

A True Problem Is A Good Problem: WSF, Success or Failure?

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Since the unease that followed the WSF Kenya in 2007, the debate on the Social Forum process has reached its hardest moment; at a crossroads, in crisis, as some have said, it has come under serious scrutiny as to what it has achieved, whether it is or remains a useful instrument, and what role it still could play.

Yet there are three clear problems in reducing the question of 'success or failure' to the SF process only: it makes this process stand for the larger, much more complex political environment of which it is just one manifestation; it abstracts the specific experience which is this process from its conditions of existence; and, by doing this, makes an open-ended problem fall under the binary terms that have at various points guided the SF debate ('new' versus 'traditional' left, 'space' versus 'movement', 'openness' versus 'capacity to promote action').

To say that the question is badly posed does not mean that the problem it reveals is not true. There is something that must be taken very seriously when it is said that perhaps the WSF, 'having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism', may have arrived at the point where it is time 'to give way to new modes of global organisation of resistance and transformation'. [1] This appears once the question is moved beyond a simple decision about the future of the WSF towards a reflection on its environment: if we are at 'a new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement', is it the 'most appropriate vehicle'? [2]

In fact, if we ask the question of what this moment is, it appears that the crisis of the SF process is only a sign of a much larger one, where it would seem that the capacity built in the last decade is in retraction rather than expansion: there has been a decrease in the size of mobilisations since February 15th 2003, other global experiments such as People's Global Action have disappeared, more restricted experiments like the Euromayday Network have been put on hold, in various cases there has been a retrenchment into sectarianism and mistrust, and there seems to be a generalised feeling that political initiative has been lost, that the promises of the turn of the century were not fulfilled, that things in some ways may have taken a turn for the worse, and that the global dimension of struggles has once again taken the back seat in relation to local and national agendas. The crisis of the WSF is then the crisis of the entire cycle of struggles that produced it, and before one moves into what a new moment should be, or what instrument is appropriate for it, it is necessary to ask where we started from, and where we are now.

The question then concerns not the SF process in isolation, but the political environment in which it appeared. This environment is not one we could choose to exit. Thus it is essential to pose the problem in a way that does not fall between the dead-end of an option between 'openness' and 'capacity to act'; that recognises the necessarily open-ended and networked nature of the space in which the SF process exists, while at the same time acknowledging that, if any solution to the challenges confronted by the SF process can be found, it lies in its capacity to feed back into its environment. This, in turn, implies recognising that the SF process is an instrument of, not a substitute for, a global movement; and it can still be useful to the extent that it can reinvent itself through new ways of striking balances between openness and closure, so as to maintain itself as a place for encounter and exchange among movements, groups and individuals, while at the same time creating the possibility for temporary and practical convergences between them to appear and be explicitly formulated.

1 - Redefining the terms

First things first. It is just as true to say not nearly enough has happened in the last ten years as to say a lot has happened: the various blows to the legitimacy of the WTO project, successful anti-privatisation campaigns such as the ones around water and gas in Bolivia, the election of left and centre-left governments across Latin America, the scrapping of the neoliberal constitution in Europe, the defeat of the CPE in France, the impressive growth of a migrant movement in the US; plus an infinite number of local victories, small victories, partial victories, even defeats that resulted in the creation of new connections and convergences that might result in victories in the future...

But what has been the role of SF process in all this? How can the extent of its impact be measured? This is where we reach the first problem: the tendency for a slippage between speaking of the 'SF as a movement', or an area of the movement, and of the 'SF as the movement'. The tendency of some to speak *as if the SF were the movement itself* has certainly done a fair amount of harm to this process' credibility in the eyes of those who felt they were being given spokespeople against their wish; but now it seems to be turned also, by some key players in the process, into a soul-searching question of measuring something that cannot be measured.

