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World Social Forum

The WSF at the crossroads

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Created in 2001, after two consecutive years of big mobilisations against the institutions symbolising neoliberal globalisation, the World Social Forum began modestly (15,000 participants) at the first WSF in late January 2001 in Porto Alegre. The process then consolidated itself very rapidly, first in Latin America and in Europe (1st ESF in November 2002 in Florence) and reached South Asia in 2003 (1st Asian Social Forum in 2003 in Hyderabad).

The WSF process has strongly developed on the planetary scale

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/wsf7.jpg>]

WSF 2007

The take off of the WSF took place amid a rapid rise in anti-globalisation mobilisations: Seattle in November 1999 against the WTO, April 2000 in Washington and September 2000 in Prague against the IMF and the World Bank, not forgetting the mobilisations in Nice and Gothenburg against the neoliberal Europe. This rise continued after the first World Social Forum: mobilisation in Quebec against the Summit of the Americas in April 2001, against the G8 in Genoa in July 2001.

The events of September 11, 2001 did not succeed in holding back the mobilisations and placed struggles against imperialist wars at the centre of the latter with an enormous success at Florence in November 2002 and above all in February 2003 when more than 12 million demonstrators protested against the preparations for the invasion in Iraq. The organisations of the Fourth International and other revolutionary organisations fully involved themselves in these anti-globalisation mobilisations and in the WSF process. The two strongest WSFs in numerical terms were those of January 2004 in Mumbai (140,000 participants) and January 2005 in Porto Alegre (150,000 participants) although one can note a subsiding of mobilisations against the war, IMF and WTO. In some years, the WSF process has developed over a great part of the planet: Latin America, Europe (including Russia), Asia (mainly India, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand), North America [1], Africa including the Maghreb. A big absence: China, but in view of the repression there it is hard to see how it will develop in the short term. Still, on the margins, there has been the significant mobilisation in Hong-Kong in December 2005 against the WTO.

The WSF groups forces going from social democratic administrators to revolutionary organisations

The spectrum of political forces involved in the WSF process is extremely broad: it goes from social democratic and Christian democratic administrators of the system to revolutionary forces via big trade union confederations (the ICFTU and the CMT-WCL regrouped today in the CIS, not forgetting the ETUC), NGOs which favour dialogue with the international financial institutions that the anti-globalisation movement fights against, and which form part, with the big union confederations already mentioned, of Global Compact (which groups, under the auspices of the United Nations, transnational enterprises, union leaderships and NGOs), [2] radical social movements (Via Campesina, the South Korean KCTU trade union, organisations of fishers, COBAS, SINCOBAS, Sud-Solidaires) and radical movements and campaigns (anti-war movement, anti-debt movement – Jubilee South and CADTM – anti-WTO campaign, not to mention the World Women's March and significant indigenous movements like Ecuador's CONAIE).

Of course, the WSF does not claim to represent all the forces mobilising against capitalist and patriarchal globalisation. Among those notably absent, let us cite for example the Zapatistas.

The evolution inside the International Council and the International Secretariat leaves no room for doubt, it is a rightward evolution

Tension has been a constant feature at the WSF International Council which brings together around a hundred organisations. Between those who think that a humanisation of globalisation is possible and those who fight it for what it is: a new phase of capitalism that must be fought radically by refusing to participate in initiatives like Global Compact, to support centre-left governments pursuing neoliberal policies and to participate in imperialist wars (notably in Afghanistan).

In the first camp we find the leaders of the big union confederations, several NGOs notably those which play a motor role in the Brazilian committee (IBASE, CIVES, Justice and Peace Commission and so on) charged with the secretariat of the WSF; NGOs and education movements in Europe (Tavola per la Pace, Caritas, CCFD, Ubuntu and more recently ARCI) as in Africa (ENDA, the South African union federation COSATU), and in South Asia. This sector does not hesitate to support Lula, Zapatero or more recently Prodi or again, the two Indian Communist Parties in power in three Indian states (Bengal, Kerala and Tripura) and which support from outside the Congress Party government in power in Delhi. They have regular meetings with the Socialist International, the European socialist parties and they advance a programme of reforms of international financial institutions and of world governance. [3]

The evolution of the Brazilian CUT which is aligned with the orientation of the Lula government (comparable to the conciliatory attitude of COSATU towards the neoliberal policy of the South African government), has strengthened this first camp.

