

'The process is going well' -Some reflections on the future of the WSF and its International Council

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How many times and for how long the alterglobalist movement in general and the World Social Forum in particular have been declared 'dead'? It happened so many times that one can only conclude that there must be quite some people who really want them to fail. Though I think they will have to be more patient. This does not mean that all goes on smoothly and that there are no problems. On the contrary. In this article, I want to reflect on some of the major difficulties for the future of the 'process'.

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The World Social Forum in Dakar was chaotic. In fact, everything had been prepared quite well, except that there were no rooms to organize all the meetings. And even if some good listening people at the preparatory meetings had feared that such a thing might happen, the organizers apparently had been waiting for a miracle till the first day of the Forum. But hundreds of seminars had no room, did not find their speakers and simply had to be cancelled. There was no programme for the first day, there was no programme for the second day and there was no programme for the third day... Quite disastrous, one might say, and of course people tried to work as best they could to find last-minute solutions. And those who knew the organizers personally could phone them and ask for a preferential treatment.

As usual, after the Forum, there was a meeting of the International Council (IC). Many people were disappointed, others were bitter. But the real miracle happened at that very meeting: the 'inner circle' - by which I mean the small group of people who have the informal but real power in the forum process - declared that everything went fine, that only some smaller, isolated organizations and individuals did not find their meetings, but that all in all, it had been a very good forum. After all, it is a 'learning process', isn't it?

The WSF Dakar was the 8th World Social Forum. Four forums were held in Porto Alegre, one in Mumbai, India, one in Nairobi, Kenya and one in Belem, Brazil. Every Forum has its own 'organizing committee', but can one say that nothing should have been learnt after seven previous Forums? Could it be that some people were silently happy to have shown that 'the Africans' clearly were not able to organize anything decent? Nairobi had been disastrous as well, and it should be clear that organizing a meeting for around 50.000 people is not easy. But a decent evaluation could have helped to avoid further mistakes. It did not happen. Once again, the 'inner circle' was satisfied and

congratulated itself.

At the IC meeting in Copenhagen, after the European Social Forum of Malmö, in 2009, a document with 'guiding principles' for the organization of the WSF was finally adopted. It was never heard of again. In January 2012, some people decided it should be updated, and again several meetings were held to do just that. In the end, it was decided we just needed a 'check-list'. Has it been made?

This is just one example of how things can go wrong and mistakes are not taken into account or learnt from. There is no 'learning process' because some people definitely do not want to learn. Why not?

The World Social Forum Process

This rather negative introduction could be seen as a criticism of the whole process. It should not. Because there is also a very positive side of the story. It shows that those who are saying the 'process is going well' have a point, though I still think they are wrong. I will come back to it, but let us first look at the positive elements, in order to avoid all misunderstandings.

First of all, in 2010 and 2011 there were more than fifty social forums, thematic and regional ones, with huge successes. There was a thematic forum in Porto Alegre and one in Mexico, there was a South Asia Forum and the process around the Maghreb/Machrek Forum. In many parts of the world, social movements got organized and prepared their events. The formula clearly is a success. The most recent and also very successful example is the Balkan Forum which held its first meeting in Zagreb in spring 2012. This is hopeful.

Secondly and most importantly, the preparation for the WSF2013 in Tunis is going well. The meeting we had in July in Monastir showed the existing dynamics within the many movements that were participating. No criticism at all should be addressed to the local organizers who are doing a wonderful job. We can only hope they will find the necessary resources to make all the promises come true.

It looks as if we are going to have a good Social Forum in spring 2013. I want to emphasize this and state explicitly that I trust the hard working organizing people. Just let us hope they will not be left all alone to do the job.

Yet, there are problems. Let me try to name some of them.

An open space

First, at the level of the World Social Forum of 2013 some questions remain. We were able to listen to a large number of movements in Monastir, but who knows who they are? Do the local organizers know? Rumours have it that many are infiltrated by islamists. A promised debate on political islam did not take place. This is really a pity, since the topic is important, especially for European participants. When working together with other movements, when making alliances, it is good to know your partner and by whom he/she is funded.

A second open question that remains is the one around the thematic axes of the forum. A general proposal was discussed and adopted at the IC meeting of Dacca, even before the task in the working-group was finished. Will it be taken into account? The point was not discussed in Monastir. Neither was the always difficult point of 'organized' and/or 'self-organized' events.

There are also many problems linked to the functioning of the IC.

