lack such organizational poles of attraction or centralization. This is not to say that the "new" forms of organization eliminate or replace the "old" ones. Many so-called traditional movements like trade unions are vital components of the social forum process. However, solidarities now combine in a novel way.

This new framework, among other factors, explains the present function of the Porto Alegre standard of social forums. These forums offer an "open space" where all kinds of organization meet and exchange views in a much less hierarchical way than in the past. They offer a focus for resistance to liberal economic policies and a space where alternatives and aspirations for change can be collectively expressed. They offer a militant space too, where unity can be forged, where international campaigns can be discussed, and where a common calendar of initiatives can be elaborated. This combination of an "open space" and the capacity to prepare joint actions has proven to be extremely dynamic. The forums also provide a way of becoming involved in politics at a time when the authority of the political left is being challenged.

Social forums embody much more complex and rich international processes than traditional

conferences (of trade unions or non-governmental organizations, for example) as well as new forms of unity building. This makes them, sometimes at least, better able to deal with the issues at hand. For example, at the European Social Forum (ESF) held in Florence in November 2002, the call for the massive anti-war demonstration on February 15, 2003, was diffused even before being relayed in January at the international level during the third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre. This "amplifier" function of the social forums thus contributed to the unparalleled success of that day. Just as importantly, the ESF is helping to define common action programs at a specifically European level, something which unions have been unable to do for the last 40 years.

Evolution

The Porto Alegre forum of 2005 benefited from Mumbai's experiment on many levels. Physically, it benefited by leaving the campus of the Catholic University, pitching its tents by the side of the lagoon, and getting closer to the local center of the city and population. It also benefited from placing the Youth Camp at the very heart of the site instead of at the far fringes, accommodating 35,000 people, especially Brazilians and Argentinians. In terms of practice, it took environmental questions fully into account in the way the site was conceived, using small producers for food supplies, using free software, and relying on the Babels network of voluntary interpreters. Organizationally, priority was given to coil-organized initiatives.

New "methodology" (to use the vocabulary of the forum) was applied. Programs were worked out after wide consultation of base organizations. Eleven "axes," "fields," or "areas" were defined so as to ensure the visibility of the major topics dealt with. All the movements were invited to check whether their initiatives could be regrouped in order to reinforce dialogue and collaboration (in a process known as "agglutination"). Every topic had to try to link reflection to proposals for action and campaigns to create a closer link between debates and mobilizations.

Since then, this new, complex methodology has been implemented in a number of other forums, though it is still difficult to judge the results. Nevertheless, it seems to effectively unite networks of militants in discussing different approaches and in defining, over and above political differences, common grounds for campaigning. It has also created a new balance between the topics of debate within the forum and the Assembly of Social Movements, which in Porto Alegre remained the place where a common calendar for international action was elaborated.

Another significant change occurred at the meeting of the international council of the WSF in Parma in October 2006, when it decided to call for one day of action in 2008 instead of organizing a new World Forum following the one in Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2007. This decision brought to a close a politically very important debate on the regularity of forums. The question arose shortly after the first ESF in Florence in 2002: while forums contribute to the development of struggle, their multiplication can exhaust financial and activist resources and in fact become an obstacle to mobilization. La Via Campesina, in particular, requested that world forums no longer meet once a year.

The debate was a difficult one, especially given the disparity of resources of the organizations involved. Most institutions that have significant resources and permanent budgets can easily ensure their presence at the forums, while militant movements such as La Via Campesina face limited means and multiple responsibilities, both inside and outside the forums. Their needs must be particularly taken into account, as it is they who ensure the social and numerical success in forums and mobilizations.

Democracy and Power Centers

By their scope and diversity, social forums pose new problems of organization and democracy. There is no single model in this field. The Brazilian process is directed by a restricted committee of eight organizations representing a balance of sectors and currents. In Europe or India, on the other hand, the process is controlled by open assemblies. In France, for example, it would be impossible to choose a particular federation to represent the whole of the labor union movement, or only one committee for the unemployed, or only one network for migrants. The meetings are thus open to any organization concerned that wishes and is able to participate.

The principle of the open assembly corresponds better to the nature of the process as a whole than a closed management committee, and indeed is [4] in accordance with the WSF's charter of principles, which call for "an open meeting place" for democratic debate. It is this principle that has allowed convergence between such disparate organizations and even the creation of new international movements like Babels, which brings together thousands of interpreters and translators [5] who are actively committed to contributing to the events (which require an enormous effort of translation and interpreting) and also to overcoming at least partially the inequality between languages (usually regarded as "international," "national," or "local").