The difficulties of the coordination of the social movements

The radical forces have sought to strengthen the popular roots of the WSF everywhere where they could do it. They have attempted - with success at certain times – to favour powerful mobilisations against globalisation (launch at the first WSF of the Appeal for the anti-war mobilisation of February 2003). These forces have also favoured the dynamic of the Assembly of Social Movements which, at each edition of the social forum, whether at world or continental level, has adopted final declarations and developed calendars of action. Despite some highs and lows, the Assembly of social movements has experienced a growing success in 2006 and 2007 (3,000 participants in the Assembly of Social Movements at the 4th ESF in Athens in May 2006 and more than 2,000 participants at the Assembly of Movements at the end of the 7th WSF in Nairobi in January 2007). But the coordination of the social movements is still weak and the social movements and campaigns which are involved still come across obstacles which are difficult to overcome. How to succeed in uniting struggles which are still too fragmented at the international scale? How to lead a discussion on strategy? Differences emerge between these movements on the attitude to adopt for example in relation to the Lula or Prodi governments.

The balance sheet of the 7th WSF in Nairobi

The balance sheet is mixed, several very negative aspects [4] have to be raised. If in the future other editions of the WSF should be marked by such features, the process will lose its *raison d'Être*.

Before touching on the negative elements, let's mention that this was the biggest international meeting where African movements from different parts of Africa met to affirm their will to struggle against neoliberalism. Moreover, different movements and campaigns [5] have profited from it to build links of struggle which unite them.

The Forum in Nairobi attracted 15 to 20,000 participants. [6] Given the characteristics of Kenya, it was impossible to expect numbers comparable to Mumbai (140,000) or Porto Alegre (150,000). If it had been correctly conceived, the WSF in Nairobi would probably have been able to attract as many as 30 to 40,000 (as in Karachi in March 2006) but this is not sure. The WSF in Nairobi was strongly marked by commodification, by militarisation, and was conceived in a manner which was excluding in relation to the population.

A brief description: This forum was marked by delusions of grandeur: the organisers believed it was possible to attract 100,000 persons (they had announced to the press between 100 and 150,000 participants) while fixing prohibitive entry rates: 500 Shillings (â,-6), the sum demanded from Kenyans was equal to a week's minimum wage (the income of the overwhelming majority of Kenyans which allows them to feed 3 to 4 persons). Such a decision implies a complete loss of contact with the living conditions of the majority of the Kenyan population or a lack of real concern with the participation of that population.

Inside the Kenyan organizing committee, some people (leaders of 3 or 4 NGOs) concentrated power [7] and took the most important decisions without really seeking to organise a process open to all the social movements of Kenya. [8] The decision to impose such a high entry price had moreover been opposed in vain inside the committee. The narrow nucleus which monopolised decisions was supported by some persons from the secretariat of the African Social Forum (mainly the leadership of the NGO ENDA-Tiers Monde based in Dakar), two or three persons from the Brazilian secretariat (representing 2 or 3 NGOs) and some Europeans. It is this small number of people that has concentrated the real power.

To go back to the delusions of grandeur: the organisation committee had hired at great cost the entire infrastructure of an enormous sporting complex capable of holding more than 100,000 people whereas it would have been possible to hold the WSF both in one of the big stadiums in the city centre (capacity of 15 to 20,000) and in one of the numerous parks near this stadium. The gigantic complex chosen by the organisers was situated at more than 10 km from the centre of the city in a residential neighbourhood. The price which had to be paid by bodies wishing to sell food in the complex was also prohibitive (between 30,000 and 60,000 shillings). The price of food served to the WSF participants was thus also prohibitive (except for the Europeans, North Americans, Japanese and the NGO and union full-timers). Cost of a single meal: between 300 and 400 shillings on average. No free drinking water on the site, a half-litre bottle of water selling for 50 shillings (or the equivalent of the price of a meal in a city restaurant). Also, inside the stadium several luxury restaurants were operating, some the property of the Minister of the Interior, well known for his repressive policy and his past as a collaborator with the British colonial power (he actively participated in the repression of the Mau Mau who fought for independence).

The organisation committee had moreover concluded a sponsorship contract with an African telecommunications transnational CELTEL (the registration of the participants and all communications went through this private enterprise present everywhere at the Forum with its advertising). The security in the stadium was provided by the police and army. Several Kenyan participants were subjected to long hours of detention in cells in the stadium simply because they had not paid the entry fee.

The tone of the speeches at the opening session (like the closing session) was essentially focused on the humanisation of globalisation. The 8,000 to 10,000 participants present at the opening had to put up with an emollient

45 minute speech by the former Zambian head of state, Kenneth Kaunda, preceded by a speech by Guy Rider, secretary general of the CIS and Flavio Loti of Tavola per la Pace. In short a very social democratic dominance.

