

The WSF as logo, the WSF as commons

Take a moment to reflect on what is happening in the World Social Forum

A discussion note

Jai Sen, New Delhi, India – May 2003 ¹

This note reflects on three topics in relation to the World Social Forum : On the dynamics of the World Social Forum as a whole, on the International Council of the World Social Forum, and – since the next world meeting of the World Social Forum is to be held here - on the Forum process in India. It is not so much a ‘paper’ as a discussion note, prepared in a form that might be useful for discussion or reflection sessions. The first version of this note was quickly put together just to be able to reach it to a meeting in time, in place of my being there personally.² All I try to do here is to try and articulate and highlight certain issues that I believe deserve wider debate, and to put forward certain proposals that we might all like to take a moment to reflect on.

During WSF3 in Porto Alegre, a new initiative named ‘WSFItself’ organised a workshop on power relations within the World Social Forum. One of the exercises that took place during the workshop required participants to try and imagine what were the kinds of policies that could be adopted by the WSF that would kill – or certainly, cripple - the Forum. In its words, the ‘toxics’. The idea was to reveal, through this exercise in intense negativism, what needed to *not* be done, and maybe even an insight into some of what is actually already taking place but that we are not being able to ‘read’ given the positivist lenses through which we normally tend to see the world around us, including the Forum.³

In some senses, this essay is only a continuation of that exercise, but without being consciously so – and especially insofar as it also proposes some other ways to look at the Forum and things we might like to consider doing to interrogate and counter what is happening. Even as it celebrates the fact of the Forum, and what it is doing and capable of, it also argues that there are several tendencies that are already taking shape within the Forum that - in my understanding and analysis - are deeply negative and contradictory to the spirit of the Forum. They include gigantism, the creeping takeover by a management culture, and the Forum becoming a brand name, its motto a logo, and the starting of a kind of worldwide franchising. They also include a distinct possibility that the actually existing Forum is not the ‘open space’ that it is said to be, and that the Forum is reproducing classical divisive social relations. I believe that there are also some quite deep conceptual problems in the present formulation of the Forum.

To me these seem enough reasons to suggest that we urgently need to take a moment to look at what is happening in the World Social Forum. To do this, I suggest several specific issues we might like to consider, in relation to each of the three topics. And in particular, I propose that there is a way in which we can begin to address important parts of this ground : By re-conceiving the WSF as a commons, and its International Council as a trust.

Topic 1 : The dynamics of the World Social Forum

I have earlier argued that the crystallisation of the WSF is one of the more significant developments of the past many decades, and perhaps of the past century.⁴ I still believe this. But I should make clear at the outset of this note why I think the World Social Forum is so important and what I think it could or should become. I argue this for many reasons, but most

importantly because of the historical, political, and politico-cultural significance of the initiative. It is all too easy to take this significance for granted, or to not fully comprehend its meaning. At the same time, we need to always critically reflect on the idea and on how we are actually exploring it in reality.

Specifically, I believe that the primary significance of the Forum lies in the political culture that it represents and is attempting to explore, which I believe to be its main contribution in political-strategic terms. The Forum, as argued by those who initiated it, is not an organisation or a movement, nor a world federation, but a *space* – and to boot, a relatively non-directed space, from and within which movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and find space to take forward their work and their visions, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. The original organisers of the Forum saw – and still see - their task as being not the building of movement, or the coordination of opinion and position, but simply as the building of space – literally and metaphorically - where free exchange is possible and making it available as widely as possible.⁵ One of the main architects of the Forum has recently issued an interesting Note reflecting on ‘the Forum as space, the Forum as movement’, and has come out strongly against seeing the Forum – the space - as being primarily occupied by movements.⁶

What is important about the Forum is the manner in which it does these things and the political culture that the initiative represents. It is the concept that underlies it – of it being a *space* (very literally, a forum in the sense of an agora or arena) and not an organisation or world federation of any kind – that is most crucial. And the real ‘success’ of the Forum is that it is permitting a scale of talking across boundaries – of cross-fertilisation – that has rarely been dreamt of before, and that it is thereby powerfully contributing to building a culture of open debate across conventional walls and boundaries. The real ‘alternative’ that it therefore has to offer is that it does not try to formulate any one alternative but rather is showing that it is possible to create, and to sustain, a non-directed space. Literally, a free space, for free thought – or to use Marx’s term, a ‘space for human self development’.

Indeed, as I understand it, helping to bridge old politics and the new, in different countries and historical contexts but at the same time in history – in part, because of the sheer compulsions of the times we are living through - is one of the most crucial and most difficult challenges for the Forum, and quite possibly also one of its historically most important.

There are of course many aspects to this. Among other things, it will be vital to not assume a homogeneity between conditions in different parts of the world – in other words, that even if there are newer and older actors in different situations, that the relations between them and the conditions they work under are always the same. At a different level, if we agree that the larger struggle is the war of ideas, it is also essential for the Forum to move from focussing on exchange among the converted and already committed to progressively opening itself up to the non-converted and to encourage within these worlds the culture of free thought and exchange on which it is founded.

There are at least three crucial groupings here : One, professionals, academics, people in the creative worlds, and also those in the corporate world, and more generally the middle classes. Two, those living and operating outside normal political channels, such as migrants, refugees, and others who are forced to respond to the displacement and exclusion they face in their own ways, precisely because they are excluded, and including the global networks through which they work. And three, the ‘uncivil societies’ that exist within all countries and contexts, the historically and structurally oppressed and marginalised, who are consequently also usually impoverished, but who are today in the historical process of finding voices of their own by which they are also challenging both states and also, necessarily, the traditional civil societies from whom the leadership of states has traditionally come and where power resides.

They are defining societies – and ‘civilisation’ – in their own terms.⁷ To some extent, the second and third categories overlap.

In this sense, the Forum – and taking part in it – is a challenge because it represents a vision that is radically different to conventional organisational thinking in the civil world - certainly at the global level, which has tended to be either federative or associational, but also at more local and national levels. Indeed, it also challenges what many see as the newest form of social organisation, the network.

The Forum frees – and challenges - us to think and act freely, but it then equally places a demand on us that we keep the space free of control and resist temptations to try to control it. It is therefore a challenge not only to mainstream, orthodox, and conservative thinking and practice but also – and perhaps even more so - to all those organisations and initiatives that claim to be working in terms of ‘alternatives’ but that are doing so through forms and relations that remain conventionally bounded and territorial. It therefore constantly represents a radical challenge at a very basic level to most existing organisations and movements – and perhaps especially to the founders of the Forum and to all those who are today attempting to build it in different contexts.

I think it goes without saying that if this is the case, then we are on new ground. We are also living in very turbulent and difficult times, but this is the world we must act in. In my thinking it is therefore essential that we move forward step by step, critically examining our progress and reflecting on it as we go. As with the other notes and papers I have written on the Forum, I offer this note as a contribution to such a process.

An overview

On the face of it, there is good reason to hold that the WSF has moved from strength to strength over its first two years, since the first ‘World Social Forum’ was held in Porto Alegre in Brazil in January 2001. In processual terms, the WSF has moved in this time from being a major annual event each January in Porto Alegre, timed to polemically challenge the annual World *Economic* Forum held at Davos, Switzerland, to being an efflorescence and celebration across the world that has now gone far beyond the question of challenging neoliberal globalisation alone.⁸

In 2002, the first ‘thematic’ Social Forum was organised in Argentina in August, and the first ‘regional’ European Social Forum in Florence, Italy, in November, which was the scene of a march by some 500,000-1 million people in a peace rally in protest against the US-led war that was then threatening on Iraq. In early 2003, before the next Forum to be held in Porto Alegre in late January, *four* regional Fora were held : The Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad, India, the Palestine Social Forum, the Africa Social Forum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. It was in this larger context therefore, that the third World Social Forum was then held in Porto Alegre during January 25-29 this year. So the ‘World Social Forum’ has become quite something else in these two years, from what it started out as being.

The annual event in Porto Alegre is also changing. From the first meeting in January 2001 that was dominantly a challenge to Davos and economic globalisation, it moved in January 2002 to being a meeting that made a call for alternatives – ‘Another World Is Possible!’. And the third meeting was more focussed on articulating the alternatives and on beginning to spell out ways in which the alternatives can be achieved – and also marked the beginning of a process of more serious introspection.⁹

After the first Forum, the World Social Forum also came not only to be portrayed by the world’s media as being ‘anti-globalisation’ but to itself ‘don this garb’ – to assume this identity.

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This label was given, and assumed, under the simplistic assumption that there is only one mode of globalisation – but where this is in fact of course exactly what the proponents of economic globalisation wanted to see people believing. But the Forum has since then moved on from this point, and has come to accept that its task is globalisation – of another kind - and that it itself is in fact a manifestation of another globalisation. Not only are other worlds possible, but so are other globalisations. And that these other globalisations are necessary, if we are indeed to build worlds other than the one we are living in.

These are crucial developments. And in terms of numbers, the relevance of the Forum to concerned people across the world is shown by growth – from 25-30,000 at the first Forum, to 50-60,000 at the second, to 100,000 at the third.

But it is not the numbers alone that count. This record of growth has to be understood against what has been happening in the wider world during this period, and within which it has been taking shape. 9/11 took place in the same year as the first Forum, and gave an impatient imperial power the opportunity to unleash its ‘war against terrorism’. Significantly, senior officials of that country at that point made clear that the so-called ‘war against terrorism’ was the best way to open the world to so-called ‘free trade’, and the President of that country – though not known for his intellect - openly equated dissidents and critics of ‘free trade’ and neoliberalism with terrorists, and brazenly declared that ‘Those who are not with us, are against us’.

A year and a half later, and even though now increasingly challenged in terms of moral authority, capitalist globalisation is still riding triumphant across the globe even as the economy of the United States unravels from within. But to achieve this, ‘security’ and surveillance measures are being relentlessly tightened by nation-states, supposedly in defence against those labelled terrorists, but also against protestors of state politics and market operations, and the self-styled leaders of the so-called ‘free world’ are increasingly meeting in increasingly remote parts of the world, walling themselves off from ordinary people, and defending themselves with their militia.

Accompanying this, there are periodic signs that Europe seems to be moving to the right, and Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalisms are rampant in different parts of the world. The US is already firmly in the grip of not just the right but a hard right. And in this year we have seen the ‘coalition of the coerced’ defiantly launch its war on Iraq, in the face of world opinion, as an obvious widening of the reach of its empire.

Equally, and concurrently, other ‘coalitions of the coerced’ are also pushing hard – to bring in the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), to open all of the Americas to free trade, and to bring in major changes at the WTO. If their efforts succeed, the results will represent major advances in the neoliberal project. But in all this – all done in the name of freedom and liberalisation - the deep shadows of imperialism and authoritarianism are very evident.¹⁰

Against this grim scene however, the developments in Brazil and in global transnational space over this past year have been encouraging. In Brazil, the presidential elections last year finally brought Lula (Luis Inácio Lula da Silva), the leader of the Workers’ Party, to the Presidency after a long campaign and four attempts. This development has the potential to change the political landscape in this major country in significant ways, and therefore also – because of its scale - in the western hemisphere and in the world. An important step towards this has been the enunciation by Lula of his government’s foreign policy, which sees the building of relations across the South, and especially with three major countries (South Africa, India, and China) as a key element. The churning that is taking place in Brazil today is still in a fragile and vulnerable stage however, and is something that all of us who value this experiment need to critically monitor and be in solidarity with.

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The massive and sustained demonstrations that have taken place in this year across the North - in Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Britain, and many other European countries, in Canada and across the US, and in Australia and elsewhere –, sometimes coordinated and sometimes country-specific, along with demonstrations in many countries of the South, have also been very important indications of another politics and of other possibilities.

