

Brief

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The World Social Forum at a crossroads

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The World Social Forum at a Crossroads

“The Forum is not deliberative in nature and time will not be wasted in discussing the commas in a final document. It will be the beginning of a process of thinking together at the world level (...). The intention is, by thinking together also on a ‘globalized’ basis, to make room – in greater depth each year – for the search for alternatives to the dominant model. In fact, World Social Forum 2001 will be only the first step, but an entirely new step, which is increasingly finding an echo the whole world over. Our hope is that this echo really will secure the beginning of a new period in the struggle against human submission to the interests of capital.”¹

INTRODUCTION

On 25 January 2001, more than 15,000 people gathered in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre to participate in the first World Social Forum (WSF). The event hit the headlines, momentarily overshadowing the World Economic Forum (WEF) concurrently held in Davos. The WSF was achieving its first objective: being a credible counterpoint to this annual meeting of world business and political leaders. Since then, the WSF has progressively evolved and gained strength: witness the exponential increase in the number of participants. It has prompted the organization of various activities and forums at the regional and national level.

However, for the last three years, doubts and criticisms have grown. Discussions have revolved around the functions and the efficacy of the WSF. Concretely, the anti-globalization movement² today faces two main challenges that could seriously compromise its usefulness and influence if they are not resolved. First, the capacity of the movement to become really ‘global’, i.e. to include people from all over the world, is being questioned. Second, there is the controversial question of the possible conversion of the WSF into a political movement with concrete strategies and policies. These issues came up again during the two forums this year, which were exceptionally held outside Brazil, in Bamako, Mali (19-23 January) and in Caracas, Venezuela (24-29 January).³ After these two meetings, it is still unclear which direction the movement will take in the future.

¹ Francisco Whitaker, “World Social Forum: origins and aims”, 2001. Available at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>

² Here, the term anti-globalization movement also refers to the people fighting for an alternative globalization (not against globalization *per se*).

³ A third forum will take place in Karachi, Pakistan from 23 to 28 March 2006.

THE WSF: A NEW STAGE IN THE RESISTANCE AGAINST NEO-LIBERALISM

Origins and Objectives

The WSF emerged from a slow process of mobilization that had gathered momentum since the mid-1990's, especially with the symbolic actions of the Zapatist movement in Mexico.⁴ This process progressively sped up and gained strength. The period preceding the creation of the WSF was marked by key events such as: the protests against the adoption of the Multilateral Agreement on Investments in 1998 and the mass demonstrations against the World Trade Organization at the 1999 Ministerial Conference in Seattle. The set up of the WSF was regarded as a new stage in the resistance to neo-liberal thought.

The idea of the Forum originated in Brazil. The initiative was put forward by a coalition of Brazilian non-governmental organizations (NGO), trade unions and charities, and was supported by European groups and personalities. It was originally envisaged as a counterpoint to the WEF held at the same time in Davos. More precisely, it was supposed to oppose the vision of the world, which the WEF reflected. The aim was to offer an alternative to neo-liberalism and capitalism. "Another world is possible", the slogan said. A broad range of people and groups participated in the Forum to support this idea: traditional social movements, institutionalized NGOs, religious groups, trade unions, local groups, etc. This variety of participants has brought about a considerable diversity of issues addressed by the WSF: the environment, international trade, poverty, war and peace, human rights, development issues, etc. As a result of this diversity, the atmosphere of the WSF stands in significant contrast with that at Davos. The WSF has come to resemble more a music festival than a traditional international meeting. It has often been called the "carnival of the oppressed".

The WSF should not be reduced to the global meeting that takes place every year, usually in Porto Alegre.⁵ As the Charter of Principles recalls, it is a "permanent process (...) which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it."⁶ Alongside the global gatherings, it has indeed generated other processes at the regional (e.g. European Social Forum), national and local levels. It is also important to note that it is not a formal institution "representing world civil society."⁷ It only possesses minimal structures to ensure its running: a secretariat and an International Council.⁸ It is fundamentally a "plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan"⁹ "open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective actions."¹⁰ It tries to facilitate the exchange of

⁴ In 1996, the Zapatist movement organized a meeting against neo-liberalism.

⁵ In 2004, the Forum took place in Mumbai, India.

⁶ Charter of Principles, point 2. See Appendix A.

⁷ Charter of Principles, point 5.

⁸ The International Council is composed of 129 organizations. It debates and decides on general political questions about the strategy and methodology of the WSF. The secretariat based in Brazil gives support to the International Council and to the organizing committees.

⁹ Charter of Principles, point 8.

¹⁰ Charter of Principles, point 1.

information, networking and coordination among civil society groups that seek and build alternatives to neo-liberalism. It hence constitutes an interesting combination of horizontal connectedness and autonomy.

A New Turn?

Since its first meeting in 2001, the number of participants in the WSF has constantly increased, from 15,000 people in 2001 to 155,000 in 2005. Yet, there has been a growing feeling of lassitude and dissatisfaction with the Forum. A twofold critique has developed, notably after the third WSF in 2003.

Firstly, many participants and observers have pointed to the incoherence and lack of homogeneity of the process. Some have particularly complained about the repetitiveness and the frequency of the WSF meetings. Others have deplored the preponderance of certain large elite-led organizations within the Forum and the widening gap between them and social movements. According to Fabienne Joerchel from Alliance Sud in Switzerland, this constitutes a serious challenge to the WSF, which should thus try hard to maintain the links between those two ‘types’ of civil society groups.¹¹ The disparity in the degree of mobilization from one country to the other is also subject to criticism.

