
THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM : ARENA OR ACTOR ?

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The concentration of power in transnational and global institutions was one of the most significant social processes of the 20th century. Nevertheless, democratic theory and practice have remained very nation-state-centred. Although there were some examples of cosmopolitan democratic thinking and transnational democratic practice throughout the century (such as the seventies project of the New International Economic Order, NIEO), most analysts and politicians simply ignored them.

The solidarity movements related to earlier attempts to democratise global power, such as the NIEO project, saw the problem in terms of inter-state relations. Many of the early 2000s movements perceive the world in a less state-centric manner. Instead of asking that a particular Third World state be given more decision-making power in global affairs, today's activists may ask for more power to the civil society groups that confront both government and corporate power. This trend holds promises. However, in order to imagine and construct institutional features of alternative futures, we may need political structures that 'civil society', as it is generally conceived, is unlikely to deliver.

In recent years, and in the wake of Seattle, we have observed the emergence of an increasing number of arenas that attract civil society organisations and citizens to express concern about capitalist globalisation. The arenas are varied, in terms of both political orientation and organisational design. The spectacular demonstrations from Okinawa to Gothenburg and Genoa have received ample media coverage and become prominent models of critical civil society organising. In most of them the main focus has been on defensive measures, being *against* something. Many of the most visible civil society gatherings have been explicitly, and often antagonistically, related to summits and well-known events of the global elite. But, more significantly, and even if with much less media attention, organised protests around these issues have been taking place in the more peripheral parts of our world.

From Anti-Davos to Porto Alegre : The Local Roots of a Global Event

In Brazil, a concrete initiative for a worldwide civil society event emerged in early 2000 with some connection to the first anti-Davos initiatives. The first formulation of the idea is generally attributed to Oded Grajew, co-ordinator of the Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES).¹ In February 2000, Bernard Cassen, Chair of

ATTAC and Director of Le Monde Diplomatique, met with Grajew and Francisco Whitaker of the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission (CBJP) in Paris to discuss the possibility of organising such a forum. Their discussion produced three central ideas for the Forum. First, it should be held in the South, and more concretely, in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. Second, the name should be World Social Forum, changing only one key word from the name of a common adversary, the World Economic Forum (WEF). Third, it should be organised during the same dates as the WEF, partially because this symbolism was considered attractive for the media.²

Soon after, eight Brazilian organisations decided to form an Organising Committee (OC) for the event. In March 2000, they secured the support of the municipal government of Porto Alegre and the state government of Rio Grande do Sul, both controlled at the time by the Workers Party (PT — Partido dos Trabalhadores).³ Initially it was the Mayor of Porto Alegre, Raul Pont, who received the idea with great enthusiasm. Soon, the state government led by Governor Olivio Dutra decided to dedicate plenty of time and effort into the WSF process.⁴ Thus the WSF, unlike many transnational events in other localities, has strong local roots. During Brazil's military rule, the city was a centre of resistance with energetic neighbourhood associations.⁵ Founded in 1980, the PT — with one of its main strongholds in Porto Alegre — has deep roots in these associations, trade unions, catholic organisations, women's movements and many other parts of vibrant Brazilian civil society.⁶

Porto Alegre was a smart choice for hosting the WSF, as both municipal and state governments were willing to allocate significant material and human resources to the event. In commercial terms most locals consider the WSF a good deal, but in ideological terms not everyone agrees.

Who Governs ?

Naomi Klein characterised the organisational structure of the first WSF as “so opaque that it was nearly impossible to figure out how decisions were made”.⁷ Others have raised similar critical remarks in all the annual editions of the WSF's main event.

The formal decision-making power of the WSF process has been mainly in the hands of the Organising Committee consisting of the Central Trade Union Confederation (CUT — Central Única dos Trabalhadores), the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST — Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) and six smaller Brazilian civil society organisations.⁸ In terms of affiliates, there is a huge difference between the two big ones and the others. The disparity in resources should not be exaggerated, however. Even if much smaller, some of the participating NGOs may have better access to financial resources than the MST. The role of IBASE, a Rio-based socially oriented research institute, has been particularly important in fund-raising for the WSF.

The other main organ of the WSF, the International Council (IC), was founded in São Paulo in June 2001. According to Cândido Grzybowski, director of IBASE, the idea to create an international council emerged in Porto Alegre on the last day of the first WSF. During the following months, the OC made a list of organisations that were then invited to the founding meeting in São Paulo. As of February 2003, the Council consisted of 113 organisations, though in practice many of them have not actively participated in the process. This number includes the eight members of the OC. Most

IC members come from the Americas and Western Europe though many also have activities in other parts of the world. Organisations based in Asia and Africa include the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (ARENA), Environment et Développement du Tiers-Monde (ENDA), and the Palestinian NGO Network. Apart from the formal members, there are 15 observer organisations, mostly the representatives of regional and thematic social forums in various parts of the world.

