

# OPENING UP THE WSF : REDISCOVERING ITS SPIRIT

**A Report on a Seminar organised by CACIM at the World Social Forum at Belém, Brazil, on January 29 2009, on 'Critically Engaging With The Principles Underlying The WSF'**

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*Introduction : The objectives of the meeting, by CACIM :*

The WSF (World Social Forum)'s Charter of Principles has come to be widely celebrated as an unusual and creative constitutional document that promotes a culture of horizontality, diversity, non-linearity, autonomy, and multi-polarity. In many ways, the Charter is one of the strongest expressions of the core principle of the Forum, of being an open-ended open space. Although perhaps no one has actually said this, some have come close to suggesting that it is a remarkable and perhaps even historic document, making manifest many of these new organisational principles of emerging movements across the world.

On the other hand, both the concept and the practice of the Forum have also come to be quite widely contested since its formation in 2001, and where most recently there has been a prominent suggestion that it is perhaps time for it to pack up.<sup>1</sup> An extensive debate has followed. This proposal was also preceded by a seemingly low intensity but high-powered and extensive debate about – and struggle over - the future of the Forum, and in particular that it needs to be given a more articulated political programme.<sup>2</sup> And this is also aside from an even longer debate about the exclusions of fellow-travellers from the WSF that the Charter has brought about, such as of the Zapatistas – who many believe were an inspiration for the global justice movement in general and for the WSF in particular.

Notwithstanding the controversies however, there is much evidence to suggest that the organisers of the Forum have also struggled over these past 7-8 years since its formation in 2000-1 to interpret and make manifest the Forum as envisioned in its Charter. This has been not only in terms of the evolution of the design and the globalisation of the Forum but also in the form and content of the series of rules and procedures they have progressively formulated over these years, and also of the organisational and policy decisions and resolutions that they – primarily in the form of the WSF's International Council – have taken.

CACIM has been involved with raising debate around these and other questions for several years now, in the form of meetings at social fora, of books that its members and associates are writing and/or editing, and of online debates (on the listserve it runs, WSFDiscuss). As a part of this tradition, and in particular because of a decision taken at the meeting of the WSF's International Council at Nairobi in January 2007 to formulate a set of organising principles to guide the planning and conduct of WSF events, and also because the Belém Forum was a place where the Forum was, for the first time in its history, actually attempting to directly engage with the objects of historical and structural oppression – in this case, indigenous peoples – CACIM decided to organise a meeting at the Belém Forum on precisely this issue : *What should be the principles that underlie the World Social Forum ?* What can we learn from the past eight years of the Forum's existence, and what are the challenges that arise from making indigenous peoples centre-stage?

This meeting was one of three interrelated meetings that CACIM organised or co-organised at the Belém Forum. The other ones were titled 'The Politics, Potentials, and Meanings of the Belém Forum : The Significance for the WSF of the Participation of the Indigenous Peoples of the World' and 'Facing the Future : The World Social Forum, the Global Justice Movement,

and Beyond'. For a more detailed statement on the planning of this meeting and the concept behind it, as well as for the lists of speakers and participants and details of the other two meetings, please see <http://cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CACIMatBelem>. And for a report on the meeting on the Belém Forum, see [http://openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=798](http://openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=798).

As it turned out, this meeting – on such a key subject - was one of the very first meetings to take place at the Belém Forum, scheduled as it was in the first timeslot on the very first open day of the Forum ! While great in principle – in terms of contributing from right at the beginning of the event to people at the Belém Forum thinking more deeply about the process of which they were now a part -, the reality was unfortunately somewhat different. Many of the participants (and speakers) had great difficulty finding the venue (right at one end of a huge campus), and arrived late; and the hall we had been allocated was double booked, and ultimately came to be given by the organisers to another organisation (and where we were given something much smaller). So we not only got a room late but we also had to redirect participants arriving at the original venue, and late arrivals found the new venue even more difficult to find, leading to our starting even later - and our losing a full hour of the three that we had.... The meeting was also disadvantaged in another way : Although we fully expected to have participants speaking different languages, and had requested translation facilities well in advance, because we were unable to afford the very high fees the Forum organisers wanted for professional translators (which they also told us of only four days before the Forum started !) all they were able to offer us was one volunteer translator – who, though she tried her best, just could not cope with the language of the discussions that took place. Thankfully however, we had participants who were able to help out, and we managed, but this disadvantage slowed up the exchange even more.

