

World Social Forum

Something new was born in Porto Alegre

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History is made by actions, but also by dreams. Imagining that another world is possible is a fundamental act of creation, and it is the first step toward making the dream come true. The World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 25–30 January 2001, could become an historical reference point for our generation.

The World Social Forum revealed contradictions and liberated creative energies. It was, without doubt, a hopeful way to begin the new millennium for those who love freedom and prize human dignity. The World Social Forum was unprecedented in character. It emerged as an initiative of worldwide civil society groups that value the practice of struggle and citizen participation in diverse societies. Their aim was to highlight the global dimension of the various proposals emerging from civil society.

The Social Forum aims to become a widespread movement of ideas, which—unlike the dominant ideology—feeds on the diversity of human possibilities. The interpretations in favour or against it are the best measures of its impact, though it is difficult to reach an agreement on its novelty, consistency and political-cultural importance.

Brainstorming

Something new was born in Porto Alegre. It was a true *Agora*² of worldwide democracy, with all the murmuring and confusion of such a gigantic event. The atmosphere invited us to dream of another world that is possible, timely and necessary. It was simply the first step.

It will take time to evaluate the impact of the First World Social Forum. The available information is approximate, but speaks for itself. Over 4,700 delegates attended, representing civil society groups and movements, academic institutions, churches, and parliamentary and municipal officials. Over 1,500 international organisations from 117 countries were registered. There were 165 celebrities (77 national and 88 international), 96 of whom were panelists (27 national and 69 international). An estimated 2,000 participated in the youth camp, and there were around 700 representatives from indigenous nations. More than 1,300 people worked in organisation, communications, technical support, translation and security, and 1,870 accredited journalists attended, 386 of whom were international.

The interest generated among the mass media was evident, with the presence of 764 mass media vehicles. There were 322 international journalists from 52 different countries. In all, nearly 12 thousand people participated in one way or another.

The Organising Committee structured the Forum into three basic types of activities: specific topics for discussion in the morning; voluntary delegate workshops in the afternoon; and in the evening, talks by important figures in the struggle for citizen participation throughout the world. Basic guidelines were proposed for the four simultaneous discussions held each morning on the four main themes:

- The production of wealth and social reproduction.
- Access to wealth and sustainability.
- The affirmation of civil society and public spaces.
- Political power and ethics in the new society.

Despite the expressive participation and importance of the debate in the morning discussions, the true wealth of the Forum and its innovative force came from the workshops proposed by the participants. In these workshops—over

300 actually took place—, diversity promoted creativity, deepening of topics, creation of proposals, exchange of experiences, and spontaneous articulation among the participants.

Guest presentations provided an efficient instrument for valuing the experiences of those identified with the cause of citizen participation. They completed preliminary efforts to map who we are and what we do to construct alternatives to the dominant ideology. Parallel meetings of mayors and legislators gave the Forum resonance as a new type of event, capable of generating a large movement of ideas.

The World Social Forum generated a collection of topics that affect everyone, of initiatives taken and practices developed, of possible alternatives and strategies to make them feasible. The Forum was not systematic, but it was a coherent collective effort. There was a risk that the wealth of diversity might result in anarchy, but this did not happen. The common principles and values that inspired this wide spectrum of participants provided a common foundation for hearts and minds, joining diverse activists from around the world in an enveloping wave.

Action on the front

The Social Forum is an important piece in the collage of opposition to the dominant ideology; it is a way of generating a collective conscience and elaborating alternative theories. For this reason, its essence and vitality are associated with the trenches of containment against the avalanche of globalisation, trenches dug by groups of men and women who are building the conditions of their own economic, social and cultural life.

It is impossible to understand the Social Forum without linking it to the growing wave of public protests against globalisation, as occurred in Seattle, Washington, Prague and Nice. The people behind the Forum are the same actors in the same struggles, movements, associations and organisations, however small or large, local or national, regional or global. It is this global convergence of diverse networks and movements that creates and sustains the World Social Forum.

