

# Social Fora as Public Stage and Infrastructure of Global Justice Movements<sup>1</sup>

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Although far from being a recent phenomenon<sup>2</sup>, transnational social movements have gained visibility and political significance during the last ten years (Keck and Sikking 1998; della Porta et al. 1999; Tarrow 2004; Smith 2004). Among the most prominent and important branches of transnational social movements are the so-called “Global Justice Movements” (GJMs)<sup>3</sup> formerly often labeled “anti-global movements”<sup>4</sup>. Today, these movements seem to exist everywhere, both in terms of their regional distribution and the range of policy domains (O’Brien et al. 2000; Andretta et al. 2003; Amore 2005). In addition, it appears that these movements are increasingly interconnected so that some observers, and more so many activists, proclaim the emergence of a “movement of movements” (Mertes 2003) that combines and integrates issues of human, citizen, women’s and worker’ rights, poverty, environmental protection, peace and disarmament, cultural identity, etc.

Given the complexity of these movements on the one hand and my practical limitations on the other, the task to overview GJMs, let alone analyze them more profoundly, is simply a “mission impossible”. What I can do, however, is to study perhaps the most prominent and important form of self-representation and coming-together of the GJMs, namely the social fora. In the following, I will proceed in four steps: first, by providing some theoretical thoughts on the importance of public stages and infrastructures of social movements; second,

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming in Seraphim Seferiades (ed.) *Collective Action and Social Movements in the 21st Century*. Athens: Themelio. I am grateful to Thomas Olesen, Felix Kolb and the members of my research group at the Social Science Center Berlin for comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the movements focusing on slavery, workers’ rights, women’s rights, and peace in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, truly transnational groups and associations were formed since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bauerkämper 2004; Boli and George 1999; Rucht 2001; Sikking and Smith 2002).

<sup>3</sup> It seems more appropriate to speak not of a single global justice movement, but rather to describe them in plural. Hence, GJMs can be conceived as a *social movement family* (della Porta and Rucht 1995: 232). An exemplary case are the left-libertarian movements (or so-called “new social movements”) of the 1970s and 1980s. The GJMs can be seen as an outgrowth of these earlier movements, whose basic values they share. Yet to a much greater extent than their forerunners, the GJMs (a) mobilize transnationally, (b) target international institutions, (c) involve groups of the southern hemisphere (instead of only acting on behalf of these), (d) are composed of socially very heterogeneous groups (including peasants, workers, indigenous people, middle-classes, scientists, etc.), and (e) make efforts to symbolically link their various specific concerns and construct a simple image of what is not wanted, namely neo-liberal globalization.

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of the label “anti-globalization”, see George 2001 and Graeber 2001.

by presenting some basic empirical facts about the origins and developments of social fora; third, by discussing some of the difficulties and challenges, which the fora are confronted with. Finally, I will speculate about the significance and perspectives of the fora.

## **1. On the Role of Public Stages and Infrastructures**

What is the glue that holds a social movement or a set of movements together? Perhaps the most obvious answer is: The glue is a common goal with a common belief behind this goal. Many people, however, share common beliefs without necessarily creating a network, forging a collective identity, and eventually engaging in joint action. Therefore, additional factors must come into play in order to create and sustain a social movement. *Major gatherings* are one among these factors, be they contentious or not, such as congresses, jamborees, mass protests, etc. In these gatherings, the adherents of a social movement physically meet with two main goals: First, they send a message to the outer world, making an external audience aware of their existence, their goals, demands, and of their activities. To this purpose, slogans are formulated, keynote speakers selected, journalists invited, and colorful media-savvy events are staged to demonstrate the strength and vitality of the social movement. In this sense, the gatherings primarily serve as public stages. Second, and less obvious, these gatherings also aim at strengthening internal bonds by talking to one another, exchanging experiences, bridging cleavages, and by expressing solidarity. Ideally, such gatherings will both energize the participants as well as impress a wider audience.

Another factor that holds social movements together are relatively durable *infrastructures* composed of social movement organizations, coordinating committees, offices, educational and training centers, think tanks, media groups, newsletters, and the like. These infrastructures allow for a sustained flow of communication between movement groups and networks, they help mobilize resources and organize major gatherings. Unlike the gatherings, the infrastructures are not designed for external and internal ‘impression management’, but for the more mundane task of keeping things going even when a social movement is in a stage of latency or abeyance. In some cases, the infrastructures are informal and loosely coupled, in other cases they are formal and more hierarchical. Over time, infrastructures may acquire a role so pivotal that they nearly become identical with the social movement at large. In this event, the infrastructure itself becomes the public stage, representing the movement vis-à-vis the public at large.

One can assume that the larger and the more differentiated a social movement, the more important the public stages and infrastructures are in holding the various parts of the movement together. Therefore, it is to be expected that these elements will play a crucial role, particularly in the case of GJMs. After all, these movements are composed of heterogeneous elements with different organizational and cultural backgrounds, covering a wide range of issues, spanning across countries, and sometimes continents.

In their early phase, GJMs made their public appearance mainly via ‘counter-summits’, usually in the context of meetings of international bodies of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other UN organizations, the WTO, G-7 and G-8, EU, etc. Particularly when such movement gatherings included mass protests and/or disruptive actions, they received wide media coverage. Yet they basically were reactive insofar as they followed the schedule and agenda of official meetings. The protests revealed what the challengers were opposed to, seldom conveying a positive and constructive message.

