

REPORT FROM THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM¹ FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVISTS AND ANALYSTS IN AFRICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report to social movement analysts and activists in South Africa and the rest of Africa arises from the meeting of the International Council (IC) of the World Social Forum that was held in Mumbai following immediately on from the Fourth World Social Forum that took place there 16-21 January 2004. Rather than trying to report in detail on the Mumbai forum itself, the main concern of this report is to communicate the assessments and the proposals for the future of the forum that were posed during the IC meeting, and to contribute to further discussions and actions on the matters raised directly, or posed indirectly. However, even as activists in Africa are becoming more aware of the WSF, it is necessary to briefly locate this report within some broader overviews of the nature of the WSF and the existing/emerging debates around its aims and functioning.

Ever since it was first held in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 2001, and then again in 2002 and 2003, the WSF has been growing in size (to include many hundreds of meetings), expanding in participation (from 15,000, to 60,000, to 100,000) and increasing in impact. It is also developing further in its methods of organisation through many discussions, external analyses and internal self-assessments. In this way, for example, it was agreed that the location of the WSF should be 'rotated' annually, alternating between Porto Alegre and other key parts of the world. For the first move it was agreed that the WSF of 2004 should be held in India as another major country of the South and one with the vast and vibrant social movements that are so crucial as the aim and inspiration, and the vital mass base of the WSF wherever it is held.

The fourth meeting of the WSF drew more than 120,000 people into the Indian mega-city of Mumbai. As had been intended, most participants were from the Indian sub-continent and from the rest of Asia. Whereas Porto Alegre, as was also to be expected, was heavily Latin American in the mass participation. There were also more Africans at the Mumbai forum than in earlier forums in Porto Alegre. This is mainly due to the increasing interest in the WSF within Africa. It is difficult to report exactly how many African organisations and individuals were present in Mumbai, but it is necessary to note that, despite efforts by the African Social Forum to identify and finance a large number of African organisations to go to Mumbai (seemingly between 60 and 70) a larger number seem to have attended under other invitations and financing, and many of these went as 'partner' organisations to Northern NGOs [see also 4. below]. As to the attendance from South Africa *per se*, it must be stressed that there was no single "South African delegation", as the local media reported, because the approximately 25-30 South African organisations

¹ Based on a presentation made to a WSF Report-Back meeting hosted by the Alternative Information and Development Center in Cape Town on 12th February 2004.

and individuals present in Mumbai also seem to have gone there on a variety of ‘tickets’ and under separate initiatives and invitations.

What is more generally significant about the predominantly Asian version of the WSF is that it introduced new features and gave different emphases to various dimensions of the WSF processes. The preparatory Indian organising and mobilising efforts over two years contributed to the expansion of the WSF subject content and coverage, and to debates within, and about, the WSF in significant ways. The experience of Mumbai is also stimulating further analyses and debates about the nature of this dynamic expression of popular forces, and about the direction(s) of development of this important means for the expanding organisation, interaction and cooperation of such forces throughout the world .

2. WHAT ARE THE BROAD AIMS OF THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM ?

There are differing views, or rather differing emphases, about the overall aims and purposes of the WSF. It was originally planned to coincide with and to act as a contrast and a counter to the annual World Economic Forum of global corporate and political elites meeting in Davos Switzerland. But with the possible change in the cycle of the WSF and of the future dates [see 10.1 and 10.2 below] and, more fundamentally, with the growing self-confidence and development of global social movements, the purpose of the WSF as a symbolic counterpoint to Davos is becoming less central. The more movement-centered motivations are receiving greater emphasis. The following are the broad visions from within the World Social Forum and its participating organisations as to its fundamental role and purposes.

2.1 The general view focuses on the importance of creating **a powerful popular manifestation and ‘statement’ to the whole world** by bringing together and demonstrating the scale and the depth, and the richness of the ideas and aims of the world’s popular social movements: their well-founded critiques and their paradigmatic and practical alternatives to neo-liberal policies and practices, institutions and agencies, and the growing resistance against the damaging effects and implications of the current global economic system and regime.

2.2 Within this, another view stresses the purpose of the WSF to enable the world’s growing mass social movements, themselves, to gain **inspiration and encouragement from each other’s experiences and achievements** and from seeing and directly feeling themselves to be part of ever larger and world-wide social forces; experiences that are particularly important for those popular and democratic forces struggling in extremely adverse circumstances or under oppressive conditions within their own countries.

2.3 A related view, or emphasis, is that such in-gatherings of so many and such diverse social forces must go even further than such important mutual encouragement and general ‘inspiration’, as above; namely to actively facilitate their **sharing of information and the exchange of ideas towards the further development of people themselves and their organisations**, and of sectoral and general, specific and holistic alternatives to the currently dominant system(s) – hence the overarching WSF slogan “Another World is Possible !”.

2.4 The even broader view is that the WSF is both a space for popular engagement and mutual strengthening, as above, as well as a site and process of **discussions on plans of action and active campaigns** to promote both diverse programs and shared aims, and a

practical base from which to agree common plans of action – hence the expanded slogan of the WSF in Mumbai “Another World is Possible! Let’s Build It !!”

Most participants in the WSF support all the above aims, but give different emphases to them. These differing emphases by various participants and analysts

- ✓ reflect and influence the ways in which such participants act within the WSF,
- ✓ underpin their assessments as to how the WSF is working, and
- ✓ affect their views and suggestions on how it should continue and develop further.

3. THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM AS AN ‘OPEN SPACE’

Much emphasis has been given and commitment has been made to promote the WSF as an ‘open space’ rather than ‘a conference’, or ‘a movement’ or ‘an organisation’, and this is the common understanding of those who subscribe to its charter of principles [see Appendix A at the end]. But there is also continuing discussion about this concept and its operationalisation.

3.1 Not an unqualified and unconditional open space

Although defined and defended as an ‘open space’ for all popular social forces, mass social movements, trade unions and other labour organisations, NGOs, civic organisations, and many others, this is not an unconditional and unqualified space. The framework for the WSF is unequivocally based on

- rejection of the dominant neo-liberal ideology and institutions currently governing the world and impacting on all countries, communities and people;
- opposition to local, national and globalised capitalism, expressed by many as corporate-serving and power-driven economic globalisation;
- resistance to the latest phase and aggressive manifestations of world-wide imperialist domination, seen also as a new form of (re)colonisation.

3.2 Not a neutral - or uncontested - space

The WSF is also not neutral as to the system of values and principles and the general ethos or spirit infusing its processes, although there are ongoing open debates within the WSF on some issues. These principles and the debates around them are expressed in

- commitment to genuine democracy and pluralism, and validation of the legitimacy of differences of methods and specific aims, tactics and strategies within the above framework of fundamental positions;
- total rejection of exclusions and discriminations based on social origins, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion, patriarchy or other sources/causes of injustice and social inequalities – areas in which Mumbai made significant contributions to the expansion of the visions and concerns of the WSF;
- strong opposition to war, and for peace; despite some differences of opinion and continuing debates over the official WSF commitment to non-violence, which is expressed practically in the exclusion of organisations, even if mass-based, that resort to the use of force to further their aims;
- continuing debate on another ‘exclusion’, namely the refusal of direct participation to political parties; although, even for those in favour of the participation of political parties that subscribe to the WSF framework, there is agreement that the WSF must not be used as an electoral platform and, once in power, political parties as governing forces could no longer participate in the WSF;
- ongoing debate on another form of exclusion/inclusion, that is about members of governments and inter-governmental institutions (such as UN agencies) being invited by

‘self-organising’ groups within the WSF framework [see 5. below] to debate with them, although such representatives are not permitted autonomous participation in the WSF².

The WSF is also not uncontested from without. Apart from the opposition from neo-liberal forces and vested interests in the *status quo*, which is to be expected, there are, on the other hand, amongst the forces ranged against the currently dominant global economic system and institutional regime, and against the dominant ruling forces, some who consider that the WSF is not assertive enough and appropriately unified in explicitly condemning globalised capitalism and promoting socialist or communist alternatives. Consistent with the spirit of the WSF, popular social movements and organisations of this point of view are welcome to participate in the open space that is the WSF and promote their views, but in India they decided to organise as the Mumbai Resistance in parallel to the Mumbai World Social Forum.

4. PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM

Another important set of issues relating to the conceptualisation of the WSF as an ‘open space’ arises from the fact that world-wide access to this space is very uneven. Many mass organisations, even with extremely limited resources, made enormous efforts to organise and enable their members to travel to Mumbai. This was evident in the large numbers of peasant, worker, women, youth, indigenous and other grass-roots groups, mainly from the Indian subcontinent but also elsewhere in Asia, ‘camping’ in very basic conditions in and around the forum site. This had also been evident in Porto Alegre, although perhaps on a lesser scale in some sectors³.

However, analysis of the World Social Forum as a whole shows that other participation is based on four different types of ‘selection’. These pose specific challenges to the WSF and to all social movements and other popular and concerned organisations, North and South, and particularly to us in Africa.

4.1 ‘Self-selection’

In principle, the WSF is based on voluntary and committed participation through self-selection and self-identification with the fundamental framework of the WSF. Despite the formal principles and agreed framework of the WSF, this openness inevitably allows in organisations and individuals who may have more limited perspectives or are very cautious in their positions on the global system and institutions, and who do not necessarily understand or go along with the radical and transformative framework of the WSF. As the WSF gains in global recognition, it could also become something of an ‘alternative fashion’ and attract ever more individuals, NGOs and similar organisations of this inclination. And - whether this is their deliberate intention or not - this could affect the overall nature of the participation, ‘soften’ the substance and influence the directions of development of the WSF.

The fundamental answer to this possibility is, of course, to increase the participation and role in the WSF of the much greater numbers of the world’s popular social movements

² The similar problem of how to include parliamentarians from national and regional (such as the EU) legislatures, and elected local government or municipal representatives, is dealt with by arranging for a specific Parliamentary Forum and a Local Government Forum in parallel to the main forum processes, but also encouraging them to then participate in the WSF as individuals, in order to experience and hopefully be influenced by the broader forum processes and spirit.

³ Although the Youth Forums in their Porto Alegre ‘camp’ drew in up to twelve thousand participants

and determined anti-globalisation and consciously anti-capitalist forces. But this, in turn, points to another problematic issue, in that access is, in practical terms, not equally available to all potential participants. There are much greater resources available and possibilities for richer NGOs and other organisations - and even individuals - from the North to travel to the WSF, to participate in the discussions and to set up 'self-organised' activities [see 5. below]. Such initiatives may be entirely well-intentioned, are unquestionably their democratic right and are, in principle, to be welcomed. But this invariably gives them a weight and influence disproportionate to their real social weight and active base in their own countries, and they may have a presence and a degree of influence that is even more disproportionate on a world scale.

4.2 'Partner selections'

When this situation is pointed out to Northern NGOs and social organisations who see themselves as part of the WSF 'stream', they do not fail to agree that this is a totally unacceptable imbalance. But their probably sincere endeavours to ensure a more participation of popular organisations from the South, and particularly from Africa, results in northern 'donor' organisations, often the same Northern NGOs already enjoying a strong presence, responding to requests for affirmative actions and assistance to those from the South, but often doing so by selecting their 'partners' in the South to attend the WSF.

Depending on the nature of these North-South partner organisations and their inter-relations, this may or may not - but very often does - undermine the independent participation and full self-expression of the Southern 'partners'. Furthermore, their selection may not necessarily reflect their own roles and real weight on their home grounds. This type of dependence seems to be particularly problematic in Africa, but may apply also to other countries and similar organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific (and in Eastern Europe?). The main responsibility and the solutions lie with such South organisations dealing with this financial - and often political - dependence on their Northern 'partners' (which, of course, is a broader issue than only WSF participation). But more objective and general solutions are also required and are being discussed in the WSF IC [see 4.3 below].

4.3 Independent 'representative' selection.

Efforts to ensure 'un-tied' financial resources to try to guarantee the independent participation of organisations from the South has, in Africa, resulted in considerable funds being mobilised and largely channeled to/through the Secretariat of the African Social Forum. This could be a sound solution if the structures of the African Social Forum functioned satisfactorily but, at present, this is a subject of dissatisfaction and disagreement within the continent. There are processes underway to address the various organisational issues within the ASF but, hitherto, the nature of the ASF has been reflected also in unsatisfactory processes of somewhat *ad hoc* or improvised methods of selection of 'representatives' from the different regions and organisations in Africa to attend the ASF and the WSF. Despite some efforts to ensure legitimacy in these processes of identification and selection, the fact to note at this point is that this is a selection [see also 12 below].

Similar organisational and financial problems very probably obtain in other countries and regions of the South, and further efforts and appropriate measures are called for internationally to respond to this. A partial solution to the financial side of the problem is a proposed WSF 'Solidarity Fund' for all those facing disadvantages and difficulties in

organising and attending the WSF. However, even if such funds were of the scale required, questions will still remain with regard to the methods of identification of recipients and the allocation of such resources. The agreed position within the IC is that such solidarity support would apply to a much wider range of potential participants than only from Africa. Such questions need to be discussed and solutions proposed at all local, national and regional/continental levels [see also 12 below].

4.4. 'Official selection'.

A fourth form of 'selection' of participants in the WSF is done by the WSF organising committees themselves, whether Brazilian, Indian or International. This selected participation, although very much smaller numerically than any of the above, arises through the processes of identifying and inviting speakers for the official forums that are set up under various designations, such as conferences, round-tables and panels and organised from within the WSF structures. Even with full and open discussions, wide-ranging consultations and conscientious efforts to ensure geographical, sectoral, social and gender representitvity, there has been a tendency to identify international 'figures' and 'experts', and intellectual 'heavy-weights'. The great majority of these, so far, have been male, and many of them - on past experience in the WSF - are not necessarily the most appropriate speakers to address very large gatherings, let alone popular audiences.

This 'communication' problem is accompanied by the more basic problem that some such figures, however eminent and legitimate in other ways, are not necessarily involved with or come from within, and are not necessarily accountable to any mass movement (or even NGO) in their own countries or domains. Although the participation in the WSF is influential, although organisationally 'unattached' intellectual figures may act as an inspiration and active motivation to them to become involved, their political weight and influence may continue to be somewhat exaggerated. This, of course, is a common and long-standing problem with the involvement of intellectuals in mass movements all over the world.

The World Social Forum has always drawn in and will continue to draw in NGO-based activists and radical intellectuals in addition to the representatives of mass movements, and other popular organisations. But what is most important is the relative weight and appropriate balance between all these components of the global social forces opposing globalised capitalism and seeking to create and secure alternatives for humanity and the world. These issues of balance, relationships and interactions, and respective roles are evident in other aspects of the WSF process, and these have become even clearer during and out of the Mumbai forum, and in the discussions and assessments within the WSF-IC, as follows.

5. THE WSF AS 'FORUM' AND 'FESTIVAL'

The WSF has always been a mixture of many hundreds of 'self-organised' meetings of every size, form and content, together with 'testimonies' and other distinctive forms of popular political, cultural and social expression and action, as well as all-inclusive mass marches, huge rallies and lively demonstrations. The Mumbai Social Forum included all these elements, but their relative weight and forms of participation differed to the processes in Porto Alegre. It could be said that Mumbai, in effect, 'inverted' the earlier WSF pattern of **forums interlaced with various other popular political and cultural actions and activities**. Mumbai consisted rather of a vast and varied array of intersecting and (literally) criss-crossing popular marches and demonstrations, chanting, dancing,

drumming and singing, *ad hoc* cultural expressions and prepared ‘street theatre’, and a web of many other **popular actions and activities within which were interspersed discussion forums and other meetings.**

In Mumbai, the big forums – the discussion panels, round-tables and similar meetings – tended, in the main, to be less based on or less inclusive of mass organisational participation than their Porto Alegre counterparts, and were thus much smaller than the 4,000 to 8,000 participants expected in the cavernous halls prepared. The great majority of the participants in Mumbai were engaged in the ‘streets’ of the vast forum site, on the many open-air platforms provided, and in the mass events in the huge improvised ‘auditorium’. In this regard, it is also important to convey the symbolism and effects of the Mumbai forum taking place in a vast derelict industrial site⁴, as compared with the initial concentration of the Porto Alegre forums in various university campuses and similar venues, although expanded in consecutive years to include similarly abandoned warehouses and open spaces in that city.

