

Answering CACIM's call for an WSF evaluation

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We can evaluate the WSF with two different attitudes: wishing that the WSF disappears ("folding up its tent") or wishing its continuity. If we are not convinced of its utility, and consider it a waste of time - some see it now even as an obstacle to gain efficacy in the struggle to overcome neoliberalism - we have only to identify what we can profit from this eight years of experience, and enter directly in a new stage of struggle. But if we see the WSF process as something helpful, we must on the contrary identify its virtues and strengths - as well as its weakness - and think how to reinforce it.

During all the WSF life these two attitudes coexisted. For instance, many people who never swallowed the WSF Charter of Principles would like to abandon those principles that render difficult initiatives involving all WSF participants. On the contrary, others say the Charter must be respected as a vaccine against the hijacking of the process for specific objectives, and as a protection for the Social Forums against parties and governments interferences.

It seems nevertheless that now we are approaching a dangerous situation: people who are insisting in the idea of the "point of crisis" or "crossroad" do it at the same time as others are multiplying activities in the WSF spirit in many parts of the world. That is to say, we are risking a disconnection between some people who "think" about the WSF process and others who "do" the WSF process.

I don't see the first group so joyful. On the other hand, I see the second ones working with enthusiasm in the roads opened by the WSF process, overcoming all "crossroads" - specially now, answering to the call for a Global Day of Action (GDA) on 26 January, as well as preparing new regional Social Forums in 2008 and the next World Forum in 2009 in the Amazon region.

This risk is especially dangerous because we are going to have an important WSF International Council (IC) meeting end March in Nigeria. The main objectives of this IC meeting are to evaluate 2008, re-situate the WSF process in the present world problems and discuss its next steps. All this based on an evaluation of the world situation, which is not necessarily evolving in the sense of overcoming neoliberalism, wars, and violent confrontations. So, "disconnecting" the IC of the rest of the WSF dynamics would be disastrous.

Naturally we have to overcome this risk. The way to do it, in my opinion, is adopting, in the evaluation CACIM proposes - and still more in the next IC meeting - the same approach we experience in the WSF decision making process. In our Organisation Committees, as well as in the International Council and its Commissions and Working Groups, we use the positive approach of

looking for a consensus instead of voting. The vote to decide collectively is evidently a great conquest of humanity. But when it is used among social organizations it carries to divisions and separations, in advantage of the dominant power. Deciding by consensus pushes everybody not to see the errors of the others - to point then these errors to the voters - but the truths others are saying, to arrive to a new truth combining all known truths, in a constructive general consent, only way to build union.

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Why is it that many people (of our “side”, naturally not among the neoliberalism partisans) do not “love” the WSF, even though they participate in it - although not always at ease? I found three major reasons for that.

The first is the fact that the WSF is a novelty as political initiative. The two others are misunderstandings: about the WSF objectives and character and about the necessity of participating in it.

Let me try to explain it better.

ABOUT THE NOVELTY OF THE WSF PROCESS

The WSF is really, in my opinion, a “political invention”, as said my colleague of the Brazilian WSF Organization Committee, José Corrêa Leite, in the title of his book written in 2003, before the one I wrote in 2004/5 also about the WSF.

It was proposed in opposition to the World Economic Forum in Davos, but it was also deeply different. It was a new kind of Forum, as a place to assemble people for discussions about specific themes. And it pointed already to the different world we thought was possible.

In which aspects is the WSF different from the Forums in which we were used to participate? The main differences were: the organisers were not events promoters (like for instance in Davos) but social organisations; no profit was envisaged (the fees of participation were nearly symbolic); the organisations carrying it out made a general “call to come” without specific invitations, travel tickets or lodging expenses paid (some known political leaders were uncomfortable with this); they did not determine the content of the discussions (only the general objective that could bring together those “called”); they did not choose key note speakers and debaters; they opened the Forum space to self-organised activities of the participants; and last but no least, they established that the Forum would not have final declarations or motions.

Many things we see now more clearly were absolutely not defined in our minds in the beginning of the process. They were in fact only intuitions. We learned, and we are learning until now, Forum after Forum.

Consequently, all these characteristics were not entirely respected in the first World Social Forum in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, except some especially important ones. As well till now they are not completely respected in all Forums organised in the WSF process, with the emergence of Social Forums, which could be regional, national or local. But these characteristics were and are present in the “facilitators” minds, who slowly try effectively to consider them in the organisation of Forums. This happened especially after the formulation of the WSF Charter of Principles, which defined more precisely the character of the World Social Forum, from the experience of the first one.

