

Whither the Alter-Globalization Movement?

The Idea and Practice of the World Social Forum

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1. Introduction

Under the slogan of “Another World is Possible” the eighth World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Dakar, Senegal, in February, 2011. Approximately 60,000 people from 132 countries participated in the opening march on the first day. The WSF was launched in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to provide space and opportunities for social movements and NGOs around the world to discuss various themes, exchange opinions and share information and experiences. This kind of emerging space can be seen as the “new public sphere” foreseen by Albert Melucci, because it allows people to talk, discuss and debate freely.¹⁾ Moreover, protests and claims in the WSF against neoliberal globalization may be viewed as a new form of “petition” claiming that the form of global polity called an “empire” deprives the “commons.”²⁾

On the other hand, some people evaluate the WSF negatively. They claim that the WSF has not been able to present alternatives despite its slogan “Another world is possible!” However, alternatives, especially social justice across borders, have been pursued and practiced in the WSF process.

In this article, I first examine the 10-year history of the WSF expansion as a transformative process of the alter-globalization movement. The 10 years of the WSF are divided into three phases. Second, I take the Climate Justice Movements (CJM) as a practical case of alternatives created through the WSF process. Finally, I would like to suggest a direction in which the alter-globalization movement may proceed.

2. The 10-year history of the WSF expansion

Over the past 10 years, the political and economic contexts of the WSF have changed dramatically. This change has had a significant influence on the orientation of the WSF as an alter-globalization movement. Needless to say, the position of

the WSF has also changed greatly. By dividing the 10 years of the WSF into three phases, I explore its process of transformation and examine its characteristics.

2.1. The first phase (2001–2005) : an upsurge

The WSF was launched in opposition to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, a meeting place of corporate leaders and Western politicians. However, the real opportunity was the protest movement against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. Many activists and social movements found this third WTO conference to be a major turning point. Labor movements, which had kept their distance from other social movements, worked together with NGOs, environmental movements, human rights activists and consumer groups. Various social movements combined under the slogan of “antiglobalization” , and succeeded in mobilizing 50,000 people in Seattle.

This experience of solidarity at Seattle led social movements to protest in Prague, Washington, Quebec and Porto Alegre. In January 2001, antiglobalization movements that had worked separately worldwide assembled in Porto Alegre. Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out that the WSF could succeed in combining diverse social movements, although most participants came from Latin America, especially Brazil.³⁾ At the Genoa Summit in July 2001, some 250,000 people gathered and participated. It was the largest protest movement against the G8 summit. Following the Genoa Summit, protest movements occurred frequently at the conference sites of the World Bank, IMF, WTO and G8.

With these protest movements arising all over the world, the WSF was launched with 20,000 participants in 2001. The number of participants rapidly expanded, reaching 150,000 in 2005, so the WSF has become well recognized internationally. There are at least three reasons why the WSF could attract and mobilize a variety of social movements in the first phase (2001–2005) .

First, the WSF was created as an open space for dissemination of experiences of place-specific struggles across the globe. For the participants, it is a forum to share their experiences in the fight against neoliberalism, or a huge venue for social learning. Participants discuss a wide number of topics such as peace and war, environment and development, labor, gender, immigrants, food, water, agriculture, debt, trade and discrimination. Through the WSF process collective identities are gradually constructed, and networks emerge.

The founders of the WSF intended to create a global forum to support people who struggle to change the world system. Chico Whitaker, representative of the Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission, insists that the WSF as a space must be preserved at any cost because it incubates new initiatives to construct another world.⁴⁾ These founders’ intentions are clearly reflected in the WSF Charter of

Principles.

The second factor is the respect for the plurality and diversity of participants. According to the WSF Charter of Principles, any groups and movements in civil society have the right to participate as long as they are opposed to neoliberalism, domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism. The WSF believes that another world could be created through association among people, beyond differences in gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. Through the promotion of pluralism, the WSF successfully fosters convergence of both antiglobalization and antiwar movements, as has been seen in the massive anti-Iraq War demonstration in February 2003. Furthermore, the choice of Mumbai as the venue for the fourth forum has succeeded in increasing its recognition of diversity and pluralism as organizing principles. In the Mumbai Forum, the “Dalits” (“untouchables”) marched, and people discussed topics such as caste, patriarchy and child labor, which were not addressed within the Porto Alegre versions of the forum. The WSF demonstrated in the process that different ideas conflicted, linked and gradually converged.