In this context, the patterns of participation in Mumbai led to various observations during the meeting of the International Council, namely :

- that the Mumbai process consisted of ‘discussion forums’ on the one hand and a **‘popular political festival’** on the other; but also
- that the ‘festival’ side, in fact, expressed and reflected popular modes of political expression and that there were, thus, **‘two types of forum’** in Mumbai; but also
- that the **‘forums on the streets’** are not only forms of action but expressions of ideas that promote deeper understandings, and that the **‘forums in the halls’** must similarly produce actions as well as ideas; and consequently
- that the forums in the streets and the forums in the halls have to be seen as equally politically valid, and the **challenge therefore is to inter-link them more, to unite ‘streets’ and ‘halls’**; pointing to the conclusion
- that while there were indeed different types of participation and activities in the Mumbai WSF, there was basically still **“one forum, although with different expressions, within the same framework of common concerns and aims”**.

Although posed above as a logically related set of observations, this is not how such views are necessarily expressed by different participants and analysts of the WSF. Many assessments in the IC tended to focus on only one or a few of the above views. These differing interpretations and emphases about the Mumbai process have revived and reinforced the long-standing discussions about the structuring and organisation of the WSF. These differing views are reflected in the proposals now being put forward and debated within the Indian and the Brazilian Organising Committees and in the IC as to the future (re)structuring and organisation of the WSF, as follows.

6. INTERNAL (RE)STRUCTURING OF THE WSF ?

Since the organising bodies are responsible not only for practical/logistical aspects but also for the overall organisation and structuring of the WSF, much of the focus of the debates on the character and directions of development of the WSF tends to be on those aspects of the structuring of the WSF for which the organising committees have direct

⁴ And much credit is due to the Indian Organising Committee for the imaginative way in which they selected and prepared this site, using local skills and materials to turn it into an appropriate ‘tented’ space – although dusty and often quite basic – for an event reflecting the realities of the circumstances of lives of the great majority of the participants

collective responsibility. And these are not simply ‘practical’ organisational issues because they relate to issues of content and substance that carry political implications.

In the first place, because it was decided from the outset that the essence of the WSF resides in the common events and mass activities, the overall aims and purposes of the WSF can best be guaranteed, or arguably best advanced in the very large meetings organised jointly. Thus the official WSF organising committees, national or international, are faced with difficult choices as to how the big events and all-inclusive processes should be conceived and organised.

6.1 The nature and role of the ‘big panels’ and related all-inclusive events

The discussions in the WSF IC meeting immediately after the Mumbai forum included different responses to the type of issues posed in 5. above. Opinions expressed and proposals put forward about the big forums, the panels, round-tables and similar jointly organised events were that these:

- **should be eliminated altogether** since they encourage too ‘directive’ political roles for the organising committees, give too great a role to ‘key speakers’, are inimical to popular modes of political discourse, discourage broader interactive participation and dialogue, and could even encourage elitism; **or**
- as they are the core of the WSF and have to be maintained, the big central panels/meetings should be totally transformed in character to become **inclusive spaces for popular participation** based on testimonies and other forms of popular political expression and debate; and the more theoretical debates should be relegated to other venues/formats; **or**
- that **‘high level’ discussion panels or round table debates are also sites, and means, of struggle** and have a role to play in encouraging strategic and even theoretical debates between experienced activists and credible analysts, and are unique opportunities to make such discussions available to wider constituencies than would normally be possible; **or**
- that, even if such central panels do have theoretical and strategic functions, they **should be selectively reduced in number and more strategically focused** only on the currently most pressing broad strategic issues/subjects, with the remaining issues dealt with in the many smaller independent and more interactive ‘self-organised’ events; **or**
- that such big central forums should be changed more radically to being instead **broadly informational, educational and mobilisational** in form and aims, and thus functioning at different levels or types of discourse and in language(s) appropriate to popular constituencies; **or**
- that such big central forums should be designed as the venues and means for gathering in the wide range of popular and activist participants from different ‘sectors’ of engagement and specialised international networks into cross-sectoral discussions or **‘horizontal articulations’ drawing together their respective views and proposals into combined events or broader campaigns, or even longer-term plans of action.**

In fact, what all the above perspectives and suggestions are pointing to are the perennial challenges facing all popular organisations/movements everywhere. These can be summed up as the challenges of having to simultaneously ensure

- ✓ cutting edge **theoretical** discussions and **conceptual** clarifications;
- ✓ immediate (and longer-term) **strategic** debates, perspectives and proposals;
- ✓ up-to-date **analytical and informational** sessions on major current global concerns;
- ✓ inclusive and empowering **educational** processes and popular ‘capacity building’;
- ✓ interactive modalities of **‘vertical’ dialogues** to develop ideas ... and people;

- ✓ processes of **horizontal exchanges** between different sectors and networks;
- ✓ mutual support and cooperation towards **common campaigns and joint actions** based on cross-cutting issues and common concerns.

In the case of the WSF, the related challenge is how - or whether - all such aims and purposes are to be achieved in and through the centrally organised events; and how, if at all, to restructure these big processes accordingly. But the fundamental challenge, in fact, does not lie simply in deciding the (re)structuring and nature of the big forums or joint panels etc, but rather in analysing and agreeing **through what organisational forms, at what 'levels' of discussion, and through what modes, all the above aims and needs are best served and best advanced.**

In sum, the question is: which of the above purposes can best be advanced through very large conference, panels and round-tables addressing many thousands of participants, and/or relatively smaller conferences attended by 'only' a few thousand or hundreds of participants ; and/or yet smaller 'seminars' or workshops and other meetings differing in size and in style to each other and to the very big or bigger processes. These options pose direct and more detailed questions not only about the 'official' WSF processes *per se* but about the role of the WSF itself, in relation to such processes aims. The same applies even to the other self-organised forms, formats and levels of engagement within the WSF.... and outside of the WSF

6.2 Other forms, formats and 'levels' of engagement

There are no simple formulae as to which topics and aims are best promoted at which levels or through which format(s). But, on the basis of wide and deep experience of popular organisations throughout the world, it can in general be observed that

- Interactive processes of **dialogue and participatory debate** are more difficult the larger the event and the number of people involved.
- **Broad information and mobilisation** processes can be achieved in large gatherings if the facilitators have the necessary communication means and skills and language(s).
- More in-depth **educational and 'capacity-building'** processes are best achieved through more focused interactive means and most effectively in smaller participatory 'workshops' (whatever their designation).
- **Theoretical analyses and conceptual debates** are, similarly, probably best advanced in other types of relatively smaller participatory meetings, such as 'strategy seminars'.
- **Tactical and strategic discussions** to consider all possible scenarios and options, and the complex relationships between interim tactics and broader strategic goals, are also probably best achieved in smaller rather than very large meetings.
- **Cross-cutting exchanges and inclusive cross-sectoral discussions on common campaigns, or plans of action** should only and can only be achieved in large open meetings; even if the practical implementation invariably has to be undertaken later/elsewhere by smaller designated groups.

Of course, as every activist/organiser also knows, such different 'levels' of discussion can also become narrowly-based, socially and organisationally, and even unintentionally elite-ist, rather than encouraging and enabling active popular participation, and this is a constant challenge everywhere. But, rather than the size or structures of the spaces/venues for different types of engagement, it is the agreed purposes, the internal *modus operandii*, the orientation/facilitation, and the preparation and understanding of facilitators and contributors, that determine **whether and how each of the forms functions at different levels; how or at which 'level' each of the above purposes or**

processes is best advanced; and ultimately how or whether these are best advanced within the WSF.

Many of these decisions do not lie principally with the central organising structures of the WSF because the smaller conferences, round-tables, seminars, workshops, and the like, are essentially the terrain for the self-organising activities of participating networks, organisations and groups, and these assessments and challenges must be taken up by them. Nonetheless, there is in this latter regard a further difficult and delicate coordinating function facing the central WSF organisers and all organisations participating in the WSF.

6.3 Coordination, cooperation and combination

Even at those levels and in those areas where the WSF organising committee(s) do not have direct responsibilities, that is in the 'self-organised' events, there are still many complex and important responsibilities for them. And the self-selecting and self-organising groups also have to be aware of and sensitive to the realities that :

- There is, on the one hand, the sheer scale and complexity of finding the necessary **time and satisfactory space for the many hundreds of autonomous events** planned by participating groups, and also to do so in ways that do not impinge upon the time/space allocated to the main large panels and all-inclusive events.
- There is also the need to try to rationalise or simplify the program to avoid duplications of very similar meetings, or overlaps which prevent participants from attending coinciding meetings on their areas of concern. This problem entails **encouraging groups working on the same topics to host joint events/debates** but without detracting from their own diversities and self-expression.
- Conversely, the even more important challenge for the central organisers is to construct the functional framework for the multiplicity of events in such a way as to **create 'thematic streams' or 'axes'** ⁵ **but not to do so in a way that encourages compartmentalisation** of organisations into their own areas of prime concern and with inadequate horizontal inter-linkages and cross-fertilisations with other 'thematic' areas and networks.
- And there is the similar challenge of enabling different social sectors, such as peasants, women and youth, to hold their own distinct and autonomous forums, while at the same time creating processes that **encourage close interactions and inter-linkages between these and the main forum(s)**, in order to ensure the participation of all social sector organisations in the main interactive exchanges and activities and in the actions coming out of the overall processes of the WSF ⁶.

