
A TALE OF TWO CHARTERS

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Because of what seems to have been one or more human errors, the World Social Forum in reality today, has *two* Charter of Principles in existence.

In April 2001, the eight Brazilian organisations that convened the first WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, prepared and issued a Charter of Principles for the initiative they had taken.¹ In early June 2001, in order to “take the Forum to the world level”, they convened a first meeting of an ‘Advisory Council’, since then re-named the ‘International Council’.² On June 10, 2001, the new body approved and issued a somewhat revised Charter of Principles.³

In early January 2002, Vijay Pratap of the civil organisation, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam based in New Delhi, called a first national consultation on the WSF in India. This followed a preliminary meeting in Bangalore in mid-December 2001. With his invitation, he circulated a copy of the Forum’s Charter of Principles. This went out to several hundreds of organisations, networks and individuals, mostly in India but also other countries in South Asia — Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The document that Pratap circulated on January 1, 2002 then came, logically, to be the basis of extensive discussions on the Forum in India, since this was the framework provided by the originators of the initiative. Over the next six months, it was 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 WSF as an idea.⁴ 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 — arguably 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 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. After some months of discussion, they issued a document titled the ‘WSF India Policy Statement : Charter of Principles — World Social Forum India’.⁵

This modified document based on the main Charter was widely circulated in India during 2002, along with the main Charter, 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. 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, based in The Hague, downloaded the Charter of Principles from the WSF website and attached this as an annexure to a paper of his on the Forum in 2002.⁶ 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 taken it for granted that the document he downloaded and was using 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 for 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.

Two Charters

But 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 2003.⁷

It is not yet fully clear how this took place, but my investigations suggest that it seems to have been a result of one or more simple mistakes, either in Brazil or in India, or both, quite possibly because the titles of the two documents are identical and the preamble identical. And in some ways it does not even really matter now, how this happened.⁸ 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 and quite possibly others also downloaded the same version during what seems to be 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.⁹ On the one hand, the situation seems to be only a result of simple errors along the way. On the other hand, given that substantial changes took place in the provisions in the Forum's Charter but it is the older version that has been so widely circulated, 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. In terms of numbers, because of the sheer scale of India and the 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 the 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).¹⁰

Third, a key (clause no. 11) in the original version 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 organisations 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 organisations* shall participate in the Forum”.

This change is likely to be of special interest to many people in India, and perhaps in many other 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 heated debates in India, and has arguably contributed to a process of splits taking place in the WSF 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 contributed to precipitating 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.

There is reason to argue, in turn, that this situation has, in its own way, also contributed to the moulding of a culture of positional warfare around the Forum in India, and to the major opposition to the Forum that is expected to take place in Mumbai during the world meeting, the so-called ‘Mumbai Resistance’.¹¹

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.¹² Given that the Zapatista movement is widely regarded as having been an inspiration for the crystallisation of the global civil movement that we see taking shape around us today, and of which the WSF is a part, this is a little ironic.

Beyond this, Waterman has suggested that there is the question of whether “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 neoliberalism)”.¹³

In a very real sense therefore, there are today, *two* Charters of Principles in existence — in India, and across the world — 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 ?

Towards contributing to a critical and more complete understanding of the WSF as it actually exists, the editors of this book have decided to, in the best public interest, publish *both* versions of the Charter in this book; and also the WSF India Policy Statement that is based on the ‘old’ Charter.¹⁴ As a member of this 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, as the result of some human errors somewhere along the way, we are today faced with the situation where there are in effect, two versions of the Charter today. In this situation, what should be done ? Should the ‘official’ version be simply declared the real one ?

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NOTES

¹ ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, and others, April 2001. In this volume.

² World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002.

³ World Social Forum Organising Committee, June 2001. In this volume.

⁴ WSF India, June 2002.

⁵ WSF India, July 2002. In this volume.

⁶ Waterman, 2002b.

⁷ In the course of preparing this volume.

⁸ For more details, see the article on which this note is based : Sen December 2003d.

⁹ Ibid. Emphasis supplied.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ International League for People's Struggles (ILPS), World People's Resistance Movement (WPRM), South Asia, Anti-Imperialist Camp (Austria), and others, September. For a discussion of sectarian politics within the WSF

in India, see Sen January 2003c.

¹² Teivo Teivainen, personal communication, June 2003.

¹³ Peter Waterman, personal communication, November 20, 2003.

¹⁴ See Sen, December 2003c for a comparison that graphically shows the changes that have taken place from the original to the revised version.

¹⁵ This note is directly based on a longer article of a similar title : Sen, December 2003d.