

The WSF's Global Call to Action

A Directory

PART ONE

CACIM

(Working draft, January 22 2008)

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Introduction

The World Social Forum is presently attempting a fundamentally new experiment for the 2008 edition of its world meeting : In place of what has happened every year since it was founded in 2001 – a world meeting in a key location of the South -, and for which it is now so well known, it has this year called for a **Global Day of Action** culminating on January 26 2008.

The Call for this Global Day of Action was generated inside the World Social Forum and launched in May 2007 in Berlin by many international networks. (<http://dev.wsf2008.net/eng/node/52>, accessed on 090108). Their position was that "Each self-organized group of networks, movements, organizations decides independently how to organize their own public initiative [...] and which issues, form and international connections with other actions or activities to adopt." (<http://dev.wsf2008.net/eng/node/53> accessed on 090108). For this purpose, a new website has been launched,¹ which is designed to be used for presenting, finding, joining, showing and connecting with actions.

The idea of a global day of action is not new; as mentioned in one of the articles included here ('Is the World Social Forum Approaching a Point of Crisis?'), there have been calls for such days of action since the 1970s, and more recently, it has been the PGA (People's Global Action) that has popularised this tactic and issued several calls for such days. But with the WSF also now deciding to adopt this approach – as, apparently, a complement to its normal vocabulary of an annual world meeting – we surely need to ask : How effective is this, as a mode of social and political action; and just what does an action like this add up to ?

This Directory : Following the Call it made on November 26 2007 for a global debate on the WSF's Global Day of Action in January 2008 and on the future of the Forum,² and in the spirit of critical engagement that informs all its work with respect to the WSF, and as a part of its work of providing public information on the WSF and other movements, CACIM has decided to prepare this **Directory on the Global Call to Action** - on the Global Day of Action and more generally on World Social Forum processes during and for 2008. We hope that having a Directory available will be able to help us all 'read' and assess the GDA *as a means of social and political action* and as the alternative and development that it is meant to be, to the Forum's normal vocabulary of a major annual gathering.

We at CACIM believe that the GDA is a significant experiment but that it needs to be closely and critically read. This Directory gives you a ready-reference compilation of what actions are being proposed in different parts of the world at this point in time (January 22-23 2008), so that you, as reader and as doer, can get an objective understanding of the action and accordingly make your assessment. That there are large numbers of actions taking place in Brazil is perhaps no surprise, nor the large numbers in France and Italy (given the record of activists and organisations from these countries traditionally taking part in the WSF); but why and how are there such large numbers of activities in Russia and the USA ? What does this mean ? And what does the *type* of actions taking place mean ? Do they add up to a struggle against neoliberalism, war, and exclusions ? **We invite and urge you** to consider putting your assessment down in writing and invite you to either send your assessment to us or post it directly on www.openspaceforum.net.

The actual Directory – chapter 6 in this document – is organised alphabetically by continent and within that, alphabetically by country; and within that, alphabetically by event title.

But please note that this composition is constantly changing, with more and more actions taking shape and being announced each day and each hour ! So the picture you will get from this Directory (and especially from this working draft – the second draft; the first preliminary one was issued on January 11 2008 for a GDA action by CACIM in New Delhi) is NOT any final picture. That picture will emerge only on that day itself – as is the case with any swarm, which is what the Global Day of Action is and is going to be.

Caveat : This is largely an unedited draft, mostly just a compilation of information that we have found on the web, with quick rough translations of some of the entries from French and Spanish using Google Translation to allow readers in English to have access to that information. This also means that we have not as yet had the time to check the language of all the entries, and where in some cases we are aware that the rendition in English from other languages is very crude. And at this stage, and with due apologies to those for whom this is not your language, this Directory has been prepared only in English.

Nevertheless, and despite all these limitations, we hope that you find this a useful document; and we would be very glad to have your feedback !

For further information, see www.openspaceforum.net and www.cacim.net;
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¹ www.wsf2008.net

² Jai Sen (on behalf of CACIM), November 2007c – 'Is the World Social Forum approaching a point of crisis ? A Note towards a Debate on the WSF's Global Day of Action in January 2008 and on The Future of The Forum'; posted on WSFDiscuss on November 26 2007 5:53:23 PM GMT+05:45; available @ <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=DebateGDAFoF>.

1

Call for Day(s) of Action and Mobilisation – January 26th 2008

(<http://dev.wsf2008.net/eng/node/12> accessed on 090108)

We are millions of women and men, organisations, networks, movements, trade unions
from all parts of the world,
we come from villages, regions, rural zones, urban centres,
we are of all ages, peoples, cultures, beliefs,
but we are united by the strong conviction that

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE!

With all the richness of our plurality and diversity and our alternatives and proposals,
we struggle against neo-liberalism, war, colonialism, racism and patriarchy which
produce violence, exploitation, exclusion, poverty, hunger and ecological disaster and
deprive people of human rights.

For many years we have been resisting and constructing innovative processes, new
cultures of organization and action from the local to the global, in particular within the
processes and Charter of Principle of the World Social Forum from which this call
emerges.

Aware of the need to set our own agenda and to increase the impact of these
thousands of expressions and manifestations, we are committed to strengthening the
solidarity and convergence amongst our struggles, campaigns, and constructions of
alternatives and alliances.

We commit ourselves to a week of action which will culminate in a Global Day of
Mobilisation and Action on January 26, 2008.

With our diversity which is our strength, we invite all men and women to undertake
throughout this week creative actions, activities, events and convergences focusing on
the issues and expressed in the ways they choose.

ACT TOGETHER FOR ANOTHER WORLD!

*Issued in Berlin, Germany, May 31 2007
See Appendix for Initial List of Signatories*

Why a Global Day of Action and Mobilisation?

<http://dev.wsf2008.net/fr/node/184> accessed on 090108

From the Zapatista uprising in 1995 and the Seattle demonstrations in 1999 appeared a worldwide alliance of
movements against neo-liberal globalisation, war, patriarchy, racism, colonialism and environmental disasters.

In first phase, this movement focused on big international mobilisations, such as Genoa against the G8 or Cancun against the WTO. The huge demonstrations against the war on Iraq, February 15th 2003 was the apogee of this phase.

During the last years the movements grew enormously, and was rooted in national struggles and local realities. Everywhere in the world, mobilisations appeared in different fields: student movements, workers issues, poverty and violence against the women, environment and climate change, indigenous people and migrants' rights, etc.

The main challenge for all of us, today, is to link those locals and national struggles with the worldwide goals, to give more strengths to our struggles, alternatives and campaigns, to enlarge our alliances.

That's the purpose of the 2008 Global Day of Action: act locally to change globally! Give visibility to our local struggles through a common day of action!

