

The World Social Forum : A Critical Engagement

Proposal for the first year in a three / multi-year ongoing project *

September 2007 – August 2008

CACIM, New Delhi, August 2007

In the perception that the World Social Forum seemed to have the potential to be a significant world process that demanded our closest attention and involvement, we at CACIM, and members of the initiative from which CACIM has emerged, CA (Critical Action), and some of our Advisors and Associates, have individually and severally been closely and critically involved and engaged with the World Social Forum since 2002, in a wide variety of ways. This has ranged from participation in the organisation of the Forum, to creating and administering what are today perhaps among the most comprehensive and significant listserves and webspaces on the Forum (WSFDiscuss¹ and OpenSpaceForum - www.openspaceforum.net), in a attempt to chronicle the unfolding of the Forum process, to organising a range of seminars and workshops both during Forum events and before and after them; to taking part in the preparation of a series of books on the Forum as well as a major bibliography on the WSF and the global social justice movement; to interrogating and exploring the concept of open space that underlines the Forum, to, most recently, initiating debate in defence of the Forum and of the values we believe that it symbolises.

This is aside from a series of related seminars and workshops, in India, Brazil, and elsewhere, starting from a first 'meeting of minds' in Bangalore, India, in May 2002.²

In this time, and through this process of critical engagement, our understanding that the WSF is a significant space of and experiment in movement and politics has been strengthened. In our understanding however, both the Forum and the idea of the Forum are now also under considerable attack, from different directions, both from within and outside. We therefore now wish to systematise and strategically focus our work on the Forum, to both continue to critically engage with but also to critically defend the Forum; to build strategically on the wide range of associations we have developed with other actors in this field, across the South and the North; and to initiate a process of engagement with different theoretical / practical perspectives emerging of the Forum and its politics among movements, civil organisations, networks, and individuals.

Looking ahead to an ongoing and sustained process of critical engagement with the Forum, in a three–four year cycle, we propose here a first year of such activities which will also lay the foundations for the subsequent processes and provide space for all those taking part in this larger collaborative exercise to develop this longer term programme. While a brief on this longer-term engagement has been outlined in the overview section in an Annexure, this document gives the broader objectives of our engagement with the Forum and the proposed programme of activities for the first year.

This proposal is built on the insights drawn from CACIM's extensive previous research and action programmes over the past six years (2001-2006) around the Forum, the open space concept, dynamics of movements, and cultures of politics. While the proposal is aimed at a longer-term evolution of programmes and activities, it also supplements and complements our other ongoing projects and past activities around the Forum. It fits within a wider programme of activities that we are progressively undertaking, all of which have as their underlying objective the encouragement and enabling of a culture of critical reflexivity in public work. Similar to our previous and other existing programmes, it is again based on a spirit of critical engagement : Of sharing, dialogue, debate, association, networking, access, and participation. It will take into account and build on our extensive existing associations in different countries of the world.

This proposal is also an attempt to move away from working on a project-to-project basis, which has many limitations as a way of working for an ongoing and contemporary process like WSF. Our hope is that the proposed programme of activities will allow us to more creatively address concerns raised

* Clarification, 11.09.08 : Although we applied for support for the first of a three/multi-year programme, as laid out in this document, we received approval in 2007 for a first two years of work, before the end of which we have to submit a proposal for the subsequent years.

here, and over a sustained period, strengthen the Forum process without undermining the various other undercurrents and processes within and outside it.

The response to our past activities around the Forum - either through the publication of books, opening up debates in various spaces, or mobilisation and propagation through seminar series - has encouraged us to continue with them and also to expand our scope of work and geographical coverage. We also feel that an important objective of any follow-up activities must be an appropriate propagation and expansion of the process, at multiple levels, in order to be able to successfully and creatively sustain the energy, spirit, and capital being generated; and to carry forward contaminations happening through worldwide convergence of resources of hope³ at numerous meetings at the Forum. This is especially so given that so much of 'the Forum' in fact takes place in the 359 days of the year beyond the actual world event.