All these kinds of

- ✓ empowering joint events and debates between those working on the same issues or in the same sectors (such as on debt, or AIDS);

⁵ 'Axes' is the plural of 'axis' – difficult to translate from the Portuguese term 'eixos' used in Brazil/ Latin America; but denoting a pole or column or, in political terms, a specific direction, a path or stream of interest and activity of similarly-focused organisations.

⁶ This is particularly necessary with regard to many trade unions which seem to have been corralled by the leaders of international trade union 'centers' into processes separate from the rest of the WSF - possibly in order to have a formal 'presence' in an undeniably important international gathering but, even in so doing, trying to prevent too intensive interactions of trade unionists with more radical popular forces in the WSF which might undermine the controlling role of trade union bureaucrats.

- ✓ enriching interactions and cross-fertilisations between those working in different but related sectors (such as on debt and trade, or trade and environment etc); and
 - ✓ inter-linkages between all social sectors and their respective organisations (such as peasant organisations interacting with trade unions);
- pose both organisational and political challenges to the WSF committee(s) and all the participating organisations in the WSF.

This challenge goes further because the solutions do not lie solely in how the forum programs are arranged, although this is important and can facilitate the above. The answer resides more fundamentally in the spirit of cooperation and debate that is fostered within and through the WSF.... even as it does also encourage ‘self-organised events’. And these inter-linkages, in turn, depend even more on

- ✓ the organisational or political culture of the participating organisations, themselves, and their commitment not only to be promoting ‘their’ issue(s) of concern and their proposals and solutions (and resisting the temptation to also be promoting themselves), but also
- ✓ their simultaneous commitment to being cooperative in the building of unity and solidarity between all the forces and components of the world social movement in the face of grave dangers in all sectors and to the whole world.

This is where ‘diversity and open space’ and shared concerns must be brought together.

7. BOTH ‘OPEN SPACE’ AND ‘ACTION BASE’

The other significant development that was evident in the post-Mumbai assessments within the WSF-IC was a greater emphasis on the WSF being not only a space for discussions and debates but also - and essentially – a base for ongoing activities and actions. This double character, but each receiving differing emphases, has been a constant feature, in discussion and in practice, within the WSF since its birth.

7.1 The view of the WSF as essentially a space

This view tends to suggest, whether this is spelled out or not, that shared information and ideas, experimental alternatives and experiential exchanges are important, in and of themselves, and in furthering processes of change in ideas, organisations and people. Or, for those more consciously committed to broader societal change, there are implicit and explicit convictions that these processes will have wider effects on others outside of the immediate experiences of the WSF, including the alternative and even mainstream media. Or, put another way, such information and ideas will influence and change broader ‘public opinion’. Through such processes the WSF will gradually but incrementally make ‘another world possible’.

This approach does not, of course, preclude ongoing activities out of and beyond the WSF, but it does not necessarily promote or prioritise broader joint actions from within the WSF. More significantly, however, this approach does not seem to acknowledge that alternatives to the current world system and regime, however creative and essential, are faced with the counter-challenges of vested interests in the *status quo* and active or passive resistance to change. And the realisation or achievement of transformative aims and aspirations is also confronted with the exercise of many kinds and levels of actively antagonistic power. In short, this approach within the WSF does not seem to recognise, let alone actively take up the issues and the structures of power; except, implicitly by some, looking towards national electoral processes.

7.2 The view of the WSF as the base for plans of action

This view is that, while the sharing of inspiring ideas and empowering information, and the discussion of practical alternatives are without doubt essential, they are insufficient to make 'another world possible'.... and achievable. In this view, it is essential also to recognise and respond to the sources of antagonistic power creating and driving the current global system and regime and resisting and actively countering such an alternative world and threatening the very survival of the world. Thus, in this perspective, the WSF has also to be a process of discussions on active campaigns to promote both diverse and shared aims, and a practical base from which to agree plans of action in order to actively mobilise much wider layers of people throughout the world, to expose and directly challenge the agencies of hostile power.

However, even for those who are committed to the view that the WSF should be a base to promote joint activities and ongoing global actions, there are different conceptions as to how this should be done, and how it will happen... or already does happen.

7.2.1 At one end is the view is that the forum as a whole should move towards producing formal declarations and united programs of action which would be more powerful coming from the WSF *per se* and carrying the stamp of global legitimacy of 'the world-wide movement'. In this view, the WSF must be developed into a united and coordinated global movement that is commensurate with the nature and challenges of the single globalised system and global power(s)⁷.

7.2.2 The directly contrary view is that it is contradictory for 'the WSF' itself to be adopting a single official declaration or plan of action in the context of its principles of pluralism. Trying to turn the WSF into a united global movement is self-defeating and not feasible in practical terms with such a diversity of participants. What is more, such a thrust would be divisive and drive many away. More fundamentally, one organisation and one plan for an alternative global system is in contradiction with the diverse conceptions as to what 'another world' or other worlds could or should be, and how it or they will be created. And the promotion of a single 'plan' is in contradiction with the very nature of the open and intensive debates underway in the forum and globally about alternatives to globalised capitalism and for the future (survival) of the world.

7.2.3 Another view is that the gathering together of a large number and broad cross-section of participating organisations within the WSF should enable and encourage those who so wish to discuss and adopt joint declarations, and formulate common campaigns and plans of action. The WSF, in this view, is a broad field of active engagement to build common aims and actions. These, however, should not claim to be 'the' official position of the WSF. Such broad agreements should rather go out under specific banners, such as the Social Movements Network [see Appendix B], although explicitly and actively encouraging all participants within the WSF and globally to support the aims and activities proposed.

7.2.4 Yet another view is that it is not one plan of action, nor one type of actions that

⁷ In the African context a similar view is expressed about the role and necessary central, directive and programmatic character of the African Social Forum: as in the 'Briefing Document on the African Social Forum' prepared for the meeting on 7th January 2004 for some of the South African participants due to attend the WSF. See also 12 below.

should emerge and that should be encouraged to emerge from the WSF. Many and diverse actions should be stimulated by information gleaned from exchanges in the WSF and by the very experience of participating in the WSF. But these ongoing activities will, and must, arise out of existing - and perhaps further newly inspired – international networks and organisations. In current global actions, it is these ‘thematic’ or ‘issue’ networks and social/sectoral organisations that reach out to other organisations: appealing to them either to endorse their calls and include their aims within their own campaigns⁸, or to come together in alliances and turn specific/sectoral actions into inclusive global campaigns and events⁹.

The first two views above (7.2.1 and 7.2.2) are clearly directly opposed. The last two approaches (7.2.3 and 7.2.4) are not mutually exclusive. But, of these latter two views,

- ✓ the one focuses more on encouraging global plans or simultaneous days of action and joint strategies, and aims to get these supported by an ever-widening range of forces; whereas
- ✓ the other consists of a myriad of activities in different campaigns, at different levels, and in different sectors which are important in and of themselves and which may (or may not, but hopefully do) coalesce into united sectoral or global actions and campaigns.

The ‘**general global plans drawing in the many**’ or ‘**the many diverse plans combining in various ways or at different points into one**’ are not mutually contradictory but reflect subtle differences of perspective or ‘starting points’. And these are reflected also in differences of emphases and differences in the conceptualisation of organisational relationships, weight and sequencing. These, in turn carry practical and political challenges for social movements everywhere, for the African Social Forum in particular [see 12 below] and for the WSF as a whole.

8. BROADER CONCEPTUAL REPOSITIONING OF THE WSF ?

The internal structural issues and options facing the organisers of the WSF, as indicated above [6.2] are that, within the WSF

- ✓ interactive processes of dialogue and participatory debate are more difficult the larger the event and the number of people involved; although
- ✓ broad information and mobilisation processes can be achieved in large gatherings, if the facilitators have the necessary communications skills and language(s), and
- ✓ ‘horizontal’ exchanges and inclusive cross-sectoral discussions on joint campaigns or plans of action should only, and can only, be achieved in large open meetings.