Why now, and why January 26th?

<http://dev.wsf2008.net/fr/node/626> accessed on 090108

The idea of a global day of action is not new. In the last years, several attempts tried to set up a day of action which could become a reference for this new "movement of movements" in analogy with May 1st for the Labour movement or March 8th for Women's day.

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has become the main space in which one all those movements meet and build alliances.

The World Social Forum is not an event. It is a process, which lives in the local, national, regional and thematic Forums, in the many and plural struggles, campaigns, alternatives for another world which are developing all over the planet.

The decision to hold the next WSF event in 2009, two years after the last one in Nairobi, helped the idea of a global worldwide mobilisation to emerge.

The date of 26th of January comes from the choice to organise the Global Day of Action in the same period of the Davos summit, to maintain the confrontation with this important neo-liberal gathering of the elites and let live the spirit of WSF which always took place at the end of January.

After the Global Day of Action 2008, an evaluation will be done in order to decide if we move the date for further mobilizations and events.

2

Is the World Social Forum approaching a point of crisis ?

A Note TOWARDS A DEBATE on the WSF's Global Day of Action in January 2008 and ON THE FUTURE OF THE FORUM

<http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=DebateGDAFoF>

Jai Sen, on behalf of CACIM, November 2007

This note proposes **a worldwide debate on two interrelated things** :

- **The totally new incarnation of 'the WSF'** that is coming up in January 2008, and –
- **The future of the Forum.**

We at CACIM believe that the WSF is not so much at a *strategic* 'crossroad' (a term and argument put forward by so many people over this past year or so, and which is therefore clearly something that is being sensed quite widely³) as at – or approaching – a fundamental *existential and conceptual* crossroad; in part because of the very particular formulation it has come up with for the 2008 edition of the WSF.

We therefore believe that it is vital, at this stage, to most seriously and critically discuss the Forum in terms of the design / formulation of the WSF world meeting in January 2008 and more generally, the future of the Forum.

We are therefore launching a debate on WSFDiscuss and **over these next 60 days**, between now (when this note is posted, November 26 2007) and the Global Day of Action that will mark WSF 2008, **invite you to join and contribute** to this debate *in whatever way/s you want and feel appropriate*. (For those who don't know of it, WSFDiscuss is an open and unmoderated forum on the World Social Forum and on related social and political movements and issues.) You can do this directly, by coming in on this listserve with your views (http://mail.openspaceforum.net/mailman/listinfo/worldsocialforum-discuss_openspaceforum.net) or by posting articles on OpenSpaceForum (www.openspaceforum.net; you can do this yourself or you can send them in to us and we will do that for you); or you can contribute to the debate 'indirectly' - by organising meetings and discussions around this subject, organising discussion on other listserves and/or webspaces, etc. All this will, we believe, swirl around and ultimately cross paths and/or converge, in this emerging worldwide web of constant movement that we all increasingly inhabit.

³ For instance : Betsy Bowman and Bob Stone, 2006 - 'The World Social Forum at the Crossroads in Caracas : The Solidarity Economy and Other Options', in the *GEO Newsletter* @ <http://www.geo.coop/WorldSocialForum200605.htm>; Walden Bello, May 2007 – 'World Social Forum at the Crossroads', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, May 4 2007. Source : Transnational Institute @ http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?act_id=16771; and : Hubert, July 2007 – 'The WSF at the crossroads'. Report to the Fourth International's International Committee Fourth International. In *International Viewpoint* - IV Online magazine : IV391 - July-August 2007, @ <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article1296>. And then there is the response to Bello by Chico Whitaker, a founder of the Forum : Chico Whitaker, May 2007 - 'The crossroads do not always close roads' ('Reflections in continuity to that of Walden Bello', translation of original article in Spanish, '*Las encrucijadas no siempre cierran caminos (Reflexión en continuidad a la de Walden Bello)*'); available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=496. Also, somewhat in response to Walden Bello's article but going much beyond this : Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2007 – 'The World Social Forum and the Global Left'. Available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=47.

*

The present context : A fundamentally new experiment

The WSF is attempting a fundamentally new experiment for the 2008 edition of its world meeting : In place of what has happened every year since it was founded in 2001 – a world meeting in a key location of the South -, and for which it is now so well known, it has this year called for a *Global Day of Action* on or around January 26 2008.⁴ On this day, or during the week around it, it has called on all those who are associated with it to *act* in favour of global social justice – and thereby, by everyone acting simultaneously, to make manifest a new kind of world meeting : Not a 'real' world *meeting*, as the WSF has traditionally been and been conceived as, but as a *worldwide*, so-called 'virtual' meeting of energies and ideas that will be generated and radiated by this simultaneous celebration and efflorescence all across the world.

It is not as if the form of an action like this is totally new; there have been some somewhat similar actions in history, such as the worldwide anti-war demonstrations on February 15 2003 involving an estimated 15 million people,⁵ or the call for Earth Day in 1971 and since then, as one manifestation among others, the dimming and shutting off of lights across several countries in the world on certain days in the year as statements of ecological concern for the planet.⁶ Similarly, Amnesty International has been a pioneer since the 1960s in initiating 'global actions' on a range of human rights issues, which in turn have often been taken up by others;⁷ and more recently, *awaaz.org* has become very successful in mobilising millions of signatures in support of certain issues.⁸

But this is, perhaps, the first time even that *such a complex, open-ended experiment is being tried* : Where people and organisations in many parts of the world – since the WSF has attracted people from perhaps most parts of the world, now – and working *in all kinds of fields*, with all their diverse perceptions, are being asked *to simultaneously manifest their concerns* – their protests, their hopes, their alternatives. In a way, as opposed to the somewhat mechanical, clock-like action of people converging in one place for the different editions of the World Social Forum that have taken place so far, this time the organisers of the WSF have called on what can be conceived of as the *cloud*, or swarm, of social movement and concern across the world – what some call 'the movement of movements' - to, just for a day, simultaneously show itself – and thereby fleetingly make the cloud manifest.

The call for this action is an extraordinary statement of organic hope and optimism in open-ended and emergent action.⁹ It is not a directive to action – which traditional movements issue to their constituents; the WSF has no power to do this (and thankfully, has not gone in that direction in taking this decision, even when under pressure to do so). It is something quite different. One could even say that *nothing like this has ever been tried before*; and that what the WSF is attempting is *a fundamental challenge, in the most positive sense, to all existing notions* of how (social

⁴ 50 Years is Enough! United States, AAI (Action Aid International), AAWC (Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign), ABONG (Associação Brasileira de ONGs), and ors, May 2007 (ongoing) – 'Call for Day of Action / Mobilisation, January 26th 2008'. www.wsf2008.net. Issued from the WSF International Council meeting, Berlin, Germany, May 31 2007.

⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_15,_2003_anti-war_protest.

⁶ See, for instance, <http://www.inhabitat.com/2007/06/18/lights-out-london-june-21st/>. There is going to be another such day soon after the WSF's GDA : "Show your support for starlight in 2008! Wherever in the world you are on **Saturday, March 29, 2008**, join with Americans in all 50 states as they turn off their nonessential lights in their hometowns between 8-9 p.m. – An event of *Lights Out America*, supported by IDA." (International Dark-Sky Association.) See : <http://www.darksky.org/>.

⁷ See, for instance, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA160222007>.

⁸ <http://www.avaaz.org/en/>.

⁹ For a discussion of emergent action including in relation to the WSF, see : Arturo Escobar, 2004 - 'Other Worlds Are (Already) Possible : Self-Organisation, Complexity, and Post-Capitalist Cultures', in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, eds, 2004 – *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires* (New Delhi : Viveka), pp 349-358. Available at http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html and @ <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=WSFChallengingEmpires2004>.

and political) 'movement' takes place and *should* take place, which is – or has mostly been, so far – linear, directed, clock-like, and therefore (in theory, at least) relatively predictable and controllable.

Over the life of the Forum since 2001, there have been several proposals that that Forum needs to be – if it is to be 'truly effective' in its aim of building another world – far more directed, far more 'clear', and far more committed to particular actions and programmes.¹⁰ In this year itself (2007), there have been several strong articles published that all, interestingly, conceive and portray the WSF to be at a 'crossroad', and urge all of us to be far 'clearer' in the direction we take and in what we do – and to *change* the Forum so that it becomes 'clearer' in its actions.¹¹ One of these articles, authored by a very influential and persuasive scholar-activist, Walden Bello, also specifically proposes that it is perhaps time for the Forum to pack up its tent and move on, and make way for other things to happen.

But note two things here : First, that each of these prescriptions follows the classical Cartesian and Newtonian logic of 'movement' – that the entity (here, the WSF) is moving in a specific direction, has reached a certain stage or point, and now must make a choice among classically defined directions and options ("left or right ?").

But - and second - what has 'the Forum' (here, in the shape of its organisers, the WSF International Council) done, in the face of this challenge ? It has decided, amazingly (but I believe also, based on its history, characteristically), to take the boldest gamble of all : To reject linear, clocklike dynamics entirely – and the choice of this way or that -, and to instead attempt to manifest itself as a cloud that it in many ways already is – with its constituents going in all directions, in apparently random ways ! But where there is, in fact profound order that makes up the apparent chaos that clouds seem to be – but 'order' of a different kind.

In many ways, this is a brilliant conception. On the one hand, it directly addresses the longstanding demand of those who have been proposing and demanding the space for more direct action (such as those who take part in the Assembly of Social Movements at each Forum)¹², and not only allows but urges all those want more 'clear' actions to go ahead and do this. (Since there no one 'meeting' to be attended, with its specific and somewhat particular format of workshops, etc, you can do what you like and whatever you think is politically and strategically most meaningful.) And on the other hand, it equally validates and invites quiet reflection in small circles – and everything in between.

In such a call, *all such actions are understood to be equally valid*, and to, in their own ways, generate and/or harness and radiate energy and movement that will light up the planet on that one, single, fateful, day, as an expression of shared concern, determination, and hope.¹³

But this, in a sense, is what the Forum has always done : Breaking new ground, constantly putting forward new ideas, new ways of doing things – and in the course of all this, itself organically learning and emerging – and, as I have argued elsewhere, emerging more as a cloud than as a clock.¹⁴

¹⁰ For a compilation of these proposals, in turn placed within a long history of social and political manifestos dating back to the Communist Manifesto and accompanied by discussions of several of these, see : Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar, compilers, with Patrick Bond and Peter Waterman, January 2007 – [A Political Programme for the World Social Forum ? Democracy, Substance, and Debate in the Bamako Appeal and the Global Justice Movements - A Reader](#). Published by CACIM (Critical Action : Centre in Movement), New Delhi, India, and University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society (CCS), Durban, South Africa. Soft copy available @ www.cacim.net and www.nu.ac.za/ccs.

¹¹ See, as above : Walden Bello, May 2007, and Hubert, July 2007. Also, though they don't use the term 'crossroads' : Alex Callinicos and Chris Nineham, July 2007 – 'At an impasse ? Anti-capitalism and the social forums today', in [International Socialism](#), Issue 115, July 2 2007, @ <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=337&issue=115>.

¹² For a compilation of the Calls from the Assembly of Social Movements, see Sen and Kumar, 2007, as above.

¹³ The fact that January 26 also happens to be the birthday for some of us in this world, including – as it happens - my colleague Peter Waterman and myself (co-editors of the *Challenging Empires* series), only makes it that much more fun !

¹⁴ See : Jai Sen, January 2007 (February 2006) - 'The World Social Forum as an emergent learning process', in [Futures](#) vol 39 (2007), pp 505-522. Available through subscription @ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.10.006>. Unedited original available @

It is not entirely clear (from the statements they have issued, and from articles that some of them have subsequently written) whether those who have conceived of this formulation are necessarily aware of this meaning of their call.¹⁵ But this does not matter; and at one level, this is precisely the nature of emergent action and of organic emergence – that those who act are not necessarily individually aware of the nature of their actions or of the larger pattern that all the various actions add up to make. Like bees and ants; and like human beings, in all cultures.

But the big question is : *Will this gamble work ?* And what, even if it does – in part or in whole -, is the social, political, and strategic significance and meaning of this action ? How will – how *should* - we assess it as well as its possible outcomes, in terms not merely of numbers or the range and diversity and actions but also of addressing the profound social, economic, political, and ecological injustice that rides so rampantly across the world ? For this is what the Forum is all about, and why it was conceived; and if it does not do this, then...

In other words, is this just one more effete action by elite thinkers who only talk – or is this real political action ?

THE FUTURE OF THE FORUM

In many senses, all these questions are intimately related to the future of the Forum. Even as the organisers of the Forum have gone out on such a limb – for it is a huge gamble – there are deep stirrings within its body and all around it, about its future; and about, literally, whether it should even exist.

There is, as already mentioned, the proposal before us all that it is perhaps time for the Forum to pack up and move on. (Though the essay in question, by Walden Bello, was perhaps meant not as a final statement but as a challenge to thought.)

There are also legion thinkers, writers, strategists, and policy makers who have, all along, questioned the value of this experiment that is called the World Social Forum. They may be mostly from outside the Forum but they do have influence.

