

Barcelona

Mediterranean Social Forum: A Balance Sheet

Monday 8 August 2005, by [VIVAS Esther](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2005).

The first Mediterranean Social Forum (FSMed) was held in Barcelona on June 16-18 2005, attracting between 4,500 and 5,000 participants (delegates, volunteers, interpreters, journalists and so on), with a very significant presence of representatives from organizations from the southern, eastern and northern shores of the Mediterranean. In the course of the three days, 200 seminars and workshops and nine plenary sessions were held. There were also women's and anti-war movement assemblies as well as various sectorial meetings of peasants, support organizations for the Palestinian people, and immigrants' groups.

Contents

- [Thematic axes](#)
- [Assembly of movements](#)
- [Some weaknesses](#)

The FSMed served as a first step towards meeting and interchange between groups from the different corners of the Mediterranean. About 250 volunteers participated in the event and the group of interpreters from Babels coordinated 260 volunteer translators from various countries.

One of the most outstanding elements of this first FSMed was the high participation of delegations from the south and east of the Mediterranean. Morocco, the Balkans and Greece each sent around 50 delegates and there were numerous delegations from the south of France and Italy. But in spite of the high interest on the part of groups from the south, only 60% of the 1,200 visas asked for were granted.

Some 500 representatives of human rights, women's and ecological groups, mainly from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, were unable to participate in the Forum. The Spanish Government rejected the applications alleging lack of time, loss of papers or the application of the Treaty of Schengen. A lamentable attitude from a government that boasts of being open to dialogue and sensitive to the demands of the social movements.

Thematic axes

The FSMed had three main thematic axes in most of the seminars and workshops: denunciation of the process of economic liberalization in the Mediterranean; defence of human rights and democratic liberties across the region; and rejection of military occupation and imperialist strategy, especially in Palestine and the Middle East.

Women, immigrants and peasants had a central role in the FSMed with big specific conferences on the resistance of women in the region; the causes and consequences of migration; and strategies for food sovereignty in the Mediterranean.

On Friday evening a women's assembly was held with about 500 delegates from across the region. They denounced the triple domination that affects women in the Mediterranean: patriarchal domination, neoliberalism and fundamentalism. In the final declaration, the women's assembly called for a day of global action on violence against women every November 25.

In 2005, this day will have as its objective support for Iraqi women jailed arbitrarily and demand their immediate liberation. In the FSMed, women had on an outstanding centrality, something which the other world and regional forums must take good note of.

The pacifist, anti-militarist and anti-war groups had their own space, the assembly of anti-war movements, which approved a call for a day of global action against the war and the occupation in Iraq and Palestine, on March 18 and 19, 2006, the third anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq. The assembly also called for actions against military bases in the region from November 8-11, 2005.

In spite of the broad ideological spread of organizations involved in the FSMed, the plenaries, seminars and workshops, generally transmitted a radical message of denunciation of neoliberal policies and imperialist strategy. The groups from the south, especially, were clearly opposed to "the development model" applied in the region and against geostrategic interests, both European and American, in the Mediterranean.

Assembly of movements

The assembly of social movements, held a day after the Forum finished, involved around 500 delegates. The assembly rejected the process of economic liberalization and the "Mediterranean Europartnership" and called for a day of action throughout the region on November 27 and 28, 2005, coinciding with the Euro-Mediterranean summit in Barcelona.

The final declaration included a calendar of common mobilization for the social movements in the Mediterranean, including days of support for the peasant struggle against the WTO on September 10 2005, against the Bolkenstein directive and the GATTs agreements, on October 15, 2005 and for the rights of those without papers and for the free circulation of people, on December 18, 2005.

All this supposes a significant step forward in the coordination of the movements in the region, who have very little tradition of common work. However, this is in any case a first step, which should prove very positive.

At the political level, and in spite of the previous tensions in the organization of the FSMed, significant problems did not exist. In any case, the most controversial question, before and after the holding of the FSMed, was the question of the Sahara.

In the weeks prior to FSMed pro-Saharawi groups accused both the local and international organizing committee of not giving the Sahara a prominent role in the FSMed, even formulating very serious declarations against people on the international committee from Morocco with excellent records of defence of human rights and in favour of Saharawi self-determination.