Considered from the point of view of its constituent parts, such a thing as the 'global movement' does not exist. The boundaries of each of the singular realities that compose, decompose and recompose it are impossible to determine; to the extent that it concerns the movement of social relations themselves, its identifiable groups, organisations, individuals and moments are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg; and each one of these exists within a complex, multilayered field of relations and causal series where the 'global' dimension of their practices is always filtered by and through local, national and regional struggles, balances of power, institutional arrangements, conjunctures etc. In this sense, the global movement can be everything, and does not really exist; it is merely the constantly shifting sum total of its parts, a mirage: a cat without a grin. A 'wild' in-itself, one which can never be appropriated into any for-itself, at once reality - perceived or presupposed - and unachievable project.

Yet, on the other hand, there is a sense in which it exists only for-itself, and this for-itselfness is the very quality that makes its emergence unique: it is a for-itself whose in-itself is not given; a grin without a cat. For we can say that what is remarkable about the changed political landscape of the last twenty years is the conjunction of three factors that has made possible the level of self-reflection that the reality/project of a 'global movement' expresses. The first is capitalist globalisation itself, which has created and relied upon structures and flows of communication, movement of people and goods to such a scale that the potential for connections between different people or realities is not

restricted to the actors instrumental in the advance of capitalist globalisation, but can potentially be accessed even by those who wish to resist it. This is the material element that enables a growing awareness of global issues and their interconnectedness; in other words, capitalist globalisation has not only expanded to every corner of the world the same policies (structural adjustment), structures (via new enclosures and their implication in global circuits of accumulation), institutions (market-friendly liberal democracies), and actors (like the IMF or transnational companies), but also, and in the very same process, created a potential for exchange and production of commonality that allows politics to appear as global for the first time. It is this exchange and commonality that makes the movement global: most groups and individuals might still be addressing national governments, intervening in local struggles, in any case dealing on a daily basis with issues that are more immediate, very diverse, perhaps even contradictory in some sense; it is the awareness of the existence of all this political activity, and the *potential* it has to become momentarily focused on questions of global relevance (such as the mobilisations against the WTO or against the war) that *constitutes a global movement of movements*.

From this follow the other two factors. First, an awareness that no struggle is either exclusively local or exclusively global, but all struggles can communicate on different levels while no struggle can subsume all others; in other words, there are no partial, 'local' solutions that can stand in isolation, and there is no 'global' solution unless this one is understood as a certain possible configuration of local ones. No hierarchy of 'major' and 'minor' contradictions, but that does not mean struggles do not or cannot communicate. When asked whether we have to act on a local or a global scale, the answer can only be: both. Second, and as a consequence, the 'what is to be done?' question tends to be recast as 'how is it to be done?', that is, how already existing can struggles communicate in ways that are the most productive and transformative. This is why issues of methodology such as those posed by the SF process – which in the past might have been invisible in the ways of posing the question of political action – acquire their present significance.

2 - Redefining the problem

In this sense, one could say that the greatest achievement of the global movement of movements has been its own coming into existence; that is, the greatest success of the last decade consists in a global process of *capacity-building* that we have initiatives such as the SF process and PGA, as well as an infinite number of others, to thank for. The development and expansion of communication among movements (from ordinary mailing lists to websites like Indymedia, free radios etc.), new technologies (Linux, p2p filesharing devices etc.), production and consumption networks (from solidarity economy to critical consumer networks and buyers' cooperatives) – all of this has gone in building the idea of a global movement. To recognise this allows us to pose the crisis now sensed within and beyond the SF process in different terms: given that we have managed (and continue) to build the capacities of the global movement of movements, how do we activate the existing networks in ways that can more effectively channel their energies into seizing the conjunctures that we are presented with?

To put the problem in this way prevents the uncoupling of the question of capacity-building and that of concerted political action; between what is facilitated by open-space networking and the production of focal points that this networking is supposed to facilitate. It stops being an option between one or the other, since the latter is presupposed by former; it becomes a (methodological) question of how to use the former in order to maximise the latter.