Nevertheless, and despite all these handicaps, we had strong presentations from all our speakers, and we at CACIM would like to thank them all for coming and for taking such strong part :

- **Amit Sengupta** (General Secretary, All India Peoples Science Network, and Member, IWC of WSF India)
- **Cindy Wiesner** (Political Coordinator of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance in the US; represented the Miami Workers Center as the co-chair of the Outreach Working Group on the National Planning Committee for the US Social Forum in June 2007)
- **Nicolas Haeringer** (PhD candidate at the Dauphine University (Paris 9) in sociology, France)
- **Raphael Hoetmer** (Programa de Estudios sobre Democracia y Transformación Global ('Study Programme on Global Democracy and Transformation'), San Marcos University, Peru)
- **Silvia Camurga** (Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras (AMB) & Articulación Feminista Marco Sur, Brazil)
- **Thomas Ponniah** (Lecturer on Social Studies at Harvard University, USA; member of NIGD)
- **Tord Björk** (Student of global social movement, and Chair, Friends of the Earth Sweden).

We also thank other participants for coming and for taking part – and those who translated, for helping out -, and we hope that this report reflects well your recall of the meeting and can, in its small way, contribute to a deeper engagement with the principles underlying – or that should underlie – the World Social Forum.

## A report on the meeting :

The Nairobi World Social Forum (WSF) was a near-disaster and the International Committee meeting that followed was explosive and divisive; it took skilful negotiations on the part of some to hold it together, recalled CACIM's Jai Sen. Thanks to those who still believe that the Forum carries promise, it is still alive. And the International Council of the WSF decided in 2008 that following a new format of the world meeting in 2008, a 'global day of action', the next world meeting of the World Social Forum process would return to Brazil in 2009 but would, for the first time take place not in its normal home at Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil, but at Belém, in the north-east of the country, at the mouth of the Amazon.

A Bahrain-based multi-national phone company Celtel had sponsored the Nairobi WSF. The organisers of the Nairobi Forum were strongly criticised – then, at this seminar - for this move and for the blatant commercialisation of the event. "Who owns the Forum?" asked Nicolas Haeringer, a PhD candidate in sociology at Paris' Dauphine University in France and the co-author of a major essay evaluating the Nairobi Forum. "Do we own the Forum so that we have the space to experiment with ideas?" While Nairobi drew widespread criticism, Belém didn't, but which is strange. The Forum had wound its way to Belém, because the organisers had recognised that the indigenous people, including the Indian tribes of the Amazon, were fighting the destruction wrought by capitalism, just like themselves, and that these people, yet to be lured into this destructive lifestyle, continue to live in harmony with nature and have alternatives to offer. And yet, as Nicolas pointed out, here at the Belém Forum, which was supposedly all about the Amazon and the indigenous and other peoples who inhabit the region, the WSF organisers had ironically once again agreed to have Petrobras, the Brazilian state-owned oil company that is drilling deep in the Amazon for oil, as the main sponsor of the event.

An 'open space' it is, remarked Amit Sengupta, General Secretary, All India Peoples Science Network, but it is also a "contested open space". It cannot be expected to be free of these internal squabbles and contradictions. It is intentional too, ensuring horizontality, diversity and plurality – but, he said, also circumscribed, to keep out patriarchy, casteism, religious fundamentalism, and the proponents of neoliberal globalisation.

