

World Social Forum: Talk versus Action. The Tug-of-War Continues

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PORTO ALEGRE, Brazil, (IPS) – A call issued by social movements to evolve towards a more active role in generating concrete action marked the opening session of a seminar assessing the 10 years of the World Social Forum (WSF) Monday in this southern Brazilian city, the birthplace of the annual global civil society gathering.

“It would be a step forward if the Forum were to adopt a declaration containing positions on which a consensus has been reached, such as anti-imperialism, the ‘financialisation’ of wealth, and the condemnation of the failure of the Copenhagen conference on climate change,” said João Antonio Felício, president of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), Brazil’s main trade union federation.

A consensus agreement would help drive “more compelling mass action,” which is necessary to strengthen social movements and avoid “a political setback in Latin America,” along the lines of what happened in Chile, where the right won the presidential elections on Jan. 17 for the first time in two decades, the trade unionist asserted.

Felício clarified that he was not talking about approving “a common minimum programme of the kind traditionally hashed out by leftwing movements, but about establishing a consensus-based platform that would serve to intensify actions.”

“Mass movements are essential in order to change the world; the game can only be won if you step out in the field to play,” said João Pedro Stédile, one of the national coordinators of Brazil’s Landless Workers Movement (MST) and a head of the global peasant movement Via Campesina in Brazil.

In Stédile’s view, “mass movements are the only instrument society has to modify reality, by pressuring governments and other powers-that-be, such as transnational corporations.”

But the WSF, which initially emerged as a rejoinder to the World Economic Forum (WEF), an annual meeting of the world’s political and financial movers and shakers in Davos, Switzerland, has already begun to foment mass actions, argued Oded Grajew, a former businessman who organised the first WSF in 2001.

It has done so by bringing together the broadest range of organisations and movements from all around the world, and facilitating the creation of coalitions and common agendas and joint actions, he maintained.

“The WSF was conceived of as a facilitator, where activists network and join together to

strengthen or broaden their activities,” said Grajew. “Those who want to propose actions can go ahead and do so, and drum up support and participants; no one is stopping them. But nobody is forced to do anything either.”

“We should remain a forum, where everyone has a chance to debate and discuss things; resolutions, no matter how consensual they appear to be, end up excluding someone,” Chico Whitaker, another WSF founder and a representative of Brazil’s Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, told IPS.

Cândido Grzybowski, director of the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), who is another of the WSF’s leading organisers, remarked to IPS that he does not believe it would be possible to approve a consensus document, although he said “it is legitimate to try.”

At the 2005 WSF, the last edition that was held in Porto Alegre – at which time a decision was reached to hold the global gathering every two years instead of annually – a group of intellectuals closely involved in the process issued the “Porto Alegre Consensus”, a “manifesto” that drew harsh criticism and found little echo.

“The WSF has unavoidable limits because of its nature as a gathering space and a generator of ideas,” said Grzybowski. “It is an opportunity to reflect and exchange ideas, and concrete action to actually create ‘another world’ is a task that goes beyond the forum,” he said.

“The crisis of civilisation called our own previous ideas and practices into question, when there was talk of social justice and it was said that increasing production would solve other problems. Today we have to link social justice to environmental justice, which was not really present in the debate in 2001,” he said.

“There are challenges like deepening the interdependence between global and local actions...and ‘decolonising’ our minds of categories that were not born of our struggles,” he said, stressing the hopes he has for the young people who have “taken over” the WSF.

At last year’s global edition in the northern Brazilian Amazon jungle city of Belem, 34 percent of the participants were under the age of 24, he pointed out.

There is a clash between new and old “cultures” within the WSF, whose first edition, in 2001, “frightened many because of its overwhelming diversity,” said Lilian Celiberti, a Uruguayan feminist with the Articulación Feminista Marcosur, which groups women’s organisations from several South American countries.

“A ‘hierarchisation’ of struggles puts certain issues, like anti-imperialism, in the forefront, but there are also other questions, like anti-sexism, anti-racism and anti-patriarchal systems,” she said.

“Forging a common agenda would mean reducing diversity. But the WSF is a chance to get together and rebuild hope – an end in and of itself,” she stated.

This year’s WSF will not feature a single global centralised gathering. Instead, 27 different national, thematic and local activities will be held throughout the world year-round. The calendar of events kicked off with the 10 Years World Social Forum Seminar and other activities in Greater Porto Alegre – the city and several nearby towns.

This week's events in Brazil will also include a Solidarity Economy World Fair, the 10th Intercontinental Youth Camp, a cultural meeting and a thematic panel on World Forum Theology and Liberation.

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