

## A Commentary on the WSF and the Social Forum Movement

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Roussett's essay addresses the various social movement formations of India, the cleavages among them, and how the WSF transformed the relationship among India's social movement organizations. Despite long held differences and lack of collaboration by India's social movement types, many participated in the WSF. The unprecedented cooperation of India's social movements at the WSF supports arguments that the WSF represents a novel form in political organizing.

As SSF prepares to send some of its members to the seventh edition of the World Social Forum<sup>1</sup> (January 20-25, 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya) and the first edition of the United States Social Forum (June 27-July 1, 2007 in Atlanta, Georgia), we offer a brief commentary on the growing "social forum movement." As our first national social forum, the USSF will provide participants with a golden opportunity to link their local struggles with the struggles of their counterparts in the Global South. In addition, our wide range of social movements, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, artists, and intellectuals will converse on a variety of topics related to human rights and economic and social justice in an open and egalitarian space.

By now many in SSF know some of the history of the WSF—it started in Brazil in 2001 with local government support through Brazil's Workers' Party and by European intellectuals and activists. The original organizers of the WSF were surprised by the rapid growth of the event. A variety of sources are credited for igniting the WSF process including the Zapatistas, the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, and new social movements.

While much is made of the annual WSF event, it is the *social forum process* that stands as the emblem of a transnational network of actors with continued engagement affirming the slogan, "Another World Is Possible," and exploring alternatives to neoliberal policies of fiscal austerity, privatization, deregulation, financial liberalization, and so-called free trade. However, as the organizers of the USSF recognize, the process of building a bridge between movements in the Global South and activists in the US entails a complicated exercise in "translation"—not least because Americans are not in the habit of framing their grievances in terms of neoliberalism.

In concrete terms, by traveling from one social forum to another—transmitting philosophical, organizational, strategic, and tactical knowledge along the way—grassroots activists, NGO representatives, and sympathetic intellectuals are contributing to the diffusion of the forum model. Owing to the proliferation of social forums across the global landscape, analysts and participants alike have characterized the emergence of the forum process as a significant breakthrough in social movement activity. But what is the nature of this innovation?

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<sup>1</sup> The objectives of the 2007 WSF can be found at the following website:  
[http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias\\_01.php?cd\\_news=2253&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias_01.php?cd_news=2253&cd_language=2)

Alongside the event-process continuum of the WSF is a significant debate on its dual status as “arena” and “actor.” Is the WSF primarily an arena for social movements and NGOs to network with one another or for grassroots movements to share techniques for effective organizing? Or is it primarily an actor unto itself? We believe this tension between actor and arena is a good one and are not seeking an ultimate resolution. As Roussett implies, this is why the WSF was able to succeed in India, where a variety of organizations with a wide scope of political perspectives could participate without compromising their visions of social justice. As long as an organization can confirm commitment to the WSF Charter of Principles, it can participate fully in the WSF.

The Charter stipulates that any “civil society” organization that renounces neoliberalism and imperialism, affirms the doctrine of human rights, and commits itself to nonviolent tactics of resistance may participate in a social forum. Armed insurrectionary groups, political parties, and sitting government officials are officially excluded. In addition, the Charter seems to stipulate that the WSF—as a collective body—is precluded from proposing a specific program. The response to the Charter has been instructive. Some have advocated a strict interpretation of it (and hence objected to the participation of Lula and the Brazilian Workers’ Party and Chavez and the Bolivarian circles). Others have advocated a more flexible interpretation of the Charter.

In light of recent debates on the WSF among scholar-activists, we offer a few reflections on the Charter. Though written in the aftermath of the first World Social Forum in 2001, the Charter serves as the blueprint for gatherings bearing the brand name “social forum.” As a number of analysts have noted, the Charter defines the WSF as a “meeting place” or “open space”—as opposed to a deliberative body (see principles 1, 5-9, and 11).<sup>2</sup> This is an extremely important distinction. From the outset, participants have wondered: If the WSF is primarily a *space* for grassroots movements, NGOs, and transnational activists of various stripes to converse or “network” with one another, should it be prevented from becoming an *agent* in its own right? Would it make sense to turn the WSF into a deliberative body? How might the WSF devise the organizational procedures—e.g., concerning representation and voting—necessary for such a step? We believe that these questions contribute to the dynamism of the WSF and the social forum movement.