While the historic WSF's Charter of Principles (CoP) that was framed in 2001 was an "important attempt at horizontality, multi-polarity, and non-linearity" – as Jai put it – reality has shown that it was still found wanting in principles to steer the Forum clear, such as when it hit choppy waters as it did in Nairobi. Checks and balances were needed to avoid and manage conflicts. The International Committee which met after the Nairobi Forum in 2007 decided to frame guidelines defining not only rules for addressing such conflicts but also to govern the relations between different parts of the Forum – which was an issue that also arose sharply in Nairobi. But these are yet to fully materialise, two years later. Rather than look at this larger question however, the Commission given the responsibility for framing the guidelines chose to focus only on the more local checks and balances for organising a Forum – and then too, the guidelines are difficult to find.<sup>3</sup>

So the guidelines that the WSF has decided to frame for itself are yet to appear on paper - but it is equally the case that resolutions arrived at in earlier fora have also never been adhered to. Nicolas pointed out that in the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre, which had been sponsored by various community groups and *favela* (local working class neighbourhood) organisations, it had been agreed that the Forum should be a 'social territory' where movements could meet, and that this territory should be in coherence with what movements struggle for. Here in Belém however, the Forum brought the WSF closest yet to the struggles of indigenous peoples - but the ownership of the Forum lay in the hands of a company they have been fighting against for destroying their lands in its relentless pursuit of oil.

So : Is the WSF an open space in practice as it is in principle? The ownership of the Belém Forum surely raises doubts over its 'circumscribed openness' – whether it is really free of neoliberal interests as it claims to be. The diversity and its representativeness too are in question. Although the 2004 Mumbai WSF saw a sizeable representation of the indigenous peoples from the region, South Asia, the rest of the fora have been – in the words of Tord Björk, chairperson, Friends of the Earth, Sweden – “middle class gatherings of civil society groups, non-governmental organisations, and academics engaging in endless discussions on neoliberal globalisation”.

Cindy Wiesner, Political Coordinator of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance in the US, though, said that she feels that the character of the global justice movement is in general change – be it ever so slowly. She recalled how the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organisation involved mostly men, most of whom were white. But the third Americas Social Forum held in Guatemala in 2008 witnessed a large congregation of the coloured and of women. A movement for global justice, she realised, demands by its very nature and purpose representations from the working class, the queers, the coloured, and women's organisations. While intentionality and the concept of an open space appeared contradictory, she said, only the two together could make the Forum truly open and representative. “In the US there have been regional and state fora which were not intentional. The leadership was white or was led by academics or policy people. The reflection of who was there and issues that came up and contradictions that were not resolved ultimately play out. By being intentional, we knew we were holding a contradiction but if we weren't intentional we wouldn't have the people we wanted to be there,” she said.

Tord, on the other hand, said that in his long association with the Forum, he has seen it stoop to new lows. For instance, the European Social Forum (ESF), which is led by trade unionists and the Left, shied away from announcing a planned demonstration against the Iraq war. Moreover, and consistent with their ideological leanings, “[the] ESF has the false, leftist version of the declaration [Charter of Principles] on its website where environmental issues are totally marginalised and only capitalism and imperialism have been talked about”, he said. Tord's experience is that the concept of open space, as practised in the WSF, is very singular. “The idea that the WSF is a 'single' place is wrong. In reality there are competing interests,” he noted. But the hegemony of one set of actors – who claim to be the holders of the truth and are in a position to produce the realities – prevails.” He suggested that a continuous discussion forum in the Forum's official website could bring some true openness to the Forum space, but he suspected that those who wanted to control the process do not want to see this happen. Even in instances when the open space has been recognised to be diverse, he rued, they haven't been interlinked – thus not allowing this gradual “accumulation of power to go further.” “Everyone can have their own websites with discussion forums but as long as they are not connected, they will remain market spaces,” he said.

In a similar vein, Raphael Hoetmer, Adjunct Director of the Programa de Estudios sobre Democracia y Transformación Global ('Study Programme on Global Democracy and Transformation') at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Peru, cited the frustration of the members of the Peace Community – which is in the crossfire in the war between the guerrillas and the army in Colombia – of finding the 2006 WSF at Caracas of no relevance to their struggles. And in Nairobi 2008, it was the civil society groups and aid organisations that ran the show, with hardly any representation from the Kenyan indigenous population. “We should use open space in a strategic or creative way, and the WSF as a spirit – a process of opening up spaces. We should invest more on local, thematic fora and on themes and movements that need our support – the criminalisation of movements, for instance,” observed Rapha.

