



## A FORUM OF CONTRADICTIONS

JÜRGEN STETTEN / JOCHEN STEINHILBER

### The World Social Forum in Mumbai

The curtain has come down on this huge globalization-wary spectacle. Up to 130,000 people had come from 150 countries to attend the fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai, to take part in its over 1000 podium discussions and seminars, to exchange views and addresses, or simply to join in its never-ending street protests. After three years in Brazil's more tranquil Porto Alegre, the WSF International Committee decided to move the anti-globalization colony from its cozy nest in Southern Brazil to the contradictory and raw reality of the 18-million metropolis on India's west coast.

The choice of venue was a good one. There is hardly another city where modernity and tradition, bitter poverty and glaring wealth, economic ups and social downs, glamour and tristesse can be experienced in such proximity. „Bollywood“, South Asia's dream factory, with its output of over a thousand movies a year, and Asian largest slum, home to some 1.5 million people – these are the palpable signs of these enormous contradictions. While India itself, just recently having joined the globalization bandwagon, has recorded high rates of economic growth in recent years, the subcontinent is and remains one of the world's main poverty regions. And finally, the – in formal terms – „world's largest democracy“ is marked by stringent social hierarchies and religious frictions which continue to be fomented right by extreme rightist parties like Shiv Sena, the

party of Mumbai's present mayor.

There can be no doubt that these problems and the social actors of the subcontinent have shaped this fourth World Social Forum. But this year the Forum's change of venue, but also the four years of development it has now gone through, have contributed to placing its strengths and ambivalences in sharper focus. In the fourth year of its biography the World Social Forum has thus become a reliable seismograph of the changes and contradictions of the anti-globalization movements.

### The actors: seeing and being seen

In keeping with the interest of the Forum's initiators in creating the broadest possible platform for all those who view the process of globalization with a critical eye, the Mumbai event attracted a highly diverse, and visible, troop of political and social actors. The participants from the host country, who, this time as well, dominated the WSF both optically and acoustically, were joined by a growing number of international actors. Apart from the multifarious new social movements from North and South, this group now includes numerous established social forces, such as parliamentarians and representatives of church organizations and labor unions. Indeed, even representatives of national governments were – albeit sporadically – invited to participate in the dialogue. Representatives of the business world, on the other hand, were, as in the past, not welcome as guests; in Mumbai they were neither seen nor missed.

The change of venue to Asia has served to underline the meeting's character as a forum for the „political South“: grassroots movements, very often politically oppressed and marginalized in their Asian home countries, made use of the forum to draw attention to their plight. But a strong presence of e.g. labor unions, farmers associations, or student organizations from South Korea, South Africa, or Brazil managed – despite language barriers – to make themselves heard. Since Mumbai – at the very latest – the WSF no longer has any need to defend itself against the old charge of being a gathering dominated by NGOs and activists from the North.

Even though the Forum has increasingly presented itself as an expression of solidarity with the South, and a venue in Europe would therefore be inconceivable. However, the North-South dialogue continues to play a weighty role. But while the groups from the South stemmed for the most part from the political – albeit left-leaning – mainstreams of their home countries, the majority of active participants from the North represented the political margins of their societies. One exception is the network Attac, which has thus far managed to elude any clear-cut political categorization.

Despite the unmistakable bias noted among the participants from Europe and the US, representatives from the middle ground of the North had no trouble making themselves heard. This group made use of the Forum as an opportunity to develop new contacts as well as to lend an ear to the discussions of and moods prevalent in the South. In parallel, representatives from the North also had the opportunity to exchange views among one another, e.g. in the framework of the parliamentary forum or the meeting of the Socialist International. Another noteworthy fact is that institutions of the UN family – e.g. the ILO's World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization – participated actively in the Forum and were represented by numerous prominent speakers (including Juan Somavia and Evelyn Herfkens).