There are also several today who argue the global social justice movement, of which the Forum is just one part (even if a very important part), has now had its day, and is now on a steep decline, imploding as it goes down. They in turn influence others, as such opinions tend to; a negative view of things, especially if well-argued, is often very contagious, sometimes at a subconscious level. But is this so ? Do you agree – is this your experience, and your understanding ?

There are also many who have taken part in the Forum and who are profoundly disillusioned by it – by the apparent disorganisation of it all; by the power struggles that are always taking place; by the traumatic effects of these power struggles and how all this seems to so completely contradict the very soul of the Forum; by the exclusions that are so rampant; by the commercialisation and the conceptual and material corruption that seems so widely to be there; and by the possibility that it does not seem to

http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=34. Also : Jai Sen, May 2007b – ‘Opening open space : Notes on the grammar and vocabulary of the concept of open space’. Discussion draft 4 modified, May 17 2007. http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=429. See also the notes for two Workshops I did at the Concordia Institute in Management and Community Development’s Summer Program in Montréal, Canada, during June 10-15 2007 (http://instdev.concordia.ca/summer_program/Programme_ete2007/index.html) : On *The Biology of Movements* (http://instdev.concordia.ca/summer_program/Programme_ete2007/2007-ExplorationSess/SessionG.html) and *What are social movements?* (http://instdev.concordia.ca/summer_program/Programme_ete2007/2007-PointDepart/Session25.html).

¹⁵ For instance, Chico Whitaker, nd, c.November 2007 – ‘Social Forums – Challenges and New Perspectives’, @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=505, draft for chapter in *Societies without Borders*, vol 3, no 1.

be going anywhere.¹⁶ No one has perhaps yet done a count of how many people (and maybe also organisations) have dropped out of the Forum process over these years, but this accounting should also be done, sometime.

But this dropout is real; and the issue is – **what needs to be done, to address this ?** What changes need to be brought about in the body and spirit of the Forum, in order to reverse this tendency ? And how can we bring about such changes ?

And then there are the funders who are always, necessarily, waiting in the wings, trying to sense whether this is where they should be placing their bets – but where there are now signs that they are dropping out, one by one.¹⁷ But where – to be blunt – the Forum has been, after all is said and done, conceived on an assumption of the generosity on the part of funders to fund not only the 'central' Forum (the secretariat, the committees, etc) but also all the hundreds and thousands of people who attend Fora across the world – many (though not all) of whom depend on grants of one kind or another. And if the funders back out, either or both from backing the central WSF and the participants, then the experiment that is the WSF as a whole is likely to implode. *Unless* we can start thinking of alternatives... But - *are there alternatives* to the approach that has been taken to the Forum so far ?

So this action, this call for a Global Day of Action (GDA), is a huge gamble. Because if it works, then everyone will be back in; but if doesn't, or works only in a very limited way, then... the ship is likely to develop massive leaks.

DEBATE !

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the Forum is therefore indeed at a crossroad – but not, perhaps, quite the kind that writers have so far portrayed it as being at. It is, rather, at an *existential and conceptual* crossroad – and although trying to understand and debate what is happening and what the possibilities are may not by itself influence things, it will certainly help - *by the very act of engagement* – in giving momentum, in giving life, in making choices.

We therefore, from CACIM, as administrators of this listserve, invite you to contribute to a debate on the 2008 Day of Action and on the F of the F : On the material as well as the social and political future/s of the Forum.

From our side, we are –

- Posting all related material on OpenSpaceForum (www.openspaceforum.net) (Note : Not @ our 'own' / the CACIM website, but @ OpenSpaceForum)
- Preparing a Reader on the Future of the Forum, comparable to the Reader we created along with the Centre for Civil Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, in January 2007, focussing on the growing tendency to define a political programme for the Forum;¹⁸ and where we will again post a soft copy of the Reader on our website (www.cacim.net) and on OpenSpaceForum

¹⁶ For a brilliant but deeply sobering discussion of the trauma of involvement in the Forum, see : Laura Sullivan, 2005 – 'Activism, Affect, and Abuse : Emotional Contexts and Consequences of the ESF Organizing Process 2004', in *ephemera, theory & politics in organization*, Vol 5, No 2, pp 344–369. URL : <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2sullivan.pdf>, accessed: 071107; and also : Emma Dowling, 2005 – 'The Ethics of Engagement Revisited : Remembering the ESF 2004', in *ephemera, theory & politics in organization*, Vol 5, No 2, pp 205–215. URL : <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2dowling.pdf>, accessed: 071107. It is interesting that it seems to be more women who write and reflect on these aspects of the experience; we men, I guess, just tough it out ? But see also my essay : Jai Sen, 2004c – 'The Long March to Another World : Reflections of a member of the WSF India Committee in 2002 on the first year of the World Social Forum process in India', in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, eds, 2004 – *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires* (New Delhi : Viveka), pp 293-311. Available at http://www.choike.org/documentos/wsf_s409_jai.pdf.

¹⁷ Imad Sabi and Clemens Wennekes (Oxfam-Novib), July 2007 – 'World Social Forum / Opportunity and Risk Appraisal / For the period 1 August 2007 – 30 April 2008'.

¹⁸ See : Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar, compilers, with Patrick Bond and Peter Waterman, January 2007, as above.

- Individually writing to invite all the most prominent and active thinkers and doers in or associated with the Forum, and others as well including those who feel its day is over, to come in on this debate
- Planning to organise specific actions on and around January 26 2008, as our contribution to the GDA
- WHAT ELSE do YOU think we can and should do ??? Please feel free to come in on WSFDiscuss with suggestions (to repeat, you can subscribe @ http://mail.openspaceforum.net/mailman/listinfo/worldsocialforum-discuss_openspaceforum.net)

AND WE INVITE YOU to now come in :

- With your reactions and comments on the above
- With articles, letters, poems, and other creations that can help us all understand the GDA
- With discussion on the F of the F
- By organising activities complementary to this call for debate, such as workshops, meetings, and/or debate on other listserves and websites on these issues
- By, on or around January 26, and aside from anything else you might be doing, also organising activities on the F of the F.
- And again : WHAT ELSE ?!

With warm greetings of hope -

Jai Sen, on behalf of CACIM, November 26 2007

3

World Social Forum at the Crossroads

Walden Bello

http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?act_id=16771

Foreign Policy in Focus, 4 May 2007

After a disappointing World Social Forum (WSF) in Nairobi, Walden Bello asks whether it is still the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement.

A new stage in the evolution of the global justice movement was reached with the inauguration of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001.

The WSF was the brainchild of social movements loosely associated with the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil. Strong support for the idea was given at an early stage by the ATTAC movement in France, key figures of which were connected with the newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*. In Asia, the Brazilian proposal, floated in June 2000, received the early enthusiastic endorsement of, among others, the research and advocacy institute Focus on the Global South based in Bangkok.