CACIM is an innovative project with an enormous potential for development of a critical global consciousness.

- **Boaventura de Sousa Santos**, Professor, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Colegio de S. Jeronimo, University of Coimbra, Portugal, and Law School, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, and key theorist on the WSF

As a member of the WSF Organizing Committee and the International Council since the outset, I closely follow the very relevant work being done by Jai Sen and his colleagues in organising a worldwide network where people who are strongly engaged with the Social Forums constantly exchange information and analysis.

- **Antonio Martins**, Member, WSF Organising Committee and International Council, Brazil

I can testify that Jai Sen and his colleagues at CACIM have played a crucial role in helping create a constructive dialogue around the WSF process, both through his book and other writings, and through his direct participation in the Forums and in discussion programs about them. I have observed this at several Forums and have participated in workshops and panels in which CACIM has exemplified this role. Indeed, his personal intervention has helped establish a mode of dialogue regarding the Forum process that can address key issues critically while at the same time strengthening rather than undermining the Forum process and community.

- **Jeremy Brecher**, Historian and author/editor of *Globalization from Below*, *Global Village or Global Pillage*, and *Global Visions*; USA

CACIM's activities around the Forum have been an important contribution to our collective debates on the future of the social forum process and of the transnational movements more generally.

- **Teivo Teivainen**, Director of the Program on Democracy and Global Transformation at the San Marcos University, Lima, Peru, Professor of World Politics at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and representative of NIGD (Network Institute for Global Democratisation), Finland, founding member of the International Council of the World Social Forum.

In the activities proposed here for the coming year, we propose to simultaneously focus on :

- Explore and engage with the WSF within India, South Asia and internationally
- In collaboration with our associates in Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America, as well as in Asia, design similar programmes and processes in these regions, looking ahead to a full and collaborative engagement in the years to come among all those interested; and -
- As far as possible and appropriate, and at a limited scale, support and enable related activities within this first year.

The proposed programme focuses on three critical areas : Firstly, the impact and potentials of the 'new politics' that the World Social Forum offers; secondly, examination of Forum as a radical democratic pedagogical space engaged in creation of alternative and plurality of knowledge systems and challenging the dominance of scientific technological knowledge societies; and thirdly, exploring the organising principles of the Forum as a space based on its Charter of Principles.

The continued engagement with the Forum will also lead to the constitution of an advisory council around the proposed programmes and to the development of the various propositions made here. We will do this through consultations both online and face-to-face meetings and by engaging them proactively at all levels. Through this, we expect to also expand and consolidate our list of prospective partners and collaborators in this programme in the South Asian region and globally, and initiate discussions with them. Finally, we would create necessary e-instruments for communication and collaboration, both by modifying existing spaces and creating new ones. We already have a group of committed members working on these various aspects comprising of Peter Waterman, Jai Sen, Madhuresh Kumar, Sah Bittu, and Subramanya Sastry, and also collaborate at different times with many other associated individuals and collaborating organisations with whom we work, in different parts of the world.

Objectives

Looking ahead to the debate and design that we hope to be able to generate during this proposed year of activities, we put forward the following as tentative statements of goals for our long-term activities, to be debated and finalised with our associates and partners during the year :

