

The World Social Forum, A Sustainable Model?

By [Pierre Rousset](#)

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After a period of remarkable expansion, the process of the [World Social Forum](#) (WSF) has stalled. The balance sheet of the most recent big assemblies turns out to be very contrasting – we can say, simplifying a lot, politically negative in the case of Nairobi (Kenya) in 2007 and positive in the case of Belem (Brazil) two years later.

The question that is raised is not primarily one of numbers: success does not depend (or does not only depend) on the number of participants, it is political: what is the point of the forums? The answer seemed obvious in the early 2000s, but that is not the case today.

In the past there was a lively interrelation between the Forum process, large anti-globalisation mobilisations, social struggles and international campaigns – a synergy that reached its peak with the mobilising and popularising role which the European forums (Florence, Italy) and global (Porto Alegre, Brazil) played in preparing the anti-war day of March 2003. The expansion of the WSF was phenomenal: in only a few years it had taken shape in Europe and Latin America, then in Asia, North America and Africa. It rooted itself in the national and local forums. The network and the Assembly of Social Movements played a dynamic role. The manifold expansion was driven by a dynamic combination of expansion and radicalisation. In the framework of the forums questions were raised which the traditional labour movement had not yet been able to answer.[1]

Today – with some exceptions – the Forum process is largely disconnected from struggles and international campaigns. Other frameworks have been formed to address the climate crisis or the so-called financial crisis, without functional articulation with the WSF. In Malmö (Sweden) in 2008, a large and dynamic anti-globalisation demonstration took place at the time of the European Social Forum (ESF), but with no synergy between the two events. In Europe, the ESF has not been able to play again the role of giving momentum that it had against the Bolkestein directive. It is possible that the process retains its vitality in North America, but it has come to a standstill in Asia and has hardly been able to redefine itself in Europe. Even if the Assembly of the Social Movements still adopts policies whose content is important (Belém), the network is experiencing a protracted crisis of functioning.

Some new features have been tried out in recent years to ensure a more efficient process: meetings of thematic assemblies in the forums, the definition of “axes” around which the initiatives are grouped, proposals for the “clustering” of workshops to increase exchanges between constituents and improve the visibility of the programme, the call for “strategic” reflection, etc... But interesting as these experiments are, a politics which has become out of date cannot be addressed solely by dealing with the operating procedures of the WSF.[2]

The Forum process continues to provide the principal “common” space to a wide range of movements at a global level and in many countries. But for all that in what sense does the

WSF provide a “sustainable model”? It has resisted the violent ideological offensive that followed the attacks of September 11 2001, which is not insignificant. But will it resist the impact of the capitalist crisis? Whether it succeeds or not, are there lessons from this experience that should be retained for the future?

The Forum process is not simply passing through a “downturn.” It is threatened by a combination of factors: a strong tendency to institutionalisation, “neutralisation” of activist groups, political differences, questioning of functioning by “dynamic consensus” etc...

The WSF, Seen from Above

The global process of the Social Forum is led by an international council (IC), originally formed by self-cooptation, and then imperfectly expanded by co-option. Given the nature of the movement, it was difficult to elect it on a representative basis or to operate on a global scale in the form of an open assembly. But this mode of structuring was always subject to a separation between the “summit” and the grassroots of the WSF. The main measure designed to prevent this danger has been the limitation of the powers of the council: mainly it decides the date and place of the global forums and organises the framework (the commissions).

The Political Significance of the Debate Within the IC on the Rhythms

The WSF began by meeting annually. The question of the rhythm of meetings was rapidly posed by proliferation of regional or thematic forums. Far from being narrowly “organisational,” this was a political question which concerns the relationship between the WSF and the social mobilisations. Thus Via Campesina was one of the first networks to demand that the global forums meet only every three years, if not every two years alternating with the regional forums. If too frequent they take up the time and financial resources of militants at the expense of preparing struggles, supporting national organisations and developing campaigns. From being a support they can become a brake on the activity of movements engaged in the process.[3]

Of course, the WSF forums are not merely international conferences. Through the number of participants, the involvement of the movements and the continuity of the “process” they constitute a form of resistance to capitalist globalisation. But – also of course – they cannot substitute for the daily struggles taking place elsewhere.

The proposals of the Via Campesina and other movements aimed at preserving the dialectical link between forums and struggles. The argument made good sense, but it has not been understood by all. The decision in this area was blocked until the International Council of Parma (Italy, October 2006). A report was produced on the finances of the WSF, which noted that almost all the organisations surveyed wanted the global Forum to stop meeting annually. It became very difficult to ignore this demand. It was decided that in 2008 there would be a global day of action that would not be labelled “WSF.” Although belated, the resolution of Parma recognised in fact that the global Forum should not necessarily meet every year and it opened itself up to organisations that still remained outside the established process.

