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World Social Forum

Mumbai: new ground for the WSF

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The fourth World Social Forum was unquestionably a political success, as attested to by the commentaries and impressions of almost all its participants. To make a balance sheet of an event and a process like the WSF is always difficult, owing to its complexity, and still more so when it takes place in a political, social and cultural context which is unfamiliar for many of us. In spite of that, I would like to draw some elements of a balance sheet, on the basis of personal experience, the accounts given by prominent members of the Indian organizing committee, exchanges of opinion with other participants in the Forum, and the analysis made on the ground by those who seem to have a better grasp of the mysteries of Indian reality and the WSF process.

The process of the WSF in India

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35711.jpg>]

One of the more significant aspects of the preparatory process for the WSF in India was the broad unitary dynamic generated between organizations and groups of a very different nature, consolidating and deepening a tendency that began with the preparation of the Asian Social Forum in the Indian city of Hyderabad in January 2003. According to members of the Indian organizing committee who are familiar with the reality of this country, there has traditionally been a certain capacity for unitary work between similar organizations (trade unions, peasant movements and so on) but this coexisted with a strong division and conflictual relationship between different organizations, like for example between NGOs and trade unions, or between the popular movements of Gandhian inspiration not linked to any political party and the mass fronts of the left parties. The WSF process has allowed the generation of a unitary dynamic that breaks down the previous barriers and compartmentalizations. The spectrum of organizations involved in the Indian organizing committee was very broad (peasant movements, trade unions, movements against the privatization of water, NGOs, dalits [untouchables] and the parties of the radical left, mainly of Maoist origin).

A small nucleus of peasant organizations linked to a sector of Maoism organized the event "Mumbai Resistance" next to the WSF enclosure, while another group of autonomous peasant organizations organized the Assembly of Popular Movements, both of modest dimensions.

Still, as Pierre Rousset, one of the foreigners most directly involved in following the preparatory process, observes, it is too soon to know if the process of the WSF and this unitary dynamic has sunk deep roots in India, although there are indications that point in an affirmative direction, like the preparation of the March 20 day of action against the occupation of Iraq, or the decision of the Indian unions to issue a call for a nationwide general strike on February 24 in Mumbai.

Profile and composition of the WSF

The profile and composition of this fourth WSF, which, with approximately 125,000 participants, was the biggest so far, displayed several new features in relation to previous editions. As nearly everybody has observed, this forum allowed a real fundamental qualitative leap in the process of internationalization of the WSF, whose participants were until now essentially Latin American, European and North American. Mumbai allowed the integration of the Indian movements and a broad number of Asian countries, mainly from the Southeast and East of the continent. This

substantial change in the participation and composition of the forum was also reflected in the dominant themes. In addition to the problems already approached in previous WSFs, here developed under the form they take in India, the specificities of Indian and Asian reality were taken into account.

The format of the forum was similar enough to that of the third WSF, with some changes in the main conferences - a significant part of which were organized by the movements and the participant organizations in the forum, and not directly by the organizing committee of the WSF or the International Council.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35712.jpg>]

Sometimes it appeared that the forum was more focused outside the conferences and seminars than inside, given the continuous demonstrations, marches, and singing of the Indian and Asiatic movements from the first to the last moment. For many movements, this was the major form of self-expression during the days of the forum, more than attending the debates.

Another positive novelty was the high visibility of the Indian popular movements, the "poor" and the most underprivileged social sectors, like the dalits. There is a broad consensus that this was the social forum where the popular visibility of the "poor" and the popular sectors had been strongest. However, it was also the WSF with the lowest institutional profile of them all. Held in a city governed by the reactionary right, where the left is generally weak, the organizational, logistical and political effort to prepare the forum could not count on any aid from the Indian institutions. The Indian organizing committee nonetheless took some exemplary decisions, such as rejecting the financial aid of institutions like the Ford Foundation, a contributor to previous forums. Again, the much praised "unity and radicalism" of Florence entirely set the tone for the forum.

The coordination of the social movements

During the forum, as every year, daily assemblies of the social movements were held, this time called "assemblies of activists", to avoid any misunderstanding with the Indian organizations, since in India the term "social movement" has a much more restricted meaning than in other parts of the world, referring only to a specific type of movement, has a more inclusive character, under which they recognize all the different realities, organizations and struggles existing in India. There were also important thematic coordinations like that of the international campaign against the war in Iraq, that brought together a broad spectrum of the existing antiwar coalitions across the world.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/35713.jpg>]

The movements that had decided last year to organize a World Network of Social Movements held three big debates. First, a balance sheet of Cancun, to analyze the weaknesses and strengths shown by the social movements on this occasion, with a view to organizing for the next Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in Hong Kong in autumn 2004. There was broad enough agreement that the process around Cancun was well prepared at the level of analysis, the pursuit of official negotiations and pressure on the national governments, but weak at the level of mobilizations, not only in Cancun, but overall at the international level.

The difficulties in organizing a day of global action against the WTO contrast, as Christophe Aguiton observed, with the strength of the recent mobilizations on subjects like the war in Iraq, or the rebirth of social struggles in many countries. The second debate turned around the operation of the Network of Movements itself. The necessity was noted of extending its composition and at the same time integrating new realities, beginning with the Indians and Asians, as well as opening an international space for strategic discussion between the movements, an aspect which until now has been very weak. Finally, the Assembly of Social Movements drew up a final declaration, outlining the main objectives of mobilization for this year, principally the March 20 day of action against the occupation of Iraq and

the WTO meeting in Hong Kong.

The weak point of the coordination of the movements was the low attendance and participation of the Indian movements. Some of the members of the Indian organizing committee, like PK Murthy, told us that this was due to the organizational overload of the main people in charge of the Indian organizations during the forum, as well as the newness of the process of world-wide coordination of social movements for the Indian organizations, as yet little inserted in the international dynamic.

The international coordination of the social movements has in principle taken a step forward in Mumbai, but we have to wait for a time before we know whether the agreements made really allow an advance in the desired direction. The challenges seem clear - to extend the network, to integrate the Indian realities and many other absentees, to open an international space for strategic debate, and to raise ourselves to the height of what is necessary for the key events of the coming year. ..

* This assessment was first published on www.espacioalternativo.org on January 23, 2004.