- ✓ Broaden and deepen informed involvement in the WSF process in India, South Asia, and more broadly globally, (a) among social and political movement; (b) among other concerned sections, such as social and political commentators, researchers, etc, and (c) in the wider public.
- ✓ Critical examination of the procedural depth, methodology, potentialities, and impact of the Forum and the 'new politics' it professes and embodies on socio-political movements and processes in the region, through extensive research by means of interviews, and discussions with the main actors in the process.
- ✓ Make a substantial contribution to the WSF process through the various activities undertaken by us, towards making it more open, transparent, and effective.
- ✓ Actual networked engagement, to introduce or to strengthen existing currents of critical reflection, (open) debate, and/or (open) structure within WSF as an experiment; and through this, enabling substantive contributions to envisioning the future of the World Social Forum.
- ✓ Detailed research into and documentation of the Forum and other processes (like movements), to understand how open space operates – but guided by an ethic of research where we share our work with those we are 'working on'.
- ✓ Introduce to students, activists, and other actors of societal processes, in India and internationally, contemporary thoughts and views on cultures of political practice; and in particular, thoughts generated from critical debate in the South on the world as a whole; with the overall objective of inspiring critical engagement with society and politics.
- ✓ Make possible critical involvement in processes of thought and action that is so essential for the creation and sustenance of a healthy civil society and a culture of critical internationalism through the Forum process.
- ✓ Stimulate and encourage the exploration and practice of a culture of open space in universities and community collectives across the country and in other countries of the region, thereby making it a norm rather than an exception .
- ✓ Provide reference material and spaces for critical discussion to students, scholars, and planners / trainers working in areas of capacity-building of development cadres and are interested in the Forum process.
- ✓ Engage and involve students and young activists in the implementation of all of the above, and in our related activities; and in particular, carrying forward the engagement and involvement that we successfully attempted in the Open Space Seminar Series.
- ✓ In general, and at multiple levels, take steps towards institutionalising the experience and potentials of our own engagement with the Forum process through various activities, so that the momentum can be sustained.

Proposed Activities in the First Year

The proposed three broad initiatives in this first year are :

Meetings of minds, to forge critical solidarities regionally and globally engaged in critical debates and discussions around various themes including future of the Forum and proposing organising principles for the Forum;

Chronicling the Forum, through the publication of books, reports, comprehensive bibliographies and chronologies in Hindi and English and also in other languages such as Bengali, Urdu, and Nepali wherever possible and appropriate, and creating an exhaustive database on the Forum and cultures of politics; and –

Exploring the Forum as a radical democratic pedagogical space, by initiating Forum fellowships and other processes with the potential of producing plural knowledge systems which will together serve the important dual purpose of documenting an historical process and opening debate on modes of association and organisation, and through this too on prevalent and potential cultures of politics and movement.

In addition, we will also initiate a process of **thinking out the way ahead**, together with others.

I : Meetings of minds : Towards an Alliance for a Critical Utopia ⁴

The primary significance of the Forum lies in the political culture that it represents and is attempting to explore and forge. This is its main contribution in political-strategic terms; this is its soul. The Forum, as designed by those who initiated it, is not an organisation or a movement, or a world federation, but a space – a non-directed space, from and within which movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and find space to take forward their work, locally, nationally, and globally. The Forum is an attempt at simply building of space – literally and metaphorically - where free exchange is possible.⁵ Here lies its newness, in not only being a specific gathering of social movements, political associations, civil organisations, intellectuals, and activists but at the same time owing a lot to them in its existence, gatherings and processes. It neither portrays a dominance of one particular ideology or struggle nor promises to be only actor for social change but at the same time seems to encompass many visions of many worlds and have come to forge an alliance of/for critical utopia.

It is towards strengthening of this alliance that the following activities are intended at through a process of meeting of minds to discuss, debate, agree, disagree, and move towards other possible worlds.

- ◆ **Instituting processes of inter-continental, intercultural collaboration** with all kind of people and groups around the world, both like-minded and also those who we disagree with, and everyone in between on issues and activities related to the World Social Forum and related initiatives. (We have already initiated discussions with potential partners around the Bamako Appeal, and have also received suggestions from others including members of the WSF International Office to initiate similar processes around the World Social Forum and the emerging global social justice movement more generally.) This collaboration will be organised largely towards the explorations of two issues : Firstly, in the light of serious problems highlighted with regard to organisation of the space in the Nairobi Forum, an **attempt at drawing up organising principles** towards organising the space and towards successfully maintaining and cultivating the Forum as a physical and temporal open space⁶; and secondly, as mentioned previously, to - in the light of a growing attack on the Forum - **explore its future and critically defend the culture of open space** propagated by the Forum.
- ◆ Taking steps to **organise meetings among initiatives around the WSF and the idea of 'open space'**, among organisations and individuals, towards sharing experiences and developing a more strategic perspective on how to go about these activities. The first such meeting was organised at the Nairobi Forum in January 2007 titled 'In Defence of Open Space' and then two subsequent workshops on open space at the anti g8 activities in Rostock, Germany, in June 2007, as part of a wider programme 'Speak With Them: a project within the G8 Resistance' organised by CACIM together with Dorothea Haerlin and Oliver Pye (ATTAC Berlin) and John Holloway (Mexico) : A debate about 'Open Space thinking and acting in open spaces' at the Rostock camp, and a workshop on 'Open Space – New Ways in Theory and Practice' at the

