

Preparing the strategy discussion on the World Social Forum

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To say that the WSF is at a crossroads is certainly correct, though it does not say anything on its future. For Walden Bello, it could mean that the road that has been followed till now suddenly stops and that the WSF process may come to an end. For Chico Whitaker, it could mean that different roads are being offered and that choices will have to be made. For others, like Gus Massiah, it could mean that a debate is urgently needed, that one has to think on the strategy to be followed and that a new cycle of WSFs can or should begin.

This article wants to be a contribution to the discussion that will have to be organised soon. I first consider the need for a new analysis of the global political situation, I continue with the achievements of the alterglobalist movement and put some questions about its future, and I finally dare to make some suggestions. They have to be seen in the context of someone who believes in the 'open space' of the WSF and in its future. But I also believe some changes will be necessary.

The world has changed since 2001

As the preparatory text of the 'Strategy Group' of the International Council (IC) suggests, today's political situation is different from the one we had seven years ago. One may certainly think that neoliberalism is in crisis, but its project is nevertheless still being put into place with more and more negative consequences.

In the 1980s, the Washington Consensus looked like an economic project with a political background. At the beginning, the neoliberal project implied a brutal dismantlement of many public institutions and a reorientation of macro-economic policies following a single model. In the 1990s a "social correction" was introduced with poverty reduction policies and the progressive elimination of traditional social protection. These "social" policies are perfectly compatible with neoliberal policies and do not tackle the growing income inequalities. In its third (and final?) phase, political reconstruction is taking place, the state is being strengthened, though this is by no means a neokeynesian state. The state has to be strong for imposing Washington consensus policies, but has to be limited in scope and needs to be guided by consensual "governance" for all other policies. If there is a crisis, it is linked, among others, to the time scales that were necessary to introduce these different policies and that were too long for some neo-colonial states. Lacking economic progress, with growing poverty and a lack of resources to cope with it, several states were "fragile" and finally "failed" and this led to a number of conflicts. In these circumstances, reconstruction does indeed

take place according to a “shock doctrine” as Naomi Klein calls it. Reforms are easier to be put into place in a chaotic situation, when all institutions are in crisis. According to the neoliberal project, the result should be pacified neoliberal states where transnational corporations can invest and disinvest according to their needs and interests. The only thing that can hinder this process is a threatening financial crisis in the USA.

At the geopolitical level, the situation has changed as well. The end of the cold war did not bring the peace that was promised. The permanent members of the Security Council permanently violate the UN Charter. Transnational corporations violate the most basic human rights. The arms race, climate change and nuclear proliferation threaten the survival of mankind. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 have been perceived as a turning-point and have been the argument to start a war in Afghanistan and later in Iraq. The permanent war against terror is perfectly compatible with the “assistance” given to “fragile” and “failed” states and allows the USA to abolish the borders between development and security. Or should we say that development policies are being converted into security policies? Here, the element that may hinder the imperialist process is the emergence of new strong sovereign states. China is getting strong in Africa, Brazil and India make the conclusion of the Doha Round impossible, poor African states say no to the “offer” of the European Union for economic partnerships. The superpowers of the North are not almighty anymore and will have to take into account the will or the refusal of the third world countries. There are more and more South-South co operations in such a way that some are dreaming of the ‘spirit of Bandung’ being back on the agenda.

A third element of change is certainly the success of the alterglobalisation movement. Just like the third world states, peoples are resisting and organising in order to demand dignity, respect for human rights and for cultural and biological diversity, a decent standard of living, public services, and so on. The alter-movement clearly succeeded in delegitimizing the neoliberal project. In Latin America, it contributed to the democratic election of progressive or even revolutionary governments.

In brief, neoliberal policies are still being put into place in many poor countries where the Bretton Woods organisations and the WTO have power, by the superpowers of the North and their transnational corporations. The resistance of peoples and governments in the third world is growing and the superpower of the United States and the European Union is threatened by the emergence of regional powers and a beginning financial crisis.

Achievements of the alterglobalist movement and some questions about its future

In addition to these substantial successes, the alterglobalist movement, in its global, regional, national and local dimensions, can be proud of its results. But it also has to think on its future. The phase of resistance has to be followed by a concrete message about the ‘other world’ that is possible. The WSF will and should never adopt one single programme for the whole movement, but it will have to make its messages more political in order to account for its successes, for its new analysis and for its new demands. The Charter of Principles allows for such a political message. But the WSF will also have to create more room for its regional constituents so that they can act according to their specific situation. It will have to promote more political debate and democracy.

The future of the WSF, whether it is seen as an event or as a process, will have to go and look beyond its current status. This unique experience has allowed for the emergence of a dynamic and plural ‘movement of movements’. It was the result of a political analysis that allowed thinking that resistance to neoliberal capitalism was enough to introduce reformist, anti- or postcapitalist policies.