Sylvia Camurga, of the Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras (AMB - Articulation of Brazilian Women) and Articulación Feminista Marco Sur (Feminist Articulation of the Mercosur region)

however suggested that horizontality amidst diversity, which the Forum aspires for, is a formidable challenge. Participating movements bring in their own political cultures, she noted – some may be hierarchical and centralised and others horizontal and anarchic. These differences inevitably play themselves out in the international committee with the hierarchical taking the lead in making decisions and the horizontal finding themselves sidelined. And for new participants, there is inevitably and always a hierarchy that they have to negotiate. “The principles of the Forum are more advanced than our [the participants’] political practices”, she said. Some may come to the Forum expecting it to join forces against globalisation, others may be here simply to demonstrate what they are doing. It therefore becomes essential, she argued, to sift through these two very different expectations, and to articulate them, or the Forum will lose its meaning.

There has also been a change in the global political and economic scenarios since the Forum first came into being. The conviction with which States moved ahead with their neoliberal agenda then has taken a beating from the global economic and ecological crises. This has lent more credibility to the beliefs of the political left as represented by Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez and Bolivia’s Evo Morales. Thomas Ponniah, lecturer in social studies at Harvard University in the US, stressed the need for the Forum “to evolve from being a global communication infrastructure to becoming a global action network that has a global impact and threatens the global economic belief in a changing political scenario with the return of Keynesianism and the rise of the Chavezes and the Moraleses.”

Cindy (Wiesner) too touched on the almost-Keynesian rescue of capitalism and the emergence on the new forms of leadership. However, she said, the Forum should identify protagonists – the people who already have the solutions and are in the best position to bring about change. “The Forum has failed many times to bring forward people who are leading the cutting edge and are offering alternatives against what we are fighting for – in relation, particularly, to indigenous participation,” she said.

Thomas dwelt on the need for the Forum to engage with political parties. The Forum, he noted, was central to articulating the need for the February 15 2003 antiwar demonstration in which 10-15 million people took part, around the world. This was followed by Spain electing a socialist government and pulling its troops out of the Iraq. He concluded, “The movements can mobilise people but do not have the power to stop things like political parties do. So we need a global programme and a space to dialogue with political parties. Excluding political parties from the Forum is inhibiting us.”

Jai (Sen) however had a word of caution on the Forum engaging with the likes of Presidents Lula, Chavez, Correa, Morales, and Lugo – who had a meeting where they addressed the participants at Belém at the very same time as this seminar. He warned, “It is all too easy to be attracted to the locus of power. But it is they who need this kind of legitimacy. It is like the moth seeking the light - but the question here is: Who is the moth and who is the light ?”.

A complex analysis of the success of the Forum in opening up spaces would mean going beyond its formal space, remarked Rapha (Hoetmer) – which he admitted, had problems and needed to be “made more open and sensitive to the Forum’s agenda”. It is easy to be too critical of the WSF, he felt, often at the cost of ignoring the significant changes that are taking place outside the Forum and because of it. There are many ‘informal spaces’ it has managed to open up. For instance, the indigenous peoples of the Andean region met in Quito two days before the Americas Social Forum in 2006. They then met again in Porto Alegre to find a continental coordinator for the indigenous peoples. All this happened in 2006. And now in Belém, they met together with the Amazonian peoples and have jointly proposed October 12 2009 as the day of a worldwide march to defend Mother Earth. “The existing informal space and spirit has, in my opinion, opened up a lot of initiatives that have in turn helped the Forum to move forward,” he said. Tord (Björk) contested his observations. “These parallel processes going on outside the WSF are not because of the Forum but due to

opposition to the Forum. There are mass mobilisations going on outside the forum. If we don't address ourselves to need for mobilisation, we are dead," he said. "At an informal level, it is mobilisation that counts. But the forum is not a space for discussions alone, it is also a space for organising action." While it is up to the movements to decide on formulae, it is for the WSF to promote this understanding, he explained.

