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The WSF: A Wasted Opportunity? Contribution to GTI Forum [Farewell to the World Social Forum?](#)

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Are we debating the role of the World Social Forum, eighteen years after its inception, only as a thing of the past or as an actionable part of the future? If the former, it would be a question of gathering lessons to inform other processes. If we are thinking of it as a process which still has relevance in the present context, then it becomes more immediate, even urgent. Has the context in which the Forum was founded, changed so much that it is no longer relevant? Even if it has not, is it too late to revive the Forum given its current state?

To answer this, we may need to look back at the factors leading to the Forum's successes in the first place. With protests against globalization, especially free trade, sweeping the globe, social movements, big and small, saw the opportunity, possibility, and usefulness of international solidarity. Globalization meant not just rapidly expanding corporate markets and profiteering but also greater access to news and information, and travel across borders was easier than ever before. Hence, the audacious global call to the world community to challenge the philosophy of corporate globalization as symbolized by the World Economic Forum received an enthusiastic response from social movements and all kinds of progressive groups and intellectuals, at first mainly from Latin America and Europe, and later from all over the world. Bolstered by this, the Forum grew, and it traveled from its home in Brazil to India, Venezuela, Kenya, Senegal, Tunisia, and even Canada. All the events were successful to lesser and greater degrees, although the Forum started to slowly lose its glitter and has now almost reached a dead end. Some of the main factors for the popularity of the Forum were:

1. The successes of anti-globalization mobilizations and the felt need for global solidarity by social movements.

2. The support of left parties in Brazil and, subsequently, of other left parties, including those with strong electoral presence and those in government.
3. The excitement of building what seemed like a global movement for an alternative politics, based on various approaches to socialism and radical democracy.
4. The access to funding from various anti-globalization organizations.
5. The popular rise of national consciousness against rapacious global corporate greed.
6. The strength of the process of working together across differences with the common aim of opposing corporate globalization and “building another world.”
7. The possibility of creating one’s own spaces within a larger shared space without the pressure to agree or the need for consensus.

The Forum soon faced the challenges of growth, which exposed the weaknesses inherent in its foundation:

1. The WSF International Council, which consisted of the organizations that were part of the first and second forum, had been created in an ad hoc manner. More organizations wanted to join, and it became impossible to decide on how to expand the IC. Hierarchy was anathema to social movements, and political parties tended to be bureaucratic. A judicious combination of structure, on one hand, and consensus-based decision-making and core teams working with broad, open working groups at all levels, on the other, might have been the answer, but this did not happen—or when they were attempted, they did not function.
2. The diversity of the organizations involved, especially as more countries participated, created a situation where a few organizations were seen as controlling the process. In the absence of any alternative methodology, these conflicts became more intense. The popularity and the spontaneity of the various forums became a weakness rather than the strength that it should have been.
3. The social forum process fell victim to the intrinsic sectarianism within the left political spectrum. An open space was a difficult concept for most of the left and liberal intelligentsia

and organizations led by the intelligentsia. Intense debates, jockeying for space within the open space without a healthy respect for the common space, corroded the spirit of the Forum.

4. There were deep divisions regarding the role of the Forum. On one hand, some felt that the Forum should become a network, issuing calls for action and developing consensus, even based on the majority, if consensus was not possible. Others, especially from more diverse countries like India, felt that this would break the Forum because consensus was impossible on any issue in these countries.

5. Funding for the Forum began to dry up as the cracks within the International Council started to affect its functioning. The reluctance of the core organizations to let governments led by sympathetic political parties support (and therefore maybe overly influence) the Forum was another unresolved issue. The WSF office could not function without funds, and the importance of a proper center was not appreciated by many social movements. Voluntarism could only go so far.

6. Those who started the Forum and the forum process, in Brazil and in the various countries where the Forum was organized, were seen by other newer entrants as controlling the space. This charge was often true, with some people trying to “represent” the Forum and setting themselves up as leaders, as arbiters of inclusion and exclusion in the process. These differences became more and more bitter and unfriendly, seen as contrary to the spirit of the Forum.

