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ChapterTitle	The World Social Forum	
Chapter Sub-Title		
Chapter CopyRight - Year	Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2010 (This will be the copyright line in the final PDF)	
Book Name	Third Sector Research	
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Abstract	<p>As a 5-day celebration of workshops and political/cultural events devoted to the idea that "Another World Is Possible," not only the periodic global meetings of the World Social Forum (WSF) are a crucial vehicle for building a more coherent progressive civil society, but also the WSF has become the venue for national regroupment of progressives in many countries, and some regions – especially Europe – have generated sustained interest in Social Forum organizing. However, notwithstanding the attractiveness of the transnational network form behind the civil society movements that make up the WSF, major contradictions continue to hamper its growth and sustainability. Ideological convergence has not proceeded at the pace many participants had hoped for, and the future of the world event and many local processes associated with it remain unclear.</p>	

Chapter 23

The World Social Forum

Patrick Bond

Introduction

As a 5-day celebration of workshops and political/cultural events devoted to the idea that “Another World Is Possible,” not only the periodic global meetings of the World Social Forum (WSF) are a crucial vehicle for building a more coherent progressive civil society, but also the WSF has become the venue for national regroupment of progressives in many countries, and some regions – especially Europe – have generated sustained interest in Social Forum organizing. However, notwithstanding the attractiveness of the transnational network form behind the civil society movements that make up the WSF, major contradictions continue to hamper its growth and sustainability. Ideological convergence has not proceeded at the pace many participants had hoped for, and the future of the world event and many local processes associated with it remain unclear.

In 2001, the WSF was founded as an alternative to the World Economic Forum – the elite Davos, Switzerland, annual gathering – by social democrats associated with the Brazilian Workers Party, the French periodical *Le Monde Diplomatique*, and the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC). The main site in which it is hosted, Porto Alegre, Brazil, was run by a friendly government until 2003, and for the first event some 12,000 people attended. The subsequent events there – in 2002, 2003, and 2005 – attracted progressively more attendees (estimated at 60,000; 100,000; and 150,000, respectively), followed by a return to Brazil – the Amazonian capital Belém – in 2009. In 2004 and 2007, the WSF was moved to Mumbai and Nairobi, where tens of thousands gathered. In between, in 2006 and 2008, the WSF was held first in several cities (Caracas, Bamako, and Karachi) and then in hundreds of locales. After a break in 2010, Dakar, Senegal, was chosen to host the 2011 WSF.

Meanwhile, the innumerable municipal-scale, national, and regional social forums ebb and flow, at the initiative of local organizing committees. In addition

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46 to its role in catalyzing the world's largest ever anti-war protest in February 2003,
47 when reportedly more than 15 million people took part as the Bush and Blair gov-
48 ernments prepared to invade Iraq – the WSF's main claim to effectiveness is in
49 setting up an alternative pole of world opinion to the dominant neoliberal (market-
50 oriented) ideology associated with Davos (see, e.g., Anand et al. 2003; Blau and
51 Karides 2008; de Sousa Santos 2004; Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Sen 2004; Sen et al.
52 2007).

53 Criticisms of the WSF have come from activists who argue that in its origins
54 the WSF merely mirrored Davos with a top-down call for an expensive gather-
55 ing in a symbolic site. At many of the events, the preponderance of international
56 NGOs (with their sponsored southern partners) makes the WSF an example more of
57 “globalization from the middle” than “globalization from below.” Explicit politics
58 within the WSF can sometimes be intensely contested, such as the periodic debate
59 about permitting entrance to political parties and politicians, or to those who have
60 not renounced violence. In 2009, a WSF International Council meeting was held in
61 Morocco in spite of Western Saharan organizations' objections that this undermined
62 their liberation strategy (the Congress of South African Trade Unions led a boycott
63 call, which was not well heeded). Or as another example, at the 2003 Porto Alegre
64 WSF, organizers were accused of systematically sidelining more radical forces such
65 as Indymedia, the youth network Intergalactica, and the ZNet network. After this
66 event, the anarchist writer Andrej Grubacic asked: “Do we really want to create
67 a movement that will resemble a cocktail party in the lounge of the Plaza São
68 Rafael Hotel in Porto Alegre? Do we want a movement dominated by middle-aged
69 bureaucrats wearing Palestinian scarves” (Grubacic 2003, p. 1; see also Klein 2003).