In this early period of contemporary GJMs, their infrastructural base was still resting on movements with a specific thematic focus (e.g., human rights or ecology) with barely any overarching infrastructures. However, some transnational movement organizations did combine various issues, e.g., Oxfam and 50 Years is Enough, later to be joined by groups such as Attac and Peoples Global Action. Yet these groups and networks could never claim to be representing the GJMs at large.

With the emergence of the World Social Forum and the subsequent creation of social fora at lower levels, the situation of GJMs changed significantly. As will be demonstrated, these fora have a dual function in that they provide both a public stage and an infrastructure for the purposes mentioned above. They are ideal in order to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of GJMs, though one should keep in mind that the social fora are merely one element of the much broader GJMs.

## **2. Basic Facts on the Forum Process**

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, GJMs became most visible via their protest activities. One variant were regional struggles and events such as the so-called “Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism”, organized by the Zapatista movement in Mexico in 1996. The Zapatista struggle was met with much sympathy by GJMs groups across the globe (Olesen 2005), inspiring subsequent meetings in the same spirit held in Spain in 1997 and Brazil in 1999. Another stream of protest was linked to official meetings of the international

organizations cited above (Pianta 2001). Although receiving ample media coverage (Beyeler and Kriesi 2005; Kolb 2004; Olesen 2004), these protests had little influence on how the movements were portrayed by mass media, particularly when mass protest was accompanied by violent activities of radical groups. Moreover, these were activities in the streets that allowed only for simple messages to be conveyed; they did not offer space for information, deliberation, and decision-making. It comes as no surprise that the idea of establishing a World Social Forum (WSF)<sup>5</sup> was met with enthusiasm by many groups. Indirectly, and at least during its inception, the WSF also may be seen as a new kind of protest gathering, because it was set in opposition, by its name, date, place, and organization, to the World Economic Forum (WEF). The latter was set up in Davos (Switzerland) in 1971 under a different label to bring together economic – and later also political – leaders in an informal and highly exclusive meeting.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, the WSF, which takes place at the same time as the WEF (usually in January), emphasizes the social rather than the economic dimension, is hosted in countries of the southern hemisphere, and deliberately is conceived as a meeting of the ‘people’ instead of the ‘elites’. After the inception of the WSF, the forum idea also spread to the level of continents, nations, and local communities.

### *The World Social Fora*

The first WSF, based on an initiative of eight founding organizations (including Attac)<sup>7</sup> that met in February 2000<sup>8</sup>, took place in Porto Alegre (Southern Brazil) in January 2001. It was hosted by the local and regional Labor Party (PT) and attended by roughly 20,000 participants from over 100 countries, among them several thousand delegates from NGOs and social movement groups, but also 436 Members of Parliament from a broad range of countries. Virtually all themes of the GJMs were represented in one way or another, heralding a process

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview on the WSF, see, for example, Sen et al. 2004 and the contributions in *International Social Science Journal* 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The meeting offers its members – all of them corporations which pay to obtain access – “intense networking in a privileged context allowing for the identification of new business opportunities” (WEF 1997, cited according to Rupert 2000: 133). The WEF seems to be torn between attracting high-level economic leaders interested in profit-making and presenting itself as an agent of social change driven by humanitarian motives (official motto: “Committed to Improving the State of the World”). For critical assessments of the WEF, see Rupert 2000; Public Citizen 2002; Graz 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The initiative basically came from Brazilian groups. Besides Attac, it was supported by ABONG (a Brazilian NGO), CBJP (the Brazilian Committee for Peace and Justice), CIVES (an organization of entrepreneurs for civil rights), CUT (an alliance of workers and employees), IBASE (a scientific institute for socio-economics), CJB (Global Center for Justice), and MST (the movement of landless peasants).

<sup>8</sup> It seems that the inspiration did not come only from Brazilian, but also from French movement individuals. Besides key activists, such as Antonio Martin and Chico Whitaker, Bernard Cassen was also one of the driving forces.

that observers later called the ‘Social Spring’ of Porto Alegre (Seoane and Taddei 2002: 99). Porto Alegre was chosen for a number of reasons: it is located in the southern part of the globe; it was promoted by a number of Brazilian NGOs; since the late 1980s, the city had practiced an innovative “participatory budget” to incorporate ‘ordinary’ and marginalized people in local (financial) decision-making; last but not least, both the city and the state of Rio Grande do Sul provided financial and infrastructural assistance in hosting the event.

The two following meetings also took place in Porto Alegre in January of 2002 and 2003, respectively. Like the first meeting, they were organized by a committee nearly identical with the representatives of the eight Brazilian founding groups.<sup>9</sup> The 2004 meeting, under the auspices of the “Indian Organising Committee”<sup>10</sup>, was held in Mumbai (India). Due to the attendance of hundreds of Indian groups, it revealed a strikingly different character. Apart from the ‘usual suspects’ it was attended by large contingents of marginalized people, including the Dalit, who range at the bottom of the Indian caste system. Not without internal critique, the meeting in 2005 took place in Porto Alegre once again, this time carried out by a much broader “Brazilian Organizing Committee” composed of 23 groups subdivided into eight work groups<sup>11</sup>. This meeting was even bigger than the previous ones. Unlike these, it was not accompanied by a separately organized rival event of radical dissenters.