At the IC meeting in Dacca, Bangladesh, after the South Asia Social Forum, hardly around twenty people from outside Asia were present. It was considered a disaster, and rightly so. Though one might wonder if the disaster was not caused by the lack of any solidarity fund? If people are not paid to come, they do not come, tickets from Europe or from Latin America are expensive. But it was an excellent excuse for cancelling the next IC meeting planned in Diyarbakir, Kurdistan, a place which 'the inner circle' did not like for political reasons. We cannot afford a second failed meeting, was the argument. This could easily have been avoided with a solidarity fund.

In terms of attendance, the last IC meeting in Monastir was a success. Apparently, the solidarity fund had worked. But was it a good meeting? Was there a well prepared agenda? Have decisions been made? Have the commissions been meeting to prepare the decisions. Have all relevant questions for 2013 been discussed? The answer is no for all the questions. Because there clearly is a problem.

One might think that many practical problems are unavoidable since the WSF has no 'structure', it is not an 'organization', and since the alterglobalist movement is not 'a movement' but 'a movement of movements' with a variable composition of people working on a voluntary basis. The WSF is an 'open space', it is a 'process' where everyone can come and do whatever he or she likes, as long as he or she respects the Charter of Principles.

This could be an acceptable excuse, were it not that it does not really explain anything, one, and that it does also lead to political problems, two. And three, there is a structure, even a rather heavy one.

Let us start with point three. The International Council consists of all organizations having demanded their admission and having been approved by the expansion commission. At every meeting, around 3 to 4 new organizations become members. The IC now counts around 150 members, it is not representative and no one can speak 'in the name of' the IC or the WSF. Whereas in the beginning, it consisted of the 'founders' of the WSF and other leftwing global intellectuals who discussed politics and some practical and organizational points, the IC slowly became a gathering of friends who discussed organizational matters. Observers long ago had predicted that such an expansion of a decision-making body was not sustainable. The intellectuals did not come anymore, since at any rate political discussions were avoided at all costs.

Soon, the IC thought it needed thematic commissions. It now has a resource commission, an expansion commission, a communication commission, a methodology and content commission and a strategy commission. That last one was created but never really accepted. And its discussions have been professionally boycotted throughout the years.

Then, some people thought that many decisions could not wait for the six-monthly meetings of the IC and that a practical 'working group' was needed. After very long and difficult discussions, a 'liaison group' was created for two years, with rather well defined rules for its composition and functioning. It worked well in its first period, in the second period it failed.

Whenever there is a specific problem, like the writing of the thematic axes, a specific working-group is formed. It works well or not, it presents its conclusions, and that is most of the time the last thing that is heard from it.

In other words, there are quite some groups and structures, but observers who have the impression that they do not help to make the whole machine work efficiently, democratically and transparently, are probably right. Many topics are buried in some group, many people do not even know about

their existence. But all the different groups do have a mandate, which can be found in the minutes of the different meetings.

So the lack or the existence of a structure does not explain much. The point really is that no one knows where we are going to. There is no strategic vision, or if there is one, only few people know about it. The rest can only be guessing.

Political discussions are made impossible. We had a very good introductory debate at the IC in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2008. Many written contributions were put on the website, many important people came to the meeting to discuss. But somehow the whole discussion melted away in some 'space vs action' debate which ignored all the political input. Everything became 'liquid' and since then, despite many efforts, some people blocked all questions about the 'how' question.

This happens mostly with a reference to the Charter of Principles which does not allow us to defend unitary positions, and rightly so, since it could lead us to endless ideological discussions. But why should it not be possible to identify the different ideological positions in order to see what way for how far we can walk together? Why should it not be possible to give some direction to the 'open space'? Why should it not be possible to just discuss the 'state of affairs' in today's world, despite our differences or precisely because of our differences, in order to hear the different views on what is happening. Is this not the real wealth, the major advantage of having an IC? I think this would be very interesting and important, but somehow it is not allowed and made impossible.

Consequently, the third problem is political. The 'process may be going well', but we certainly have no political success. Neoliberalism is as strong as ever and is now in full swing in the European Union. The economic and social consequences of these policies are even worsened by the looming ecological problems. A 'green economy' is in the making and is not going to improve the livelihoods of billions of people in the world. New wars are in the making.

And how does the WSF react? We do not react. How does the IC react? It does not react. It does not even discuss these problems. In Dacca it was decided to 're-dynamize' the IC, by trying to get back the many movements and intellectuals who more or less abandoned the process, and to attract the new movements who at first sight are not really interested to integrate the process. A programme was prepared for a 'political debate', with topics, names and a time schedule. It was abandoned. Why? The 'political debate' we had in Monastir was decided on one day before and speakers were invited at the very last minute among those who were present. There was no conclusion, not even an effort to round up the meeting. A very valuable member of the IC who had not been involved in the preparation of the debate, was invited to give a kind of synthesis, which was inevitably irrelevant. It was not discussed.

