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Response to Comments

Contribution to GTI Forum [Farewell to the World Social Forum?](#)

Roberto Savio

In the insightful comments in this month's discussion, there was broad agreement about the importance of the World Social Forum. The WSF opened a utopian laboratory (as Thomas Ponniah says), and the impact was felt worldwide. But the success of WSF gatherings was never under contention. Hundreds of thousands of people came from far and wide, paying travel and participation costs, to share their hopes and dreams. This was unprecedented, far exceeding our expectations in the early planning meetings.

While we agree on the WSF's historical significance, when we turn to the reasons for its decline, that unanimity falls apart. Some commenters point to weaknesses in the WSF's internal processes, political bickering, and lack of inclusive democracy; some highlight tensions between social movements and NGOs; some stress cultural conflicts (e.g., between Anglo and Latin worlds); others the decentralization that generated a multiplicity of workshops, often on the same subject, like in a fair; and still others argue that the costs of attending posed high hurdles for smaller organizations. Indeed, all these considerations are legitimate.

Despite the diversity of these critiques, we concur on one key factor: the International Council was not up to the task of consolidation and growth of the movement. The original Organizing Committee envisioned the IC as having a facilitating, not steering, role. Perhaps for this reason, the IC was not structured to offer a place for real debate (interventions were usually restricted to no more than three minutes). It never even engaged a rapporteur to record decisions to be passed on to the following IC meeting, or those not on the IC. The turnover of IC participants compounded the problem: the majority of participants at each meeting were new, so discussions ensued on issues that had previously reached consensus.

Nevertheless, every attempt to give more structure to the IC was rebuffed by those who equated organization with bureaucratization. As Francine Mestrum notes in her comment, “Horizontalism and the fear of hierarchies are very justified, but they should not make accountability impossible.” Such accountability depends on open and clear communication, but the transmission of information from one forum to the next one was absent. Thus, panels repeated themselves at every forum without input from prior panels. This lack of continuity and cumulative knowledge was aggravated by the fact that forums were held in different locations, often with many different participants.

From the inception of the WSF, I worked on the Communication Commission. We were just a small group reporting to an IC that considered information technology a job restricted to professionals. The ways in which communication was more than information was not appreciated. At an IC meeting in Mexico, we asked every member of the IC to provide us with the names of ten journalists in their country so that we could organize a WSF information network. Only four did so!

In my view, a main cause of the decline of the WSF is that it became an inward-looking movement not accountable to the outside. Although at the beginning social media and the Internet did not have the reach they do today, if we had opened a process of communication and participation, the WSF could have retained its strengths while enabling many new organizations and activists to join the process. For the many who lacked the financial resources to attend, communication would have kept them in the loop. But communication is far more than its technical means; it’s about a culture, and unfortunately this culture was sorely missing in the IC.

All commenters, in one way or another, call for the survival of the WSF as a vehicle for bringing together the new movements spawned in response to the success of globalization. But requiring these movements to physically attend the Forum events—the WSF process, as presently formulated—becomes increasingly obsolete.

Truly linking political actors takes much more than a few, episodic conversations. In particular, the WSF needs to be able to distribute papers with proposals for action. Without this, how can

we work with others? Surely not by asking them to join the IC, which would be a sure-fire way to bore people with bureaucratization, a fate other important organizations have suffered. In fact, the IC must be reduced in size, have effective and transparent rules, and accept its role as a steering body with responsibility for the content of the Forum, and for connecting it to institutions, organizations, and militants worldwide.

Many commenters of this exchange underscored how drastically the world has changed since 2000. Indeed, globalization has lost credibility, defended only by apologists for the status quo. It is hard to find anyone today who upholds the proposition that the “rising tide” of the market will lift all boats. The anxiety of those left out has fostered the rise of the likes of Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro, etc. In 2017, the 500 richest people on the planet became, collectively, \$1 trillion richer than in the year before. In four years, they will have increased their wealth by an amount equivalent to the budget of the United States. This is clearly unsustainable.

Our world comes from a string of events driven by greed, a primary engine of history. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall was seen to signal the end of history, as capitalism would now unify the world. The Washington Consensus offered a manifesto and a blueprint: everything that did not create profits was a waste. Ideologies were abandoned for pragmatism, which was itself an ideology. In the 1980s, conservative heads of state like US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had undercut multilateralism, social justice, and solidarity. Now, Leaders of social democratic parties, like UK Labour’s Tony Blair, contributed to that legacy. Blair’s Third Way replaced social democracy’s ambitions with resignation: since globalization cannot be stopped, let us work to give it a human face.

Then came the financial crisis of 2008, which ushered in a time of fear after decades of unabashed greed. Before that crisis, only France had a right-wing, xenophobic, and nationalist party. After, such parties flared up across the US and Europe, with Portugal the exception. The wars in Iraq, Syria, and Libya have led to massive migration, and in the immigrants fleeing the destruction of their countries, xenophobic forces found their scapegoat.

As all this unfolded, the WSF adhered to a clearly insufficient formula. Let us meet, let us discuss, let us share, in self-referential meetings, with no relation with the political process, and without

any practice of communication. Most participants were taking part in the political debates of the day, but at Forums had to abstain from any political activity. It was reminiscent of a church event where one met like-minded people and shared experiences and hopes to act upon after returning to their normal life. WSF participants in their normal life found plenty of actors engaged in action. New meeting points arose as people reacted to greed and fear, social injustice, and climate change, rendering the WSF antiquated and outdated. It continued to require physical presence, and the money to get there, to attend discussions with no place for action. Try engaging Greta Thunberg in this approach.

I am convinced that unless we take radical steps toward updating the WSF with mechanisms for interacting with the outside world and for some level of political action, it will continue to diminish and eventually die. The Talmudists of the WSF will say no, that doing so might sow divisions in the WSF, reducing its plurality and unity. But with the present trends ominous, a new formula can and must be found. The contributions to this debate are a clear proof that there is enough knowledge, vision, and experience for the task.

In this fractured and splintered world, we will know quite soon what the future of the WSF will be. In a world without values, its new identity could be to debate and renew the values—peace, social justice, solidarity, transparency, participation, among them—that can negate war, conflicts, and destruction. The rekindling of these values, which neoliberal globalization has eroded but are found in the constitutions of many countries, would be a powerful bridge to a revitalized movement. The WSF, as a holistic organization, could engage with all those that reject self-destructing capitalism's greed and fear to spread an affirmative discourse on values that can underpin the search for "another world."

About the Author



Roberto Savio is the founder of the Inter Press Service (IPS) news agency, a nonprofit cooperative of journalists and experts specializing in global communications and development issues. Since 1973, he has been a consultant on information and communication issues for many developing countries, designing the National Information Systems Network (ASIN) for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the UNESCO-supported Latin American Features Service (ALASEI). He has served on the International Council of the World Social Forum since its inception in 2001, and is the Chairman of the Board of the Alliance for a New Humanity. He is the co-founder of Media Watch International, co-founder of the Internet service Othernews, and president of Indoamerica, an Argentine education NGO.

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