Paradoxically, the struggle against globalisation leads to the creation of global networks and civil movements. The cornerstone in the building of a global perspective by civil society was laid by civil organisations working together on the Uruguayan Round (1986–1994) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which was followed by the creation of the World Trade Organisation. The next step was Seattle at the end of 1999. Already, there were signs of a strategic alliance of actors, including citizen's networks, NGOs and trade unions. A similar process occurred around the topic of external debt and the World Jubilee 2000 Campaign.

In the 1990s, active global citizen's networks emerged in the sphere of the cycle of UN conferences. Most of these were thematic networks accumulating the knowledge and experience vital for envisioning alternatives to globalisation. The Social Watch network is an example, and many other networks were organised around it: SAPRIN (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network), Alliance for a Responsible and Solidary World, RIAD (Interamerican Network for Agriculture and Development), APM (Peasants' Agriculture and Modernisation), Peasant Way, One World, *etc.*

The World Social Forum aims to create another space for this encounter, a crossroads, an open university where global citizens reflect and exchange knowledge and experience. The idea is to extract the constructive common essence of diversity, which exists in global citizen initiatives and in resistance to the dominant ideology. This was the resounding achievement of the World Social Forum. The rest was daring and courage by those who committed themselves to

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² Marketplace in ancient Greece.

this work: the Organising Committee in Brazil³, the International Support Committee, and the vital support of the State of Rio Grande do Sul and the Municipality of Porto Alegre.

The social network of organisations and movements in Brazil, with their extensive experience of participating in local government, were necessary conditions for the realisation of the Forum and a clear signal to the world about its reach. Finally, we cannot ignore the good political sense of the organisers who correctly identified the immediate objectives of the World Social Forum as the synthesis of all the wishes of participants, and as a counterpoint to all that the Davos Forum stood for.

Weighty provocation

The first and fundamental result of the Forum was the event itself. In this first stage, its existence became a relevant political event. The second important result, inseparable from the first, was the Forum as the antithesis of the World Economic Forum of Davos, the great mecca of neoliberalism, a *locus* of meetings and exchanges among the governing elite of economic and financial globalisation.

The Forum established the importance of public debate of contrasting perspectives, and this forms a fundamental element of its identity. There were many tensions, pressures and disagreements at the Forum. It did not, however, seek adherence to one central idea capable of attacking the dominant ideology. Rather, it accomplished its basic objective of respect and appreciation for the diverse citizen's initiatives and ideas. The Forum did not result in one official document. Many documents were produced by various networks and organisations participating in the different workshops. Respectful of the tremendous diversity of opinions and the natural contradictions among them, these documents represent what could be called the conclusions of the World Social Forum.

Creating an open forum, respectful of all the ideas, initiatives and experiences of civil society was a risky task. During the preparation process and our days in Porto Alegre, there was tension between the concept of mobilising for direct action and the idea of creating a space predominantly for reflection and debate. In the end, the latter prevailed. Another constant danger was that government involvement would make the Forum official and partisan. However, the open negotiations with officials from national and municipal governments, their generous support and their enormous comprehension of the nature of the event, allowed the Forum to be what it was intended to be: a civil society event, of great social and political import, that points to the emergence of a wide movement of ideas promoting citizen participation.

The importance of the Forum could be seen on the faces of participants, and in the messages from those who were absent. Messages from Brazil and from around the planet, manifesting support and the wish to participate, were a source of strength and a reason for continuing the Forum. The mass media amplified the Forum and gave it resonance, and this led to a public commitment to continuity.

Today there is a great need for a space of global dimensions to confront and register our dreams, ideas, experiences and movements. People desire and perceive the possibility of a more human, democratic and sustainable world based on the values and ethical principles of freedom, equality, diversity, solidarity and participation, though these desires and perceptions are expressed in different and even contradictory ways in different societies and cultures. These aspirations are threatened by the avalanche of economic globalisation. But it is these aspirations, in their stubbornness and persistence, that build the foundation for initiatives such as the Forum. Activists from across the world, dedicated to diverse local struggles, become involved (when possible) in processes that bring them

into contact with one another, leading them to re-imagine and rethink the world they desire. The World Social Forum provides space for the growth of a powerful movement of ideas.

