

From Event To Process

Reinforcing the social forums' processes

Marti Olivella and Nicolas Haeringer

Martí Olivella is the director of the Centre pour l'Innovation Sociale in Barcelona. Nicholas Haeringer is a social researcher from Paris. Both are active in Memoria Viva (<http://www.memoria-viva.org/>). They wrote this article in French after WSF 5 in Porto Alegre, January 2005. The version which we publish here is the result of the combined efforts of the anonymous translator at http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=ci_barcelona_nico_in and Naila Durrani.

The Social Forums have existed for five years. They have grown in number, at all levels, and are starting to reach all the continents. Since the first WSF, the Brazilian Committee, and later, the International Council, have assured the forum's continuity. The world social forums follow this pattern and every year, its organizers try to learn from the preceding year. There is an improvement not only in quantity (i.e. the number of participants), but also in quality.

However, it is necessary to recognize that at present, the social forums are essentially events dependent on time and venue availability. There are very few organizations that have resources to follow the WSF organization's rhythm, and even more rare are the organizations which can follow the rhythm of another forum, a regional one, for example. On the other hand, the people who organize different forums are not yet prepared to offer the tools and methods that would allow its participants to follow the forum's dynamics, which go beyond the event itself. The « memory » projects are an exception, which start a few weeks before certain forums and continue several months after the event, offering the participating organizations the possibility of working further on their proposals and reports. Attempts are currently being made at the level of the ESF. These could inspire a similar approach within the International Council too.

The forum as an event and the forum as a process

There is a great number of people who try to reinforce the forums as a process. This can be amply explained. For the time being, it is important to try to reinforce the dynamics of the forums, starting from the inside. From this perspective, the phases before and after the forums should not be left only to its organizers, militant professionals and a few journalists. It should be possible for each participant of the forum to contribute to the formation of the Forum's dynamics, in an approach that corresponds to the forum's image of openness and inclusivity, and one that gives importance to diverse points of view, without trying to reach a consensus. On the other hand one could consider that reinforcing of the forums as process is a good way of bypassing the opposition between the forum as an event and the forum as a movement.

To reinforce the forums as a process means enabling their existence beyond the event itself, from their current transitory status to a more permanent one. This permanency cannot be achieved in terms of an open space vision of the forum, but through establishing and ensuring simple but clear procedures, with the guarantee that it will not turn into an organizational or a hierarchical structure. This is precisely the risk that accompanies the conception of the forum as a movement. Firstly, to be realistically an "open spaces" conception, the forums cannot be just that; in order to increase the number of organizations involved, the forums dynamic cannot be confined to a few days only in any year since it is almost impossible for the organisations to meet, share and articulate their proposals of potential interest to each other .

The event-forum has its own constraints owing to their immediate and accumulative aspects. The event gives us little time to step back and analyze its long term effects. The social forums are not comparable to the Davos economic forum. They cannot be organized in a completely sequential and reflective manner. Their very intuitive and spontaneous character are essential elements that allow them to be innovative. The erratic character of the forum's organizational process, through which each person hears and discusses the problems presented, is not so much a sign of immaturity but a proof that the forums are a major political innovation. Thus, we can only expect that the groups engaged in the preparation of a particular forum are also taking account of its longer term or on-going nature.

The process and the event should be distinguished from each other, not as opponents, but in order to juxtapose them in a dynamic manner, so that they may reinforce each other. And the methods for reinforcing the forum-process should be actively sustainable.

Up to now, the process is the poor relative of the event. There is no specific budget dedicated to it. The expenses of the process remain invisible, and rely on contributions given by organizations that have good financial, human and technical resources which allow them to work on the process during the whole year. Owing to this, the forum-process has not yet been formalized. In spite of all the difficulties, the forums have organized themselves and their organizers have learnt what is required and have started to introduce a number of changes from one forum to another. The social forums are not separate events which succeed each other without any link. Thus the management system of the process does in fact work. But it has its limits, as shown by the big increase in the number of meetings, discussion lists, groups and subgroups or even the WSF 2005 debt. Another consideration implicit in the process, which lies on the informal relationship among the organizations and in which the role of some of the individuals is central, does not allow for inclusivity in the organizational process. The existing complexity of the situation calls for important changes to be made.