Alternative Summit in the town of Rostock. In particular, we propose to organise during 2008, on behalf of a wider collective we helped to establish in 2005, the EIOS (Explorations in Open Space) Collective, and under a separate proposal, a world conference on open space as a culture of politics.⁷ (This collective came out of meetings supported by Oxfam-Novib and by UNESCO, the 'Encounters in Open Space' workshops just before and then during the WSF in 2005.⁸)

- ◆ Building on our credibility as an initiative independent of the official WSF process, **initiating exploratory discussions with specific sections and communities in India**, such as the Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women, the physically challenged, sexual minorities, and others, both those who have already taken major initiatives at the World Social Forum and those who have stayed away from the WSF, as to how they would like to take part in a programme such as this, their visions and questions, and a documentation of the processes and utopias that they are helping create.
- ◆ **Organising extensive debate** at the launching of a series of books in Hindi titled *Samrajyon Se Sangharsh* ('Challenging Empires') with politically, socially, and culturally conscious readers **across the Hindi heartland of India** (exact locations to be decided) such as Bhopal, Indore, Dehra Dun, Ranchi, Patna, Lucknow, Varanasi, Aligarh, Kanpur, Munger, Bhagalpur, Dumka, Raipur, and Shimla, aside from Delhi; and also in **Nepal** with writers, journalists, artists, social activists, university and college students and teachers to broaden the arena of debate and discourse related to WSF processes.

We believe that it will be important to keep the focus on general and specific themes while organising the meetings. Strategically important themes and cross-cutting concerns will be taken up in the meetings in consultation with the participating organisations. Since many organisations in Hindi-speaking states took part in the preparatory processes of the WSF in Mumbai and India Social Forum in New Delhi, during 2003 and 2006, we believe that the meetings and debates we are proposing here in the run-up to the 2008 mobilisations with the book launches will serve the purpose of seeding and generating debate that will continue even after the actual launch of the books.

II : Rewriting Histories and Futures : Chronicling the Forum

As quoted earlier, and in the words of de Sousa Santos, the WSF is the only utopia so far of the 21st century. Give this, we believe that it is an important and necessary task to comprehensively document the processes, ideas, struggles, debates, discussions and events associated with it (including critiques, dissent, oppositions, and alternatives). This is something we have been significantly involved in from early on, chronicling the Forum and its movements in a variety of ways including the publication of books and reports, organising meetings and seminars, and running listserves and maintaining perhaps the most comprehensive webspace on the Forum, the widely referred to and wiki-based / dialogic space, OpenSpaceForum.net.

For myself, as someone involved with the WSF but far from India, the most impressive of [its activities] has been CACIM's Open Space Forum (www.openspaceforum.net), providing a service to the movement(s) internationally.

- **Peter Waterman**, researcher/activist on international unionism, labour internationalism, and the new global solidarities; co-editor of *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires, Volume I* (2004), author of *Globalisation, Social Movements and the New Internationalisms* (1998, 2001), and co-author / editor of several other books; The Hague, The Netherlands

The proposed activities in this area are :

- ◆ **Continuing to build a comprehensive database** documenting the WSF process and related open space initiatives on the webspace **OpenSpaceForum**, and starting a monthly e-newsletter on the publication of materials related to WSF. We already have a very substantial database of literature on the World Social Forum and the global justice and solidarity movement (prepared together with Peter Waterman, and part of which was published in *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires*, and using methodologies we have developed for other work, we now propose to also develop a **detailed 'diary', or chronology and bibliography**, of the World

Social Forum process, and other related processes [the first edition of bibliography available at www.openspaceforum.net].