Porto Alegre was meant to be a counterpoint to "Davos," the annual event in a resort town in the Swiss Alps where the world's most powerful business and political figures congregated annually to spot and assess the latest trends in global affairs. Indeed, the highlight of the first WSF was a televised transcontinental debate between George Soros and other figures in Davos with representatives of social movements gathered in Porto Alegre.

The world of Davos was contrasted to the world of Porto Alegre, the world of the global rich with the world of the rest of humanity. It was this contrast that gave rise to the very resonant theme "Another world is possible."

There was another important symbolic dimension: while Seattle was the site of the first major victory of the transnational anti-corporate globalization movement -- the collapse amidst massive street protests of the third ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization -- Porto Alegre represented the transfer to the South of the center of gravity of that movement. Proclaimed as an "open space," the WSF became a magnet for global networks focused on different issues, from war to globalization to communalism to racism to gender oppression to alternatives. Regional versions of the WSF were spun off, the most important being the European Social Forum and the African Social Forum; and in scores of cities throughout the world, local social fora were held and institutionalized.

The Functions of the WSF

Since its establishment, the WSF has performed three critical functions for global civil society:

First, it represents a space -- both physical and temporal -- for this diverse movement to meet, network, and, quite simply, to feel and affirm itself.

Second, it is a retreat during which the movement gathers its energies and charts the directions of its continuing drive to confront and roll back the processes, institutions, and structures of global capitalism. Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*, underlined this function when she told a Porto Alegre audience in January 2002 that the need of the moment was "less civil society and more civil disobedience."

Third, the WSF provides a site and space for the movement to elaborate, discuss, and debate the vision, values, and institutions of an alternative world order built on a real community of interests. The WSF is,

WSF's Global Call to Action : A Directory

CACIM, New Delhi, India / www.cacim.net. Working draft, January 22 2008

indeed, a macrocosm of so many smaller but equally significant enterprises carried out throughout the world by millions who have told the reformists, the cynics, and the "realists" to move aside because, indeed, another world is possible...and necessary.

Direct Democracy in Action

The WSF and its many offspring are significant not only as sites of affirmation and debate but also as direct democracy in action. Agenda and meetings are planned with meticulous attention to democratic process. Through a combination of periodic face-to-face meetings and intense email and Internet contact in between, the WSF network was able to pull off events and arrive at consensus decisions. At times, this could be very time-consuming and also frustrating, and when you were part of an organizing effort involving hundreds of organizations, as we at Focus on the Global South were during the organizing of the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, it could be very frustrating indeed.

But this was direct democracy, and direct democracy was at its best at the WSF. One might say, parenthetically, that the direct democratic experiences of Seattle, Prague, Genoa, and the other big mobilizations of the decade were institutionalized in the WSF or Porto Alegre process.

The central principle of the organizing approach of the new movement is that getting to the desired objective is not worth it if the methods violate democratic process, if democratic goals are reached via authoritarian means. Perhaps Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas best expressed the organizing bias of the new movements: "The movement has no future if its future is military. If the EZLN [Zapatistas] perpetuates itself as an armed military structure, it is headed for failure. Failure as an alternative set of ideas, an alternative attitude to the world. The worst that could happen to it apart from that, would be for it to come to power and install itself there as a revolutionary army." The WSF shares this perspective.

What is interesting is that there has hardly been an attempt by any group or network to "take over" the WSF process. Quite a number of "old movement" groups participate in the WSF, including old-line "democratic centralist" parties as well as traditional social democratic parties affiliated with the Socialist International. Yet none of these has put much effort into steering the WSF towards more centralized or hierarchical modes of organizing. At the same time, despite their suspicion of political parties, the "new movements" never sought to exclude the parties and their affiliates from playing a significant role in the Forum. Indeed, the 2004 WSF in Mumbai was organized jointly by an unlikely coalition of social movements and Marxist Leninist parties, a set of actors that are not known for harmonious relations on the domestic front.

Perhaps a compelling reason for the *modus vivendi* of the old and new movements was the realization that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism and that the strength of the fledgling global movement lay in a strategy of decentralized networking that rested not on the doctrinal belief that one class was destined to lead the struggle but on the reality of the common marginalization of practically all subordinate classes, strata, and groups under the reign of global capital.

What Constitutes "Open Space"

The WSF has, however, not been exempt from criticism, even from its own ranks. One in particular appears to have merit. This is the charge that the WSF as an institution is unanchored in actual global political struggles, and this is turning it into an annual festival with limited social impact.

There is, in my view, a not insignificant truth to this. Many of the founders of the WSF have interpreted the "open space" concept in a liberal fashion, that is, for the WSF not to explicitly endorse any political position or particular struggle, though its constituent groups are free to do so.

Others have disagreed, saying the idea of an "open space" should be interpreted in a partisan fashion, as explicitly promoting some views over others and as openly taking sides in key global struggles. In this view, the WSF is under an illusion that it can stand above the fray, and this will lead to its becoming some sort of neutral forum, where discussion will increasingly be isolated from action. The energy of civil society networks derives from their being engaged in political struggles, say proponents of this perspective.

The reason that the WSF was so exciting in its early years was because of its affective impact: it provided an opportunity to recreate and reaffirm solidarity against injustice, against war, and for a world that was not subjected to the rule of empire and capital. The WSF's not taking a stand on the Iraq War, on the Palestine issue, and on the WTO is said to be making it less relevant and less inspiring to many of the networks it had brought together.

Caracas versus Nairobi

This is why the 6th WSF held in Caracas in January 2006 was so bracing and reinvigorating: it inserted some 50,000 delegates into the storm center of an ongoing struggle against empire, where they mingled with militant Venezuelans, mostly the poor, engaged in a process of social transformation, while observing other Venezuelans, mostly the elite and middle class, engaged in bitter opposition. Caracas was an exhilarating reality check.

This is also the reason why the Seventh WSF held in Nairobi was so disappointing, since its politics was so diluted and big business interests linked to the Kenyan ruling elite were so brazen in commercializing it. Even Petrobras, the Brazilian state corporation that is a leading exploiter of the natural resource wealth of Latin America, was busy trumpeting itself as a friend of the Forum. There was a strong sense of going backward rather than forward in Nairobi.

The WSF is at a crossroads. Hugo Chavez captured the essence of the conjuncture when he warned delegates in January 2006 about the danger of the WSF becoming simply a forum of ideas with no agenda for action. He told participants that they had no choice but to address the question of power: "We must have a strategy of 'counter-power.' We, the social movements and political movements, must be able to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level."

