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## **Soul-Searching in Porto Alegre**

**A Report from the 5th World Social Forum**

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## 1 Back to the roots? The WSF returns to Porto Alegre

In 2004 the World Social Forum (WSF) took off for Mumbai, but in 2005 it returned to its origins and the place it was firmly associated with for four years. Porto Alegre, home to 1.4 million people in the south of Brazil, had provided the WSF with a geographical face from the outset, and now it has become the springboard for new departures in the Forum movement.

There were mixed feelings about the WSF's return from the harsh bustle of the Indian metropolis to the more tranquil port that gave birth to the Forum and watched it grow. Lula, enthusiastically welcomed here two years ago but now – as an architect of an austerity plan – he can no longer expect undivided support. Indeed, in its traditional bastion of Porto Alegre his Workers' Party (PT) has been compelled to hand over the keys of the city to the opposition after 16 years at the helm. By contrast, the wind blowing across the continent is still from the left, most recently with victory for the Frente Amplio under Tabaré Vasquez in Uruguay and success for Evo Morales in the Bolivian local elections in December.

Recalling the WSF to Brazil posed another major challenge to the organizers after the positive record of Mumbai, which initiated a whole new kaleidoscope of issues under the banner headline of human rights, thereby attracting a broader spectrum of participants. Porto Alegre had to build on the Mumbai experience to counter any impression that things were returning to the old format. And the organizers were not deaf to criticism. They extricated the Forum from the Catholic University and opened up a World Social Territory in the heart of town, 400 hectares on the banks of the Guaíba River. The youth camp was in the middle of it, with over 35,000 youngsters integrated into the Forum's cartography for the first time. Some 130,000 participants who found their way into the tented community were treated to a mammoth four-day programme with at least 2000 events, workshops, exhibitions and concerts. To encourage closer debate and improve networking between the 5,700 organizations and social movements who registered, the 500 show tents were grouped into eleven thematic focus areas.

The hard statistics are impressive, and the 5th WSF once again exceeded the considerable magnitude of its two predecessors. There is no

doubt that the Forum's success over the last four years has surpassed all hopes. Expectations grow by the year, and now that (WTO and IMF) "summit-storming" days are over the WSF is the only high-visibility meeting point for groups critical of globalization. But now people are talking of stagnation. There is nothing new about this diagnosis, of course. Every Forum since the outset has heard prophets warn that its impact is on the wane, that it is "losing its ideological bearings" (Lula) or in any case nothing more than a "romantic throwback for Christians and anarchists". But with so few signs that tangible, progressive changes have occurred around the Forum's core issues – like world trade, combating poverty and peace policy – there are growing reservations about the Forum's political rationale. From within the WSF itself, doubts about its thematic and strategic orientation and ultimately its value and its influence are being voiced with increasing persistence.

## 2 The WSF menu: a few old chestnuts and a lot of water

This year the wide variety of themes addressed by the World Social Forum was structured into eleven focus areas and five pervasive themes. These included, for example, "Social struggles and democracy", "peace and demilitarization", "alternative economies", "human rights", "knowledge and technologies" and "ethics and spirituality". Gender issues, social emancipation and the culture of political confrontation were to be taken into account in each of the thematic discussions.

The broad range on offer at the Forum's "theme supermarket" cannot, however, disguise the fact that once again the tone in Porto Alegre was set by a critique of globalization which has been heavily influenced by Western discourse, notably with a Latin American and European flavour. Input from Africa, Asia and the Middle East passed largely unnoticed in the daily flood of 500 or more listed events. There was never much chance that the new issues to come out of Mumbai, such as patriarchy, (religious) fundamentalism, racism or the informal economy, could attract the same attention in Porto Alegre. But the discussions about the traditional core anti-globalization themes – "global finance", "global food", "global trade" and "global services" – were actually pretty similar to the WSF sound bites we heard two years ago. One reason for this is that the momentum and topicality of a

whole number of issues, such as the FTAA or even the WTO, have declined considerably. If the FTAA has come to a political standstill, the social movements in Latin America are laying claim to much credit for this. But it also illustrates what slow progress NGOs and social movements have made in the last few years in adopting programmatic positions and reaching agreement on a range of core questions. So many of the strategic debates that were driving the Forum two years ago have lost their steam: e.g. whether to reform or abolish the international institutions, the "global social contract" versus "deglobalization", or collaboration between NGOs and trade unions. While these issues have been discussed exhaustively without arriving on a consensus, there are no new strategic debates on the horizon.