The division of labour between the IC and the Brazilian Organising Committee has been ambiguous from the outset. The IC has gained increasing importance on paper and, to a lesser extent, in practice. It is fair to emphasise its role in giving international legitimacy to the Brazilian organisers,⁹ though this has not been its only role. Until now, the system has worked relatively well, making decisions through what some of the Brazilian organisers call *construção*, constructing them in a critical debate and sometimes, laborious consensus building. The IC is not supposed to have mechanisms for disputing representation, nor for voting.¹⁰ The only time there has been a vote was when in its first meeting it had to be decided whether the following meeting of the IC would take place somewhere in Europe or in Dakar. The overwhelming majority voted for Dakar. When it was decided that the WSF process in 2004 would take place in India, the linkage between the IC and the organisers both in Brazil and India became more complex.

The selection of the founding members of the IC, mostly through invitations by the Organising Committee, was reasonably easy when the overall process was still known to only relatively few networks. In the future, when there will be more groups interested in joining the IC, more explicit selection procedures will have to be established. There are indications that the question of fair representation will become more controversial in the WSF process. For the moment, initial procedures for selecting new members have been drafted at the meeting of the WSF International Council in June 2003 in Miami. They were not as detailed as some proposals, but some of the points were nevertheless contentious. For example, it was proposed that only those organisations that are active in several countries can be members of the IC, but this proposal was finally not accepted.

During 2002–2003, the Brazilian Organising Committee was renamed ‘The Secretariat’. The ambiguity of the relationship with the IC has, however, not been totally overcome. In some documents the renamed body is (self-)defined as ‘Secretariat of the International Council’, whereas others refer to as ‘Secretariat of the World Social Forum’. In practice, the terms Organising Committee and Secretariat have often been used synonymously.

Before the January 2004 Forum in Mumbai, Indian organisations will constitute a new Organising Committee. It is less clear what the composition and the role of the Organising Committee and the Secretariat will be in the next two years. As the WSF is not an event but a process with many events, it may become an established practice that these different events have particular organising committees, and the WSF as a whole has some co-ordinating body that, apart from the International Council, could be the Secretariat. At the same time, there are criticisms of the role of both the IC and the Brazilian Secretariat.

The decision to hold WSF 4 in India was made simultaneously with the decision to organise the WSF 5 again in Porto Alegre. Various IC members repeatedly expressed fears that if the WSF leaves Porto Alegre indefinitely, and the next venues do not meet

the expectations, the whole process might die out. Fixing the place of the 2005 Forum, therefore, was seen as protection against the unlikely eventuality that the process to move the Forum to India was to result in a catastrophe.

In the WSF, organisers have been reluctant to explore ways in which cyberspace could be used in organising more formal decision-making processes. Peter Waterman has argued insightfully and provocatively that the WSF “uses the media, culture and cyberspace but it does not *think* of itself in primarily cultural / communicational terms, nor does it *live* fully within this increasingly central and infinitely expanding universe”.¹¹ There has been a slightly more conscious use of cyberspace in the various projects of the governing bodies of the WSF after the meeting of the IC in Miami in June 2003.

From the Porto Alegre Events : Towards a Transnational Process

For many, the increasing numbers of participants have been one of the most important assets of the WSF. The 2003 Forum had over 20,000 official delegates and roughly 100,000 participants. Some, however, feel that this has led to an atomisation of dialogue.¹² Michael Albert (this volume) proposes that the main annual WSF gathering should be attended by 5–10,000 people — delegates from the major regional Forums of the world.

The main mechanism for the globalisation of the Forum has been the regional and thematic Forums that are being held in various parts of the world. The more visible among these have been the Thematic Forum on neoliberalism in Argentina in August 2002, the European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence, Italy, in November 2002, the Asian Social Forum (ASF) in Hyderabad, India, in January 2003, and the Thematic Forum on Drugs, Human Rights and Democracy in Cartagena, Colombia, in June 2003. These Forums have formed part of the semi-official calendar maintained by the Organising Committee / Secretariat and the IC.

Sometimes there have been tensions between the WSF governance bodies and the organisers of the other Forums. For example, at the August 2002 IC meeting in Bangkok, the Brazilians, invoking the Charter of Principles, strongly opposed the plans of Italian organisers to invite political parties to formally take part in the ESF. The Italian delegates responded by accusing the Brazilian Organising Committee of hypocrisy, given the visibility of the Workers Party in all Porto Alegre Forums. A similar controversy occurred during the organising of an October 2002 Social Forum event in Quito, focusing on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) that IC members found thematically and organisationally too narrow.