The second set of questions relates to the very functions of the Forum and to its political dimension. For the last few years, there has been a “great deal of frustration over the fact that ‘nothing’ seems to be coming out of this enormous effort.”¹² Some people have started to question the usefulness of the Forum. In their opinion, it lacks clear goals and direction; it stagnates. Patrick Piro affirms that the WSF is experiencing a “crisis of growth.”¹³ This crisis results from the tension between “participative quantity” and “qualitative proposal”¹⁴. There is indeed a possible contradiction between the enlargement of the Forum and the necessity of progress. In reality, opinions greatly differ about the existence and the extent of this contradiction. There are basically three positions.

First, there are people who do not share the view that the anti-globalization movement is running out of steam. This is Fabienne Joerchel’s stance. She thinks that “the movement is not waning. It matures. It is taking roots and extending to other regions of the world. It is less spontaneous and better organized.”¹⁵

Other observers do not agree with this analysis. For Ignacio Ramonet, the movement has shown signs of weakness since 2005. The original objective of the Forum, i.e. to fight neo-liberal globalization, has progressively faded away. He claims that the Forum cannot “continue to only be an open space for the exchange and debate of ideas that does not

¹¹ “Le mouvement altermondialiste n’est ni dispersé, ni essoufflé”, *Le Temps*, 26 January 2006.

¹² Solana Larsen, “The World Social Forum in search of itself”, *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2006.

¹³ Patrick Piro, “Forum social mondial: la crise de croissance”, *Politis*, No 827, 2004.

¹⁴ “Vers Porto Alegre 2005, les prochains défis du FSM”, *Le Courrier*, 28 February 2004.

¹⁵ “Le mouvement altermondialiste n’est ni dispersé, ni essoufflé”, *Le Temps*, 26 January 2006.

lead to any concrete action” because it runs the risk of becoming “a sort of international associations fair, a global civil society show.”¹⁶ It is time to move on to a more “offensive” phase. Some concrete actions and common positions should emerge from the WSF. The Forum needs to convert into a global political force. Ignacio Ramonet favors a more centralized and output-oriented version of the Forum. This conception is supported by other leftist intellectuals and activists that have tried hard to influence the debate. The 12-point Porto Alegre Manifesto proposed at the time of the 2005 WSF by 19 intellectuals including, among others, Ignacio Ramonet, Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Frei Betto, reflected this point of view.¹⁷ With this document, the authors showed their willingness to reach a common program on which to base future policies. “It’s a synthesis of what the WSF is proposing globally”, Ignacio Ramonet said at the launch of the Manifesto, specifying that he was not speaking in the name of the whole WSF.¹⁸ Some participants go even further in their proposals. For example, Moussa Tchangari, Executive Director of Alternatives in Niger, thinks that the movement needs to be radicalized and politicized. One cannot limit it to a counter power. It has to have a strategy of power.¹⁹

Others have disapproved of such a radicalization of the movement. First, they believe it would be impossible to create a unique international political force because of the heterogeneity and the diversity of the movement. Pierre Khalfa, member of ATTAC France shared this opinion.²⁰ More importantly, they stress that it would be against the very spirit of the Forum and its open, plural and non-deliberative context. While they acknowledge that the WSF process has to evolve, they object to its politicization. According to Solana Larsen, “there are ways the Forum could become more effective without falling into the old power traps.” He argues that “by organizing the events of the Forum primarily by purpose instead of themes, the Forum process might help direct participants to create more new initiatives and campaigns that transcend global borders.”²¹ Kumi Naidoo, Secretary-General of Civicus: World Alliance for Citizen Participation in South Africa, concurs that a middle ground is possible. “Although it would be a mistake to straitjacket all World Social Forum delegates into an artificially-constructed consensus on policy propositions, it is important that the Forum corrects the myth that there are no major policy directions that most World Social Forum delegates share and advocate – both within and outside of the World Social Forum.” She adds that demands for change need to be formulated at a “broader level.”²² Francisco Whitaker’s analysis goes in the same direction.²³ He opposes the radical reading of the situation. “If the people are frustrated, it’s because they are expecting something they can never get from the Forum.”²⁴ The WSF is and should remain an open space for dialogue, “formulation of proposals, free

¹⁶ Ignacio Ramonet, “Caracas”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2006.

¹⁷ See Appendix B.

¹⁸ “Group of the 19: the Consensus of Porto Alegre”, *TerraViva Online*, 30 January 2005.

¹⁹ Moussa Tchangari, “Les défis du mouvement altermondialiste”, *Points de Repères*, Vol.5, No. 5, January 2005.

²⁰ Pierre Khalfa, “Nous sommes à un tournant”, *Le Courrier*, 16 October 2004.

²¹ Solana Larsen, “The World Social Forum in search of itself”, *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2006.

²² Kumi Naidoo, “Civil society must oppose, but also propose”, *TerraViva Online*, 20 January 2006.

²³ Francisco Whitaker is one of the Brazilian founders of the WSF.