The big problem nevertheless, was the fact that this political invention did not fit in in any of the existing categories of analysis and reflection about political action. The WSF was a strange “animal” that erupted, already with big dimensions, in the sea of our political initiatives. It was a non pyramidal Forum, situated much more in the logics of the networks, a new stream that was also appearing in the sea. This “animal” diminished the self-confidence of many people, who were used to working with tools of action and analyses built during more than a century. They would prefer, then, to stay where they were more at ease.

Anyhow at its beginning the WSF was seen with a certain sympathy, as well as somehow inoffensive, so that could be accepted. Things became complicated when the Forum launched a new and different world process, with incidence in political practices. Some people began then to disqualify it - “it is a Woodstock of the left”, “in the Forums we only discuss and discuss”.

But why was it necessary to create such unfamiliar and troublesome kind of Forum?

I would say that we have seen a new political actor rising: the “civil society” - as citizens organized in social movements and other types of bodies - which needed a space to express itself.

Later on we saw also that it would be good to feed the “animal”, because it could help overcome one big difficulty of the left: the fact that it was recurrently victim of the malediction of the division, weakening itself, for the pleasure of those who dominate the world.

THE EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS POLITICAL ACTOR

In fact, the WSF was not created, as many people think, to enter in competition with political parties or replace their action, or to enter in competition with the struggle to “conquer” governments. Both types of political action are necessities to build the new world. The WSF intended only to reinforce the so called “civil society” that was emerging in the world by its own initiative - that is, autonomous from parties and governments, and not accepting to be only part of their strategies.

Throughout the work of organizing Forums, we saw also more clearly that the civil society articulation differs from that of parties and governments. It can be built only through horizontal networks, without leaderships and pyramids of responsibilities - overcoming the limitations of the representative democracy, with its “delegations” of power and internal struggles for power, typical of parties and governments logics. That is why we put in the WSF Charter of Principles that the WSF “does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings”.

But we saw more clearly, moreover, that the political action of this new actor is also different to the one of parties and governments. It unfolds as in the networks - in a big variety of types, rhythms, themes and levels of action, being developed autonomously by a big variety of organisations. That is why the WSF Charter refused a specific and unique WSF “political program”, to be endorsed by the organisations participating in the Forums. Anyhow, such a common program would be practically impossible to build, in the Forums or in the organising instances of the process, considering the number and diversity of organisations gathered in it.

Naturally, parties, movements or governments can propose strategies to fight neoliberalism, or a new model of society to be built upon the ashes of capitalism, or a utopia to mobilize the crowds, rendering more foreseeable the territory of the unknown post-capitalism. Social Forums then can be places to discuss these propositions, but not to obtain its acceptance by all their participants.

In this perspective, I would say that if the WSF International Council does not resist the temptation

of trying to do a WSF “political program”, it really risks its own death, as it will be in a deep contradiction with the WSF logics.

THE NEED OF BUILDING UNION

All of us know that building union is important for all political actors engaged in changing the world – specially left political parties and movements. But it is still more important for the civil society as political actor.

The force of the mobilized majorities – workers, electors, consumers, citizens – can be decisive in the political struggles. Parties and governments know it and use it in their strategies. But the diversity of interests inside the civil society may maintain it so fragmented that its force as an autonomous political actor may not emerge.

Which kind of union would be then suitable for the civil society, to pressure for the majorities’ interests and even build alternatives independently of parties and governments? Civil society organisations can support each other but not through tactical or strategic alliances, under centralized commandments. They only can be united by solidarity ties, assumed freely.

WSF process was then envisaged as unlimited horizontal networking spaces at world, regional, national or local levels.

They would create at first occasions for mutual recognizing, overcoming of prejudices among organisations and identification of convergences. Then the respect of diversity was seen as essential inside the civil society, as a practice to be exercised during the Forums and in the interrelations built in the Forums, pointing already to the future: the respect of diversity would have to be a fundamental value in the new world we wish.

In addition, to advance towards the kind of union suitable for civil society, it was seen as necessary to overcome the poorness of the representative democracy, and to point towards the empowerment of the citizens; and, through the respect of their diversity, towards the development of their initiative and creativity, instead of moulding them in conformist behaviours.

This process would then create conditions to experience new values contradicting those which motivate the action inside capitalism, and which we need to abandon to overcome this system: cooperation instead of competition, human needs instead of profits, respect for nature instead of its maximum exploitation, long term perspectives instead of short term interests, acceptance of differences instead of homogenisation, co-responsible liberty instead of egoistic individualism, being instead of having.