These controversies are examples of the organisational problems that the WSF is bound to encounter in its process of geographical and thematic expansion. While there are reasons to maintain coherence and some underlying rules in the process so that the WSF brand does not simply evaporate, too much control by the IC and the Secretariat is bound to limit the creativity of those in charge of the de-centralised events.

Apart from the semi-official list of regional and thematic Forums, myriad local events have been organised under the WSF banner but without any official recognition. Their proliferation is one of the most vital signs that the WSF process is indeed expanding, although it complicates attempts to see the WSF as a movement of movements with a more or less clearly defined political strategy.

How to Be and Not Be Political

The WSF provides a space for actors to construct projects in local and global contexts. The organisers that emphasise this role feel the WSF should avoid issuing declarations of support for any particular political processes. As stated by Cândido Grzybowski, “political action is the responsibility of each individual and the coalitions they form, not an attribute of the Forum”.¹³ Arguing a more pronounced dichotomy between the Forum as a space and the Forum as a movement, Chico Whitaker (this volume) has criticised “self-nominated social movements” that “seek to put the Forum inside their own mobilising dynamics, to serve their own objectives”.

For some, the WSF’s different identities are by no means incompatible : it is possible to be an *arena* and an *actor* simultaneously. Based on discussions in the IC and in the Forum sites in January 2003, I personally sense that there are increasing pressures to overcome the current reluctance to issue political statements.

Many in the governing bodies of the WSF, however, tend to conclude that the WSF should not plan to become a political actor since it does not have internal procedures for democratic collective will-formation. More critical voices argue that the correct way forward is to create mechanisms for democratic participation within the political architecture of the Forum. Once reasonably transparent and democratic mechanisms have been established, the WSF could more legitimately start to express itself as a collective movement.

Indeed, the unwillingness to formulate political statements is occasionally questioned among organisers and related actors, who would like to see the WSF expressing opinions on certain issues such as the crises in Argentina, Palestine and Venezuela. At the Bangkok meeting in August 2002, Walden Bello and others argued that the Council should produce a public statement encouraging movements around the world to take part in the protests planned for the WTO meeting in Cancun, in Mexico, in September 2003. In the January 2003 meeting of the Council, various delegates argued strongly in favour of making a public statement against the imminent war in Iraq. In both cases, the apparently consensual decision of the Council was not to issue any such statements. It is, however, likely that there will be more intense debates on this in the near future.

One way to avoid political silence without violating the Charter of Principles is to facilitate processes whereby organisations that take part in the WSF produce political declarations. Ideally, most participating organisations would sign such declarations, which could have powerful political impact. Until now, the social movement declarations produced during the WSF events have not been circulated very widely and thus, their impact relatively modest. Nevertheless, they have created controversies among the WSF organisers. Even if these declarations do not officially claim to represent the WSF as a whole, Chico Whitaker fears that the media may consider them as semi-official conclusions. This can then lead to political disputes about whose concerns get to be expressed in the declarations.

Inclusions and Exclusions

The internal politics of the WSF have also been played out in how different groups have been given spaces during the main annual events. Racial tensions created some internal controversies, particularly in the first Forum.¹⁴ The “whiteness” of the Forums

is related to enduring racism, although it should be remembered that Rio Grande do Sul is one of the rare parts of Latin America where many locals are light-skinned people of European origin. Gender tensions have also been present. Even though there are no major gender differences in participant numbers, the Brazilian Organising Committee consists predominantly of middle-aged men. In the IC, representatives of feminist organisations have played a more visible role and gender issues have been included in the programme, although somewhat marginally. There have been other controversies on hierarchies and exclusions within the WSF — for example on the celebrity status of some participants, or the status of armed groups.

Even if it is not clear whether the WSF will become a more active political entity with developed internal will-formation mechanisms, it is clear that until now, the most important impact of the Forum on democratic projects has consisted of the encounters between different groups and activists within its confines. Geographically, most participants have come from the Southern Cone of Latin America and from Southern Europe, but there has been a conscious effort to facilitate the participation of people from Asia, Africa and other parts of Latin America. The process has attracted increasing attention in India, where the WSF 2004 will take place. The participation by groups from the United States has been growing every year.

Limits of Civil Society Purity : Connecting with and Distancing from Other Kinds of Actors

According to its Charter of Principles, the WSF is “a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context”. Even if the Brazilian media often portrays the events as almost directly organised by the PT, the party does not formally belong to the Organising Committee. The participation of Lula da Silva in WSF 2001 and 2002 was technically as representative of an NGO he had founded rather than as a representative of his party. Having become the President of Brazil, his participation was of a different status in WSF 2003, and as such, the object of controversy.

