

## **WORLD SOCIAL FORUM – A PROCESS IN CONSTRUCTION**

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### **A Global Day of Action in 2008**

In January 26th 2008 takes place a new experiment in the World Social Forum process: the Global Day of Action (GDA), with free activities, all over the world, self organized by WSF participants, in all levels, places and themes of the struggle to overcome neo-liberalism (the whole can be seen in [wsf2008.net](http://wsf2008.net)). That is to say, this year the WSF is absolutely decentralized, instead of one Forum somewhere in the world, as in Porto Alegre (2001, 2002, 2003 and 2005), Mumbai (2004) and Nairobi (2007), or three nearly simultaneous Forums as in Bamako, Caracas and Karachi in 2006.

This format seems successful, considering the variety of initiatives taken. In a great number of countries different organisations have worked together, in the WSF spirit, respecting their diversity, in very creative ways, to show together the 26th January what they are doing to build “another world”.

In this way, people who would never have the possibility of going to a world meeting are participating, at local or regional level, of similar open spaces, linking in new networks civil society organisations.

This multiplication of articulations in the civil society, as dense as possible and in continuous expansion, is in fact more important than only world meetings. I would even say that the 2008 Global Day of Action format is to be used every year from now on, linked to the World Social Forum of each year, as in 2009, with the World Social Forum in the Amazon region.

But to situate better the GDA in the WSF process, it can be useful to remind the meaning of the WSF.

### **A “political invention”**

The WSF was really a “political invention”, as says the title of a book written in 2003 by José Corrêa Leite, one of the members of the Brazilian WSF Organization Committee.

It was proposed in opposition to the World Economic Forum in Davos, but it was also deeply different. The WSF was a new kind of Forum, as a place to assemble people for discussions about specific themes. And it pointed already to a different world.

The main specificities of the WSF were: the organisers were not events promoters (like for instance in Davos) but social organisations; no profit was envisaged (fees of participation nearly symbolic); the organisations carrying it out made a “call to come” without specific invitations, travel tickets or lodging expenses paid; they did not define the contents of the discussions (only the general objective that could bring together those “called”); they did not choose key note speakers and debaters; they opened the Forum space to self-organised activities of the participants; and last but no least, they said that the Forum would not have one final declaration.

These characteristics were not entirely present in the first World Social Forum in 2001, as they were still not clearly defined in the beginning of the process. They were in fact only intuitions. But after having respected in the following Forums a Charter of Principles presenting such conditions, it became clear for the WSF organisers that they were conditions to ensure always the same good results. The Charter, based on the experience of the first World Social Forum, had been written to define more clearly its character.

### **Resistances**

This “political invention” at its beginning was seen with certain sympathy, as something inoffensive, which could be accepted as an opposition to Davos. But it did not fit in any of the existing categories of analysis and

reflection about political action. The WSF was in fact a strange “animal” - a space and not a movement - that irrupted in the sea of the political initiatives (where activists and intellectuals were hardly trying to survive, after the Berlin’s wall fall, but it was a sea they knew). It was a non pyramidal Forum, organized according to the logics of the networks - a new stream that was also appearing in the sea. It then diminished the self-confidence of many people, used to work with tools built during more than a century.

Some resistances having appeared, things became more complicated when the Forum launched a process with incidence in political practices. Some people began then to disqualify it – “it is a Woodstock of the left”, “in the Forums we only discuss and discuss”. And till now in the WSF discussions the same question emerges continuously: is it a space or a movement?

Why then such unfamiliar and troublesome kind of Forum was created? According to the organizers, it was because they saw a new political actor uprising without a space to meet and discuss its perspectives: the so called “civil society”, as citizens organized in social movements and other types of bodies.

### **Reinforcing civil society as political actor**

In fact the WSF was not created to enter in competition with political parties, or with the struggle to “conquer” governments, both anyhow necessary to build the new world. It intended only to reinforce the “civil society” that was emerging by its own initiative, that is, autonomous from parties and governments and not accepting to be used by them in their strategies.