On the other hand

- ✓ more in-depth educational and ‘capacity-building’ processes are best achieved through more focused interactive means and most effectively in smaller participatory workshops;
- ✓ deeper theoretical analyses and conceptual debates are, similarly, most effectively advanced in various types of relatively smaller meetings such as in seminar series; and

⁸ As many organisations have done in response to the calls from the debt movement, or from the “50 Years is Enough” campaign against the IMF/World Bank, for adoption of their demands by other campaigns.

⁹ As many organisations have done in lining up together with the more specifically ‘trade networks’, such as Our World Is Not For Sale, against the WTO.

✓ tactical and strategic discussions to consider all possible scenarios and options, and the complex relationships between interim tactics and broader strategic goals should also, at least initially, be undertaken in smaller more interactive processes.

These political-and-process issues face the WSF organising committees with significant choices as to how the next and future world forums are to be structured internally. But even if, or as, the WSF organising committee(s) adopt the kind of internal restructuring of the forum, as indicated above, **a much broader ‘restructuring’ or repositioning, and even reconceptualisation, of the nature and role of the WSF as a whole is indicated.** The fundamental question is not how and ‘at what level’ the latter set of capacity-building aims, and analytical and strategic discussions can be served within the WSF, but **whether the annual gatherings within the WSF are the prime or most propitious framework within which such purposes can be carried, should be carried out, and are being carried out.** The indications are that :

8.1 As an annual event the WSF does not and cannot provide for the continuous and intensive processes of discussion, education and debate that, as any activist/organiser knows, are integral to **organisational and people development**. These also invariably entail flexibility in rhythms of work and adaptations to different participants. They also demand consecutive follow-ups. The WSF does not allow sufficient time and space for such intensive, tailored and continuous discussions, debates, and capacity-building to be carried out, and it could be harbouring unrealistic expectations as to what can really be achieved in this regard in such relatively brief annual global events. On the other hand, meeting regularly once a year, the WSF could actually be diverting the attention, personnel, time and resources that are demanded for the continuing and essential local and sectoral efforts that are so essential and so fundamental.

8.2 By extension, it is also indicated that the WSF is actually not even the best or most propitious framework for **dissemination of information, and solid mass mobilisation**. At one level this can take place through continuous electronic communication. For popular mass information it has to take place at local, national and regional levels and within social/sectoral frameworks before world events because

- ✓ in-depth, appropriate and information and mobilisation processes have to be designed and carried out through planned campaigns and other carefully designed processes as close as possible to the locations and situations of peoples work and lives;
- ✓ detailed, finely-tuned tactical decisions and positions must, similarly, be undertaken within the specific circumstances of each locality, country, organisation or campaign, and in relation to their own defined strategic aims;

8.3 And most significantly of all, the WSF, despite its important specific functions and global role, is not the prime framework within which world-wide popular forces - from the grass-roots and local, through the national and regional, to the continental and international - are actually and most effectively being created . Developing common national, regional/continental, and especially international, plans of action is such a complex political and practical process that the most productive framework(s) and base(s) for detailed tactical and strategic discussions arise most securely from the discussions and debates within and between national/regional frameworks or social/sectoral networks. It is these that identify the detailed issues and possible counter-responses. It is these that assess the balance and distribution of forces in their areas, their ‘sectors’ or on ‘their’ issues. And it is on these bases that they create appropriate plans of action and joint campaigns. And, ultimately, it is the **strength and credibility of the ‘regional’ and**

social/sectoral networks that are essential to mobilise and secure effective mass responses to international initiatives, and even to ensure mass responses to and the success of ‘global calls’ for ‘global’ actions.

9. SOME OBSERVATIONS ON INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES AND ROLES

All the above observations point to the conclusion that while the WSF is an important venue and additional international terrain within which to strengthen the many existing (and new) international networks, and future campaigns and initiatives; it is these **regional and social/sectoral organisations and ‘issue’ networks, rather than the WSF *per se*, that are the most fundamental basis and means for popular organisation and action.**

Deliberately referred to above as ‘an additional terrain’, the WSF has specific characteristics and an important role in periodically bringing together vast numbers and an all-inclusive range of the world’s popular social forces explicitly ranged against the currently dominant global system and regime. But it must also be kept in mind that the WSF is not the only such venue – nor even necessarily the largest – and many other global events, large and small, also provide important occasions and targets, inspirations and stimuluses for the coming together, mutual support and direct actions of wide arrays and vast numbers of ‘anti-globalisation’ forces¹⁰.

Similarly, the WSF reflects and strengthens but does not and cannot create – let alone direct – the many existing international networks and organisations. Most of these preceded and are, in fact, the direct and indirect inspiration, the fundamental ‘sustainers’ and driving forces of the WSF, not the other way round. These **powerful constitutive forces behind and in the WSF** include such important, well-established and varied forms of international cooperation and action such as those of the international alliance of peasant organisations in Via Campesina, the (emerging) international alliance of landless peoples organisations, and the international indigenous peoples network; the international migrant workers network, and even the new ‘global unions’ such as Public Service International. Although the strength and effectiveness of these international alliances, in turn, also depend fundamentally on their constituent or member organisations working at their national and local levels.

There are also significant ‘issue’ networks such as the Jubilee South coalition on international debt and related issues; the international ATTAC network on global financial issues/institutions and related issues; the international Our World is Not For Sale alliance on international trade and related issues; the international Friends of the Earth on environment and sustainable development issues; the international rivers alliance and the global water campaign and related (especially privatisation) issues; the global People’s Health Movement and related human rights and social issues; and literally dozens of other highly effective international ‘issue’ campaigns or sectoral networks and coalitions. As is evident, even as these aim to focus on specific issues or dimensions of the global system, they also take on broad the complexities of ‘related’ issues. Thus, these networks themselves also interact with each other from within their own ‘streams’ of activities to form networks of networks.

¹⁰ Including growing numbers of mass social forces – such as the peasant and indigenous peoples around the WTO meeting in Cancun in 2003; or the growing numbers of organised workers in the European Social Forum in Firenze in 2002, and many other similar experiences..

Bringing these together in the WSF to share their wide range of experiences and detailed information, and to gather further potential supporters to such coalitions/networks/alliances, can certainly enrich and strengthen these networks individually and collectively. But these international sectoral networks and multi-organisation 'issue' coalitions emerged before the WSF and, in their most fundamental locus and base of activities, and in their very *raison d'être*, these have grown in direct response to the challenges of the 'issues' and the problems within the sectors in which they are engaged.

The significant common feature of such coalitions and networks is that they are rooted in very detailed understanding, and focused actions on the local, national, regional and international realities of the functioning of the currently dominant global system and regime, on the local manifestations and roles of governmental and other agencies of the dominant global system, and engaged in proposing detailed transformative alternatives.

It is, of course, not politically necessary or desirable to counterpose 'the networks' and the WSF, but it is necessary to do so analytically in order to clarify the real processes/relations and the main locus of initiatives and sources of popular power in the world today. This is necessary because - in the excitement of participating in the WSF, and in the euphoria of contemplating a new site and source of world-wide popular cooperation and actions - movement analysts and activists can get carried away and lose sight of the real bases of popular power and their own most fundamental responsibilities. It is essential, therefore, to keep in perspective the appropriate time, attention and efforts that have to be devoted to all the immediate areas of work and commitments; and the time and importance that can or should be allocated to international activities and actions even though these are inter-linked and mutually reinforcing.

Thus although the WSF processes undoubtedly support, they must not, in any way, become a substitute for local/national work as the real base of the independent international sectoral campaigns. There is also a danger that the WSF could, in effect although not by intention, be used to 'channel' such diverse, creative and independent international initiatives. It is these latter that are the primary constituent elements of 'the global movement' - which is, in fact, a combination of movements not one single 'movement', except in abstract conceptualisations. In their very activities, in their separate and interconnected initiatives, it is these - not any central structure or single 'organisation', nor even something as inspiring and all-embracing as the WSF - it is these many and varied local, national, regional, continental and international forms of cooperation and action that, *de facto* and in their daily practice, comprise 'the global movement'.

