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## Farewell to What? Redefining the Process

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Farewell to the World Social Forum?](#)

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Those ready to sound the death knell for the WSF have not expressed clearly what the WSF is to which they are saying farewell. At the same time, those of us seeking to further develop the WSF as a process must be clearer about communicating what the WSF is meant to be and what are our collective ways forward as WSF process participants and as WSF process facilitators.

Throughout the twenty years since the WSF was first launched in Porto Alegre, neoliberal hegemony has persisted, and the political forces maintaining this hegemony have added darker values to the sad passions of competition, greed, envy, and consumerism. The WSF process has been visible through significant events but has not grown to counter-hegemonic scale, nor to a steady “counter-Davos” format.

There have been proposals for bringing together transformative forces, such as Peoples Global Action (founded in 1996), the International Peoples Assembly (founded in 2019), and several other efforts aimed at fostering collaboration between climate justice and post-development activists. However, there is no decentralized, horizontal, and scalable multi-thematic counter-hegemonic “process” proposal comparable to the WSF in sight (the emphasis on “process” as opposed to “movement” here is key).

The WSF, innovative in its format as a facilitated open space, remains a valid proposition for massive horizontal self-organizing. It is based on voluntary “dialogic activities” between autonomous participant civil society organizations, focused on popular education and transformative initiatives (struggles, campaigns, projects), held in a shared open space, without overarching vertical representation or leadership on political contents therein produced. The

innovation lies in the radical horizontalism of a process that be sustained by its participants, relying on a decolonized Enlightenment culture, valuing dialogue and reason, and empowering its participants. In this process, facilitators are taking responsibility for participation formats, but are not claiming for leadership on political contents

## Looking Back

There has been insufficient attention given to developing and formalizing WSF open space process methodology, rooted in shared knowledge through practice and specific vocabulary. For many involved with the WSF, the idea of a “WSF event” has been clearer than that of a “WSF process,” which has remained much fuzzier. Indeed, a more formal consideration of the WSF process is a necessary step for this process to reach a counter-hegemonic status. The other step is being able to communicate the process to many more people—for example, via the Internet.

The WSF idea had a strong start, backed by significant funding. However, the demise of many early social forum process-events, at regional, thematic, and local scale, has been due, in large part, to the fact that many of their “facilitators” did not understand, or want to understand, the practical implications of facilitating a horizontal, open, dialogic space format as laid out in the WSF charter. This diagnosis should have spurred methodological efforts.

Instead, collective reflection on methodology has been more wanting since 2011, when the International Council, the nearest thing to a WSF facilitating community, stopped its methodology commission, which had mostly focused on WSF event methodology, and not ventured much into exploring notions about the process-event and less so those about the overall WSF process. Cold exchange of papers replaced the heated and stimulating face-to-face or online discussions, with the younger generation virtually absent from the debate.

That the WSF is still going after nearly twenty years is a testament to its relevance, but the transmission of its ownership from the founding generation, who came of age in 1960s and 1970s activism, to the next generations is not secure. With the WSF process now less trendy, individuals and organizations committed to promoting it must rely primarily on their own resources, which requires a higher level of motivation.

Participant experience in a WSF event, built along methodology developed before 2010, can also feel somewhat stale today, a consequence of the weak collective methodological efforts developed in the last decade. Those efforts have not allowed for new participation formats meant to stimulate and make mutually visible, hence “articulable,” concrete autonomous initiatives with actions, announced by specific coalitions of WSF participants, or for development of collective practices of online participation for those who are unable to come to an event, whether for reasons of time, visa, or money.

Neglect of formalization and methodology is definitely one reason to account for the wide gap between the WSF’s original counter-hegemonic potential, as a “formal massive organizing innovation,” and its current reality, which is still significant. To reduce this gap, persistent facilitating work from a refreshed WSF facilitating community is necessary.