- ◆ Following the successful publication and translation of the World Social Forum : Challenging Empires in 2004, undertaking the **collation and publication of two volumes** as sequels to the first book, within a new book series titled “Challenging Empires”.
- ◆ **Initiating a major programme, in collaboration with others across the world, of online and hardcopy publication of significant papers etc** on the World Social Forum and related initiatives; initially in English, and through collaboration with institutions elsewhere, also in other regional and world languages.
- ◆ **Starting a process of detailed interviews** with important actors, individuals, and organisations across the world, in order to identify and trace out the dynamics and trajectory of the WSF process.

III : Radical Democratic Pedagogical Spaces - Critical Courses and Forum Fellowships

The WSF owes its vitality to the historical role it is playing of being a sustained and increasingly familiar space where we, as human beings, can exchange with each other and also pick up pheromones as we move around, at a scale never before possible; and through doing so, we are being able to perceive and understand the larger world around us and comprehend how to move and to act within and in relation to this wider world. This is its real function and nature, as an ‘open space’.⁹ It is a space of convergence of the intentions of the people involved in movement dynamics at the local, so-called ‘national’, ‘regional’, and global levels and at the same time responsible for a process of self-organised emergence transforming politics (and whether political leaders like to accept this or not), and constitutes a deep challenge for all kinds of politics, including (as argued by Arturo Escobar) the ‘progressive’. The WSF symbolises self-organised, emergent politics, a politics that is radically different from the traditional vertical politics (whether on the right or the left), politics of power and of the capture and retention of power, and of the giving of vision such that some lead and others follow; a politics based on principles of horizontality, equality, and open-endedness,¹⁰

This is the radical democratic pedagogical strength of the Forum premised on the sharing of common and horizontal spaces that spontaneous, autonomous actions are enabled and empowered which can be employed in institutions, organisations, movements, and other significant institutions. The activities proposed in this third stream are intended at realising this pedagogical aspect of the Forum and making further explorations within this territory :

- **Continuing a process of Critical Courses, (a)** : Initiating and carrying forward in other parts of the world, in collaboration with other institutions, lessons and other initiatives arising out of two ‘critical courses’ offered at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, in the autumn of 2006, within the Institute of Political Economy (cross-posted with Sociology & Political Science) by CACIM member Jai Sen : 1. Challenging Empires—Open Space and Dissent in Movement and 2. Other Worlds, Other Globalisations (available @ www.critical-courses.cacim.net). These courses were based on an experimental pedagogical approach to knowledge and learning that drew upon the concept of ‘open space’ to creatively innovate : The ways in which courses are developed and taught; the roles and relations between ‘teacher’ and ‘student’; opening the scope and spaces of learning; and fostering norms of critical engagement, collaboration, inclusion, and respect for difference and dissent.
- **Continuing a process of Critical Courses, (b)** : In collaboration with others, taking the first steps towards developing and instituting a series of online courses and seminars on critical issues related to the World Social Forum and to world movement.
- **Instituting Forum Fellowships** in order to provide young activists, students, and researchers with the resources to conduct studies of different aspects of the Forum process in India and globally based on interaction with social and popular movements and civil organisations and networks in the country who are part of the WSF process and also those who boycott it and/or take part in alternative processes. This will also provide the Fellows opportunities and resources to them to critically engage with and get involved in wider socio-political processes in India and globally.

