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World Social Forum

The abuses of the World Social Forum: Towards the end of the process?

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Genesis of the WSF

The World Social Forum (WSF) was born following the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement in the 1990s, including the Zapatista uprising against NAFTA in 1994, the campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1998 and the great mobilisation in 1999 in Seattle against the WTO summit, with nearly 50,000 participants from around the world.

The political and ideological context was marked by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War which led to the hegemony of the United States and liberal ideology, but also by the emergence of social movements fighting against the ultra-liberal policies dictated by the international economic institutions (IMF, WB, WTO) as part of the Washington Consensus.

The enemies of the WSF were therefore well identified: the World Economic Forum in Davos, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the multinationals, the United States as an empire...

The Charter of Principles of Porto Alegre defines the WSF as "An open space for reflection, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action among social movements and civil society organisations that are opposed to neoliberalism and to the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism..."

The World Social Forum is therefore not simply an event for the debate of ideas and proposing alternatives to neoliberalism. It is also an ongoing process that involves the construction of common actions on a global scale. In other words, the WSF will have to be a catalyst for social struggles, and to make struggles more visible, with the overall objective of reinforcing the common battle against neoliberalism and, in general, against capitalist globalisation, to help reverse the balance of power in the world.

Meanwhile, the WSF is aware of more and more serious abuses that have "reduced (it) to insignificance" [\[1\]](#), making it into a simple international fair for associations and development NGOs. Excessive commercialisation in the heart of the Forum area, outsourcing certain aspects of the organization to private companies, high fees, the presence of official delegations and Islamist fundamentalists, funding of the Forum by undemocratic governments and other uncertain funding sources, activities recorded in complete contradiction with the principles of the WSF Charter...

Add to that the internal crisis of the International Council (IC) of the WSF whose commissions are no longer operational, as well as the liaison group that played the role of coordination between the commissions and prepared Council meetings. Decisions are most often prepared in advance by a minority that controls the IC, mostly members of large NGOs whose presence and influence are increasingly important in front of the low representation of social movements and movements for change in the IC.

The hope of Tunis 2013 evaporated after "Tunis 2015"!

The WSF in Tunis 2013 gave a new impetus to the process, or at least a little hope! The revolutionary process and

the popular uprisings in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world have achieved a Forum more or less successful in comparison with the previous editions, including those held on African soil (Nairobi in 2007 and Dakar in 2011). This is also the positive conclusion drawn by the IC that pushed its members to take the decision to organise a second consecutive forum in Tunisia in 2015. Compared to 2013, a change was expected, both in terms of mobilisation and organisation in regard to the involvement of social movements for change, and articulation between movements for common concrete actions. Unfortunately the result was disappointing, despite very good debates in some workshops and some interesting conclusions from certain convergence assemblies which proposed joint action dates. [\[2\]](#)

The excesses of the WSF 2015

The 13th edition of the WSF faced the challenge of ensuring significant participation, as much as that of 2013 to bring together the struggles of social movements, especially in the region that is experiencing protests boiling over: protests against the shale gas development in Algeria, the movement of striking teachers in Algeria and Tunisia, unemployed graduates fighting for their right to work... and the popular uprisings in Africa (Burkina Faso, Togo, Congo...), in Europe (particularly in Greece and Spain) and Latin America. The third challenge was to facilitate the construction of common agendas against the international financial institutions and the debt system, against the exploitation of natural resources by multinationals, against neo-liberal free trade treaties, against the regression of the most basic human rights, against violence against women, for climate justice and food sovereignty, social justice and peace ... The fourth challenge was for the organisational and security sectors, that is to say assure a required quality of organisation and interpretation and avoid violence and disturbances that political clashes can cause as happened in previous years.

As the WSF approached fears were growing, and some of them were confirmed. First on the issue of mobilisation, despite the inclusion of a large number of organisations (over 4,000) and no less than 1200 recorded activities, participation was lower than in 2013. The estimates of the organising committee are of the order of 45,000 participants, but this is a quite surprising figure which is certainly "inflated"! It was not based on the number of badges distributed or on confirmed registrations.

Another aspect that should be highlighted; i.e. the near inability of some movements really struggling to participate in this Forum. Certainly, there have been debates on Greece, on Spain, the current protests in Africa (Burkina Faso, Togo, Congo...) but these movements, and in a general manner the so-called "new movements" were not present.

On 27 and 28 March around thirty convergence assemblies were scheduled. However self-managed workshops were organised in parallel. This is what accounted for the low participation in the meetings. This methodology did not facilitate the convergences.