Unfortunately, the decision of Parma has progressively unravelled. In the end the global day of January 2008 has again become an annual initiative of the World Social Forum. This day (or week) was a relative success, which reflected the commitment of the movements

involved in the WSF to the continuation of the process. But the betrayal of the spirit and letter of the resolution of October 2006 signified that the needs of the militant movements that mobilised at the same time both within and outside the WSF were not taken into account by the IC – even though it is they who first and foremost give the WSF the character of a social forum, in touch with the struggles of the most exploited. The enlargement process was not thought through “from below” but rather “from above.” Who in reality wished to maintain a frenetic pace for the forums? Individuals and organisations for which the intensification of the “process” did not pose problems, either because the WSF had become their principal place of political recognition policy (individuals, small groups) or because they had at their disposal a budget and an apparatus of fulltimers which enabled them to take part without difficulty (“top level” union structures, large NGOs, funding agencies, church movements ...), without this necessarily implying a real commitment to build momentum.

The much vaunted functioning by consensus came to a dead end and was replaced by a unilateral war of attrition conducted by a “bloc of interests” at the top.

Parties and Churches

Political parties have not been admitted as “co-sponsors” of the WSF process (a decision which to me seems reasonable). However, for those parties involved in real life in the same mobilisations as the movements, the modalities of their presence in the forums has been defined according to the country (which also seems reasonable). The distinction is important: we are discussing here movements which equally take on a responsibility in the organisation of the forums and the representation of the process within the IC.

There have been extensive debates on the role of parties – but never on that of the (Christian) churches and their various organisations. However, they are not “social movements,” even in the wide definition of the IC of the WSF. Although Caritas is registered as an NGO, its statutes specify that it is under the direct authority of the Vatican (a religious hierarchy and a State!). The issue was raised at the International Council of Parma, taking account of rather alarming information on the weight of the churches in the preparation of the WSF in Nairobi. The World March of Women was concerned about the consequences this might have on the issue of women’s rights or sexual preferences ... the Indian representatives recalled how they had carefully protected the Mumbai Forum from the religious conflicts that are rife in their country. However, the debate had barely begun when it was cut short: because organisations like the World Council of Churches and Caritas were members of the IC, the presence of their counterparts in the national committees could not be challenged.

The fears expressed in Parma were unfortunately justified to the extent that a formal declaration was signed by many movements to protest about how the rights of women and homosexuals were attacked within the forum by religious currents – that is to say, even within our own space of liberty.[4] Despite this and some other very serious problems posed by Nairobi, there has been virtually no critical discussion on the critical assessment of this experience at the IC of the WSF that followed in Berlin. “The churches have always been there, so ...” This is also true of the parties, which did not prevent their status being discussed. We can bet that if non-Christian religious hierarchies (Muslim, Hindu etc...) asked to be members of the IC there would be a debate! If the (Christian) churches “are there” it is because the forum was born in Brazil and some Brazilian organizers wanted it. The

involvement of religious organisations in unitary popular mobilisations varies according to the country (even more than the links between parties and movements). I do not prejudge what would be the conclusion of an international discussion on their place in the process nor deny the progressive commitment of some of them. But which religious organisations are we talking about?

We are no longer in the 1970s, with the currents of liberation theology in Latin America confronting their religious hierarchies, advancing political agendas clearly anchored on the left (except, generally, on issues such as reproductive rights or sexual preference), even joining the armed struggle like the Christians for National Liberation in the Philippines, apostles of the theology of struggle. Some orders and individuals are still involved in resistance. But the movements of which we speak here are not in open rupture with their hierarchies – and these latter are rarely progressive! They are at best in an ambiguous relationship of autonomy-dependence vis-à-vis the church hierarchy. Many Protestant churches are very reactionary, as is the very reactionary Pope and his policy of asserting Catholicism, moral order and anti-atheism.

I do not question the participation in the forums of movements “defined as religious” engaged in mobilisations against the war and for social rights. But the co-opting of church organizations within the IC, which is obliged to organise the “non-confessional” space (to quote the Charter of the WSF) of the forums and ensure their “social” character seems very problematic.

The Centre of Gravity of the IC

The composition of the IC is now less “monocoloured” (whites from Latin America and Europe) than at the beginning. But the weight of the “hierarchical” organisations has continued to grow. We can mention, in addition to religious organisations, major NGOs and funding agencies which are not what they were in the 1980s.[5] The current mechanisms for controlling and allocating funds gives them significant power over grassroots organisations on the ground. A social movement is not a sub-contractor, a service provider or a consultancy – it pursues activities that require continuity. Funding by “projects” represents a totally different logic which places local organisations in a situation of permanent insecurity, and therefore of dependence.