The question then becomes one of how to exercise democracy in this vast movement of movements. "Traditional" forms of militant democracy, tested in social struggles, presuppose a homogeneity of actors that does not exist here. Strike committees are elected in each company by the striking workers, and councils are elected by the inhabitants in each locality: these bodies can then be centralized by means of delegations elected at the regional or national level. In contrast, the process of the forums is characterized by its heterogeneity. The challenge is how to balance votes between a strong trade union federation of hundreds of thousands of members, a network of feminist organizations, an association of local ecologists, and a small international solidarity committee. It becomes a challenge to elect a delegation without giving rise to a crisis if it means choosing between competing trade unions or movements. Under such conditions, recourse to the vote is infrequent and operation by means of consensus is often the rule.

Achieving consensus requires taking the time to integrate divergent points of view as closely as possible. It does not necessarily mean unanimity: once the debate is exhausted, the minority should not seek to prevent implementation of collective decisions. Consensus seeking makes it possible to ensure that divergences do not prevent joint initiatives.

Consensus plays such an important part in the WSF process since it corresponds well to the idea of an "open meeting place for reflective thinking" which the forums encourage. Concrete measures have been taken to encourage participation in international meetings by the most financially disadvantaged: contributions by social movements in the North reduce travel costs for those in the South, while the "migration" to other countries of the European assembly preparing the ESF facilitates the presence of organizations from the east and southeast of the continent. Of course, financial and social inequalities are far from being overcome, but a more consistent effort is being made to surmount them.

The forums face a number of challenges. In Europe, for example, the question of political parties is the focus of many debates. In accordance with the charter of principles, political parties cannot jointly organize forums with social movements, but neither can they be excluded from these open spaces. The debates especially relate to the "marked" presence of certain organizations on the political left, such as the International Socialists, the European Socialist Party, and the Socialist group in the European parliament. In South Asia, however, it is often the role of nongovernmental

organizations and the financing they receive that creates difficulties for many movements. The role of churches can also pose problems. While churches and church organizations are members of the WSF international council, the degree to which religious institutions may organize in what the charter itself describes as a "non-confessional" space is unclear. For example, can Caritas, a network of charitable organizations under the direct authority of the Vatican, have the same status as another social movement? And how can different religions be represented equally?

The composition of the WSF international council reflects its Latin and western origins, but since the Mumbai forum of 2004 in particular, Indian representation has played a much more central role. This geographic widening of the international council, however, faces much resistance and proceeds at a slow pace. In the same way, the weight of militant social movements is small compared to that of more institutional organizations, which have the means and permanent budgets to participate as often as they wish.

The international council has significant although restricted capacities: it decides the place, date, and a portion of the contents of the world event. For the remainder, it creates a framework in which all the forces concerned can act. In this sense it offers direction to the overall process of the forums. However, at the meeting in Parma, Italy, in October 2006, the international council noted that it is actually the whole of the world forums – regional, national, and local – that nourishes the WSF. Thus, the WSF is directed by multiple centers of capacities, by the movements which, on every level, in every place, take the initiative, some using their financial power, others their capacity of mobilization. There is no "general command," and as long as the dynamism of social resistance is expressed in and by the forums, they will be able to remain a democratic framework of expression.

Expansion and Articulation

The forum encourages a North to South solidarity that challenges regional inequalities. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami serves as a case in point. In the aftermath of the tsunami, the role of local grassroots organizations and people's movements proved to be essential to the economic, social, and psychological rebuilding of the region, and important links were created and strengthened between social movements in the North and their counterparts in the disaster-stricken countries. Also, more traditional international campaigns have been revived, like that for the cancellation of Third World debt. At the same time, new "horizontal" solidarities are forming. Never in the past have the same neoliberal anti-democratic policies been applied by the same institutions in such a universal way: from East to West and from South to North, all peoples are faced with the same deregulations, privatizations, and opening-up of markets, with the same attacks on civil liberties. "Preventive" war and "anti-terrorist" ideology appear to be the counterparts of capitalist globalization, and this situation is encouraging a unity of resistance.

The social forums offer a framework where both standard solidarities, "traditional" and "horizontal," can be addressed. Specific campaigns are again occupying a more important place after the big "general" mobilizations of past years against neoliberal policies: for the cancellation of Third World debt, against discrimination, and against the war in Iraq, for example. The role of the regional forums appears to be strengthening, and the World Social Forum is being decentralized, inevitably taking on a more regional content than previously. The decentralization of the movement must not lead to its disarticulation or a weakening of the capacity of collective resistance to liberal and military globalization, so new and concrete answers will also have to be found to meet this challenge.

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* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest – 1500 to the Present

A presentation of the "International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present"

Footnotes

[1] Correction: this phrase is not understandable as it is in the printed version.

[2] Correction: the end of this sentence disapeared in the printed version.

[3] Correction: the adjective "economic" was added in the printed version, but it is too restrictive.

[4] Correction: "compacted", the sentence became difficult to understand in the printed version.

[5] Correction: the adjective "professional" remained alone in the printed version, while translators were both professional and not...