'The global movement' is the sum total of these diverse autonomous networks, these apparently diffuse forms of popular counter-power; cooperating and coming together voluntarily, even if unevenly and sometimes sporadically. And it is these that must be, and are, the base and source of power of all those committed to joint actions in order to counter hostile global power and to make 'another world' real. Of course, such a fluctuating global network, or network of networks, such a vast and varied alliance of movements, is much more difficult to mobilise - and even to conceptualise - than one clearly coordinated 'global organisation'. However, these new modes of diverse, seemingly *ad hoc* and apparently diffuse, but more profoundly democratic and rooted forms of autonomous international organisation and voluntary global cooperation are a highly significant development in the world today. They should be seen not as an *ad hoc*,

pragmatic or 'interim' phenomenon but rather as the precursor of different modes of popular self-organisation and active popular participation in the 'other world', the more deeply democratic world that is being contemplated and created.

In this perspective, the sectoral organisations and networks must not be seen as a 'transitional' form, 'an earlier phase' of 'something else' that is 'more developed'; the embryonic form of some 'higher form' of global organisation. Such views, consciously or unconsciously looking towards centrally coordinated international organisation, fail to recognise

- what is historically significant about the innovative modes and methods of international political cooperation, organisation and action in the world today, and
- what these point to or suggest about different political methods and modes in the different world that is being sought.

If these new forms of bottom-up self-organisation, these mutually supportive practices, and voluntary joint actions are to move forward and move beyond traditional methods, modes and concepts, they must not, and hopefully cannot, simply be marshaled into 'a new united global movement' and misconceived attempts to do so could be counter-productive and even destructive. Herein lie the real challenges and questions for all social movement activists/analysts worldwide regarding the direction of development of the WSF, as follows.

10. DEVELOPMENT OF THE WSF AND THE 'SOCIAL FORUM MOVEMENT'

There are a number of practical organisational decisions on the form and directions of development of the WSF that seem to be indicated. Summing up from the above, the conclusions are that

- ✓ if, as seems evident, the WSF is not primary but depends upon and reflects the sum total of the strength of local, national, regional and continental organisation, and
- ✓ if, as is argued above, the WSF is not the only or even the primary locus and focus of international cooperation and campaigning activities, and
- ✓ if, as is incontrovertible, the WSF must strengthen and not detract from or distract energies and efforts from the many existing (and future) levels, areas and forms of popular self-organisation and action;

then careful consideration must be given

- not only to the internal (re)structuring of the WSF as indicated above,
- not only to the international political role and appropriate political 'positioning' of the WSF in relation to, and together with, other forces, and source of popular power, as discussed above; but also
- to the literal physical location, and the most effective cycle of activities of the forum or forums.

10.1 Many locations and wider 'cycles'

It has already been agreed internationally (as mentioned at the beginning of this report), and after much discussion, that the location of the world forum should be circulated to different politically significant parts of the world in order to

- ✓ to draw on the strengths of their social movements,
- ✓ to draw in their social movements and
- ✓ to share with them the political stimulation and inspiration of hosting of the WSF.

To a lesser degree but also of some importance, rotating the WSF is further motivated by the need to share out the hosting responsibilities which can place enormous pressures on

the time and resources of the national organising committees and national organisations - even with support from the more experienced WSF national organising committees from previous 'host' countries.

However, it has also been agreed that the WSF should 'return' each alternate year to Porto Alegre, given its now historic symbolism. In this way, the Brazilian organisations and the authorities of Porto Alegre, and the state of Rio Grande do Sul within which it is located, will have some 'relief' every second year. Although it also has to be said that the local authorities - and business interests - in Porto Alegre see distinct economic and commercial advantages, and not only political significance, in hosting the WSF. Thus they are very eager for it to remain in their area and are very reluctant even to see it moved elsewhere in Brazil, as other cities/states within Brazil seem to be suggesting.

However - whatever are the periodic advantages for, or burdens upon, the host city/country and forum organisers - from the point of view of the **participating organisations** the pressures are unrelieved and continuous since they need to prepare for each annual WSF wherever it is held. They have barely got through one world forum when they are immediately confronted with the need to plan and actively prepare for the next. Such pressures can adversely affect national social organisations and the sectoral campaigns which have to cope with local or national issues and monitoring and dealing with their own governments' initiatives and programmes. This burden is particularly marked in countries in the South in which popular organisations are also having to deal directly and daily with international institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, and with the intrusions into their countries of powerful foreign governments particularly the EU and the US.

For those organisations actively engaged also in international issue-based or social sectoral networks there are other pressures. These networks follow different rhythms of work to each other and to the annual world social forums, and they have also to cope with the exigencies of monitoring and responding to the initiatives and activities of inter-governmental meetings, such as those of the EU and African Union, and many other sub-regional entities, as well as the processes within and the international meetings of institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and the WTO. Within such perspectives, the WSF can actually constitute a distraction from their extremely complex and pressing, immediate and direct areas of responsibility.

The conclusion indicated is that the cycle of the WSF has to reflect these broader realities and deeper demands, and not only the requirements of organising the WSF itself. In recognition of this situation, it is argued that the cycle of world forums needs to be extended. There are already suggestions that discussion on the 'periodicity' of the WSF (as it is termed in the IC) should address the arguments for the cycle to be extended to two years. This would mean a world forum each second year (in different locations or alternating with Porto Alegre) with the intervening year being devoted to regional/continental forums and/or thematic forums.

10.2 Many forums and 'bottom-up' processes

In this latter respect, there is also much discussion and agreement within the forum that the experience and spirit of the World Social Forum must be spread much more widely throughout the world and expressed at every level and in all sectors. In this way, the idea will be fostered more widely of creating 'social forum spaces', encouraging many different forces and organisations to come together in non-sectarian ways to share their

experiences, openly discuss their ideas and their diverse and convergent aims. The pace and rhythms of the creation of such local and national forums will differ according to different circumstances in the world, and above all in reflection of the real state of development of self-organised social forces. But social forums created according to the different internal dynamics in each country and region could help to build greater mutual understanding and cooperation, and produce united fronts of action at local, national and regional levels and on common causes where they are most needed. It could also contribute to the strengthening of genuine democratic cultures where these are still nascent and struggling against established social patterns and adverse inherited political practices, and in hostile external environments, particularly in much of the South

The conscious spreading of the 'forum' method and model is already being taken up at the continental, regional, national and local levels in many parts of the world, although with differing degrees of success and with differing interpretations and adherence to the methods and spirit of the WSF. Nonetheless, it is possible, with respect to the increasing adoption of the forum idea, to talk of 'a social forum movement' in the broad not literal organisational sense. In this context, and in order to enable these forums to blossom and grow at every level throughout the world, there might even be a case to be made for the world forum to follow an even broader, more enabling and more realistic cycle.

On the basis of this kind of assessment, suggestions were also put forward in the meeting of the WSF-IC in Mumbai that the WSF should be held every third year. As a three-yearly in-gathering, the World Social Forum would provide a global target - which all the many local, national and regional, as well as sectoral and thematic forums could work towards, **building from the bottom up**. The three yearly cycle, it is argued, would be short enough to provide a middle-term target and stimulation, but a target not so close as to divert efforts from the immediate and essential organisation-building and solid mass mobilisations 'on the ground'. Such a pattern would also reflect and reinforce the vision, expressed in 9 above, of the World Social Forum as the coming together, the confluence of a vast number of regional and sectoral streams of organisations and actions rather than as their font or source, and certainly not as their 'initiator' and 'director'.

It might be argued, on the other hand, that such a three-yearly cycle might be too long given the rapid pace of events and changes in the world today requiring rapid world-wide popular responses. This is a valid concern, but given the increasing organisational skills and the facility of electronic communications - and, more importantly, given the constant interconnections, mutual recognition and growing mutual confidence between the international sectoral organisations and networks - the necessary political and joint practical responses to global events and issues can be rapidly and effectively achieved. It does not require organisations to literally come together physically for such planning and coordination to be possible. When a 'global' response to some situation or urgent issue is required it can be - and, on current practice, is being - initiated by any one of the networks or organisations that are appropriately situated, geographically or sectorally. And any such initiative, if it is convincingly presented and recognised to be important, will be rapidly consolidated through wider consultations, general agreement, and coordinated mobilisations. This is how the major gatherings and actions in Seattle, Genoa, Washington, Cancun, and many others were achieved.

Finally, these perspectives also indicate that although the WSF itself should be seen as a vitally important space and base for regular cross-cutting exchanges and inclusive cross-sectoral discussions on common campaigns, or plans of action, as discussed above, it is

not correct to suggest [as in 6.2 above] that such agreement ‘can only’ be achieved in such large open meetings as the WSF provides. Clearly this is not true, and the effectiveness of other modes of creating united international actions are daily being born out in experience and developed further in political practice.

