

TOWARDS 'ANOTHER WORLD'?

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Voices of the South on Globalization is a monthly newsletter intended to inspire a meaningful North-South Dialogue by raising awareness for global interdependences and by offering a forum for voices from the South in the globalization debate. Each edition will present short analyses or commentaries from a Southern perspective on one particular issue of the globalization process.

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FROM PORTO ALEGRE TO BELÉM

The World Social Forum (WSF) is at the crossroads. Initiated in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, one of the most important cultural, political and economic centres of Southern Brazil, the Forum was conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The city of Porto Alegre hosted the Forum three times before Mumbai provided the venue for the fourth in 2005. It returned to Porto Alegre in 2006. The sixth World Social Forum was "polycentric"; it took place in January 2006 in Caracas (Venezuela) and Bamako (Mali), and in March 2006, in Karachi (Pakistan). The Forum in Pakistan was delayed because of the Kashmir earthquake that had occurred in the area. The seventh WSF took place last year in Nairobi (Kenya).

A Global Day of Action replaced the Forum this year. It mobilised thousands of autonomous NGOs and civil society organisations around the world. Whether the global call for action was a success or a failure is a subject of debate among leading organisers of the event. More fundamental is that inside the WSF there are different groups, some advocating a more centralised, coherent approach.

Roberto Savio, probably among the best informed WSF insiders who has been its international committee since it was created, opines that "there are themes, like the stupidity of war, the need for social justice, defence of the environment, the need for a stronger gender agenda, respect for indigenous people, and many others, in which there is unanimity". It would make a great impact, he said in an interview with the IPS news agency, if the movement would push and campaign for the creation of those platforms to influence governments and institutions. However, there are many who think that the political institutions are part of the problem, because they are becoming less and less inclusive of citizens, and more and more mechanisms of power and self-reference.

This debate has not concluded yet and will continue for a long time. In his view, "the fact that we cannot push for platforms, because we must remain only an open space, dilutes our power of implementation in a world where there is an urgent need for a change". But the WSF is made by many views, and we must accept those others, he said.

Cândido Grzybowski, director of iBase (Brazil) and member of the WSF's International Committee is more optimistic. WSF 2009 that will take place in Belém in the Amazon (involving nine South American countries) will inaugurate a new stage for the Forum, he told IPS news agency's independent publication TerraViva.

"Following the experience of the Global Day of Action," he said, "we will have the opportunity to produce an event showing different aspects of a growing and militant planetary citizenship. We still haven't defined certain internal methodological issues, of how to organise a debate so centred within multicultural dimensions and differing perspectives. However, the WSF will find a way through, as we've shown by the experience of past events. We've never held a WSF identical to any of its predecessors; we are always innovating - and we're going to innovate once more, I'm very sure of that." ☑

MORE THOUGHTS THAN ACTION ON ACTION DAY

By Alejandro Kirk, Managing Editor TerraViva

Unlike the massive gatherings of past years, the World Social Forum's *Global Day of Action* on Jan. 26 did not fill avenues around the world nor did it make headlines on any major progressive media outlet, let alone the mainstream.

Yet, to Cândido Grzybowski of Brazil, one of the most influential leaders of the movement, the initiative was successful because people in 72 countries of the world were once again able to "re-establish citizenry".

Walden Bello, a sociologist and activist from the Philippines, said: "The Global Day of Action was something new, so I am not surprised that the mobilisations were not that big. But it was still impressive that they were carried out in scores of cities at a time that there was no immediate emergency, like responding to another invasion, on the agenda."

"There were some really big successes, like the big mobilization in Mexico City. Let us examine our experiences in this first Global Day of Action and learn from them. Practice will make perfect," he added in an e-mail interview with TerraViva, a newspaper published by IPS.

With "tens of thousands" participating around the country, Brazil, the WSF's birthplace in 2001, became once again its core. In Rio de Janeiro the Day of Action coincided with - and somehow competed against - the city's world famous Carnival.

With the sole exceptions of Mexico, however, no other local Action Day rivalled Brazil's numbers. From Italy, with activists devastated by the fall of their center-left Government and the prospect of a triumphal comeback of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, to Atlanta in the United States, only the most committed showed up to reaffirm the WSF's central motto: "Another World is Possible".

Paradoxically, the human-rights crisis in Gaza prompted Palestinian non-governmental groups to shy away from staging a Day of Action, wary that political factions manipulate their initiatives.