IV : Thinking out the way ahead

In this first year, apart from the activities mentioned above we look forward to also engaging in a process with others across the world to formulate our longer-term programmes. Beginning with this year, our endeavour will be to engage more with the ideas of some of the key theoreticians of the Forum and of emerging politics (such as Antonio Martins, Arturo Escobar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Cândido Grzybowski, Chico Whitaker, Christophe Aguiton, Emma Dowling, Ezequiel Adamovsky, Gina Vargas, Hilary Wainwright, Immanuel Wallerstein, Janet Conway, Jeff Juris, Michal Osterweil, Moema Miranda, Patrick Bond, Peter Waterman, Rodrigo Nunes, Teivo Teivainen, and Walden Bello); with the key new organisers of the Forum worldwide, such as in Kenya, the US, and in Québec; and with organisers of alternative, autonomous, or oppositional spaces, to see their relevance beyond their immediate contexts. At this point, we feel it may also be pertinent to issue a call with others for a global conclave to once again locate and articulate voices from the South within the Forum, and to complement this by collating the rich body of knowledge emerging out of local struggles all over the South.

We will also work with the co-editors of the new Challenging Empires series, Peter Waterman and Jai Sen, to look at the possibility of collating this body of literature and debate and bringing this out in public.

Our future programmes will be in line with the objectives we have laid out in this proposal and the emerging thinking out of this proposed year of engagement with the members of the advisory council.

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Annexure

An Overview on the WSF

The World Social Forum (WSF) started in 2001, and since then it has become a year-round and around-the-world process. What started off as a counter-platform to the World Economic Forum, standing in opposition to its programme of neo-liberal economic globalisation, has since evolved to become an independent space to also posit alternate programmes, a space where other worlds are imagined, and for some, perhaps created. It has also become an extraordinary process for the gathering of peoples and cultures from across the world where participants – living as we all do in our own particular worlds, and coming from them when we converge – experience, perceive, and begin to understand the grandeur, richness, and plurality of the world at large.

But, and as should perhaps be only expected in something so plural, the WSF means different things to different people. It has even attracted the formation of its own counter-platforms, as was evident at the Mumbai edition of WSF in January 2004 (in the form of Mumbai Resistance), at the European Social Forum in London in November 2004 (Alternative Zones), and at the World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela, in January 2006 (the Alternative Social Forum), and at the European Social Forum in Athens, Greece, in May 2006 (Autonomous Spaces). Drawing from our experience and analysis at CACIM, a CACIM member had indeed argued that the taking shape of these alternatives can be seen as an organic expression of the proliferation and manifestation of the 'open space' that the WSF says it seeks to be – because this refraction and fractalisation is in the very nature of open space.¹¹

True to its spirit, the celebration and critique of Forum has not only come from those outside it but also from those very active within the process. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, one of the million believers, would like us to believe that the WSF is the first critical utopia of the twenty first century and aims to break with the tradition of the critical utopias of western modernity, many of which turned into conservative utopias : From claiming utopian alternatives to denying alternatives with the excuse that fulfilment of utopia was underway.¹² Whereas, Walden Bello, a prominent participant in the Forum process has proposed that the WSF has served its historical purpose and thus it is time for it to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organisation of resistance and transformation.¹³ But going by the experience and the continued efflorescence of the WSF across much of the world – as reflected in the continued Social Fora at national levels, most recent being in the heart of the Empire, US Social Forum – it remains very relevant to those elements of society that take part in these fora.¹⁴

Now in its seventh year, the Forum has been trying to constantly re-innovate its methodology both in order to sustain the euphoria, energies, imaginations, and dreams it has generated and also as a direct expression of this energy, as a process of emergence.¹⁵ At the same time, the Forum has also been decentring and expanding its reach by encouraging and enabling its expression and manifestation in different continents and other regional editions. The step taken in 2005 of moving from single-centric Fora to polycentric ones in 2006 was also a very major step in the development of the World Social Forum - as important as the historic step of organising of the Forum outside Brazil for the first time, in January 2004, in Mumbai, India, and then in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007. Similarly, the decision not to have an annual world Forum at all in 2008 is an invention that is trying to create thousands of nodes across the world in an emerging networked society.