## At the Crossroads

WSF process facilitators are permanently at a crossroads. They have the options to quit or continue as facilitators. They have the options to involve or not other contributors from their organizations to build the capacity of a WSF facilitating community. They have the options to resist or not calls or temptations to “overlay a voice onto the open space,” whether through acting as a spokesgroup, setting a political agenda for the Forum, instituting a super-assembly speaking with an implicit forum-wide voice, or other means.

In part because of the erratic dynamics of the International Council, created too quickly in 2001 after the success of the first WSF event, there is still not an effective WSF facilitating community, one willing to guide the development of the WSF process as intended by its initiators. Indeed, the Council has served more as a gathering of personal representatives of politically significant WSF participant entities. Contributing somehow to the overall WSF process facilitation, itself not well-defined, was not a requisite to be part of this council. The absence of an effective WSF process facilitating community has hindered the collective work of exchanging experience and exploring more participation formats in the various manifestations of the general WSF process.

Some may brand the present proposal to resume formalizing and developing WSF methodology as uselessly “formalistic,” or as an attempt to “depoliticize the forum.” “Methodology should be at the service of politics,” they may argue. But what does “politicizing the forum” mean, and how is this done? And by whom? The facilitators?

The WSF format, as an innovation in massive social self-organizing, is designed to empower participating civil society organizations, and the coalitions they build, as the relevant political actors in the open space. It is meant as a dialogic process, welcoming to movements, and not as a movement itself. The WSF is not intended to be a political subject itself, even though such a vision is seductive for some facilitators and comfortable for some participants.

A massive horizontal decentralized process cannot be sustained by a vertical leadership, but by participants sharing and owning a common view of this process, with clear concepts and vocabulary. Developing a living “WSF lexicon” could be a priority for the methodology work of a WSF facilitating community.

## Looking Ahead

An “intra-WSF facilitating community compact” could be a way forward for working together despite differences about directions for the facilitation of WSF process. A first possible step would be to explore the problematic implications of a “splitting scenario”: retaining the current WSF open space process, while establishing a WSF-related movement.

Then, a “cohesive scenario” could be explored for cooperation between (1) those focusing on improving the relevancy, clarity, and quality of participation formats in WSF process, and (2) those focusing on stimulating the building of “coalitions from below,” using those participation formats, to develop, in a decentralized way, through formulation and articulation of initiatives, the political contents in the forum space, and thus the resulting overall political significance of the WSF process.

If the proposal for such an “intra-WSF facilitating community compact” were well received among facilitators, some could proceed with creating spaces for discussion about facilitating experience and methodology. A permanent methodology working group could be re-

established, along with a second group to cultivate a “WSF calendar of events,” giving a concrete vision about the overall process.

We can deplore the lost years, energies, and opportunities in WSF facilitation, and, as we look ahead, we know there is no way to catch up miraculously on those. We cannot expect fast results or trust fast-track solutions. However, in troubled times, we need to be ready to greet the challenges ahead in an updated WSF open space.

One critically strategic task is inspiring younger generations to come and use the WSF process tool and space. A participant-to-participant outreach campaign using social networks on affinity basis in the build-up to the forthcoming WSF Mexico could reach out to many young people. It would invite them to join “welcoming groups” ushering them in a diversity of thematic intercommunication spaces, inviting to express their goals in the forum and informing about how to participate. Rooted in the harsh and swiftly evolving reality of twenty-first century, younger participants could then feel empowered in the WSF process, dialoguing with the legacies of elderly activists, and using this WSF tool for their own coalition building political goals.

So, rather than saying “farewell to the WSF,” let us issue an invitation to “get back to work” and implement what can be realistically prepared and achieved, leaving “what it could have been if...” laments for the end of the facilitating day, in a refreshed WSF facilitating community.<sup>1</sup>

1. Elements for renewed efforts of formalization about WSF process advocated in this text are presented in the following document:

<http://openfsm.net/projects/gti-and-wsf/gtiandwsf-input7-formal-view-wsf> and in other spaces of [www.openfsm.net](http://www.openfsm.net).

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## About the Author



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