Weak in numbers, the Day of Action was competing for media room against an extraordinarily "newsy" day: Barack Obama's victory at the Democratic primary in South Carolina, the massive flight of besieged Palestinians from Gaza, lethal repression in Kenya, the death of former Indonesian dictator Suharto, the arrest of Jérôme Kerviel, the French "rogue trader" who made a bank lose seven billion euros and is now credited with saving the world from recession.

The question many in the WSF are asking themselves is whether headlines make a difference, for if it did, the WSF would be by now doomed. News agendas are not neutral and creating a new one might well be a central subject for the countries of the South.

The WSF has been so far unable to repeat the astounding public relations successes of 2002 and 2003 when the world's top media sent their correspondents to Porto Alegre to find out what this "rival" to the World Economic Forum in Davos was about.

Most analysts explain such impact as the result of the WSF's novelty and its unexpected huge number of participants. Most now maintain that the current scarce media attention is due to factors ranging from deliberate censorship to the lack of "attractions," by way of celebrities and intellectual stars that the Forum's International Committee decided not to promote.

Celebrities such as rock star Bono now prefer to attend Davos, where they think they can influence the powers that-be than associate themselves with a loose event where they are deliberately kept within the crowd.

Commercial media stay far away from the WSF's thoughtful debates on a battery of development issues, and show up only when "anti-globalisation" demonstrators angrily throw stones to McDonald's outlets and battle riot police. Underlying this issue is the WSF's excruciating internal debate about itself. Born rather as an intellectual exercise to contest Davos' arrogance with alternative proposals to the 1990's "end-of-history" ideology, it became a global political phenomenon whose direction nobody seems able to foresee, let alone direct.

Walden Bello is the most radical advocate of a total overhaul of the World Social Forum, complete with a strategy and a stand on each one of the world's main challenges.

For mobilisations to succeed, "there should have been common resonant slogans and demands, like demanding withdrawal of the U.S. and Coalition forces from Iraq, respect for the rights of immigrants, opposition to the Doha Round, and an end to Zionist oppression of the Palestinian people," Bello said. "Refusing to take stands on the grounds that these will drive away some people is a sure way of ultimately making a movement irrelevant."

Nevertheless, economist Pedro Stédile, one of the WSF founders and the main ideologist of Brazil's influential Landless Workers Movement, sees such proposal as an "illusion". "The WSF is a space for debate, exchange and reflection. It would be an illusion, idealistic, to believe that it would be possible to adopt more practical resolutions or ideologically united platforms. This could disperse energies and leave us locked in mere ideological (internal) struggles," he says. "Our bet is for the WSF to be a fair of ideas," Stédile said. ☑

DIVERSITY -- A BIRTHRIGHT WAITING TO BE RECOGNISED

By Mario Osava

For many people, the World Social Forum's influence and effect is waning, perhaps because it has out-paced public opinion and the dominant political processes, but not the real needs of the times, which require complex and urgent solutions.

Maintaining an open, unstructured space for debates and coordination in order to strengthen civil society, in a "horizontal" manner and without adopting resolutions, while rejecting the temptation to become a movement with a direct influence on power, are hallmarks of the difference between the WSF and the current political culture. But they are creating internal conflicts within the WSF.

Organising in non-hierarchical networks, and recognising and respecting diversity in all its dimensions, are part of the democracy of the future that WSF theorists propose to build from within its own internal practices. But they are little understood by the general public, or by many WSF participants themselves.

Climate change may be an opportunity for the Forum to recover the initial impact it made on public opinion, now often attributed to the "novelty" value of its early meetings, the first of which was held in Porto Alegre.

The climate change crisis adds new appeal to the WSF slogan, "Another World Is Possible," and emphasises the "...And Necessary" which many activists add to it. The present level of knowledge about climate change indicates that change is inevitable, and may be positive if humanity decides to act, or catastrophic if inertia prevails.

The issue creates opportunities to identify the values and structures that are leading the world towards disaster, and reinforces the need to change them, according to one of the founders of the WSF, Francisco Whitaker of Brazil, in a recent article defending open debate in the forum against proposals to change it into an instrument of action.

Climate and environmental issues will be central to the world conference which the WSF will hold again in 2009, after the decentralised demonstrations promoted this year on the Global Day of Action. It is no coincidence that the Amazon jungle region was chosen as the venue for the next WSF, which will be held in Belém.

But the Forum's basic difficulties ultimately derive from the enormity of the challenge of coordinating and mobilising global civil society for "another world," one that is safer and more just.

The world has become more complex, with diverse interest groups and cultures that are no longer content to submit to domination. Women, black people, indigenous people, the mentally ill, people with disabilities, young people and homosexuals are all demanding their place in society and in decision-making processes.

