

A Tale of Two Charters (or : 'Another Charter Is (Im)Possible !')

Jai Sen, December 2003 ¹

This note suggests that because of what seems to perhaps have been one or more human errors, the World Social Forum today in reality has two Charter of Principles in existence. This would be amusing, and perhaps even unimportant, if it did not have some possibly serious consequences.

The story of the WSF's Charter of Principles raises important lessons for any initiative such as the World Social Forum : In principle, wanting to be open, relying on autonomous action on the part of everyone involved (its leadership, its participants) and in many ways dependent on this energy, working with a minimum of bureaucracy, working partly or largely in the virtual world, and working with a culture where, by and large, those who are active with it are not 'constitutionalists' – constantly referring to the initiative's Charter for legitimacy. But in such a culture, many things slip between the cracks, and when and if problems arise in such a context regarding reference points, they can have potentially serious consequences. And in the case of a world initiative such as the World Social Forum, worldwide consequences.

In April 2001, the eight Brazilian organisations that convened the first 'World Social Forum' in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, prepared and issued a Charter of Principles for the initiative they had taken.²

In early June 2001, in order to "take the Forum to the world level", they convened a first meeting of an 'Advisory Council', which has since then been renamed the 'International Council'.³ On June 10 2001, the new body approved and issued a somewhat revised Charter of Principles.⁴

In mid December 2001, a delegation made up of two members of the-then Brazil Organising Committee and one representing the WSF International Council visited India for the first set of formal discussions with civil organisations in India towards the possibility of Indian organisations hosting the world meeting of the Forum in January 2003. This first meeting, held in Bangalore, decided that a wider consultation was needed, and asked Vijay Pratap, of the civil organisation Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam based in New Delhi, to call such a meeting.

Pratap called this larger meeting (on January 9-10 2002) by an e-letter on January 1 2002, with which he circulated a copy of the Forum's Charter of Principles. This went out to hundreds of organisations, networks, and individuals, mostly in India but also in other countries in South Asia - Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

To the best of her memory now, Pratap's assistant at that time, Kusum Lata, recalls that they obtained the Charter of Principles by email from Chico Whitaker, member of the Brazil Organising Committee who had been among the delegation at the Bangalore meeting just two weeks before.⁵ This was in late December 2001, six months after the Charter was modified.

The document that Pratap circulated on January 1 2002 then came, logically, to be the basis of extensive discussion on the Forum in India, since this was the framework provided by the originators of the initiative. Over the next six months, it was also translated into several languages in India and published by several organisations in the course of the discussion and mobilisation work they did around the Forum, as a part of what in India was called "The WSF India Process", a plan for large-scale mobilisation and consciousness raising around and through the World Social Forum as an idea.⁶ India is a big country, with a very large number of social and politically active

organisations and individuals. As a consequence, this document, in various forms, and over the whole of the subsequent year, reached tens of thousands of people in the country.

Those who took the responsibility for setting up the WSF process in India also came to the conclusion that the Charter as it stood did not fully address social and political conditions as they exist in the country, and that there were also some problems with the language – with the kind of English that was used in the original that they had received. They therefore decided to modify the Charter, to suit local conditions and use of language. The WSF India Working Group (a preparatory committee that existed during January-April 2002, prior to the establishment of WSF India at a second national consultation in April 2002) approached Chico Whitaker of the Brazil Organising Committee to get his advice in this matter, and he advised them that while WSF India could certainly prepare and adopt its own statement, it should not be called a ‘WSF Charter of Principles’ since this might confuse people. The document, issued in July 2002, was accordingly titled the ‘WSF India Policy Statement : Charter of Principles - World Social Forum India’.⁷

This modified document – based on the main Charter - was then circulated widely in India during 2002, along with the main WSF Charter of Principles, for debate and discussion during the mobilisation for the Asian Social Forum in January 2003, and more generally looking ahead to the likely holding of the world meeting of the Forum in India in January 2004.⁸ It was also put up on the WSF India website, along with the WSF Charter of Principles on which it was based. In this way, the Forum’s Charter and a version as modified in India therefore reached an unknown further number of people.