### **The issues: between globalization discourse and social protest**

The submovements attending the World Social Forum – highly heterogeneous in terms of their

political, social, and geographic horizons – brought along their own issues. The fundamental working principle of the World Social Forum, and at the same time the source of its „magic“, is the principle of an open political culture. True, the Forum is not neutral, but it has managed to avoid the temptation to formulate any „pure“, unadulterated political line. Indeed, the Forum is a diverse market of „globalization-critical“ possibilities without any binding ideological base, one that at best shows signs of an emergence of unfocused negative coalitions – against „neoliberal globalization“ or the US. The one aspect shared by the better part of those attending the Mumbai Forum is the vague formula borrowed from the Zapatistas: „Another World is Possible“ – as well as the conviction that the character of globalization can in any case be corrected through social action.

The original core issues of the critique of globalization were taken up again in Mumbai. Under the keynotes „global finance“, „global trade“, „global food“, and „global services“ the delegates discussed GATT, GATS, and TRIPS, frankenfood and sterile maize, the limits of privatization, access to water and seed, transnational corporations and tax havens – the „red-light districts of capitalism.“ It was noted that above all in the seminars on international political economy, which, along with the impending Iraq war, topped the agenda of the last Forum in Porto Alegre, the international participants were often on their own.

The Indian organizations had other priorities. Three of the Forum's five main thematic axes were concerned directly with central social issues facing the country: while the aspects „neoliberal globalization“ and „war and militarism“ picked up on the focuses of last year's Forum, some of the new focal points addressed included „the caste system“, „(religious) fundamentalism“, and „patriarchy“, issues that had until then attracted little attention. In the eyes of progressive social movements in South Asia, this thematic broadening of the scope of the World Social Forum has meant a real step forward. For instance, some members of the Dalit movement (earlier referred to as the „untouchables“) have long struggled to place the effects of the caste system on the international agenda. The fact that, after their success at the UN conference in Durban on ra-

cism and discrimination, they have managed to place the issue on the agenda of another major world forum is certain to strengthen their hand. But other issues also pushed for consideration: child and forced labor, dowry-related murders and homosexual rights, the informal sector and precarious employment. It is not likely that these issues will be able to hold their own in the long term at World Social Forums in other regions of the world. Still, the quite general concept of human rights appears to be taking on shape as a new point of reference that could develop into a further focal point of the Forum. One challenge facing the next Forum will be the issue of how to improve the way in which regional and global issues and different discussion and protest cultures are dovetailed.

The change of venue has meant a another substantial expansion of the range of issues up for discussion at the „thematic supermarket“ which the WSF has become. There is no question of any constant recurrence of the same old issues. In the future, too, the dynamic of the WSF will only be able to be maintained as long as the Forum is able to integrate new aspects and to see contractions as one of its strengths, not as a weakness. Many people who bemoan the „tyranny of the unstructured“ or call for more clear-cut political contours are confusing social movements with the Forum itself. They – in coalitions of one size of another - will have no choice but to seek to embrace the seeming contradiction between thematic diversity and a focused message capable of mobilizing a broad public.

### **The latest issue: the WTO and ambiguous attitudes toward the G20**

No one other issue dominated the discussion on classic globalization issues in a way comparable to the debate on the WTO and the collapse of negotiations in Cancún. Those who looked at little more closely at the debate found themselves in the midst of a new variant of the centuries-old dispute between reformers and revolutionaries. The center of interest: the G20 – a group of countries led by Brazil, India, South Africa, and China which played an instrumental role in bringing the Cancún talks to a halt. Admired by many for its chutzpa, the G20 found itself confronted in Mumbai with a mixture of respect and

animosity. While advocates from the South, like Walden Bello, who are calling for a reshaping of the global balance of political power, privately harbor a certain measure of respect for the G20's courage, they openly reject the Group's political pragmatism, concerned as it is not with abolishing the WTO but with reform on one small but significant point – agricultural policy. If the G20 were able to push the EU and the US to make concessions on this point, the move would, it is true, signal an important political shift. But on the other hand this would also mean a consolidation and legitimation of the „system“ fundamentally rejected by its hard-line critics. It is for this reason that it is not the G20 but the G90 – the group of the poorest, for the most part African, WTO member countries that enjoys the undivided sympathy of opponents of globalization like Walden Bello. The G20 came in for criticism for the exaggeratedly pro-free-trade position it allegedly embraces. The representative of the Brazilian government saw himself confronted with bitter accusations leveled by the NGO scene in Mumbai: „This is not the Lula that we know!“