The news from another major country however, India – and where the World Forum is scheduled to be held next January - has been less encouraging. Last year, India experienced a brutal and chilling anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat. While elections in the highly contested state of Kashmir later in the year yielded a fresh government, and while this year too a more centrist party has won another state election, the state election in Gujarat last year returned to power with a landslide the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that is widely seen as having been responsible for the communal violence, and its neo-fascist Chief Minister. With the party and its allied organisations saying that Gujarat is a model for what should happen in the rest of the country, and with elections taking place in several states over this coming year, the shadows of fascism still threaten India. Anything remotely like fascism setting in in a country of the scale of India, would have worldwide repercussions.

This struggle continues in India. But again, as in the case of Brazil but in a different way, these developments therefore need to be the concern of people across the world, and not only Indians, as it tends to be today; and as in the case of Brazil, we need to develop a culture and politics of deeper and more critical internationalist solidarity.

These are of course only a few fragments of what is happening in the world today. But given this broader background against which the Forum is taking shape, I believe that we urgently need to take a step back and try and see the larger picture. We need to ask ourselves: How does the Forum fit into all this ?

Perhaps most importantly, the WSF has struck at the level of meaning : For it has made resonantly clear – and from media coverage and so much else, the message has clearly struck home – that there *is* an alternative to economic, capitalist globalisation, there *are* alternatives. And that people all over the world are now mobilising to live those alternatives. There is good reason to think that the Forum – the European Social Forum and then the World Social Forum – played a role in making possible the massive worldwide mobilisation that took place against the Iraq war on February 15-16. In this way, the WSF – along with all the other forms of global civil action that are also taking place - is playing a profound role in freeing peoples all over the world of the shackles of the colonisation of the mind by the idea that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalisation and by replacing this with the idea there are indeed alternatives – and importantly, that this is as global a project as neoliberalism. The possibility of alternatives and the implicit sense of not being alone are extremely important at a juncture like this.

The challenge for the World Social Forum now is what role it should play in translating this into real social and political alternatives. But equally, the challenge for the Forum is surely going to be how to relate to the extraordinarily fluid and volatile new world context that we now live in. This only brings added responsibilities on larger initiatives such as the Forum. The situation both creates opportunities for new transnational and other transborder civil action and also demands the capacity for and exercise of strategic insight. The task for the Forum now must be not merely to provide a space for free exchange but also to struggle to defend and constantly expand this space. The reduction of civil and political space that is taking place or is threatening to take place in so many countries across the world is not something that the Forum will necessarily want to take on as such, or as a whole, and it remains to be seen in what ways it or those who take part in it respond to this new situation, but that it should play a role in the emerging situation seems indisputable.

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Finally, the Forum will surely have to face the challenge of being increasingly perceived not merely as an arena but as an actor.¹¹ This ambiguity of identity and role has in some ways been its strength, and a 'secret' of its magic, as is the case with many social and political actors. But it seems unlikely that the Forum can continue to rely on this illusion remaining in place. It is going to have to work to reinvent itself, as it becomes more one than the other.

Some issues

With all this said, and precisely because this seems to be both the potential of the Forum and a challenge to it, we need to critically reflect on the Forum and on what is happening within it. I am going to limit my discussion in this first section, in relation to the dynamics of the Forum, to only the following issues :

- ? **Giganticism**
- ? **Each meeting of the Forum is becoming a series of discrete events, and not a real meeting of minds**
- ? **The World Social Forum as a whole is seen only a Big Event and a singular Idea, and not a world process**
- ? **Is the Forum becoming a brand name and corporate monoculture, and its motto 'Another World Is Possible !' a logo ?**
- ? **Organisational culture : Is the Forum only reproducing classical divisive social relations ?**
- ? **Is the space that the Forum has created really open ?**
- ? **Is there, and should there be, only one *World Social Forum* ?**

§ **Giganticism** : The most obvious success of the Forum is its size and growth – and its most obvious problem is this too and the breakdowns that come with this, the increasing need of an 'efficient management culture' in order to handle the size, as well as a growing culture of giganticism.

As many commentators have already pointed out, the last World Forum in Porto Alegre all but broke down. No programme was published, large numbers of events – what in Forumese are termed 'self-organised events', organised by independent entities and not by the Forum's Organising Committee – were rescheduled, relocated, and some just cancelled; and worse, the reason for this disaster, overload, was perhaps never fully and publicly acknowledged. While those who have written on this (for instance, Michael Albert of Z magazine and Z-Net, who had organised a major set of 40 seminars under the general theme 'Life After Capitalism' and suffered massively¹²) have been most gentle in their criticism, and while the organisers also handled themselves with remarkable grace throughout that period, the fact is, to use Peter Waterman's phrase, things went 'out of control', simply because the Forum's organisational abilities were inadequate.

On the face of it, it seems a little ironic to use this phrase for something like the Forum, that professes to provide an 'open space' and to apply the minimum of control. But the reality of what took place challenges us to recognise that such an initiative in fact demands extensive systems of planning and control. We need to not pretend that such systems are not there. While it can well be said that the Forum constitutes a very rich experiment of how to manage an enterprise of this scale with a minimum of restrictions, we still need to remind ourselves that 'Open space' does not mean 'no control'. But I will come back to this point.

Similarly, the Asian Social Forum in India – though vibrant and otherwise successful in many ways, and although admittedly only the first such meeting organised in India - also broke down at several levels. I will also come back to this later on.

But there are many who believe that it is precisely the scale of the Forum, and its exponential growth, that has commanded for it respect from the world's mainstream media and therefore from the neoliberal world.

There is also good reason to argue, as I have, that one part of the magic of the Forum – of the culture and the experience of the Forum – is that the scale is big enough for each participant to become anonymous and therefore to not feel she has to defend her organisational identity or ideology or whatever; and therefore to be able to be far more free : Free to listen, free to express herself, free to share. This is especially important when the participants are coming from different streams of thought and action. Smaller meetings, where everyone becomes known, rarely offer this possibility.

With the next Forum being held in India, where traditional politics demand large mass presence and where mass organisations pride themselves on their ability to mobilise large numbers, there is already a call for the Mumbai Forum to be of at least the same scale as WSF3 in Porto Alegre, in other words 100,000. (Although it is only fair to acknowledge that there are apparently also some calls within the Mumbai Committee for a smaller, more focussed event.) Others are also saying that even a crowd of 100,000 will have no impact at all on a city of the scale and intensity of Mumbai, and that it 'needs' to be much larger yet.

Another problem is plan versus reality – where reality overwhelms plan : In each Forum the actual number of participants has been 2-3 times the projected number. (WSF1 20,000 vs 7-10,000 expected; WSF2 50,000 vs the 20,000 expected; and the Asian Social Forum, 18-20,000 vs the 7-10,000 expected.) So the Mumbai Forum could end up having some 250-300,000 people taking part.

And yet another problem is logistics, and the disintegrating, alienating impact of such large numbers. Since in most places it is not possible to hold an event of this scale – 100,000 and more – in one location, logistics require separating the events geographically, according to some scheme of rationality and according to what facilities are available where. In Porto Alegre this year, the organisers decided to hold the Forum in four different locations (in the previous two years, the Forum was largely though not exclusively held in one location, the PUC – the Catholic University). This meant that participants this year had to decide on either spending a lot of time commuting between locations or electing to stay in one or two locations – and thereby losing much of the particular magic that the Forum has to offer.

Indeed, one reading of the Forum this year was that even if inadvertently, this planning also led to a class-wise separation of the participants – thereby even further reducing the experience of crossing boundaries that the Forum has earlier offered. This happened because of the grouping of activities : The more academic events were clustered together in PUC, and attracted the more academic crowd – students, professors, researchers; with CUT, the big Brazilian trade union federation, establishing its camp beside the Gigantinho stadium, most other trade union and working class organisations held their meetings there, inevitably tending to attract working class crowds; and the more highbrow intellectual events were apparently located in the warehouses at Amaram, near the port, and tended to retain a particular crowd that rotated between those events.

If this picture is even remotely close to reality, this surely contradicts completely the most fundamental idea of the Forum. To address this, many are suggesting reflexive recourse to suggesting that what the Forum needs is 'more efficient management'. Conclusion: We

urgently need to rethink the gigantism that has crept into and seems to be in danger of overwhelming the Forum.

§ Each meeting of the Forum is becoming a series of discrete events, and not a real meeting of minds : In my understanding, the World Social Forum – and especially as manifested in its world meetings - is increasingly tending to become a gargantuan set of separate events rather than the ‘open space’ for the free, unrestricted, and undirected meeting of minds that it was originally intended to be and that it is still described as.

This problem is most commonly associated with scale, as above, but does not flow only from this. It comes also from the undeclared emphasis on private, individualised, separate initiative and enterprise, and from the lack of prioritisation and premium given to sharing, between organisers and between participants.

In some senses the problem – and the undeclared emphasis on individualised use - also arises from the conceptualisation of the space as being ‘open space’ and not as a commons. Though apparently similar, there is a fundamental difference between these two concepts. The term and concept ‘open space’ carries with it no implication of obligations of responsibility for those using it, either presently or to the future, other than – and this too, only possibly – of struggling to keep it open. The emphasis is on ‘use’. The alternative term that some advocate in place of ‘open space’, of ‘public space’, in fact reveals more clearly the underlying assumption that there exists an authority of some kind that is responsible for the maintenance of the space.

The term ‘commons’, on the other hand, implies a specific social contract and concept – specific to the commons under consideration – between all those who use it and dwell around it and where they all accept that the space is common to all; that there are mutually agreed systems and rules of both use and enjoyment; and therefore that it is the obligation of all to sustain and maintain it. In a sense, all users become ‘trustees’ of the space, for their own use and for the use of future generations. To re-think the Forum as a commons could well be very fruitful.

It also tends to be assumed – in the present way of conceiving of the Forum as ‘open space’ - that ‘another invisible hand is possible’ : That if you bring people together in a (large) open space, they will necessarily interact. While this has been the magic of the Forum so far, and certainly sets it apart from most other such events – to the point where it is almost becoming a logo -, and while this will continue to take place to some degree in future events, this formulation ignores certain key issues :

- i) The tendencies of people belonging to particular streams of thought and action to stay within or close to ‘their’ streams
- ii) The tendency of some (many ? most ?) streams of thought and action, especially those from old politics but not only those, to organise their events in what amounts to being an exclusive manner : With familiar and reliable speakers, and organised in such a manner that the events ‘speak’ primarily to those within the streams, in other words with an internal discourse – and so inevitably tend to keep things separate
- iii) The intercultural differences that exist between participants from different countries and contexts, and that is likely to be all the more the case as the Forum matures as an idea and the dominance of people from the host country reduces, whether in Brazil or anywhere else.

§ The World Social Forum as a whole is increasingly being seen only a Big Event and a singular Idea, and not as a world process : There is too much to suggest that the World Social Forum is tending to be seen only as a mega event – or now, a series of mega events – rather than the world process that it has the potential to be, and that it needs to become in order to achieve its potential.

The World Social Forum started off as an event. Inspired by its success, the organisers – the Brazil Organising Committee – had enough foresight to be able to say, in the Charter of Principles they drafted for the Forum just three months later in April 2001, that :

2. The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localized in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that “Another world is possible”, *it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.*¹³

And when the Brazil Organising Committee formed the International Council shortly afterwards, in June 2001, it had the vision to see that the main purpose of the Council was to take the Forum to the world level.

Consistent with this vision, the International Council decided at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2002 to give a call for the organisation of what it called ‘regional’ and ‘thematic’ fora, from 2002 onwards. As already mentioned, several regional and thematic fora then took place during 2002, and continue to take place during 2003.

On the face of it, and as just mentioned, on the one hand it is wonderful to see all this as a part of the globalisation of the World Social Forum. At another level however, there is reason to be concerned with what is talking place. Each event – each ‘Forum’ – is tending to take place by itself, virtually unrelated to the Fora that have taken place or that are going to take place – other than looking ahead in a general way to the next ‘world’ social forum. There is little or no exchange of experience, of strategy, of information. Is this how it should be ? Imagine, for instance, if the UN were to organise, through its various regional offices, a series of world and regional conferences with broadly the same theme in different parts of the world, but without any connection between the meetings. Would we see this as a celebration of difference, or as poor coordination and a waste of resources ? And as is discussed in more detail below, most if not all the Fora taking place are tending to only reproduce the ‘Porto Alegre menu’, and in that sense are spawning a monoculture rather than being a celebration of the richness of the world, which is what the Forum is surely about.

