

---

## THE WSF : WHERE TO NOW ?

---

michael ALBERT

The worldwide Social Forum phenomenon is thriving. In contrast, the WSF once-a-year international event has run up against internal limits and needs renovation. Forums worldwide include relatively local events for small towns, cities, counties, whole states, and even regions. Examples are Forums for Ithaca, New York, USA, Brisbane Australia, South Africa, and Asia. There are many instances at each level, including, for example, about a hundred in towns throughout Italy. These Forums worldwide have two universal aims, and beyond that, much variation. One, to promote respectful communications and solidarity and two, to prioritise vision and strategy as well as analysis.

Moreover by all evidence, the Forums worldwide cause even activists who disagree to congregate, to hear one another, to develop new ties, and to take seriously, economic, political, gender, race, culture, ecology, globalisation, and international goals and strategies. Some local Forums excellently generate shared programme and actions among sub-sets of participants. But even short of that, by at least enhancing solidarity and enlarging vision, all the local Forums powerfully aid movements.

Another attribute of the Forums worldwide, more in evidence the more local they are, is accountability and transparency. Local Forum organisers are generally well known to the people participating and attending. Even for Forums lacking a fully democratic process, the decision-makers are at least known enough to the attendees to be accountable. Decisions are subject to challenge, refinement, and renovation.

Similarly, local Forums have a manageable scale. Arrangements, fees, setting up panels and getting people to them, all occur relatively smoothly. Local agendas tend to include many interactive sessions so that everyone involved participates more or less equally. People can access one another. Presenters and audience aren't sharply divided. A few people don't enjoy elite status. Others aren't marginalised.

Without exaggerating the virtues of the Forums worldwide, they are having positive effects and moving in participatory, transparent, and democratic directions.

The WSF — the *world* meeting of the WSF process — is, however, different.

### The World Social Forum

The bottom-up Forums worldwide were spurred into existence by a very top-down WSF. The former has yet to reform the latter. So in contrast to the Forums worldwide, the WSF is not yet transparent or accountable, much less democratic. It has become unmanageable. And while it has profoundly valuable participation, there are often sharp and even destructive differences between the WSF's layers of participants. While some of these difficulties certainly derive from doing a massive event with unreliable and insufficient resources, there are other avenues of improvement as well.

### The WSF's Decision-Making

The originators of the WSF took a great idea, made a courageous leap, and inspired effective work. In time, however, they became a leadership in a tighter, more determinative, and less exemplary manner. They began and remained unaccountable, save perhaps tangentially to their own organisations. This was caused likely in part by the difficulties of operating on such an unprecedented scale, partly by the structure and philosophies of some of the NGOs and other organisations involved such as the French ATTAC, and probably due to more singular factors as well.

After WSF 2, I was enlisted to help with a variety of Forum-related projects and, as a means to facilitate my doing so, I was asked to join the WSF's International Council. I missed a spring and a summer meeting, one in Thailand, the other in Barcelona. However, I did attend a meeting in Italy in the fall. My experience was that the Council wasn't a serious seat of power, and that the IC was barely a rubber stamp.

It wasn't that the people sitting around the table in Florence weren't an impressive group. They were worldly and wise, and many of them came from movements and constituencies of great importance around the world. And it wasn't that the people at the table didn't want a more democratic and participatory approach. This desire was raised repeatedly. But after a short time at that meeting, it became obvious that despite the members' stature and desires, the people on the Council and at the table were not the real locus of WSF power. The powers that be had some functionaries present, chairing the meeting. And it was clear that the powers that be had decided what the agenda was, what would be made known regarding the overall WSF situation to the people in the room, and what the International Council could be permitted to discuss — and that those attending had only very limited influence.

I circled around the room asking many of those present, "Who are the real decision-makers in the WSF? Who is it that allots limited choices to this group, saving important matters for their own eyes? Who is it that makes the bigger decisions that never come before this group?"

While a few folks could hesitantly name a leader or two based on knowing the history of the WSF, no one I talked to was confident about even that, much less a whole *list* of leaders. I felt I had been dragged onto a Central Committee that had a still higher body that dictated *key* results. But when I asked my fellow committee members who those higher authorities were, no one knew.

