

Building a Social Movement World Network

A proposal for discussion

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ORIGINS

During the first World Social Forum, more than a thousand people representing hundreds of social movements, NGOs and trade unions of the whole world gathered in a common assembly and, with a feeling of strong unity, approved the "Porto Alegre Call of the Social Movements for Mobilization". (1) This was a unique and important moment.

The World Social Forum provides spaces, agendas and conditions for all organizations opposed to neo-liberalism to come together, to debate and to propose. The Forum as a whole does not assume specific positions or actions, but neither is it neutral, as shown in the WSF charter of principles and in the programming of the conferences. Regarding the matter of statements, declarations and actions, participants are free to organize in order to articulate initiatives in their own name, as long as it's not confused with the WSF role.

This was the spirit of the 2001 Porto Alegre "Call of the Social Movements" which, after a series of discussions and debates evaluating the consequences of the neo-liberal policies across the world, called on the social movement to mobilize against a series of institutional events in the year ahead, such as the annual meetings of the World Bank and IMF, the ministerial meeting of the WTO and the G8 Summit in Genoa.

Building on the Porto Alegre process, there was an international meeting of social movements in August 2001 in Mexico City, following the Congress of the Latin American Confederation of Rural Organizations (CLOC). This meeting, called by CUT and MST of Brazil, ATTAC-France and Focus on the Global South/Thailand, strengthened the decisions of Porto Alegre 2001 and gave us the opportunity to debate and construct proposals taking considering the political, language and cultural differences of the participants.

The second World Social Forum in January 2002 was the first great international event opposing neo-liberal globalization after September 11. It was a tremendous success, bringing together more than 50,000 people from across the world and demonstrating deep commitment to the work of building international resistance and solidarity. Again in 2002, hundreds of social movements, NGOs and trade unions met over five days to prepare a common call for action. The second call of the social movements (2) emphasized the rise of militarism and our opposition to war, as well as highlighting the failures of neo-liberal capitalism demonstrated by Argentina's economic and political crisis and the collapse of the US corporation, Enron.

At this time, the MST and the CUT volunteered to establish a secretariat to help coordinate preparations for the social movements meetings in the coming year and during the 2003 World Social Forum.

The secretariat has proposed that we initiate a debate on how the social movements that started to

come together in Porto Alegre could move in the direction of a more permanent articulation, while clearly preserving the differences between this initiative and the WSF.

This suggestion is now being framed as a proposal to establish a "Social Movements World Network". The process is in its first stages and the purpose of this paper is to engage many different groups in a regional and global discussion about this idea and to establish a process that takes advantage of the upcoming regional and thematic events promoted by the WSF.

Before drafting this document, some of these ideas were raised at the Asian Social Movements meeting held in Bangkok 10-12 August and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002, where a meeting of social movements was called. Other meetings to discuss this proposal are scheduled for Quito, Ecuador, during the mobilizations against the FTAA; in Florence, Italy, during the European Social Forum; in Belém, Brazil, during the Amazonian Social Forum; in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the African Social Forum; and in Hyderabad, India, during the Asian Social Forum. Depending on the evolution and outcome of the debates we intend to call for a grand assembly in Porto Alegre to conclude discussions and adopt resolutions.

THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

To constitute a minimum base for a social movements world network, it is necessary to have a clear perspective of the historical moment in which we are living.

The failure of neo-liberal economic policies to promote economic and social justice has weakened the consensus on the "Washington Consensus". At the same time, the multilateral institutions promoting structural adjustment, trade and financial liberalization, especially the WTO, IMF and World Bank, are rapidly losing their legitimacy.

Simultaneously, we are experiencing a tremendous rise in public opposition to neo-liberal policies in both the South and the North and the internationalization of the social movements, trade unions and NGOs opposing these policies and working for social and economic justice. At the same time, though, many of the "traditional social movements" and political parties, especially in the North, are facing a crisis as they struggle to develop new strategies, structures and approaches in response to a very dynamic and complex situation.