National states "are no use" to indigenous peoples, "because they are based on a non-indigenous model that is incapable of understanding diversity," said Lisio Lili, a member of the Terena people and of the Inter-Tribal Committee, adding a new complication, hardly considered as yet, to the world the WSF activists wish to transform.

The Terena, who number some 20,000 to 30,000 people, live in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, close to the Pantanal wetlands shared between Brazil and Bolivia. They are regarded as virtually assimilated into the dominant society, because many of them have moved to cities and attended university. But lately they have reaffirmed their identity, and even reclaimed their ancestral lands, occupied by ranchers.

Over the border in Bolivia, now headed by indigenous President Evo Morales, representatives of indigenous peoples in Andean and Central American countries, as well as Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, met in La Paz from Jan. 15 to 17. They issued a declaration in support of building "plurinational states" in which they would have an active voice and recognition of their territories, rights, customs and community economies.

The indigenous peoples' reaffirmation of their rights implies rebellion against the national states that were imposed throughout the Americas by means of extermination policies. It will be interesting to monitor and analyse in detail how an indigenous president in Bolivia manages that state, where plurinational and regional models of autonomy are in conflict.

In 1500, the indigenous population of Brazil was estimated at five million, but had fallen to a few hundred thousand a decade ago. Since then it has begun growing again. The state now has an ambiguous attitude towards its indigenous citizens. The constitution recognises indigenous rights and there are welfare policies -- distribution of basic food products, for example -- but there are permanent obstacles to the recovery of their traditional lands.

In Mato Grosso do Sul, the Kaiowá branch of the Guaraní peoples are facing administrative and legal delays, and even the murder of their leaders, in their efforts to recover lands along the border with Paraguay, where many of their kin live. In fact, an "institutional globalisation" has taken place which obliges all people to organise themselves as national states. Such an imposition is also at the root of the vast tragedies in Africa. This is related to diversity of a kind that has not yet been discussed even by the WSF. ☑

TAKING STANDS IS VITAL

Interview with Walden Bello, Executive Director of Focus on the Global South

The WSF as an "open space" idea can either be implemented in a liberal direction or in a committed, progressive direction. Being partisan on issues that advance justice, equality, and democracy should be seen as a virtue, not as a stance to be shunned.

Q: How do you see the future and shape of the WSF?

A: Taking stands on key issues like U.S. aggression in the Middle East, Zionist oppression of the Palestinian people, and the poverty-creating neo-liberal paradigm is vital to making the WSF vibrant and relevant. Refusing to take stands on the grounds that these will drive away some people is a sure way of ultimately making a movement irrelevant. The movements that advance and grow are those that are not afraid to take stands on the vital issues of our times.

I am not talking about staking stands on 1001 issues but on the core issues of our times, maybe about six or seven of them. The WSF as an "open space" idea can either be implemented in a liberal direction or in a committed, progressive direction. Being partisan on issues that advance justice, equality, and democracy should be seen as a virtue, not as a stance to be shunned.

Q: What is the right balance between political action in the form of political parties and within the social movement? How can this have an impact in Southeast Asia?

A: Political parties continue to be important vehicles for political transformation. However, social movements should see parties as one vehicle for transformation and should use other institutions and agencies, like unions and NGOs, to push their agenda.

The vanguardist or Leninist party subordinating civil society organizations and movements to one overriding objective -- seizing political power -- is obsolete and dysfunctional. Transformation must take place along several fronts, and the process is just as important as the goal.

Social movements must push for the institutionalisation of mechanisms, such as national assemblies of social movements that could serve as a check on the bureaucracy, parliament, and other political bodies. Civil society should aggressively serve as a counterweight to both the state and the private sector. Civil society is a key actor in reinvigorating the democratic revolution, which has ossified into electoralism in most countries in the North and South.

Q: Since the first WSF, Latin America has experienced a spectacular shift to the left, in different shapes. Do you think this process will lead to meaningful change or will it eventually turn rightwards?

A: Well, I think the WSF emerged from a process in Latin America where social movements were, as in Brazil, shaking up the traditional institutions of political repre-

sentation. The Workers' Party in Brazil was, in its initial stages, an energetic hybrid of political party and social movement that captured the allegiance and imagination of the masses.

However, a new stage was reached when the Workers' Party became a serious contender for power. It became "professionalized" and began attracting middle class elements that were interested only in limited social transformation. Then, in the last few years, during the Lula presidency, the state and the ancien regime have captured the Workers' Party.

At the same time, in Venezuela, a charismatic relationship between a populist president and the urban poor became the vehicle for change in a country with weak social movements.