70 In other words, there is a natural class critique of the WSF, given that the political
71 stance of many activists is more radical than that of the NGOs, progressive profes-
72 sionals, academics, funders, and other civil society representatives who wield more
73 weight at the event and in its planning. Many, however, would rebut that at least, to
74 its credit, the WSF is not imposing a political “line” or litmus tests on the various
75 ideological groupings. Yet others object that this too is a fatal weakness, leading to
76 an overall inability of a global progressive community to cohere behind a common
77 political perspective and platform (hence the Porto Alegre Manifesto and Bamako
78 Appeal were generated by leading leftist intellectuals including Samir Amin).

79 Following discussion of the WSF-style network and its application to transna-
80 tional eco-social justice issues and constituencies, an interrogation of ideological
81 orientations within and around the WSF – as was evident at the 2007 global meet-
82 ing in Nairobi – allows us to consider whether the Social Forum politics has a future
83 at a time when there is an urgent need for countervailing power and ideology from
84 the left, to take advantage of opportunities offered by the crisis of capitalism.

85 86 87 **The WSF as Network Form**

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89 What is surely the main accomplishment of the WSF is the construction of dialogi-
90 cal spaces. These spaces might ultimately support ideological, analytical, strategic,
and even tactical convergence between far-flung movements that span the globe.

23 The World Social Forum

91 Indeed, the Social Forum network is potentially a means by which the “globaliza-
92 tion of people” can become real, a genuine counterpoint to the “globalization of
93 capital.” In the process, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004, pp. xii–xiii) insist
94 that their new category, “the *multitude*” of oppressed people (as distinct from the
95 “masses”), might also “be conceived as a network: an open expansive network in
96 which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides
97 the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common.” Again, ideally,
98 the network form provides “the model for an absolutely democratic organization
99 that corresponds to the dominant forms of economic and social production, and is
100 also the most powerful weapon against the ruling power structure” (ibid, p. 85).

101 As Helmut Anheier and Hagai Katz (2004, pp. 207–208) put it, “global civil soci-
102 ety is a very relational, ‘networky’ phenomenon” drawing upon “interconnected and
103 multilayered social space,” “chains of interaction,” and “horizontal relations” and
104 harking back to Manuel Castells’ analysis, providing new opportunities for “decent-
105 ralisated concentration where a multiplicity of interconnected tasks take place in
106 different sites” (see also Taylor 2004). According to Hardt and Negri (2004, p. 135),
107 the challenge is “to communicate and act in common while remaining internally dif-
108 ferent.” Whereas previously, dissenters were divided along sectoral, geographical,
109 and other lines, “today network movements are able to address all of [the grievances]
110 simultaneously,” in part because many “target neoliberal globalisation as the source
111 of their poverty” (ibid).

112 In that sense, internationalist progressive networking traditions that some WSF
113 strategists and allied intellectuals draw upon took their modern form with the rise
114 of Zapatismo solidarity from 1994 (when Mayan Indians from Chiapas, Mexico,
115 revolted against local oppression and the World Trade Organization), and in the
116 North, the Seattle WTO protest of 1999. Others would go to earlier periods, such
117 as slavery-abolition campaigning (albeit with emotional paternalism and indeed
118 powered by British capital’s competitive drive), which continued into the twentieth
119 century with pressure against King Leopold’s plunder of the then Belgian Congo.
120 Often while exiled in the capitals of the colonial powers, the African continent’s
121 nationalist movements forged ties during the twenty-first century, in the pro-
122 cess establishing newly empowered relations with northern critics of colonialism,
123 apartheid, and racism. Victorious mass African movements against colonialism and
124 imperial adventurism, stretching from the 1950s Kenyan Mau Mau and Nkrumah’s
125 Ghanaian visions to the liberation of South Africa in 1994, inspired leftists and
126 anti-racists – as did a variety of 1960s and 1970s anti-colonial and anti-imperial
127 solidarity movements ranging from Vietnam to Chile to Mozambique.

128 In reestablishing these connections, the WSF does not represent a brand new
129 mode of politics, although it did provide an opportunity for grassroots militants to
130 break from a sometimes ossified 1980s–1990s mold of nongovernmental, “devel-
131 opmental” activism and to turn their gaze to global norms and processes. Indeed,
132 the network form of organizing has allowed profound critiques and strategies aimed
133 at overthrowing existing power relations to emanate from cross-border coalitions
134 of activists working sector by sector. International solidarity carefully pursued with
135 respect and understanding is a crucial component of this process, as suggested by
experiences in various progressive transnational sectoral networks, such as land (Via

136 Campesino), health care (International People's Health Movement), free schooling
 137 (Global Campaign for Education), water (the People's World Water Forum), cli-
 138 mate change (Climate Justice Now!), debt (Jubilee South), democratic development
 139 finance (World Bank Bonds Boycott), and trade (Our World Is Not for Sale!).