It also helps draw attention to another point: it is a great illusion to treat the global movement as a 'social base' in any classical sense. It is untrue that what has been lacking in the last ten years is

proposals: there have never been so many than now, many of which of global scope, and held by platforms and groups taking part in the WSF process. It is entirely immaterial that documents such as the Porto Alegre or the Bamako Appeal were not 'officially' issued by the WSF; since the WSF has no fixed membership, and its participants have no binding relationship with it, the fact that they have not produced the effects that their subscribers expected would not have changed if they were 'official' statements. The fact that the call for the February 15th mobilisation was 'unofficially' issued (by the Assembly of Social Movements rather than the WSF) was no deterrent for the people who took to the streets. The network-capacity built in the last decade creates the conditions for such things to happen again, but not in any way that could be 'directed' in the same way that a 'leadership' directs a social base. [3]

It is a mistake, in fact, to treat even the February 15th call as a 'command'. What made it successful was not only that it concerned what was evidently at the time the most relevant geopolitical issue, but the same thing that made the Assembly of Social Movements issue the call: the fact that there was already some degree of mobilisation and organisation underway for it. The WSF certainly had a role in rerouting the call over more and wider networks; but it is very likely that the call would have otherwise found other channels, and worked just the same. What was felicitous about it was not its being 'the right idea at the right time', but that it recognised and amplified an idea that was already active and effective at a grassroots level. Can methodological mechanisms to help 'detect' such ideas can be developed at the WSF? I try to imagine some at the end.

While an increase in communication does represent a growth in capacity, an increase in global communication alone does not make a movement: by the costs that they impose on participants (travel and hotel expenses etc.), WSFs end up attracting large social movements, well-funded NGOs, and individuals who can afford it; not necessarily a 'representative' snapshot of what is going on worldwide in terms of struggles at any given moment. While there is nothing that can be changed about that, it is important to think of ways in which participation can be strengthened at the level of local, regional and national forums; communication between these levels and the global enhanced; and resources be used to offset the natural imbalance at the global events, and to help with building material capacity for movements in the places where the WSF take place. In the final section, I also try to imagine what these could be.

3 - To have done with (binary) judgment

In the beginning, one spoke of a tension between the WSF as 'space' and as 'actor'; nowadays, the dichotomy is presented in a way that concerns less the discussions about the future of the process, and more the general approaches to transformation that would oppose those who want to 'change the world without taking power' and those who believe it is necessary to pass through the state apparatus. If these terms made sense at some point, that is not the case now.

The politics constitutive of and constituted through the global movement of movements, as described above, necessarily moves beyond universality (as the capacity to represent it in a single point that is more than only an abstract formality) and linear accumulation (as the progressive movement of convergence towards this point) towards multiplicity (as the unrepresentable singularity of each of its components) and connection (as the establishing of links and positive feedbacks between these singularities). If this is the case, the space in which politics exists today is not the field of a merely ideal choice between the two positions; it has been materially reconfigured in such a way that the question of methodology - 'how is it to be done?' - has to have precedence over 'what is to be done?'. If the movement itself is 'open' (in the sense that its boundaries are never given), this is what defines the space in which even those arguing against 'openness' can argue at all. That is, the two

'camps' in the SF debate share the same problematic, even if they may desire different paths for action. Both sides know that the SF process can very well decide to move towards taking more substantial positions on issues and becoming a closed platform; if this has not been done so far, it is because even those who wish to do it realise that it would necessarily entail a restriction to its reach, without any guarantee of a concrete gain in return. In other words, they know it would be a trade off between the 'universality' of being able to state the 'right' global solutions, and the 'pluriversality' of being able to bring together the widest variety of forces. In the end, they have no option but to accept the 'open space' argument, even if purely for pragmatic reasons.

But this does not automatically mean that the 'open space' alternative wins, and that the question is closed. Multiplicity and connection require political conditions that allow them to exist and expand, and action upon these conditions requires some degree of (temporary) unity. The issue is then one of keeping the SF process open and at the same time redesigning it in ways that maximise both capacity-building and the possibility of allowing concerted action to emerge. This is the question concerning the practical arrangements – mechanisms, methodologies – that create openness and facilitate the composition of difference and its convergence onto some points; and this, again, is a problem in no way exclusive to the SF process.