In 2006, three so-called “polycentric WSFs” were held in Caracas (Venezuela) and Bamako (Mali) in January, and in Karachi (Pakistan) in March. While the Caracas meeting, mainly due to its large attendance and the prominent role of President Hugo Chavez, received ample media coverage, the two other meetings passed largely unnoticed by Western – and probably also Non-Western – mass media. The most recent WSF took place in Nairobi (Kenya) in January 2007. Africa was chosen to symbolically and factually strengthen GJMs’ activities on this continent. The meeting was attended by some 50,000 participants, most of them Africans. Because of the considerable logistic investments, it appears that future WSFs will take place only every second year.

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<sup>9</sup> ABONG, Attac, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, Ibase, MST, and Rede Social de Justiça e Direitos Humanos.

<sup>10</sup> The Indian approach was more inclusive than the Brazilian. The structure consists of the India General Council (IGC) as the central decision-making body (“open to all social movements and organizations that are committed to the WSF Charter of principles). There were 135 members in the IGC in 2004. In addition to this body, there is the India Working Committee, which “is responsible for formulating policy guidelines that form the basis for the functioning of the WSF India process” (67 organizations nominated from the IGC, indicative of the diverse social, political, and economic gamut”); the India Organising Committee – “the executive body of the WSF 2004, ...responsible for organising the event (45 individuals, each a member of one of the eight working groups); the Mumbai Organizing Committee consists of organizations based in Mumbai represented in each of the functional groups”.

<sup>11</sup> Spaces, Solidarity and Popular Economy, Environment and Sustainability, Culture, Translation, Communication, Mobilization, and Free Software (linked to the Communication WG).

Table 1: Basic figures on the World Social Fora

	Estimated number of Participants	Delegates from NGOs and movement groups	Accredited journalists	Number of countries	Budget
Porto Alegre January 2001	20,000	4,700	1,870	117	n.a.
Porto Alegre January 2002	50,000	12,274 from 4,009 groups	3,356	123	1.55 million Euros from official sources
Porto Alegre January 2003	120,000	20,763 from 5,171 groups	4,000	123	4 to 6 million Euros
Mumbai January 2004	111,000	1,653 groups	3,200	117	1.5 to 3.8 million Euros
Porto Alegre January 2005	155,000	6,588 groups	6,588	135	3.3 to 5 million Euros
Caracas January 2006	52,000 - 80,000	2,500 groups; 19,000 delegates	almost 5,000	140	6.6 million Euros <sup>a</sup>
Bamako January 2006	15,000 - 20,000	289-584 groups	n.a.	51	2 million Euros
Karachi March 2006	30,000-40,000	350-400 Groups	n.a.	46	200,000 Euro
Nairobi January 2007	50,000-57,000	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: "FSM em números", press release of the WSF, January 2005; various reports on the events in Caracas, Bamako, Karachi, and Nairobi. with partially discrepant figures.  
<sup>a</sup>This figure was given by a Dutch source but may be exaggerated.

During its relatively short existence, the WSF has become an institution in its own right and can be seen as a showcase for a wide array of issues, groups, and claims. One dimension of success is certainly the number of participants (see Table 1), another is the extensive media coverage that the WSF has received. The number of journalists registered at the WSF rose from 1,870 in 2001 to 6,823 in 2005.

It is evident that the largest contingent of participants comes from the respective host country. Nevertheless, at all international social fora and particularly at the WSFs people from many countries are represented. Definite figures on the composition of participants are not available, but reports converge in their rough estimates. In Porto Alegre, apart from the many

Brazilians, a significant number of people from other Latin American countries, predominantly from neighbor states such as Argentina and Uruguay, took part. Europe is perhaps the continent that ranges next, followed by North America, Asia, and relatively few African and Arab states. However, when the WSF was held in Mumbai in 2004, probably 90 percent of participants came from India. With the exception of Mumbai, it appears that the ‘ordinary’ local people and particularly marginalized and poor people rarely attend the meetings. The great bulk of participants are members, both rank and file and representatives/delegates of political and social groups (indigenous associations, farmers’ movements, churches, trade unions, political parties, NGOs, leftist think tanks, etc.). But also independent intellectuals, artists, members of cultural groups, and unaffiliated young people take part. Representatives of groups generally are reimbursed by their organization for large parts of their travel expenses. This also implies that bigger, well-connected organizations with their own funding or external support are overrepresented, particularly when coming from countries far away from the forum’s location. Also, it seems that women are slightly overrepresented in the WSFs.

The WSF meetings usually last four to five days. In Porto Alegre, the main site of the gatherings initially was the Catholic University. Later, in 2005, the key location was a strip of a few miles of land stretching along a lake. A few solid buildings, but mostly large tents and a few open air settings were used for the numerous gatherings, workshops, cultural performances, and the like. The entire area was partitioned according to eleven distinct “thematic terrains” such as poverty, human rights, women, etc. The WSFs generally start with a large, colorful, and vibrant protest march and end with a concluding general assembly and/or another march. In Porto Alegre, the WSFs relied on a fairly sophisticated organization with thousands of paid helpers and volunteers, air-conditioned facilities for the press, access to computer terminals, a considerable contingent of translators, semi-professional or professional artists on stage, places to consume food and beverages, a large youth camp, hundreds of booths for political groups and campaigns, etc.

For the most part, the organization works reasonably well, but it is far from being perfect. Sometimes the translation is of poor quality or absent altogether; sometimes announced speakers do not show up; sometimes the heat in the crowded tents is unbearable. The quality of the organization changes from location to location. For example, in the 2006 Caracas meeting, the “forum was an exercise in frustration. More than 2,000 sessions scattered throughout the city, they were sometimes hard to find and often took a long time to reach.