Developing a strategy of counter-power or counter-hegemony need not mean lapsing back into the old hierarchical and centralized modes of organizing characteristic of the old left. Such a strategy can, in fact, be best advanced through the multilevel and horizontal networking that the movements and organizations represented in the WSF have excelled in advancing their particular struggles. Articulating their struggles in action will mean forging a common strategy while drawing strength from and respecting diversity.

After the disappointment that was Nairobi, many long-standing participants in the Forum are asking themselves: Is the WSF still the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement? Or, having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?

4

Crossroads Do Not Always Close Roads

(Reflections in continuity to that of Walden Bello)

Chico Whitaker

Translation of original article in Spanish, '*Las encrucijadas no siempre cierran caminos (Reflexión en continuidad a la de Walden Bello)*'

Available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=496

"Is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?"

The minimum that one can say to Walden Bello's question at the end of his essay "The Forum at the Crossroads" is that it is daring... It has, however, the merit of saying directly and clearly what a certain number of members of the WSF International Council thinks, but do not say.

But we cannot stop reflecting on its instigating reasoning, especially when it affirms that the WSF has already "fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism." Or in quoting Hugo Chávez, when, at the 2006 Forum in Caracas, "he warned delegates ... about the danger of the WSF becoming simply a forum of ideas with no agenda for action," and said that now it is necessary to "have a strategy of 'counter-power,'" and "to move into spaces of power at the local, national, and regional level."

To begin it would be necessary to see what crossroads and therefore of what roads we are speaking. The WSF continues on a path that did not exist before, and one that is parallel to concrete resistance to neoliberalism and to the struggle to change the world. He has been open not to replace the other but rather to give it support, creating conditions so that those who resist and fight can be articulated and reinforced more and more.

These two paths do not have to cross. Being different they can continue on parallel paths. And if they are both necessary - and this would be the question to discuss - they should not eat each other, as Walden proposes. What they should do is to be related intensely and permanently, to become closer and closer, to mutually feed on each other, so that more and more people are at the same time on both, interconnecting themselves on one and acting on the other one. That is to say, be fighting at the same time that they are expanding their alliances and gathering more and more forces to go further and further in their fights.

If the path to change the world effectively and deeply is still very long, the support that can be given by the WSF to this struggle also has to continue for the long term. Truly, we do not arrive at any crossroad, but rather we have to face the necessity to clarify the horizons better, so that the two paths can continue forward.

The initial options in the WSF

It would be useful to remember that from the creation of the WSF there is a discussion that accompanies us, in all levels of reflection and decision over social forums, on the character of the WSF: is it a space or a movement? What Walden Bello, who seems to be among those who only see the WSF as a movement, proposes does not have therefore, in itself, anything new. The new thing - maybe the surprising thing - is the radicalness of his proposal. It does not imply that the WSF approaches the other path, remaining as a space, but rather simply that it disappears, when crossing the other one. As if the two paths could not coexist, as has happened during these past seven years, and now we should only continue on the road of action.

Before the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, its organizers were already in front of that disjunctive space-movement. To create a place of encounter or to propose, to all those who came to the Forum, concrete actions of resistance and transformation? That is to say, they had at their head a bifurcation that would define the character of the process that they began at that moment.

When organizing that first edition and when proposing its Charter of Principles – written starting from the lessons and discoveries of that edition - they have opted for the path that would give the WSF the character of a space. But they saw it as an instrument in the service of those who were in the action, that is to say, the existent movements. In other words, they have considered that the vocation of the WSF was to begin something that did not exist before, that would not be to change the world directly but rather to help those who fight to change the world.

An initiative with this objective was, for them, more necessary than the creation of a new movement, with its own political program and its immediate objectives and more long term, its militants and its specific actions defined by its directing instances. Such a movement could not even be considered "a movement of movements," because it would be always in competition with other movements looking to carry out the same objectives.

So they have organized the Forum primarily as an open encounter of the different types and levels of civil society organization - social movements, NGOs, unions. They wanted to put all of their actions in relationship. And not only among more directly political movements, in the struggle for power, but rather among all the types of action that we need to change the world effectively and deeply, even at the level of personal behaviors. It was necessary to reinforce and to multiply them, until the planetary level, to face a globalized capitalism, inside this general mobilization of citizens usually called "alterglobalisation."

The organizers of the first Forum saw it therefore as a global space - that could expand horizontally to all the horizons and all the levels of reality – where the different proposals and actions under way could be known, discussed, deepened, evaluated, questioned, articulated, with freedom and the widest possible participation, incubating new initiatives and movements. Without this whole exchange resulting in a "unique final document" of the Forum that sought to unify all its participants in light of options or specific

They established that an important step to be given to help the fight for another world was that the discussions in the "WSF space" were propositional, this is, they looked for alternatives for the real construction of "another world." And that the initiative to propose, in that space, debates – as in a forum of ideas - or articulations - heading for new actions - should be reserved specifically for civil society, a new political actor that was emerging in the world. This new actor had not until then an instrument of such a dimension and of this type so that their components, in their extreme diversity, were given to know some to the other ones and to define common objectives of struggle.

But the organizers of the first Forum had also considered an even more important question: we are many who fight to change the world but we are not able to build the union that could give us a great deal more force. That is to say that it was necessary to tempt to understand each other and to reinforce each other, instead dividing us recurrently, destroying us mutually.

They considered then that to build the union it was not enough to meet and to get to know each other. It was also necessary to experience new practices of political action, based on horizontal relationships, in which all respect each other in their diversity of methods and objectives, in that nobody was considered more important than anyone else, in a space without hierarchies nor main leaders, in which all could be heard instead of competing among themselves according to the capitalist logic. This would allow the discovery of convergences and the possibility of new alliances, inside the logic of networks that were already signed in the world as a more democratic way to organize ourselves. Little by little, in the Forums that have been organized after the first one, the construction of that union has become, in fact, the fundamental result to wait for them, or its role in the fight for the "other possible world," as a time of practical exercise of new types of relationships.

In this way the Forum, as an "open space," would serve precisely to build "new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation," as Walden Bello desires, that should become concrete not in the path of the Forum but rather in the path of action. Since - only limitation - they did not seek to

impose their decisions on the other participants of the Forum, neither to speak in the name of all of them, and less still to lead the Forum to take positions in the name of the Forum, linking them to all participants.

The organizers - or facilitators of the creation of the "WSF spaces," as they have called themselves, from the local level to the International Council, so that they were not considered "leaders" of a new "movement" - have continually discussed these options from 2001, during all of the encounters. And today we discuss in these same Forums "the future of the WSF" and its "open space" character. Many proposals that arose in the Forums and in the International Council are framed in fact in this discussion, which exists from the beginning of that process.