To suggest that the main reason why the promises of the late 1990s did not come true is because of a 'resistance' to taking power fails to acknowledge that at no particular time it seemed like there was any power to take (if one speaks of the movement as global, what kind of power could this have been?); and that what the movement ran up against was precisely its being overpowered by a combination of military might and criminalisation (Genoa, the War on Terror etc.). But it is also for this reason that one cannot say that political power 'does not matter': it was the turn taken by geopolitics since 9/11 that severely diminished the space of manoeuvre in which those promises grew. Yet the fact that there are movement-friendly or movement-originated governments in power now cannot make us forget that this may not be the case tomorrow. One of the few lessons we must by now have learnt from history is: the separation between movement and state is necessary, not in the sense that they are necessarily opposed, but in that they are different in nature and have different temporalities; and it is only to the extent that movements maintain some degree of autonomy that they are capable to affect institutions. Expanding the capacity and power of movements can never take the back seat in relation to the investment in institutional arrangements or placing demands at the level of representative politics; but clearly some institutional arrangements are better than others, and some demands have to be wrenched from friendly or unfriendly governments – and collective action is necessary for that.

In both cases we have a legitimate problem, badly posed in terms of absolute dichotomies. To the extent that everyone agrees that the global movement of movements has fallen short of its promise, and that this sentiment is projected into the SF process as a question of its methodology, and in the movement at large as a question on the relation between movements and institutions, these are the questions that define our shared problem. Its solution, however, lies outside the option of accepting or rejecting (or restricting) the space of networked politics; it resides in an experimentation within a networked environment that takes into consideration the way in which it functions, and tries to redesign it so as to maintain the gains achieved so far, while attempting to go beyond them.

4 - The original tension

It could be that these absolute oppositions have, in fact, a practical origin in the structure of the WSF itself; a clear tension is already inscribed in its original ambition, which was directly translated into the format.

The new cycle of struggles that emerged in the late 1990s managed, over the years, to find various different channels of communication, be they peer-to-peer, local, national, regional or global; these in turn have produced different focal points, be they given by the struggle itself (such as the anti-CPE mobilisations in France bringing together lots of disparate political perspectives, and opening a space for politicisation of people who might not have been politically active before), be they engendered in such a way as to make communication and networking possible: the Zapatista Encuentros, Via Campesina, People's Global Action (PGA), the Euromayday Network, the Otra Campaña, and an infinity of smaller, more local and/or focused moments of coordination. The SF process is thus only one case among the latter. A focal point is defined as a temporary convergence of political forces, groups and individuals who come together because of their political or thematic affinity (broadly or narrowly construed, as the case may be: SFs are politically broader than the Euromayday Network, for instance; Via Campesina groups, however different politically, are united by their social base and focus on land issues).

Let us hold on to these six distinctions: between global and 'local' (broadly construed) ones, between those given in the course of a struggle and those 'artificially' created, between those defined by political or thematic affinity. [4] Among all the examples, the SF process has from the start been the one with the widest ambition, both in terms of reach (it only compares to PGA in its global aspiration) and in terms of affinity (it excludes in theory, but not necessarily in practice, political parties and groups that might resort to arms; otherwise, it is receptive towards any vaguely described anti-neoliberal forces). This may very well be its blessing and its curse, in any case its founding tension: never has there been something which aimed at such breadth and at remaining an open space at the same time.

This tension was translated directly into the original format. The first World Social Forum (WSF) was rather straightforwardly designed to be a conference (so much so that the organisers did not think about providing accommodation for those who could not afford a hotel – a demand which had to be absorbed, with growing problems over the years, by the Intercontinental Youth Camp).

Unsurprisingly, the format of the event was perfectly traditional. On the one hand, panels ('plenaries') where keynote speakers would address the key issues and 'present proposals' – the forum's moment of universality, the 'big picture'. On the other, a large range of workshops ('self-organised activities') taking place simultaneously in the afternoon – the moment of diversity (the local) and particularity (the immediate). Since there was no system in place to facilitate the merging of the latter, the tendency was for one to have a huge number of different perspectives around a similar subject or area being presented separately, sometimes simultaneously, therefore establishing relations between people organising workshops and those attending them (the 'consumers' 'shopping around' for ideologies, ideas, or experiences) more than between organisers themselves (the 'producers', groups and organisations who, in theory at least, were there to talk about the work they had been developing).