Challenges on the table

There was agreement on general definitions regarding the continuity of the World Social Forum: it should be annual, it should be on the same date as the Davos Forum in Switzerland, and it should be as global as possible. It was more challenging to find common ground on six controversial topics. The strengthening of this initiative depends on meeting these challenges.

Globalisation

Few Africans, Asians, Northern and Eastern Europeans, Caribbean and Central Americans participated. There was also a deficit in participation of some groups, e.g. some age groups, different ethnic and cultural groups, and the disabled. More diverse representation cannot be achieved by a greater call for diversity, or a greater will to participate. Financing the costs of participation is a logistical problem. Those who want to attend the Social Forum, particularly those from southern countries, do not have the resources to pay their own way, and they are unlikely to receive support from the international corporations.

At the same time, as the experience in Porto Alegre revealed, the location of the Forum is a powerful occasion for energising local movements, associations, groups and networks. This is a positive aspect in terms of what the Forum aspires to be. But such mobilisation will only occur if the Forum maintains its global dimension, bringing together people involved in many local and global struggles and allowing them to interact. The worst option would be to *nationalise* the Social Forum, making it a prisoner of one country or place where it is held.

For these reasons, the Organising Committee proposed that the Forum travel around the world. The most daring idea, which emerged at the last moment and achieved consensus, was to attempt a multipolar World Social Forum in the year 2002. But it can only be multipolar if the initiatives in all regions and countries are held at the same time and with the same vision. They must generate the same climate of citizen activity and exchange, and everyone who participates should feel that they are participating in a unique initiative. Meeting this challenge will require the same level of effort that went into organisation of the First Forum.

Character

The novel character and the privileged political-cultural place of the Forum in the global context are intimately linked to the deepening of its essence as a space for debate and exchange. Mobilisation and action have their world agenda and, though they are important, they do not need the World Social Forum. The Forum must be preserved as a convergence of networks and movements for collective strategic reflection, as a university of global citizenry, where individuals come together bringing different ideas and practices, from which proposals for the future are shaped.

Principles

The Social Forum will be a place to generate ideas and proposals whose strength arises from social and cultural diversity, as well as theoretical and practical consistency. It is a necessity and a right of those participating in the initiative to assume positions and create and publish documents. But to aim at creating *one* unified document would be to apply a homogenising straightjacket, and would damage the legitimacy of the Forum's critique of globalisation with its uniform way of thinking. The values and ethical principles established are what congregate the diversity of the Forum. The work of the World Social Forum is based on a charter of values and principles, to which participants adhere as an urgent and permanent task. This charter provides positive criteria and permits the forging of our own diversity without the risk of creating allies that are undesirable because of their ideas and practices.

³ The following entities are part of, in Brasil, the Organizing Committee of the World Social Forum: Abong, Attac, CBJP/CNBB, Cives (Brazilian Association of Businessmen for Citizenry), CUT (Central Union of Workers), Ibase (Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis), Center for Global Justice and MST (Landless Peasant Movement).

Agenda

This is a particularly important challenge. There appear to be no disagreements because the agenda is not yet apparent. In Porto Alegre there was room for everything. We should recognise, however, that—unlike the Economic Forum—it was not the consistency of the agenda that created the impact, but rather the intention of creating this consistency. This at least was the opinion of the mass media.

In fact, the Forum served as a balance. The organisers proposed the thematic discussions, the participants proposed the workshops. The idea was to produce a common ground or synthesis of these proposals, creating and validating an agenda for the future. This was partly achieved.

How was this agenda established? As something to be defined, because the debates were so varied that it was impossible to identify it immediately. It should, however, aim to elaborate the topics that motivate people all over the world.

