

“The challenge of a global solution outside the system”

Towards the Dakar World Social Forum, February 2011

Friday 28 January 2011, by [FERRARI Sergio](#), [TOUSSAINT Éric](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2011).

The World Social Forum (WSF) is practically the only space for convergence of social movements on a planetary scale, so it is essential to continue strengthening it. This is the stance of Éric Toussaint, global justice analyst, who knows the World Social Forum from the inside as he has been a member of its guiding body since its founding, the International Council. Éric Toussaint is a Belgian historian and political scientist, and in Belgium, chair of the Committee for the Abolition of the Third world debt (CADTM www.cadtm.org). This organisation, very active in many countries, in particular in Africa, is one of the groups taking part in preparing the upcoming Dakar forum in 2011. Interview.

Sergio Ferrari: How do you see the World Social Forum today?

Eric Toussaint: The Forum is practically the only global arena where there is a convergence of social movements, NGOs, leftwing political organisations and even progressive governments, and that is why I think it must be strengthened. There is no other body of its kind. Despite criticisms we might have of it, we cannot abandon it. And creating something else would not make sense: it would be a competing structure that would remain very limited. The WSF is what we have today. That does not mean that there aren't certain reasons for concern about the course it has taken.

Q: And what are these concerns?

A: We can see several problematic aspects. Firstly, the decision by the majority of WSF leaders and facilitators not to go beyond a forum, i.e. refusing to modify the Charter of Principles in order to allow the forum to adopt final statements and plans for action. Moreover, because of its success, public authorities and private foundations have proven very willing to offer significant backing to the WSF. We see a trend to organise very costly events, with very high budgets, which I see as a cause for concern. Not to mention two further risks that are very present. Above all, there is a risk of creating a “WSF industry”. Already, very powerful NGOs are setting up projects around the WSF, and live off these. And then, there is the danger of seeing the emergence of a kind of “global justice bureaucracy”. This refers to a layer of leaders who, thanks to their offices, have a certain degree of power and privileges, and remain in office for years.

Q: What “antidote” could thwart these trends or struggle against these disturbing aspects?

A: Fortunately, there are positive elements. The International Council of the WSF has proposed measures to prevent repeating the errors committed in 2007 during the Nairobi (Kenya) edition in Dakar. The Nairobi meeting was without a doubt the most spectacular failure of the WSF. I am rather confident that these missteps won't reoccur in Dakar: for example, providing communications exclusivity within the WSF space to a multinational, or setting very high entrance fees, beyond the reach of local participants from popular sectors.

For Dakar to be a success, I think we must strengthen the presence of social movements from Africa

and the rest of the world. The wind is blowing in this direction. Since November 2010, mandated by the Assembly of Social Movements, we organised a preparatory meeting of popular movements in the Senegalese capital. This took place just before another International Council meeting intended to settle the final details of February's event.

Q: How do you evaluate this preparatory seminar?

A: It is a success in terms of participation. Many Senegalese social movements were present. More than 60, including the major rural and urban trade unions, as well as representatives of organisations of fisherfolk, farmers, neighbourhoods, youth and women. They all turned up, which shows that there is a real dynamics and is reason for hope. The participants were enthusiastic and optimistic in terms of the support WSF can count on in Dakar's popular neighbourhoods and in remote regions and on the chances of its message getting heard. Events will be organised in the neighbourhoods leading up to the forum. CADTM is organising a political-cultural hip-hop show, and well-known groups that refuse to be co-opted by the market are taking part. They will be performing new numbers speaking out about the debt, food sovereignty and unfair trade agreements between Senegal and Europe, etc.

On the regional level, the determined support from youth is seen as a significant factor. A caravan of coaches has leaved Nigeria in the third week of January. It will travel via Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso and Mali, where it will meet up with other delegations coming from Conakry. It will have travelled thousands of kilometres before it arrives in Kaolack (Senegal's second-largest city).

We are expecting hundreds of participants in this event, which we are backing alongside the African Social Forum and networks such a No Vox and ATTAC. CADTM is merely stimulating preparations for actions. It does not wish to monopolise this nor play a hegemonic role. We are seeking true convergence.

We will also organise a seminar in Kaolack on 3 and 4 February on feminist's struggles. Representatives from all continents will be taking part. If the Dakar WSF should have a limited impact, these initiatives will play a role in mobilising on their own. It is essential to strengthen the social dynamics.

Q: Is this an attempt to spur participation in the sub-region?

A: Yes. Nigeria is 2 500 kilometres from Dakar. The caravan's route through different countries is an opportunity to publicise the Forum. Events will take place at each stopover to explain what will happen at Dakar. All of this leads me to cautious optimism.

Q: A different dynamic from the Nairobi edition, which you see as a failure?

A: Our hope lies there. We must be cautious about Dakar's outcome, two weeks prior to the WSF the general public in the area has not been informed about the event, which is very different from how things went in Belem 2009 or Porto Alegre in 2005 and before. Yet objectively, conditions have come together to bring out a broad participation of the Senegalese people and social movements in the country and region. We will see if this open space, broad invitation with a more accessible location will add up to a good popular participation.

I have a few worries about the Senegalese social movements. According to trade-unionist colleagues' analysis, they are going through the darkest period in the last twenty years in terms of their ability to mobilise. The situation is not good; however this is not due to these movements but to more global political conditions.

There is one important element: on the first day of the WSF - and the days leading up to its kick-off - the emphasis will be on 50 years of African independence. Events will be held on the island of Gorée, facing Dakar, where more than one million slaves were shipped out from the 16th to the 18th centuries. This means accusations against yesterday's slavery and the current system. This is a symbolic moment for collective memory, a bridge between past and future, and a call to rise up against world crises.

Q: As for world crises, the Dakar WSF must also be interested in the outcomes of the Davos (Switzerland) World Economic Forum, taking place just beforehand, from 26 to 30 January...

A: Indeed it is. We are experiencing a crisis of the capitalist system in which everything is linked: the crisis is financial, economic, climatic, food-related and migratory. It involves management on the global level, since nowadays there is not any world institution that can boast legitimacy. The G20 is no more legitimate than the G8. And the UN doesn't succeed in playing the role its charter foresees.

Of course, growing deregulation is provoking this crisis, but it is also directly rooted in the system itself. The WSF message must be clearer still than at the time of its founding, 10 years ago. It must insist on the need to globalise resistance, to put forth global solutions and to call for another path than the globalised patriarchal capitalist system.

The people meeting at Davos still have the capacity to launch offensives against the people "down below". But little by little the latter will overcome their fragmentation - though it will be a hard process - to progress towards proposing a global alternative, which is more than necessary. And I think the solution is not reforming the existing system, but taking a resolute stance against it.

Eric Toussaint interviewed by Sergio Ferrari

P.S.

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