These three fundamental problems do not close the list.

New movements of young people are emerging. They are worshipped by the members of the 'process' as heroes, they incorporate hope, they are supposed to bring new blood to the old movements, but why? Are the 'old' movements really not able anymore to have ambitious goals? Do they need the young to believe in themselves? Let us avoid all misunderstandings: the 'occupy' and other 'indignados' are very welcome within 'the process', but it is not so sure they really want to come. Some of them were invited in Monastir, but do we know if they want to stay? If they can strengthen our 'process'? Many of their rules, such as horizontality and non representativity, are preached by the WSF since its inception, but are not really practiced. The 'new political culture' is certainly not a fact yet.

Another problem is linked to the scale at which 'old' and 'new' movements are working. The WSF

process started out of indignation over the neoliberal globalization process, with protests against the power of the WTO, World Bank, IMF ... the new movements seem to be more locally rooted and active. For the true alterglobalists among us, this is perfect, since we have to be active on all levels, from local to global, over national and regional. But the fact is that global and regional processes are withering, in Europe, in the Americas and in the WSF itself.

It has been said that global meetings are not for everyone, travel costs are too high and not ecological. That is certainly true, but since a couple of years all IC meetings can be followed directly by webstream and 'extended' activities are organised at every social forum. So those who really want to follow, can follow.

What is happening is that more and more organizations apparently do not believe in the WSF process anymore, and the reason why this is so should have to be carefully examined. Unfortunately, a 'forum of forums', planned for September 2012 and meant to make a self-assessment of the whole process, was abandoned...

But the process is going well

In Monastir, there was a short meeting of a special working group aimed to reflect on the reform of the IC. There clearly is a lot of discontent, but again the 'inner circle' sees no problems. Contradictions are 'unavoidable' since groups have no 'mandate' and 'the process is going well', so it was said.

These arguments have already been refuted in the previous point.

I can see no reason why the IC should not try to work efficiently, democratically and transparently. And why it should not look at a number of political questions. When the IC decides to not go to Diyarbakir but send a 'delegation' (which it did not), it is political. When it decides to not have a real political debate, it takes a political decision.

Since the election of Lula as Brazilian president, we have had not one single political success. We had a major anti-war protest in 2003 - which is constantly referred to - but we did not stop the war. We may - indirectly - have influenced the 'Arab spring', but the long awaited social justice and democracy are not facts yet. We have not achieved anything. Should that not be a reason for a thorough assessment of our 'process'?

The self-satisfactory statements of the 'inner circle' have become unbearable. Some of its members do not know what it means to be an ordinary WSF participant. They do not know what it means to have no meeting room. They are extremely nice people, whom I highly respect and even admire, but they stand high above the ordinary WSF participants and even IC members.

Finally, let me mention a very sad last problem. It is clear we have not achieved the 'new political culture' we pretend to have introduced. We claim that our diversity is our wealth, but respect for other people is often missing. This is particularly clear with the interpreters who are working on a voluntary basis and often have to wait one to two hours before a meeting is really getting started, and are then asked to work till 8 o'clock at night ... There is disrespect for members of the IC who are not invited to some important meetings, like the one with the Brazilian president in Porto Alegre in January 2012, or who are -consciously - not told about the change of a meeting room, so that they cannot attend. These practices would never be accepted in more formal settings, but in the WSF process they happen regularly and are laughed away...

Informal power

After almost ten years of my personal participation and observation of the IC process, a pattern seems to emerge.

First, a confirmation of a suspicion I had early on. The refusal of formal structures, the refusal of transparent decision-making mechanisms, the claim for horizontality has nothing to do with a 'new political culture', but everything with keeping hidden the real power structures. It would be foolish to pretend there is no 'power' in the WSF/IC process, there clearly is and there will always be, and the solidarity fund serves to coopt followers. The 'inner circle' is not larger than about ten persons, and I guess not even all of them are conscious of the role they are playing. Most of them are working hard, though there is no respect for outsiders whatsoever.

Let me avoid all misunderstandings: when I talk of an 'inner circle' I do not mean some kind of conspirational club of persons making important decisions. I refer to a loose group of eminent IC members who work hard but do not feel the need for any assessment or any democratization.

If the WSF/IC process wants to survive, it will have to change.