Then in Bolivia and Ecuador, we had social movements with strong roots in the indigenous people achieve power electorally and begin, unlike in Brazil, a transformation of the state.

Q: How do these developments reflect in the WSF?

A: All of these developments have been reflected in the WSF, where, as in the continent from which it sprang, there are contending political tendencies in the ranks of the people. You have trends that are closer to the People's Party tendency and others that are closer to the Venezuelan and Bolivian tendency.

What is important though is that the WSF and its associated movements remain independent of governments and parties and maintain their ability to criticize governments when they conciliate the US and neo-liberalism, like Brazil under Lula, and lend critical support to governments like those of Venezuela and Bolivia.

They should be able to express broad support for an initiative like the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) while criticizing some of its more controversial plans like the building of oil and gas pipelines from Venezuela to Argentina, which would create ecological problems and destabilize indigenous peoples.

Provided they remain independent of one another, social movements like the WSF and the new progressive governments can develop a healthy, positive relationship. ☑

Walden Bello was interviewed by Alejandro Kirk for IPS news agency's independent publication TerraViva that was published on the occasion of the Global Day of Action. The complete issue is available at: www.ipsterraviva.net/TV/wsf2008

'MILITARISM AND PARANOIA WILL STRIKE WSF'

Interview with Boaventura de Sousa Santos

The movement against capitalism, injustice and oppression requires a strong convergence of social organisations that have fully accepted their differences, says sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who predicts serious future difficulties for WSF meetings.

Due to "the rise of militarism and paranoia over security, in future many activists will be prevented from travelling to other countries by being denied entry visas, because a new kind of criminalisation of social protest is under way," De Sousa Santos says in an interview with IPS correspondent Mario de Queiroz.

De Sousa Santos is a professor at the University of Coimbra, in Portugal. He earned his doctorate in sociology of law at the Yale University in the U.S., and is a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In his prominent public life he has vigorously defended strong social and civic movements as essential for participative democracy. He is a distinguished active participant in the WSF.

Q: Do you think it was a good idea not to hold an international meeting of the WSF this year, but to hold local events all over the world, with the risk that poses in terms of dispersion, loss of identity and loss of momentum in the coming years?

A: Every political movement must walk at the pace of its activists and leaders. In the case of the WSF, what really counts today is the pace of the organisations and movements that are part of the International Committee (IC).

For years, some organisations have been saying that the energy they invest in organising and preparing for the WSF prevents them from working properly on their specific action agendas, and that it would be preferable to hold a global WSF meeting every two years. This option has now achieved consensus in the IC.

I see it above all as an opportunity for new forms of growth and for reinventing its identity. . . . I would personally be satisfied if a decision to hold the WSF every other year were to arise from the evaluation of this year's Global Day of Action. I foresee new short-term challenges, and I believe that the Forum, while maintaining its basic philosophy, may be about to go through deeper changes.

Q: What changes, for example?

A: Coordinating with other trans-national initiatives, and learning from and with them. I'm thinking of the vast popular education movement, and "The Other Campaign" by the Mexican Zapatistas (EZLN), both of which have enormous virtues. The specific case of "The Other Campaign" is a new way of building counter-hegemony, a new political culture and a new policy on alliances.

Q: The IC is divided over whether to carry on as an open forum, or to formally assume political positions in the name of the WSF, based on consensus.

A: All new political initiatives face two specific difficulties: the language they use belongs more to the past than to the future, even when the reverse appears to be true; and its participants are divided between their past experience and the will to innovate. The novelty of the WSF is its new way of organising with the goal of creating a new political culture. That's why I would define the WSF as a counter-hegemonic form of globalisation rather than as alter-globalisation -- as implied by its rallying call, "Another world is possible". It is as much a cultural struggle as a political one, in which the cultural component has a much slower maturing process than the political one.

The logic of these two struggles sometimes clash. The idea of the WSF as a space for meeting and debate leans more towards the cultural dimension, and that of the WSF as an activist movement tends to emphasise the political dimension. But the polarisation of these two ideas is an inheritance of past thinking on the left -- a thinking which doesn't comprehend that open space is itself a movement -- a space on the move.

Q: Isn't there a problem of representation and even democracy within the WSF?

A: The WSF is not a parliament, nor a political party. Our concepts of representation and democracy are based on organisations. Debates about this issue would be very useful, as we would then be thinking about new ways of political organising and legitimacy. For instance, how would a world parliament or a global political party function? The historical role of the WSF is to open that debate, and not to conclude it. The problem with the WSF is that it isn't truly global in terms of its participants, nor in its themes or its political orientations. But a future combination of the WSF as a meeting and as a Global Day of Action might be a promising solution.