It is urgent to raise funds which will allow a more rigorous and transparent management of the process and which will guarantee that its leaders do not take over the power, but would facilitate the work of others. This becomes even more urgent since the world social forum keeps re-inventing itself as it will be decentralized by being held in several venues in 2006. The work will be carried out mainly from afar. This will include anticipating and transforming the way the

IC at its Commissions work which currently work only through physical meetings, wherein the discussion lists are rarely used for discussing topics such as funding, where the follow-up of decisions made in a meeting is not satisfactory, where the participants who were absent in a meeting raise again topics that have already been decided upon during previous meetings, where the responsibilities and the roles of the commissions and the formal/informal groups are not very well defined, and where because of lack of exchange of information, many things are done more than once by different groups and different people while other tasks are left hanging.

Two dimensions of the process-forum

The process-forum has two dimensions within the framework of the World Social Forum :

- the establishment of the organizational process of the world social forum, its decentralized venues in 2006 and support to the preparatory dynamics for the forum in 2007 ;
- Construction of a process which will enable the forum to go beyond the event itself, whereby participation in the event will become an element of the whole dynamic of WSF.

The first aspect is all about working at a distance, about collaborative tools that will turn meetings, which are expensive, time-consuming and are harmful to the environment (because they use too much fuel), into becoming only a step at the heart of a much bigger and permanent work plan. It is about encouraging coordination, facilitating and making more dynamic the different work groups which are linked to the world social forum organization.

The second aspect concerns the visualization, re-valuing, transmission and debate about what is discussed along the forum, by means of written documents, pictures, audio files, videos and any other means.

Numerous approaches are either already in place or are being launched, and seek to consider one or several elements of the process-forum. A list, as exhaustive as possible is presented as follows: the works of the WSFtools group about consultations and collaborative tools, the works and perspectives opened by Memoria Viva, the Proposal's Billboard system, the evaluation of the WSF with Delibera, the proposal « Map for another world », the proposal to organize a world social forum through the internet by some International Council members. We should also include the Nomad project and Babels' work linked to the forum memories, and working in co-operation with Nomad. Further down on this document there is a description of each of these groups as drawn up by themselves .

Some of those approaches are directly linked to the International Secretariat, others come from IC members. Some were born within the Content and Methodology committees of the IC. They are all legitimate and tend to go in the same direction. The aim is not to make them compete nor to force them to come together. In fact, it is important to make sure that they continue

complementing each other, and to try to coordinate them well, so that we avoid some things being done several times by different groups. Agglutination [this word is often used within the WSF about the clumping together of events and activities - ed.] should begin within the IC itself before we come to the WSF's activities.

Taking into account what the facilitation of the forum-process implies, we have to raise funds that would be specifically dedicated to it, in order to make it possible for a small international and decentralized team to work on the facilitating and making more dynamic the processes in liaison with the International Secretariat and the Sao Paulo Office. This would also enable IT experts to put together the electronic tools which are essential in the international dynamics of an innovative body such as the forum.

Current actors of the forum-process (as an indication, additions to be made, in any order)

The International Secretariat : The international secretariat of WSF, and in particular its Brazilian section, have until now convened the IC meetings, facilitated the committees' work (more or less actively, depending on the committees), and taken charge of the relationships with WSF's national organizers (BOC and its working groups). The IS is responsible for the budget, through to members of the BOC. It leads the Sao Paulo office. The IS works around a mailing list and frequent meetings of its Brazilian section – without keeping any minutes.

The International Council: The International Council is the place where decisions regarding WSF's major orientations are made (decision to organise WSF 2004 in Mumbai, suppression of plenary sessions organized by the BOC and the IC, consultation, organization of the polycentric forums, etc). Those decisions are mostly prepared by the International Secretariat. The IC can also contribute towards facilitating certain aspects of the forum-process, such as the facilitation of the agglutination groups – even if this facilitation is not very active. The IC have elaborated some rules regarding functioning which are available on WSF's website. Summaries of its decisions are published in the forum's newsletter (bulletin), and the minutes are sent to IC members. It has a mailing-list (without are not archived).