Other than in the sense of different meetings taking place over time in different parts of the world, there seems good reason to think that what is happening is still far short of being the larger WSF process that was envisaged, and that the Forum needs to be.

According to the WSF Charter of Principles,

3. The World Social Forum is a world process. All the meetings that are held as part of this process have an international dimension.

But is having an ‘international dimension’ by itself enough to make the Forum a world process ?

§ Is the Forum already a brand name and corporate monoculture, and its motto ‘Another World Is Possible !’ becoming a logo ? As the Forum spreads across the world, not unrelated to the question of the Forum becoming just a series of discrete events is the distinct possibility of the Forum becoming a brand name and a monoculture, and its motto ‘Another World Is Possible !’ a logo. Without being excessively cynical, there is reason enough to, just

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for a moment, think of the 'regional' and thematic events as being franchised events. If this is at all the case, then at the same time as it is contributing to the civilising of globalisation, the World Social Forum is arguably also contributing to the globalisation of a certain civilisation. This is deeply problematic ground.¹⁴

The organisers of the Porto Alegre Forum the Brazil Organising Committee (now called the 'International Secretariat'), and perhaps with a little help from friends elsewhere, have come up with a very particular vocabulary for the organisation of the World Social Forum as a event : Conferences, Seminars, and Workshops made up the menu for the first year, with the Conferences organised by the organisers of the Forum and the other two kinds of events being 'self-organised', by organisations participating in the Forum. Over the subsequent years the Brazil Organising Committee has added several items to this menu, more recently after discussions within the International Council : Panel discussions, Testimonials, Roundtables of Controversy, and so on. The Brazil Organising Committee / now the International Secretariat continues to struggle with this formula, often creatively, and - for instance - has recently come up with the proposal that the Conferences, which earlier used to be at the centre of the Forum (and where this was replicated at, say, the Asian Social Forum) and dominated the event, should now be at the margins, and the self-organised events should be brought to the centre.¹⁵

Aside from this main menu, there is also something of a standard side menu, of other world fora taking place alongside the World Social Forum : A World Youth Forum, a World Parliamentary Forum, a World Forum of Local Authorities, this last year a World Education Forum, and so on. There is also another side menu of less formal activities, such as rallies and marches, and an obligatory formal part of the menu are colourful inauguration and closing ceremonies, as major celebrations of being together.

The problem is that since the Forum is widely seen as having been 'successful', this menu is beginning to be copied, and there is some reason to think that this *menu* is tending to become standard, as a kind of recipe for success – for replicating the richness and vigour of Porto Alegre. There is also some amount of unstated assumption that if a World Social Forum-related meeting is going to be organised elsewhere – whether the world forum or smaller versions – it needs to be like the Porto Alegre event.

But this is of course what creating a brand is all about, and even if this is exaggerating the situation, there is a danger that the Forum is going to become a world chain, with a standard recipe, and the Forum becomes something that comes out of a biscuit-cutter. This then becomes the problem, not the solution. The day may also not be far off when someone suggests that patenting the Forum's motto 'Another World Is Possible !', just in case someone else tries using it - and so that this initiative alone can provide this distinctive flavour.

'The Forum' is also catching. Aside from the regional and thematic fora mentioned earlier, there are now city-level fora all over Brazil and in several parts of the Europe and state-level Fora in parts of India; and surely elsewhere as well. The longstanding 'Radfest' organised annually by the Havens Center (the A E Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change) at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the USA has, for instance, this year called itself the 'Midwest Social Forum'. While on the one hand it is wonderful to see all this, as a part of the globalisation of the World Social Forum, at another level we need to ask ourselves : Is what is taking place a spreading of the *culture* of the Forum, along with creative local reinterpretation, or is it simply a reproduction of the outer form, the menu ?

We need, I believe, to struggle with the possibility that we are here doing exactly what all conventional initiatives and enterprises do, and therefore only reproducing conventional culture : In short, spawning a monoculture. And the most difficult aspect of this will be to

struggle with the possibility that if this is at all true, then we are also spawning monoculture in the name of diversity and pluriculture.

§ Organisational culture : Is the Forum only reproducing classical divisive social relations ? And is it following obsolete organisational theory and strategy ? There are three broad questions here that I believe need to be discussed :

- ? The roles of individuals in the Forum, and the creation of 'classes';
- ? Whether organisations are the vanguard of society and of social change; and –
- ? The ad hoc application of norms.

Since the International Council is in a sense a microcosm of the Forum as a whole, I will also touch on organisational culture as it applies to the Council.

At the moment, there are two broad categories of participants in the World Social Forum that has so far been held in Porto Alegre : 'Delegates' – who come from and are meant to represent organisations of one kind or another - and those who are variously called 'Hearers' or 'Observers', who are individuals. This separation was apparently not the case at the European Social Forum last year, when – I am told – the Italians decided to accept both 'organised' participants and 'non-organised people' (individuals), and I see from the preliminary invitation to the European Social Forum this year too, that both organisations and individuals have been invited. (In the absence of information to the contrary, I am assuming that this participation is on an equal basis.) But this separation has definitely been the case at the World Social Forum that has been held so far at Porto Alegre, and it was also the case at the Asian Social Forum in India this last January (2003). As far as I know, this is also the proposal for the World Social Forum in India to be held in this coming January (2004). And though I do not know the rules for the organising committee for the European Social Forum, it is certainly the case that the International Council is made up only of the first class.

Similarly, whereas the organisational structure in India last year provided space for individuals to be there, it has recently been revised to exclude individuals, and the proponents of this change have specifically drawn legitimacy for this change from the manner in which the International Council is organised and the emphasis that the Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat places on organisations and organisational representatives.

The Forum's Charter of Principles also provides space only for organisations, and not for individuals :

"... The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world..."

Whether the qualifier 'only' applies to the term 'organisations and movements', thereby specifically excluding all other categories, or to the phrase 'of civil society', is left unclear; but whichever it is, it is clear that it excludes individuals.

I am not aware of what the history of this categorisation is, but two features become obvious as soon as we look at these terms, 'Delegates' and 'Observers' (or 'Hearers'). One, that even though the Forum is declared to be an open space – open to all – in reality the organisers have created two 'classes' for access to and use of the space. There are some who have the legitimacy to 'participate' (and are even given a designation that recognises this), and there are some who are only meant to 'observe' and to 'hear', and otherwise not participate. In actual practice, the rule about 'Hearers' is not completely exclusive; it only means that they do not have full privileges and the right of access to all meetings. But the principle remains, that individuals are made to belong to another class.

Some may see and portray this as only a problem of words, a terminological problem. But surely we must ask ourselves, as in the case of any discrimination : *Why* have the organisers of the Forum made this division and this discrimination ? And can it be justified ?

The second feature, by corollary, is that the Forum privileges those who represent organisations, and therefore organisations themselves.

The proportions between the two classes at the Forums also reflect the classic condition, of the privileged being the (small) minority and the other class being the (large) majority. In the first Forum there were apparently something like 4,000 delegates and some 16,000 'hearers', and this proportion has apparently been repeated each time.¹⁶ As always, it is the minority that is the privileged; and as always it is the class to which the minority belong that has created the Forum and now manages it.

In other words, even while calling it an 'open space', the minority has created a space which is in fact reserved primarily for itself, has bestowed special privileges on its members, and has consciously given reduced privileges to the class that provides the majority of participants.

The thinking behind this discrimination, according to one of the architects of the Forum, 'was to push organised people to come and to avoid transforming the Forum into a traditional congress'. So that, among other things, when the organisers of the Forum were asked what participants were going to do with all that happens at the Forum they could say that 'the participants are already organised, and therefore in a position to take things forward'. (This also serves to answer the question of why the Forum as such does not take any resolutions or decisions on behalf of society at large : Because, in this thinking, it does not need to, because things will move forward within the dynamics of organised action in society.) And the thinking behind not having individuals on committees is that the committees should be made up only of organisations fighting neoliberalism – since 'who do individuals represent ?'. In other words, the thinking is that organisations – of whatever kind – 'represent' society, and are and should be the vanguard of change in society. The thinking behind the formation of the International Council as it stands essentially reflects this wider thinking, and as I say, has now come to also dominate thinking in India as well, after a brief one year when we thought more freely.

I would like to suggest that this – and especially the marginalisation of individuals - is only a reflection and manifestation of classical property relations. Think of landowners and sharecroppers, of landowners and licensees (not even tenants, who have rights), and of factory owners and workers. This is not semantics; words have meanings, and let us not avoid them. In other words, the unstated and undeclared structure of the Forum is that organisations, which are seen as the agents and vanguard of social transformation, are the owners and managers of the space that is the Forum.

We all know however, and perhaps can agree, that this is also not how we ideally want to relate to each other – that we do not want to discriminate between individuals, and that this is not what actually happens at the Forum, on a person-to-person basis. But then why have we reproduced among ourselves this kind of class structure, even as we speak of building other worlds ?

In short, I think that all of us who participate in 'the Forum' need to think about this question deeply; and since it has been established to think on behalf of the Forum – even though a little contradictorily, as I point out later on, in the discussion of Topic 2 -, I think the International Council also needs to reflect on this question. The fact that the Council is made up only of those who belong to the first class will perhaps make their task tougher, but unless they throw the question open to a referendum, this is the only choice available. (In the case of

a referendum of course, the question would arise : Who would have the right to participate ? All participants, or only organisational representatives ?)

I believe that there are three basic parts to this question. First, In this day and age, when we know that the vast majority of people in most societies across the world – industrialised, post-industrial, ‘developing’, and so-called ‘transitional’ - do not belong to formal organisations, and are increasingly associating informally – such as through networks of myriad kinds -, do we still believe that formally organised organisations are and should be the vanguard of society ? That it is organisations alone that are going to lead the process of social transformation – but when we can see before our very eyes that although organisations have made many major contributions to social change over the past century, organisations alone have not proved to be sufficient ? And when we know that countless individuals have also made profound contributions in so many ways to the changes that have taken place, from unlocking the doors of understanding to opening up unimagined spaces ?

Beyond this, second, do we believe that it is only organisations, and those delegated by such organisations, who have the legitimacy to think and dream on behalf of all of us and to formulate the future ? And that the roles that ‘unorganised’ individuals play in society – of representing conscience, of exercising imagination, of having multiple identities and therefore the potentiality of myriad multiplication of ideas they are stimulated by, and now, increasingly, of mobilising millions of people across the world through e-networks – have no legitimate place in this process ?

I believe that we must ask ourselves these questions even if we ourselves know of cases where ‘hearers’ have already seen through this structure and while registering themselves as individuals, have otherwise taken full and equal part both within the Forum and in the follow-up activities – which by the logic of the Forum is primarily the historical responsibility of organisations and their representatives.¹⁷ The issue is not whether individuals can get through the fences; the issue is why the fences are there.

I acknowledge readily that this suggestion, and these questions, challenge traditional processes of organisational formation and action – but this, I submit, is precisely what our times are about, what all recent global civil action is about, and what the Forum is about : Transcending history. I believe that we need to take a step back, take a breath, and think about this issue carefully. We need to think about contemporary possibilities and requirements, and to let our minds fly forwards to the future, not bound by history and historical baggage.

In doing this, I believe it is useful to reflect on the fact that all – or most - existing forms of civil organisation in fact emerged during the 19th century, in the course of the industrial revolution in what is now the North, and follow modes and relations of organisations that belong to the social and economic relations of that age. Things have changed a lot since then, and are rapidly changing in our own times. It might well be that we now need to recognise new modes of association and organisation, and if necessary, even to forge new modes – as we indeed are, such as networks, where individuals are participants, not members; in other words, where the property relations are different.