11. THE NATURE AND ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL

In the context of the above analysis arising from discussions within the IC - and particularly the observations in section 9 about the role of the WSF in relation to many other levels and diverse forms of international organisation and action - there are some more specific questions that arise with regard to the WSF International Council, itself. This present report does not provide sufficient space in which to deal fully with such a complex issue as the nature and role of the IC, or provide suggestions on it. But some important questions are posed implicitly in the analysis above, and do have to be raised explicitly within this report from within the IC to African popular movement analysts and activists.

The IC plays an enormously important role in protecting the nature and projecting the role of the WSF, and in discussing and determining the directions of development and functioning of this world-wide process and world event. But even in apparently deciding only on the functioning of the WSF itself, such as on the length of the ‘cycle’ of the world forums, the IC also affects the time/space for the development of other social, geographical and thematic forums,. The IC’s decisions can affect and even constrict the breathing space available for the work and activities of other autonomous sectoral organisations, movements and networks. And by deciding, or at any rate heavily influencing the location of each world forum - although this is still up to the indicated countries to take up or not [but see also 12.6 below] - the IC also plays a significant role in affecting political processes in specific parts of the world.

Such direct and indirect influences, and even unintended but real ‘interference’, are undoubtedly very far from the good intentions of the members of the IC. However, such inordinate influences and impact are inevitable and almost intrinsic within a body shaping the role and directions of development of so highly significant a political phenomenon as the World Social Forum. These influences and powers over a highly important global event and associated processes are so significant that they pose unavoidable questions about the nature of the IC itself.

The IC seems to have ‘evolved’ in a somewhat *ad hoc* way over time, although this is not to suggest that this happened without intensive and often contentious but conscientious debates. However this evolution has taken the committee away from being a broad and open consultative body which the Brazilian Organising Committee originally created in a sound and democratic spirit. The original consultative committee was open to all those *bona fide* supporters and promoters of the World Social Forum to participate in discussions with the Brazilian organisers around the functioning and structuring of the Porto Alegre forums. However, although there seem to have been some conscious efforts to encourage some participation from all the regions of the world, the fact is that it was mainly the better resourced, more informed and alert, and more active and proactive organisations that got onto the original ICC and these seem, in the main, to have stayed there ever since.

There has, over the years, been a broadening of the membership of the international committee to include representatives from many important national and international mass organisations, such as big trade union federations, huge grassroots mass movements, and extensive continental and international sectoral networks and campaigning alliances. But there is still a sizable number of members that are relatively small, even if influential, national or regional NGOs, research institutes and other such bodies. And the majority of these seem to be based in countries of the North. The question is not whether such organisations have valuable contributions to make, and they do provide an important continuity with the history of the WSF and in the evolution of the IC. The problem is that this somewhat *ad hoc* composition of the IC is increasingly anomalous. It is also becoming more problematic as the IC has to be constantly expanded in order to incorporate representatives of huge mass movements, while also keeping in the existing small NGOs and the like.

This somewhat cumbersome and probably increasingly unsustainable *modus operandii* raises other more fundamental questions. The IC seems to have gone through a further phase as an International Coordinating Committee to become the International Council that it now is. It has also developed its structures and improved its functioning, efficiency and effectiveness through the creation of a number of planning sub-committees. This could be positive. But such structures and the IC as a whole could also carry centralising effects and substitutionist implications. The problem is that this un-elected and not fully representative IC is now an important international decision-making body and a *de facto* political ‘steering committee’ for the World Forum. And by extension, as illustrated above, the IC is playing some role, as well, in influencing other processes beyond itself and affecting other organisations participating in the WSF.

The further problematic dimensions of this *de facto* ‘international steering committee’ is that there are undoubtedly some within its ranks who subscribe to the view of the WSF as a potential ‘global organisation’, as discussed above. For those so oriented, the IC is implicitly viewed, or could potentially be used, as the emerging ‘Central Committee’ of the global organisation aspired to. Whether this is the conscious or unconscious intention of organisations still influenced by traditional ‘vanguardist’ models and other hierarchical modes of organisation, or not; many others in the IC without such orientations or intentions could, themselves, also be contributing to this tendency through their own hierarchical notions and/or through not interrogating the directions of development, the membership and the expanding influence and *de facto* international political powers of the WSF-IC.

These are all complex issues and there are no simple answers. But they do indicate the necessity for the IC to analyse and discuss its own composition and powers in the context of the discussions of the structures, functioning and role of the WSF as a whole. And these discussions need to be open to the opinions and wider discussions of those identifying with the WSF and its aims. Organisations in Africa should be aware of these issues, expect and require them to be openly discussed and widely reported, and make their own separate and combined interventions.

12. SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FACING AFRICA

Clearly, there are a number of general challenges facing African, as with all other popular organisations, in terms of the complex issues raised above. There are also more specific challenges facing African organisations and the African Social Forum in particular.

12.1 The first challenge facing African organisations, already indicated above [4.3], is how to deal with the pressing problems relating to the structures and functioning of the African Social Forum. These require full and impartial discussion, and frank analyses as to what the problems are, how they arose and where the solutions could reside. Such debates have already featured in the two continental social forums that have taken place, in Bamako (2002) and Addis Ababa (2003) respectively; as well as during the ASF events both in Porto Alegre and Mumbai. These issues are also being raised in individual papers being circulated for discussion since Mumbai¹¹. A review and improvement in the organisational structures and functioning of the ASF is apparently already underway, as was agreed should be done during the ASF meeting in Mumbai. An official assessment and report is required from the elected regional Coordinating Committees, separately and in the planned joint meeting together with the nominated Secretariat. These, in turn, require full and open discussion across the continent.

12.2 What will also inevitably have to be taken up in these debates are the implicit and explicit differences of conceptualisation of the role and nature of the ASF¹². These reflect other similar tendencies worldwide, and differing interpretations of the nature and aims of the WSF as a whole, as discussed throughout this report. These, in turn, are reflected also in the way the various regional and national forums in Africa, as well as the continental meetings of the ASF itself, are set up and function. These forums do not necessarily, or usually, conform to the idea of the forums as 'open spaces' with self-selecting participation and including self-organised activities. Due to the scarcity of resources for most organisations in Africa, participation has had in the main to be funded centrally (and from abroad?). It also seems that participation/selection is decided in the somewhat uneven and unsatisfactory ways referred to in 4.3 above.

Furthermore, organised more as traditional 'conferences' producing composite joint declarations, many of these forums do not always conform to the non-directive, open and pluralistic principles of the WSF, although formally committed to them [see Appendix C on the Bamako Declaration and D on the Addis Ababa Concensus]. This may be a realistic reflection of the current state of development of African civil society and of political traditions and pressing needs within the continent. However, if a more 'conference-like' form of 'forum' is the deliberate option within Africa, fully discussed and reflecting African realities, it must be made explicit and officially communicated to the WSF-IC, particularly in the light of 12.6 below.

12.3 The related set of challenges to African organisations more generally is how they can participate more actively and effectively both in the African Social Forum and in the World Social Forum. In part this can be served through the appropriate (re)structuring and improved functioning of the ASF, together with the provisions being discussed for international solidarity funding through the WSF. These measures may alleviate one set of problems, but there will still remain difficult questions about the methods of

¹¹ See, for example, discussion papers being circulated through the *tradenet* and *eppmwengo* listserves

¹² As pointed to in footnote 9 above

identification of those organisations to receive financial support and the consequent 'selection' of those to attend the ASF and the WSF. Current processes of selection do not necessarily guarantee the appropriate participation of the most significant social sectors in Africa. Alternatively, the ASF method of organisation and functioning does not provide the counterbalancing stimulus towards the self-organisation and development of key social forces in Africa in order that they themselves can secure their international participation and development. Of course, the ASF/WSF processes cannot, in themselves, create such forces but they can and should consciously and sensitively try to support their growth and development.

Clear criteria and procedures have to be established to ensure that selections to attend the ASF/WSF take place on solid and representative bases from within all the organised popular forces and in a balanced way from within the respective countries and sub-regions. But if there are to be such 'selections', whether with or without financial support, this in turn places important responsibilities on the organised national and regional social forces in the ASF Coordinating Committee to undertake such roles collectively, and to do so in an open and consultative, impartial, transparent and enabling way for legitimate organisations in their areas. There is always the danger of 'gate-keeping' roles slipping in where there are the few selecting from among the many.