Equally, Peter Waterman, researcher, writer, and political commentator based in The Hague, The Netherlands, who extensively writes on the Forum and on the global justice and solidarity movement more generally, downloaded the Charter of Principles from the WSF website and attached this as an annexure to a paper of his on the Forum in 2002.⁹ Waterman does not clearly recall when he downloaded the document, but assumes it must have been either in late 2001 or in the first half of 2002. His copy is dated, in Portuguese, ‘Brasil, domingo, 12 de agosto de 2001’ (Brazil, Sunday, August 12 2001). Since then, he has continued to write extensively on the Forum, and has at all times taken it for granted that the document he had downloaded and was using was the Charter of Principles.

It is also very likely that there are many others all over the world like Waterman and all of us in India, who have been interested in the Forum since its formation in 2001 and have followed its activities and even taken part in it, who also see this document as being the Forum’s Charter.

The Charter of Principles that was received by organisations in India on January 1 2002 and obtained by Waterman and others during 2001-2 has therefore become a foundation for the understanding of the idea of the World Social Forum. Thousands upon thousands of people - certainly in India and South Asia but quite possibly also much more widely, because of the power of networks and of information and communication technologies today – therefore think of the Forum in terms of the provisions of this Charter.

Two Charters

The problem is that this version – the one that has been circulated and digested so widely – has now turned out to be *the earlier, superseded, and original* version of the Charter. This discrepancy was discovered only in late October 2003.¹⁰ And moreover, and more importantly, the problem is that this ‘original’ version, is significantly different in some ways from the version that is today up on the WSF website, which is the one that was approved by the International Council in June 2001.

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It is not yet 100% clear how or where the mistake/s took place. It could have been in the document Whitaker sent to Pratap, or that Pratap somehow had both versions on his computer and he / his assistant sent out the 'old' version, by mistake. (They bear the same title, and the preamble is identical, so an error is very understandable.) Equally, it is possible that Waterman was able to download the old version well after the revised version had been approved because the Brazil Organising Committee had not yet placed the new one up there, or even that Waterman had both documents on file and used one and not the other. And in some ways it does not even really matter how this happened, now. But the fact is that in early January 2002, six months after the Charter was revised, Pratap widely circulated what seems to have been an already 'old' version of the Charter; and that Waterman also somehow downloaded the same version at what seems to be during roughly the same period, and circulated it. And that this version has subsequently in turn been further circulated, translated, and read, across the world.

In broad terms, and also in broad spirit, the two versions are similar. But there are also significant differences, in the phrasing and the emphasis. The revised version has 14 clauses, versus 15 in the original; ten of the clauses have been changed significantly, and only the Preamble and three clauses from the original Charter remain the same, nos 2, 3, and 7; one clause, a key clause that declared that "The meetings of the World Social Forum are always open to all those who wish to take part in them, except organizations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action", has been replaced in the revised version by a single phrase, "Neither party representations *nor military organizations* shall participate in the Forum"; and the list of signatories (the eight organisations that formed the Forum) has been replaced by a statement that the document was "Approved and adopted in São Paulo, on April 9, 2001, by the organizations that make up the World Social Forum Organising Committee".¹¹

The revised version had also already come into use by this time however, at least by some, such as for instance in March 2002, when the Brazil Organising Committee (since then renamed the 'International Secretariat') issued a Note on "the principles that guide the WSF".¹² This document drew attention to some specific clauses in the Forum's Charter of Principles – and referred specifically to clauses in the *June 2001* version. The only problem is that no one who was working with the original April 2001 version seems to have noticed this : That this Note was referring to wording that had changed.¹³

On the one hand therefore, the situation seems to be one only of simple errors, somewhere : That the superseded version of the Charter was either sent to Pratap or used by them, by simple mistake; that in the rush of things, the WSF Secretariat forgot to make this change and the old version also remained up on the FSM website, even into early 2002; and/or that Waterman also perhaps made some mistake. (Although the Charter had already been revised, Waterman downloaded – at some point in late 2001 or early 2002 - a copy of the April 2001 version that was clearly dated 'August 12 2001' – two months after the revision in June 2001.)

On the other hand though, given that the older version has been so widely circulated, and where substantial changes took place in the provisions in the Forum's Charter of Principles, this is also not a mere bureaucratic issue. It is of considerable consequence.