In accordance with principle 7 of the Charter, the organizers of the WSF have allowed—and even encouraged—affiliated movements to circulate declarations. The “Assembly of Social Movements” is one avenue in which various organizations join together in a single voice. At the same time, in accordance with principles 5 and 6, the organizers have consistently rejected the idea of producing a political program for the WSF as a whole. Arguably, the organizers’ reluctance to allow deliberation on a common program reflects concern for maintaining the sheer diversity of political positions expressed in the WSF (see principles 8 and 9). While the WSF opposes “a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by governments and international institutions

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<sup>2</sup> A series of essays on the arena-actor dilemma can be found at the following website: [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html)

at the service of those corporations' interests" (principle 4), along with "domination by capital" (principle 11), it remains agnostic on the question of what kind of system should replace neoliberal capitalism.

This sheds light on the controversies surrounding the "Porto Alegre Manifesto,"<sup>3</sup> written by 19 prominent figures at the 2005 WSF, and the "Bamako Appeal,"<sup>4</sup> produced by 80 prominent figures at the 2006 WSF. Though broad, these documents point in the direction of a political program. In principle, many activists might easily agree to the Manifesto's twelve points, including: the cancellation of the Global South's debt, the implementation of a tax on transnational financial interactions, the elimination of offshore banking, restrictions on media conglomerates, and the elimination of foreign military bases, accompanied by support for human rights, environmentalism, and national sovereignty. What is considered problematic is the claim that the twelve proposals of the Manifesto "give a sense of a direction to the construction of another, different world." Although the Manifesto acknowledges that its proposals must be judged by the WSF in its entirety, it is not clear how the WSF could go about ratifying the platform.

The more recent Bamako Appeal, which consists of a more detailed set of proposals for another world, is designed to consolidate the gains made at previous social forums. With an emphasis on constructing South-North solidarity and building a cultural, political, and economic consensus, the Appeal is an invitation to act on the collective consciousness of the forum process. Although we support many of the proposals in the Appeal, we recognize that its "ratification" would entail a new direction in the forum project. Would a formal acceptance of the Appeal infringe on some of the unexpected collaboration witnessed in India and elsewhere? This question remains open.

We have isolated two factors that we feel inform the controversies surrounding the Manifesto and Appeal. One is autonomy—clearly a value held by most participants in the social forum process. While the claims in the two documents may be acceptable, they appear to be representational of the WSF and could be perceived as delimiting the autonomy of participating organizations. The second is the lack of decision-making procedures in the WSF. The WSF has no mechanisms for proposing, drafting, debating, ratifying, or implementing a common program.

The concept of "prefigurative politics"—or the enactment of the world we envision—encapsulates the charge of the WSF process as a dynamic global entity. This concept helps to explain why documents and declarations such as the Manifesto and the Appeal are problematized—do they reflect a decision-making process that should be continued in the future? Direct and participatory democracy or non-hierarchical decision-making is highly understood as the method of choice by many organizations that participate in the

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<sup>3</sup> Information on the "Porto Alegre Manifesto" can be found at the following website:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porto\\_Alegre\\_Manifesto](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porto_Alegre_Manifesto)

<sup>4</sup> Information on the "Bamako Appeal" can be found at the following website:  
<http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/bamako.html>

WSF and for the future world they envision.

In many ways, the WSF and the social forum movement reflect the Latin American mobilizations that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s—including the Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil, which contributed to the founding of the WSF, the Zapatistas in Mexico, who sponsored two Inter-Continental Encounters against Neoliberalism and for Humanity and became the center of a massive solidarity network, and the Reclaimed Factory Movement in Argentina, which reinvented worker self-management by seizing abandoned factories. Notwithstanding their diversity, these movements share an allegiance to the idea that we should prefigure in the present day the society we wish to create in the future. The same idea—often articulated in ecofeminist literature as the strategy of “reclaiming the commons”—can be traced from the Chipko Movement in India to advocates of the “subsistence perspective,” “relocalization,” or “alternatives *to* development” in movements for “globalization-from-below.” We believe that the concept of prefigurative politics offers powerful clues about how the WSF and the social forum movement will proceed.

We are enthusiastic about SSF's participation in the 2007 WSF in Nairobi and the 2007 USSF in Atlanta. The upcoming USSF presents a perfect opportunity to challenge US insularity, a policy of our national government but one that has also affected our scholarship and how our social movements and NGOs operate. While working on local and national campaigns, US-based activists and scholars will be in an arena that can transnationalize their perspectives. In preparation for these two events, we would like to encourage SSF members to discuss the strengths and limitations of the WSF and the social forum movement.