Given the obstacles faced by participants, many sessions started an hour or even two late, or they did not start at all.” (Blandling 2006: 18)

It is difficult for outsiders to understand the nature of the WSF apart from the fact that it is a huge and colorful gathering. In addition, it is a kind of global communication network resting on a stable infrastructure. A fairly unobtrusive, though actually central, position is held by the International Council as decisive steering body. During its two to three meetings a year and based on intense communication on the Internet (see Cardon and Haeringer 2006), the Council decides on the location and basic shape of the WSF meetings as well as on general policies regarding the organization, financing, program, etc. The Council acts in close co-operation with both its five to six staff members at the WSF office in Sao Paulo as with the locally based Organizing Committee. This is in charge of logistical and technical problems as well as the details of the program, but at the same time it may also act as a political counterweight to the International Council.

The general ideological base and political aims of the WSF are laid out in different texts, most notably in the first and later revised Charter (“World Social Forum Charter of Principles”, January 2001, revised in April; second version in June 2001). In addition, a number of declarations and calls have been presented by various groups at various occasions, for example the declaration of the Organizing Committee of WSF in Mumbai in 2004, a Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum in India (April and May 2002), a declaration of the peoples movements at the Asian Social Forum in 2003, a memorandum of the International Council issued in Porto Alegre in 2003, and a number of declarations by smaller, self-elected groups of mostly intellectual individuals, such as the “Manifesto of Porto Alegre” (January 2005)<sup>12</sup> and the “Call of Bamako” (2006)<sup>13</sup>.

These charters, memoranda and calls differ to some extent regarding their claims, frames, and specific wording, obviously reflecting the more or less contingent composition of the authors, but also the highly valued principle of diversity among the GJMs in general and the WSF in particular. Some parts of these texts are met with harsh critique, for example when these suggest telling others what is best for them. Still, the two versions of the WSF Charter are widely considered to summarize the baseline and self-understanding of large parts of the

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<sup>12</sup> The launch of this manifesto came as a surprise to many participants because, according to the Charter of Porto Alegre, nobody should try to speak on behalf of the multitude of groups and networks. No wonder that the mere fact of presenting such a manifesto was heavily criticized. The authors of the manifesto are 19, mostly prominent, individuals of the WSF scene such as Bernard Cassen, Ignacio Ramonet, Eduardo Galeano, Sousa Santos, and Walden Bello.

<sup>13</sup> This call results from a meeting on the eve of the WSF in Bamako in January 2006. It was strongly influenced by a handful of French intellectuals.

groups and networks associated with the WSF process. Its mission is perhaps best reflected in the first and fourth paragraph of a total of fourteen:

“The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth.”

“The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalisation commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests, with the complicity of national governments. They are designed to ensure that globalisation in solidarity will prevail as a new stage in world history. This will respect universal human rights and those of all citizens – men and women – of all nations and the environment and will rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples.”

Further paragraphs specify some of the broader goals. They also emphasize the decentralized and pluralistic character of the WSF. From this follows the refusal “to be a body representing world civil society” (paragraph 5):

“The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. “ [...] It thus does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings, nor does it intend to constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the organisations and movements that participate in it.” (Paragraph 6)

#### *Social fora and networks at continental, national, and sub-national levels*

The WSF has inspired groups and networks in various parts of the world to organize smaller social fora, ranging from the continental to the national to the local levels (della Porta 2005). Like the WSF, these other fora have a dual face of public gatherings as well as of an emerging infrastructure that has to be understood as a process in its dimension. Cross-national regional

fora were held, for example, in Africa (Bamako/Mali in 2002, Addis Abeba/Ethiopia<sup>14</sup> in 2003, Lusaka/Zambia in 2004, and Conakry/Guinea in 2005), Quito (Ecuador), and Hyderabad<sup>15</sup> (India) in January 2003. In Africa, regional social fora were also established (Central Africa Social Forum, Maghreb Social Forum).

The European Social Fora (ESFs) took place in Florence (November 2002), Paris (November 2003), London (October 2004), and Athens (May 2006). They differ in form and size insofar as they are strongly shaped by national and local contexts. The ESF in Florence was attended by 60,000 people (sometimes referred to as “delegates”) and culminated in a huge demonstration of approximately half a million people (one million according to the organizers). The ESF in Paris had an extraordinarily high budget of 7 million Euros and was attended by some 60,000 participants. Yet the respective march was definitely much smaller than in Florence. The London ESF, to a large extent supported by the City of London<sup>16</sup>, attracted around 25,000 participants and ended with a demonstration of 70,000 to 100,000 people. It was accompanied by so-called “autonomous spaces” organized by groups who, for various reasons, disagreed with the ‘bureaucratized’ main event. Instead, they emphasize self-organization and ‘horizontality’. The ESF in Athens attracted 20,000 to 30,000 participants and included a march with some 70,000 people.<sup>17</sup> Also, four relatively small “autonomous spaces” of different ideological strands were organized. Only one of them was physically located at the site of the ‘official’ ESF outside the city, while the others were at various buildings in Athens.