140 The WSF is a site where a variety of such networks can run events and draw
 141 in new organizations. There are roughly three dozen categories into which these
 142 networks fit, divided into three types: political movements (a very broad category);
 143 traditional and cross-sectoral civil society movements; and issue-based civil society
 144 movements (see Table 23.1).

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 146
 147 **Table 23.1** Typology of World Social Forum movements

148 *Political movements for social change*

149
 150 Political movements/parties representing values/ideas of social democracy, nationalism,
 151 socialism, autonomism, and anarchism

152 *Traditional and cross-sectoral civil society movements*

153 Labor (including unemployed movements, migration, and workplace health/safety)

154 Women (including a variety of gender issues)

155 Youth (including children)

156 Anti-war (including arms sales, nuclear weapons, and land mines)

157 Anti-racism (dating to abolition)

158 Minority rights and ethnic

159 Civil rights

160 Democracy (including transparency/corruption)

161 Consumer

162 Indigenous rights

163 Human rights

164 Sexual identity

165 Disability rights

166 Cultural (art/music/literature/crafts/video)

167 Religious

168 Solidarity

169 Elder rights

170 *Issue-based civil society movements*

171 Finance/debt/aid/investment

172 Trade

173 Economic subsectors (including recuperated factories)

174 Corporate disempowerment and anti-consumerism

175 Land/agriculture/forestry/fisheries

176 Housing/urban access rights

177 Water (including irrigation, groundwater, dams and rivers, household access, and sanitation)

178 Energy (including global warming, pollution, and household access)

179 Health (including treatment)

180 Food/nutrition

181 Social security

182 Education

183 Other environmental (including toxics, nuclear, mining, marine)

184 Media

185 Policing/prisons

186 Information/ICT

23 The World Social Forum

181 What, though, are the core characteristics that make these transnational net-
 182 working opportunities so appropriate to the current conjuncture? As James Ferguson
 183 (2006, p. 108) asks:

184 Can we learn to conceive, theoretically and politically, of a “grassroots” that would be not
 185 local, communal, and authentic, but worldly, well-connected, and opportunistic? Are we
 186 ready for social movements that fight not “from below” but “across,” using their “foreign
 187 policy” to fight struggles not against “the state” but against that hydra-headed transna-
 188 tional apparatus of banks, international agencies, and market institutions through which
 189 contemporary capitalist domination functions?

190 To answer this question requires assessing whether coherence is growing within
 191 the WSF movement, toward social movements “fighting across” national borders
 192 and against transnational capital and multilateral institutions. A debate precisely
 193 along this line took place at the WSF in Nairobi, among other indicators of logistical
 194 and political difficulties that seemed to be debilitating.

197 The World Social Forum “at the Crossroads”

199 The divergent ways forward for global justice movement political strategy were
 200 evident at the 2007 WSF in Nairobi. One of the most influential commentators and
 201 activists, Walden Bello (2007, p. 1), found the Nairobi WSF to be

202 Disappointing, since its politics was so diluted and big business interests linked to the
 203 Kenyan ruling elite were so brazen in commercializing it ... The WSF is at a crossroads
 204 ... many long-standing participants in the Forum are [now] asking themselves: Is the WSF
 205 still the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and
 206 peace movement? Or, having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the
 207 diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up
 208 its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?

209 From January 20–25, 2007, the 60,000 registered participants heard triumphalist
 210 radical rhetoric and yet, too, witnessed persistent defeats for social justice causes
 211 – especially within the WSF’s own processes. Many of these were aired at the
 212 leading African political webzine, www.pambazuka.org (2007). They included
 213 local grievances of activists that remained unaddressed: colonial-era land edicts and
 214 policies that dispossessed their communities, the impact of mining and extraction
 215 activities on the environment and human livelihoods, discriminatory policies by
 216 successive governments that have guaranteed the stubborn survival of pre-colonial
 217 conditions of poverty and underdevelopment among many pastoralist and minor-
 218 ity communities, the arrogant disregard for the concerns raised by Samburu women
 219 raped over the years by British soldiers dispatched on military exercises in those
 220 Kenyan communities, and tensions persisting with neocolonial-era settler farmers
 221 and indigenous Kenyan comprador businessmen in hiving off thousands of hectares
 222 of land while the pastoralists and minority communities are targets of state terror,
 223 evictions, and denunciations.