It was created by people who broadly believed in the power of civil society and in the possibility of having a different and new political practice. From the beginning, the world of political parties was evacuated. The WSF allowed for movements from Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa to know each other and to learn from each other. Networks and networks of networks were created. Ten years after the cold war, a new perspective was opened for the global left that probably thought its reorganisation would be easy. 'Another world is possible' is a really brilliant slogan that breaks with the 'pensée unique' of TINA (There is no alternative). It reaffirms the right and the power of human society to self-determination.

What does this mean for the changes within the WSF process?

First of all, the need for having a more political discourse follows logically from the new analysis that will be made of the global situation. Neoliberalism is delegitimated but it continues to reign and it will not be abandoned as long as people cannot say "no" to it. The many conflicts that have broken out are evidence of the fight for natural resources - income resources - and of the blocked political systems. Economic and social development, as well as the democratization of societies including the redistribution of wealth and income, is the obvious answer for all those who refuse war. But these changes will not come about spontaneously. Of course, the analysis will give different results in different regions and countries, but it seems clear to me that a more political discourse can only be in favour of the necessary process of change. The Charter of Principles does not condemn the WSF to permanent neutrality. On the contrary, it allows for positions in favour of a more just and fair globalisation, social justice and respect for human rights. In that sense, the Charter of Principles does not have to be changed.

Considering the changing political environment, the analysis will have to be fine-tuned and the debates will have to be clarified. At this moment, the debates on sustainable development, on fighting terrorism and on reducing poverty show a certain analogy between the themes of concern for the left and the right. But it is no surprise that these consensus themes are being proposed by neoliberal forces and risk to blur the ideological borders. Certainly, poverty is neither a leftwing nor a rightwing concern, but the way in which poverty is tackled is fundamentally different for the left and the right. Too many NGOs have followed the World Bank in its actions and I think that if the alterglobalist movement wants to have its own identity, one should avoid scenes like the ones at Gleneagles where the World Bank, NGOs and Bono were united in demanding "Make Poverty History". The same goes for sustainable development and the war on terrorism. We all agree that something should be done in favour of development and against terrorism, but the political approaches will be totally different for the leftwing and the rightwing forces. If we want to avoid paralyzing "post-politics" as Chantal Mouffe calls it, we have to break the consensus in order for different projects to emerge and to organise the debate. To prepare a more political discourse and clear demands, then, implies to clarify the positions and to avoid the blurring of ideological lines that hide the class dimension or the post-colonialism of different topics.

Furthermore, certain national or regional situations can be helped with a more political and clear message and credible alternatives. However, in other cases the political reality of some countries is well beyond the careful positioning of the WSF. Here one clearly has to think of Latinamerican countries like Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador. It would be absurd to ask the movements of these countries to work and speak below the level of what has already been achieved. These situations need to be consolidated and some kind of support from the alterglobalist movement might be useful. Declarations and/or actions not in the name of the WSF but from movements participating in the WSF should be possible, even with or in favour of progressive governments.

One can understand that the WSF or its IC want to avoid tiresome ideological debates. But it is more difficult to believe that it wants to simply avoid all kind of political debate or

positioning. Its IC is not representative, but maybe one should reflect on solutions in order to avoid it losing its relevance. Just like the WSF risks to lose its relevance when all large networks have been created and movements do not need the WSF anymore to meet and talk. If the WSF wants to be something beyond the open space where movements meet and talk, wants to be a global political space where progressive movements can deliberate, then political debates should be promoted. The movements participating in the WSF are not homogeneous, but in spite of all their differences, the unity of the movement should be preserved.

Some suggestions for the future of the WSF process

These considerations bring me to some suggestions, some preliminary ideas on the way forward to try and revitalize the WSF process. It is always difficult to change fragile and delicate situations, it is sometimes impossible to find an agreement with the multitude of movements that are present within the IC and the WSF. Nevertheless, I do take the risk to propose some ideas. They can be dismissed, improved or changed according to the needs and possibilities.

a) Let us try to avoid the trap of having to choose between 'deepening' and 'enlarging' the process. Both are absolutely necessary if we want the process to survive. If we want to be a truly global movement, a global political agent, then we need partners in China, in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. If we want to play a role, we need clear alternative political messages. This important work requires a lot of patience.

b) In this context and considering the amount of work to be done, a WSF every 2 or 3 years seems to be feasible. In between, regional, local or thematic forums can be organised. In this way, the WSF can be prepared in a more comprehensive way and the link with local social actions can be ensured.

c) It is regrettable that some participants of the WSF seem not to be leftwing or progressive, whereas some radical or revolutionary leftwing movements seem to prefer a parallel forum to express their demands. If the WSF is a truly open space, the second group should be invited. And if we really respect the Charter of Principles, the first group should be kept out. Is it not possible to directly ask all participants in the forum whether they agree with the Charter of Principles? Or can directives be given at the moment of registration in the WSF? In order for this to work properly, one might be asked to tick a box when registering electronically.

d) It will of course not be possible to reach an agreement with all on different political issues, because of our ideological and methodological differences. All the same a solution should be found for more systematic political points of view, possibly even allowing for majorities and minorities. In this way, alliances could be promoted as well as the emergence of large ideological/political tendencies that can in the end lead to alternative programmes. It could be a solution to avoid the current paralysing neutrality, as well as the lack of transparency of initiatives like the Consensus of Porto Alegre and the Call of Bamako, however interesting they were.