First, and most centrally, the reality is that this error has been broadcast in the country and region where the next world meeting of the World Social Forum is to be held - a large and populous country and region where there are a large number of organisations active in relation to the Forum. It is therefore very likely, given the history, that the majority of these people have the 'old' provisions in their minds and records, and therefore a somewhat different understanding of the Forum's founding principles from where the Charter today stands. In terms of numbers, because of

the sheer scale of India and region, it could even mean that half the people in the world who today know of the Forum see the original April 2001 version as the initiative's Charter.

Second, there have been many changes from the older to the revised version, so it is very possible that different people with different interests will find different changes of significance. The changes range from an important shift in ecological vision (Clause 1), to including the complicity of national governments in the destruction caused by economic globalisation (Clause 4).¹⁴

Indeed, it is an open question if even those on the WSF India Organising Committee – who are organising the world meeting - know what the real provisions of the Charter are. If so, this is also highly ironic, given that WSF India requires all those who wish to join its organisational bodies to declare in writing that they are willing to adhere to both the Forum's Charter and the WSF India Policy Statement.¹⁵ The irony also goes further : Because – since the WSF India Policy Statement is based on the earlier, original version of the Charter – they are in fact therefore demanding adherence to two somewhat different sets of provisions.¹⁶

In a very real sense therefore, there are today *two* Charters of Principles in existence - in India, and across the world – and even if one is the 'official' one. And in some ways, because of how widely word is likely to have spread through the actually existing Forum, it is now very difficult to say which is the 'real' one – and which 'virtual'. Or are they both real ?

Third, a key clause in the original version (no 11) would seem to have been replaced by a single phrase. Specifically, the emphasised portion of the clause “The meetings of the World Social Forum are always open to all those who wish to take part in them, *except organizations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action*” would seem to have been replaced by the emphasised phrase “Neither party representations *nor military organizations* shall participate in the Forum”. [Emphasis supplied.]

This change is likely to be of special interest to many people in India, and perhaps in many countries also, because it was on this basis that the message was spread in India that the Forum does not permit 'armed groups' or 'militant groups' to take part in it, or even those associated with such groups, and that several groups who were otherwise interested in taking part in the Forum stayed away. The clause was the subject of several very heated debates in India, and has arguably contributed over time to splits taking place in the World Social Forum process in the country. In other words, the 'existence' of this clause in the version that has been circulated and used in the country – even if only through a mistake - has thus possibly precipitated a situation that is in some senses the last thing that the Forum should be doing, and against its very spirit. It has closed space, not opened it. This may not have happened if the revised version of the Charter had been in use.

One specific consequence of this 'debate' in India was that one of the civil groups that had initially offered, in April 2002, to take major responsibilities for organising the Asian Social Forum (held in Hyderabad in January 2003), the Hyderabad-based FAIG – Forum Against Imperialist Globalisation – ultimately not only withdrew from the Forum but also organised a major demonstration and rally against the WSF, at the time of the Asian Social Forum. This was within the very first year of the Forum process in India. Although FAIG is widely understood to be affiliated or sympathetic to the PWG, the People's War Group, the most active and militant Maoist formation in India today, the formation and existence of the Forum could surely have been a way of deepening dialogue with the PWG, not of closing it.

There is some reason to also argue that this first round of splitting, and also the manner in which those in the leadership of the Forum process in India – led by groups affiliated to the CPI(M)

- handled the criticisms the WSF was facing both before and during the Asian Social Forum (when other civil groups also came out in opposition to the Forum) contributed to a more general culture of positional warfare in relation to the Forum, and in its own way to the moulding of much more major opposition to the Forum that is expected to take place in Mumbai during the world meeting, the so-called 'Mumbai Resistance'.¹⁷

It is also on the basis of this provision – if not the clause itself - that the Zapatistas have reportedly been denied access to the Forum in Porto Alegre (or that they have chosen to stay away), and at the world meeting in 2002 the registration given by the organisers to some Basque organisations was reportedly later also cancelled when it was realised that they were Basque and therefore might be supporters of armed struggle, thereby allegedly contradicting the WSF's Charter of Principles.¹⁸ Given that the Zapatista movement is widely regarded as having an inspiration for the crystallisation of the global civil movement that we see taking shape around us today, and of which the World Social Forum is a part, this is a little ironic.