In the case of the ESF, with its absence of a formal steering committee or permanent office, the European Preparatory Assemblies (EPAs) are the most important coordination mechanisms (Haug 2006). In these assemblies, representatives of movement organizations and independent individuals from various European countries meet in a very informal setting. Nominally, the assembly is open to everybody and by no means is a committee of official delegates. In practice, a core of the same 30 to 40 people secures continuity, most of them playing a key role in a movement organization. They take non-binding but nonetheless relevant decisions concerning the date, place and – to some extent – also the structure of the

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<sup>14</sup> In this meeting organized by the African Social Forum, only some 200 people from more than 40 African countries participated. They represented social movements, trade unions, farmer associations, NGOs, and research institutions (Sen et al. 2004: 312).

<sup>15</sup> According to the organizers, it was held in at least 90 venues and was attended by 8,000 delegates.

<sup>16</sup> According to newspaper reports, almost half of the budget of 1.3 million pounds came directly or indirectly from the City. This resulted in an outcry from oppositional parties against left-wing mayor Livingstone.

<sup>17</sup> Due to the activities of about 200 radicals, this march was accompanied by clashes with the police, destructions of property, and, to the amazement of many observers, internal skirmishes that included members of the Organizing Committee at both sides.

ESF meetings. But attendants of these meetings also have to respect the relative autonomy and idiosyncracies of the – mostly exclusively national – organizing committee of the country hosting the respective ESF.

At both the global and the European level, additional structures have emerged in connection to the social forum process. One stunning example is Babels, a network of some 9,000 interpreters who – on a voluntary basis – devote their time and energy to enable communication in these transnational meetings and beyond. Babels defines itself not as a mere service agent. It rather aims “[t]o be an international network of volunteer interpreters and translators who want to use their skills and expertise for the benefit of those social and citizens’ movements that adhere to the charter of principles of the Social Forums; and to permit the sharing of their analyses and experiences and to co-ordination of their actions at an international level” (<http://www.babels.org/a21.html>). While Babels did an excellent job at various international social fora, collaboration with the local organizing committee does not always work smoothly. For example, after a series of problems during the preparatory process, Babels decided not to organize interpretation for the WSF in Nairobi (<http://www.babels.org/article566.html>).

Inspired by the WSFs, regional cross-national fora were held not only in Europe but also in other continents, for example, at the US/Mexican border (“Wall of Shame”), on the Caribbean Islands, and in North Africa. Moreover, nation-wide social fora were created in a host of countries, usually after a sizeable number of local fora had already come into existence. In Italy, for example, the forum process is fairly advanced, with an estimated number of 130 social fora in 2005. In Sweden, for example, regional social fora were held in five cities in May 2004. In Germany, by contrast, the creation and networking of social fora began relatively late, resulting in more than 50 groups and networks in 2005 (Haug, Teune, and Yang 2005: 85).<sup>18</sup> The first nationwide social forum was held in Erfurt in the summer of 2005, attracting approx. 2,500 participants. Between 2002 and June 2006, over 160 social for a meeting have been held in over 120 cities with well over a million participants.<sup>19</sup> Considering the announcements for the near-term future, the forum concept does not seem to loose momentum.

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<sup>18</sup> An early and isolated Social Forum in Germany, not to be confused with Sozialforum Tübingen (an alliance of local self-help groups mainly engaged in matters of health), was created in Tübingen in the spring of 2002.

<sup>19</sup> For the comprehensive list, see [http://www.melbournsocialforum.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=34](http://www.melbournsocialforum.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=34)

### 3. Difficulties

The fora cannot be interpreted only as an indicator for the attractiveness and spread of the GJMs, but also as a barometer of the movements' challenges and problems six of which are mentioned below.

#### *Who is eligible to participate?*

Part of the attractiveness of the WSF stems from its open and vibrant mass event character. In principle, the WSF is deliberately designed as a platform that allows every individual and every group to participate. The only groups that are definitely excluded are those with a right-extremist<sup>20</sup> and racist orientation and left-wing radicals who are engaged in guerrilla warfare (e.g., the Columbian FARC<sup>21</sup> and the Basque ETA). The initial Charter excludes “organisations that seek to take people’s lives as a method of political action”. Furthermore, the WSF is reluctant to permit some (though not all) established political leaders to play an official role in its many sessions, workshops, and plenary meetings. This is stated in the June 2001 version of the Charter:

“[The WSF is] a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context... Neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the Forum. Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity.”

This vague directive allows room for interpretation. For instance, the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, who wished to give a talk in Porto Alegre in 2003, was not welcomed. The same applied to Hugo Chávez from Venezuela, and Fidel Castro in 2002. The WSF “officials” argued that established politicians have many opportunities to spread their word and therefore should not be given space at the WSF. The organizers of the WSF, however, came under attack when they allowed Lula da Silva, at the time candidate for the state

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<sup>20</sup> According to the Wikipedia entry on the WSF, “right-wing opponents of the current global order have criticised the supposed pluralism of the WSF, as it only includes movements on the left (from social democrats to anarchists).” Whether or not right-wingers ever intended to participate in the fora is unclear. However, there are some right-extremist groups who stress their convergence with left-wingers when it comes to opposition to neo-liberal globalization. According to these groups, the decisive dividing line is not between left and right but “between ‘below’ and ‘above’”, as a right-wing representative stated in a May First demonstration in Berlin in 2002.

