

Dakar 2011 WSF: Political and Popular Success for the Assembly of Social Movements

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After several years of stagnating, [1] the Assembly of Social Movements (ASM) [2], a process that brings together anticapitalist social forces, achieved a significant qualitative leap forward during the latest WSF that was held in Dakar from 6th to 11th February 2011. Over and above the popular success which meant that the assembly was one of the major events of the WSF, the ASM succeeded in reaching a consensus on a truly shared agenda of struggles, as well as respecting the diversity and various priorities of respective social movements. It also made major decisions on the next steps to be taken towards a genuine international coordination of social movements. Such breakthroughs now have to be carried through into the field of social struggles, and this progress now needs to be consolidated through struggles on the ground, as well as facing the huge challenge : how to provide a global response to the new offensive of major capitalist interests, and make a positive contribution to transforming the balance of power in relations in favour of the working classes in the South and in the North.

The ASM in Dakar 2011: a popular success story

After the WSF opening march on 6th February that brought together some 60,000 participants, the ASM was one of the main events of the forum in terms of participation, mobilization and convergence. In a highly charged atmosphere, almost 2,000 activists, including dozens of social movements and networks from all over the world came together on 10th February. This atmosphere was partly due to the current revolutions in the Arab world. The participants reasserted their determination to fight together against capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and all forms of oppression and discrimination. The social movements present also adopted and applauded a final declaration [3] that will be a roadmap for struggles to come.

This success was no mere chance. It was the result of the intense efforts made by the ASM international facilitating group over the previous months. The third world seminar of social movements that took place in Dakar in November 2010 was one of the key elements. [4] During that strategic seminar several Senegalese and African social movements were able to share their views on the next WSF, appropriate the ASM process, and decide to get involved. The creation of a specific group for the preparation of the 2011 Assembly played a major role, not only in terms of the quality of support and massive mobilization during the assembly, but also to ensure a greater degree of

involvement, transparency and democracy in the decision-making processes: extensive invitations to preparatory meetings, fast and efficient communication, organization of several hours of debate, creation of a drafting committee for the final declaration... such elements are far from negligible details, and they should be maintained as examples for the future. It is important to bear in mind that logistics and politics cannot be dissociated, and that behind each political act there are committed men and women who are working and shouldering responsibilities.

In spite of all these efforts, there was no guarantee of success. In recent years the ASM has gone through difficult times. On the one hand several social movements dissociated themselves from the process; an example was those that chose to focus on climate change. Other social movements were caught up in supporting movements that have implemented neoliberal policies (the Prodi government in Italy from April 2006 to January 2008 to mention just one example). The WSF in general and the ESF in particular are definitely weaker than they were in the past. On the other hand, the ASM was 'attacked' by part of the International Council of the WSF that sees it as a threat and does not want it to become too significant within the WSF. For over two years, several social movements have managed to restore a constructive dialogue within the IC on the legitimacy and usefulness of the ASM, including for the WSF process as a whole. This did not prevent some people from trying to lay obstacles in the path of the ASM in Dakar 2011. One illustration: a couple of hours before the assembly was scheduled to be held, we did not know where it would take place... Fortunately the preparatory group was able to respond swiftly and ensure that the ASM had a room with enough seats, a sound system, and interpretation.

Two other positive elements deserve to be mentioned. First the ASM invited new actors to participate, in particular the Senegalese hip hop movement, which not only gave strength and power to the meeting by their forceful opening, but also contributed to the ASM dynamics by sharing their experience of local struggles, and contributing their expertise in communication and popular education. Secondly, in spite of the many activities around the WSF, after expressing their support for the Tunisian people following the overthrow of the neoliberal dictator Ben Ali, the ASM were able to hold an action in support of the Egyptian people. This took the form of a sit-in in front of the Egyptian embassy in Dakar on 11th February 2011, only a few hours before Mubarak's official departure.

Dakar 2011 ASM: a political success

Over and above the significance of successfully holding the final assembly as such, we should bear in mind that the ASM is first and foremost a process that aims to support the convergence of struggles, help articulate social movements and construct common agendas and schedules for actions and mobilizations. After some difficult times in the past few years, the social movements involved in the ASM in Dakar succeeded in defining interesting strategic and political perspectives, particularly on the thorny issue of prioritizing struggles.

For several years the social movements involved in the ASM had faced the challenge of how to define priorities in struggles. It was essential for the ASM to resolve this issue since consolidating our struggle against capitalist globalization and reversing the labour/capital balance of power at global level involves articulating our various approaches in a general movement that needs to be both massive and coordinated. This can only happen if the social movements define shared priorities in their various actions. We must find the means of repeating what happened in 2003 with the war in Iraq: there was global mobilization by hundreds of social movements that brought together millions and millions of people who demonstrated. Even though this mobilization with 12 million people demonstrating in February 2003 did not prevent the war, if we want to win victories, to conquer and

defend people's rights, we still need massive popular mobilization to counter the cold logic of capital. Recent uprisings in Arab countries are a timely reminder.