### **Inside the WSF: There's trouble brewing in the engine room**

Those familiar with the innermost workings of the World Social Forum are fond of comparing it – half in jest – with the Olympic Games. Both here and there the preparatory work is in the hands of an international and a national organization committee. While the international committee defines the Forum's rough structure – the venue, the issues, the number of events, etc. – the national committee is in charge of detailed planning and managing funding and logistics on the ground. The International Committee's composition and operating principles have always been surrounded by an aura of mystique. No one seems to be familiar with the criteria according to which members are appointed to the committee, and the broader public is not informed in detail of the issues discussed in its sessions. Again and again, the bone of contention is the question of who is to be invited to participate in the large-scale podium discussions organized by the WSF and in whose name the self-styled representatives of the „new social movements“ are actually speaking. Members of the „old“ social movements in particular often claim that many of the

participants granted ample speaking times and attention at the Forum are without any broad political base at home. The other side is in turn apt to respond to the demand for more „representativeness“ raised mainly by labor unions by pointing to the latter's bureaucratized and sclerotic structures. In view of these tensions, it must be noted that the International Committee has thus far managed to avoid any major splits leading to the formation of break-away groups. What this could lead to is clearly shown by developments in the Indian organization committee, which was unable to integrate radical forces and was forced to acquiesce in the emergence of the so-called „Mumbai Resistance“, „a counter-event to the counter-event“ which was accorded far too much attention by the international media.

Another issue that turned out to be as thorny as the question of the WSF's internal structure is the issue of funding. True, the organizers sought to use attendance fees to cover a major share of the Forum's costs. But even this huge gathering, which, in view of its modest budget of € 2-3 million, deserves to be called a „low-cost event“, was unable to make ends meet without at least some subsidies. Grants provided in the past by major US nonprofit organizations like the Ford Foundation have been a particular point of contention. According to the organizers, these donors were not involved this time around. This year's major supporters, likewise large in size but far less controversial, included Oxfam and some of the major European church organizations.

### **Outlook: Outra vez em Porto Alegre**

Many Brazilian delegates could be seen at Mumbai's airport waving their national flag, a scene reminiscent of those familiar from international football matches. In their eyes the World Social Forum is a Brazilian invention, one

inseparably linked with the name of the town that hosted the event the first three times it was held. The price for the move to India was a concession to Brazilian to hold the next, fifth, Forum in Porto Alegre again. Even though the World Social Forum has itself long since become a facet of what is generally referred to as globalization, a periodic discussion, protest, and get-to-know-one-another gathering which we seem to have come to count on as a regularly occurring event, the planned return to Porto Alegre in January 2005 is also bound up with a certain risk. The reason is not only that the Mumbai Forum's dimensions, colorfulness, and diversity, and thus the broad echo it has found in the media, will be more than difficult to match. It is above all the economic and trade policies of President Lula's government that will put the Forum to a hard test. One important element of the political and logistic formula of Porto Alegre was the support (including financial support) provided by the leftist-oriented PT and the Brazilian labor union federation, CUT. The more the Brazilian government is caught up in the travails of quotidian politics, the more difficult it is to bridge the contradictions inevitably besetting the Forum and to provide for unity and peace in the camp of the Brazilian organizers. But to close by citing the WSF's slogan, marked as it is by a unmistakable note of Latin American joie de vivre and optimism: Another World is Possible.

*The Authors: Jürgen Stetten and Jochen Steinhilber are staff members of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's (FES) Department for Development Policy in Berlin; and they were part of the team organizing FES-activities at the World Social Forum in Mumbai. Further information can be found under [www.fes.de/globalization](http://www.fes.de/globalization).*

---

Contact:  
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Berlin  
Hiroshimastrasse 17  
10785 Berlin  
Tel.: ++49-30-26-935-914  
Fax: ++49-30-26-935-959  
[Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de](mailto:Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de)  
[www.fes.de/globalization](http://www.fes.de/globalization)