²⁴ Solana Larsen, “The World Social Forum in search of itself”, *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2006.

exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective actions.”²⁵ In his opinion, the problem does not lie in the absence of concrete proposals but in their poor visibility, an issue that he thinks will have to be dealt with in the near future.

Various measures have been taken to address some of these criticisms. The issues of the frequency of meetings and of regional disparity were debated within the International Council through the years 2004-2005. It agreed on a compromise solution: to organize global meetings on a biennial basis complemented by decentralized forums to be held in various countries in between. For the 2006 session, the decision was to hold a polycentric WSF. Four events were scheduled: in Bamako, Mali (19-23 January), Caracas, Venezuela (23-29 January) and Karachi, Pakistan (23-28 March), and in Bangkok, Thailand. The last one was in the end cancelled. The idea of a polycentric forum emerged from the acknowledgment that the intensity of mobilizations was uneven. The organizers progressively came to realize that the social movement had to enlarge and visit other regions of the world. The main objective of such a polycentric process is to “develop regional dynamism”²⁶ and to bring the process nearer to the populations. All the same, the general purpose of the Forum remains unchanged, i.e. to facilitate contacts and exchanges between civil society groups. Many activists have welcomed the decentralization of the process. For Paolo Gilardi of a Swiss public service union, this draws the attention to the fact that problems differ from one region to another.²⁷ Nevertheless, not everybody is satisfied with the new formula. A Greenpeace representative finds it very costly for only limited results.²⁸ Others fear the Forum will lose its global dimension. Yet, as Paolo Gilardi rightly points out, “we’ll only be able to judge the success of the three-stage meeting once it’s all over and there is time to take stock of what has been achieved.”²⁹

To be sure, the polycentric nature of the process has had some virtues. In fact, the two forums of Bamako and Caracas have contributed to highlight the two fundamental questions posed to the anti-globalization movement today: Can the movement really acquire a global dimension? Should the movement convert into a political force?

FROM BAMAKO TO CARACAS

A Global and Homogeneous Movement?

As Philippe Bernard and Marie Delcas remark, the “juxtaposition of the Latin American and African realities” revealed the great disparity of social mobilization between the two continents.³⁰ The timidly emerging African civil societies contrast sharply with the well-

²⁵ Charter of Principles, point 1.

²⁶ Interview with Eric Toussaint, *IV Online Magazine*, November 2005.

²⁷ “Swiss welcome three-stage WSF”, *NZZ Online*, 23 January 2006.

²⁸ “Hugo Chavez, parrain contesté du Forum social”, *Le Monde*, 19 January 2006.

²⁹ “Swiss welcome three-stage WSF”, *NZZ Online*, 23 January 2006.

³⁰ Philippe Bernard and Marie Delcas, “L’altermondialisme face au pouvoir”, *Le Monde*, 7 February 2006.

structured and well-organized South American civil societies. This clearly shows that the anti-globalization movement has a long way to go to really become global.

Bamako

The Organizing Committee had great hopes for this Forum that was “of great importance for African People.” According to the organizers, it represented the first opportunity for African social movements to really discuss and harmonize their actions, to share experiences with other groups and to show the potential of African civil societies.³¹ Unfortunately, the results fall short of expectations.



Opening Ceremony

Only 15,000 to 20,000 people participated in the Forum whereas the organizers had hoped for 30,000. Participants represented various interests; women’s, youth and human rights organizations, trade unions, as well as peasant groups were present. However, they mainly came from West African countries. Only few Europeans and Americans had made the trip to Bamako; many had chosen to go to Caracas instead. This limited the diversity of participants and considerably reduced the intercontinental exchange that had been considered essential to the success of the meeting.

The disappointing turnout can partly be explained by the cost that the participation in such meetings induces. It was very expensive to reach Bamako, especially for African people. Low turnout also results from the split of the Forum into three different meetings

³¹ Official website of the Bamako Forum: [http://: www.fsmmali.org](http://www.fsmmali.org)

(in Mali, Venezuela and Pakistan). However, the main explanation is to be found in the weakness of the anti-globalization movement in Africa. “The anti-globalization movement is not deeply rooted in Africa. It is not only because most Africans can’t afford to attend the WSF (...) but also because African social movements are relatively weak”, says François Houtart, executive director of the Centre Tricontinental.³² For Ayesha Kayee from the South African Institute of International Affairs, the problem does not really come from the nonexistence of civil societies in African countries, but lies elsewhere. She argues that there have been “vibrant civil societies (in Africa) in the last decade, but they have not passed on enough information to strengthen local people. Information empowerment is lacking in Africa – and that’s where civil societies have failed.”³³ This lack of information amidst local populations was evident during the days that preceded the opening of the Forum. No great sense of enthusiasm emerged from the streets of Bamako. The majority of Malians did not know much about the Forum. Others “thought it was a meeting for Western people to which the local population was not invited.”³⁴