The *real* WSF leadership, I think, makes many key decisions. Will the event

have Lula present, and in what capacity ? What about Castro, or Chavez ? Will there be exclusions and if so on what grounds ? What about the Zapatistas ? Will being in a party, advocating violent tactics, or even just being from some group that the inner circle finds too radical or otherwise dislikes (such as the Disobedienti from Italy, or the international People's Global Action) preclude prominent participation ? What content will be part of the core of the events (more on this below), and what content will be left as periphery ? Who will have their way paid and who will not ? Will there be a march, and who will be the key speakers ? Will there be a collective statement, with what content ? What efforts will or won't be made to achieve gender balance, race balance, geographic balance ? How will class differences be addressed, if at all, within the process and more broadly ? How will press be handled, both mainstream and alternative ? Will the WSF start to discuss facilitating an international movement of movements, or will it persist only as a Forum ? What will be the accommodation between advocating reform of capitalism and advocating a new system entirely ?

The decision-making of the WSF is not transparent though transparency could be easily attained : just post the relevant names and make known significant decisions. The decision-making is not accountable. This would be far harder to attain, but could at least be better approached, even for so complicated an entity. There is no widespread democratic input from regions around the world. While this could be difficult, it ought to be on the agenda, and implies some obvious organisational changes.

### The WSF's Operational Viability

At WSF 3, most people probably perceived great success in terms of the actual details of speaking, listening, eating, sleeping, and marching. This is because what happened, happened well. People going to events largely enjoyed them — be they marches or rallies, big panels or meetings, or the youth camps. People perceived and will report that what they attended was carried off adequately and even smoothly. As indeed, most of the events were, as they were perceived. Which is quite amazing and immensely praiseworthy.

But what about the 400 or so panels that were cancelled very near the time of the WSF, and long after people *planned* to participate in them ? No one attended or presented at those panels, because they didn't take place at all. No one saw that they weren't there, other than those who suffered the cancellations. What about the events that weren't on any printed schedule, and that attendees couldn't find and that therefore attracted a fraction of the participation they deserved ? Only very few people attended those events, all others being ignorant of their existence. Though the few who did attend were quite distraught, the full loss was again unrecorded, since it was a loss of the benefits that might have been had, if people who didn't know to go to sessions, had been able to go under better conditions. And what about the events whose rooms kept being changed, again disrupting or even obliterating their attendance ? In some cases even presenters couldn't find panels. Again, few knew about this.

Maybe all these problems could have been avoided by stricter limits on the numbers of events and panels, by earlier scheduling, and so on. Or maybe, while there might have been less chaotic disruption with better preparations, most of the chaos

wasn't ultimately the fault of those doing the work — but was a nearly inevitable by-product of the WSF's having grown too large and embodying too many unpredictable factors for the resources available.

In short, the WSF at its current size seems to a considerable extent unmanageable. It isn't that leftists can't handle large scale, per se. It is that having so few resources, no one could effectively manage so many unpredictable variables.

### WSF Hierarchies

Each year, the WSF anoints a sub-set of events as their own. These events are prominent in the official schedules, have appropriate-sized rooms and resources, and their presenters are afforded considerable comforts, including paid hotel rooms and sometimes travel allowances. Moreover, their housing was at hotels that were better, the more prominent the person, not the more needy. I would guess this group to be roughly 100 people. I am quite sure that among them were some people who needed the financial aid, but also a great many who did not, relatively speaking.

On the other hand, there were the rest of the presenters. Maybe a few thousand or so. The events that these participants planned in many cases did not even appear in the official schedules and were subject to last minute termination or, short of that, to room changes. These second-tier presenters were afforded few comforts and little financial support though they included overwhelmingly less well off people than the 100 or so at the hotels. Gender still seems to play a horrible and destructive role in people's roles and visibility, as well. Beyond presenters, moreover, there were the youth who were housed in a camp with barely sufficient water and barely acceptable sewage. That the roughly 30,000 people in the youth camps made it a vibrant community in which there were no hierarchies is immensely admirable. But the many virtues of those who endure harsh conditions joyfully don't excuse the fact that they were treated as a separate entity with little visible effort to incorporate them.

Is there no alternative to having some participants living in camps, others in bearable environs, and a few in luxurious hotels? Couldn't there be sliding scales of fees and accommodations more in accord with need than with notoriety and with those better able tithed to help those less able? Younger folks can bear worse conditions better. Older folks need better conditions to manage such a strenuous undertaking. Some variation of accommodations is certainly warranted on this account, but being prominent shouldn't be the criterion.

Without attention, layering of participants' material circumstances abets even less warranted differences — due to gender, race, class, place of origin, and fame — in how people are regarded in general, in the media attention they are accorded, and in the visibility and promotion they receive. Often, attention afforded rises in nearly inverse proportion to the activism people do, to the extent they are anti-hierarchical in their own lives, and to the lessons and insights they have to offer and to share with other people at the WSF events. It isn't surprising that in the youth camps there is sharing and equity, dwarfing what prevails in the hotels. So while it would probably be impossible to do without the hotels, it is the logic and culture at the hotels that needs examination.