<sup>21</sup> A member of the FARC was interdicted to participate in the WSF 2001 but actually was not physically hindered to do so. Again in 2002, representatives of the FARC were not allowed to participate.

presidency in Brazil, to give a speech and instrumentalize the WSF by advertizing for himself and his party PT.<sup>22</sup> Also, ministers of national governments (six from France) did participate in the WSF 2002. While the critique regarding the appearance of leading politicians was very explicit in the 2001 and 2002 meetings, a more relaxed attitude was prevalent when both Lula da Silva and Hugo Chávez held speeches on the occasion of the WSF in 2005. The WSF policy of keeping established politicians separate or at least at the margins of the event was certainly violated during the WSF in Caracas in January 2006. To the dismay of many participants, Chavez used this event as a public stage to promote his ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ and “his cult of personality, which some critics on the left see more as show than substance” (Blanding 2006: 17).

### *Who should participate?*

Ideally, the WSF is a gathering of “the people” as opposed to the elites, in particular a forum for those who suffer mostly from the negative effects of neo-liberal globalization. In fact, however, it is predominantly a meeting of a leftist, though ideologically highly diverse, counter-elite who intends to take, and often actually performs, an advocacy role on behalf of the most deprived and poor people. Accordingly, there are repeated calls for reducing the proportion of group representatives, NGO officials, etc. in favor of ‘ordinary’ people, particularly those from the least developed countries. To date, however, these appeals for a more inclusive composition of the participants had little effect, so that the overrepresentation of people who are more fortunate continues. Many activists, particularly those from southern countries, simply cannot afford the travel expenses.

Related to the idea of the WSF as an egalitarian and participatory event is the critique that too much space is reserved for the political ‘stars’ of the movement, be they leftist party leaders or renowned intellectuals. As a matter of fact, some well-known individuals, such as Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, and Walden Bello, were put at the center of some meetings to attract the “masses”. In Mumbai, for example, such individuals had an audience of probably 100,000 people during their speeches. This ‘star cult’ was met with much criticism from participants who believe in the value of equality and grass-roots structures. In reaction to this criticism, the organizers of the WSF in 2005 and 2007 deliberately avoided promoting prominent speakers. This, in turn, also raised criticism on the part of participants, who felt overwhelmed by the flood of small workshops and events and

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<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that Lula da Silva also accepted invitations to attend the World Economic Forum Annual Meetings in 2003 and 2005.

accordingly were demanding some ‘highlights’ that would not only be attractive to many people, but would also enhance media coverage.

### *Who makes decisions?*

Another controversial issue is who decides on the location, major panels, financing, etc. In this context, the recruitment of the decision-making body is crucial. On the eve of the first WSF, decision-making was essentially a matter of those groups who launched the WSF and set up a preparatory group consisting of seven people. Apart from the Brazil-based groups, Attac France was most influential, represented by its president Bernard Cassen. This ad-hoc group was later replaced by a much larger body, the International Council. At the time of the WSF 2003, the Council included more than one hundred groups and networks, 123 at the time of the WSF 2004, and 143 by the end of 2006.<sup>23</sup> To the dismay of close observers, even after years of its inception, the Council continues to have an opaque recruitment process which, apparently, works on informal co-option rather than on any form of democratic and transparent procedures. Admittedly, it would be difficult to implement such procedures because a fixed and clearly identifiable constituency does not exist that could send delegates according to well-specified principles and rules. Less understandable, however, is the fact that the Council remains a fairly ‘closed shop’ without any external control, accessible minutes, etc. All it provides to the public are “rules of operation” and brief summary reports of its meetings that – for the most part – lack specific information, such as details about organizational problems and internal controversies.<sup>24</sup>

A further point of criticism concerns the financing of the WSF. While sponsors associated with the movement spectrum are widely accepted, some activists are concerned about the fact that considerable amounts of money come from local and regional governments (e.g., the Porto Alegre City Government, Rio Grande do Sul State Government), and from institutions such as the Carter Foundation and the Ford Foundation.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the recent WSF meetings that took place in Porto Alegre, even commercial institutions, such as the Bank of

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<sup>23</sup> A categorization of the members shows that multi-issue groups (33), human rights (14), trade unions (14) and civic rights (13) are the most common. Regarding the areas, 49 groups are truly international, followed by 17 from Latin America, 6 from Africa and 5 from Europe. The remainder comes from other regions or could not be classified.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, the report in the Council’s meeting in Nairobi in March 2006 states for the item “International Council Re-organization”: “The debate about re-organization of the International Council is still going on, and it goes slowly. The discussion about the formal relation with the Regional, Continental, and National Forum – open since at least one year – is still to be done. The situation is different in each continent, and it creates (sic!) additional difficulties to the debate, but we feel it’s important to make pressure on it and to take part in this discussion.”

<sup>25</sup> For example, the Ford Foundation contributed USD 500,000 to the WSF in 2003.

Brazil, the Association of Brazilian Airports, and the oil company Petrobras, sponsored the events. Critics are afraid that strings could be attached to these flows of money, causing the WSF to perhaps become more “tame and toothless”. The issue of financing was particularly salient in the Mumbai meeting in 2004. The Indian organizing committee neither accepted money from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation (because the U.S. was engaged in warfare) nor from the Indian government and corporations. Support came, however, from British, Dutch and German NGOs, in particular. Over time, financial sources have become more diversified. Also, fees from participants are increasingly important, enabling the WSF to perhaps become less dependent on institutional money givers. Nevertheless, the 2005 meeting in Porto Alegre ended with a substantial deficit. Moreover, there is also the risk of commercialization. For example, in the 2007 meeting in Nairobi the cellphone company Celtel was doing the registration, linking this to participants buying a Celcel simcard, and displaying the company’s adverts in many places.