Union representation has also changed. A number of national and international union leaderships have only entered into the WSF process reluctantly. They did not appreciate its radicalism, its unusual diversity and spontaneity. Their integration was a victory for the anti-globalisation movement. But with the weakening of its dynamism the bureaucratic union leaderships have taken over the initiative. They now outweigh the class struggle unions within the IC of the WSF.

The WSF Seen from Below

Seen from below, the view is much more diverse than from above. Indeed, the annual forums reflect the political situation and the dynamic movements of the host country and region, as does the quality of the preparation ensured by the national organising committee.

Mumbai, Nairobi and Belém

The comparison of the three forums of Mumbai (2004), Nairobi (2007) and Belém (2009)

illuminates this point. All have common features, starting with the large number of participants and the many militant meetings that these “spaces” enabled. All three illustrate the process of global expansion, from its original countries in Latin America and southern Europe to Asia and West Africa (Bamako, 2006) and East Africa (Nairobi).

More than any other global forum that at Mumbai has earned the name of social forum, because the movements made the space theirs, the collective participation was so great and the most oppressed were so visible. Meeting faced to a hostile city hall, without benefit of government support, with much more rigorously selected sources of international funding than was customary in the WSF, it was on an organisational level totally independent. Its success was made possible by the involvement of a wide range of organisations that often do not work together and by a long period of preparation which enabled trade unions and popular associations to come from every corner of this country-continent.[6]

We can say that the forum in Nairobi was in many ways the antithesis of that of Mumbai. The most institutionalised “entities” (including the churches) dominated the process. It was closely linked to state authorities. The organisation was partly run by large companies. The space was not designed for the poorest (entry costs, expensive food, little free clean water...). The market that we fight was omnipresent. The forum certainly provided a rare opportunity for African movements to meet – and for them to meet with international movements. But it represented a real political backward step.

After Nairobi, the Belém forum appeared as a rebirth of the process.[7] The very strong Brazilian participation showed that it met a need. It raised the question of the immense problem of the fate of the Amazon rainforest. The link between ecological and social issues was more central than had been usual in the previous forums. The rights of indigenous peoples were brilliantly affirmed. It was the opportunity for fundamental debates for the Latin American left around the competing orientations of the governments of Lula and Chavez. However, Belém was far from a replica of Mumbai. The weight of state financing was great and the presence of government authorities obvious. But the dynamism of the regional (Amazonia) and Latin-American movements fuelled the forum with a real militant political content.

The future of the WSF depends in part on the country where it meets, on how national and regional movements are involved, and on the political issues that are raised. In North America and the Middle East, for example, issues like the war and the impact of the global capitalist crisis arise with greater force today than in Brazil. The social forums are built “from below” more than “from above.”

Contrasting Political Evolutions of the Social Movement

Nevertheless, certain global political events affect the dynamic of anti-globalisation. As long as the blows were struck from the outside – after September 11 2001, repression in Gothenburg (Sweden) and Genoa (Italy) – the radicalism of the movement has maintained itself on an international scale. But two major political turning points have undermined it from within.

The WSF activists were first divided in the key countries on the issue of social-liberal governments of the left or the centre-centre left. This was particularly the case in Italy vis-à-vis that of Prodi and the participation in government of the Party of Communist Refoundation (PRC). But it is also true for Brazil (Lula), South Africa (the ANC in power), and

in West Bengal, an important Indian state ruled by the CPI-M.

The obvious failure of the Italian experience (return to power of Berlusconi, electoral defeat of the PRC) and the explosion of the financial crisis have not succeeded in restoring the dynamic unity of before. In part, this reflects the continuing weakened state of the social movement, but it also reveals that the differences we face are more profound than temporary disagreements about the policy of the “lesser evil” and support for Prodi against the Berlusconi right.

Anti-liberalism has split under the pressure of the financial crisis, one wing of the movement “globalising” its alternatives, another, in contrast, moderating its ambitions. For example, Peter Wahl, co-founder of ATTAC in Germany and member of the NGO Weed says that we can only choose between different varieties of capitalism. He places his hopes in the reformist sectors of the elites and calls on civil society to influence them so that the capitalism of tomorrow is fairer socially and more sustainable environmentally. He relies on a somewhat expanded G20, a G23, and the UN to lead the reform.[8]

Another example. France experienced a significant wave of radical mobilisations (for example “sequestration of senior executives” also known as “boss-napping”) during the first half of 2009, ranging from universities to car factories, to the point that the elites were concerned about a Greek-style social explosion or a new May 68. It was possible, it was necessary, to take initiatives to facilitate the convergence of these struggles. The fear of it getting out of control, however, pushed the trade union confederations to act together (a fact without precedent in France for a long time) to organise a nationwide day of action every two months! After an undeniable initial success, participation in these repeated days obviously decreased. The desire for trade union unity was used to channel and defuse the movement. The government understood well that it needed to do nothing except wait for the lack of perspectives to demobilise the movement.