And third, aside from all this, do we really want to continue to tolerate the discrimination that the Forum is so far practising, between different ‘kinds’ of individuals taking part in the Forum – between individuals representing organisations and so-called ‘unorganised’ individuals, and the marginalisation that this represents of the latter ? And do we really believe that the Forum would degenerate into ‘a traditional congress’ if this discrimination were to be removed ? Surely, a meeting takes the shape of ‘a traditional congress’ because it is organised that way – a meeting to take mass decisions -, not because of who it is made up of !

My sense is that it is the same logic and theory, of believing in the leading role of organisations in society and social change, and thereby of privileging them and of giving greater recognition and credence to their representatives, that is behind this formulation. We need to reflect on whether these forms, and this thinking, can – alone – lead to new politics, and to other worlds.

Indeed, we need to push this question forward and ask two more. One, we need to ask ourselves the hard question : What is the basis on which we, in actual reality, relate to each other during the various activities at the Social Fora ? Do we ask ourselves, before listening to someone, “Does she represent an organisation, or not ?”. Do we make our judgement on the validity of what she is saying on this basis, either thinking about the representativeness of what the person is saying or of what follow-up clout she carries ? But if we do this – which I believe that those belonging to organisations do, and especially those representing larger organisations – is it not the case that by and large, individuals do not claim these qualities and bring entirely other qualities to bear, and therefore need to be judged differently ?

And two, how do we differentiate between someone representing an *organisation*, as a delegated member of that organisation, and someone ‘representing’ a *network* which is usually far less structured than conventional organisations and does not conceive of ‘representation’ in the same way ? Or is it simply scale that matters ?

Aside from these conceptual and ideological considerations are the strategic and practical. By excluding or at least marginalising individuals, what the Forum is in fact doing is marginalising a huge and vital section of societies all over the world, and thereby weakening the larger movement against neoliberalism, imperialism, and fundamentalisms of all kinds. This is especially so in those countries of the world that do not enjoy electoral democracy or the freedom to associate and organise, and where it is individuals who play the most vital roles. Indeed, there is some reason to argue that this underlying premise, regarding the primacy of organisations, also emerges from particular conditions that pertain in certain countries and societies, but not in all – but where here, as in other areas, there is an attempt to valorise this as a universal principle that is valid in all spaces, at all times. In short, to globalise a certain mode of civilisation.

It is important, perhaps, for me to point out and emphasise that this discussion is not intended either to devalorise organisations and organisational representation or to glamorise individuals and their contributions. The question is certainly not ‘organisation’ or ‘no organisation’. There is no question that organisations are the only known form of representing the claims and entitlements of those who are structurally and historically marginalised, whether women or workers or Dalits and indigenous peoples; and that organisations are especially important in today’s world, when the neoliberal project is attacking the social dimension of everyday life. In this sense, the very existence and formation of organisations, as a part of the struggle for social expression, is itself a struggle against neoliberalism. But this does not take away from the discrimination that is today practised in the Forum against individuals. We need to rethink and reconceptualise this whole question.

Norms and their application

This brings us to the third question, of norms and their ad hoc application. At the level of the Forum as a whole, it is of course the case that providing you declare when registering that you are representing an organisation (and are willing to pay the much higher registration charge), no one actually asks what kind of organisation you represent (or even if it exists !), whether you are really *delegated*, or authorised, to represent it, and so on. All this is done on trust. This is the first level of adhocism; because the same value is placed on, and privilege given to, someone who ‘represents’ an organisation made up of two or three people or one that

has millions of paid up members. I perhaps do not have to emphasise how weak a basis this is, for justifying the discrimination that is presently practised against individuals.

By extension, the same weakness applies to the foundations of the International Council, and arguably even more so because the members are, in a sense, handpicked and it has so far been a somewhat ad hoc, accretive body. As a consequence, there are now some serious differences and anomalies in the Council that urgently require addressal – and certainly before they arise in a controversial sense, or worse, at adversarial moments. At the minimum, there needs to be consistency in the application of the criteria that have already been adopted for the International Council – but, as I argue above, there also needs to be rethinking of the criteria themselves.

§ Is the space that the Forum has created really open ? : We need also to reflect on the question of whether the ‘open space’ that the Forum is meant to be, is genuinely open, in the actually existing Forum, or whether it is not in fact mediated and structured at a number of levels. If it is in fact mediated and structured, then this has profound implications for the Forum, since it is built on this conceptual foundation and both delegates and observers and also commentators have widely internalised this idea and constantly reaffirm this in what they say. Listen, for instance, to what William Fisher has to say, and where he and Thomas Ponniah have produced and edited the first major book in English on the World Social Forum :¹⁸

What is the WSF all about? It's not a social movement in and of itself. It's an open forum, and in that there's a commitment to its openness, to the participatory nature of it, to *open democracy*. That's the key convergence.¹⁹

It is only fair if I acknowledge that I too have so far accepted, internalised, and widely advocated and celebrated this concept in my writings on the Forum.²⁰

There are a number of issues involved here, of which I will touch on only a few here :

1. My first suggestion, or proposition, is that no space that is created by someone ever exists by itself. At one level, this is of course self-evident, but since this question arises in the case of the Forum, we need to explore it. In his thought-provoking recent paper that I have already referred to above, Chico Whitaker - one of the members of the Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat and one of the architects of the Forum - has compared the open space to a ‘square’ (in the English translation of his paper, and presumably *praça* in Portuguese), and said that this is a ‘totally neutral space’.²¹ But, with all due respect, I would suggest that just all squares and *praças* have historically been and still are produced by someone - whether the church, or feudal power, or landowner, or more recently an institution of state or of the market (and sometimes but rarely, of popular power) - so has the open space that is the Forum.

In a very basic sense therefore, the plaza – and therefore also open space - does not and cannot exist by itself, but must always be seen as part of a larger whole. Crucially, I suggest that the relationship between the two – the space and the entity that creates it - is as important as the plaza by itself. By definition, any entity represents certain interests. The Forum is therefore, in short, a socially and politically constructed space, and can never be ‘totally neutral’, as he puts it in his note. And so we need to always look at constructed by whom, why, and under what conditions.

In this case, the open space that is the Forum has been created by the Brazil Organising Committee, and is today maintained by the International Council. If one looks at it in terms of social forces, then it has been created by certain sections of civil society in Brazil and is being maintained by a section of global civil society, to promote the struggle against neoliberalism. It is worth also pointing out that it is also, by definition, a civil space, and restricted to civil actors.

Jai Sen, May 2003 – ‘The WSF as logo or as commons - Take a moment to reflect on the Forum’

All comments welcome

And referring to my earlier argument, I suggest that we also need to recognise that the World Social Forum is a space created primarily for civil organisations and their representatives, and others such as individuals are there by the grace and license of these entities, who also constitute the Committee which oversees the space, and not by right. Civil organisations are in fact therefore the undeclared owners of the open space that is the Forum.

2. All institutions, and forces, have rules of their own, and especially for the generation and use of spaces they create. In the case of the World Social Forum, the Charter of Principles represent the rules, and with more local interpretations providing even more specific rules (such as the 'WSF India Policy Statement' that was generated in India during 2002, modifying the Charter of Principles somewhat to suit local conditions).²² These rules specify who is and is not welcome in the space, and either openly or covertly suggest the use of force to ensure that the rules are observed. For the most part it is hoped that people entering the space will observe the rules, and depends on the ordinary person's common sense. Over time however, this can become problematic for the organisers. The debate going on within the World Social Forum about the role and possible dominance of social movements could be considered a case in point, and this has led Chico to produce his note. The discrimination that I suggest exists against individuals is another potential 'problem'.
3. Aside from who is and is not welcome to use the space, is also the question of position, of the drawing of boundaries, and of tolerance of grey areas. The Charter of Principles makes clear that the World Social Forum is a space for

“... groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person.”²³

By definition, or certainly by implication – and it has been widely read this way - this therefore excludes anyone who is not willing to declare herself actually opposed to neoliberalism. In India, it has now reached the stage where those wishing to become members of the newly formed 'India General Council' must – or are supposed to - first sign a form declaring their adherence to the Forum's Charter of Principles. This unfortunate development might be viewed by some as being merely a minor aberration, but it surely also reflects a deep-seated culture that is coming to the surface as the menu of the Forum is interpreted locally.²⁴ In short, the Forum's formal prescription as it stands leaves no room for exchange or debate with those who are not necessarily so sure about their positions – and it therefore is becoming a closed debate, among the committed and converted alone.

While this may not be quite how the Forum always functions in reality, these are the present declared rules of engagement, and the emerging rules of engagement. They are, in short, exclusive and intolerant, and – the evidence suggests – perhaps becoming increasingly so, as attempts are made by the managers of the Forum to control the use of the space. It goes without saying that the managers of the Forum are in all cases organisational representatives.²⁵

4. Beyond ruling out debate, the Charter of Principles as it stands takes a position only on the question of neoliberalism and imperialism. But this is of course only one concern in terms of world politics. It is presumably what the Charter of Principles focuses on because the World Social Forum was conceived and born during the time of the rise of global civil action against the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions, following Seattle in November 1999. Today, there is also worldwide concern about war and peace – connected of course to the rise of the American imperium - and the closure of democratic space that is taking place so widely. In many parts of the world the questions of religious nationalism and communalism [religious sectarianism and fundamentalism], and of what we in South Asia

term in general term 'fundamentalism' (which however, we realised in Porto Alegre this year, has become an impermissible term in North Atlantic parlance), is of grave concern. The question is whether those who drafted the Charter of Principles, and who today manage the Forum, are willing to open this space to other concerns, and if so, on what terms. So far, the Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat and the International Council have shown themselves remarkably quick in terms of embracing the question of war and militarisation, although they have not yet formally modified the Charter of Principles. On the other hand, despite their having been specifically articulated in IC meetings and elsewhere, the questions of religious nationalism and communalism have not yet entered the Council's vocabulary. This is perhaps nothing more than a question of dominance in the Council by organisations and their representatives where these issues are not strong. But the Council's ability to handle these intercultural issues will also be an important indicator of the degree to which the Forum is an open space.

§ Is there, and should there be, only one *World Social Forum* ? As is well known, the 'World Social Forum' was given birth to in Porto Alegre, in January 2001. (The best available records suggest that it was conceived in about February 2000.)²⁶

As mentioned above, following the call in January 2002 by the International Council for regional and thematic fora to be held, several such meetings have been organised, including the European Social Forum in November 2002 and the Asian Social Forum in January 2003. But the question is : In what ways were these two meetings any less 'world' fora than the 'World' Social Forum that has so far only been organised in Porto Alegre (and that is going to be organised in Mumbai in India this coming January) ? And is there any reason why there should be only *one* 'World' Social Forum each year ?

In terms of the origins of participants, the Porto Alegre events were arguably not really more 'world' – and less 'regional' - than the two so-called 'regional' fora. For understandable reasons, it was largely people from Latin America in general, and from Brazil in particular, who were able to go to Porto Alegre. This next year, the participants will again, for understandable reasons, largely be from Asia, and then too South Asia, and within that, India. What is the logic therefore, for calling the January event a 'world' meeting, and the rest 'mere' regional ones ?

Looking at things from another side, from the point of view of building a world consciousness of the idea, and a sense of belonging to a world process, would it not make sense to call *all* large – regional, continental - meetings of the World Social Forum, *world* meetings ?

This admittedly runs the risk of making the 'World Social Forum' become even more of an organisational brand name than if all the meetings have different names, but that seems to be about the only danger - and it is surely not for this reason alone that the WSF is going to become a brand name, if it becomes one at all. But on the other hand, doing this will only recognise what is surely a reality : That each major WSF meeting is The World Social Forum itself taking place, and an instance of the culture of the World Social Forum being manifested locally.