#### *A place for decision-making?*

Supposedly, the most articulated and politically relevant criticism refers to the ideological diffuseness of the WSF and its inability or rather unwillingness to take strategic decisions. The WSF defines itself in the June 2001 Charter as a “forum for debate”, “a movement of ideas”, and “a process”, but certainly not as a unified actor. While many praise the open and market-like structure of the WSF (Whitaker 2004; Teivainen 2004), others have become increasingly dissatisfied precisely because of this structure that, in their view, only allows for an idiosyncratic self-presentation and does not lead to political decisions or, more importantly, political action. For example, Hardt (2002: 113) characterized the first WSF as “perhaps too happy, too celebratory”, while an outright critic bemoaned the WSFs and ESFs as a “self-congratulatory spectacle” (Levidow 2004). Thus far, all attempts to transform the WSF into a more coherent political force have failed completely or were rejected from the outset by the majority in the International Council. The greatest obstacle is certainly the sheer number and the heterogeneity of participants with their different cultures, ideological leanings, priorities, and strategies.

Overviewing the situation at the local level is difficult. It seems to differ enormously depending on the location. In general, however, the chances to act in a relatively coherent manner are greater than acting on higher levels, because of the more personal and more continuous interactions between key activists.

### *Creating a common identity?*

Similar to nearly all movements, GJMs are fairly clear and explicit as to what they do *not* want. Based on their overall orientation, there is no doubt that they reject all forms of inhumanity, exploitation, and racism. Taking such a stance, however, does not imply that one has already created one's own identity. First, these are positions that have been promoted by many "progressive" movements in the past – movements to which today's movements are not necessarily link to. Second, these positions are also taken by political groups which GJMs would perceive as their opponents rather than their allies. Consider the rhetoric of the World Economic Forum that underlines its commitment to humanitarian values and deeds. When it comes to defining the "unwanted", the lowest common denominator of GJMs is their *opposition to neo-liberal globalization* (Rucht 2003). It is not by chance that GJMs refer to such a vague term as neo-liberal globalization (or to substitutes such as the "Washington Consensus"). It is this vague signifier that allows different ideological tendencies to interpret it in their own way and to then attach this term to the problems that they are most preoccupied with. If one were to replace neo-liberalism with capitalism or imperialism, for example, this would no longer serve as a negative denominator acceptable to all groups. While many of these groups define themselves as anti-capitalist, others, probably representing the majority, do not. These oppose an excessive and ruthless capitalism, but not capitalism per se. It is this difference that perhaps marks the deepest and potentially most consequential cleavage among GJMs – a cleavage from which many internal and external conflicts around more specific questions can be derived. According to their positions regarding this cleavage, for example, one stream among GJMs wants to abolish an international institution such as the WTO ("Smash the WTO"), while another strives for more or less fundamental reforms. Undoubtedly, these are the same conflicts that have already marked the labor movements since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The tendency to create an open space (Wallerstein 2004, Withaker 2004) while at the same time avoiding to set priorities and search for a common strategy nourishes dissatisfaction especially among the radical groups. These have complained at the occasion of the 2002 meeting that the speakers do not tend to mirror the (allegedly more radical) view of many participants, and, regarding the 2003 meeting, that strategy was not a major issue. Internal conflicts already became visible during the first WSF, when some activists destroyed an experimental plantation of transgenics of the Monsanto corporation, and at the WSF in 2002, when the radicals organized a separate march against the "reformist WSF" parallel to the opening session. These conflicts escalated at the 2004 WSF. The Indian-led organizing

committee was not able or did not want to integrate many of the radical groups, which then held their own gatherings. One such gathering was the People's Movement Encounter II; the other, larger one was called Mumbai Resistance and, according to reports, involved 310 "political movements". The European Social Forum in London in 2004 was also marked by a separate and physically distant forum of the "autonomous groups", who strongly criticized the mainstream forum.

### *Keeping the momentum?*

These internal problems and conflicts are known to insiders, but are less interesting to the larger public. The organizers and many participants view the WSF as an impressive, peaceful, and colorful event – a meeting place for the peoples of the world. It is appealing to mass media who tends to be bored by ritualized summits of elder statesmen in suits who, at best, issue a dry declaration of intent. Not surprisingly, the WSFs increasingly attract journalists. Even the 2006 meeting in Caracas, only one of three 'polycentric' meetings in this year, was attended by almost 5,000 journalists (Brand 2006). Whether such media attention also translates into political impact, though, is a topic worthy of further investigation. Over time, it may well be that the WSF becomes a routine event whose appeal to the outside world gradually fades. However, one cannot rule out the possibility that the WSF, along with the increasingly numerous regional social fora, might become a tool that will bring different movements closer together.

## **4. Significance and Prospects of Social Fora**

1. Within only a few years, the social fora in general and the WSFs in particular have become a trademark and showcase for GJMs. According to one observer, the WSF "is making striking contributions to the reinvention of global politics" (Grzybowski 2006: 12), according to another it is "one of the most significant civil and political initiatives of the past several decades, perhaps of this past century" (Sen 2004: xxi). While this may be an overstatement, one has to acknowledge that in some instances the WSF could attract even more public attention than the rival events of the elitist World Economic Forum.