12.4 The further directly related challenge to all existing African organisations - and especially NGOs and other similarly narrowly-based organisations - is how to play an active role in the ASF but avoid substituting for mass-based organisations. Reflecting the currently very uneven levels of development and differing nature of civil society organisations across Africa - mostly consisting of NGOs, and depending heavily upon NGOs - the selection to the ASF has tended, in the main, to draw on well-positioned NGOs and eminent individuals. This may reflect the current realities of the state of civil society development within much of Africa, and it can be argued that the participation of such forces is to be encouraged, anyway. But this is not a satisfactory state of affairs.

This problem, of course, arises in many other situations than only the WSF. Thus, the broader and historic challenge to all such NGOs is their responsibility and role in contributing as effectively as possible to the rapid development of autonomous mass-based social organisations and movements in their countries. In some cases this means where these are lacking in independence, as is the case with many NGO 'national coalitions' still too cosy with governments, and national trade union 'centers' still too close to their ruling parties. In other cases, for a variety of reasons specific to different countries, such mass organisations are still embattled, weak and divided or virtually non-existent.

12.5 In this context, the next related challenge is how to adopt (or adapt?) disseminate and actively promote in all African countries and regions the inspiration of the 'social forum' approach. These, too, are not a substitute for mass-based sectoral organising but they can encourage them and build on them. The aim must be to find ways to create social forums that draw together as many popular social organisations, and committed/supportive NGOs and progressive institutions in their countries as possible/necessary to engage in the kind of open and non-sectarian debates about the specific and common problems being confronted, whether these are of national or international origin (if these causes can in fact be separated). And the idea must be to work within and through such local and national social forums towards the creation of joint campaigns and plans of action. The practice and experiences of open discussion and

mutual confidence-building in national social forums can also contribute towards the creation of negotiated united fronts to advance the interests of popular constituencies, their countries, their sub/regions, and Africa.

12.6 An 'African' World Social Forum?

But, over and above all the foregoing fundamental challenges, a more immediate question facing African organisations is how to respond to the informal but widespread idea, internationally, that Africa should be the location of the sixth WSF following on from the fifth due to take place in Porto Alegre in 2005. This idea has not yet been formally proposed 'to Africa' by the WSF-IC, but it was raised in the discussions in the post-Mumbai meeting. It has also been picked up in a typically superficial way by the mainstream media in Africa and elsewhere, as if the idea is a simple and foregone conclusion. There is no one simple self-evident positive or negative response. Just because the idea has been raised does not mean it has to be accepted or, more importantly, when and under what circumstances it could be accepted. The realities and the complex implications of this idea need to be widely disseminated and discussed fully by popular organisations throughout Africa in their local, national and sub/regional structures, as well as in the organisational structures of the ASF. Given the importance of the matter, the issue may also have to be taken to the next full African Social Forum meeting.

12.6.1 Possible problems - It is understandable why well-intentioned international organisations feel that there is an enormous significance attached to holding a world social forum in the continent suffering the most extremely negative effects of globalised capitalism. But there is also a significant responsibility resting on the shoulders of international organisations making such suggestions. These could carry significant implications both for Africa and for the future of the WSF, itself.

What this very broad 'global' vision and external view does not seem to recognise is that 'Africa' is not 'a country' like Brazil or India (which, in themselves, faced their own complexities, anyway). Africa is an entire continent, a vast and very varied continent of 54 countries, and such a significant 'symbolic' gesture raises many complex – and potentially divisive – questions. The first basic question is: which country or countries in Africa have the vast and vibrant popular social movements and related forces – whose role has been emphasised and established as being so crucial as the inspiration and mass base of the WSF wherever it is held. It is precisely these vitally important considerations that motivated the first location of the WSF in Brazil and then its rotation to India. Such genuinely mass-based social forces cannot simply be 'conjured up' for the WSF wherever it is held. The question, once again, is where - or indeed whether - such organised mass forces exist in Africa?

As indicated above, there are already various differences within Africa on the WSF, as on other questions. These are not unusual nor insurmountable, but they are real, and they could be exacerbated by issues posed in 'bringing the WSF to Africa'. In this regard, it can be observed that there were also many old differences and divisions within India, and even new differences occasioned by the transfer of the WSF to this vast and complex country (or subcontinent). It is to their credit that the Indian Organising Committee responded to these problems with great maturity and political skill and, through wide-ranging and inclusive consultations, managed to build (sufficient) unity of purpose to carry the WSF process forward.

Africa organisations actually starts from the favourable base of powerful common pan-African identity, and from long and deep experiences of organising, acting and struggling together in regional, sectoral and continental networks and organisations. It could be very possible to forge the necessary agreement within Africa and between the many and different organisations in our many countries to discuss and reach decisions on how to deal with the possibilities of hosting the WSF in Africa. But such an outcome is not easy or inevitable, and it depends crucially on high level of mutual trust and respect and organisational skills and experience between all the organisations involved. Without these, rather than being a mobilising and unifying experience, the WSF-in-Africa idea may create unfortunate tensions and divisions within Africa and exacerbate the existing differences and even tensions between African organisations within the ASF. This, too, is not unique to Africa but it has been an ongoing aspect in the ASF since its inception.

12.6.2 Positive possibilities. It is also understandable that the immediate instinct of many organisations in Africa is to welcome the idea of an African-based World Social Forum. Such an idea has immediate emotional as well as political appeal to many Africans. The effect of holding the forum in African could

- ✓ focus world media and ‘public’ attention on the specific and profoundly difficult problems within Africa - above all the AIDS pandemic and the looming human catastrophe;
- ✓ draw the wider world popular social forces into more informed and active solidarity with Africa and, in so doing, also with similarly-situated countries, communities and peoples throughout the world;
- ✓ send out another warning to the global governmental, corporate and institution agencies - that have such an enormous responsibility for creating or contributing to the crises in Africa - that global social forces are going to target them for their culpability.

The other significant political motivations internal to Africa for supporting this idea are that it could, in the year(s) leading up the event, be used for

- ✓ putting African governments ‘on notice’ that their role and their responsibilities for the plight of their peoples and the crises in their countries will be ‘in the spotlight’ of powerful global social forces gathering into the continent; as well as
- ✓ providing a period and a means to mobilise social forces within our respective countries to bring pressures or persuasions to bear on African governments, separately and together (in the AU) to fulfill responsibilities to their peoples and the continent.

At the same time, however, it also has to be recognised that there are other underlying, undeclared or unconscious motivations for responding with enthusiasm to the idea of holding such a significant event in Africa. These rather more subjective and unacknowledged motivations relate to the ways in which

- ✓ the selected country or countries would benefit from holding the world forum, and benefit not only politically but even financially/economically¹³
- ✓ particular organisations would come to the fore and play highly empowering and rewarding roles in the planning and running of such an event;
- ✓ even specific individuals would be in the limelight and enjoy the gratification of the enhanced power and attention that accompanies such ‘global’ roles.

12.6.3 The fundamental questions - These latter motivations have to be noted because they do play a role in such decisions, whether or not they carry the same weight

¹³ Which, as indicated in 10.1 above, is not so unusual

as other more legitimate even more complex and more public considerations. But the most important and serious questions for African organisations to consider with the utmost care and seriousness, and to discuss dispassionately, inclusively and transparently

- whether Africa has, or rather which African countries have the organisational means and the mass movement base to maintain and contribute further to the patterns of participation and levels of action already established in Brazil and India as being so crucial to the credibility, the aims and the impact of the WSF; **and**
- whether taking up the mammoth responsibility of organising and hosting a world social forum will at this stage of African popular social/political organisations act as an inspiration and a stimulation towards the urgently needed and often very preliminary development of organised mass social forces in most African countries, and the effective activation of such forces; **or**
- whether such an enormous project will divert precious resources, time, energies and personnel away from the pressing and primary challenges of strengthening and, in many cases, having to encourage the very emergence of new mass social movements and/or the coalescence between existing and new social forces that are so essential to the peoples of Africa; **and**
- whether, in the absence or relative weakness of such mass social forces in much of Africa, prematurely taking up the organisation of the WSF will, at this stage, actually result in the existing organised groups, that is mainly NGOs, playing the dominant role - which will reinforce the civil society patterns that are already very marked and problematic on the continent.
- whether, in this situation, the uneven nesses in the development of self-organised mass movements in the different countries and regions of Africa will not be deal with effectively and may actually be reinforced.

All these questions together confront African organisations with extremely complex questions and profoundly important decisions that can have enormously positive but also possibly negative effects on mass social organisation and popular political action in Africa and on **internal organic popular political development, coordination and cooperation on the continent and across the continent for years to come.**

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