The WSF as a whole - Some proposals for consideration :

- 1) Since one purpose of the Forum – though not the only one – is to have impact on world opinion, but scale is becoming a contradiction, rethink the strategy of the Forum in terms of how to impact world policy. Rethink the format, rethink the medium. Respect and explore the idea that smaller can be better – and that this is an alternative to conventional thinking.

- 2) Think of the Forum first as a meeting of minds, and not as a set of events where 'another invisible hand' is expected to work its magic.
- 3) Think of the Forum not as an organisation or an event but as a culture of politics and as a process that is unfolding. Rethink the idea of 'The World Social Forum' as being the one, big annual event. Think about what this shift in thinking implies.
- 4) Reflect more deeply on the idea of the Forum as open space. Understand its limits, and come up with ways that that can defend the openness and can make it more open. Consider the possibility, and the potentials and limitations, of conceiving of the Forum as a commons rather than as 'open space'.
- 5) Rethink and challenge the subliminal idea that organisations 'own' the open space that the Forum represents. Find space within the Forum for individuals, not as interlopers but as full citizens. Remove the two-class system within the Forum.
- 6) Rethink the undeclared but underlying idea in the Forum that organisations are the leading edge of change in society. Consider the possibility that organisations have important roles to play but are not the only agents of change, especially in societies as they are emerging. Rethink the idea of 'representation'.
- 7) One approach towards all this : Insist on the Forum being an open and participatory process.

Topic 2 : The International Council of the World Social Forum

The International Council of the World Social Forum was set up in June 2001, after the almost unexpected success of the first World Social Forum in January 2001 and the subsequent enunciation of a Charter of Principles for the Forum by the Brazil Organising Committee in April 2001. The original idea of the Brazil Organising Committee, which had till then led the process of organising the Forum with the help of some friends such as Bernard Cassen of ATTAC France, was that the Council would play a kind of advisory role to it – “as a permanent body that will give continuity to the WSF beyond 2002, to consolidate the process of taking the WSF to the world level”.²⁷ It was in fact at first even called the ‘International Advisory Council’, but the name was quickly changed.²⁸

But by January 2002, when the ‘decision’ was taken at a meeting of the International Council to decisively internationalise and globalise the Forum, it was clear that the Council was already becoming much more than advisory, and during 2002, the idea emerged that it should gradually transit to becoming an International Committee, and where the Brazil Organising Committee was also re-named the ‘International Secretariat’ – of the World Social Forum but also, in effect, to the Council. The year 2002 in fact marked an extraordinarily intensive process of interaction and work in terms of organisational development, for the Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat and also for the International Council.²⁹

From the nature and tenor of discussions that took place at the last meeting of the International Council however, in Porto Alegre in January 2003, as well as from the content of some of the communications in its regard, it was obvious to perhaps everyone that some careful reflection on the Council and its functioning is already very overdue. In too many senses, the baby that is not even two years old yet is already showing signs of middle age – though this is also a reminder that the life rhythm of organisations is very different from that of human beings, and we should be much more conscious of this. At this rate, it will be old by the time it is four, in human time scale.

Some of the more obvious dynamics are as follows :

- ? While there exists a general statement on the types of organisations that need to be included in the Council, and a broad ‘ideological’ criterion has been defined in the Charter of Principles, there seems to be no declared set of norms on the basis of which membership of the Council is decided or has been decided in the past. Indeed, the very process of nomination and induction is left unclear.³⁰
- ? While the Charter of Principles declares that the World Social Forum has no intention of representing world civil society, the International Council is increasingly being seen, and sees itself, in terms of ‘representation’ – through mass organisations and movements – and its ‘representativeness’; and even though, as others have also pointed out, none of the members are in fact elected or nominated by participants in the Forum as a whole.³¹
- ? In many ways, and at many points, the presence and participation of ‘mass (or movement) organisations’ is celebrated and specially valorised in the Council. But there is a kind of almost aquarian quality to this, insofar as while the Charter of Principles makes clear that World Social Forum does not pretend to represent world civil society, yet ‘representation’ – and especially of ‘the masses’ - is made a special virtue in the International Council (as in the Forum as a whole).
- ? This (as above) is the formal structure. In fact, while notionally democratic and horizontal, it is very evident that the International Council is dominated by the International Secretariat and by certain other individual members of the Council; and that not all decisions are taken by the Council or at Council meetings. Several observers have commented that decision-

making in the World Social Forum and the Council is opaque and obscure, which is of course completely contradictory to the principles that it professes.

- ? Presentations and representations by Council members suggest a wide range but also a very uneven level of experience : Some 'global', some regional, some more national, and some more or less local. While the range is at one level welcome, because it adds richness and depth to discussion, it is not always clear that all members are always listening to or understanding each other, and yet clear that certain levels of discourse dominate. This situation is only exacerbated by the fact that people speak different languages.
- ? There are sometimes perceptible differences in terms of intercultural perceptions of the same issue, between different members. Different uses of the same terms. Different ways of speaking, presentation, logic, and even of silence and abstention. Some of this difference gets ironed out through the simultaneous translation offered at meetings – but this ironing out is not necessarily desirable. But my sense is that these differences, and the richness that this represents, is not being read. Instead the discourse again tends to be dominated by unwritten, undeclared international rules of meeting behaviour.
- ? There is often an evident lack of shared perceptions among IC members, which on further exchange seems to be a consequence of nothing more than a lack of knowledge by members of each other as human beings, of the organisations each variously represents, and of the culture and context each comes from. But the consequence of this, and also of intercultural differences, sometimes leads to almost adversarial positions being taken – often quite unnecessarily.
- ? A discourse of 'we' and 'they' is rising in the Council. 'We' referring to those who oppose neoliberalism, and 'they' a rather ambiguous 'other'.
- ? The Council is tending to replicate the most conventional organisational culture : To collectively form another international gathering that exists only in abstract transnational space, unconnected to the particular cultural realities of where they meet, and meets only to make 'decisions'. Can old, conventional organisational cultures such as this really lead to building another world ?

The WSF International Council - Some proposals for consideration :

Know each other, and think of the International Council as a meeting of minds : My sense is that some (and even much) of the above is happening simply because members of the International Council do not know each other (as human beings, of the organisation/s and work each variously represents, and of the cultures and contexts each comes from). In order to get past this, meetings of the International Council need to be thought of, and organised as, meetings of minds and experiences, and not only for the purposes of making policy decisions.

Take a moment to reflect : As a complement to this, the IC needs to also take a decision to establish a process of periodic collective 'retreat' and reflection, as a group but not as a Council. At least once a year, preferably twice (since not everyone will be able to come to it if only one meeting is scheduled). At least three full days, preferably four. Can be organised anywhere in the world, but wherever it is, it should not be in a town or city and should be in an inspiring, relaxing environment; and it should not be linked with a 'work' meeting – a meeting of the International Council or of its subcommittees. Members should come as individuals, leaving – to paraphrase something from the Philippines - their arms, mobiles, and ideologies behind, and not as Council members.

Some of us have now started a process of doing this in India, and we would be happy to share our experiences in case anyone is interested.

Resolve the Council's ambiguous identity : The International Council is also something of a contradiction in terms, since according to the Charter of the Forum, "The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body", and yet it is, as we know, a meeting of the Forum and it does make decisions on its behalf. It can be argued that this is not the 'World Social Forum' that the authors had in mind when they wrote the Charter, but the ambiguity remains.

My own sense is that it is high time that the International Council addressed this question, and sooner better than later. This is both a matter of avoiding having to answer this question if it ever raises as a challenge to the legitimacy of the body, but also, and more importantly, because I think that the lack of clarity in this area is contributing to a lack of clarity in terms of just what the International Council can and cannot do - in other words, an existential crisis. At the moment, it is neither one (a reflective, deliberative body) nor the other (a decision-making body).

'Trust' rather than 'ownership' and 'representation' : An interesting possibility might to rethink and recast the Forum as a commons, as already suggested, and the Council in terms of 'trusteeship'.³² As earlier argued, instead of looking at the Forum as open space that has no ownership (but where I argue that in reality it does, in an undeclared way), we might like to look to look of the Forum as a commons which is constantly being created – produced and reproduced – by all those who participate in it, both organisations and individuals, and is created for the benefit of all those who create it and sustain it and also for those who might use benefit from it, including future generations. In this conception, the body set up to oversee the commons being created would be a Trust, and where the primary responsibility of the Trustees would therefore be not to represent either themselves or those who delegate them, as shareholders, but rather the interests of all the 'designated beneficiaries' of the Trust – as is conventional in all Trusts. Since shareholding would not be the principle, this formula would therefore allow both organisational representatives and individuals to be on the Trust, thereby also allowing us to break through the conceptual problem in the present formulation.

There would of course need to be a provision for appeal in relation to the actions and decisions of the Trust and of Trustees, and many other such details would have to be worked out.

Respect and celebrate intercultural differences : I have also argued before, and argue again here, that the International Council needs to pay attention to intercultural differences between members. Simply providing translation between the main world-dominant former colonial languages is not enough. It needs to understand, and find space for the reality, that it is made up of people coming from many different cultures, and from many different sections of society within given societies, and that this is increasingly going to be the case as the Forum globalises and as it moves through the turbulent currents of emancipatory movement. Different cultures have different ways of speaking, presentation, logic, and even silence. Some of this gets ironed out through translation – bringing in the translators' own cultures into play - but this is not necessarily desirable. Different cultures also have different uses of the same terms. My sense is that these differences, and the richness that this represents, is not being read. Instead the discourse in the Council is tending to be dominated by unwritten, undeclared international rules of meeting behaviour, borrowed from those who dominate the world as it is today. We are simply reproducing conventional power structures in the Forum, even as we speak of building other worlds.

This manifested itself, for instance, in the last meeting of the International Council, in Porto Alegre in January 2003, when attempting to discuss and address the important question of whether the next world meeting should be held in India. Instead of respecting the differences, the debate went suddenly into a kind of 'international cosmopolitanism' that everyone felt everyone else would understand – but in this case it was not a higher level of discourse but in fact a kind of lowest common denominator, an aggressive adversarial style,

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that in my understanding deeply undermined the pluricultural experiment that the International Council and the Forum represents. As one speaker - Carola Reintjes - thankfully pointed out, the Council is still at a very fragile and vulnerable stage, and this kind of positional warfare was the last thing that it needed. The loud applause that she received for this intervention only spoke for how deeply her observation resonated with so many who were present. But the Council needs not only to be reminded of this, but also to struggle to respect the differences – and rather than being oppressed by the differences, because of logistical challenges, it needs to celebrate them.

Pay attention to organisational culture and norms of membership : I have already discussed this question of organisational culture in some detail in the section on the Forum as a whole. By implication, because it is now the policy-making body for the Forum I believe that the Council also needs to pay attention to these questions, and also as they apply to itself; and also to the norms of its membership, in terms of the organisational culture that it wants to itself manifest - and that it sees the Forum as a whole manifesting.

Topic 3 : The World Social Forum in India

This third and last section of this Note looks at the World Social Forum in India, both because the world meeting is to be held here this next year (January 2004), which will mark a fundamental new stage in the history and dynamics of the Forum, and also because it perhaps offers a useful case study, or 'microcosm', of the WSF as a whole. Given that the world meeting in India is not just an Indian initiative however, but one originating in Brazil and in the International Council and that it is only to be hosted by WSF India and organised jointly with the WSF International Secretariat, the discussion in this section necessarily looks at the history and dynamics of this event not only 'within' India but globally.

The World Social Forum process in India was initiated in December 2001, at the initiative not of Indians but of the Brazil Organising Committee and some members of the International Council. An early decision of the Brazil Organising Committee was that the Forum should be internationalised and globalised. Within their own understanding at that time of the World Social Forum as being essentially an annual event, timed to challenge Davos, and based on their strategic analysis of possible alternative locations in the world, the Brazil Organising Committee decided that India was the most suitable other location for the Forum, and that ideally, the third World Social Forum, in January 2003, should be held in India.