Meanwhile, the political situation has evolved. The priority was no longer the battle against globalization, but the rise of the right wing and the weakening of support for the left and for a progressive agenda. The left failed to build on and clarify their perspectives on globalization, to differentiate a progressive agenda from that of the anti-globalization right. They were more accustomed to fight for control than to celebrate diversity. The reasons for the rise of the right wing are not very different from the reasons for the fading out of the Forum, however. The failures in the theory and practice of the progressive movements, political parties, and NGOs were directly responsible for their loss of popularity, and the rise of the right.

The tradition of fighting for and taking political ideological positions always seemed to outweigh the urgent need to address rising right-wing politics, pulling together across the huge diversity

of interests represented in the Forum despite differences, and building better alliances across social movements and left and liberal political parties. Social movements were more comfortable with fighting centrist and left political parties and less prepared to fight the populist politics of the right wing. This led to the political crisis that helped the right wing to come to power on the same anti-globalization issues popularized by the Forum and the movements that created it. The agenda that mobilized participation in the various forums was changing, but the Forum was not reflecting this. Instead of working with the International Council and the various organizing committees in the various regions and countries, those who differed failed to see the political urgency of closing ranks against the rising tide of right-wing populism. The experiment of working together despite differences, which should have been one of the main contributions of the social forum process, failed to overcome the traditional suspicions between the actors in the forum space: social movements, political formations, and intellectuals. Sectarianism was fashionable; self-reflection, uncommon.

Would the Forum have become more relevant if it had taken positions on world issues? This is speculative. The earlier calls from the Forum were not signed by all the participants in the Forum; they were calls from different thematic axes within the Forum. The positions that the Forum did take did not make many political waves. The thematic forums, which focused on specific topics and issued statements, were not as effective as the bigger, more open events. If the IC had presumed to issue calls for action or even issued political statements, it would have been accused of trying to represent the thousands of organizations that attended the various Social Forum events, without consulting them. This would have been the case even if the calls had been in the spirit of the WSF Charter. The International Council did not enjoy that kind of credibility. Their role was to enable, not to lead. So the call would have to come from within the Forum events. But there were far too many participants to be able to claim consensus on a statement. The solution was the creation of strategy spaces which did issue statements, such as the Social Movements Assemblies, and these statements were important mobilizing tools. The differences on the role of the Forum led to deep divisions and extreme positions.

The proponents of the open space concept included those who advocated that the inauguration and the opening plenaries of the Forum should not be organized, because the sessions might be seen as positions taken by the entire Forum. This was a puzzling stance. There were also some

who felt that only social movements should have space to speak in the main plenaries, not “stars.” Unfortunately, the result was that many did not attend at all. A lot of the excitement around the Forum was for attendees to hear people whom they had read and heard a lot about.

Maybe the more effective methodology to keep the Forum going would have been to open it up further, to take the help of political parties in government to organize the Forum, to have more commitment to diversity and political differences. The reluctance of the IC toward holding forums in Europe and in OECD countries should have been overcome early. Maybe the IC should have become an open forum, with a small core and an office in Brazil.

There are those who say that the very popularity of the Forum led to its downfall. That the very number of participants was so staggering that it became difficult to organize. This is ironic—that too many was the problem, not too few!

Although people came to the Forum and participated on their own, affordable space was required to stay for seminars, events, and cultural programs. For most smaller organizations, organizing a Forum would be impossible unless they (a) built very broad alliances with all kinds of organizations in the city or (b) linked up with local government and political parties. For India, the Social Forum represented a process that lasted for over two years, building unlikely friendships and alliances which had a deep impact on the politics of protest movements in the country, and could have done more if it had not fallen apart due to bickering and sectarianism.

Is the Forum still relevant? In its present form, perhaps not. The work of popularizing the Forum, which took a decade, has been jettisoned. But clearly, the need for a political pole counter to the right wing globally, where there is a space to come together for debate, sharing, and solidarity, has never been as important as today. And one can only hope that it is not political cynicism that is preventing this from happening.

Therefore, in a sense, yes, the potential of reviving the Forum does exist, but many changes and much open discussion would be needed. A reinvigorated Forum would also need to include not only social movements and NGOs, but also all left and progressive parties fighting for another world.

About the Author



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