The Social Forum aims to be proactive and not reactive, as most worldwide citizen's events have been. To create its own identity, it must have its own agenda and not depend on the immediate agenda of the *owners* of the world. The challenge is to create an agenda that, as Boaventura Souza Santos said in Porto Alegre, is capable of "proposing the new in order to maintain the old." Given globalisation's dismantling of rights, the defense of these rights demands the building of a new perspective that allows a universal dialogue as well as the multiculturalism of the emerging planetary citizenry. Postponing this task would put the Forum at risk of losing direction.

Practices

The proposal of alternatives, though still in an embryonic stage, is part of the worldwide citizen's initiatives. The Forum may function as a "translator", allowing us to recognise equality in diversity, to know what joins us and what distinguishes us. We need to exchange of knowledge and experiences arising from action, to identify convergences, and to engage in systematic political reflection. Another challenge is to gather and evaluate what has already happened in many workshops,

roundtables and testimonies. There is a lack of funding, but there is also a richness of citizen's practices, which is the best guarantee that the Forum will develop a perspective radically opposed to that of the Economic Forum.

Legitimacy and operational capacity

In principle, the role of the Organising Committee of the First Forum ended with the event. Nevertheless, the participating Brazilian entities have a specific responsibility that they cannot deny. This responsibility is shared by the governments of Rio Grande do Sul and Porto Alegre and all those who supported the Forum in one way or another.

The problem begins with legitimacy, though it does not end there. The announcement and the organisation of the Forum's continuity must be based in a committee that is worldwide, geographically and socially. This is a delicate and difficult task that can only be executed by the Organising Committee of the First Social Forum. A great political will and much generosity will be needed. One path is to immediately identify the networks and movements that adhered to the event and are willing to give it continuity. Further, those who have already formed committees to make the Forum worldwide and even organise similar events in their regions should become members of the Organising Committee.

For this process to have operational capacity, an International Political Committee should be established to define the direction of the Social Forum. A representative and operational Organising Committee should be formed in each location where the Forum will take place, and an Executive Council should be created to make the connection between the Political Committee and the various Organising Committees and to articulate the process of the multipolar Forum. It is better to accept the risks involved in carrying out these proposals, as happened with the First Social Forum, than to wait for ideal conditions.

In conclusion, we must keep in mind that the Forum will be positive as long as it does not exercise power directly. Politics is part of its identity, but its commitment is to widening public space for the exercise of citizen participation. It must not become an event for arguing positions, whatever they may be. It is the rising wave of civil society itself that must be nourished and not dissipated or broken up on the beach. ■

Is Another World Possible?

VIRGINIA VARGAS¹

Not everything went smoothly at the World Social Forum (WSF). Some feminists were present at some of the sessions, in part because Southern Cone feminists put pressure on the organisers, but this participation was not at all equal. This is why a feminist manifesto, read at one of the morning plenary meetings, pointed out the clearly sexist language and relatively small presence of feminists in debates on very important topics.

The internal political confrontation in Brazil was not to be taken lightly either: on the day of the WSF inauguration, President Cardoso spoke publicly against it (wasting a unique opportunity to break with the one-track thinking and complacent democracy in his country), accusing it of being an "exhibitionist festival of the left."

The live conference between the Social Forum and the Davos meeting also led to complications. It should have been a space for political discussion, but some WSF participants hurled simplistic accusations instead of expressing the much more human and complex dynamics that inspired the Forum.

There was also the significant presence of political parties (mainly from Brazil), which, although it did not occur, risked disfiguring what was necessarily

a forum for global civil society. Underneath all these dynamics, feeding them, was the constant tension between old and new, between new themes and new subjectivities and the old avant-garde vision and rhetoric. It is one-track thinking caught in the dynamics of change.

For the organisation of the next Forum, it is proposed that the international organising committee be further opened up—hopefully, this will contribute to a better planning. Regarding feminism, the decision to widen the discussions, and add other actors and movements to the debate, and the recognition of new trends that are interlaced with and enrich feminist proposals for the new millennium are challenges we must face at the next Forum. We also raise the challenge that is contained in the question asked by REPEM: "Isn't it time to remember that the world is for everyone (men and women), or isn't it at all?" ■

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