What happens with Walden Bello's proposal is that, in light of the fact that he seems to have opted for a Forum-movement, he could but question the possibility of a "space" to be "the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement." In fact, leaving aside the parallel road that was begun in 2001 and considering only one, or a mixture of both, what he proposes is that we stop the limitations that walking inside the WSF, as a space, imposes on us, so that we can continue ahead with more force - "to occupy spaces of power" - only on the path to action.

Current perspectives and necessities

Walden indicates however in his essay some of the positive effects of the WSF that in fact could not exist if it was not a space. So, he says "the WSF became a magnet for global networks focused on different issues, from war to globalization to communalism to racism to gender oppression to alternatives" permitting that civil society, in its diversity, "to meet, network, and, quite simply, to feel and affirm itself," as "a retreat during which the movement gathers its energies ." He considers that "the WSF provides a site and space for the movement to elaborate, discuss, and debate the vision, values, and institutions of an alternative world order built on a real community of interests." And considering that "perhaps a compelling reason for the *modus vivendi* of the old and new movements was the realization that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism," says "that the direct democratic experiences of Seattle, Prague, Genoa, and the other big mobilizations of the decade were institutionalized in the WSF or Porto Alegre process," providing "an opportunity to recreate and reaffirm solidarity against injustice, against war, and for a world that was not subjected to the rule of empire and capital." Also considering that "developing a strategy of counter-power or counter-hegemony need not mean lapsing back into the old hierarchical and centralized modes of organizing characteristic of the old left."

But when saying all this, his proposal to take up camp sounds as if he is saying that the WSF has been in fact a nice experience, but it is necessary to accept that it is over.

We know that all organizations - including the WSF - have to disappear one day, when their role was fulfilled. But have we already arrived at this moment? Are we at a point on the road at which it should stop? Maybe Walden, in this aspect, is being too optimistic, since I do not believe that he wants to delude himself.

Have all of the positive effects of the WSF to which Walden refers been brought to all the corners of the planet? In Asia, in the old socialist countries, in the Arab world, in China, in all of America, in all of Africa? Have all civil society organizations in all the countries of the world - or at least a significant number of them - had the opportunity to carry out the interconnections provided by the Forums? Have there been local forums in all the cities or regions of the world - or in a large number of them - so that this experience can be lived by those who cannot travel to world or continental encounters, or even national ones? Have they been created in all spaces so that civil society be reinforced and articulated to take its place as a new political actor? Does the experimentation of new political practices that overcome "the old hierarchical and centralized modes of organizing characteristic of the old left" has been made by all the organizations that fight against globalized capitalism? Have these new political practices effectively penetrated the organizations that come to participate in the Forums, changing them internally? Are all the movements already fully convinced that "that they needed one another in the struggle against global capitalism," and are able to build their union, instead of continuing to be divided and facing each other?

It is not the case to give examples – more so sad examples, in organizations that have participated in the creation of the WSF – showing that all this is still far from happening. In what concerns cultural changes, in the behaviors and in the practices of political action, there is no doubt that, under the ideological dominance of capitalism, we need maybe generations to see this happening. Why then to interrupt that process, or to finish that parallel road to action? That is in fact the question to put to Walden Bello, in response to the question at the end of his essay.

The Forum's communication with the world

But I worry that Walden Bello's proposal helps us less than our opponents. Even more so because it comes from within the WSF.

In fact, to say that the WSF is finished is exactly the same thing that the large international media says that attempts to decree the death of the WSF, so that the owners of the world do not have to worry any more. The members of the Communication Commission of the WSF International Council cites for us, as an example, what Spanish newspaper El País said in January of this year: "the WSF has disappeared from the radar screens."

That Commission points to what, in my opinion, is currently the biggest challenge of the WSF: communicating with the world. We can clamor with loud and multiple voices that "another world is possible," but there are still a very large number of those who do not believe it. Without any doubt, they are the largest majorities. And we have still not been able to do so that all that is proposed, discussed, intended, articulated, and done, starting or not in the Forums, arrives to the eyes and ears of those large majorities, as messages of hope.

In a recent meeting of the Communication Commission in Italy, I have been able to see more clearly the difference of evolution - one positive and one negative - of the two dynamics lived by the process of the WSF, toward inside and outside.

The dynamics toward the inside corresponds to its first challenge, to organize Forums that were indeed spaces of encounter, recognition and mutual learning, identification of convergences, launching new initiatives of resistance and transformation, feeding properly stated actions and building the union.

This dynamic has always been upward. Each Forum has taken advantage of the experiences of the previous one, looking to improve its methodology for a more complete realization of their objectives. From the first Forum that combined activities proposed from above, by their organizers, with self-organized activities from below, by their own participants, we arrived in 2005 at a completely self-organized Forum. On the other hand the Letter of Principles has been signed more and more. And many new articulations and actions, even on a planetary level, arose in the Forums and were consolidated, including the biggest for Peace in February 2003 that surprised everyone.

In the last Forum, in Nairobi - with fewer people for reasons that have already been well identified - the methodology gave important qualitative leaps, as with basing the inscription of activities not in theoretical topics but rather in transformative objectives, or when reserving the fourth working day to program concrete actions. Diverse organizational inadequacies, however, have not allowed the full use of these advances.

The little outward communication on the other hand made the inadequacies more visible than the advances in Nairobi, such as the new networks that have arisen in it, and this Forum has deserved very controversial evaluations - some frankly negative ones, as if there was not the obligation to defend the son of the attacks that he has suffered since he was born. Walden Bello has said in his essay that that Forum had been very "disappointing." Onyango Oloo, one of its organizers, ended up writing 24 pages of hard criticisms, beginning by saying that the Forum had been a "disaster." At the same time, among other positive analysis, Gustave Massiah, from France, without ignoring what was insufficient, titles his evaluation: "Nairobi 2007, an excellent World Social Forum."

The literature on this Forum is therefore varied. And as its International Council has not presented better information, after the Forum, on the character of the 2008 Forum and perspectives for 2009, many journalists have been able to say that the WSF process has lost much of its force.

But it is certain that the WSF is not so dead. I recently listened to Oloo's words, the one who wrote the 24-page criticism, in a round-table in Italy, relating the extremely positive outcomes of the Nairobi Forum that today appears in Kenya's society, in spite of all its inadequacies.

The best demonstration that the process is alive is, however, the multiplication of Regional and Local Forums. It is expanding more and more, as with the first United States Social Forum in June, and at the same time others in Québec, in Germany, in the countries of Maghreb in Mauritania, in Denmark, in Guatemala, in Brazil, in South America's Triple Border, among many others.