This context made some people wonder if the meeting served any purpose at all. Some, as Aliou Traoré, have questioned its usefulness. This teacher from Bamako bitterly noted: “before, it was politicians putting us to sleep with their words – now it’s those who question globalization.”³⁵ Yet, not all participants shared his skeptical view. Despite logistical problems³⁶, many considered the Forum successful. Margaret Da Costa from an Angolan human rights organization was pleased with her experience in Bamako: “People are talking, and networking: that is what is important – not our own little problems caused by attending a conference in a country with serious constraints.”³⁷ An Indian activist affirmed it was “a wonderful opportunity to network with groups, especially from West Africa.”³⁸ In fact, it was the first time so many African organizations participated in the WSF. Various topics were debated: land rights and the control over natural resources, the preservation of the ecosystem, new forms of imperialism, corruption among African elites and women’s issues. The question of immigration also attracted considerable debate. On 22 January, a protest against the expulsion of Africans from European countries was organized by the French organization No-Vox and followed by more than a thousand people.³⁹ The meeting between NGOs and migrants thus facilitated a fruitful exchange of views and experience on that topic. Finally, it should be noticed that two groups were particularly active during the Forum: youth and women’s organizations. Aminata Barry, President of a platform of NGOs in Mali, was delighted to see that “women that had never left their village came to share their experience with the world.”⁴⁰

³² “L’Afrique s’éveille à l’altermondialisme”, *Le Courrier*, 20 January 2006.

³³ “Will Bamako meeting tackle Africa’s sore spots?”, *International Press Service*, 10 January 2006.

³⁴ Geoffrey Pleyers, “Forum social mondial: Infos depuis Bamako”, 22 January 2006. Available at <http://www.indymedia.be>

³⁵ Solana Larsen, “The World Social Forum in search of itself”, *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2006.

³⁶ There was shortage of accommodation, as well as translation and transportation problems. The activities were spread throughout the city. Many activities were cancelled without notice.

³⁷ “Satisfaction with an Afrocentric meeting”, *International Press Service*, 24 January 2006.

³⁸ “World Social Forum: taking Mumbai forward”, *One World South Asia*, 20 January 2006.

³⁹ The protest was stopped by the police and military troops because unauthorized. The demonstrators agreed to disperse in return for the promise that they would be allowed to meet with the French Ambassador.

⁴⁰ “Amorce d’une mobilisation africaine à Bamako”, *Le Monde*, 23 January 2006.

To conclude, the Bamako Forum has highlighted the relative weakness of the anti-globalization movement in Africa compared to other continents. Yet, many observers, like Antonio Martins from ATTAC Brazil, think that it “represents a critical step for Africa, (...) which has now entered the horizontal process launched by the Forum.”⁴¹ It thus showed that the anti-globalization movement in Africa is emerging, though at a slow pace.

Caracas

The picture was quite different in Caracas. The Venezuelan city welcomed more than 75,000 participants at the Forum. Although this falls short of the organizers’ expectations (they were expecting 120,000 participants), the relatively good turnout revealed the vitality of the anti-globalization movement in America (North and South), which seemed to be lacking in Africa. One hundred and seventy nationalities were represented but the majority of the participants came from the American continent (mostly Colombians, Argentineans, Brazilians and Americans). There were, among others, environmentalists, indigenous people, human rights and women’s organizations, and trade unions. Two thousand five hundred organizations and 4,900 journalists were present. Many had come to get a sense of the Venezuelan experience – this country is now led by Hugo Chavez who claims to have his roots in the anti-globalization movement. They wanted to see how his ‘progressive’ ideas were being translated into concrete actions. For example, Zach Hurwitz from Global Exchange in the United States said that “the main purpose of the trip (was) to educate people to look deeper into the realities of Venezuela, so they (could) come back and fight the media blitz and put pressure on government.”⁴²



Day one of the World Social Forum Caracas

⁴¹ “Bamako a tenu son pari: un forum porteur d’espoir”, *Le Courrier*, 25 January 2006.

⁴² “US activists study Bolivarian Revolution”, *International Press Service*, 16 January 2006.

A large number of activities was organized throughout the city.⁴³ Six broad themes were to be discussed: 1) “Power, politics and the fight for social emancipation”; 2) “imperialist strategies and resistance by the people”; 3) “alternatives to predatory model of civilization”; 4) “diversities, identities, and cosmovisions in movement”; 5) “labor, exploitation and reproduction of life”; and 6) “communication, culture and education: democratizing dynamics and alternatives.” Most of the discussions focused on the first two. More specific topics were dealt with within particular workshops: land reforms, indigenous people’s rights, water issues, war and peace, international trade, etc. An emphasis was put on issues peculiar to South American countries.

Unsurprisingly, the Forum turned out to be directed mainly against the US Government – and not so much against Davos. Hugo Chavez’s influence was apparent. The anti-war demonstration that opened the meeting set the tone with people waving banners denouncing the war in Iraq and ‘American imperialism’. The presence of the American peace activist Cindy Sheehan also revealed the anti-Bush nature of the meeting.⁴⁴

Opinion is divided on the outcome of the Forum. To some participants, the WSF in Caracas marks a new stage in the development of the anti-globalization movement. According to Mary Lou Malig, “Caracas was a good tonic for a process that is in danger of losing its way.”⁴⁵ It has given a renewed impetus to the movement. Julio Fermin, one of the organizers, concurs that “the WSF process came out strengthened.”⁴⁶ Lilia Solano, Director of the human rights organization ‘Justice et Vie’, was particularly thrilled that the grassroots movements had gained strength. “It is not the big organizations financed by Western countries that decide on the WSF agenda anymore. It is now grassroots organizations”, she argues.⁴⁷ Some people found the debates very fruitful. However, others are less enthusiastic. Indeed, many were quite disappointed with the meeting. Though they acknowledge that it has allowed the creation of partnerships between South American organizations, they believe it failed to really take on a global dimension. Others have complained about the repetitiveness of the discussions and the lack of innovative ideas. Roberta Coutinho Chagas contrasts Caracas with Porto Alegre where, she thinks, the discussions were more numerous and the topics more diversified.⁴⁸ The weakness of the organization was also pointed out. In Eric Toussaint’s opinion (a member of the International Council), there has been a “setback” in terms of the organization of the WSF.⁴⁹

⁴³ Two thousand two hundred activities were planned. About 400 were cancelled without notice.