Of course, we need presentations, sometimes even to very large audiences, but it ought to be possible to reduce or even eliminate relative passivity and subordination of those who come to the WSF mainly to listen, and of those who present but have less known names.

There is another odd, if very much unintended layering effect at the WSF. The WSF is called a World Forum. We all say, “The WSF had 100,000 participants”. And when I say and hear phrases like that, to me it sounds like a claim that 100,000 people from all over the world gathered. While WSF 3 attracted roughly 100,000 people, perhaps as many as 70,000 were from Brazil and perhaps another 15,000 were from neighbouring countries in South America. So one might reasonably say that this was a major *South American* Forum that invited 10–15,000 people from around the world to attend as presenters or guests, as well as say it was a World Forum. Shouldn't a *World* Forum be worldly representative, with some degree of proportion among its delegates to movements and activism around the world ?

### Where To Now ?

The WSF has been a remarkable phenomenon three times so far. It has propelled Forums worldwide. It has educated, inspired, and engendered ties and connections. Its structure and processes were a miracle the first year, amazing the second year, but have begun to fall short the third year. The WSF, with all its virtues, is in diverse ways reaching the limits of its current incarnation.

The issues raised above and many more that other participants no doubt have on their minds, must be explored and debated. New ideas need to be put forth, evaluated, refined, and implemented. Here are eleven thoughts that may have some merit — but whether they do or not, certainly changes must be made :

- Emphasise local Forums as the *foundation* of the worldwide Forum process.
- Have each new level of Forums, from towns, to cities, to countries, to continents, to the world — be built largely on those below.
- Have the decision-making leadership of local events locally determined.
- Have the decision-making leadership at each higher level chosen, at least in considerable part, by the local Forums that are within the higher entity. The smaller local Forums in Italy choose Italy's national Forum leadership. The European Forum's leadership is chosen by the national Forums within Europe, and similarly elsewhere.
- Mandate that the decision-making leadership at every level should be at least 50 per cent women.
- Have the Forums from wealthier parts of the world charge delegates and organisations and attendees a tax on their fees to apply to helping finance the Forums in poorer parts of the world.
- Make the once-a-year international WSF a delegate event. Cities and states in Brazil should have a Forum. So should Brazil as a whole. So should other countries in South America, and so should South America as a whole. And, likewise for India and South Asia, for South Africa and Africa, and so on. But the world event should be different. It should be representative.

- Keep the WSF attendance at 5,000–10,000 people delegated to it from the major regional Forums around the world. Have the WSF leadership selected by regional Forums. Mandate the WSF to share and compare and propose, based on all that is emerging worldwide — not to listen again to the same famous speakers who everyone hears worldwide all the time anyhow — and have the WSF’s results, like those of all other Forums, published and public, and of course reported by delegates back to the regions.
- Feature grassroots activists from movements around the world much more prominently in major events and throughout all Forums to strengthen the WSF and local Forums as vehicles for their activity and counter tendencies toward elitism.
- Ensure that the WSF as a whole, and the Forums worldwide do not make the mistake of trying to become an international, a movement of movements, or even just a voice of the world’s movements. To be a Forum, the WSF and the smaller component Forums need to be as broad and diverse as possible. But being that broad and that diverse is simply being too broad and too diverse to be an organisation. The Forums can and should be venues for meeting. They can and should facilitate networking among mutually congenial participants that lead to shared actions. But to be an organisation that takes decisions about anything other than its component Forums would transcend the Forum project’s degree of unity.
- Mandate that Forums at every level, including the WSF, welcome people from diverse constituencies — using the Forums and their processes to make contacts and develop ties that can in turn yield national, regional, or even international networks or movements of movements which do share sufficiently their political aspirations to work closely together, but which exist alongside rather than *instead* of the Forum phenomenon.

---

FEBRUARY 2003

Edited version of ‘The WSF’s Future’, on [ZNet](#), February 2, 2003; renamed ‘WSF : Where to Now ?’, on February 3, 2003. <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=41&ItemID=2956>.

---

Michael Albert lives in the United States and works for [Z Magazine](#) and in particular for the online web system [ZNet](#). He is the author of many books and articles, founder of various media institutions, and most recently wrote [Parecon : Life After Capitalism](#), (Verso Books).

---