



October 2019

Transforming the WSF Forum: *Farewell to the World Social Forum?*

Rita Freire

With deep respect for the people who took the first steps towards Porto Alegre in 2001, with their keen perception of social unrest and the possibility of an event capable of influencing the international political scene, we must remember that the WSF was born mainly of its time. The WSF emerged from a process that exploded in 1999 in Seattle, which broke the silence of a world dominated by the Washington Consensus. A succession of uprisings took place around gatherings of the global political and economic elite—in the case of Seattle, the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The WSF comprehensively brought together the new alter-globalization movements with older activists engaged in long-term, grassroots social struggles and the NGOs and intellectuals critical of the neoliberal system. It was the great counterpoint to the powerful World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland

The WSF Charter of Principles provided a beautiful point of departure that celebrated a space open to diversity, a vigorous event located in time and space that could reproduce by virtue of its transformative force. The Charter was designed to protect the Forum from misappropriation and misrepresentation and, in a way, has preserved the original intent. But the Forum was also established to advocate for the transformation of the world, and it, too, cannot be exempt from transformation.

Media and technology have changed since the launch of the WSF. This new reality needs to be taken seriously when discussing the future. Facilitating communication between movements, struggles, and ideas has been a must for the Forum from the start. It was built by making the

best use of the young Internet to disseminate its call and facilitate the emergence of regional and local social forums. But in the ensuing decades, it has lacked resources and strategies for addressing political struggles that have moved to the digital plane. Many battles are being lost there.

In the past year, the technology community has been designing a communication network appropriate for the WSF process and debates. This has become a top agenda item for the International Council as it addresses the future. Creating and adopting the needed technology will not come without political choice.s Prioritizing this modernization as part of a wider strategy would mean a resumption of communication as a priority for the WSF process for a new age.

Another challenge is to resolve the sometimes paralyzing debates surrounding the Charter of Principles. The situation in Brazil in August 2016, where a coup to overthrow President Dilma Rousseff and dismantle the nascent Brazilian rule of law was “legalized” by political institutions and naturalized by the media, was one of the most tense and emblematic cases of a long discussion about the political impact of the WSF and its Charter. The call for a strong and unified declaration was denied—under strong protest—by the International Council. That led to a document signed by a collection of individuals that lost relevance, since individually, each board member represented only their own organization, not the collectivity that the WSF could have represented.

We can't know how much difference a public statement by the WSF in 2016 would have made to the mood of the confrontations in Brazil. But it is also true that the consequences of the coup were devastating. It led to unthinkable setbacks and the election of a candidate aligned with humanity's worst political vices: the celebration of arms, torture, military and religious control over the government, environmental destruction, and discrimination. It allowed a government that fully submits to US interests in current geopolitical conflicts, as well as to Israel's, thus steering the world toward darker fate. All of this came without a strong and resounding warning from the WSF against the coming disaster.

But the main limit to the political impact of the WSF may not come from the paragraphs of its Charter, but from the way the debate on the document competes with other possible foci of attention. How do we connect the energy arising from encounters with real collective

possibilities for collective action? This challenge falls to the International Council, as facilitators of the WSF process—a political task that needs to be addressed by those with the legitimacy and commitment to undertake it. Adopting democratic processes, as Savio’s article suggests, would be a leap in that direction.

Changing the process means that today’s Board should deal with transforming itself to transform its dynamics. That sounds painful to the current Council, yet it goes back to the symbolism of the ouroboros that bites its own tail, thus feeding on the experience, digesting mistakes, renewing and evolving itself.

The Charter of Principles was born from the WSF and not the other way around. If the WSF’s dynamics are legitimized by the processes, there are no prohibited transformations.

About the Author



Rita de Cassia Freire Rosa is a Brazilian journalist and a communication rights activist. She coordinates Ciranda International Shared Communication and represents it on the WSF International Council and the World Free Media Forum International Mobilization Group. She is the editor of the Arquimedia Agency for journalism and digital technologies and a member of the Brazilian Women and Media network. In 2013, she became the first civil society representative to chair the Curator Council of Empresa Brasil de Comunicação, the governing body of the public communication company, and later served as its president.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Rita Freire, "Transforming the WSF," a contribution to the forum Farewell to the World Social Forum?, *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/wsf-freire>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.