⁴⁴ Cindy Sheehan is an American peace activist. Her son was killed in Iraq. She gained international attention when she put her tent near George Bush’s ranch in Texas as a mark of protest.

⁴⁵ Mary Lou Malig, “6th World Social Forum in Caracas”, *Focus on the Global South*, 4 February 2006.

⁴⁶ “Le Forum social se termine à l’ombre de l’imposante stature de son hôte”, *Le Courrier*, 30 January 2006.

⁴⁷ Philippe Bernard and Marie Delcas, “L’altermondialisme face au pouvoir”, *Le Monde*, 7 February 2006.

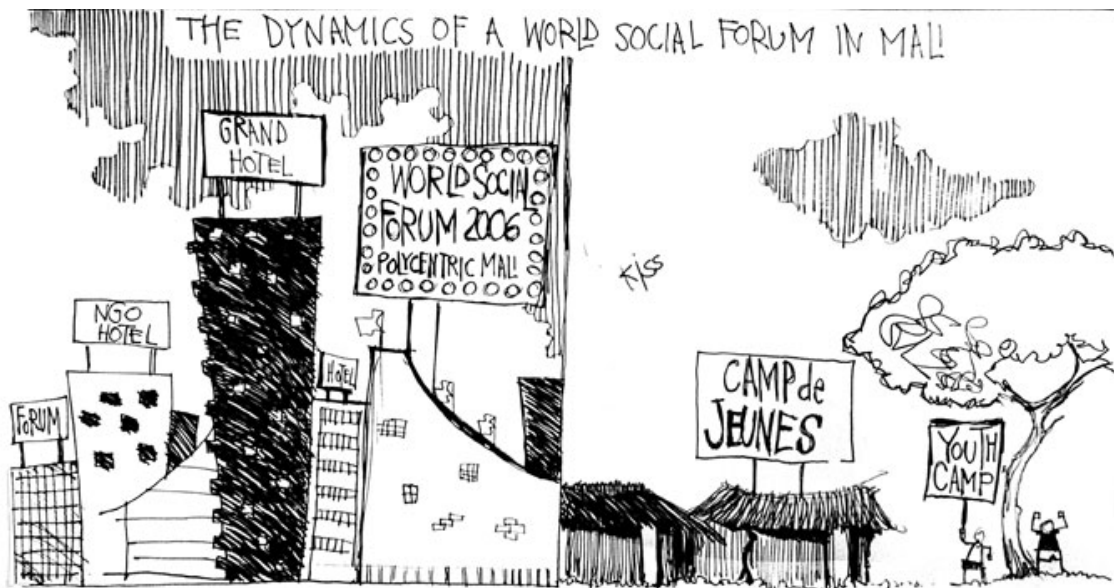
⁴⁸ “Le Forum social n’a pas mobilisé la communauté altermondialiste”, *Le Monde*, 30 January 2006.

⁴⁹ “Le Forum social se termine à l’ombre de l’imposante stature de son hôte”, *Le Courrier*, 30 January 2006.

The two WSFs in Bamako and Caracas clearly revealed disparity within the anti-globalization movement; it is deeply rooted in South America and only slowly emerging in Africa. Nevertheless, it is also evident from the comparison that the two forums have encountered some of the same problems and criticisms.

The WSF and Politics

Bamako



The issue of power and of the political dimension of the WSF process resurfaced in Bamako. Various workshops indirectly considered the relation of the anti-globalization movement to politics. However, the question was raised primarily during the conference that was held before the official opening of the Forum, on January 18. This conference was organized on the occasion of the anniversary of the Bandung Conference.⁵⁰ The general theme was “From the creation of a collective consciousness to the building of a collective actor.” It was sponsored by various leftist intellectuals and organizations – some of the same people that had supported the Porto Alegre Manifesto in 2005.⁵¹ Between 500 and 1,000 people attended this one-day meeting.

The idea of the conference was to have a debate about new forms of imperialism and to see how the spirit of Bandung could be revived. It was also “to prepare for a stronger political outcome of the WSF by moving beyond the idea to ‘just’ create a space for broad discussions.”⁵² More precisely, the network of personalities that initiated this event wanted to elaborate a common document with concrete strategies and actions. François Houtart explained its objective: “it is not the 5th Internationale, but the idea is to make

⁵⁰ In 1955, leaders from Third World countries gathered in Bandung, Indonesia to unite against Western and Soviet colonialism.

⁵¹ Among others, Ignacio Ramonet, Gus Massiah, Bernard Cassen, François Houtart and Samir Amin.