Although the Forum has been successful in expanding its reach – and is today truly an efflorescence across the world - it is also the subject of various critiques, the most common being that it is merely a talk shop, and another being that by insistently attempting to remain an open space and by a practice of not itself taking positions on key issues of world politics, it is not meeting its potential and is also co-opting radical energies. In our opinion, it is this mode of engagement, of open-endedness, and of WSF perceived, cast, and attempted to be retained as an open space, an 'incubator' of ideas and alternatives where individuals, organisations, and movements come together, share, exchange, build bridges, relationships, strategise, etc. which is under critique, because of its difference from the other existing forms of engagement. In this latter conception of the WSF, the WSF is more like a chowk (a public square) where people gather publicly and interact, but not as a neutral entity but with an ideology of its own : Of open exchange, of critical solidarity and hope. But the most important question which needs attention and answer is : what kind of engagement ? what kind of spaces ? what kind of movements ? – all towards creation of an/other world(s).

Even as we now move to wishing to also defend the Forum and its principles, we feel we must underline the quality of critical engagement that informs our approach at all times. Our most recent initiative, which we purposely named In Defence of Open Space (a workshop at the WSF in Nairobi), has led not to an outright and uncritical 'defence' of the Forum but to a process named Critical Engagement with Open Space (CEOS – see <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CEOSProcessIntroLetter>).

We therefore highlight here two issues : One, the huge gap between the apparent or potential political role of the Forum and its real role; and two, the degree to which the Forum, which declares itself to be an open space, in reality tends to be restricted to people who broadly already agree and closed to those with differing points of view. The latter of course only tends to reinforce the former.

In terms of the political potential of the Forum, in our understanding and experience there is – and in spite of the impressive scale of the gatherings that take place in its name or of the claims made about it or on its behalf, and of its apparently significant critical positioning in matters that directly impact both national and global societies - there is still little public awareness either of the existence of the WSF as a worldwide initiative or of the distinct culture of politics it seems to offer and seeks to propagate, either within social and political societies, let alone in the public. Broadly speaking, it is either uncritically celebrated or uncritically dismissed; or ignored. All three possibilities suggest the need for a critical engagement with it, towards opening it up to the public.

This discrepancy between the apparent and the real Forum becomes only more stark in terms of the second issue we highlight here, the availability of the WSF as an open space.

On the one hand, the Forum declares itself an open space, and it is widely celebrated for being this. On the other hand, we have found – from our encounters with people not only at the Forum but in the cities and countries where the Forum has taken place – that the Forum is widely perceived by those who choose to not attend to be exclusive (and by some, even rather narrow in its thinking). This is all the more so the more local the Forum is (looking at it geographically, from the world event to the regional to the national to the local, such as city Fora). In our analysis and understanding so far, this tends to be the case because the more local the Forum the less anonymous the participants are – and therefore the less free to take risks by exploring new ideas – and also the more the organisers tend to belong to a monolithic thinking and the more they tend to instrumentalise it, to build their particular movement or tendency. This is aside from the several analyses that have shown the Forum to at times be highly orthodox in the ways its organisers and dominant participants behave.¹⁶

Conversely, there is much reason to argue that the WSF today is sufficiently robust to be able to create, or to enable the creation of spaces that enable exchange between more diverse opinions, and including with those differing opinions on issues that are central to the Forum; and indeed, that the Forum has the credibility to potentially play a role in creating spaces for engaging with fundamentalisms, which is one of the most burning of all social problems today.

Hence, in our understanding there is much reason to think that a close, critical engagement with the idea of the Forum is badly needed at this time, at a time when the movement is growing worldwide and also in relation to the very bold, open-ended, but risky 'World Social Forum' planned for the year 2008. We believe that the efforts we are proposing here will contribute to deepening informed debate about and involvement with the Forum in India, in tandem with the mobilisation that will take place around the Forum elsewhere across the world. And the critical support to this initiative by such a huge part of the world's population, through their participation, will add to the strength and deepening of the process.