The situation in India is perhaps more understandable, because the version of the Charter that was known in the country specifically had this provision, but on what basis was the access denied, and registration revoked, at the world Forum, in January 2002, fully six months after the International Council approved the revised Charter, in June 2001 ?

Relatedly, Waterman has suggested that the publication of the Call of Social Movements from the second world meeting of the WSF, in January 2002, was subsequently held up for 6-9 months "because one of the signator [sp] organisations was considered by ??? to be an ETA union front, and there was, apparently, a fear on the part of ??? that this would damage the PT/Lula in the forthcoming elections".¹⁹

And beyond this, and as Waterman has again suggested, there is the question of whether the "the conditionalities of the Charter have [therefore] not been exercised [by the WSF] more against the ultra-left than the parliamentary left and centre ([which are] often complicit with neo-liberalism)".²⁰

And finally, it is of course necessary to recognise that in a relatively open and dynamic process such as the World Social Forum, there is always the completely unpredictable possibility of problems arising in the future from the differences between the two versions.

All these questions need to be asked, and answered. While the Forum is not a constitutionalist initiative, on the other hand a careful study of the history of the dynamics of the Forum as it is emerging shows that the architects of the Forum and at least some of its leadership do regard the rules by which participants can enter the 'open space' that it is meant to be, as important – and the initiative is increasingly insisting upon adherence to the rules.²¹ But what are the rules ?

Towards contributing to a critical and more complete understanding of the World Social Forum as it actually exists, the editors of a forthcoming book on the Forum have decided to, in the best public interest, publish *both* versions of the Charter in this book and also a comparison that graphically shows the changes that have taken place; and also the WSF India Policy Statement based on the 'old' Charter.²² As a member of that group, I invite your critical attention to this history and to these realities.

I also invite the attention of the 'official' bodies of the Forum to this issue, at national and global levels. Clearly, the revised version of the Charter was – perhaps among other things – put up

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on the website at some point of time, but not everyone who is involved with the Forum was informed and there was not a vigorous enough information campaign to make sure that all those interested in the Forum abandoned the superseded version. As a direct consequence of this, it is clear that there has been some mistake, and those initiating the Forum process in the country invited to host the first world meeting outside Brazil have been using an obsolete Charter. As a consequence, there are in effect two versions of the Charter today in existence.

In this situation, what should be done ? Should the 'official' version be simply declared the real one ? Or are there some other steps that also need to be taken ?

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Endnotes

¹ I thank Peter Waterman for his trenchant comments on an earlier version of this note, and Teivo Teivainen both for his searching comments and questions and the information he made available to me on the history of the Forum.

² ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001 – 'World Social Forum Charter of Principles', dt April 9 2001. 2 pp. ~~Available at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4&cd_language=2~~ [This document was earlier available at this site. Reference deleted Jai Sen, November 18 2003.] Published in : Jai Sen with Madhuresh Kumar, compilers, August 2003 - *Are Other Worlds Possible ?*, The Open Space Reader on the World Social Forum and its Engagement with Empire.

[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.]

³ World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002.

⁴ World Social Forum Organising Committee, June 2001 – 'World Social Forum Charter of Principles'. Available at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4&cd_language=2. The version available on the Forum website says that it was the 'WSF International Council' that approved the revised version. Historically, this is in fact perhaps not quite correct, because the body at that time was known as the 'Advisory Council' and not the 'International Council', and it was only renamed subsequently. But since the former was renamed the latter, this is not of great significance.

⁵ Kusum Lata, assistant to Vijay Pratap, discussion, New Delhi, November 30 2003.

⁶ WSF India, June 2002 – 'Building another world - The WSF India Process : A note for discussion'. 6 pp.

⁷ World Social Forum India, July 2002 – 'WSF India Policy Statement : Charter of Principles - World Social Forum India'. 3 pp. Earlier available on the WSF India website www.wsfindia.org. Published in Jai Sen with Madhuresh Kumar, compilers, August 2003 - *Are Other Worlds Possible ?*, The Open Space Reader on the World Social Forum and its Engagement with Empire.