During the FSMed pro-Hassan VI groups tried to disrupt seminars and the final demonstration, but

the organizers were able to isolate the provokers and the assembly of social movements approved a document in support of the struggle of the Saharawi people. At other European forums political tensions in the organizing committee have been reflected at the forum itself, but this was not the case here and it can be said that no organization dominated the FSMed or made an instrumental use of it.

At the organizational level, the FSMed involved a high number of activities, with: sectorial seminars, workshops, exhibitions, meetings, cultural activities and so on, all passing off without any great misfortunes.

Logistics, interpretation system, and room use all worked out well. In relation to catering (both inside the enclosure as on the food stands on in the outer patio) social principles of fair trade were respected. Unlike other European forums, in the FSMed the products of Coca-Cola and other multinationals were not sold and a policy of accessible prices was applied.

Some weaknesses

In spite of the positive elements, the FSMed had important weaknesses. Surely the most remarkable was the low attendance from Catalonia and the Spanish state in general. Unlike other regional forums, the FSMed did not transcend the nucleus of promotional organizations and it was not a central initiative on the agenda of the Catalan and Spanish state movements, nor for most of the social sectors that had participated previously in the mobilizations against war or neoliberal globalización.

It is a paradox when one contrasts the 1,100 Catalan students who attended the ESF in Florence or the 2,200 in Paris with the weak presence of students at the FSMed, although the timing of the Forum coincided with student examinations. This weak participation and local impact can be explained in a number of ways.

Firstly, we need to take into account the origin of the call for the FSMed at the end of 2001, basically by Catalan organizations who formed part of the international council of the World Social Forum but without a real link with the important mobilizations then taking place in the area.

When attempts were made to establish a broad planning framework, the organizations and groups most linked to the dynamics of the mobilizations against the World Bank (2001), the Europe of Capital and War (2002) or the student mobilizations for the first European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence (2002) or Paris (2003) were for the most part not involved. The organizing committee remained relatively small.

Only some of the militant sectors were involved in the process and they were absorbed by the logistics of the Forum so were unable to dedicate sufficient efforts to the work of building it. Elements that had characterized previous mobilizations (massive poster campaigns, information points in the city and so on) were absent this time.

Also, the FSMed was originally planned for late 2003, then put off to 2004 and, finally, June 2005, which was another element in the erosion of the organizing committee.

The political conjuncture in which the FSMed was held was also unfavourable, with an ebb in the social response to the Zapatero government. The latter has made certain concessions like the withdrawal of the troops from Iraq, the cancellation of the National Hydrological Plan and the approval of same-sex marriage, as well as adopting a political practice different from that of the

Aznar government, leading to a significant demobilization.

In particular, if we make a comparison with the periods in 2000 and 2003-04 with big protests against globalization, the government of the Popular Party and the war. In spite of this, there have recently been some protests, albeit weak and isolated, against closures and relocation of companies or struggles in favour of the unconditional regularization of the conditions of immigrants.

However, since the demonstrations against the war in Iraq there has been a dynamic of fragmentation and disarticulation of struggles and social movements in Catalonia, and there has been an absence of campaigns and initiatives mobilizing a broad and plural spectrum of organizations and groups as in the previous period of protests. These elements would also contribute to an explanation of the weak impact of the FSMed in Catalonia as in the rest of the Spanish state.

On the other hand, the big organizations involved in promoting the FSMed, like some of the trade unions, did not make a real effort to build the initiative and their participation was limited. Of the 250 volunteers present at the FSMed most registered in an individual capacity with the exception of those involved with the alternative union organizations IAC (Intersidincal Alternativa de Catalunya), with 50 volunteers, and FTC (Federació de Treball de Catalunya), with 40.

Another of the significant problems of the FSMed was the significant misalignment between the breadth of the program and the spaces where the Forum took place and the real size of the event. More than 200 seminars were excessive if compared with the number of delegates.

This, along with the two great pavilions in which the forum was held, meant that most of the conferences, seminars and workshops were half empty. The atmosphere was not one of forums with jammed rooms and thousands of people. A less ambitious format would have been much more reasonable.

Anyway it is impossible to deny that the FSMed brought together very diverse and plural organizations from all around the Mediterranean with very little mutual knowledge and still less experience of joint work. In this sense, the first FSMed has been about the construction of bridges and the crossing of borders.

At the international level there will be future editions, in Barcelona we will start to build a unitary campaign against the Euromediterranean summit "Barcelona +10" and denounce in the street the neoliberal policies being implemented in the Mediterranean.