The moment of diversity and particularity was therefore marked by total dispersion; good for networking, but not conducive in the short term to the emergence of any consensus or common proposals, or even the thrashing out of differences towards some kind of common ground. The moment of universality, on the other hand, suffered from other, just as obvious, problems. First of all, its very 'universality', instead of being immanent to the forum itself, had to be 'produced in laboratory' by the organisers, who chose themes and speakers. This is not bad in itself; the organisation of anything this big will have to rely on that to some extent. But it has the clear drawback that, however open the organisers want to be, they will always reproduce the limits of their own horizon: deciding what are the important issues and who are the 'right' people to talk about them – in other words, the very universality aimed at – is an operation always contaminated by particularity. Through open manipulation or unconscious limitations, universality will always fall

short of itself.

That was, at the time, the biggest problem for those who criticised the WSF for lack of openness. The most serious inadequacy of this format, however, lies elsewhere: the separation of the two moments itself. As seen above, placing connection above accumulation means that the formation of any larger strategies will tend to happen as the aggregate result of smaller, partial connections and strategies; in other words, the movement is always from particular to universal. The problems in the format adopted by the WSF originally were of providing no connection between one and the other; placing the universal far above the particular, as if the latter could only appear in the guise of limited cases of the former, and therefore placing the formulation of 'proposals' as exterior to the very behaviours and practices that were already visible in the movement; while at the same time failing to provide intermediary moments where these practices and behaviours could organise themselves into larger (even if still partial) wholes. This was very evident in the (very traditional) division of labour between 'intellectuals' and 'masses' which has often been criticised; what goes unnoticed sometimes is how the functioning of the 'self-organised' moment ends up reinforcing the separation: in appearing as complete fragmentation, in allowing for an expression of the movement as a pure, 'wild' in-itself that does not 'add up', it seemed to naturally require moments of self-reflexivity where the people who could see the movement 'from above', as it were, could describe what was happening to the others.

This inbuilt flaw of the model explains why, even after all these years of listening to people discuss the 'main' questions and present 'major' proposals, there is a widespread feeling that we have collectively failed to come up with something. To now say the WSF must come up with clear 'proposals' forgets that, from the start, they were always being presented; the real questions are why those presented have never come to be universally embraced, whether the fact they came 'from the outside' was not the problem to begin with, and what are the ways in which they can be immanently produced.

The methodology went through an important transformation in the 2005 WSF. After years of criticism, the plenaries were eliminated and the event became entirely self-organised. Instead of the International Council autonomously discussing and deciding on the larger thematic axes of the event, they did that by going through the raw data provided by an online consultation; finally, the resulting thematic areas were appointed physical spaces.

These three changes definitely were steps forward; for the first time, any attempt at trying to define what the event (not the movement!) was 'all about' was done by departing from actual behaviours and practices rather than 'from the outside'. The fact that the thematic spaces were physical ones meant that, in theory at least, the possibility of people and groups working in similar things coming across each other was enhanced. Finally, the previous order of 'presentation' of 'proposals' was accordingly inverted: instead of being made 'separately' by those addressing the 'masses' at the plenaries, they came out in the end, as a collage of all the ideas submitted by participants to the Mural of Proposals.

Yet it is the Mural that shows how this change did not escape the original logic; what it represented was still the same 'wild' in-itself without any mediation, without any attempt at going from the particulars towards something that would not be universal, but would be common to a relatively large extent. This methodology, for some, was the confirmation of all the prejudices against the particular; left to itself, without those who can see it from 'above', it can be nothing but an incoherent mess. Deprived from the focal points of the plenaries which tackled the universal problems and the 'big' issues, the potential strength of the event would just dissipate in the fragmented sphere of particularity, where everyone talked about their own issues but never got round to finding anything in common. This explains why the 2005 experience was greeted with

increased exasperation by those who were already worried about the lack of capacity to come up with anything concrete; three clear expressions of this were the documents known as the Porto Alegre Manifesto (2005) and the Bamako Appeal (2006), and the reintroduction, in 2006, of the plenaries — under the mystifying name of ‘co-organised activities’.