The participation of several ministers of the government of France in WSF 2 was criticised by many delegates, and the Belgian Prime Minister who had announced a visit was told by the OC that he was not welcome. Decisions on how to deal with governments and their representatives, inter-governmental organisations and UN agencies are inconsistent. Certain UN agencies have been actively involved in organising activities related to women, while the official line has been that inter-governmental bodies cannot participate.

In order to overcome these dilemmas, the IC meetings of 2002 decided that the WSF would have a new category of events : roundtables of dialogue and controversy, where representatives of institutions not allowed to attend as official delegates could be invited to debate and discuss. This innovation was an effort to combine two contradictory aims : to keep the WSF as a purely civil society arena or actor, and not to become an inward-looking space for like-minded civil society organisations. The policy on who would be invited to these roundtables has not been clearly defined, but some key organisers think that representatives of some UN agencies could be invited, but not the World Bank and IMF.

In sum, the enthusiasm the WSF has generated around the world will lead to various dilemmas. Some organisers may emphasise the importance of clinging to strictly defined civil society partners; others are likely to have more pragmatic positions to obtain material and political support. The planned organisation of WSF 4 in India will be a crucial moment. On the one hand, it will provide a concrete possibility to give the process a better geographical and thematic balance. On the other hand, it may be difficult to find hosting local governments willing to dedicate as much energy to the process as has been the case in Porto Alegre. The organisers of WSF 4 in India will also have to deal critically with the question of foreign funding. In the Brazilian case, the importance of the foreign funding conditionality was there, but should not be exaggerated.

From Anti to Alternative

In most post-Seattle events, protesters have often been labelled ‘anti-globalisation,’ and some of them have used the expression themselves. It would, however, be analytically faulty and politically unwise to simply define the movements as being *against* globalisation, if the term is understood as the increasing transgression of nation-state borders on a worldwide level. Many of them are, I would claim, looking for a *different kind of* globalisation. *Outra globalização* (another globalisation) is an expression that has been emphasised by some of the key organisers of the Porto Alegre meetings.¹⁵ Despite this insistence, the Latin American mainstream media talks of ‘anti-globalisation activists’ when referring to both Porto Alegre and other events inspired by it. These would be the February 2001 protests against the WEF regional meeting in Mexico and the March 2001 marches around the Inter-American Development Bank meeting in Santiago de Chile.

For those who want to argue for the possibility of a different kind of globalisation, there is a risk of ending up with strange bedfellows. It is not always easy to see the differences between the ‘alternative’ globalisation proposals with the idea of many business leaders that some democratisation is necessary in order to make the global expansion of capitalism acceptable. Those who cling to the ‘anti-globalisation discourse’ are often right when they claim that the alternative globalisation strategies would only lead to very moderate changes. Often, but not always.

It is frequently assumed that in the anti / alternative divide of globalisation debates, ‘anti’ represents more radical and revolutionary options whereas ‘alternatives’ are more superficial reforms. This assumption is not very helpful. Within the alternative globalisation spectrum, it is possible to find political projects that strive for a globalisation that radically transforms the world. While anti-globalisation people can be pro-capitalist, pro-globalisation people may be anti-capitalist. In principle, the WSF offers many opportunities for people on all sides of this debate to work together.

Despite various references to the necessity of imagining and constructing a different world, the issue of a democratic global order has not had a very high priority in the agenda of the WSF. There have been claims by intellectuals and groups working on issues of global democracy that the WSF process has been too much dominated by nationalists espousing anti-globalisation themes, when it might be the case that this is not even the position of the majority of the participants. Yet, one of the intellectual

problems the WSF faces has been the lack of open debates between different visions of how the world should concretely be re-organised if, as the main slogan of the WSF says, another world is to be possible.¹⁶

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NOTES

¹ CIVES has sometimes been characterised as an association of business representatives that support the Workers Party (PT).

² Personal communication with Bernard Cassen, April 16 2002; also Cassen 2002.

³ On the origins of the WSF, see Whitaker, April 2002.

⁴ Personal communication with Jefferson Miola, April 20 2002.

⁵ Wainwright 2003.

⁶ On the origins of the PT in Rio Grande do Sul, see eg. Prestes 1999.

⁷ Klein 2001.

⁸ Associação Brasileira de Organizações Não Governamentais (ABONG); Ação pela Tributação das Transações Financeiras em Apoio aos Cidadãos (ATTAC); Comissão Brasileira Justiça e Paz (CBJP); Associação Brasileira de Empresários pela Cidadania (CIVES); Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE); and Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos.

⁹ See eg. Waterman 2003b.

¹⁰ World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002 [April 2002].

¹¹ Waterman 2003.

¹² Savio January 2003b.

¹³ Grzybowski January 2003.

¹⁴ *Correio do Povo* January 2001.

¹⁵ Grzybowski 1998. See also Santos April 2001.

¹⁶ See Teivainen 2003a.