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Who defines what the World Social Forum is?

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Has the World Social Forum really missed the boat in a fast changing world?[1]

In the late 90s people went to the streets to demonstrate against an unjust global world order in front of the meetings of global institutions like the WTO or the G8 meetings. They claimed the streets and gave birth to global movements with protest slogans like: "You Are G8. We Are 6 Billion". In these times the World Social Forum (WSF) took place for the first time in 2001 in Porto Alegre. But what has happened since then? The 2000s were brandmarked by "new wars" against terrorism and a bipolarization of the world between a Christian liberal western and a women-oppressive Islamic world order promoted by mass media; by handmade ecological disasters like the nuclear power plant accident in Japan, by the explosion of the oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico or by the progressive desertification caused by overgrazing and deforestation; and last but not least by a deep financial and economic crisis which reinforced worldwide capital concentration and led to mass unemployment rates among young people. Ever since, the capitalist world model still prevails. And just one decade later people are back – reclaiming the streets – with a very similar slogan: "We are the 99%". The social upheavals in the Maghreb-Mashrak-Region and the protests – Occupy Wallstreet or Indignados – that have emerged in Europe and the US are now considered as new hopes for the global justice movements.

For the organizers of the World Social Forum these "new" social movements are also considered as an opportunity to reflect again about the idea of horizontalism and to renew their organizational structures. The last International Council (IC) meeting after the WSF in Tunis was therefore held under the promising title "the Future of the International Council".

This Council was formed shortly after the first WSF held 2001 in Porto Alegre (Brazil) to give political direction and also to get more social movements and NGOs involved from other regions of the world. The idea of the WSF since then has spread around the world with countless regional, national and local editions as well as with WSF events organized outside of Brazil in Mumbai (India), Nairobi (Kenya), Dakar (Senegal) and lastly in Tunis (Tunisia). Despite this expansion strategy, the WSF became a stable and permanent movement. One could even argue that it became a *movement without moving itself*. Nevertheless there have been – since the very beginning – self-critical voices about power structures in the International Council and very worried voices about the future of the WSF as a whole. Anyway in the structure itself nothing has changed: most of the members in the International Council are founding members, the majority comes from Brazil, and it is often unclear if the members really represent the opinion of an organization or movement. At first sight all this seems to be a lack of democratic decision-making within the WSF. However taking a sober look at the function of this International Council one could also argue that this body actually just takes one important decision collectively. And this is the answer to the question: Where should we all meet again? Apart from that, all the efforts for self-reflection, improvement, learning from the past, self-assessment, and evaluation etc. inside of the International Council have never and probably never will lead to a reform of the WSF. There is no such thing as learning from the past or an organizational development inside of the WSF process.

An organizational development might even be the most dangerous undertaking for the maintenance of the WSF. The attempt to form a really democratically legitimated and representative body would also mean to clarify the mandate of the IC, to take official decisions and to increase the level of bureaucratization. Furthermore there might be a will to take much more control over the open and obscure WSF process. Therefore I would rather argue that the friendship ties between the members of the IC are essential for the continuation of the WSF. People know each other for a long time and therefore trust and help one another. Because of these ties they are willing to invest their efforts to keep the WSF going, they commit themselves to follow-up proposals made by members and last but not least people want to hold on to the WSF, even in spite of all the criticism they have. What can be more important for a movement? A group of friends which helps to realize the next WSF event but which is not in a position to take any top-down decisions, or a democratically legitimated body which follows an official mandate?

The future of the WSF does NOT need a reform of the International Council but a reform of the organizing process of the event.

Even after more than one decade, the WSF is still an interesting opportunity for activists to come together and in all the places it might take place in the future there will be people enthusiastic about it. It is more than an opportunity for people to come together, to share experiences, to learn from one another, and to get politically organized. It gives also hope for solidarity between social struggles all over the world and also hopes that another world is (still) possible. This mythical image of the WSF prevails and also in Tunisia people were excited about the idea of hosting the WSF. However in what follows I will argue that, regarding the attention, the effort and the energy paid to the event, there is a need for a shift away from the event itself and towards the *organizing process* of the event.

The Event of the WSF from 26 to 30 March 2013 in Tunis was a coming together for activists for four days. It was a huge conference of international non-governmental Organizations (INGOs) but with just a few social movements present. Mostly the global jet-set elite came together and used the WSF as a platform to exchange – just like any other international event of civil society. Most of the participants of the event do not know anything about the organizing process. Therefore they assess the WSF by judging the degree of how well or badly the event is organized, e.g. whether or not the orientation on the site of the WSF is easy, the registration works, a good translation is provided.

The spectators of the event are consumers of the services given by the organizers. They have the expectation of a perfectly organized INGO meeting in their mind when they think about the WSF. The question is then: *Where is the difference between the WSF and any other international civil society event?*

If the World Social Forum wants to make a difference to other international events then the six months or longer process and not the four days of the event become more important. In this process social movements and individuals should be able to take ownership of the WSF. Unlike the 150 volunteers who got involved just two weeks before the event started and helped with logistical questions during the event, activists should be encourage with their own initiatives to shape *their* WSF.

Therefore I would argue that the knowledge of what a World Social Forum is shouldn't be that of a logistically perfect organized "open space" which is mainly used by big INGOs and where social movements are marginalized. But the event should be the result of a collective learning process about what the WSF should look like.

The principal question is: How to create structures of a process which allows social movements as well as individuals to get actively involved in creating a WSF?