Nevertheless, a few items did manage to work their way up the political agenda in Porto Alegre. These include the United Nations, combating poverty, peace and above all the water question. To step up the pressure on politicians prior to various international conferences this year, many NGOs have joined the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. The motto is intended to encourage more efficient coordination and greater visibility for a number of activities, e.g. the trade campaign, the education campaign and the campaign against HIV/AIDS. Lula, who spoke in Porto Alegre as a "guest" of this initiative, urged NGOs to use the Global Call to channel more activities towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

But what attracted the most limelight in Porto Alegre was the campaign against the privatization of water. Inspired by the successful referendum in Uruguay, where a large majority rejected the privatization of water services, and by the ousting of the transnational corporation Suez from Bolivia's El Alto, these well-networked NGOs and social movements took advantage of the WSF to publicize their campaign, ultimately forging it into an emblem for Porto Alegre 2005. This partly fulfilled an idea put forward by liberation priest Leonardo Boff – similar to Arundhati Roy's suggestion last year – that the WSF should agree on one or two world-wide mobilizations.

### **3 Stage or actor? The "networkers" and the "Group of 19"**

There have always been different views about the strategic role the WSF should play. While the Forum Charter emphasizes the opportunity to exchange ideas and initiatives, some of the WSF's leading players also see it as a political force. It is not just the 5,000 or so accredited journalists who look forward each year to a final declaration that translates easily into media formats. Well organized NGOs and movements such as Via Campesina, Focus on the Global South and even a range of Trotskyist organisations have long aspired to the global stamp of the WSF beneath their campaigns. And faithful to the old notion of a vanguard, an "Assembly of Social Movements" tries every time to lend contours to the fuzzy edges of the Forum by adopting a statement which is regularly mistaken for the WSF final document.

Whether the Forum should be an arena for discussion and exchange or whether it should constitute a movement remained one of the most controversial issues at Porto Alegre 2005. This year's Forum, however, was marked less by attempts to reconcile these positions than by the two approaches drifting apart.

As a point of crystallization for groups and movements with very different regional, social and political frames of reference, the Forum paid tribute once again to its original principle, which was to offer an "open space". Self-organization was even more pronounced than in the past. Participants from previous Forums were asked in advance to indicate the themes most important to them. Drawing on this reservoir with its thousands of proposals, the organizers then distilled eleven thematic focuses for this Forum. Another visible indication that the Forum was to be more egalitarian than usual was the decision that there should be no large-scale events of the kind hosted in past years by the International Council of the WSF. These tended to resemble a political rite of mass, with a star-studded line-up in an overflowing hall, but although they no doubt served a purpose in terms of media impact for the WSF itself, they were hardly effective in meeting the Forum's objective, which is to build links between the various players. From the point of view of the advocates of an "open-

space-Forum" it should be left to the individual actors and movements to transform the encyclopaedic desiderata and countless initiatives into political clout.

Admittedly, not everyone condones this approach. During the Forum a kind of "Council of Elders" in the globalization sparring arena came out with a "Porto Alegre Manifesto". 19 well-known names from the Social Forum, including Bernard Cassen, Ignacio Ramonet, Eduardo Galeano, Sousa Santos and Walden Bello, presented twelve proposals for a different world which embraces (almost) the entire anti-globalization agenda: Tobin tax, debt relief for the countries of the South, fair international trade, anti-discrimination and transfer of UN headquarters to the southern hemisphere. No position was expressed on peace and security. This "Porto Alegre Consensus" can now at last be weighed in black and white against its favourite adversary, the Washington Consensus. But it seems as though the consensus is confined for the time being to its signatories. The initiative prompted a considerable raising of eyebrows among various stakeholders, in particular the trade unions as advocates of the "open space" Forum. Apart from Emir Sader none of the prominent Brazilian organizers of the WSF signed this appeal.