These dynamics, lived in the WSF to build the civil society union, in its diversity and autonomous relations, could reinforce its action as political actor. And, as for parties and governments genuinely searching to answer to the human beings, the union is also necessary, this experimenting would be a positive message coming to them from the WSF process, pointing to new kinds of alliances.

It must be said that all the intuitions behind the WSF “invention” were not new in the world. It was not something coming from zero. It was one of the results of at least 40 years of humankind thinking about political practices, criticizing authoritarianism and acting consequently. It appeared explosively in 1968, entered into a process of maturing with the horizontal networks as a new way to organise actions and with experiences like the Zapatistas from 1994, and arrived to a climax in the 1999 Seattle protests.

The success of the process that began with the WSF in 2001 is due, I think, to the fact that its Charter of Principles announce clearly some simple conditions to develop these intuitions: the

refusal of a final document of the Forums; the non-existence of leaderships directing the meetings or of spokespersons; the non-existence of a political programme of the WSF as a body; the absence of specific invitations to participate, in order to create an “open space”; the equal importance given to all activities inside the Forum; the possibility that the activities be proposed as much as possible not by the organisers but by the participants themselves; the refusal to accept activities inside the Forum organised by political parties or governments; the refusal of government interference, even and specially when they give logistical support; and the refusal of violence as a means in political action.

The growing dimensions of the Forums is empirical evidence of the wisdom of these Principles, just as the non-respect of them can create problems as happened already in some recent occasions.

So, if the WSF cannot change the world, it can create better conditions for it, through the reinforcement of the civil society as political actor and through the experimentation of new political practices, pointing to a new political culture.

The problem then is the delay. This road towards the construction of civil society union – as well as the new kinds of alliances among parties — needs time and involves deep changes of paradigms and behaviours. That is why the misunderstandings about the WSF process – that I will analyse now – not only remained but also grow.

WSF - SPACE OR MOVEMENT?

The first misunderstanding that appeared was related to a question: is the WSF a space or a movement?

This question was already very much discussed and many old and new arguments for one or another option can be presented. I will not do it here. The book I wrote about the WSF — “The WSF challenge” — considers mainly this alternative.

These options must in fact be considered in the context of the desire to change the world, as rapidly as possible, that motivates all WSF process participants. The Charter of Principles defined the WSF as a space and not as a movement, and established that it did not intend “to be a body representing world civil society”. Many people were frustrated and later “profoundly disillusioned”, as said the CACIM invitation to evaluate the WSF. They would prefer the WSF as a strong new movement or as a “movement of movements”. Seeing WSF “calling” capacity to put together tens of thousands of people of the entire world wishing to overcome the neoliberalism, they consider that it can be used to mobilize these people and many others to confront directly the dominant system. As if we had finally found the organisational issue to overcome the perplexity produced by the Berlin’s Wall fall. Why not put the WSF meetings at the service of concrete political actions, to realise as soon as possible all the changes having strategic priority, or to weaken the system by exploring its contradictions?

This is the sense of “folding the tent”: abandoning the realisation of seemingly innocuous world, regional and national meetings for interchanges, reflections, learning and even articulation of the civil society organisations and movements, and tenting with all our force in the terrain of real politics, with the participation of political parties and even left governments – the really existing ones.

Naturally nothing can impede us to adopt the option of WSF as a movement. If we think we are already sufficiently strong and united to be able to change the present tendencies of the world

history, we could consciously end this stage of the WSF history, change in this sense the Charter of Principles and begin new reflections and alliances.

Myself, I think that we are not so strong and we would be making a bad choice interrupting the present WSF process. Civil society is still not, unhappily, so strong a political actor as we would like, while left parties and governments remain confused.

And left parties and governments seem to remain in the perplexity.

I prefer to consider, as I wrote sometime ago, that both strategies - creation of spaces and launching movements - can and must coexist. We can continue in both "roads".

If this coexistence is accepted, they can reinforce each other. Social movements and organisations can launch through civil society forums new autonomous initiatives to overcome neoliberalism. Campaigns and pressures launched by them can be incorporated in the left parties and government's programs of action. New movements and even "movements of movements" can be created, autonomous of the WSF events, as it happens already with the one we used to call "altermondialism". Parties and governments, as well as movements linked to them, can do what they must do, as well as support the civil society spaces to build their union.

If the WSF process continuity is ensured, as a tool to articulate civil society towards action, the challenge will be in the road of the "real politics", where still we do not see clearly the best direction to take.