Again, the preoccupation – the problem it reveals – is perfectly legitimate. But does posing it in terms of an insurmountable contradiction between openness and action or ‘effectiveness’ lead us anywhere closer to a solution? And if it is correct, then what to make of the fact that plenaries have failed just as much to produce anything? Or that the Porto Alegre Manifesto and the Bamako Appeal have not proved to be the programmes that people were waiting for? And that one cannot imagine that their reception would have been in any way different had they been issued as official WSF declarations?

If there were only two options, both tried and failed, it would really be time for people to fold their tent. What needs to be explored is an intermediary position, that maintains and enhances the stress on capacity-building – beyond simple communication networks towards material support – while developing methodologies that allow for focal points for concerted action to be identified. Identified, rather than chosen; the point is not to depart from a geopolitical analysis that would determine what are the ‘burning issues’ to be acted upon, but from an analysis of the movements themselves, their present practices and behaviours, their long- and short-term objectives, their concrete possibilities and the obstacles they face, so that a picture of what can and needs to be done – in relation to movements themselves, rather than the world – can emerge.

5 - Where are we now?

The question whether the SF process is still viable, useful or necessary is something that no one can really answer today; it is better asked of future historians. It is certainly not one that can be answered by the SF process alone; in the end, it is the survival (or not) of the networks that feed into it that will decide if it will survive or not, or have a role to play. Even if the IC decided to put an end to the global process, anyone anywhere who still saw a use to the idea would use it, and could call it ‘social forum’.

The blessing and the curse of the SF process has been to aspire at once at maximum openness and maximum breadth. The reason why it was so, and has remained so despite calls to the contrary, is because even those wishing otherwise know that the cost of turning it into a more definite platform would be the sacrifice of this breadth. There are plenty of such platforms, national and global, that have been around for a while, with their agendas and programmes; they have, as much as anyone else, been successful in changing the world. The advantage of the SF process has been to provide a place for encounter, exchange and capacity-building among them. So it should be quite clear: if the decision to give the WSF a definite political programme should be taken, this would entail creating something else which would remain the Social Forum only in name; it would cease to be an ‘agora’, and become another actor within an agora; it would cease to be a ‘container’, and become a content (and thus the last of the ‘containers’ created in the turn of the century would disappear). The WSF, insofar as it wants to be the WSF, is quite literally condemned to remain what it is. And if it is true, as said at the start, that the capacity built in the last decade seems at a point of retraction rather than expansion, then there could be no less useful decision regarding what to do with the WSF than that of turning it into a closed platform instead of an open space.

If the SF process still has any use, it is by remaining what it is; which does not mean that it does not need to change. I would like to close with a few concrete ideas of how this change could take place;

these are not so much proposals, as thought experiments concerning some directions the process could take, and why.

- periodicity:

To say that there has been a retraction in the capacity built over the last decade does not mean there is a need for more World Social Forums; if anything, it means precisely the opposite. The proposal that Via Campesina has defended for years now, that the WSF take place every three years, should be put into place. This would free up time and resources for concrete actions and networking around local, regional and thematic affinities, which take logical and political precedence over the breadth of the WSF.

- communication with the local and thematic forums:

Assuming some of this networking will take the form of local, regional and thematic social forums, the communication with these must be actively sought out by the IC and intensified. They should be given space in the WSF webpage, through which any arising campaigns and actions could be advertised, and those involved in them contacted. Funds should be allocated to facilitate the attendance of people involved in such campaigns (and not 'representatives' of such forums) at the WSF. These would be measures towards constructing the WSF as a place for the debate on how to enlarge local struggles and strategies, and find synergies between what is happening in different places.

- listening:

But much of this networking, and many of these struggles, will not take place through social forums. The IC must remain attentive to what is happening outside the SF process, seek out contact with it, try to provide it with support through the SF networks, and allocate funds for the involvement of these actors in the WSF, as well as in other (thematic, regional) forums.