The third factor lies in its interesting forms of organization. These are loose global networks that ensure an open meeting space among a variety of actors. They are polycentric, loosely connected, apparently leaderless networks, so that the WSF makes no decisions, nor does it represent civil society. The original founding members of the WSF rejected a hierarchical structure, and purposely employed this tactic to avoid conflicts and splits among social movements. These tactics reflect the recognition of the founding members that they cannot resist the “empires” of the 21st century with the 20th century-style movements adopted by trade unions and political parties.

However, at the fifth forum in 2005, 19 intellectuals including Immanuel Wallerstein released the so-called “Porto Alegre Manifesto” in which they demanded clear political positions on specific issues instead of free discussion. The Porto Alegre Manifesto seems to show the frustration among radical forces towards unclear direction of the movement and the lack of converged alternatives.

2.2. The second phase (2006–2008) : stagnation

In the second phase, many regional, national and thematic forums were held at various places, parallel to the world forum. Then a polycentric approach was introduced in 2006, and three forums were held at the same time in Bamako, Mali, Karachi, Pakistan, and Caracas, Venezuela, to consolidate regional movements. On the other hand, in the second phase, the WSF faced an identity crisis brought about by its rapid expansion. The positive factors in the first phase became negative in the second phase. In other words, the original ideas gradually fell away from reality,

and the WSF faced at least three challenges.

The first challenge was the positioning of the forum as an open space. The moderate members of the forum considered that the creation of open space and the process of creating a space could represent an axis against neoliberalism. On the other hand, the radical members criticized them, saying that counteraction could not be applied without a united perspective. In particular, “the Bamako Appeal” adopted at the 50th anniversary of the 1955 Bandung Conference held the day before the Bamako Forum began claimed to have made plans for concrete action at the forum.⁵⁾ The most serious challenge here was whether the forum would continue to exist as an event without specific political directions or become a movement with a single line of action and direction.

Faced with severe challenges, the International Council introduced an “Assembly of Social Movements.” This was a new system that allowed appeals on the closing day of forums for mobilization in the struggle against neoliberalism. Moreover, it held demonstrations to make its presence and strength more visible.⁶⁾ Some groups made joint statements at the seventh forum in Nairobi. Among these, more than 2000 people adopted an action plan called “African Struggles, Global Struggles.”⁷⁾

The second challenge was the relationship between social movements and political parties or liberal governments. This relates to the issue of autonomy of the forum. Because the WSF Charter of Principles did not permit participation by political parties, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela took part in the forum as a private individual at the invitation of La Via Campesina. However, it is said that the Caracas Forum in 2006 could not be well organized without financial support from the Venezuelan government.⁸⁾ In Latin America in these years, liberal parties associated with social movements took power in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. In reality, this issue of proper distance of the forum from leftist governments or political parties was raised from the beginning because most organizers of the early WSF were members of the Workers’ Party, which later produced President Lula of Brazil. The WSF predicted conflict between social movements and political parties, so it was decided not to allow participation by political parties to minimize risk. In the first stage, a huge number of participants and their energy concealed this contradiction. However, in the second stage, the concern that the WSF may be tamed by political parties was raised.

Third, the failure of the Nairobi Forum in 2007 affected the direction of the WSF. The Nairobi Forum was expected to focus on issues of Africa under globalization; however, it reflected commercialism and militarism and could not sufficiently focus on people living in the peripheries.⁹⁾ In addition, the visibility of large international NGOs, such as Christian Aid and Human Dignity Network, was greater than that of social movements in the South. For participants high visibility

means important issues. Fironze Manji criticized the event by saying that the Nairobi Forum was more a gathering of NGOs than of social movements that could make change possible.¹⁰⁾ Underlying frustrations of social movements against large international NGOs came to the fore. In other words, the weakness of Africa's social movements was exposed.

These three challenges brought a period of stagnation to the WSF.¹¹⁾ The WSF International Council decided not to hold one central event in 2008, and to hold a global day of action against neoliberalism instead. As a result, the cohesion of the forum and its international visibility decreased.