To target this question there is a need for a closer look at the structures at the local but also at the international level of the WSF. In the organizing process there is always on the one hand an NGO which is mostly in charge of the administrative work and on the other hand a bunch of loosely coupled commissions (youth, women, culture, methodology, logistics and so on). This structure is a COPY-PAST-STRUCTURE for the WSF. It can be found on regional or national events as well as inside the International Council which has its own commissions.

This structure consists of an administrative NGO and an "open" commission structure where people can get involved. The administration body in Tunis was called "Comité de Pilotage" (Steering Committee). It is formed by representatives from Tunisian civil society organizations. Inside the Comité de Pilotage there is one NGO taking the main responsibility to fundraise – in order to deal with foundations –, to negotiate with the government and its ministries, to handle the registration and payment of the NGOs with their activities and to even deal with private enterprises like travel agencies or hotels. The main interest for the WSF of all these different entities is to create a logistically perfectly functioning "open space".

On the other hand, you find people interested in the process like social movements or individuals who are enthusiastic about the idea of horizontalism and who want to get involved in the process. They take part in the commissions and start to develop their own ideas and plans for the WSF which do not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the idea of the Comité de Pilotage. The different interests which evolved during the organizing process in Tunis led to disappointment by those people who wanted to get involved in the process.

One example often given by people involved in these commissions is that of an initiative to start a bicycle caravan. The idea of this bicycle caravan was to go by bicycle to different places in Tunisia and to talk to people about the World Social Forum. The people who took this initiative wanted to talk explicitly to "small" and "new" associations from Tunisia. A dispute started with the Comité de Pilotage whose members wanted the bicycle caravan to do it together with the UGTT – the biggest Tunisian union – as they could organize the events in the different cities they planned to go to. They did not follow this recommendation and therefore lost the financial support and furthermore were "excluded" from the WSF process because some members of the Comité de Pilotage tried to make the initiative untrustworthy by telling other Tunisian associations that the caravan is not officially representing the WSF. The attempt to monopolize the interpretation of the WSF marginalizes other ideas even though they could have coexisted. The wish to control the outcome of the commissions also came to light in the work of the commissions. For example, two months work in the methodology commission about different thematic axes got changed after just one informal meeting in a small group of three people from the organizing committee. The indifference of the Comité de Pilotage was shown by the fact that no reports of the commissions were read. The culture commission worked independently but a report after every meeting was sent to the members of the Comité de Pilotage via a mailing list. When the commission presented a proposal of a financial plan for all the planned activities, the Comité de Pilotage had to deny it. This proposal was way outside the budget and could not have been carried out in any possible way. Because of this communication problem, the work of the commission had to start all over again. Other commissions like the youth commission, which might have needed support to organize themselves because of many internal struggles, were likewise left aside by the organizing committee.

This kind of open loosely coupled commissions which are supposed to find their own way to work together get blocked every time they try to take ownership of the WSF. This leads to disappointments and many people turned their back on the WSF during the process. However there does not seem to be an interest in the future to reinforce the commissions but to keep the structure disorganized and weak. The main question for a reform of the WSF is therefore how to link the open structure of the commission closer to the administrative structure in the organizing process of the WSF event and in doing that, how to balance the different interests of a perfectly organized event and of an experimental field for initiatives from civil society who try to take ownership of the WSF.

In the following, this experimental field for initiatives will be illustrated by examples in order to give an idea about how the organizing process of the event could support initiative and actually help to create even new movements. One of those examples is NOMAD. Founded in November 2012 this group of young men from Redejef worked on a low budget solution for the translation equipment. Using radio frequencies they transmit the translation from the interpreters cabins to radios which serve as receivers for the audience. They provided all the equipment for the WSF and they want to support more social movement's events in the future to facilitate the communication between social movement activists. Just like this group did, there could have been many more groups who contribute with their creative solutions to the event. For example, a group who wanted to build the radio transmitters as well as a group who wanted to work on the Wi-Fi provision at the university. They presented to the officials their idea to make a low budget project to build it, but they did not get permission to do it. The organizers decided to have "professional" Wi-Fi and radio transmitters. So they gave this task to a government owned enterprise which built the Wi-Fi connection and provided radio transmitters.

All these groups who tried to get into the process with their ideas were disappointed. They couldn't get an open space for their initiatives in the process; they couldn't develop their experiences in working together because the organizers focused much more on having a more perfectly organized "open space", in the end mostly "occupied" by INGOS.

In summary, there is a need to reflect profoundly on the structures of the WSF process in which movements should be encouraged to take more responsibility and ownership of the WSF and in which the knowledge about the idea of the World Social Forum is not determined by the interests and expectations towards the WSF coming from foundations, governments and INGOS. The reinforcement of the commissions' structures will then lead to a localization of WSF. If the *World Social Forum* is strongly rooted at the local level the question arises how to link it again to the global level. So apart from a reflection on how to open up to social movements from the country where the WSF takes place, the question is also how to open up to social movements from other countries – not just for participation during the event but also before it, in the process. Linkages between local movements and other movements must be facilitated to put them in the position to find solutions about how to define the *World Social Forum* or rather how to take ownership of the WSF. The challenge is then how to renew the WSF process to create another WSF and at the same time how to keep it attractive for INGOS and foundations. This can be done by having an administrative body which knows how to facilitate the communication and coordinate the initiatives without controlling them. One first important step is to make the budget completely transparent and to empower the initiatives. This administrative body then has the difficult task of balancing the interests between INGOS, foundations, the government, enterprises, local and global movements. During the process the decision is taken who defines what the WSF is and what it will look like. If social movements get excluded in this decision-making process, in the long run the WSF will not be able to make a difference from other civil society events.

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[1] The following analysis is based on a two-month participant observation of the preparatory work for the WSF 2013 at the office in Tunis.