It is also important to note that some content of some activities were in contradiction with the WSF Charter of Principles: organisations defending the agendas of the World Bank, activities that defend the partnership agreements between the EU and the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, others who talk about entrepreneurship in solidarity-based economy, etc. The Forum program was also sponsored by Tunisian enterprises (TUNISIA TELECOM TUNISAIR, TRANSTU ...). Add to that the strong presence of religious Islamists distributing free religious propaganda books! As well as Islamist parties like the Moroccan party "Al Adl wal Ihsane" (Justice and Spirituality), which even held its stand at the Law School!

The presence of a strong delegation of Algerian pro-regime (about 1200 participants supported by the government) and a Moroccan official delegation panicked the Forum and disrupted the conduct of certain activities. The organising committee had to do a press conference on March 27th in the morning to denounce the violence caused by the

Algerian delegation (without citing the official Moroccan delegation!) but that conference was disrupted by the same delegation.

Another very big problem: interpretation. The Tunisian organisation committee preferred to form a group of local volunteers, including language students and translation teachers, without using the experience and expertise of the Babels network recognised for its experience, competence and political involvement with the WSF process, which has so far provided interpretation for the various editions of the WSF. The Local Committee, having found that Babels interpreters are "expensive and demanding!", contented themselves with volunteers with very little experience and whose number was very inadequate. This has led the Babels network to make the decision to boycott WSF Tunisia 2015. [3] Also working conditions for performers were very difficult (no adapted material, no per diem, no food ...) which led them to strike in the afternoon of March 27 while some convergence assemblies took place.

WSF Tunis 2015: an Anti Terrorism Forum!

After the attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis on March 18th that killed 22 people, the WSF organizing committee met in emergency and made a statement in which it announced the continuation of the Forum and its decision to change the route of the Forum's opening march which would now leave instead from Bab Saadoun towards the Bardo museum under the slogan "The peoples of the world against terrorism"! The statement also spoke of the creation of a committee within the International Council for the drafting of the "anti-globalization international charter of Bardo for the fight against terrorism."

Therefore, the WSF advertised itself as an anti-terrorism event and the Tunisian media event spoke only of anti-globalists coming to Tunisia to "denounce terrorism"! Fortunately, several members of the IC of the WSF and other international activists responded quickly and expressed their concerns. A meeting of international social movements with the organizing committee, held on 22nd March, helped clarify and agree on the slogan of the opening march: "The peoples of the world united for freedom, equality, social justice and peace, in solidarity with the Tunisian people and all victims of terrorism and all forms of oppression". Social movements have refused that the WSF could be considered an event against terrorism, and stated that there are several forms of terrorism and that terrorism is fed by international imperialism.

Despite these clarifications the opening march was globally a protest against terrorism, and as such was reported by the press and the Tunisian media announcing that the organisations of international civil society demonstrated in Tunis against terrorism!

The issue of terrorism, which was invited to the debate (including the IC meeting of the WSF) shows that within the WSF itself there are those who put themselves in the wake of imperialism and those who fight it.

The future of the WSF?

It is clear that the World Social Forum is currently in crisis, as well as its International Council. It was recovered by the supporters of a "liberalism with a human face!", those who see the Forum as a simple event. The struggle against the capitalist system is not on the agenda and is not a common agenda of the various components of the dynamics of the WSF. The future of the process is therefore uncertain!

In other words, the WSF is inward-looking and not intended to counteract the World Economic Forum in Davos or

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any other neoliberal body. It has no more objectives in terms of enemies to fight. And worse, it sits in the empires lap (cf. fight against terrorism). In fact, it is without a political compass.

In addition, the WSF has never managed to actually be a forum for movements to express themselves. Only structured organisations are able to finance the travels of a few militants. There has been very little attention paid to the grassroots.

The Assembly of Social Movements (ASM), which was the last minute of the WSF in the early years, and calls at each edition for action days and mobilisations worldwide, has been rendered meaningless by the strategy and methodology established by the IC. It is now marginalised and placed at the same level as other convergence assemblies! The idea was to break the momentum of the AMS which positions itself concretely in the field of alternatives to capitalist globalisation. And social movements themselves have contributed to this by their withdrawal and disinterest, including some major international movements that had initiated this dynamic.

Social movements, especially those that make up the ASM, and the various movements fighting for global social justice, are called to more coordination and cooperation for the common struggle, even beyond the WSF, to strengthen the fight against capitalist globalization for a more just and equitable world.

Translated by Jennie Bright for [Tlaxcala](#).

Original article in French [CADTM](#).

[1] "Why the World Social Forum ran out", by Emir Sader, a Brazilian sociologist and political scientist.

[2] See in particular the [Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements – World Social Forum 2015](#).

[3] See press release of Babels network: Babels will not participate in the 2015 WSF.