Contrary to the decisions of the International Council, the organisers have not favoured convergence between movements. To give only one example: while the 4th day of the WSF should be conceived to allow the adoption of platforms and common strategies, calendars of common action, the organisers had planned 21 thematically different assemblies.

Big NGOs from the Christian churches had a high profile and some affirmed positions against women's rights to abortion and against LGBTs.

Happily, this did not happen without a reaction. The action of several components [9] of the coordination of social movements means that the Nairobi WSF did not end on a negative balance sheet. Several meetings of social movements succeeded from the first day in determining a common attitude and preparing the Assembly of Social Movements. There was immediately agreement on non-acceptance of the prohibitive entry price demanded of Kenyans. Contact was made with the organisers so that they let Kenyans enter for free if they wanted. Faced with the refusal of the organisers, provisions were taken to open the doors of the stadium to Kenyans who wanted to enter without paying. We should also mention that the People's Parliament had organised for the three first days of the WSF an alternative forum in a park in the centre of Nairobi. A thousand people participated every day. Then the People's Parliament joined the Assembly of Social Movements on the 4th day. [10] Although the organisation committee of the WSF had planned that the Assembly of Social Movements would take place on the 4th day at 9.30 am without translation (clearly in an attempt to sabotage it), it actually took place at the end of the day with more than 2,000 participants who ended the WSF in a unitary and combative spirit. [11]

The WSF International Council which met for two days just after the WSF was worrying. The number of critical and self-critical voices concerning the balance sheet was very limited: 6 to 7 critical interventions out of about fifty in total. [12] The next IC in Berlin from May 29-31, 2007 will adopt a code of conduct for the organisation of the next WSFs.

Beyond the WSF in Nairobi: putting down roots, creating networks, strengthening synergies...

We should distinguish the rightward evolution of the International Council from the overall process which remains positive. The dynamic of the European Social Forum has allowed the strengthening of European networks capable of uniting the struggles against the privatisation of public services, for a charter of social rights and so on. The process of preparation of forums remains democratic due to regular meetings of the preparatory European assembly. In South Asia, the dynamic of the WSF have strengthened the links between militant forces in India and Pakistan (and beyond). In Latin America, the Social Forum of the Americas has been strongly oriented to the struggles against the FTAA, against plan Colombia and so on. We will see what will emerge from the first United States Social Forum in late June of 2007. In 2008, there will not be any edition of the World Social Forum, it will be replaced by global days of action around the pivot date of January 26-27, 2008. The 8th WSF will take place in 2009 and the location will be defined by the International Council soon.

It is important to pursue active participation in the dynamic of the World Social Forum even if this latter does not constitute the alpha and omega of the anti-globalisation movement. Far from it.

[1] [The first US forum took place in Atlanta, in Georgia from June 27 to July 1, 2007.](#)

[2] Global Compact was launched by the UN secretary general in June 2000. It involves 100 transnationals, 1,000 other private enterprises, with NGOs, in such a way as to resemble a new world governance. Also involved are the new International Trade Union Confederation, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch alongside Total Elf Fina, Bayer, Unilever, BP, Shell, Nestlé, Nike... See the [presentation](#) on the site of Global Compact .

[3] During the 5th WSF in Porto Alegre the ICFTU, the CMT (today regrouped in the CIS which has 160 million members) were associated with the Global Progressive Forum, which is the NGO created by the European Socialist Party and the Socialist International so as to be able to participate in the WSF (www.globalprogressiveforum.org) to organise 11 conferences on the theme of the "Social dimension of Globalization"). In 2006, the Global Progressive Forum was admitted as a member of the International Council of the WSF, not without debate.

[4] See the dossier at [Europe-solidaire](#).

[5] See common resolution of the debt campaigns which are equipped with a permanent committee of facilitation at [CADTM](#).

[6] The official balance sheet presented by the organiser committee affirms that there were 56,000 participants, which is false

[7] Onyango Oloo, the national coordinator of the Kenyan Social Forum which publicly took its distance in relation to this nucleus, published two months after the holding of the WSF an [edifying analytic description](#).

[8] See also the [balance sheet](#) written by the People's parliament

[9] The anti-debt campaigns (including the CADTM) and anti WTO campaigns, the social movement Indaba from South Africa, NGOs, several ATTAC movements, the World Women's March, the movement No Vox... without forgetting the People's Parliament of Kenya.

[10] This radical social movement had also organised demonstrations against the over high price of food in the stadium. On the 4th day, some members of this movement looted one of the 5 star restaurants and distributed the food free to some dozens of street children who had accompanied them.

[11] See the [final declaration of the social movements](#).

[12] See the [report of the International Council](#).