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Social Forums – Challenges and New Perspectives

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The decision of holding the World Social Forum on exactly the same days as the Davos World Economic Forum was in fact something of a “counter-communications operation.” The global media, which is entirely attuned to what global elites are doing and saying, would be obliged to open at least a little space to those who were contradicting these global elites at a simultaneous meeting time about alternatives for the future of the world.

The WSF organizers won the bet, and the WSF got some media coverage. Yet communication with the world continues to be a big challenge to the WSF process. We are still fighting to make the WSF better known and experienced all over the world, and to make the majorities aware that “another world” is not only possible but it is necessary and urgent.

A good example of this difficulty is the distorted information about the WSF International Council decisions after its meeting in Nairobi, in January 2007, regarding the continuation of the WSF process in 2008 and 2009. With very little information, those who preferred to see the WSF disappear said that its International Council did not know what to do, specially considering the lower attendance at the Nairobi Forum compared with earlier ones. That is to say, the claim was that the process was getting weaker.

In fact, even with fewer participants at this Forum it was a big step forward to increase the African civil society political participation and articulation at the continental level. The Council decided to promote a Global Day of Action in January 2008, the 26th, with multiple, diversified and auto-organized activities all over the world; and then with a new centralized World Social Forum in 2009, in a place then to be defined, and then it was
decided after the subsequent IC meeting to have the 2009 Forum: in the Amazon Region, more specifically in the Brazilian city of Belem do Pará.

Nor did the global media pay much attention to the evolving regional, national and local plans announced at the IC meeting. So, very little was said before and after the United States Social Forum that was realized in Atlanta in June 2007, at the very heart of the country that so dominates the world today. Such information as this shows that instead of weakening, the WSF process is even speeding up, as more and more plan to participate in the 2008 Global Day of Action and to participate in the 2009 WSF in the Amazon region.

Unfortunately for me I could not come to the United States Social Forum. I read nevertheless many reports, commentaries and evaluations disseminated through the internet. So, I could see that it was a very successful Forum, as a space where multiple and diverse organizations that are fighting for “another United States” – specially at the grassroots level – could exchange information and ideas, learn about each other, and mutually identify convergences and plan more articulated common activities and struggles. It seemed to me that the majority of those that came to the USSF left it with very much enthusiasm.

But I would like to make a comment about something that, from my point of view, can have a negative effect on the continuation of the process. I saw reports that there was a final resolution that participants at the USSF were called upon to endorse. As this type of resolution or proposition tends to appear in many Forums, it would be perhaps useful to deepen this question. Its with the same preoccupation with the future, I would also like in this paper to indicate some new possibilities that are emerging in relation to the activities to be organized in connection with the 2008 Global Day of Action.

**Final Declarations**

The question of final declarations or resolutions is not new in the WSF process. It accompanied the process since its beginning, in the discussion of how to ensure its character of space facilitating the emergence and articulation of as many as possible actions to change the world, and, at the same time, how to facilitate and deepen the engagement of the Forum’s participants in the actions and articulations proposed in it.

Some participants consider that to ensure the engagement in actions, the Social Forum process should have a political mobilizing program,
defined in a final declaration of each meeting, as an all activists’ meetings or assemblies. This preoccupation increases naturally as the time passes and as we do not see how our process is effectively changing the world. Many of us become impatient. Many of us become more and more anxious to obtain results, in the struggle to defeat those who – calmly or violently – impose injustices. Many of us think that we cannot only organize more and more meetings but we must do more to increase our own power in the face of the enormous dominating power.

Others, like myself, think that the Social Forums are not this power but only spaces – open spaces – that facilitate the building of this power. The power to change things will be the one of the organizations and movements of the society. This position is that the Forums must function as big nests making possible interrelations and articulations among our many organizations and movements, in mutual respect of their diversity. This common space would make possible the appearance of new ideas, propositions and convergences, overcoming the sectoral limits and the local or national dimensions of the struggles, reaching to the planetary level. Such propositions should gain as soon as possible their own dynamics and force, and an autonomy liberated from the dependence of the place (the nest) where they appeared. In this perspective, this space – continuously at the disposition of those wanting to reinforce their own actions, or those wanting to come again to the nest to evaluate what is happening and build new alliances – must host as many propositions as possible, diversified in colors and sizes, as the struggles for a new world must be multiple and diversified, and grow at all levels of complexity and aims.

Proposals of final declarations of the Forums – wished by those preoccupied with results, saying definitely what must be done – appear sometimes as an initiative of respected intellectuals, whose analysis prove to them that we know already how to change the world or, more frequently, as an initiative of important social movements, in meetings called Social Movements Assembly – or People’s Assembly, as it happened in Atlanta. All networks or social organizations can do such final meetings in the Forums, to close their discussions with decisions about the continuity of their struggles. It is even desirable. The problem is when some – like the Social Movements Assembly – are organized as the only one on the last day or immediately after its end.

According to the principle of relational horizontality – one of the main characteristics of the Forums’ organization – all initiatives, propositions and declarations of the participants have the same importance. But if one
of the assemblies has the privilege of being the only one at its final day, it appears necessarily as a final activity of the entire Forum, or its most important assembly, where final decisions will be adopted by all participants, that is to say, as the Social Forum’s final declaration.