India was chosen by the Brazilians because it is, like Brazil, a large country with a more or less functioning electoral democracy and strong and vibrant traditions of civil and political movement. It is also strategically located in Asia, the most populous continent in the world – and which had till then been very poorly represented at the World Social Forum. To this Samir Amin, of the Third World Forum and member of the International Council added, at the meeting of the International Council in Porto Alegre in January 2002, that it was evident that Asia was the arena of the next strike of the US imperium, and so it was essential for the Forum to now be held there – and that if so, India was really the only choice, especially given the role it has historically played in South solidarity, and especially in terms of Afro-Asian politics.³³

Based on this thinking, and on the basis of some preliminary and informal discussions with some Indians known to them at meetings in Europe during the second half of 2001, the then-still forming International Council decided at its second meeting in November 2001 to send a delegation of members of the Brazil Organising Committee and the International Council to India, to explore possibilities. A first meeting with a handful of Indians from different civil formations took place in Bangalore in mid December 2001.

There was strong disagreement at this meeting regarding the possibility of holding the Forum in India, however, and the meeting decided that another larger meeting should be called to consider the possibility. This meeting, which was in effect the first national consultation on the WSF in India, was held in New Delhi on January 9-10 2002. The meeting debated the question at length and came to the conclusion that the meeting could and should be organised in India but in January 2004, and not 2003 as had been proposed by the WSF delegation; primarily because 2003 was too close and also because the fact that there are to be general elections in India in 2004 offered a target for possibly using the Forum as a vehicle for building a broader secular civil platform. This perspective was generated within the understanding mentioned earlier, and that is widely shared by progressive actors in India, that the rampant religious nationalism we are now faced with is as dangerous as capitalist globalisation, and that the two in fact intertwine. The meeting also urged the International Council to look at the World Social Forum more as a process than as only an event; and towards this, it offered to help organise a regional Social Forum somewhere in South Asia in late 2002 or early 2003.³⁴

The International Council meeting in Porto Alegre later that month agreed in principle to the proposal from India to host the world meeting in 2004 and not in 2003, and also issued a call for regional and thematic Social Fora to be held during the year. Holding the Forum in India in 2004 also had strategic advantage of calming those in the Brazil Organising Committee and

other Latin American delegates who were worried about the World Social Forum being so suddenly 'taken away' from Brazil, and yet developing a definite plan for it to be held somewhere else in the world, in due course.

WSF India was established in April 2002, at a second national consultation held in the city of Bhopal, in north-central India. This meeting established an organisational structure and framework for the Forum in India, creating an Working Committee, Programme Committee, Mobilisation Committee, and a Coordination Team; adopted a modified Charter of Principles, titled the 'WSF India Policy Statement', which also addressed Indian concerns about communalism [religious sectarianism and fundamentalism];³⁵ decided to call a regional, Asia-level meeting in January 2003; and agreed that the WSF India *process* of communication and mobilisation was more important than the event, and that the event should only be seen as a high point within a much broader *process* of building consciousness within the country about neoliberalism and communalism and about struggles for other worlds.³⁶

The idea that the World Social Forum, as an 'open space', is an unusual opportunity for the mingling of different streams of civil and political thought and action, was again underlined, again in relation to the struggles being fought within the country and within the strategic perspective that this indicated. The Bhopal Consultation also specifically provided space within the WSF India Working Committee for the participation of individuals and small organisations. Given that the WSF Charter of Principles and the International Council provide no space for individuals, this in a sense broke important new ground for the Forum. The idea was also articulated that we needed to develop a more specifically *internationalist* perspective to our work.

The experience of the first year

The experience of the Forum in India over the subsequent year has however been very mixed. Many, including the delegations from the Brazil Organising Committee and the International Council, seem to have regarded the Asian Social Forum in January 2003 as being an unqualified success and a significant event, and paid little or no attention to either the serious criticisms of the WSF during the Forum and its boycott by some formations and the holding of a parallel event; or to the fact that the preparatory WSF 'process' had in reality been much weaker than projected, except for 1-2 states; or to the serious organisational problems and breakdowns that took place during the Forum. Most of the big events at the Forum were also fairly self-centred and conservative, where the speakers chosen were all known people in the field and therefore 'safely progressive' and the audiences were composed of the already committed, and where there was little opportunity given for debate. There was also little attempt made at talking across boundaries and towards developing new perspectives.

While undoubtedly a vibrant and colourful event, the position taken by delegations sent to observe the Asian Social Forum – and the ignoring of the very obvious problems – perhaps had a lot to do with their enthusiasm for India's candidature for the world meeting in 2004 and with a desire to succeed in terms of the larger strategic project and vision of holding the Forum in Asia, since the International Council was evidently going to judge India on the basis of its performance with the Asian Social Forum. But this somewhat uncritical attitude could also be seen as bordering on patronisation, not solidarity, and also does not help much in building the culture of critical internationalist solidarity that the Forum needs to develop and to foster.

The 'political' experience of the first year of the Forum in India was fairly wide but not anything like as broad-based an experiment as had been hoped and projected. It came to be strongly dominated by formations within the organised left, which some argued was the case only because they were willing to make available their networks and cadres to the Forum and also do the dog work that is required in organising such processes and events. Many outside the left felt that the Forum was highly exclusive and unwelcoming, and kept away from it, as did

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some who are normally sympathetic to the left. The Forum committees in India made little effort to reach out beyond the standard minimum mix of social movements, trade unions, and 'ngos' (or voluntary organisations), and then too largely only through known networks.

This raises an important strategic issue. In many senses, the World Social Forum does not promote a culture of 'inviting' people to participate in the Forum, but rather one of creating conditions where "all those interested in promoting their activities [are] able to do so". The Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat has at one stage even issued a Note that clarifies and underlines this.³⁷ But this has not quite been the practice, at least in India. In reality, those who have become active members of the Forum have in most cases also joined / got onto one or more of the several committees that have been set up, and have quite widely 'spread the word' about the Forum in their own networks and associational groups, both autonomously and through the WSF India Secretariat. (This is part and parcel of a culture of 'mobilisation' that is a standard part of the vocabulary of civil and political movement in India, and is therefore widely used in WSF literature generated in India.)

This has meant, first, that the Forum in India has in fact developed substantially on the basis of 'invitations'; second, that there have been and exist sections of civil society who are, relatively speaking, privileged in terms of information about and involvement with the Forum; third, inevitably, that the 'open space' that the Forum is meant to be is primarily occupied by these sections, and fourth, by virtue of this subliminal emphasis on 'network politics', WSF India has given very little attention to developing open systems of communication which would be aimed at and reach much wider circles. It is important to also recognise that this has not happened by chance; it has taken shape as a function of a specific culture of politics – and which, as it happens, is one that the Brazil Organising Committee has advised against. And combined with the unwelcoming attitude to others that many have experienced, far from being an open space this has resulted in the Forum being dominated by those who are on the committees.

Equally, when looking back over the first year, it is clear that the idea of a building a broad 'process' within the country was undermined at an early stage, by virtue of WSF India focussing all its attention on the event and not on the process and by 'mobilising' within closed circles. To the extent that there was 'mobilisation' it was done by those member-organisations of WSF India who were best placed to do this – most especially the cadre-based organisations – and strictly within their own ideological circles. The consequence has been that the Forum has developed in India only within very closed circles.

By and large, the approach taken by all the WSF committees in India, at all levels, was simply to manage the event alone, and the management followed very conventional lines – primarily those set by the Porto Alegre model. The historical fact that the WSF process in India was initiated not by Indians but by outsiders might explain this managerial attitude.

In an attempt to rationalise this approach, some members of WSF India have even gone to the extent of recently suggesting that WSF India was set up in 2002 only to organise the Asian Social Forum. Aside from not being the case, this assertion in fact only serves to reveal the degree to which such people saw themselves only as event managers. This situation is radically different from the situation in Brazil, where the process was initiated, and for that matter also in Europe, where once again there are initiators among the Organising Committee.

While there is no doubt that some individuals and organisations worked very hard, and that organising the Asian Social Forum required a lot of hard work, the experience of the first year was also marked by ad hoc behaviour, individualism, lack of accountability, and a lack of respect for collective process as organisational norm, and in general an unwillingness to accept and adopt organisational norms and principles, including transparency. There was a strong

intolerance of different opinions, and a strong resurgence of sectarianism and of conventional struggle for power, dominance, and control over the affairs of the Forum. Attempts to introduce processes of critical reflection were supported by many but undermined by others.³⁸

Again in retrospect, some or all of this might have to do with the fact that many saw the task as being one of successfully managing a task they had been asked to handle, as distinct from initiating a process; and far from taking risks, of wanting to come out at the end in a good light : Of being efficient and capable managers. Because the real goal, after all, was to win the world meeting.

The Asian Social Forum was also a truly pan-Asian meeting only to a very limited degree. This however was also at least partly due to a series of misunderstandings, and partly to a lack of conviction. When the initial invitation was extended to Indians to host the world meeting, it was a fledgling WSF *India* that responded, in January 2002. But because the idea of holding 'regional' meetings came to be articulated at the meeting of the International Council that month, and WSF India elected to offer to host the world meeting only in 2004, WSF India came by default – and mistake - to be referred to by the International Secretariat as the 'Asia Organising Committee' and the event in January 2003 as an 'Asian' meeting, even though WSF India had till then offered only to help organise a *South* Asian meeting.

There was also some enthusiasm for this idea within WSF India however, and especially by a member of the WSF India Working Group who had recently joined an Asia-level organisation and who attended the International Council meeting in Barcelona in March 2002 on behalf of WSF India. In many ways, the decision to make the meeting an Asian meeting was taken not by WSF India but in Barcelona, in the course of and name of the International Council.³⁹ This 'expectation' of the Council was then communicated to WSF India, and largely in order to respect the information we received, the idea was approved at the WSF India Consultation at Bhopal in April 2002, after considerable debate.

This 'decision' to make it an Asian meeting however largely remained unexplored let alone fulfilled. The systems required for managing such an event properly were ultimately never developed, largely because of shortage of time. Plans were nevertheless prepared within WSF India to at least organise an 'Asian Solidarity Group', which could help build mobilisation for the Asian Social Forum within Asia.⁴⁰ These plans were then approved at an 'Asian Social Movements Meeting' held in Bangkok in August 2002, immediately preceding the International Council meeting held there that month. Based to some extent on the prevailing misunderstandings about the Asian meeting, and also on their own presumptions about the feasibility of organising a pan Asian meeting in such a short time, some members of the International Council even showed some considerable anxiety in Bangkok about the fact that an 'Asian Organising Committee' had not been formed till then. But for reasons that have never become clear, the plans remained stillborn in Bangkok, the Asian Solidarity Group was never formed, and WSF India did not push any further for this; and nor did the International Council.

Given the demand from the International Council that the meeting that WSF India organised must be an Asian-level meeting, and given the strong push that took place within WSF India for this to take place, this is a curious outcome. After all, the decision to hold the world meeting of the World Social Forum outside Brazil and in Asia, was not a small one; it contains a major vision within it, and has profound implications and, in theory, potentialities, aside from placing a huge responsibility on civil organisations within India. The lack of interest that then took shape in pursuing ideas developed is therefore a development, and phase, that remains to be better understood, and it is important that this be done.

Notwithstanding all this, based on the reports that it received from its own representatives and also the report on the Asian Social Forum presented by representatives of

WSF India, the International Council at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2003 decided to go ahead with holding the World Social Forum in India in 2004. As mentioned earlier however, and as has also been documented by other authors, this was not an easy decision, or a unanimous decision.⁴¹ In my estimation, the somewhat bitter exchange that took place on this question, despite skilful attempts by members of the Brazil Organising Committee to build consensus, is likely to have a long-term impact on the culture of the International Council.