THE "OBLIGATION" TO PARTICIPATE

The second misunderstanding I pointed before was about something like a "moral obligation" to participate in all the world events of the WSF process, which the social organisations leaderships seem to feel. The continuous growing of the dimensions of these events — 150,000 participants in 2005 in Porto Alegre — pushed people to think that their presence was also necessary to affirm the WSF force.

In fact the WSF organisers made a "call to come" to all civil society organisations which were "opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth", as indicated in the WSF Charter of Principles. As a result, all organisations struggling to build the "other world possible" were welcome.

In the following Forums this open invitation made more and more people come, and the "animal" grew more and more. But the participation in world events, with all its consequences in financing and in preparation work, came on top of all the obligations of each organisation in its own struggles. After four years, naturally, many participants were tired with this supplementary effort. And they began, in the 4th WSF, in India, to propose the realisation of World Forums only every two or even three years. This solution was not adopted, as the Forums have also a symbolic dimension, with its annual rhythm, and their interruption could lead to a weakening of the process.

But in fact the Forum is now a world level process, and it is this process that must be as dense as possible, with continuous expansion and articulations. Its meeting moments do not need to be as big as possible. The process is more important. If the meetings are big but are not supported by a growing articulation of the civil society organisations, their force is artificial. They may even mislead us, giving the false impression that behind these meetings we have a civil society which is

articulated and dense.

That is why the 2008 WSF format - free activities, in all levels, places and themes, self organized by WSF participants - seems to be very interesting, better than the 2006 format, with the polycentric Bamako-Caracas-Karachi World Social Forum.

I would even say already that the 2008 Global Day of Action (GDA) format could be used every year from now on, independently but linked to the unique World Social Forum to be organized each year - such experience can be done already in 2009, when the World Social Forum will take place in the Amazon region. I recognize the force of the WSF invention in the variety of initiatives that are happening all over the world to prepare the GDA. In many, many countries different organisations are working together, respecting their diversity, in very creative ways, to appear together the 26 January 2008. Most of these organisations will never be able to come to a world or even regional meeting. But they will be linked in a unique decentralized event in the GDA. This articulation could be experienced (and deepened) every year, with a growing network of organisations.

In fact, those who agree with the WSF utility would help it more efficiently by pushing the expansion of the process (by the multiplication of social forums and articulations all over the world at all levels) than coming to every world meeting.

THE APPROACH TO EVALUATE

Overcoming these misunderstandings, we can better analyse our experiences, and improve the way Social Forums are organized to ensure its functioning as the simple tool it is, at the service of social organisations and movements. This is the type of evaluation WSF needs: from inside it, by those engaged in it, bringing hope to the discussions, instead of the pessimism that tends to appear when we analyse it from outside.

To prepare as best as possible the 2009 WSF and the following, we have to learn from all the World Forums already realized. Many difficulties could be identified in the last one, in Nairobi, but also in the previous ones. The "Organising Principles" being discussed in the International Council try exactly to avoid the repetition of errors, and to indicate the good way of solving the problems of such huge events. If this discussion could incorporate also the lessons coming from regional, national and local Forums it would be great. Jai Sen's demand to publicize as much as possible the discussion of these "Organising Principles" must be welcome. (See above, and <http://www.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CACIMHome>.)

Among the WSF weakness, which we have not yet been able to solve, is, for instance, how to stimulate and help the Forums participants translate into new real articulated actions all the discoveries they make during the events (new questions, new convergences) and to deepen after the Forums, as intensively as possible, the articulations they built during them.

In this perspective, we tried in each Forum new tools - such as the Mural of Propositions in 2005, and in 2007 the use of the fourth Forum day for the planning of actions. Both did not function as we would like. Since Nairobi we are also building a permanent tool to facilitate, through the internet, the interrelation among participants and their actions and campaigns, at a world level, before and after the Forums. But we have still to work, to make it easily accessible for everybody.

Civil society articulations are not so easy exactly because the civil society structure is characterised by its dispersion and diversity. Even an important participant's network, that emerged in the first World Social Forum particularly preoccupied with mobilization - the Social Movements Assembly -

did not find till now the best way to do it. Some tensions appeared between them and the Forum's organisers, with misunderstandings about this Assembly final document, as our Charter of Principles refuses a WSF final document. But in some regional Forums they present already very clearly their final declaration as theirs and not of the Forum as a whole. Anyway, they are still searching for the way to make their final assemblies a moment to engage their participants more deeply in the propositions that are presented.