It became then clear that the civil society articulation differs from that of parties and governments. It can be built only through horizontal links, without leaderships and pyramids of responsibilities, with their “delegations” and internal struggles for power, typical of parties and governments logics. That is why the WSF Charter of Principles said that the WSF “does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings”.

It became clearer, moreover, that the political action of this new actor is also different of the one of parties and governments. It unfolds in a big variety of autonomous types, rhythms, themes and levels of action, of a big variety of organisations. That is why the WSF Charter refused a specific and unique WSF “political program”, to be endorsed by the organisations participating in the Forums.

Parties or governments may propose strategies to fight neo-liberalism, or a new model of society to be built upon the ashes of loser capitalism, or a utopia to mobilize the crowds, rendering more foreseeable the territory of the unknown post-capitalism. Social Forums then can be places of discussion of these propositions by the civil society, but not to obtain their acceptance by all their participants.

### **Building unity**

This new type of Forum opened also another possibility: to be a tool helping to build unity, overcoming a historical difficulty of the left, recurrently victim of the malediction of the division, which weakens it, for the pleasure of those who dominate the world.

The force of united mobilized majorities – workers, electors, consumers, citizens – can be decisive in the political struggles. Parties and governments know it and use it. But the diversity of interests inside the civil society may fragment it so much that its force as an autonomous political actor may not emerge. So, as for all political actors, building unity is important for civil society.

But its union cannot be built through tactical or strategic alliances, under centralized commandments. Civil society organisations can only be united by solidarity ties, assumed freely. WSF process was then envisaged as unlimited horizontal networking spaces at world, regional, national and local levels. These spaces would be occasions for mutual recognizing, overcoming of prejudices among organisations, identification of convergences and, when possible, launching of new political initiatives – at local, national or planetary level.

The respect of diversity was then seen as essential in this process. It would be a practice to be exercised

during and after the Forums, pointing already to the future: the diversity had to be a fundamental value in the new world in construction.

In addition, it was considered necessary to overcome the poorness of the representative democracy and the moulding of the citizens in conformist behaviours. The citizens had to be empowered, and their initiative and creativity developed.

In this perspective the WSF could be also the occasion to practise new values opposite to those which motivate the action inside capitalism: cooperation instead of competition, human needs instead of profits, respect of the nature instead of its maximum exploitation, long term perspectives instead of short term interests, acceptance of differences instead of homogenisation, co responsible liberty instead of egoistic individualism, being instead of having.

### **The process leading to the WSF**

Obviously all these intuitions behind the WSF “invention” were not new in the world. Humankind thinking criticizing authoritarianism appeared explosively in 1968. It entered then in a process of maturing, with the horizontal networks as a new way to organise actions. And after experiences like the Zapatistas from 1994, it arrived to a climax in the 1999 Seattle protestations.

The WSF merit in this process was the systematisation through its Charter of Principles of some conditions to develop these intuitions, pointing to a new political culture: in addition to the already presented characteristics of the Social Forums – as the essential one concerning the refusal of a WSF final document - the Charter establishes that the Forums, as “open spaces”, have no leaders directing the meetings or spokespersons, neither their own political programme; that all activities inside the Forum have equal importance; that political parties or governments could not propose activities inside the Forum or interfere in its organisation - even when giving logistical support; and that violence was refused as a mean of political action.

### **The distressing delay**

The problem, nevertheless, is the delay to build the civil society unity, as well as new kinds of alliances among parties. They are essential to change things. But building unity – and new kinds of alliances - needs time, and involves deep changes of paradigms and behaviours. Well, this increases the anguish of many of those who think already that “another world” is not only possible but also necessary and urgent, who would like to see results as soon as possible.

On the other hand, we face the hopelessness of the majorities. A good minority of people will say, if asked, that “another world” is not necessary. And the big majority will say that it is not possible. The climate problems are opening new possibilities to awake the consciences. But a long way is still to be covered, and we still don't know how to reverse significantly the perspectives, to give hope to a more substantial portion of the human beings, so as to mobilize them towards real changes.

This is, perhaps, another possible positive effect of decentralized WSF activities like in the GDA: much more people than only through world meetings poorly covered by the media will know that many people are working to build a different world.

But we must be conscious that we are walking in a long way, and that we have to persist walking.