2.3. The third phase (2009-2011) : revival

WSF 2009 took place in a central location—Belem, Brazil—at a time when the world faced a global crisis of capitalism. Sushovan Dhar pointed out that the Belem Forum was a turning point for the WSF to revive.¹²⁾ The following three points seem to support this argument. First, the number of participants was restored. More than 130,000 people from 142 countries assembled at Belem, a remote town located at the mouth of the Amazon River. This number shows that the WSF still has the power to mobilize people. The world financial crisis at the end of 2008 raised peoples' interest in the destructive character of global capitalism.

Second, through the WSF process, the interest of indigenous people in the struggle against neoliberalism was increased. Approximately 1900 indigenous people from 190 ethnic groups and tribes attended the Belem Forum. Most were from the Amazon basin. This was the most significant participation of indigenous people in the entire history of the WSF. They demanded land rights to ensure social, ecological and economic equity.

Third, a new method called "Assembly of the Assemblies" was introduced at Belem for global action. While the debate over space or movement continued, the Belem Forum adopted dozens of political resolutions and proposals to be the subject of mobilization programs around the world in 2009. IPS-TerraViva stated that "the 21 thematic assemblies broke the WSF seemingly taboo issue of taking common political stands, under pressure from thousands of civil society groups anxious to seize the opportunity opened by the global economic crisis to progressive change."¹³⁾ In other words, the WSF seemed to shift direction from "dialogue" to "mobilization." The attendance of five presidents also attracted global media attention.¹⁴⁾ The five presidents chose to attend the WSF rather than the WEF at Davos, which means that for leftist governments the WSF is worthy of consideration. Thus, the financial crisis showed that capitalism could sustain itself no longer, and their attendance gave legitimacy to the forum that sought for alternatives. After the Belem Forum, approximately 80 thematic and regional forums were held all over the world. It

represented a new tendency for the alter-globalization movement to converge from a continental basis to subregions, geographical-cultural regions or meetings with a thematic basis.

Here, let me quick review the 9th world forum held in Dakar from February 5 to 11, 2011. At the Dakar Forum the African mobilization had an important innovation: the use of caravans from all over Western Africa. Sixty thousand people from 132 countries attended the forum. The Dakar Forum was much more open and accessible than the Nairobi Forum in 2007. However, there were serious logistics problems, of which lack of rooms was the most serious. These problems were caused by a lack of communication and of any deep conglutination of activities. This kind of disarray discouraged participants and caused a huge loss of energy. In addition, indigenous people from several places were marginalized by difficulties in obtaining visas.

In spite of the problems, the debate and content of the forum achieved most of its goals.¹⁵⁾ Activists and scholars came from all over the South, and discussed African issues including land seizure and food sovereignty. Thirty assemblies took place, and participants were able to network and build connections with local movements. Needless to say, the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts inspired the overall mood of the forum. In any case, the African social movements, which had organized three forums in Africa, strengthened in confidence. This is a substantial achievement for the WSF generally. The third phase was thus a revival phase.

3. Creating alternatives: The Climate Justice Movements

Over the past 10 years, many global networks and campaigns have been born from the WSF process. These include the Global Call to Action against Poverty, the anti debt movement represented by Jubilee South, the opposition movements against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, water privatization and so on. There is a tendency towards network convergence on a single issue basis, especially since 2005. The CJM is an illustrative example of creating alternatives.

3.1. Core claims: climate debt

The concept of “climate debt” is part of a larger ecological, social and economic debt owed by the rich industrialized world to the poor majority. In this sense, it is based on the concepts of the “polluter pays principle” and “common but differential responsibility principle.” The CJM insists that the developed countries owe a twofold climate debt to vulnerable people because historically they have released large amounts of greenhouse gasses (GHG) into the atmosphere.¹⁶⁾ One is “emissions

debt.” The developed countries have emitted excessive amounts of GHG, thereby substantially diminishing the Earth’s capacity to absorb GHG. With less than 20% of the population, developed countries have produced more than 70% of emissions since 1850. The reduction of natural space reduces the development opportunities of the South. The other is “adaptation debt,” which the developed countries owe to developing countries for the adverse effects of their excessive emissions. The developed countries must pay the victims costs to avoid the effects or compensate them. Likewise, both emissions and adaptation debts constitute the “climate debt” that the developed countries owe to the developing countries.