That is effectively how the Social Movements Assembly declaration is understood specially by the media, in spite of the WSF Charter of Principles. This Charter forcefully rejects final declarations exactly to avoid the possibility of synthesizing the Forums’ discussions and interchanges in some necessarily limited conclusions, or to put the rich diversity of the participants action under some specific banners.

The Movement to Action

In fact those proposing such “final” declarations are calling – their declarations are usually named “calls” – all the participants of the Forums to engage themselves in the action they propose. When this occurs, we run the risk of seeing fewer and fewer initiatives coming to light, as well as fewer and fewer people attracted to the Forums, because people do not want to be obliged to participate in actions with which they don’t agree necessarily or completely. This is the result of advancing actions by hijacking the nest.

It would be a pity if we made our diversity disappear or our mutual help be destroyed, or our mutual reinforcement be destroyed, or our nest to be destroyed, exactly when we begin to be understood – from the end of the last century – that many of us were too isolated in our struggles and now can be reinforced if we unite with others. The real question to be solved is how to ensure open spaces to meet – the Forums – and, at the same time, in parallel, how to engage and articulate with those who are ready to continue their action or begin new ones after leaving the Forums.

The methodology adopted in the Nairobi WSF intended to answer this question, making possible the interchange in the first three days to sit together the fourth day – in as many as possible small or big meetings – to plan the actions that were discussed and proposed earlier. This method gave some results but not sufficient results, with some probable positive exceptions. We had many “planning” workshops in the morning and more than twenty plenaries in the afternoon, but in the plenaries people could only be informed about what was planned in the morning, with less possibility to engage themselves in other proposals, and not even to eventually combine actions.

The final Social Movements Assembly took place also at the end of the Nairobi Forum. But independently of its being or its not being considered,
the Social Forum final assembly, it seems that it was not a good solution to the problem we must solve. In a discussion list about the WSF this text of Stellan Vinthagen, referring to the Social Movements Assembly held in Nairobi, shows clearly that we must think a little more about the method used in any assembly or plenary:

... That proposal of statement is read and after that a “debate” on the statement is opened with the opportunity of making changes. Within minutes the line of people who wanted to speak in Nairobi was filled and the interventions were very loosely connected to the statement. Mostly it was a line of monologues, announcements, anti-neoliberal speeches, congratulations on various struggles in the world, salutes of slum-dwellers in Nairobi and of the successful WSF in Kenya, etc... It was not bad in itself, but it wasn’t a political debate about how to do global action campaigns or build a strategy for the movement of movements. As time passed, less and less people stayed on, and at the end of it, the chair of the meeting announced in front of the couple of hundreds that where left that the statement was adopted...

Ideas for the 2008 Global Day of Action

The call for this Day of Action states:

We are millions of women and men, organisations, networks, movements, trade unions from all parts of the world; we come from villages, regions, rural zones, urban centres; we are of all ages, peoples, cultures, beliefs, but we are united by the strong conviction that

ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

With all the richness of our plurality and diversity and our alternatives and proposals, we struggle against neo-liberalism, war, colonialism, racism and patriarchy which produce violence, exploitation, exclusion, poverty, hunger and ecological disaster and deprive people of human rights.

We commit ourselves to a week of action which will culminate in a Global Day of Mobilisation and Action on January 26, 2008.

With our diversity which is our strength, we invite all men and women to undertake throughout this week creative actions, activities, events and convergences focusing on the issues and expressed in the ways they choose.

There are already plenty of ideas about the activities to be realized on 26th January 2008, in the frame of the Global Day of Action: regional and

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1) Activist-scholar from War Resisters International and School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University.
2) see www.wsf2008.net.
local forums, festivals, music and theater spectacles, protest marches, etc. The proposal of linking each of these activities with others in other continents, can also create a dense web of relations, all over the world, of people fighting to overcome the present neoliberal domination. One idea is being developed in Brazil that could create the possibility of participation for many people, opening also perspectives for the future: the organization of “fairs of actions to change the world”.

The fairs are based in the practice of the stalls that tend to be used in all Forums, where the organizations and movements show what they are doing and answer to questions about their actions, as well as disseminate written information about them. The potentiality of these stalls to facilitate intercommunication among Forum participants, more directly and freely than in the workshop discussions or conferences, were made clear by the organizers of the 2007 Melbourne Social Forum, in Australia, calling people to use stalls in the Forum:

In previous years the stalls have been a highlight and we’d like to have a great array of stalls run by Melbourne’s activist community again this year. Stalls are a great way of having a presence at the event: to share knowledge with people, to sell your progressive goods, to find volunteers and interested people, and to let the community know about the important work your organisation is doing. It is (...) a great opportunity for some exposure for your group.

In this perspective, such a fair as a one-day event is easier to organize than a local social forum, in every little city or every region of bigger cities. All movements and organizations that are working for “another world” can be identified and invited, becoming then better known by the others and interchanging knowledge, experiences and information more easily than in Forums. Markets for the solidarity economy can be organized, as well as innovative experiences of social money. And new action articulations can born as in the Forums. Combined with spectacles of music or dance or even theater groups, the fair can also attract the population, making it possible to disseminate more widely the WSF message.

This type of event could be then organized every year, at the date of the Social Forums at the world level, becoming a local tradition. And it would be possible also to use the internet so that the participants of the fair could follow what is being discussed, what is happening and what is being proposed worldwide, opening the possibility of a genuine world campaign and worldwide social Forum.