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## No Political Voice, No Future

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

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So much has been said already about the World Social Forum, its past and its future, its successes and its failures. There is certainly no consensus about any of these. There is a past with many successes and some major failures. Whether there is a future will depend on what our objectives are.

The world has changed since 2001, the year the WSF premiered. Looking back, while thinking of a possible future, I wonder if our major mistake has been that we have never clarified what exactly we wanted. “Another world is possible”—certainly, it still is, but for whom and from what perspective? It was an excellent slogan, but it allowed us to never say how “other,” how different, and in what way, that new world would be.

As Roberto Savio says, the direct impetus for the WSF was an outcry against neoliberalism, structural adjustment, the austerity policies of the international organizations, and the financialization of the economy. There was still some hope that, ten years after the end of the Cold War, there was a possibility for peace, for better international relations, for global governance, for progress and development.

In the early Forums, according to my research, the demands for real system change were, in fact, rare.<sup>1</sup> There was very little talk of anti-capitalism, socialism, or revolutionary strategies. The radical alternatives discussed focused on social relations, participation, and a solidarity economy beyond markets. There was very little anti-globalization, but more alter-globalization with demands for a fair global order, based on the United Nations as opposed to the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. There was a strong belief and trust in

democratic values of participation and citizenship. In sum, the first World Social Forums were mainly reformist, succeeding in delegitimizing the existing neoliberal system but without achieving convergence of demands and strategies.

## A Market for Alternatives

Today, none of the problems have disappeared, though the priorities and demands of social movements are different. There has been a shift towards more local topics and more post-development topics, which converge in a defense of nature and indigenous people, and an opposition to modernity and large infrastructure projects. NGOs continue to talk about issues that are already on the agenda of international organizations, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Topics like the environment, gender, and migration, have also gained momentum.

Climate change rightly became priority number one, and while it is often said that climate justice and social justice go hand in hand, this link is never made concrete. The resurgence of fascism worldwide is barely mentioned. But at the last Forum in Salvador de Bahia, there were workshops on hip-hop and “women and soccer.” Approximately thirty proposals have been made for “thematic axes” for the upcoming Forum in Mexico next fall. When the apparent contradiction between the huge global problems we are facing and the lightness of the topics discussed is pointed out, the response from the founders is that we should respect the Charter of Principles. No topics are more important than others.

This lack of focus and of hierarchy are both responsible for the decline of the WSF. Its founders have been neither able nor willing to adapt to the reality of our times. Most intellectuals have left the International Council (IC), discussions are now mainly technical and self-referential, and decisions are in the hands of weak and mostly local movements and NGOs.

The WSF and its potentially important concept of “open space” have become a festival where all can come and do whatever they like. This results in a kind of market where participants offer their own alternative, at whatever level and to whomever is interested. There is no effort anymore to achieve convergence, to propose concrete and unified positions and actions. And since no one can speak in the name of the WSF or the IC, media are not interested anymore.

Two small but telling examples may clarify what this means for the political existence of the WSF and its IC. At the 2016 IC meeting of Montreal, after the “coup” against Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, a proposal was made to denounce this anti-democratic event. The founders refused, stating that a first agreement in the IC was a “coup” in itself, and that even in case of consensus, no declaration should be made. A similar attitude existed during the WSF in Salvador de Bahia, after the assassination of Marielle Franco in Rio de Janeiro. No, this was not a matter for the WSF, another founder declared; we had nothing to say on this brutal act.

It should be clear that a “market forum” without political voice has and should have no future.

## The Need for a World Social Forum

Today’s world is in a worse shape than it was twenty years ago. Structural adjustment, now called “austerity,” is applied the world over; climate change is hitting most countries, including the rich ones; thousands of people try to migrate and are dying at sea, in the desert, or at some fence. Slavery is re-emerging. Proto-fascist and authoritarian regimes are killing democracy, violating human rights, and reducing the space for social movements. Never before has there been a bigger need for a strong global voice to delegitimize this state of affairs and to propose alternatives.

However, most movements are now turning inwards, taking the slogan “think globally, act locally” very literally. These local actions are certainly very valuable, and it is true that at the city level, with the new thinking on municipalism, concrete alternatives with a direct impact on people’s lives can be very important.

However, as was already understood twenty years ago, it can never be sufficient. The choice is not between local and global; we obviously need both. We should not leave the global capitalist system untouched.

Unfortunately, the traditional political advocates of alternatives—social democracy and the radical left—remain silent. Social democracy largely was converted to neoliberalism and lost much of its legitimacy; the radical left has failed to grapple with the failures of “real socialism” and largely remains stuck with old recipes without any traction for today’s youth. As for the Greens,

they have not achieved any convergence and are too often focused on the single environmental question. We must fight neoliberal capitalism if we want to preserve the environment and achieve social justice.

Can the old WSF, then, be resuscitated? Should it? The advantage is that its formula—its “brand”—exists, and that it has some beautiful principles such as horizontalism and open space. I see four conditions if we want the WSF to play an important global role:

(1) First of all, we should clearly know what we want. For some, the Forum never was a space for building a global movement for political alternatives, but for shaping anti-imperialist alliances, in favor of some countries and against others. If we do not know what we are heading for, we should not even start to build something new.

(2) The WSF’s principles should be redefined. The “open space” principle should not be used to make political acts impossible. It is indeed great if local movements can come and discuss the topics they work on, whether it is hip-hop or soccer. But next to these activities, there should be political conferences, focused on analysis, convergence, and dissemination.

Horizontalism and the fear of hierarchies are very justified, but they should not make accountability impossible. A light structure, with responsible and democratic leadership, is perfectly possible and badly needed.

(3) The founders of the WSF have done a great job. They took the initiative for the organization of the first global gatherings of social movements, and we should be grateful. However, today, a younger generation of men and women is needed, with knowledge of world matters, with enthusiasm and energy for bringing together the existing movements on all continents that want to work for a better world and that understand that global and local actions are needed.

(4) A WSF without a political message is useless. A new International Council with contemporary academics and intellectuals should be formed in order to guide the WSF. They should organize political debates on all major topics and limit the proliferation of thematic axes and events.

Of course, everything depends on the available resources. But if these can be found, I am convinced there are interesting people to be found as well, of different generations, to steer the WSF in new directions. The upcoming Forum in Mexico is probably the last opportunity we have to do just that, but if this WSF again resembles a big Persian market with purely Mexican colors, we should definitely stop.

## Endnotes

1. Francine Mestrum, "Forum social mondial : une alternative démocratique," in *Mondialisation des résistances: L'état des luttes 2004*, eds. Bernard Duterme, François Polet, and Laurent Delcourt (Paris: CETRI/FMA/Syllepse, 2004).

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## About the Author



Francine Mestrum chairs Global Social Justice, which advocates for transformative universal social protection. Her research concerns the social dimension of globalization, poverty, inequality, social protection, public services, and gender. She serves on the International Council of the World Social Forum and the International Organizing Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum. Her latest book is *The Social Commons: Rethinking Social Justice in Post-Neoliberal Societies*.

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