224 Firoze Manji, the Kenyan director of *Pambazuka* (2007), argued: “This event
 225 had all the features of a trade fair – those with greater wealth had more events in

226 the calendar, larger (and more comfortable) spaces, more propaganda – and there-
227 fore a larger voice.” Such sobering observations were also reflected in a statement
228 by the Social Movements Assembly at a January 24, 2007, rally of more than
229 2,000 people: “We denounce tendencies towards commercialization, privatization
230 and militarization of the WSF space. Hundreds of our sisters and brothers who
231 welcomed us to Nairobi have been excluded because of high costs of participa-
232 tion” (*Pambazuka* 2007). Conflict areas included the arrest of a dozen low-income
233 people who wanted to get into the event, protests to forcibly open the gates, and
234 the destruction of the notoriously repressive Kenyan interior minister’s makeshift
235 restaurant that had monopolized key space within the Kasarani Stadium’s grounds.
236 Moreover, the Kenya Airports Authority systematically diverted incoming visitors
237 to hotels, away from home stays (2,000 of which were arranged but only 18 actually
238 materialized due to diversions). Setting these flaws aside, consider a deeper politi-
239 cal tension: for Onyang Oloo, “These social movements, including dozens in Kenya,
240 want to see the WSF being transformed into a space for organizing and mobilizing
241 against the nefarious forces of international finance capital, neoliberalism and all its
242 local neo-colonial and comprador collaborators” (*Pambazuka* 2007).

243 244 245 **Wither WSF Politics?** 246 247

248 Is there a political orientation within the WSF that would prove capable of meet-
249 ing such expectations? WSF networking has tended toward a strategic formula that
250 aims, first, to build durable and relatively democratic mass movements informed
251 by internationalism yet perhaps paradoxically often aiming – in concrete cam-
252 paigning terms – at what Walden Bello (2002) has called “deglobalization” (of
253 capital), which in turn permits a “decommodification” of essential goods and ser-
254 vices and a “destratification” of society such that access is based on “rights” or even
255 a “commons” approach.

256 To illustrate, South Africans and other activists have had dramatic victories in
257 deglobalizing the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights regime, by demanding
258 that decommodified generic anti-retroviral medicines to fight HIV/AIDS – instead
259 of branded monopoly-patented drugs (which in the late 1990s had cost \$15,000 per
260 person per year) – be provided to all who access public clinics in a destratified man-
261 ner, not dependent on means testing or other social divisions. The victories that by
262 2009 permitted 750,000 South Africans access to HIV/AIDS medicines would not
263 have been possible without the kind of international networking and solidarity that
264 is exemplified in WSF processes. In South Africa and elsewhere, similar struggles
265 are underway to deglobalize food (especially given the genetically modified organ-
266 isms threat from transnational corporations), to halt biopiracy, and to send water and
267 energy privatizers back to France and the United States.

268 More than this, the South African decommodification agenda entails struggles to
269 turn basic needs into genuine human rights including free anti-retroviral medicines
270 to fight HIV/AIDS (hence disempowering “Big Pharma”); 50 litres of free water per

23 The World Social Forum

271 person per day (hence ridding Africa of Suez and other water privatizers); 1 kWh
 272 of free electricity for each individual every day (hence reorienting energy resources
 273 from export-oriented mining and smelting to basic-needs consumption); extensive
 274 land reform (hence deemphasizing cash cropping and export-oriented plantations);
 275 prohibitions on service disconnections and evictions; free education (hence halting
 276 the General Agreement on Trade in Services); and the like. A free Basic Income
 277 Grant allowance of \$15 per month is even advocated by churches, NGOs, and trade
 278 unions. All such services should be universal (open to all, no matter the income
 279 levels) and, to the extent feasible, financed through higher prices that penalize luxury
 280 consumption.

281 The broader goals in this case and most others are to link movements, enhance
 282 consciousness, develop the issues, and build democratic organizational forms and
 283 momentum. This potentially unifying agenda could serve as a basis for wide-scale
 284 social change, in the manner that Gosta Esping-Andersen (1991) has discussed
 285 with respect to Scandinavian social policy. Beyond the issue-by-issue strategies that
 286 stress deglobalization of capital, decommodification, and destratification arrived at
 287 through internationalist solidarity, these networks are also sites for debates over
 288 broader political programs.

289 Global justice movements at the heart of the WSF have not, though, found it that
 290 easy to establish any consensus, given the divergent tendencies between socialism
 291 and autonomism. For example, in early 2005 at the WSF in Porto Alegre, 19 well-
 292 known movement intellectuals and activists gathered to produce a draft of “Twelve
 293 proposals for another possible world” (abridged in Table 23.2).