The priorities of the movement do not appear simply through geopolitical analysis (concerning the big trends in world politics and economy), nor through the SF process alone; identifying those issues that matter and those areas where struggles are already happening, and strategies taking shape, can only happen through a patient work of listening.

- the use of financial resources:

1) More resources should be used to facilitate communication and networking in advance of the WSF and in general, including funds for participation in the terms above. This obviously means that the event itself should consume less resources (more on that later).

2) In the event itself, resources should go, whenever possible, into building permanent infrastructure rather than organising a big, temporary gathering: the acquisition of materials (computers, phone lines, sound equipment etc.) which can then be donated to local movements; perhaps even (if at all possible) the acquisition, or a donation towards the acquisition, of permanent spaces, rather than the use of rented ones.

3) Making the event 'cheaper' can be done by tapping as much as possible into the resources of local movements and organisations: using their spaces and equipment, finding technical support among free software networks, involving movements and solidarity economy networks into the provision of food etc. Exchanges can be made on the basis of voluntary work/resources against permanent infrastructure funded by the SF process etc.

- scale:

There is a trade off here: to make the WSF into a more focused event that can allow actions, strategies and campaigns to emerge, against a larger, more expensive event that can aggregate more participants. If the present choice is for turning the WSF into something more conducive to action, taking the first option is justified. This would have the added advantage of making the process more autonomous in relation to the funding, and decreasing the weight the funders have in the process. (For some, this only appeared as a problem after Kenya; for others, it has been a problem all along).

There is a lesson to be learnt from the US Social Forum, where a very clear limit was drawn between being a funder and being allowed to participate in the organising committee.

Also, the 'loss' of having a smaller WSF is not actually that great. It should not be thought that people's primary mode of engagement in the SF process, or in struggle in general, should be through an event that takes place in the other side of the world. A smaller WSF with a stronger, more engaged local and thematic process would be everyone's gain.

- location:

Again, a trade off: organising the event in 'friendly territory' has the advantage of greater financial support, while having all the inconveniences we know well; on the other hand, organising the event in areas where struggles are ongoing has the advantage of refocusing the forum and providing a space of reflection and support for local movements.

The lack of funds resulting from this could be balanced by tapping into local resources; when there is a greater feeling among organisations that a forum matters for them, they are more likely to make an effort to make it happen against all odds. The best example here would be the Foro Social Argentino of 2002.

Finally, this would mean a better use of the human resources of the WSF. If you gather a large amount of people in a 'friendly territory', you will have one of those rare opportunities of amassing strength in numbers at a global level wasted on a bland march for peace, justice etc. If you do the same in a place where movements are caught up in a struggle, you are putting global weight behind a local issue.

- date:

There is no reason why keep the opposition between the WSF and WEF. The dates for a WSF should be decided in the same way one chooses a day for an action; it should appear as result of a work of listening and consulting, and could be chosen according to various criteria:

a) a global issue (for example, to have the opening march of the event on the day of the anniversary of the Iraq invasion)

b) a local issue (a date that makes sense within the timeframe of mobilisation and escalation of a local struggle in the place where the forum is located)

c) an emerging pattern (a date that makes sense within the timeframe of a certain amount of different regional or global campaigns, so that the event could be used to draw attention to those)

- methodology:

1) in the run up to the WSF:

Apart from the proposals made above, it would again be important to analyse carefully the experience of the US Social Forum. The USSF did not happen because there had to be a forum in the US (something that was said since the first WSF), but because the time was right for it. It spent a long time in the making, and the organisers went through a long process of consultation and debate with groups across the country in order to deepen and enlarge it. Three caravans were organised leading to the event itself, stopping along the way to inform and involve more people. (In a way, the USSF had more in common with the PGA caravans and conferences of the early 2000s than with the WSF). The conclusion is clear: a forum matters more when it is more truly built from the bottom up – even if this comes at the cost of taking longer.