The easiest way to do it is to abandon the IC and go on working with a small group of co-opted followers. There is then no longer a need for democratic transparent procedures, they can get rid of the annoying meetings where everyone has to say something, irrespective of the relevance to the topic on the agenda. Could this be what is meant by the 'decentralization' some members are talking about?

Nevertheless, other solutions are possible and desirable. Because a global gathering seems to be necessary and because the search for political convergence remains as relevant as ever.

The Charter of Principles would not even have to be changed. It is based on sound principles which can be respected.

The IC can be a kind of parliamentary assembly of the alterglobalist movement. If it meets once or twice a year, it can inform the audience of what is happening in different parts of the world. It can discuss and plan thematic, regional and other social forums and prepare the two-yearly World Social Forum. It can decide on the most important topics and/or regions to be worked on.

But before it can start to work in that way, an inventory should be made of its membership and the attendance of meetings. We should know what movements are regularly coming to meetings and which are not, especially for the older ones but also for the many new movements that have been accepted in these past years. There are now around 150 members of the IC, the task can not be that difficult.

In order to make IC meetings relevant, we should avoid to turn them into some kind of political tourism. Whether it is Dacca, Bangladesh, or Monastir, Tunisia, it would be so good to spend half a day of every IC meeting to listening to one or two academics who can explain the political, economic and social situation in their country. We then know, at least, where we are. Very often and for many participants, this is now not the case. They depend for information on casual meetings with local people who are not the most objective informants.

There should be a small group of people, 5 or 6 maximum, to prepare the agenda of every meeting, after asking for suggestions to the whole group. Everyone has the right to make proposals, the small ad hoc group decides.

At every IC meeting, there should at least be half a day for political debates, so that everyone is kept informed of what is happening in the world and a 'common' vision might emerge. The topics can be decided by core preparing group. Specific people can be invited to talk about them.

After every meeting, a separate list should be made of decisions taken and of who is responsible for implementing them. At every meeting this list should be checked in order to see whether implementation has followed.

Permanent commissions should consist of 4 to 5 members who should always be present at meetings, which are also open to other IC members. Possibly, these meetings can happen electronically and if decisions have to be made, they can also happen electronically.

There should be a permanent and transparent solidarity fund, and members of the IC should pay a yearly contribution.

The IC can again become an interesting debating group at high level, with representatives of social movements from all over the world. People should again want to attend it, because it is stimulating and interesting.

Most urgently, there should be a strategic debate in order to see what our objectives are and how we can try to achieve them. Times have changed since the first WSF and our analysis has to be updated. Then, at least, we will know what we are doing and whether we want to do it.

If we want to prepare the future, we should first look at the past and analyse what went wrong. Something may be wrong with the structure, but I fear something is also wrong with the manner we behave, with the lack of trust and the priority given to personal and organizational interests instead of our common WSF/IC interest. This, we have to discuss and find out. It is not a matter of 'blaming' and 'counter-blaming', it is not a matter of talking about 'structures' instead of 'persons'. It is a matter of a lucid analysis of what went wrong, among friends. I personally do not think anyone has to be blamed, but we also must realize that no democracy is possible if there are no democrats. It is my personal conviction that we can only prepare the future if we make an honest self-assessment and look at what can be improved.

Does the 'inner circle', those who have the informal power, want such a development? I think they have a moral obligation to all the people who have given their time and energy to a process that is now running into chaos, to give some clarifications. What is the WSF about? What is the IC about? Is it just a matter of organizing social movements? Of bringing them together? Is it about proposing alternatives to a capitalist and neoliberal world order? Is it about searching for convergence between people and movements? Is it about creating 'civil society' next to but separate from the political world? These questions, I think, need answers if we want to continue, because some of these points are totally compatible with neoliberal policies.

If these answers cannot be given and cannot be found, if nothing really changes, an alternative may be sought after in the Assembly of social movements. Though here again, many problems exist. This meeting has been taking decisions, yes, it has been giving political declarations, yes, but they are hardly more than slogans. There is no real political debate about alternatives and solutions to real problems. There is no real search for convergence and respect for divergence. Though it should be possible to organize it in a better way.

Nothing yet is lost. Many possibilities exist. Our most important achievement is the quality of the people involved in the IC. The 'inner circle' consists of highly respected men and women whom I personally consider friends. But they should not treat the IC as a bunch of idiots, consciously or

inconsciously.

If we speak of a crisis of 'democracy' and 'representativity' - which there is - we should beware of becoming ourselves part of that problem. The WSF/IC was meant to be part of the solution. If we say 'another world is possible', surely 'another IC' must be possible as well. Let us make it.

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