⁸ Although the Brazil Organising Committee and International Council originally requested Indian organisations to host the third world meeting, in January 2003, it was finally decided that they would host

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only the fourth meeting, in 2004. For this history, see Jai Sen, December 2003b – ‘The Long March to Another World : Reflections of a member of the WSF India Committee in 2002 on the first year of the World Social Forum process in India’. Forthcoming in Sen, Anand, Escobar, and Waterman, eds – The World Social Forum : Challenging Empires. New Delhi : Viveka.

⁹ Peter Waterman, 2002 – ‘What’s Left Internationally? Reflections on the 2nd World Social Forum in Porto Alegre’, in Working Paper Series, Number 362, 38 pp. The Hague : Institute of Social Studies, *web*: <http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/GloSoDia>.

¹⁰ In the course of preparing the forthcoming book The World Social Forum : Challenging Empires, edited by Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman. New Delhi : Viveka. I have written to Chico Whitaker to ask him for his recall on this matter, and after underlining repeatedly that there is only one Charter of Principles, he has said “[I] think the best we can do is to discuss all this personally during the WSF. Perhaps putting together all peoples implied, including our Secretariat (to whom I am sending also copy of this mail), to arrive to “the” Charter of Principles. Then we can see what to do with all misunderstandings.” Letter dt December 21 2003.

¹¹ For a detailed comparison, see Jai Sen, December 2003c – ‘Two Charters of Principles : A Comparison’. Comparison of Original April 2001 WSF Charter of Principles with Revised Charter of Principles issued in June 2001, as found on the WSF website in October 2003. December 19 2003, 8 pp. Emphasis supplied. URL: http://www.choike.org/documentos/Two_charters_compared.pdf

¹² WSF Brazil Organising Committee, March 2002 – ‘Note from the Organizing Committee on the principles that guide the WSF’. Dated March 7 2002. http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4_2&cd_language=2.

¹³ This too, I only noticed in November 2003.

¹⁴ Jai Sen, December 2003c, as above.

¹⁵ WSF India, nd(b) – ‘Affirmation Letter - Indian General Council’. Download form, 1 p, available in November 2003 at <http://www.wsfindia.org/affirmation-letter-1.php>; also in WSF India, nd – ‘WSF 2004, Mumbai, India : The Global South Joins Hands’.

¹⁶ For a discussion of this step and other such – which can be seen as the emergence of organisational fundamentalism in the Forum, see : Jai Sen, December 2003g – ‘How Open ? The Forum as Logo, the Forum as Religion : Scepticism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will’. Forthcoming in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, eds, 2004 – The World Social Forum : Challenging Empires. New Delhi : Viveka.

¹⁷ International League for People’s Struggles (ILPS), World People’s Resistance Movement (WPRM), South Asia, Anti-Imperialist Camp (Austria), Bayan (Philippines), Confederation of Turkish Workers in Europe (ATIK), and others, September 2003 – ‘Introducing MR-2004 : Mumbai Resistance-2004 - Against Imperialist Globalisation & War’. September 5 2003. Available at <http://andorra.indymedia.org/new/2003/11/698.php>. For a discussion of sectarian politics within the WSF in India, see Jai Sen, January 2003c – ‘The Long March to Another World : Reflections on the World Social Forum process in India and internationally’. Available at http://www.choike.org/cgi-bin/choike/links/page.cgi?p=ver_informe&id=967. For an abbreviated version, Jai Sen, December 2003b – ‘The Long March to Another World : Reflections of a member of the WSF India Committee in 2002 on the first year of the World Social Forum process in India’. Forthcoming in Sen, Anand, Escobar, and Waterman, eds, 2004 – The World Social Forum : Challenging Empires. New Delhi : Viveka.

¹⁸ Teivo Teivainen, personal communication, June 2003.

¹⁹ Peter Waterman, personal communication, November 20 2003. ‘PT’ refers to the Workers Party, and ‘Lula’ to its leader, who is currently the President of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Jai Sen, December 2003g – ‘How Open ?’ as above, for a discussion; and for positions, Chico Whitaker, March 2003 – ‘Notes about the World Social Forum’. Revised version, dt March 17 2003, and

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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>. Both forthcoming in edited form in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, eds, 2004 – The World Social Forum : Challenging Empires. New Delhi : Viveka.

²² Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, eds, 2004; as above.