When we apply Thomas Pogge’s concept of negative duties to the climate change issue, the climate debt concept is much more understandable.¹⁷⁾ The rich continue to emit excessive amounts of GHG despite recognizing the crisis of global climate change and having methods to avoid it. CJM claims that this is a violation of the human rights of the socially vulnerable people in the South. By continuing emissions, people in developed countries violate the human rights of the developing countries. Therefore, the rich have responsibilities to ameliorate the situation by paying “reparations” and guaranteeing the rights of the developing countries to develop in the future.

3.2. CJM formulated in the WSF process

The concept of “climate debt” is based on that of ecological debt, and is very close to the idea of a campaign appealing for cancellation of “odious debt,” led by Jubilee South. This concept of climate debt was taken to the Nairobi Declaration adopted at the Nairobi Forum in 2007. In the same year, social movements in the South involved in the alter-globalization movement assembled at the 13th session of the Conference of Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC in Bali, and established the “Climate Justice Network (CJN) .”

In 2009, the CJN called for a massive assembly on climate change, and at COP15 it called for a global day of action with the slogan “System Change! Not Climate Change!” They succeeded in mobilizing approximately 60,000 people. Social movements such as La Via Campesina, Jubilee South, the Indigenous Environmental Network, Friends of the Earth, Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens and Focus on the Global South played the leading role by linking the climate change issue with neoliberal economic policy. They criticized any solutions based on market mechanisms and utilized the opportunities for social movements to meet at COP16 in Cancun, the WSF in Dakar and G20, and discuss tactics for COP17 in Durban.

The concept of climate debt attracted people’s attention at both COP16 and the Belem Forum in 2009. At COP15 some 50 developing countries including Bolivia,

Venezuela, Bhutan, Malaysia and Sri Lanka referred to climate debt and proposed to make it a formal principle. Bolivia in particular made demands at the People's Conference, and requested that COP16 reflect the people's voice in decision making.¹⁸⁾

3.3. Climate justice in climate change negotiations

The concept of climate debt was supported not only by the CJM, but also by some developing countries at COP15. However, only Bolivia expressed its opposition to the "Cancun Accord" at COP16. This is partly because of pressure from powerful countries such as the US and the EU. Although the Bolivian proposal has legitimacy, its proposal had not been on the negotiation table for subsidiary meetings of COPs. The appeal of the CJM was disregarded. In addition, the Climate Action Network (CAN) , a principal umbrella group of NGOs led by Northern NGOs, puts considerable energy into examining technical aspects of climate change such as emission trading, and tends to disregard the environmental justice movement. The cleavage between CAN and CJM supported mainly by social movements seems to be bigger.

At the same time the official climate negotiations are stalled, which were symbolized by the failure of the talks in COP15 at Copenhagen in 2009.¹⁹⁾ The CJM made it clear that there were serious flaws of the North-dominated negotiation process and rule making in terms of social justice. The Bolivian proposal revealed ethical problems hidden in mitigation and adaptation issues. Unless negotiators from the North and the South seriously take climate debt issues into considerations, the climate negotiation remains stalemate.

4. Conclusion

In this article, the 10-year history of the WSF expansion was examined. As has been shown, the WSF has been transformed by pressures from both inside and outside. At the first phase the concept of the open space for debate and meetings succeeded in stimulating the participation and exchanging among participants. With the second phase the original cycle of the WSF came to a close, and the WSF shifted from the focus on a central area of debate to various self-organized sites.

In the third phase, the WSF has evolved. It will continue to change from a space for dialogue to one of mobilization and action. Some radicals predict the creation of the Fifth International while the WSF remains as a space for dialogue.²⁰⁾ Others propose to create another international system that does not regulate activities or direction.²¹⁾ The International Council of the WSF announced that the next WSF will take place in Tunisia in March 2013. This choice reflects the intension to

deepen the relationship between the WSF and the Arab world. The dynamics of the Arab world and its revolutions might produce synergetic effect in the fourth WSF phase when it comes together with the movements of the Occupy Wall Street and *Democracia Real Ya* in Spain.

In any case, alternative norms are constructed in the process of interaction among diverse social movements, as the CJM shows. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to examine various cases of creating alternatives to neoliberal globalization.

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- 18) The Bolivian President Morales held the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in April 2010 in Cochabamba, Bolivia. About 30,000 people from 126 countries participated in this conference and adopted "the Cochabamba agreement" ("agreement of people"). It proposes to establish an International Tribunal for climate

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