The rise of unilateralism, the war in Afghanistan, the establishment of new US military bases in the Philippines and other parts of Asia and the belligerent threats against Iraq, are all attempts to reinforce the domination of the big countries of the North, in particular the United States. In Latin America, the US military presence is growing under the pretext of the "war on drugs" and in all parts of the world, the "war on terror" has provoked the violation of basic political and civil rights and a rise in fear, xenophobia and racism. This, too, is giving rise to new alliances and convergences between social movements, trade unions and NGOs in the South and North and highlighting the links between militarization and globalized capitalism.

Economically, the global system is undergoing a severe crisis of overproduction and declining profits, resulting in massive lay-offs, corporate restructuring and a collapse in share prices. In this context, corruption at the highest level of corporate America is now coming to light, as are the intimate links between US capital and the US administration.

Democracy itself is under threat. Vibrant and dynamic democracies give us hope, yet in many countries elite democracies or dictatorships prevail. In others, voter turn-out is at an all-time low and fascist and fundamentalist political parties are able to capitalize on economic and social marginalization. Internationally, the United Nations system - which for many is the last hope of inter-

state democracy - is ineffective and powerless, as witnessed in Johannesburg during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) where the agenda of people-centered sustainable development was hi-jacked by the needs of corporate-centered economic growth.

THE PROPOSAL TO CONSTITUTE A SOCIAL MOVEMENTS WORLD NETWORK

The world is changing very quickly and we need new structures, decision-making processes and new formations to articulate and drive a radical democratic, feminist, internationalist and anti-imperialist agenda.

This requires the constitution of a network of movements that is squarely in defense of democracy and peace and that is broad, plural, feminist and anti neo-liberal. We need a movement that is independent of political parties, that respects the autonomy of the organizations constituting the movement and is non-ideological. That does not mean, though, that it is not political.

During the 2001 and 2002 World Social Forums, assemblies of social movements adopted resolutions articulating common analyses and committing common mobilizations. These assemblies were open to all delegates at the WSF and the agreements were constructed collectively and endorsed by mass assemblies.

During the WSF 2003, we propose to discuss the creation of the Social Movements World Network. This proposal is a clear indication of our willingness to build a common framework as a reference and as a tool for our international mobilizations, however such a proposal can only succeed with the engagement of movements from around the world in discussions and debates.

WHY DO WE NEED A SOCIAL MOVEMENTS WORLD NETWORK?

A Social Movements World Network would help us develop the conditions so that the diverse social movements of the world can exchange analyses, opinions and information on the present conjuncture and establish some shared priorities and necessary tasks, before and after the meetings of the WSF. The debate, interchange and coordination between us could then become a more permanent process.

The objective is to go beyond episodic encounters among the movements of the diverse countries and continents, to construct a deeper political debate, to establish horizontal structures to facilitate exchanges and common actions and to extend the reach of the movements in all the continents.

This demands at least the establishment of a minimum coordination and exchange of information through a web site, e-mail and the Secretariat (3).

DEBATING THE PROPOSAL FROM HERE TO PORTO ALEGRE

In the lead-up to the 2003 WSF, we will organize meetings during the regional and thematic forums listed above to debate this proposal. We will then carry the conclusions and proposals from these meetings into Porto Alegre itself, so that the final assembly is the accumulated result of a process involving movements from around the world, and not only those in Porto Alegre.

The Secretariat has built a data bank of the organizations and networks that signed the manifestos of 2001 and 2002, but it is necessary to identify other social movements, unions, NGOs and organizations that should be brought into the initiative.

We have prepared this document to provoke debate and discussion on the proposal to build a Social

Movements World Network in the many regional events taking place before the next WSF, when the assembly of social movements, NGOs and trade unions will be asked to adopt a final position on the proposal.

CUT - Brazil, MST - Brazil, World March of Women - Quebec, ATTAC - France and Focus on the Global South - Thailand. (3)

Notes:

(1) <http://www.focusweb.org/publications/2001/Porto%20Alegre%20Call%20for%20Mobilisation.htm>

(2) <http://www.focusweb.org/publications/2002/Porto%20Alegre%20II-Call%20of%20social%20movements.htm>

(3) The role of the signatories of this document is simply to promote its discussion and we do not assume any other mandate.