⁵² “World Social Forum 2006 opens in Bamako, Mali”, *Independent Media Centre*, 18 January 2006.

initiatives against neo-liberalism and capitalism more coherent.”⁵³ In a speech given at the conference, Ignacio Ramonet reaffirmed this point of view. For him, the anti-globalization movement should move to a new phase. He is convinced that the time has come to make concrete common proposals and to create a collective actor.⁵⁴

The outcome of this meeting was quite limited. Fabian Frenzel pointed to the sterility of many discussions and criticized their blinkered anti-American tone.⁵⁵ No formal decision was taken in the name of the Forum – thus respecting the principles of the WSF Charter. The conference only produced a ‘program of action’ called “the Call of Bamako”. This declaration, which was opened to signature, listed ten very broad proposals to be debated in the future.⁵⁶ As for the 2005 Manifesto, this initiative created controversy and a divide between its proponents and its opponents. Indeed, many participants rejected it because they refused the conversion of the Forum into a political organization. This was, for example, the case of Francisco Whitaker.

Philippe Bernard and Marie Delcas rightly note that the very abstract discussions held during this meeting contrasted with the ones heard in the streets of Bamako.⁵⁷ One had the impression that the debate about the politicization of the movement was essentially limited to the elites. In Bamako, the majority of delegates was far more interested in seizing this unique opportunity to meet people, debate ideas, share experiences and to discuss concrete actions. The gap between the concerns of the ‘elite’ of the movement and those of the ‘base’ was evident.

Caracas



*Opening march in Caracas
Radical women were everywhere at the march*

⁵³ “Bandung inspire les altermondialistes”, *Le Courrier*, 21 January 2006.

⁵⁴ Susan George, “De retour de Bamako”, 23 January 2006.

⁵⁵ “World Social Forum 2006 opens in Bamako, Mali”, *Independent Media Centre*, 18 January 2006.

⁵⁶ Available in French at: <http://wb.attac.be/Grain-no540-FSM-2006-BAMAKO.html>

⁵⁷ Philippe Bernard and Marie Delcas, “L’altermondialisme face au pouvoir”, *Le Monde*, 7 February 2006.

The question of the relation between the anti-globalization movement and politics takes on a particular dimension in the Latin American context where many ‘progressive’ leaders have recently come to power. As expected, it came back to the forefront at the WSF in Caracas.

The WSF, which was largely financed and supported by the Venezuelan Government, indeed ran the risk of a political takeover by the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. This danger was clearly perceived by the Venezuelan Organizing Committee, which felt it necessary to recall on the official website that the WSF was a “non-governmental and non-partisan space” and that the “presence of Chavez (would) not alter the WSF.”⁵⁸

Undoubtedly, therefore, the WSF in Caracas had a “political accent.”⁵⁹ Given the specific context in which it took place, this was hardly avoidable. It is undeniable that the WSF was marked by the presence of Hugo Chavez. His image literally permeated the event. During the opening anti-war demonstration, people waved pro-Chavez banners and shouted slogans praising their ‘hero’. In the streets, stalls offered T-shirts and posters printed with Hugo Chavez’s picture. The President was also physically present. He directly participated in both public and private meetings. He gave long speeches at two events, in which he explained his view on socialism and on the future of the anti-globalization movement.

Still, the fundamental question remains: did Hugo Chavez really take over the WSF? This question is meaningless according to Christophe Ventura from ATTAC France. He argues that “the movement is so diverse and composed of so many different entities” that a takeover is impossible.⁶⁰ In the same way, Mary Lou Malig objects to the allegations of manipulation by the Venezuelan President.⁶¹ Alfredo Valladao qualifies these assertions. In his opinion, WSFs have always been used for political purposes by the leaders hosting them. It was true for the Brazilian President Lula in Porto Alegre. It is true for Hugo Chavez in Caracas. This is to a degree inevitable as the WSF greatly depends on the financial and logistical support of the authorities of the organizing city. However, Alfredo Valladao thinks that this takeover has always been of a limited extent.⁶²

Other participants believe that the politicization of the social movement is actually a good thing. Indeed, for them, it is the only way the movement can be successful. Hugo Chavez himself supports this idea. The anti-globalization movement – and the WSF – needs to take on a political dimension. He warns the WSF about the risk of it “becoming simply a forum of ideas with no agenda for action.”⁶³ “It would be tragic”, he says, “if the WSF

⁵⁸ See: <http://www.forosocialmundial.org.ve>

⁵⁹ “World Social Forum with a political accent”, *El Universal*, 24 January 2006.

⁶⁰ “Et si c’était le Forum qui avait récupéré Chavez ?”, *Le Courrier*, 30 January 2006.

⁶¹ Mary Lou Malig, “6th World Social Forum in Caracas”, *Focus on the Global South*, 4 February 2006.

⁶² “Au Forum social mondial, les ‘français’ contre les ‘brésiliens’”, *Libération*, 26 January 2006.

⁶³ Mary Lou Malig, “6th World Social Forum in Caracas”, *Focus on the Global South*, 4 February 2006.

became merely folkloric or just another tourist gathering.”⁶⁴ The WSF should have a strategy of power. It should be a counter-power.