Looking ahead to hosting the world meeting

The experience of the World Social Forum in India over the first year, and especially in relation to the organising of the Asian Social Forum, has now been fairly extensively debated within the World Social Forum in India, both during the Asian Social Forum and then at two further national consultations organised in February and March 2003.⁴² A certain amount of this debate has also reached wider public circles.⁴³ To some degree as a consequence of this analysis and debate, and also very much oriented towards the task of hosting the world meeting next year, a somewhat revised organisational structure has been created for WSF India. In place of the earlier 'WSF India Working Committee', there is now an 'WSF India General Council', a body made up of all civil organisations in India who are willing to declare their commitment in writing to the World Social Forum Charter of Principles and to WSF India's Policy Statement. Some 150 or so organisations are listed so far.

Within this, a new 'India Working Committee' has been established, of some 60-70 organisations that will act on behalf of the Council; and within this in turn, a new 'India Organising Committee' has been created, made up of individuals from member organizations who are willing to commit a substantial amount of time over this next year – at last count, some 39 – to act as a kind of executive body for organising the world meeting. Aside from this, a WSF Mumbai Committee has been established in the city where the World Social Forum is to take place, Mumbai (earlier Bombay), on the western coast, to manage logistics and to act as the local host committee.

This situation is therefore in sharp contrast to the situation in Brazil, where there just eight organisations that constitute the Brazil Organising Committee and they have been there since the founding of the Forum back in 2000. On the fact of it, WSF India is therefore attempting much more of a 'representative' experiment. Given however, that India is variously said to have between one hundred thousand to one million civil organisations, of one kind or another, these numbers are of course not very large, and the experiment should not therefore considered to be too 'representative', by any stretch of the imagination. This is the case even though large trade union federations are now members of the WSF India committees, because after all is said and done, organised labour still constitutes a very small proportion of labour in the country, some 7 percent. At best, the present composition should be seen as only providing WSF India with a respectably wide base in terms of constituencies.

The reason for choosing India as the host country has already been presented. Within India, Mumbai was chosen as the location for WSF 2004 after the most recent national consultation, held in Nagpur in central India in March 2003, heard and considered proposals from several cities : alphabetically, Chennai (earlier Madras), Kerala, Mumbai, and New Delhi (and also Nagpur which withdrew in favour of Mumbai, which is in the same state). Mumbai was chosen because it appeared to have the most broad-based organising committee; because groups from Mumbai seemed to have done the most preparatory work and made the most convincing presentation; because Mumbai is easier to reach from all parts of the country than Kerala, the next most popular location; because it is also the easiest location in India to reach internationally; and because it was felt that Mumbai is a more ethnically mixed, cosmopolitan place than Kerala, where most Indian languages are spoken, which the working and labouring peoples of India who come for the Forum would find more comfortable than any other location. Conversely, and very significantly, the argument is that 'the message of the Forum' can

therefore also spread out from Mumbai much more powerfully all over the country, through their travel lines. (Precisely what 'message of the Forum' was however, not discussed.)

Attempting to organise a major event such as the Forum in a mammoth city such as Mumbai – which is also the mercantile and financial capital of the country – will in any case be a huge challenge. It is a very expensive city. It is also a very crowded city, and while it is full of rich facilities, they are spread all over, and the world meeting will almost certainly have to be held in several locations if it is going to be anything like the size of WSF 2003 in Porto Alegre. So commuting and search will be unavoidable parts of the experience of the world meeting – and excellent information systems in multiple languages and forms absolutely vital. The meeting therefore runs all the risks that have already been raised and discussed earlier in this note.

Mumbai is also the home to one the most virulent sectarian and communal parties in the country, the Shiv Sena, which is bound to oppose at least certain aspects of the Forum. Far from being marginal, the Shiv Sena is one of the biggest parties in the state in which Mumbai is located, Maharashtra, and was till recently in government; and it is also a close ally of the rightist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party – 'Indian People's Party') which heads the government at the centre.

Since the BJP is leading a process of active neo-liberalisation of the country's economy, and has been very accommodative to US actions over the past year, it is certainly going to face bitter criticism at the Forum in January 2004. Even if the BJP does not actively try to frustrate the Forum being successfully held, in order to protect the international image of its government in an election year, the Shiv Sena is very likely to be let loose to do what damage it can. It will definitely oppose the entry of Pakistanis into the country for the Forum, and is very likely to also protest things such as the manner in which 'foreign' women participants at the Forum are likely to dress, given that Mumbai has a hot and humid climate (as a 'threat to Indian culture').

Even if the Mumbai Committee has reportedly already had meetings with the Chief Minister of Maharashtra (roughly equivalent to the Governor of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, of which Porto Alegre is the capital) and obtained his agreement to cooperate,⁴⁴ these conditions are not only a long way from those prevailing in Porto Alegre but are almost diametrically opposite.

These are of course only some of issues involved in the holding of the world meeting in India. Being a world event, the International Council decided at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2003 that the WSF 2004 in Mumbai will be organised not by WSF India alone but by WSF India in conjunction with the International Secretariat. It now remains for the WSF India Organising Committee and the International Secretariat to explore and make manifest the potential magic and strength of India and Mumbai as the first alternative location to Porto Alegre, and to also address the several challenges that doing so contains.

The experience so far of the second year : Questions for the future

Several meetings have now already taken place of the organisational bodies of WSF India, including most recently a first meeting of the Organising Committee in Mumbai on April 19-20 and of the Programme Committee in New Delhi on May 23 2003. A precise division and sharing of responsibilities between the WSF India Organising Committee and the International Secretariat still has to be worked out. Members of the International Secretariat and the International Council were meant to have come to India for a first set of joint meetings on April 20-21, but this was postponed till May 30-31 because of the worry about SARS in Asia.

There is no question that there is tremendous enthusiasm within particular circles in India for hosting the World Social Forum in India next year. As mentioned earlier, in large part

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this arises from an argument that there is intrinsic strategic value in a wide range of civil and political streams intermingling, and this in turn is located within the reading that secular and progressive forces have so far not been able to withstand and significantly arrest the rise of communal and religious-nationalist forces within the country, and these forces have now assumed dangerous proportions. In short, it is hoped that the Forum can help bring progressive forces together, and to be more strong in unity or at least on a common platform.

Aside from the logistical and political challenges of hosting the world meeting in Mumbai, the question is also whether such progressive forces will be able to resist using the Forum itself – which is meant to be an open space, and not a platform for unity – as *their* platform, as distinct from their working to provide a space *within which* or *from which* unity might be achieved, remains to be seen. Whether moreover, these forces will allow space in the Forum for others who broadly agree but may not precisely share the same vision, also remains to be seen.

This vision also seems so far to be the horizon of thinking about the Forum in India. There has so far been little discussion of the larger strategic and historical perspective on the basis of which the decision was formally made by the International Council to hold the next world meeting in India, as outlined above. There is indeed, little or no internationalist thinking in WSF India as yet, beyond a proposal to organise an Asia Committee, to help with ‘mobilisation’ in the region. (A first Asia-level consultation is scheduled to take place in Mumbai on June 1-2 2003.) Basically, if anything it seems to be so far assumed that just holding the meeting in India and Asia is enough to achieve the larger strategic objectives. There remains a great deal to do in this area.

In general, there is – remains - a marked preference for dealing with the Forum as a management question, as ‘event management’, and not as politics, and certainly not as geopolitics.

There has also already been a reoccurrence of rather opaque decision-making within the new WSF India, where a worldwide call for an ‘Asia Consultation’ in mid April was suddenly issued in late March by someone within WSF India without any discussion at all of this idea by the newly-constituted bodies. This meeting was then summarily called off by the very first meeting of the new WSF India Working Committee, following a number of letters questioning this development. But the postponement was made on the pretext of the war on Iraq and the SARS epidemic – ‘factors beyond our control’ - and not by facing what had happened.

On the other hand, the fact that this happened has probably been a useful lesson to the new members of the new committees that such things can and will happen unless they introduce norms of functioning that have so far been resisted within WSF India. The initial impression that the new committees gave – certainly, the WSF Mumbai Committee – was that they were far more open, inclusive, friendly, and welcoming in their communication, which is something that was sorely lacking throughout this past year and only added to the general sense of exclusion and domination that was radiated. But, it has to be added, at the time of writing this openness seems to have broken down, hopefully only temporarily. There is much reason to think that people from within India and abroad are finding it difficult, even impossible, to get responses from the Secretariat even to enquiries about attending meetings. The Secretariat has itself recently written to say that the e-group server that it has been using is not functioning. For a process such as the World Social Forum these are not minor issues, especially given the history the process in India.

A significant change that has been brought in during this present year has been the exclusion of individuals from any of the Committees in WSF India, as already mentioned. It has been interesting that no specific *decision* of this kind was taken towards doing this, nor was there much debate around this important structural-organisational question even though it was

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clearly articulated at the national consultations and then in email exchange. The decision has become law simply by virtue of the fact that the new rules omit any mention of individuals, and the new rules have come into place simply on the basis of a proposal to this effect by two members of the previous committee, belonging to the same political and civil formation. As mentioned, the only formal explanation of this decision is that a member of the International Secretariat has recommended this. This lack of debate on such a significant subject does not bode well for WSF India.

In conclusion, the experience in India over the first seventeen months therefore seems to strongly confirm at least some of the tendencies that were drawn out in the earlier sections, which looked at the World Social Forum more as a whole. Just as illustration, first, control : The tendency of factions within the Forum community in India to try to manage, control, and in effect 'own' the space that is the Forum. Second, intolerance, as evidenced in the effort to exclude or discourage those who those struggling to be in control do not approve of and also by, from this year, creating a new rule – overturning last year's explicit policy – that excludes individuals from participating in the organisational aspects of the Forum. Third, the tendency so far to simply 'manage' the Forum, rather than seeing it as an opportunity for creating and fostering new politics and a new culture of politics, and then creatively exploring this. And fourth, the tendency so far to largely just reproduce the Porto Alegre menu and to almost treat holding the Asian Social Forum and now the world meeting as a kind of franchised event (and even citing the Brazilian precedent in defence of changing standing policy so as to exclude individuals) – though in all fairness, recent meetings and documents suggest that some members of the WSF India Committees are trying to break out of this mould, for the world meeting.

None of this takes away from the enthusiasm that 'the Forum' has already succeeded in generating within India, at least among limited circles. But insofar as the process in India can perhaps be considered as a kind of laboratory for the WSF experiment, these and some other developments in India might possibly also offer pointers to what might take shape more widely in the Forum. The instance regarding the marginalisation of individuals has already been pointed out. Accompanying this, and equally significant, has been the decision to have an extremely articulated – if not actually hierarchical – structure for the Forum in India, consisting of not less than four levels of Committees (Mumbai Committee, IOC - India Organising Committee, IWC - India Working Committee, and India General Council), and an equally highly articulated sectional representation on the IWC, of organisations representing Dalits, Adivasis, women, workers, and so on. In this way the world comes to be totally and absolutely described – and all those who do not fit in, then have no place. Parallel to this has been the decision to demand written adherence to the Forum's Charter of Principles.

All this can, on the one hand, be interpreted as decisively doing away with the ambiguity that so far exists in, for instance, the International Council – but the question can also be asked whether the pendulum has not swung so far the other way in India as to become equally problematic. In short, the experience in India seems indeed to be something of a microcosm of what is happening more widely in the Forum, and just possibly, also offers some lessons as to what the future holds.

Engaging with the World Social Forum in India - Some proposals for consideration :

- 1) Be concerned and informed about larger political and social developments in India
- 2) For people in other parts of the world, try and visit India during this year for a substantial period of time, and build close working relations with like-minded people and organisations there. Encourage others you know to also do this.