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Notes

¹ WSFDiscuss is an open and unmoderated forum for the exchange of information and views on the experience, practice, and theory of the World Social Forum at any level (local, national, regional, and global) and on related social and political movements and issues.

² See, for instance, the report of workshops we co-organised just before and during the World Social Forum in 2005 : Jeff Juris and Rodrigo Nunes, June 2005 – ‘Encounters in / Explorations of Open Space, I and II - A Report and Some Reflections’. Report on EIOS1 and EIOS2, workshops and meetings held at Integria and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, on January 21-24 and January 27-28 2005. Available @ www.openspaceforum.net.

³ A phrase borrowed from Raymond Williams and Robin Gable, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (Verso, 1989).

⁴ Boaventura de Sousa Santos has used this term extensively to refer to the Forum and elaborated on it in his various writings including, *The Rise of Global Left* (Zed, 2006)

⁵ Jai Sen, January 2007 - ‘The World Social Forum as an emergent learning process’, in *Futures* vol 39 (2007), pp 505-522. Available through subscription @ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.10.006>. Unedited original available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=34.

⁶ The problem of organising of the physical space at the Forum has always been there leading to protests by the physically challenged groups in Mumbai or in general inability of the marginal groups to have similar access at most of the Forum locations in various ways. The recent ‘protests’ by the slum dwellers at the Nairobi Forum brought this to the fore and echoes were heard at the IC meeting just after that. For an account of the events at the Nairobi Forum, see Shannon Walsh, February 4 2007 – ‘We Won’t pay to discuss our own poverty !’ @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=497

⁷ CACIM, on behalf of the EIOS Collective, January 2007 – ‘Explorations of Open Space : A Proposal for a World Conference and a related consultation process in India to comprehensively, critically, and creatively explore the political-cultural concept of open space’.

⁸ See the report from these workshops, as in endnote 2 above.

⁹ Jai Sen, January 2007 - ‘The World Social Forum as an emergent learning process’, in *Futures* vol 39 (2007), pp 505-522. Available through subscription @ <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2006.10.006>. Unedited original available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-download_file.php?fileId=34.

¹⁰ Arturo Escobar, 2004 – ‘Other worlds are (already) possible : self-organisation, complexity, and post-capitalist cultures’ in Sen, Jai and others eds, *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires*. New Delhi : Viveka

¹¹ Jai Sen, May 2007 – ‘Opening open space : Notes on the grammar and vocabulary of the concept of open space’. Discussion draft 4 modified, May 17 2007.

¹² Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2006 – *The Rise of the Global Left : The World Social Forum and Beyond*. London and New York : Zed Books.

¹³ Walden Bello, May 2007 – ‘World Social Forum at the Crossroads’, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 4 May 2007. Source : Transnational Institute @ http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?act_id=16771.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the assessments and reflections on the US Social Forum in June 2007; summarised on OpenSpaceForum (maintained by CACIM) @ <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=SocialForums%3AUSSocialForum>.

¹⁵ Jai Sen, January 2007 - ‘The World Social Forum as an emergent learning process’, [as above](#).

¹⁶ See, for instance : Anila Daulatzai, December 2004 – ‘A leap of faith : Thoughts on secularistic practices and progressive politics’, in *International Social Science Journal*, Issue no 182, pp 565-576. Available at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/servlet/useragent?func=showIssues&code=issj&open=2004#C2004>; Giuseppe Caruso, December 2004 – ‘Conflict management and hegemonic practices in the World Social Forum 2004’, in *International Social Science Journal*, Issue no 182, pp 577-590. Available at <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/servlet/useragent?func=showIssues&code=issj&open=2004#C2004>; and : Jai Sen, 2004b – ‘How Open ? The Forum as Logo, the Forum as Religion - Scepticism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will’, in Sen, Anand, Escobar, and Waterman, eds, 2004 – *World Social Forum : Challenging Empires* (New Delhi : Viveka), pp 210-227. Available at http://www.choike.org/documentos/wsf_s315_jai.pdf.