Yet, another group of people has criticized the over-politicization of the Caracas Forum. Cesario Ribero from Brazil regrets the interference of Hugo Chavez: “I am disappointed (...). Chavez took over the forum; it became very governmentalized and pushed aside the organizations.”⁶⁵ For many participants, the presence of Hugo Chavez limited the autonomy of the event. It affected the very identity of the Forum, which is conceived as a non-partisan and autonomous space. As a sign of protest, hundreds of activists decided to organize an Alternative Social Forum. They complained “that the main event has strayed from its freethinking leftist roots and serves as propaganda for President Hugo Chavez.”⁶⁶ “The objective is not to compete with the WSF but we want to continue as an ongoing space for exchange”, states Rafael Uzcategui one of the Alternative Social Forum organizers. Here the antagonism reappears between those who want the Forum to remain a debating space and those who want to convert it into a political force.

To conclude, it is interesting to note that a majority of participants still seem to find it crucial to maintain the autonomy of the movement. Even the International Assembly of Social Movements explicitly mentioned the importance of this principle in its final declaration.⁶⁷

“The Forum is facing a delicate moment, and will have to decide what course to take with caution, because it is in danger of losing much ground gained since 2001, when it emerged as a counter-current to the World Economic Forum.”⁶⁸

⁶⁴ “Politicisation versus purity debate comes to a head”, *Focus on the Global South*, 28 January 2006.

⁶⁵ “Social Forum ends in Caracas with Sheehan calling Bush a ‘terrorist’”, *Agence France Press*, 29 January 2006.

⁶⁶ “Activists seek end to poverty, Iraq war”, *Associated Press*, 25 January 2006.

⁶⁷ The International Assembly of Social Movements is composed of approximately 300 social movements. It was created in 2001. It is in favor of the adoption of common strategies by the anti-globalization movement. On the last day of the Forum, it adopted a document called “the Caracas Document” that gave the agenda of 2006 anti-globalization events.

⁶⁸ Plinio Arruda Sampaio, Brazilian activist, quoted in “Time to walk the talk”, *International Press service*, 26 January 2006

CONCLUSION

The WSFs in Bamako and Caracas have underscored the diversity and heterogeneity of the anti-globalization movement. More generally, they have highlighted the fundamental challenges faced by the WSF process today. Given the current state of the debates, it is doubtful that those issues will be addressed in the short-term. One can expect they will continue to 'haunt' the next two WSFs in Karachi (March 2006) and in Nairobi (January 2007).

The WSF is "in search of itself"⁶⁹ and it is hard to see what direction it will take. Present trend seems to be toward the widening of divergences within participants and toward growing lassitude. If this is confirmed, one might fear for the future coherence of the process.

⁶⁹ Solana Larsen, "The World Social Forum in search of itself", *Open Democracy*, 25 January 2006.

ANNEXE A: WORLD SOCIAL FORUM CHARTER OF PRINCIPLES

1. The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are 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 Mankind and between it and the Earth.
2. The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localized in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that "another world is possible", it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.
3. The World Social Forum is a world process. All the meetings that are held as part of this process have an international dimension.
4. The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests, with the complicity of national governments. They are designed to ensure that globalization in solidarity will prevail as a new stage in world history. This will respect universal human rights, and those of all citizens - men and women - of all nations and the environment and will rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples.
5. The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world, but intends neither to be a body representing world civil society.
6. The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body. It thus does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings, nor does it intend to constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the organizations and movements that participate in it.
7. Nonetheless, organizations or groups of organizations that participate in the Forum's meetings must be assured the right, during such meetings, to deliberate on declarations or actions they may decide on, whether singly or in coordination with other participants. The World Social Forum undertakes to circulate such decisions widely by the means at its disposal, without directing, hierarchizing, censoring or restricting them, but as deliberations of the organizations or groups of organizations that made the decisions.
8. The World Social Forum is a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context that, in a decentralized fashion, interrelates

organizations and movements engaged in concrete action at levels from the local to the international to built another world.

9. The World Social Forum will always be a forum open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging of the organizations and movements that decide to participate in it, as well as the diversity of genders, ethnicities, cultures, generations and physical capacities, providing they abide by this Charter of Principles. Neither party representations nor military organizations shall participate in the Forum. Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity.

10. The World Social Forum is opposed to all totalitarian and reductionist views of economy, development and history and to the use of violence as a means of social control by the State. It upholds respect for Human Rights, the practices of real democracy, participatory democracy, peaceful relations, in equality and solidarity, among people, ethnicities, genders and peoples, and condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another.

11. As a forum for debate, the World Social Forum is a movement of ideas that prompts reflection, and the transparent circulation of the results of that reflection, on the mechanisms and instruments of domination by capital, on means and actions to resist and overcome that domination, and on the alternatives proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and social inequality that the process of capitalist globalization with its racist, sexist and environmentally destructive dimensions is creating internationally and within countries.

12. As a framework for the exchange of experiences, the World Social Forum encourages understanding and mutual recognition among its participant organizations and movements, and places special value on the exchange among them, particularly on all that society is building to centre economic activity and political action on meeting the needs of people and respecting nature, in the present and for future generations.

13. As a context for interrelations, the World Social Forum seeks to strengthen and create new national and international links among organizations and movements of society, that - in both public and private life - will increase the capacity for non-violent social resistance to the process of dehumanization the world is undergoing and to the violence used by the State, and reinforce the humanizing measures being taken by the action of these movements and organizations.

14. The World Social Forum is a process that encourages its participant organizations and movements to situate their actions, from the local level to the national level and seeking active participation in international contexts, as issues of planetary citizenship, and to introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world in solidarity.

