

Six Steps the World Social Forum *Must* Take

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The World Social Forum (WSF) is at that “show-me” moment: “*Hic Rhodus, hic salta!*” to borrow from a classic work.

At the start of the century, against (1) a rampant capitalism animated by the information revolution and re-integration of China and India,* (2) a resurgent US militarism asserting control over Central Asia and the Middle East, and (3) in the absence of viable, national scale left-wing projects, the WSF made sense. Its defiant assertion contrary to both immediate experience and official propaganda that “another world is possible” provided all that was necessary to rally a dizzying range and depth of causes, movements and organizations to its banner.

The WSF condensed earlier grassroots globalizations that rejected treaties-from-above and global elite consensus building in unaccountable multilateral institutions like the IMF, World Bank and the WTO. Inspired by the fires of Seattle, imagined in Franco-Brazilian dialogues, the forum united a world against neo-liberalism and later against US militarism. At once it inspired comparisons to earlier Internationals, the anti-colonial and Pan African conventions, and the Rio and Beijing summits of the 1990s.

Now, with capitalism in crisis and with its neo-liberal variant thoroughly discredited, with the US military project resting on accords with provincial warlords in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with significant left-wing governments and socialist-oriented projects in Latin America, it is necessary to consider the future value that the WSF can add to the social change project.

Framed differently, the WSF pried open the space necessary to imagine and organize alternatives; now that the space exists and that *this* world is impossible, the challenge for the WSF is to establish a new function for itself.

All of this takes place in a world of increased urgency: the timetables are no longer mainly political: they run up against hard environmental responses to human activities. The economic crisis and the rotation of capitalist governments in the Global North increase the urgency for a coherent left project.

To deal with this urgency we need to (1) know who we are; (2) begin a structured dialogue between “sectors”; (3) develop mechanisms for coordinating actions; (4) build structures for deliberation and accountability within sectors, (5) sharpen the differences with the emerging Global Keynesian project while identifying areas of strategic collaboration and competition; (6) articulate our localisms, regionalism in addition to our globalisms.

None of these foreclose on the Social Forum as an open and potentially “horizontal” space. Indeed each of these can be executed either from above or below. Space considerations do not allow me to propose the ways in which to realize these through incremental, bottom-up strategies. Also left unanswered in this note is the question of *who* will make this happen: the International Council, the Movement of Movements, the diffuse mass of attendees? This important question for everyone—how do we make

things happen within the social forum process?—is left unanswered here. An earlier note, “The Future of the WSF Process” (see <http://tinyurl.com/wsffuture>) provides prescriptions for how to approach the forum.

1. Know Thyself: Toward Inventory of Movements**

Many commentators have rightfully celebrated the globalization of struggles that the social forum permits. This has been particularly the case for excluded and oppressed identities including most notably, the case of the “outcasts” from South and East Asia and indigenous peoples. Beyond identity-based movements, however, a vast array of civil society groups have been using the WSF as one of several important global platforms for coordination and organizing.

Unlike the typical “interests groups” of western social science, these organizations have been coordinating their issue-based work in ways that demonstrate their awareness of the universal and global character of their concerns. Outstanding movements here include those around water, public health, alternative economics and development, debt relief, environmental justice, gender equality, HIV-AIDS and human rights. Ironically, class-based organizations like trade unions and even many left-wing think tanks appear to lag behind these movements’ global self-awareness.***

Nonetheless, these movements are now challenged to look outside of themselves and identify their counterparts in other struggles. For example, how does the movement that challenged tobacco corporations by supporting the world’s first public health treaty establish its identity with movements challenging mining practices or even mining itself? The WSF process seems ideally placed to build an inventory of such movements. It can also facilitate their cross-networking in deliberate ways.

2. Structure Dialogues between Sectors

Based on an inventory of movements, the WSF can help structure conversations between these sectors as a way to spur additional decentralized conversations between each. These movements have developed distinct cultures of work and organizing over life of the forum process. A structured dialogue will permit not only a cross-fertilization of repertoires and best practices, it will enrich the vision of that other possible world whose existence the forum has asserted.

In addition to old, tried and true techniques like joint panels, new technologies exist for conducting large-scale conversations, including parallel, small group conversations leading to proposals and opportunities for real-time voting and/or consensus building. The forum could therefore structure the dialogues to go well beyond the leaders of these movements to include grassroots level activists.

The objectives for such a dialogue should initially be to hold the conversations itself; over time concrete achievable objectives will emerge. The time frame for the “over time” phrase of the last sentence must be seen in light of the global environmental and health challenges. In the course of these dialogues, it is likely that movements will come to understand the brute deadlines imposed by environmental destruction and that these will guide across sectors.

3. Build the Organizing Platform

In 2003, the Global Day of Action seemed proof-positive of the WSF's promise as a global organizing platform. However, even a cursory review of turnout around the world suggests that the actions were strongest where the left and left social movements already had a strong tradition of social protest and demonstrations. In other words, the global framing of the day of action added some value to the organizing but it did not signal the birth of a global actor. Instead, the movements have yet to attain a similar degree of coordination and unanimity. In the new context, proactive measures are needed to give coherence to the dispersed struggles.

A strengthening of the WSF's organizing apparatus is necessary to build the organizing possibilities of the forum. For example, old-fashioned techniques, coupled with newer social networking tools could be used by a WSF staff to strengthen organizing from below.