2) An event that is smaller, that takes place somewhere where there is ongoing mobilisation, that builds on a process of aggregation on the thematic and local levels, and that is built through a careful work of listening and consulting would tend to be more focused, and probably more capable of coming up with actions and campaigns.

Attempts like the Porto Alegre Manifesto and the Bamako Appeal have shown it is pointless to try and come up with ‘proposals’ or ‘alternatives’ where these are not the product of an immanent process of negotiation of identities, identification of common targets and conjunctures, mutual consultation, creation of commonalities etc. The main reason why both the methodological experiments made by the WSF since 2005 have failed is because there is only so much that can be done in a few days with no prior preparation.

Creating a greater gap between WSFs and intensifying the exchange between it and the local and thematic levels would help, but there is nothing that can really be done to overcome it. There is, however, still a lot to learn from the methodologies employed in experiences in the ‘periphery’ of the SF process, such as the Youth Camp and the Foro Social Argentino, as well as the USSF. [5]

3) It is essential that the experience of thematic spaces (what was called, in the Youth Camp, Thematic Convergence Spaces, in 2003, and Action Centres, in 2005) that was tried out in 2005 be maintained.

4) Four helpful measures would be: to make all organisations, in the act of registration, fill in a sketch of their action plan for the following year(s) (containing campaigns, timelines etc.) that would be made available on the website, alongside any broader proposals for days of action etc. that they might want to bring to the table; base the process of ‘agglomeration’ of activities also on affinities concerning action plans (similar campaigns, targets etc.); making a calendar with the proposed dates for days of action etc., as well as the campaigns that have a broader, global scope, available with the newspaper containing the list of activities at the WSF; having two days focused on action-planning, one at the beginning, another one at the end, so that, within each thematic space, there can be a first round of presentation of ideas, and, after discussions have taken place, a second round of working out commonalities and deciding on actual dates, actions, themes etc. These could, then, be taken to a Social Movements Assembly on the last day, where they could be further discussed and announced.

In all of this, of course, the position of the WSF as a space in whose name no decisions are made would be maintained – and, as we have seen, changing this would not only have a negative effect, it would very probably have no positive effect at all. But it is essential to recognise that the problem posed by those who worry about its future is a good one. Only, it is not a problem that can be solved by making an absolute choice between openness and closure: the challenge, for the SF process as well as for anyone else today, is to build commonality from difference, which necessarily means

finding ways of striking temporary balances between openness and closure, through thematic, political, regional or other affinities.

P.S.

* Rodrigo Nunes was an auditor-member of the International Council, representing the Porto Alegre Intercontinental Youth Camp.

Footnotes

[1] BELLO, W. The Forum at the crossroads.

[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias_textos.php?cd_news=395]

[2] Ibid.

[3] To say it cannot be controlled does not mean that any initiative is useless, but that there is no guarantee as to which initiatives will 'work' and which will not. A powerful example here would be the campaign for 'dignified housing' (*vivienda digna*) that has been going for two years now in Spain. The movement began when, at the height of the anti-CPE protests in France, an anonymous individual sent out an email calling for a day of protest for the right to affordable, quality housing. The email did the rounds, and on the arranged day hundreds of people – from cab drivers to hairdressers, as well as 'activists' – took to the streets in different cities. By the second self-convoked day of protests there were thousands, and since then a number of local assemblies have been created, many of which are still going. Cf. vdevivienda.net.

[4] It should be clear that none of the three pairs exists to the exclusion of the other two, nor does any of the terms exist to the exclusion of all others; all focal points are different combinations of these six elements. For example, even in very intense moments of convergence in a struggle, some focal points (such as a meeting to coordinate a march, and the march itself) require artifice (such as setting dates, places, courses etc.); the distinction refers however to the fact that they are imposed by the rhythm of the struggle itself, rather than being created *ex nihilo* as a coming together which then may or may not lead to some kind of common action.

[5] I discuss the first two in: NUNES, R. The Intercontinental Youth Camp as the unthought of the World Social Forum [<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2nunes1.pdf>]; and especially: Networks, open spaces, horizontality: instantiations [<http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2nunes2.pdf>].