Q: Given the dramatic nature of climate change, might the WSF be obliged to change its priorities, its central themes?

A: Without a doubt. What's important is that the WSF should not deal with the topic in the style of Al Gore -- that is, as a problem that has nothing to do with global capitalism, with indigenous and peasant movements, with the issues of land and water, with discrimination against women. Debates about climate change are the new frontier in building counter-hegemony. ☑

'ANOTHER AFRICA HAS ALREADY BEGUN'

By Zarina Geloo

"Another Africa is not just possible, it has already begun. Africans have begun to articulate their issues in their own way, and to seek their own solutions to their own problems."

Coming out of anyone else's mouth, these words would have sounded kitschy, but they came out of the toothless mouth of a woman farmer, riddled with arthritis, aided by a walking stick, who has never attended a World Social Forum, but is an active member of the Zimbabwe Social Forum.

The ASF forum represents more than 300 African social movements from a broad spectrum of organizations; academic, social, development, religious and youth groups, from about 45 countries.

Speaking through an interpreter, Andrina Maseko, an organic peasant farmer who belongs to the green movement in Zimbabwe, says the AFS has grown from its rather 'head bashing sloganeering' in 2002, to a cohesive continental movement which is able to articulate its problems and engage global institutions to call for a rethinking of structural adjustment programmes, and denounce the inequities of the world's trading system.

"Who would have thought in 2001 after the first WSF", that an African country would host a WSF, a global event", she said of the last WSF in Nairobi, Kenya. "This all signifies an awakening in Africa and a definite shift of power into African hands." Its not just about Africa hosting the WSF that excites Maseko, it's the way the AFS has taken control of the problems Africa is facing and is taking the lead in finding solutions to those problems.

"It carries more weight when the AFS talks about the under-development in developing countries, than having concerned international NGOs articulating our issues. We are able to harmonise our strategies and policies when we network as Africans, than when we meet at global forums where our issues though discussed, but without the same passion or sense of urgency."

For Sara Longwe, a long time gender activist and member of Civicus and Femnet, it's the bigger picture provided by the AFS that she greatly admires. Having attended most WSFs, including the regional Southern African Forum, she says civil society groups and NGOs in Africa can see a picture beyond their own issues and relate them to the continents problems. For example gender based violence was being tackled differently in countries, when the networking began through the AFS, organisations were able to pool strategies resources and fight the scourge on a regional and continental basis.

"There is solidarity in the AFS. African civil society, through interacting with each other, have been able to look beyond themselves and their issues and look at issues in the bigger African picture."

Rather tongue in cheek, she adds that the ASF has also sorted out the chaff from the wheat. "We had some NGOs that touted themselves as champions of certain issues. They wanted to be considered the experts. The interactions and networking within the ASF cut them down to size as they realized there were others who had gone far ahead and they did not know everything and were actually lagging behind. This was a big learning experience for many."

Longwe says NGOs and civil society groups have become a lot savvier in their engagement with powerful entities. The ASF before was mostly about making 'global noise' which was good as it was a big voice that was needed at the time. "The big guns (World Economic Forum), were having their meetings and we needed to drown out their voices." But the AFS has moved to another level, where the meetings are not global or continental, but local through the national forums which feed into the ASF.

This means that thinking is global but the action is local. "Countries take the macro and apply it to the micro, this has been the major success of the AFS. With the experience and support gained from the AFS, civil society is able to take lessons learnt at the global level, at the WSF, to influence lower levels in their localities.

The most powerful thing for Longwe is that the ASF has become a process not an event. People spend the whole year working on the Forum and its objectives as a continuum rather than something which they commemorate once a year.

Toufik Ben Abdalla of the ASF secretariat says the Forum, was created to reach an African perspective on globalisation, and attain a consensus on what issues Africa could raise at the WSF. In this the ASF has made strides towards better organization and coordination among Africa's social movements on basic development issues. There are three main ideals the ASF strikes to achieve; autonomy for the continent, independence from the international financial institutions and to work on African unity by consolidating citizenship. These are still a long way coming, but the fact that civil society has begun to talk about them and sees them as issues to be resolved is a step forward.

"The ASF has become the force that enables civil society to work together in a way it has never done before, It has taken the issues affecting the continent and put them into a perspective which all countries can identify with."

While there is optimism there is still some negativity surrounding the ASF. Trevor Ngwane a South African academic says the African Forum process is still largely dominated by NGOs rather than grass roots movement. He feels the people on the ground have been left out of the process which is supposedly meant for them. ☑