An NIGD participant was of the view that the search for alternatives should be prioritised over building of movements; the Forum, therefore, needed to take the shape of a process but the lack of documentation of what is happening in the Forum was hampering the Forum's evolution as a process. Another participant from California, in the US, alluded to the overabundance of NGOs as the reason behind a lot of people being excluded from the Forum. Benjamin Bunk from Germany, observing that diversity could keep out the hegemony of a certain group, asked, "Shouldn't the Forum try to become a social utopia so that everyone can participate - as right now, there is a lot of exclusion?"

What stood out starkly to Tord was the exclusion of Mexico's Zapatista movement, which had pioneered the struggle against neoliberalism in the early nineties and had inspired the Global Justice Movement in general and the WSF in particular. And yet, when the Brazil's Worker's Party joined together with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to call the first Forum, the Zapatistas came to be excluded as a consequence of the CoP that the WSF's first Committee prepared excluding groups who have resorted to arms. And from then on, all the Fora have, to the contrary, carried a huge NGO presence. "NGOs professionalise and corporatise movements," Tord maintained. "This creates a disconnect between discussion and action." He also rued the fact that while liberation movements like the Zapatistas are kept out of the Forum, political parties and the resurgent Left at the helm of Latin American States - in the form of Presidents Lula, Chavez, Correa, Morales, and Lugo - are welcomed into the Forum with deafening applause. "There are no nice political parties", he said; "they are part of the dominant system and they are violent, and so are liberation movements, sometimes. Even civil society is responsible for a lot of the violence, as well. It is founded on money that comes from somewhere else".

Amit (Sengupta) admitted that the event that the Forum takes the shape of every year holds a lot of promise, because an open space unfolds in the event but, in a process, things also had to be prioritised and the idea of open space is often compromised. "But it is for the movements to invest in the form," he added. "To be able to bring Palestinian movements, those from Iraq here – this is where the real challenge lies."

Rapha was against reducing the Forum to either an event or a process. He felt the need of a WSF spirit that pervades the way the participants think and engage in politics, thus influencing those they engage with even outside the Forum – a solution, perhaps, to resolving the looming contradiction, that Sylvia (Camurga) pointed out, between how we live our lives, which are often patriarchal, exploitative, and exclusionary, and the WSF Charter which we relate to when we are at the Forum. Indeed, what we seem to need is precisely the spirit that the WSF's Charter articulates it as being : Horizontal, multi-polar, and non-linear.

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<sup>1</sup> Walden Bello, May 2007 – 'World Social Forum at the Crossroads', in Foreign Policy in Focus, May 4 2007. Source : Transnational Institute @ [http://www.tni.org/detail\\_page.phtml?act\\_id=16771](http://www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?act_id=16771).

<sup>2</sup> See, for full details : Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar, compilers, with Patrick Bond and Peter Waterman, January 2007 – A Political Programme for the World Social Forum ? Democracy, Substance, and Debate in the Bamako Appeal and the Global Justice Movements - A Reader. Published by CACIM (Critical Action : Centre in Movement), New Delhi, India, and University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society (CCS), Durban, South Africa. Soft copy available @ [www.cacim.net](http://www.cacim.net) and [www.nu.ac.za/ccs](http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs).

<sup>3</sup> The only version of this document that seems to be publicly available as of June 2009 (even though a final version was supposedly approved by the International Council at its meeting in Copenhagen in September 2008) is an October 2007 first draft; @ <http://www.wsfprocess.net/mem/drafting-recommendations-about-organizing-wsf-events/guiding-principles-for-holding-wsf-events-revised-draft-1/> (accessed 12.06.09) : Vinod Raina, October 2007 – 'Guiding Principles for Holding WSF Events', draft 1, 26.10.2007. This draft is also available @ [http://openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=501](http://openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=501). We from CACIM have repeatedly requested both the main author and the WSF International Office for a copy of the final version of the report or a link to it, but have not received anything as yet.