The IC commissions: Some commissions are much more active than others: content and methodology commission, finance commission, and to a lesser extent, the expansion and communication commission. Up until now, the strategy commission is the less active one. It prepares the IC's decisions and also proposes some decisions. Content and methodology commission, organized in sub-groups, are also a space where some IC decisions are made concrete (such as the consultation). The commissions mandate was defined in Miami. Every commission has its own mailing list (again not recorded). They don't have an online working space.

Memoria Viva: Memoria Viva's team was created from the IC Content and Methodology Commission (CMC)'s work teams. This team was in charge of facilitating the interlinkages, at the moment of the WSF 2005 registration, to

build up its written memory, through the Proposal Panel system, to build a website capable of becoming the Memory webpage of all World Social Forums and made accessible to receive information from others Forums. It is a small team made up of Brazilians, Catalans and the French and financed from November to March by CCFD and ESF 2003 funding association. The 4 CMC Brazilian facilitators were in charge of the political and institutional direction of the project. Memoria Viva is organized around a web site, a database and a mailing list (which is recorded) and it communicates mostly through Skype.

Nomad: The International Nomad Project aims to create alternative technical solutions to the translation teams. It does not intend to become WSF's service provider, but looks at the possibility of experimenting with new techniques, and coming up with new ways of using existing techniques. The Nomad project also allows the archiving of some of the audio content of some of the activities of the forums, has several mailing lists (which are recorded), forums, wiki and a website. The Nomad project goes beyond the social forums.

Babels: Existing outside the WSF event, Babels is an international network linked to most of the Social Forums and other events. Transtrad is a subgroup dedicated to the written translation of documents produced throughout the organization of the forums. Babels brings to light the political meaning of languages. Some of Babels's members also work directly or indirectly linked to the forums memories (multilingual lexicons), many mailing lists (with archives), forums, wiki, web, database. The Babels network goes beyond the Social Forums.

Wsftools: At the Utrecht Meeting, this group has been given charge of proposing technical tools for the global consultations held prior to the decentralized forums held in 2006. It is also in charge of proposing tools and methods to allow the International Council to work from a distance. Has a mailing list (but no files) and wiki.

Delibera: This deliberation multilingual webtool was utilized to evaluate the WSF 2005 after having been used to prepare the International Council Meeting in Porto Alegre in 2003 to evaluate the resolution proposal of the IC. Delibera can be used to evaluate from a distance the degree of agreements and disagreements and the arguments and suggestions collected from the IC or the committees' documents, prior to the meetings, as well as during the meetings. Delibera can also help to prioritize proposals and actions in a participatory manner but from a distance and within the framework of the forum-process.

Map of the new world: This project was presented in a document sent to the International Council's list and concerns the Forums' Memory. It aims to allow each organization to dispose of what it has done during the forum and also to inform any interested party of its continuation and its participation in the forum through an open publishing system.

A WSF on the internet: Members of the IC have proposed in meetings or through the mailing list to organize a virtual WSF in 2006.

The Challenges of a polycentric forum-process (to be completed)

Important note: The tasks described in the following are facilitating tasks. They aim to make more dynamic, to animate, as well as to take over the information developments needed. Evidently the decisions are to be taken within the core of the entities in charge of that (IS, IC and organizing committees).

–Support in the animation of debates in the IC and its committees (moderation in the broadcasting lists, keeping in mind the multi-lingual nature of these lists, follow-up to the decisions taken and establishing links between the IS, IC and committees, etc.)

–Support in the preparation of the IC Meetings and of its committees (preparatory documents, agendas, etc.)

–Establishment of cooperative tools which will allow the International Secretariat and the International Council to work from a distance (ref. Utrecht's IC decision, under preparation in Wsftools). These tools will rely on a small animation team (preparation of Pedagogical kits, animation and making more dynamic the debates, online support, etc.)

–Support in the adequate articulation of the different "chapters" of the WSF 2006 (establishment of tools to enable the setting up of effective linkages among IS, IC and its committees on the one hand and the organising committees on the other).

–Support in the organization of a general consultation (IC Utrecht's decision, being developed within the Wsftools).

–Establishment of a kind of process "Mural de Propuestas" ("Mural of Proposals"), which will be added to the current database website found in www.memoria-viva.org (IC Utrecht's decision, to be developed in the CMC and Memoria Viva), Web publishing animation, links to the other forums (e.g. regional, thematic and local).