Therefore it can be said that the dynamics of the Forum toward the inside, that is to say, toward those who are fighting for another world, continues ascending nowadays. And the 2008 Forum, with its format of multiple simultaneous activities throughout the entire planet, in its diversity of types and topics, with one day of common visibility in the symbolic date of Davos, it can carry us to a very significant World Social Forum in January of 2009.

But the same thing has not passed with the outward dynamics, that rather has descended. It is interesting to note that the two dynamics (toward inside and toward outside) they were both in ascendance until the 2005 Forum: more and more people came to participate in the World Forums, as well as multiplying on the regional, national and local levels. And was in 2005, in which 150,000 people came to participate in the largest until then that the dynamic toward the outside began to lose force.

It is not for another reason that the Communication Commission of the International Council will present, in the next meeting of the CI, in Berlin, a plan of work towards the outside.

Communication with the world is not, however, a task of a Commission. It has to be assumed by all of the participants of the process. It is not only an issue of communication with journalists, essential channels to broadcast the information, but rather of multiple communication systems that could make possible that all people arrive at the certainty that "another world is possible." Even more, as many things are already being made - of resistance and effective transformation - that "other world" is already in construction. With those who act to change the reality having a powerful instrument to articulate and to unite more and more: the process of the World Social Forum.

In fact, in the face of this new challenge that the WSF faces, it would be good if we could say that now we will concentrate our efforts in the communication of the WSF process outside of it. But Walden Bello's essay awakens us to the fact that this is still not possible. At the same time that we will have to work so that the WSF communicates better with the world, it will be necessary to continue fighting so that its path does not get lost in unexpected crossroads.

May 23, 2007

5

Evaluating From The Inside, With Optimism Answering CACIM's call for an evaluation of the WSF

Chico Whitaker, January 2008

Dear Friends,

When I read the first question of the CACIM's proposition to evaluate the WSF ("Is the World Social Forum approaching a point of crisis?"),¹⁹ without seeing who was asking the question, I thought immediately: all right, here we have again somebody for whom the WSF must "fold up its tent".

Then I saw that it was Jai Sen who signed the text and I said: no, Jai is involved from the beginning in the WSF process, and I know he wants really to stimulate an "open debate, discussion, and serious thinking about the future of the Forum in general". I decided then to bring to it my ideas, hoping my English will be understandable (corrections will be welcome...).

* * *

We can evaluate the WSF as CACIM proposes with two different attitudes: wishing 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 of this already 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) next January the 26th, 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 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, "disconnect" now the IC of the rest of the WSF dynamics would be disastrous.

¹⁹ Jai Sen (on behalf of CACIM), November 2007 – 'Is the World Social Forum approaching a point of crisis ? A Note towards a Debate on the WSF's Global Day of Action in January 2008 and on The Future of The Forum'; posted on WSFDiscuss on November 26 2007 5:53:23 PM GMT+05:45; available @ <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=DebateGDAFoF>.

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.

* * *

Why it seems that many people (of our "side", naturally not among the neoliberalism partisans) do not "love" the WSF, even participating 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 The WSF was different of 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 till 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 specially 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 it 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 irrupted, already with big dimensions, in the sea of our political initiatives - where we were hardly trying to survive, but it was a sea we knew. 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, used to work 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 certain sympathy, as well as somehow inoffensive, so that could be accepted. Things became complicated when the Forum launched an also 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 uprising: the “civil society”- as citizens organized in social movements and other types of bodies – which was needing a space to express itself.

Later on we saw also that it would be good to feed the “animal”, because it could help the overcoming of 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 the 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, ignoring its power. 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.

Through out 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 of 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 loser 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.

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 of the 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.

Well, this 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 searching really 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 this 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 protestations.

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 of these 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 governments interferences, even and specially when they give logistical support; and the refusal of violence as a mean in the political action.

The growing dimensions of the Forums were an empirical evidence of the wisdom of these Principles – as well as the non respect of them, fully, can create problems, as it 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 to be covered, 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 grew.

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 anguish 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 all the world wishing to overcome the neoliberalism, they consider that it can be used to mobilize this people and many others to confront directly the dominant system. As if we had finally find the organisational issue to overcome the perplexity produced by the Berlin's Wall fall. Why not putting the WSF meetings at the service of concrete political actions, to realise as soon as possible all the changes having strategical priority, or weaken the system by exploring its contradictions?

This is the sense of "folding the tent": abandoning the realisation of innocuous world, regional and national meeting for interchanges, reflections, learning and even articulation of the civil society organisations and movements, to enter 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 do a bad choice interrupting the present WSF process. Civil society is still not, unhappily, so strong as political actor as we would like. 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 use to call "altermondialism". Parties and governments, as well as movements linked to them, can do what they must do, as well as they can support the civil society spaces to build their union.

If the WSF process continuity is ensured, as a tool to articulate civil society towards the action, the challenge will be in the road of the "real politics", where still we do not see clearly the good 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, till 150.000 participants in 2005 in Porto Alegre, pushed people to think also that their presence was also necessary to affirm the WSF force.

In fact the WSF organisers made a first "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 in addition to 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, in continuous expansion and articulations. Its meeting moments do not need to be as big as possible. The process became 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 we have already behind these meetings a civil society really 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 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 and many countries different organisations are working together, respecting their diversity, in very creative ways, to appear together the 26th January 2008. Most of these organisations will never be able to come to an world or even regional meeting. But they will be linked in an 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 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, in improving 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 followings, 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.

Among the WSF weakness, which solution we were not able till now to find is, for instance, how to stimulate and help the Forums participants to translate into new real articulated actions all the discoveries they do during the events (new questions, new convergences) and to deepen after the Forums, as intensively as possible, the articulations they built during it.

In this perspective, we tried in each Forum new tools – 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 instrument 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 the mobilization - the Social Movements Assembly – did not find till now the best way to do it. Some tensions appeared among 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 the way to make of their final assemblies a moment of more deep engagement of their participants in the propositions that are then 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 this results we cannot forget that the capitalism made many big steps to deepen the domination of the world, since the Berlin's Wall downfall, that goes much more far than the 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 and 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, its 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 a enormous effort to do, to awake more people. We took seven years to see a little clearer in the WSF process that the communication problem 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" serious problem is related with the WSF IC, and the disconnection we risk to have between those who "think" the WSF and those who "do" it, that I have already considered in this text. This disconnection uses 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 as leading directions and supporters, and separations between those who think and those who do things.

But the IC members are delegates of the organisations members of the IC. They come mostly from the directions 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 "basis" of our process it is practically impossible to participate of the IC meetings, as I said also 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 would have to 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 of the experience of the Forums already realised. But it can 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 no 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, although all these difficulties, to reinforce civil society and push for a new political culture, we have very much 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.

Chico Whitaker, January 9th, 2008