The forum could proactively resource outreach to organizations with similar proposals for the self-proposed workshops and encourage them via telephone and e-mail to contact one another. Similarly, they could review with them the action components of their work. These could be used to develop deliberative conversations for action out of the individual workshop proposals.

These are all tools already used by the dispersed staffs of the various global networks and social movements. By spreading out the WSF to a more manageable frequency, a relatively small staff of fewer than 20 people can catalyze the organizing potential inherent in the several thousand proposals for activities received by the WSF for each forum.

4. Hold Ourselves Accountable

If the social forum idea has inspired its attendees with its horizontality, aspects of its practice have generated much disappointment. Global and institutional inequalities are reproduced rather than challenged or even attenuated within the social forum. Large disparities exist between the foundation-supported and command cities-based NGOs expressing themselves not only in the programming and physical presence at the forum but also in the informal parties and conversations taking place at elite hotels and restaurants or in side-excursions throughout the life of individual fora. The social forum begins to appear much more like already-existing world.

Actively encouraging the larger formations and smaller ones to present their perspectives on matters of contention to their social forum peers in a public way may help overcome the informal mechanisms of exclusion and create incentives for positive working relationships.

In this vein, many solutions and mechanisms to deal with inequalities and differences elsewhere ought to be deployed within the forum. From the First International, for example, the forum should encourage many voices and currents as representatives, rather than selecting between more or less legitimate tendencies. From indigenous cultures, often reinvented often for mainstream purposes are a range of peace-making, ombudsman-like roles for building dialogues and generating working relations between formations. This is a valuable culture for the WSF to nurture and diffuse across borders.

Intrinsic to accountability—and an incentive for groups to submit themselves to the judgment of others—is the prospect of resolution and the overcoming of past obstacles to joint action. To the degree that the forum offers these prospects, the greater its continued relevance to the building of global social movements. Beyond these kinds of nuts and bolts offerings, lie bigger political tasks.

5. Sharpen the Differences: Another World beyond Neo-Keynesianism

The crisis of neo-liberalism has re-awakened Keynesian thinking as an alternative. This is the kind of thinking represented by the many original forum protagonists and a current that has grown over the years. The more intolerable life became under neo-liberalism, the more its loyal opposition appeared to be the other possible world. With thinkers like Paul Krugman representing its left edge, Global Keynesianism may represent a step forward but it has not consolidated itself. Krugman, for example is well to the left of the Obama administration's economic team. He is consistent with the kind of "fair globalization" recommended by the corporatist thinking governing the International Labor Organization and other international institutions.

However, for the left and in the spirit the movements that animated the social forum, it is grossly inadequate. Core issues of the traditional left—e.g. the distribution, ownership and control of the things that sustain life—coupled with world scale environmental urgency demand a radical social change project. For the social forum, the challenge will be to promote opportunities for its diverse participants to gain the kind of intellectual coherence that the IMF provided for neo-liberals and that the ILO provided for neo-Keynesians.

For a global left that has been on the defensive since the overthrow of Allende and subsequent imposition of corporate globalization, this means moving beyond the embrace of diversity toward conscious strategic choices of partners and friends in a multi-polar world with a range of economic and political models.

6. Strengthen the Regional

Now that the "end of history" has ended, that the one-size-fits-all assertions about appropriateness of "liberal democracy" and "free market" institutions for the entire world have been vanquished, it is also clear that the local, the regional and the national remain profound shapers of life and of personal experience. Despite the very real globalizing forces, the vast majority of people live and work within the countries of their birth, local and regional rivalries and alliances shape their cultural, political and social lives. More often than not, their comparisons and references are neighboring regions and countries rather than the global.

The alternative choices for the WSF's current Amazon venue suggest the importance of the regional: Indonesia and South Korea. Each readily brings to mind a distinctive set of issues. In this vein, fewer *World Social Fora* will provide the space and the incentive to grow regional Social Fora and spread the process globally.

Belém, 2009 – By way of conclusion

Now in its 9th year, the Social Forum has provided a welcoming space for the Global Left. The forum in Belém will host Lula, Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa, and Evo Morales among its highest profile attendees. It has also provided sharp focus on the struggles of indigenous peoples and nature itself in its choice of location at the mouth of the Amazon. In these choices, the forum at once demonstrates the strengths and weakness of its entire project: its appeal lies in the moral power—of indigenous struggles in the case of Belém—it leverages; its ambivalent relationship with political power—officially excluding parties from participation while drawing in heads of state—suggests the chasm it must traverse between its social movement/civil society base and the power needed to address that base's claims. The steps suggested here maintain the forum's moral authority while orienting it toward effective social movement activity and even political power.

* That doubled the size of labor power in the global labor market without a commensurate expansion of consumption.

** Patrick Bond has suggested a global research project to review the different progressive global networks.

*** Wherever a global regulatory or process has emerged, so too have global social movements to press their claims. This is reminiscent of their emergence relative early state structures in Europe. This is a positive development because global civil society is often present at the very moment of creation of these proto-global state structures unlike the social movements that have had to contend with consolidated national states.

Suren Moodliar has been active in the WSF process since 2003. In 2004 he was among the organizers of the Boston Social Forum. This note is a follow up to one co-written with Kim Foltz and Jason Pramas (<http://tinyurl.com/wsffuture>) at the 2005 forum in Porto Alegre. He is a coordinator of Massachusetts Global Action and one of its projects, *encuentro 5* and the Color of Water.