Reaching a consensus on the need to reach this goal was not at all an issue within the ASM. However finding a single concrete objective on which to focus energies was a different matter entirely, as choosing one automatically means abandoning another. Social movements generally focus on one or several issues: food sovereignty, water, biodiversity, public debt, women's rights, racism, war, militarization, neocolonialism, GMOs, human rights, climate change... to name but a few. What basis is there for deciding that, say, food sovereignty will be the priority issue for a couple of years? The question had not been solved before the Dakar WSF. Discussion had always come to the same conclusion: while it is necessary to come together to support specific shared demands, all struggles are equally important, and it is most difficult if not impossible to choose one specific issue and decide it will be the shared priority for all social movements [5].

However failing to resolve this issue had concrete strategic consequences for the ASM: the final declaration at the end of global assemblies or strategic seminars listed all sorts of issues in an attempt to be inclusive, and outlined a calendar of events with the main dates for action and mobilization already scheduled by the various social movements. This certainly comforted connections and solidarity but it failed to federate social forces around any single issue. This resulted in the dissipation of strength.

At the 2009 Belem WSF a first qualitative leap had consisted in deciding on 'only' four dates for global mobilization in 2009. The ASM Belem declaration [6] was a significant step forward in that it provided the catchphrase 'another world is possible' with a concrete content as it focused on a number of radical anticapitalist, antiracist, feminist, ecological and internationalist alternatives.

At Dakar, the preparatory session discussion focused global mobilization on two dates: one on March 20th, to support the continuing revolutionary processes in the Arab world. The second is October 12th, with a global day of action against capitalism. Many people did not expect an outcome like the support for the revolution and struggle against the capitalist system. Of course, the international context has played a decisive role, with a global crisis of the system and popular uprisings that have (finally) restored legitimacy and a new dimension to the concepts of anti-capitalism and revolution. Another key element is the integration of these two dates with four major global struggles: the fight against transnationals, the struggle for climate justice and food sovereignty, the fight to end violence against women, and the struggle for peace, against war and colonialism. The final declaration made these key current struggles of the social movements more visible. Although the specific dates connected to these struggles do not in themselves appear, they are implicit. It is important to bear in mind that the huge amount of preparatory work contributed greatly, and explains this success story, as well as contributing to the hours of high-quality discussion between members of social movements from all over the world.

Of course we are still a long way from winning the struggle. Today's battles are still all too weak and isolated, compared with the global strength of capital; and in spite of the victories that certain peoples have succeeded in winning, capital remains hegemonic and continues its hold on all aspects of life (political, social, ideological, the media...). It is not because two global dates have been chosen that the situation will change more quickly. Nevertheless the declaration and the orientation agreed on, show that the social movements are gaining in political maturity and, given the current international context, that they are ready to include their specific struggles in an overall struggle against the capitalist system.

The expansion and consolidation process of the ASM

Another positive aspect emerging from the Dakar ASM is its enlargement and its internal functioning. An observation must be made: after ten years existence, the ASM still has not managed to develop a virtuous dynamic that would allow it to create a genuine coordination of global social movements. The causes are multiple, and are both internal and external. Tensions with the WSF process have certainly played a role, but are far from being the only reason.

An important element to bear in mind is the fact that the ASM has always wanted to avoid institutionalisation, a rigid structure and international leadership, a political orientation set in stone or even formal and exclusive membership. Although these concerns are perfectly legitimate in principle, an overtly restrained strategy has resulted in an opposite excess, namely that of a lack of identity and definition of a specific way of working; all this has caused low visibility and appeal of the process.

The ASM process has involved deep reflection in recent years; this has been especially supported by organizing strategic seminars that identified weaknesses, and introduced remedial measures. At the Dakar WSF several very important decisions were taken in this regard.

Renewal and strengthening of the ASM facilitation group: the first global seminar on social movements was organized in Brussels in September 2006, a global facilitation group of ASM was formed [7]. The objectives of this group, composed of around fifteen networks and movements in order to maintain a geographical and sectoral balance, were to develop the entire process as a whole, stimulate exchange and convergence, facilitate the preparation of major events such that the WSF, ensure continuity of discussion, improve communication by circulating relevant information and facilitate linkages between the ASM and the WSF process, especially the International Council. Unfortunately, this group failed to function and achieve the objectives. There are many reasons for this, but the cause was the inability of movements - already deeply involved in their own series of struggles - to delegate a specific person to take up the work required by these tasks.

Various discussions have however indicated that the facilitation group is a positive initiative. This means that five years after its creation it now needs to be renewed and revitalized. The main idea is to achieve a positive balance, (at thematic, sectoral, & geographical level, without forgetting gender balance) and work in a relatively open and flexible way. It is important to bear in mind that the ASM is not aimed at becoming a structure with its own leadership or specific goals. The ASM is a tool that emanates from real, existing struggles, in order to strengthen, articulate and help them to converge. Nevertheless, in order to make decisions that are relevant to and involve social movements around the world, it is necessary to have a space for discussion and decision-making that is both efficient, transparent and democratic.