The French anti-globalisation movement should have supported the struggles, assisted their synergy. But it was paralysed. A violent controversy arose between the CGT trade union branches in the car factories in struggle and their confederation leadership, accused of inaction. However, it is that same leadership which is represented in the executive committee of the Social Forums (CIFS) not the Continental factory workers.

Certainly we cannot simply counterpose the “base” to the “summit” to judge the choice of the federation leadership. But to put it bluntly, left or union realpolitik often disguises processes of “neutralisation,” of adaptation and social co-option. It must be noted that faced with the crisis the union bureaucracies and other more or less institutionalised movements put on the brakes of politicisation and militant developments. The crisis reinforces their fear of radicalism.

The brief period of unanimous anti-globalisation has closed. How can we continue to build the broadest unity for struggle in these conditions? The answer is not simple – and certainly not identical across countries or regions. It is even less simple because the “spaces” for discussion are sterilised and constrained.

From top to bottom – in the International Council as in many meetings of the anti-globalisation movement – many things are discussed, but not how to build struggles, even though that should be a major concern and that we need, in this area in particular, to exchange analyses and experiences! The IC of the WSF even gives itself the luxury of

organising a “strategic” reflection where political disagreements are glossed over. An amazing depoliticisation of strategy – without debate, a dynamic process (the formation of a consensus) is replaced by an insidiously authoritarian way of functioning.

We can thus understand the development of the calls for a response after the capitalist crisis. One of the most radical is also one of the first: that of Beijing.[9] Certain statements follow this line, like that of the assembly of movements at Belém[10] and elsewhere.[11] But in most cases they are bland, whereas one was entitled to expect a deepening of the initial momentum.

Legacy and Future

Is the WSF useful for the struggle? That was and that remains the key issue. The best of statements (and there are good ones!) are useless if they are not translated into mobilisations. The birth of the WSF represented a positive break vis-à-vis the routinised international conferences of NGOs. But the more it disconnects from the social struggles the more it in its turn becomes institutionalised. A process very advanced at the level of the international council, but still partially offset by the dynamism of the movements which participate in some of the forums. The experience of the forums is still usually rewarding for the (new) participants. But the WSF process is extremely costly in terms of financial resources and the energies of militants. These costs become unjustifiable if the struggles do not derive sufficient benefit from them.

Whatever becomes of the WSF, it expressed a historical experience whose positive lessons should not be forgotten. It opened a space of convergences where the whole range of resistance to the commodification of the world could be found. It aided the synergy of struggles when the labour movement or the political-military organisations were no longer playing the centralising role that they did in the last century. It has given shape to anti-globalisation, combining old solidarities (North-South ...) with new forms of solidarity (“horizontal”), restoring colour to an internationalism that had lost its lustre.

The experience of the forums can thus help to overcome some strategic impasses. How, for example, can the relationship of forces be improved when massive strikes have not proved sufficient to permanently block the neoliberal counter-reforms? Convergence (including at the local level) allows us to envisage territorial mobilisation: the simultaneous action of an entire population in and outside the workplace (which goes well beyond the solidarity of people with a strike by employees). The “territorial strike” has been tried in many countries of the Third World, but in few countries of the “first world.” But it is not for nothing that “All together” (tous ensemble) became so popular a banner at the time of globalisation. The experience of the forums, a permanent crucible of multilateral solidarity, provides food for thought and concrete reflection on such questions, for the future.

Pierre Rousset is a member of the executive committee of the Fourth International. This article appeared on [Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières](#) website. Translation by Richard Hatcher.

Notes

1. See Pierre Rousset, “[World Social Forums.](#)”
2. See Walden Bello, “[The Forum at the Crossroads.](#)”

3. See João Pedro Stedile, "[The WSF Has to Agree On Common Actions Against Common Enemies](#)," IPS, 24 January 2008.

4. See "[Another World is Possible in Diversity: ...Affirming the struggle for sexual and reproductive rights](#),"

5. See Michael Warschawski, "[Grassroots Activism and NGOs](#)."

6. See Kamal Mitra Chenoy, "[Making history: the future of the World Social Forum](#)."

7. Eric Toussaint & Pauline Imbach, "[A New Start with the 2009 World Social Forum](#)."

8. Peter Wahl, "[With Realistic Radicalism: Which approach to the upcoming era of reforms?](#)"

9. Beijin Call, "[The global economic crisis: An historic opportunity for transformation](#)."

10. Social Movements, Declaration, Bélem, "[We won't pay for the crisis. The rich have to pay for it!](#)"

11. For example in the Philippines, "[People Over Profits, Society Over The Market: The Balay Kalinaw People's Agenda to Respond to the Economic Crisis](#)

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