

Making history: the future of the World Social Forum

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The World Social Forum in Mumbai was democracy in action in search of a fairer, people-centred world, says one of its Indian organisers. But to advance its global ambitions, must it look beyond Brazil as the site of future forums?

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The fourth World Social Forum, and the first held outside Brazil, concluded in Mumbai on 21 January after six days of intensive discussion, rallies and cultural events. What did this event really mean? Why did they participate – more than 100,000 people, including both the 15,000 from over 130 countries outside India itself, and the overwhelming numbers of urban and rural poor, Dalits, tribals and women?

Read Kamal Mitra Chenoy's preview of the WSF, "Dateline Mumbai"

They came, most evidently, to protest against the failure of neo-liberal globalisation to provide equitable and sustainable development, and to debate alternatives. The forum – in the 1,200-plus public meetings, seminars and workshops organised by movements from India and abroad – had, as its overarching themes, discussion of the forces that disfigure humanity: patriarchy, racism, casteism, religious sectarianism, and militarism.

These discussions voiced a rich variety of views from the environmental, women's, tribal, indigenous peoples', workers', peasants' and other movements, and diverse intellectual and political tendencies. Such a plurality is built into the forum and its charter, in the form of the concept of an 'open space' that encourages contending opinions to debate and exchange experiences. This space includes those figures (like Joseph Stiglitz and Mary Robinson) who want a reformed liberal model to replace the neo-liberal 'Washington consensus' that dominates the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the OECD; and more radical critics who seek anti-capitalist alternatives (like Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and Walden Bello).

The very fact that such diverse voices as Jean Drèze, Juan Somavia, Prabhat Patnaik, Medha Patkar and Jose Bové could explore differing visions of the future in a shared environment is indication of the democratic character of the space the WSF created in Mumbai.

Containing multitudes

Some of the WSF's critics have variously charged the forum with being a foreign-funded talk-shop or nothing more than a carnival. The cacophony of views expressed at the WSF, activists in the Mumbai Resistance event claim, disables the unity of the opposition that is needed to United States attempts

to secure its global hegemony.

The best refutation of such views is the experience of WSF participants themselves. The overwhelming majority of Indians who attended came at their own cost, which included lost income from the workdays they missed, and involving little or no subsidy from the organisations they represented. The same is true for most middle-class activists, both from India and abroad.

The Mumbai WSF, in contrast to the Brazilian committee which had arranged earlier forums, decided not to accept funding from agencies like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Britain's department of international development (DfID). So the Indian media image of elite, foreign-funded intellectuals dominating the 'rented' crowds in Mumbai is a canard; as is the comment that most participants were not intellectually engaged and had come only for a latter-day Woodstock-type carnival.

Indeed, the range of views and discussions at the WSF reflects the serious thinking among those present in search of fresh, sustainable, people-centred models of globalisation. But when all regional, national and even local particularities are taken into account, it has become clear that there can be no single "alternative" model. Any innovative socio-economic approach in western Germany would differ from that in the country's eastern region, as both would from experiments in different parts of Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Yet it is precisely the combination of shared concern and frank discussion of these complexities by major intellectuals, leaders of mass movements and activists – in audiences large and small, from 50 to 50,000 – that makes the World Social Forum unique. This is the WSF's strength and the reason why it will endure: a commitment to democratic debate founded on diversity and openness, and a recognition of the responsibility of intellectuals to question received wisdom from whatever source.

The sheer scale and variety of the gathering is itself an achievement. It is unfortunate, then, that sections of the media highlighted a case of alleged rape of one South African delegate by another (a charge since withdrawn) in a five-star hotel several miles from the WSF itself. It is a cardinal principle of the WSF's organisers to condemn all violence against and harassment of women – experiences given all-too-rare attention by the media in India, including in Mumbai.

Read America Vera-Zavala on "A space of freedom: the World Women's Forum"

Again, the intrinsic character of the forum itself presents an answer to such inequality of treatment. This enormous popular gathering – even larger and more diverse than its predecessor in Porto Alegre – featured extensive discussions by feminist organisations, and noted intellectuals like Nawal al-Saadawi and the 2003 Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. These discussions included criticisms of the aggressively patriarchal attitudes that lead to and legitimise crimes against women; and creative feminist analyses of dominant, neo-realist, state-centric concepts of 'national security'.

The world entire

The main practical lesson of the Mumbai WSF is the need to provide more time for informal discussion and exchange of experiences. The wish of the organisers to give all movements the space they desired meant that formal discussions stretched from 9am to 8pm. This did not leave enough time for more relaxed dialogue. A shortage of funds also left many good and diverse discussions unrecorded even in summary form – a major drawback which deprived the forum of what would have been an invaluable record of a historic event.

Despite these limitations, the WSF's international council believes that the Mumbai event was a

milestone of social organisation in India itself, and across Asia as a whole. In both nation and continent, the Mumbai forum marks the broadening of alliances against the world's dominant economic model and the politics of communalism and bigotry.

It is likely that, after 2006, such massive annual mobilisations will be held only every two years, with continental and regional forums in the intervening year. There is also a sense that the forum must move beyond its Brazilian base as much as possible; the hosting of the event in different continents and countries in principle would expand and strengthen the global reach of alternatives to neo-liberalism.