It also jarred somewhat with the Charter of the World Social Forum to see and hear so many representatives of the political establishment – more than ever before. One reason for this was no doubt that the PT, the governing party in Brazil, adopted a high-profile approach to engaging leading figures for panel discussions and seminars in order to counter any impression that the PT was shying away from debate about the government's strategy. Another was that organizations like the Socialist International ensured a copious programme of peripheral events, further boosting the numbers of Social Democrat politicians who took the trip to Porto Alegre. Among these were António Guterres, President of the SI and former Prime Minister of Portugal, who spoke at several seminars; and Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Chairman of the Global Progressive Forum and also President of the Party of European Socialists. But the core of the reform camp at the Forum consisted once again of the international trade union movement, not only in the

shape of ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder, but also numerous delegations from ICFTU affiliates. The international organisations were also very much in view, but this time they were not confined to welcome guests in Porto Alegre such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). The IMF and the World Bank also ventured into the lion's den, responding to criticisms during panel discussions.

While a process of mainstreaming could be detected beneath the surface of the Forum in Porto Alegre, headlines from the World Economic Forum in Davos were also dominated by development themes – debt relief, Africa and HIV/AIDS. So can we expect the two Forums to be linked in the mid-term, as some observers suggested with just a hint of mockery? In all likelihood, no. It is not only the nature of the event in Davos that stands to prevent rapprochement. The centrifugal forces of the World Social Forum would be bound to thwart any such venture. The more evident the creeping advance of established players becomes, the more we can expect internal tensions and contradictions to grow.

#### **4 "Lula no – Chávez sí": a craving for political heroes**

One of the vital ingredients of the World Social Forum has been its definition as a space free of party and state politics. The deliberate decision not to install political leaders or integration figures served during the initial period to contain tensions and rivalries between different political groupings. Instead, the magnets to the audience and press were writers and academics, such as Noam Chomsky, Arundhati Roy and Joseph Stiglitz. Due to this year's almost totally decentralized format, even these human compass points were either absent or submerged in a plethora of separate events. The vacuum that was left found itself filled, of all people, by two politicians – Presidents Ignacio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela.

Just how hard it is to associate the Forum with a single figure over any length of time was illustrated by Lula da Silva at his second Forum appearance in his capacity as State President. In early 2003, when the former trade unionist became the beacon of hope for all Latin America, he was celebrated by over 50,000 people as the

hero of the World Social Forum. Compared with how his aura has lifted in his own country, he still managed to put across a punchy message when he addressed the Forum this year, and he was met with benevolent approval by his political friends. But the frenzied cheers of previous years were not echoed. Instead, a group of radical critics attracted media attention by heckling noisily in the hall and burning Lula puppets.

The role of the political hero was awarded this time to Hugo Chávez, with the unofficial closing session of the Forum tailored as his backdrop. It proved effective, at least for the Latin American majority. With a backing of revolutionary songs and a Che Guevara chorale, the former army officer who is now Venezuela's head of state had the affections of the predominantly Brazilian audience on his side. "Chávez sí, Lula no", they chanted, giving full vent to their disenchantment with the policies of Lula's administration. For the non-Latinos present, the populist style of the Venezuelan President's multi-hour speech was, if anything, a source of consternation.

In retrospect, the Forum's organizing committee not only transgressed its own red line by devoting two major events to Lula and Chávez. It also triggered the very effect it had feared: rather than integration and identification, the result was polarization and disharmony.

A completely different type of political hero was personified by the Vietnamese delegation. At an event entitled Meeting Vietnam 30 Years after the War, the team from the south-east Asian country recalled not only the casualties of the belligerence, but also the fact that globalization has its winners as well as its losers. "Socialism is not only possible but also visible", the delegates from the land of economic miracles had inscribed proudly and confidently on their posters. With average growth rates of 7% the Vietnamese government has undertaken effective measures to combat poverty and (subtext) taken advantage of the globalization all too demonized in Porto Alegre. Whereas another winner in the globalization scenario, the People's Republic of China, shunned the World Social Forum due to the huge presence of political groups from Hong Kong and Tibet, the official Vietnamese Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO) dispatched a delegation of no fewer than 30 people to far-off

Porto Alegre. In the Vietnamese tent they were ready and waiting for critical questions: "What Vietnam is doing has nothing to do with socialism", came an interjection from the audience. The VUFO spokesman replied with a friendly but unmistakable lesson on the difference between a free market economy and a market economy of socialist complexion, adding with a dash ofchutzpah that, after all, the decisive point was what cause economic growth served!