e) Another issue to think of is the reorganisation of the International Council in order to clearly establish responsibilities and to accept a better structure. At this moment, because of horizontality, structures and hierarchies as well as any kind of working methods are being avoided. But one should wonder whether such a situation is sustainable in the long run. Structures always show a risk of bureaucratization or institutionalization, but their absence can also hide non explicit and harmful power relations. Here, we should start with transparency, by 'broadcasting' the deliberations via the internet.

f) For the organization of the WSF it is important to have an as large as possible participation of

progressive forces. Consulting the participants can therefore be very useful. But the big political issues that are of concern for the alterglobalist movement are known and they are not very different from one year to another. For 2009, it is not too difficult to give already a list with probable issues:

- a. War and peace: international and domestic conflicts, arms trade ...
- b. Transnational democracy: UN, World Bank, IMF, WTO, ILO, etc.
- c. International politics: WB/IMF, WTO ... (debt, poverty, corruption, free trade, taxes ...)
- d. Sustainable development: agriculture (and biofuels), biological diversity, Kyoto, etc.
- e. Economic policies: STN's, solidarity economy...
- f. Cultural diversity and discrimination: sexual, ethnic identities, migration, etc.
- g. Gender
- h. Human rights
- i. Social Justice: labour and social protection, poverty, inequality...
- j. Global Public goods and their funding: transport, water, education, health, national and international taxes, etc.
- k. Knowledge and communication: research, media...

Possibly, an additional point can be added in order to discuss "the future of the alterglobalist movement". Here, different movements could discuss their convergences and their divergences and prepare future alliances.

These different suggestions imply a more important role for the secretariat, the organizing committee and the IC in the organisation of the WSF. At first sight, this might hinder the autonomy of the movements. However, the experience of the seven past forums has shown the recurrent character of the main issues. If totally new topics are proposed, they should be discussed and find a place, but only if they are in conformity with the Charter of Principles.

The last day of the forum can be dedicated to the search for convergences on all different topics. If these different themes are better prepared and defined, this should be possible. It would be an improvement of the formula of the "4th day" of Nairobi.

Another possibility to promote political debates could be to start each theme with an important co-organised debate where the large political trends could be presented. After such a debate, sub-themes could be discussed in different workshops.

This proposal is not meant to impose anything on the participating movements, but to better guide their participation and to enhance the possibility of political convergences. All candidates for participation in the WSF certainly should be consulted, but this has not necessarily to concern the big thematic issues. Participation can also concern the sub-themes, the organisation itself or the modalities for political positioning. It can also concern the concrete proposals to be discussed on the last day. The WSF could end with some political statements of some of the participating movements.

g) Finally, in order to enhance the transparency of the whole WSF process, it would be good to adopt the “guiding principles” that were first discussed in Nairobi, including the points on the funding of the WSF.

Conclusions

Two elements are of particular importance for the future of the WSF. First, the need for some kind of “leadership”. Currently and formally, there is no leadership. Personally, I think that a big forward-looking event with more than 100.000 participants does need some formal leadership in order to ensure democracy, transparency and the pursuit of some clear objectives. The definition of these objectives are my second point. They must go beyond criticism of neoliberalism and globalisation. What do we want the WSF to be or to do? The other world that we think is possible should be made more concrete, not in the form of a single programme, but as different issues that can be integrated in different programmes or guiding principles for regional and national movements.

Some may think that these timid suggestions are too far-fetched. But just think of our ‘enemies’. Rightwing movements do have clear objectives and strategies. They do prepare their analysis and discourses. They do have structures and organisations. And they are winning. We may prefer alternatives, but they should be alternatives that allow us to win the social and political battles.

What is at stake with this strategy debate is the future of the alterglobalist movement in general and of the WSF process in particular. At the global level, the alterglobalist movement has little future without the WSF, so the WSF cannot be dissociated from the movement even if they do not coincide. The WSF is and must remain an open space for different movements. In my opinion, these movements now have to be encouraged to better organize themselves within the WSF, to make alliances and political statements and to build on the structure the WSF is offering them. But the WSF is also a structure that does not say its name. Democracy demands that this is brought into the open.

It is possible that some movements will not be open to any ideological positioning and will prefer to remain ‘neutral’. The question has then to be put what the potential can be of a general movement of different single issue movements that cannot speak out on other issues than the ones they are working on? The question can be put in another way: what is the future of a movement that speaks out on a whole series of different political questions? Is there not a risk of being compared with a political party? How to be political with movements that do not want to speak of politics?

Whatever the outcome of this debate, we will have to do everything possible to preserve the achievements and the unity of the movement, with its enormous potential to mobilize and motivate people. The WSF is a process and an event, a political process and an alternative festival. But the event is not an end in itself. Clear counter-hegemonic objectives have to be defined, and this can not be done without any kind of political debate or leadership. The WSF is and must remain an “open space”, but the space, I think, has to be organized and structured.

P.S.

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