294 It can well be argued that these proposals risk the “top-down” danger of imposing
 295 programmatic ideas on fluid movements and campaigns (Bond 2005). Reflecting
 296 the same tendency, a much longer effort along these lines was made by Samir Amin
 297 and Francois Houtart at the January 2006 WSF: the Bamako Appeal. An alternative
 298 approach to this would have been to permit the programs to emerge from struggle, as
 299 they always have. In any case, the ideological diversity of the WSF has not permitted
 300 sufficient clarity on such matters.

301 In South Africa, the Centre for Civil Society has hosted several debates on this
 302 question, with at least four varying points of view emerging (CCS 2006). While
 303 the Bamako Appeal combined the traditions of socialism, anti-racism/colonialism,
 304 and national development – and the leader of the Organization of African Trade
 305 Union Unity, Hassan Sunmonu (also a WSF International Council member), found
 306 “a lot of merit in that Bamako Appeal that we can use to transform the lives of our-
 307 selves, our organizations and our peoples” (CCS 2006) – it has been contested by
 308 Franco Barchiesi, Heinrich Bohmke, Prishani Naidoo, and Ahmed Veriava (2006)
 309 on the grounds that it is too “last century” in tone and content and overly reflects
 310 the mutation of the WSF from an arena of encounter for local social movements into
 311 an organized network of experts, academics, and NGO practitioners. To Barchiesi
 312 and others, the Bamako Appeal is seen to be part of “the WSF elite’s cold institu-
 313 tional and technicist soup, occasionally warmed up by some hints of tired poeticism
 314 ... [providing] little nourishment for local subjectivities whose daily responses to
 315 neoliberalism face more urgent needs to turn everyday survival into sustained

Table 23.2 Twelve proposals for another possible world^a

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^aThe 19 signatories – regrettably 18 men and just 1 woman – were Aminata Traoré, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Eduardo Galeano, José Saramago, François Houtart, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Armand Mattelart, Roberto Savio, Riccardo Petrella, Ignacio Ramonet, Bernard Cassen, Samir Amin, Atilio Boron, Samuel Ruiz Garcia, Tariq Ali, Frei Betto, Emir Sader, Walden Bello, and Immanuel Wallerstein.

confrontations with an increasingly repressive state” (ibid, p. 1). Barchiesi et al. prefer to praise the “powerful undercurrent of informality in the WSF’s proceedings [which] reveals the persistence of horizontal communication between movements ... based ... in the life strategies of their participants” (ibid, p. 5).

A third position on WSF politics is the classical socialist, party-building approach favored by Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee founder Trevor Ngwane and other revolutionary organizers. Replying to both Amin and the autonomist critique at the July workshop, Ngwane was concerned about reformist projects that “make us blind to recognize the struggles of ordinary people,” but recognized that “militancy alone at the local level and community level will not in itself answer questions of class and questions of power” (CCS 2006). For that a self-conscious socialist cadre is needed, and in this regard the WSF is taken to represent a critical site to transcend localist political upsurges.

23 The World Social Forum

A fourth position seeks the twenty-first century's anti-capitalist "manifesto" in the existing social, labor, and environmental movements that are already engaged in the transnational social justice struggle. The WSF's greatest potential – so far unrealized – is the possibility of linking dozens of radical movements in various sectors. At present, though, at each WSF the activists seem to disappear into their own workshops: silos with few or no interconnections. Hence, before a Bamako Appeal or any other manifesto is parachuted into the WSF, it is necessary for activists to compile their existing grievances, analyses, strategies, and tactics. Sometimes these are simple demands, but often they are also articulated as sectoral manifestos.

Lest too much energy is spent on these political scuffles at the expense of ongoing struggle, consider, in closing, the spirit articulated by Ngwane in a Nairobi debate with WSF founder Chico Whitaker:

Ordinary working class and poor people need and create and have a movement of resistance and struggle. They also need and create and have spaces for that movement to breathe and develop. The real question is what place will the WSF have in that reality. What space will there be for ordinary working class and poor people? Who will shape and drive and control the movement? Will it be a movement of NGO's and individual luminaries creating space for themselves to speak of their concern for the poor? Will it be undermined by collaboration with capitalist forces? I think what some of us saw happening in Nairobi posed some of these questions sharply and challenged some of the answers coming from many (but not all) of the prominent NGOs and luminaries in the WSF. (*Pambazuka* 2007)

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Chapter 23

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Q. No.	Query
AQ1	Please check the text “Other environmental (including toxics, nuclear, mining, marine)” in Table 23.1. Should it be “Other environmental movements (including toxics, nuclear, mining, marine)”?
AQ2	Please check the edited sentence “Lest too much energy is spent on these . . .” for intended meaning.
AQ3	The order of publisher and location details is not consistent. In order to maintain book consistency, please check and confirm.

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