## 5 Next stop Africa

To leave no room for doubt about the Forum's continuity, the international steering committee always agrees on the next venue before a World Social Forum begins. The same procedure was adopted this year, but with the opposite effect. Rather than holding out prospects for the future, the decisions taken by the International Committee provoked the sceptics. In fact, it took two decisions. First, next year (2006) the Forum is to be "regionalized", and second, the year after next (2007) the Forum will take place in Africa. The African members of the organizing committee are to agree among themselves on a venue and country.

The decision to regionalize the Forum next year has its origins in an idea the organizers have been discussing for some time, which is to return to a two-year rhythm. While those who prefer the biennial option cite pragmatic reasons, drawing attention to the costs and logistic investment, its opponents fear that this would diminish media interest and also quash the political momentum from which the Forum draws its vitality. The pragmatic arguments seem to have held sway, because regionalization in essence means a shift to the two-yearly event. The regional Social Forums, which already exist, do not generate the same dynamic appeal for the media or for participants as a World Social Forum concentrated in a single place. Nevertheless, the regional and even national social forums should manage to ensure that the Forum process maintains its vitality until the next World Social Forum in two years.

The decision to stage the next World Social Forum in Africa is potentially more serious. After the positive experience of moving the Forum to Mumbai in 2004, there is much to be said for

rotating the venue. However, an event which lasts 4 to 5 days, is expected to pull in 100,000 participants and breaks down into 2,000 separate parts makes extremely exacting demands. Besides, at past Forums 80-90% of the participants came from the country or sub-region where it was held. For potential hosts and organizers in Africa, this poses a huge challenge, given the low population density and difficult logistic and socio-political conditions across the continent.

One possible venue would be South Africa, which has experience in such matters after staging the UN summit on sustainable development 3 years ago. Moreover, the trade union umbrella COSATU is an organization which not only boasts a large number of members and logistic potential, but has contributed to the organizing committee of the World Social Forum repeatedly in recent years. An official application from South Africa has not (yet) been lodged, but there are sensitivities to bear in mind elsewhere on the continent which relate to the economic and political giant on its southern cape. But South Africa is not out of the running yet, in spite of the murmurings about other candidates (Kenya or Morocco).

## **6 A plea for maintaining the World Social Forum as an innovative network**

It would be mistaken to regard the World Social Forum as a failed experiment just because of the inherent contradictions that were all too evident again in 2005. It may well be the case that the tensions between "reformists" and "fundamentalists" cannot be eliminated, but no doubt a Forum designed for pluralism can live with that. Were the WSF to succumb to the Comintern syndrome and aspire to becoming a regal procession which parades the one true critique, it would mean the end of the Forum. It no longer

functions on the outside as a "second super-power" and counterweight to Davos, but it works increasingly well on the inside as a "network of networks".

It is easy to overlook the particular attraction that the Forum exerts on representatives of the political left from parties, parliaments and trade unions in developing countries and emerging economies. It grants them an opportunity for political exchange beyond the fossilized structures which have evolved in international federations of parties, parliaments and trade unions and which are so hard to wrest open. The World Social Forum provides a chance to network as equals – a feature that representatives of the South in particular find lacking in established bodies.

To uphold the Forum's momentum, it should be developed into a place with even greater leeway for debate and controversy between participants, where the scope for joint initiatives can be explored. Conceivably, for example, a distinction could be drawn – without compromising the openness of the event – between education events for a broader audience and colloquia targeted rather at people in pivotal communicative or decision-making functions. This departure would certainly be compatible with the magical formula in the Forum's Charter: "The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action."

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