- 3) Encourage people you know in India to fully participate in the Forum – to go into the space. This is the only way to truly democratise and defend open space. Equally, encourage people you know in all parts of the world to fully participate in the Forum.
- 4) Globalise the Forum ! Insist on open, internationalist planning of the World Social Forum – which as it happens is taking place this next year in India but where this should be embedded in WSF practice, as a matter of principle and permanent practice; and on the introduction of easy, online participation in planning and policy formation.
- 5) Resist the likely tendency of the Forum in India itself becoming a platform for building unity, however necessary this might be for some social actors within India. Insist that the role of the Forum is only to provide space for this to happen.
- 6) Insist on the public articulation of a larger, more strategic internationalist perspective for the holding of the Forum in India – for if this articulation is not there, and clear to all, then what is the purpose of not continuing to hold the world meeting in Porto Alegre ?
- 7) Insist on open, inclusive, democratic, and friendly communication both from the WSF secretariat in India and from the International Secretariat in Brazil.

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Some relevant clauses from the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum :

“5. The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world, but intends neither to be a body representing world civil society nor to exclude from the debates it promotes those in positions of political responsibility, mandated by their peoples, who decide to enter into the commitments resulting from those debates.

“6. The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No-one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body.”

Endnotes and references

1 Contact details : Jai Sen, A-3 Defence Colony, New Delhi 110 024, India. Ph 91-11/5155 1521, 2464 2109. Eml jai.sen@vsnl.com

2 This present note is a revised and expanded version of a Note I was invited to prepare on the World Social Forum for the VI Encuentro de Economía Solidaria held in Córdoba, Spain, May 1-3 2003, which I titled 'A moment for reflection'. I thank Carola Reintjes for giving me the opportunity to spell out these thoughts. I am now deeply indebted to Jeremy Brecher, Dave Ranney, and David Szanton for their rich and challenging comments on an earlier draft of this version. I also want to thank Chico Whitaker for his writings and for the correspondence we have had, as referenced below, which have played an important role in pushing me to think through the ideas I explore in this note. Finally, I would like to also thank Ville Luukkanen of KePa, Helsinki, for inviting me to write a note on my impressions on the Forum as it stands today. This note has also come out of that request, and commitment.

3 The workshop was titled 'Getting over issues of rivalry and power : A challenge for the FSM ?'. More information from Celina Whitaker at wself@no-log.org.

4 Jai Sen, 2002 - 'Are other globalisations possible ? The World Social Forum as an instrument of global democratization'. Chapter 8 in Rikkilä and Sehm Patomäki, eds, 2002 – From a Global Market Place to Political Spaces, pp 167-205. Abridged version of paper based on presentation made at the NIGD (Network Institute for Global Democratisation) Seminar at the World Social Forum, on 'Global Democracy ? A North-South Dialogue' held on February 4 2002, at Amarzen, Porto Alegre, Brazil. The title of the full paper, unpublished as yet, was Jai Sen, March-April 2002 - 'On Building Another World [Or : 'Are other globalisations possible ?] : The World Social Forum as an instrument of global democratisation'. I draw heavily on this earlier paper for this first section of this present one.

(Rikkilä and Sehm Patomäki document available in full at <http://www.nigd.org/publications> . Full paper available at : http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/download/Network_Inst_Global_Democratisation.rtf or at : http://www.choike.org/cgi-bin/choike/links/page.cgi?p=ver_informe&id=977)

5 See, for instance, Francisco (Chico) Whitaker, February 2002 – '*Lições de Porto Alegre*' / 'Lessons of Porto Alegre'. M/s, 3 pp, dt February 21 2002. Revised version of Note to the Comissão Episcopal de Pastoral of the CNBB, on February 19 2002. Original in Portuguese. Whitaker represents the CBJP on the WSF Brazil Organising Committee.

6 Chico Whitaker, March 2003 – 'Notes about the World Social Forum'. Revised version, dt March 17 2003. 10 pp.

7 For a discussion of cleavages and strategic linkages, see Mary Kaldor, 2000 – "Civilising' Globalisation ? The Implications of the 'Battle in Seattle', in Millennium, Journal of International Studies, 2000, vol 29, no 1, pp 105-114; and for a discussion of the question of uncivil societies, see : Jai Sen, November 2002d – 'Civilising Globalisation ? Or Globalising Civilisation ? Some reflections towards civil governance and a conscious, critical globalisation'. A Paper for a Presentation to the Opening Session of 'Helsinki Conference 2002 : Searching for Global Partnerships' held in Helsinki, Finland, December 2-4 2002. Organised by the Crisis Management Initiative (Office of President Ahtisaari), on behalf of the Government of Finland. 38 pp.

8 This overview draws heavily on an earlier paper, 'The Long March to Another World : Reflections on the World Social Forum process in India and internationally' (January 2003).

9 While the WSF has itself followed a practice of encouraging reflection and assessment and of placing such documents on this website, WSF2003 perhaps marked the point when several more major papers were prepared either before or immediately after. These include : Michael Albert, February 2003 - 'The WSF's Future', on ZNet, February 2 2003 <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=41&ItemID=2956>; Nikhil Anand, May 2003 - 'Bound to Mobility ? Identity and Purpose at the World Social Forum'. Paper for Seminar on 'Environment and Development: Dilemmas of Power and Place', Yale University; Jacklyn Cock, 2003 – 'A Better or Worse World ? The Third World Social Forum, Porto Alegre 2003'. Centre for Civil Society, Durban, South Africa, Research Report 5; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, March 2003 – 'The World Social Forum : Toward A Counter-Hegemonic Globalization'. First draft, March 2003. Presented at the XXIV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Dallas, USA, March 27-27 2003. 35 pp. Can be consulted at and cited from <http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/bss/fsm.php=A9> Boaventura de Sousa Santos; and : Peter Waterman, forthcoming - 'Second Thoughts on

Jai Sen, May 2003 – 'The WSF as logo or as commons - Take a moment to reflect on the Forum'

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The Third World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, January 23-28, 2003: Place, Space and the Reinvention of Social Emancipation'. First and second drafts in circulation.

10 Prashant Bhushan, March 2003 – 'Bush Must Be Stopped Now Before It Is Too Late'. Note circulated over email, dt March 15 2003, and : Samir Hussain and Pranjal Tiwari, April 2003 – 'Unimaginable Futures'. Z Net, April 28 2003.

11 With due acknowledgement to Teivo Teivainen's recent paper on the Forum of this title, even though my concern is not quite its theme. March 2003 – 'The World Social Forum : Arena or Actor ?'. Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) meeting, Dallas, Texas, USA, March 28 2003. Unfinished draft, 17 pp.

12 Michael Albert, February 2003, as above.

13 From : ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001 – 'World Social Forum Charter of Principles', dt April 9 2001. 2 pp. Emphasis supplied.

[ABONG = Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organisations; ATTAC = Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens; CBJP = Brazilian Peace and Justice Commission, of the National Council of Bishops (CNBB); CIVES = Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship; CUT = Central Trade Union Association; IBASE = Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis; CJG = Centre for Global Justice; MST = Movement of Landless Rural Workers]

14 For a discussion of this issue, see : Jai Sen, November 2002d, as above : 'Civilising Globalisation ? Or Globalising Civilisation'.

15 Chico Whitaker, March 2003, as above.

16 Personal correspondence with Chico Whitaker during March 2003.

17 See Nikhil Anand, 2003, for a discussion of this as it took place at WSF 2003.

18 William F Fisher and Thomas Ponniah, eds, 2003 - Another World Is Possible, Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum. London : Zed Books.

19 In : Thomas Ponniah and William Fisher, interviewed by Solana Larsen, February 2003 – 'Under a tree in Porto Alegre: democracy in its most radical sense'. February 5 2003, on openDemocracy, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-91-954.jsp>.

20 Sen 2002 and November 2002, as above, among other places.

21 Chico Whitaker, March 2003, as above.

22 World Social Forum India, July 2002 – 'WSF India Policy Statement : Charter of Principles - World Social Forum India'. 3 pp. Available on the WSF India website www.wsfindia.org.

23 ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, and others, April 2001, as above, Clause 1.

24 WSF India, April 2003 – 'WSF India General Council – Affiliation letter', dt April 12 2003. Those joining are also asked to make a suggested 'voluntary contribution' of Rs 5,000 (Euro 100, approximately) when they join, as a token of commitment and as a way of generating local funds. The fact that this requirement of written adherence is specifically mentioned in a subsequent memo from WSF India makes clear that this was not a bureaucratic accident but rather represents clear intention.

25 I must make clear that I am not here attributing any personal motives to any individuals, in any way. As I see it, those who are taking these positions and defining these rules are only acting out their historical roles.

26 Francisco (Chico) Whitaker, February 2002, as above, and Teivo Teivainen, March 2003, as above.

27 World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002 – 'IC – Nature, responsibilities, composition and functioning'. 2 pp, dt August 22 2002. Available : http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4_2_2_1&cd_language=2.

28 For a discussion, see Teivo Teivainen, March 2003, as above.

Jai Sen, May 2003 – 'The WSF as logo or as commons - Take a moment to reflect on the Forum'

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29 For an overview of these activities, see : World Social Forum, International Secretariat, nd c.January 2003 – ‘The directions of the World Social Forum process’. Note circulated at the meeting of the WSF International Council, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 21-22 2003. 3 pp.

30 See World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002, as above.

31 For a discussion, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos, March 2003, as above.

32 I thank Jeremy Brecher for this thought-provoking suggestion, of looking at the Council as a trust.

33 For an elaboration of Samir Amin’s arguments, see : Samir Amin (Third World Forum), interviewed by V Sridhar, January 2003 – ‘For struggles, global and national’, in Frontline, volume 20 issue 2, <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2002/stories/20030131008201200.htm>.

34 For a more detailed discussion of this history, see Jai Sen, March-April 2002 - ‘On Building Another World’, as above, and also ‘The Long March to Another World’ (January 2003), as above.

35 World Social Forum India, July 2002 – ‘WSF India Policy Statement’, as above.

36 WSF India, June 2002 – ‘Building Another World : The WSF India Process – A note for discussion’.

37 WSF Brazil Organising Committee, March 2002 – ‘Note from the Organizing Committee on the principles that guide the WSF’. Dt March 7 2002. http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4_2&cd_language=2.

38 For a discussion of this experience, see Jai Sen, January 2003a - ‘After the first year – Looking back into the future : Reflections on the World Social Forum process in India and internationally’. First draft, 63 pp. This essay was then edited, re-titled, and reissued in mid January 2003 as : ‘The Long March to Another World : Reflections on the World Social Forum process in India and internationally’, as above. Translations of the summary of this essay in Portuguese, French, and Hindi appeared as a booklet at the January 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, published by KePa in Finland.

39 See the Report of the International Council meeting in Barcelona, where it says “This WSF [WSF India] will seek to expand to become Asiatic.”.

40 WSF India, July 2002c - ‘Towards the Formation of an ‘Asian Solidarity Group’ for the Asia Social Forum being organised by World Social Forum India in Hyderabad, India, during January 2-7 2003’. A Note for Discussion.

41 Teivo Teivainen, March 2003, as above.

42 The WSF India Committee invited feedback on the Asian Social Forum, and received many comments, which were then circulated to everyone on the WSF India e-list. From my side, I had already prepared a first draft of critical reflections on the first year of the Forum in India before the Asian Social Forum and circulated it there, titled : ‘After the first year – Looking back into the future : Reflections on the World Social Forum process in India and internationally’, as above (January 2003). Some of the basic propositions of the essay were discussed at two meetings held during the Forum, and a Note was then prepared and circulated based on the discussions.

43 For instance, Jai Sen, January 2003d – ‘The Long March to Another World’, in The Hindu, January 29+30 2003, p 10. A number of articles also appeared reporting on the Asian Social Forum, but few that explored the debate and the experience. See, for instance, Sukumar Muralidharan, January 2003 – ‘Globalising Resistance’, in Frontline, Volume 20, Issue 2, January 18 - 31 2003. Cover Story. Vol 20 Issue 02. URL: <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2002/stories/20030131009100400.htm>

44 As reported by them at the WSF India National Consultation in Nagpur in April 2003.

Jai Sen, May 2003 – ‘The WSF as logo or as commons - Take a moment to reflect on the Forum’

All comments welcome