ANNEXE B: PORTO ALEGRE MANIFESTO

Twelve proposals for another possible world

Since the first World Social Forum took place on January 2001, the social forum phenomenon has extended itself to all continents, at both national and local levels. It has resulted in the emergence of a worldwide public space for citizenship and strife, and permitted the elaboration of political proposals as alternatives to the tyranny of neoliberal globalisation by financial markets and transnational corporations, with the imperialistic, military power of the United States as its armed exponent.

Thanks to its diversity and solidarity between its actors, and the social movements of which it is composed, the alternative global movement has become a force to be taken into consideration globally. Many of the innumerable proposals which have been put forward on the forums have been supported by many social movements worldwide. We, the signers of the Porto Alegre Manifesto, by no means pretend to speak in the name of the entire World Social Forum, but speak on a strictly personal basis.

We have identified twelve such proposals, which we believe, together, give sense and direction to the construction of another, different world. If they would be implemented, it would allow citizens to take back their own future. We therefore want to submit these fundamentals points to the scrutiny of actors and social movements of all countries. It will be them that, at all levels - worldwide, continentally, nationally and locally- will move forward and fight for these proposals to become reality.

Indeed, we have no illusions about the real commitment of governments and international institutions to spontaneously implement any of these proposals, even though they might claim to do so, out of opportunism.

Another different world must respect the rights for all human beings to live, by the implementations of new economic measures. Therefore, it's necessary to:

1. Cancel the external debt of southern countries, which has been already paid many times over, and which constitutes the privileged means of creditor states, local and international financial institutions, to keep the largest part of humanity under their control and sustain their misery. This measure needs to be complemented by the restitution of the gigantic sums which have been stolen by their corrupt leaders.
2. Implement international taxes on financial transactions (most notably the Tobin tax on speculative capital), on direct foreign investments, on consolidated profit from multinationals, on weapon trade and on activities accompanied by large greenhouse effect gas emissions. Such financial means, complemented by public development help which should imperatively be 0.7% of the GNP of rich countries, should be di-

rected towards fighting big epidemics (like AIDS), guarantee access to all humanity to clean water, housing, energy, health services and medication, education, and other social services.

3. Progressively dismantle all forms of fiscal, juridical and banking paradises, which do nothing more than facilitate organized crime, corruption, illegal trafficking of all kinds, fraud and fiscal evasion, and large illegal operations by large corporations and even governments. These fiscal paradises are not only limited to certain states, existing in areas of non-legality; they also exist within the legislation of developed countries. In a first instance, it would be advisable to strongly tax capital flux entering and leaving these 'paradises', as well as all establishments and actors, financial or otherwise, taking part in these gigantic transactions.

4. All inhabitants of this planet must have the right to be employed, to social protection and retirement/pension, respecting equal rights between men and women. This should be an imperative of all public polity systems, both national and international.

5. Promote all forms of equitable trade, reject all free-trade agreements and laws proposed by the World Trade Organization, and putting in motion mechanisms allowing a progressive upward equalisation of social and environmental norms (as defined under the conventions by the International Labour Organization) on the production of goods and services. Education, health, social services and culture should be excluded from the scope of the General Agreement on Trades and Services (GATS) by the WTO.

The convention on cultural diversity, currently being negotiated at UNESCO, must result in cultural rights and politics of public cultural support to explicitly prevail over commercial rights.

6. Guarantee the right to for all countries to alimentary sovereignty and security by promoting peasant, rural agriculture. This means a total suppression of all subventions to the export of agricultural products, mainly by the USA and the European Union, and the ability to tax imports to avoid dumping practices. In the same way, every country or group of countries must be able to decide in a sovereign way to forbid the production and import of genetically modified organism, meant for consumption.

7. Forbid all type of patenting of knowledge on living beings (human, animal or vegetal) as well as any privatization of common goods for humanity, particularly water.

B. Another possible world must sustain community life in peace and justice, for all humanity. Therefore is it necessary to:

8. Fight by means of public policies against all kinds of discrimination, sexism, xenophobia, antisemitism and racism. Fully recognize the political, cultural and economic rights (including the access to natural resources) of indigenous populations.

9. Take urgent steps to end the destruction of the environment and the threat of severe climate changes due to the greenhouse effect, resulting from the proliferation of individual transportation and the excessive use of non-renewable energy sources. Start with the execution of an alternative development model, based on the sparing/efficient use of energy, and a democratic control of natural resources, most notably potable water, on a global scale.

10. Demand the dismantling of all foreign military bases and the removal of troops on all countries, except when operating under explicit mandate of the United Nations. Specially for Iraq and Palestina.

C. Another possible world must promote democracy from the neighbouring level to the global level. Therefore, it's necessary to:

11. Guarantee the right to access information and the right to inform, for/by all citizens, by legislation which should:

- a) End the concentration of media under gigantic communication groups
- b) Guarantee the autonomy of journalists relative to actionnaires
- c) Favour the development of non-profit press, alternative media and community networks.

Respecting these right implies setting up a system of checks and balances for citizens, in particular national and international media observation institutions.

12. Reform and deeply democratize international institutions by making sure human, economic, social and cultural rights prevail, as stipulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This implies incorporating the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization into the decision-making mechanism and systems of the United Nations. In case of persisting violation by the USA of international law, transfer the United Nations headquarters outside New York, to another country, preferably southern.

Porto Alegre, January 29 2005