Other difficult questions are related with the results of the WSF process in helping to change the world effectively.

One question already raised in some evaluations is the difficulty of many organisations to bring to their internal lives what they experienced or learned in the Forums. This could happen because some values lived in the Forums may bring problems to the internal functioning of the organisations, especially those concerning horizontal relations.

Another question about results is linked with the changes at the personal level, in the motivations, behaviours and hopes of each one of us. In fact one of the discoveries made in the Forums was the direct relation between personal change and structural changes. To change the world we need also to change ourselves, internally, towards new values like those proposed in the Forums. And this is extremely difficult as, after the five Forum's days, we are again entirely encircled by the practices we want to overcome.

Actually the evaluation of these two types of results could be a good question to be put, at their arrival in the Forums, to the WSF events participants. They could at least become aware of this preoccupation, before living their new Forum experience.

But the external result that anguishes more people, leading them to criticise the WSF, is the effective change of the world. In fact to consider these results we cannot forget that capitalism made many big steps to deepen the domination of the world, since the Berlin's Wall downfall, which goes much further than military oppression and the control of economic logics and institutions. It subjugates the minds and the hearts, in nearly all the world - including among political leaders supposing fighting against capitalism. The world moves under the rules of the money and of the capitalistic values. There are many, many people struggling against neoliberalism and building new frames of life, but, actually, they still do not make very much difference. And thinking about the WSF itself, eight years are a very small time in the world history.

In fact, if we ask if another world is possible, a good minority will say that it is not necessary and the big majority will say that it is not possible. Even those now fighting strongly for their rights would not necessarily be so motivated to change the world in its fundamental structures. The climate problems are opening the possibility of showing how these structures and values are in their origin. But we have still an enormous effort to do, to awake more people. We took seven years to see a little clearer in the WSF process that communication is perhaps our most important challenge. We still do not know how to obtain a significant inversion of perspectives in the world, to give hope to a more substantial portion of the human beings, so as to arrive to the critical mass that will enable real changes.

Here we could see, perhaps, another good effect of decentralized activities like in the GDA, linked to World Social Forums: much more than only through world meetings poorly covered by the media, people will hear about the possibility of "another world" and will know that many people is working to build it.

Another "internal" problem is related with the WSF IC, and the disconnection we risk between those

who “think” the WSF and those who “do” it, that I have already considered in this text. This disconnection used to happen in political parties, between the Party leaders and the militants at the basis, or in the Unions. Paradoxically, it could happen also in the WSF process, where we don’t have categories such as leaders and supporters, and separations between those who think and those who do.

But the IC members are delegates of the organisations members of the IC. They come mostly from the leadership of these organisations - in the logics of representation and delegation of power, whose poorness we denounce through the way we organise the Forums. For the “base” of our process, it is practically impossible to participate in the IC meetings, as I said already. Are, then, the IC meetings participants those who “think” the WSF? Or could we begin also to link everybody through the mechanisms we will experiment in the GDA?

There is also a growing ambiguity about the IC “facilitator” role, and the decisions it finally takes. The frontier between “facilitation” and “direction” is not very sharp. The IC cannot decide about the WSF process participants’ struggles but it decides about how the process will evolve. This happens with the methodology used in the world events, for instance, even if the local organisers of each event are free to decide about it. If there are no impositions, we could say that our way of working is normal and useful: through the IC Commissions the local organisers can benefit from the experience of the Forums already realised. But it can also be felt as direction. The same happens with the steps of the process. The decision about stimulating a Global Day of Action in January 2008 was an IC decision. It did not send orders to the WSF process participants to take initiatives all over the world, and still less it defined the themes of the activities to be realized. But if we have an insufficient mobilisation it is possible that it will be attributed to a lack of direction. Let us see...

These ambiguities could be avoided by the transparency of the IC publicising its structure, functioning and discussions, seen till now by many people as something mysterious and even secret, opened only to people of the “direction” of organisations participating in the WSF. But we still did not find the way to ensure this transparency.

In conclusion, if we see the WSF with optimism, from inside, as a new useful and necessary tool that must be preserved and improved — despite all these difficulties — to reinforce civil society and push for a new political culture, we have a great many positive reflections to do. That is the approach of any WSF process evaluation and its future that can help us to really build the possible, necessary and urgent “other world”. I hope it will be the approach of the participants of the evaluation CACIM proposes, as well as of the participants of the IC meeting in Nigeria.

P.S.

* From Focus on Trade n° 136, Part 1, January 2008.

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