As a large gathering, the WSF serves two functions. On the one hand, it strengthens bonds within and across the movements. It raises hopes, energizes many participants, links large numbers of issues and groups, and – last but not least – contributes to the creation of an overarching identity and community as expressed in the vision of the WSF as a meeting place

for global civil society. On the other hand, the WSF serves as a stage for sending messages to the public at large. According to its slogan “Another world is possible”, the WSF reminds the public that dissenting groups are challenging the existing economic, political and social order which they perceive as unjust, exploitive and destructive.

On the other hand, the WSF as well as regional social fora have become more than merely a series of annual gatherings. In connection to these, a more stable infrastructure has come into existence and gradually serves as node of information, communication, and organization of different kinds of movements acting on different levels. At the global level, this role has been acquired by the International Council and the WSF office in Sao Paulo. At the European level, where no official body with a formal membership and no permanent office exists, the functional equivalent to the ESF structures are the relatively loose European Preparatory Assemblies (EPAs) that take place every two to three months. In connection to the forum process, additional structures such as Babels, the political network of interpreters, have been created.

At subcontinental and national levels, a variety of organizational forms exist which is difficult to overview. Yet it is clear that occasional regional gatherings are gradually complemented by a more permanent structure. While its initial purpose was to enable further meetings, this structure gradually takes on more continuous tasks of coordinating and steering movement processes within a given territorial scope. The WSF serves as key reference point for all these fora at lower levels, but is neither willing nor capable of steering and controlling these. At this point, it is hard to say whether or not this reference point will lead to greater structural homogeneity.

2. As it has been shown, the social forum process, despite its apparent success, is facing a variety of problems. It attracts both external and internal criticism regarding its organizational and financial background, structure, range of participants and, most importantly, its unwillingness or incapacity to engage in strategic decision-making and joint political intervention. These conflicts indicate internal cleavages that, in the long term, question the hope of creating a common identity as a “movement of movements”. Even if the fora were to experience further growth, they are faced with three challenges that may cause drawbacks in the long term: heterogeneity, routine and ritualization, and the call for constructive solutions,

*Heterogeneity.* Tensions and cleavages are common among nearly all social movements. But while an issue-specific movement has more specific targets and opponents and is marked by relatively dense interactions (i.e., factors that help bridge ideological and strategic cleavages), the plethora of GJMs, for the most part, is not as densely linked, or its network

consists of linkages that are merely symbolic. One of these symbolic links is indeed the WSF. However, given the large variety of issues as well as the heterogeneity of political ideologies, social bases and cultural backgrounds, GJMs have not (or at least not yet) been transformed into a “movement of movements”. For better or worse, they are far from representing an overarching single movement. Even at the European level such a movement (in singular!), as proclaimed, for example, by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2001), has not materialized. While some organizers, above all those from various leftist parties, still dream of creating a coherent global movement and want the WSF to become a unified actor, such idea is deliberately rejected by a great majority of other groups. These perceive diversity and a high degree of decentralization as an asset rather than a burden. They argue that the acceptance of diversity reduces the pressure to conform to certain ideological, organizational, and strategic models. Accordingly, participatory horizontal structures – as opposed to vertical structures based on delegation – are embraced and promoted. Yet the appraisal of diversity and horizontality cannot overcast the existence of several profound cleavages that pose the risk of absorbing much energy, if not causing the movements to falter altogether. These cleavages may diminish the movements’ capacity to join forces, further expand, and deepen their impact on agenda setting and policy making.

*Routine.* Over time, the WSFs and social fora at lower levels are losing their initially extraordinary character. They are becoming a matter of routine and ritualization, thereby reducing both the excitement of participant activists and the interest of mass media. Such a situation tends to increase competition among social movement organizations in receiving public attention and recognition. This process goes hand in hand with a trend towards the ‘NGO-ization’ and institutionalization of some movement groups and the moderation of these groups’ claims. In addition, partial success tends to pacify the reformist groups, but not the radical fringe, thereby contributing to the risk of internal cleavages. These may also be exacerbated by differential responses of established institutions, sometimes including a “carrot-and-stick strategy” with limited concessions, pre-emption and co-optation concerning the “serious” groups on the one hand, and exclusion, discrimination, and criminalization of the “radicals” on the other.

*Proposals.* A third major challenge for the social forum process is the quest for constructive proposals. After a period of relatively few internal conflicts, owed largely to the total autonomy of issue-based movements and the preoccupation of defining what they are opposed, GJMs are increasingly confronted with questions of constructive solutions. Both from within and from the outside they are called to clarify how “another world” could look

like, and what this implies when it comes to specific policies. Again, this challenge is likely to bring internal conflicts to the fore, deepening the cleavage between reformists and radicals.

While these factors are likely to weaken the movements, other factors work in the opposite direction, thereby resulting in closer co-operation among movements and in an increased mobilization capacity. Such factors are (1) the growing relevance and urgency of transnational problems and related international politics; (2) the vast potential of southern movements' continued growth; (3) the facilitating role of modern means of communication (particularly the Internet) as a tool for transnational cooperation and mobilization; and, last but not least, (4) the ability of many groups to learn from previous negative experiences, for example, to resist the attempt to promote Leninist avant-garde models and proclaim the "one and only" correct political ideology. Many groups, though not all, have learned to accept and embrace diversity, while at the same time avoiding an attitude of "anything goes". The social forum process has been an important contribution in this respect. While the role of social fora may be limited to serve as a stage and instrument of infrastructure, the challenge for GJMs generally is to create a capacity for strategic intervention but at the same time maintaining diversity.

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