Continue the expansion work: This step is fundamental because to build a real capacity for mobilization at all levels, international or regional networks will not suffice. It is important for all the social forces that are part of the ASM dynamics to assume genuine ownership for it, and support and strengthen it by translating it into their own realities and actions. But for the moment, apart from the social movements that are active in the WSF process and / or involved in international dynamics, the thousands of social movements bravely struggling to defend their rights at local and national level are essentially unfamiliar with the ASM. The facilitation group and all social movements involved in the ASM now need to address this urgent and important issue. They need to make contact with and establish dialogue and cooperation with these movements.

Continue to decentralize: In 2006, after five years of participating in the WSF and ASM, it appeared important for social movements involved in this process to take stock, both of the state of the

process itself and of the evolution of the international situation. This was achieved at the first global seminar on social movements that was held in Brussels in September 2006. A hundred delegates, representing fifty organizations from around the world took part. In January 2010, the social movements decided to hold a second global seminar in São Paulo from 22nd to 24th January. Understandably, this seminar was characterized by a strong Latin American presence; it contributed to making concrete progress on a number of things, particularly in relation to the Latin American context, such as conducting a major campaign against foreign military bases in Latin America. Based on these results, it was decided to develop the decentralization process by holding similar seminars in four continents. The third seminar of social movements was held in Dakar in November 2010 ahead of the WSF. Given the impact of this seminar, both in terms of involvement of African social movements as well as the success and the global dynamics of the ASM, it is clear that this process of continental decentralization should continue. An agreement of principle was reached to hold the next seminar in Asia. As well as the strategic seminars, it would also be interesting to develop Continental Assemblies of social movements over and above the global assemblies that take place during the World Social Forum. This decentralization is especially important to expand the process, thereby increasing the capacity to mobilize at local, national and regional levels; this is a fundamental aspect if we want peoples' demands to have a real impact on political decision-making.

Develop a more precise reference document on the political orientation and the working of the ASM: One important issue facing the ASM is that it is impossible to know precisely which social movements are part of the ASM process. Indeed, there is no ASM membership list, and none of the final declarations adopted at a WSF have listed the signatures. Although this may represent certain advantages, it nevertheless weakens the process, hiding its true representativity, and raising questions about the democratic nature of its operation. What is the ASM? What does it represent? Who are the members? How does it work? How are decisions taken? How is an ASM statement written? For most individuals and social movements, apart from those who are active in the process, it is very difficult or impossible to answer these questions. During discussions conducted in Dakar, the ASM facilitation group decided to launch a process to develop a reference document that would provide a clearer definition of the political orientation and ASM working methods. Although its nature and scope have yet to be determined, the preparation of this document, whether it will be called a charter, a platform or a reference text, needs to be drawn up with all due consideration and as collectively possible; time needs to be taken for the drafting process to allow the expansion of the dynamic and involvement of new social movements.

If things move forward in the right direction, that is to say, with an active facilitation group involved in the coordination of social struggles, a broadening of the process in as many countries and regions as possible, a clear political orientation and effective and democratic functioning, as well as an ability to massively mobilize at global level, the ASM can fully play its role: that of transforming the balance of power in favor of the oppressed all over the world.

After a relatively weak but nevertheless positive global action on 20th March 2011 [8] that was linked to the urgency to show immediate support and international solidarity with the struggling people in the Arab world, the global action that is planned for next 12th October will provide a new important test for assessing the commitment of social forces within the ASM. Irrespective of this, as a process of convergence for anti-capitalist struggles, the ASM has its place and its legitimacy in the struggle against capitalism and in building a world that is socially just and respectful of nature.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See, in French, Olivier Bonfond, «[Historique et perspectives du processus de l'Assemblée des mouvements sociaux](#)», ESSF (article 21601).

[2] See keyword 645: [Social Movements Network](#).

[3] See: [Declaration of the Social Movements Assembly \(Dakar WSF\)](#), Essf (article 20220).

[4] See the report: [Report on the Seminary of the social movements / Dakar / November 5th-7th 2010](#), ESSF (article 19079).

[5] CADTM as well as several other social movements have always favoured this position and are prepared to defend the idea of a shared single theme without however setting aside their central theme.

[6] See [We won't pay for the crisis. The rich have to pay for it !](#), ESSF (article 12821).

[7] See, in French, Olivier Bonfond, «[Historique et perspectives du processus de l'Assemblée des mouvements sociaux](#)», ESSF (article 21601).

[8] See, in French: [Bilan du 20 mars 2011 : journée mondiale de solidarité avec les peuples arabes](#), ESSF (article 21603).