

Report of the International Council Meeting of the World Social Forum

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This is a brief report of the International Council (IC) meeting of the the World Social Forum (WSF) that has taken place in Mexico City from the 5th to the 7th of May 2010. The meeting was preceded by a day-long workshop on the WSF methodology. The focus of the whole meeting was the next WSF event to take place in Dakar in February 2011. There were long and detailed presentations by some of the members of the organising committee and engaged conversations with the IC members. The work of each IC commission focused on the actions necessary to both strengthen the current process leading towards Dakar and to make the Dakar event successful and fulfilling of the WSF vision to catalyse encounters between activists from different regions of the planet. Finally the renewal of the Liaison Group generated a dynamic critical reflection by the IC members.

The Methodology Workshop

The vibrant methodology workshop generated a detailed and sophisticated debate on the vision of the methodology commission, on its practical implications, and the challenges faced in the journey towards Dakar. Close scrutiny was dedicated to the development of the WSF methodology over the years and to the lessons learnt from past experiences. According to some of the outcomes of the workshop, the methodology should be thought in close relation with the specific objectives of the WSF process and should in general focus on exploring ways to inspire a new political culture of transformation based on the celebration of difference and on a non-hierarchical organisational structure. To achieve these objectives the methodology commission will strengthen even further its coordination with other IC commissions following a trend that has been very successful of late and will explore new languages and cultural expressions of communication. With a specific focus on the Dakar event, the methodology commission will facilitate the definition of the programme as it has done since 2005, on the basis of an extended consultation process aimed at eliciting from social movements and civil society organisations, their strategic interests and political commitments.

WSF 2011

The Dakar event will start on Sunday the 6th of February with the official opening and a march along the streets of the Senegalese capital. The following day will focus on Africa and the African diaspora and will see a proactive involvement of the organising committee in defining the programme. The second and third day will revolve around the myriad of self-organised activities. The fourth day will help build moments of thematic convergence and the fifth day will be dedicated to the assembly of assemblies experimented in Belem in 2009. The event will take place in the university campus which allows room for up to 60,000 people (although further spaces are available should the registration show the need). The foci of the Dakar event will be multiple. It will be articulated around three axis of critical encounter: the analysis of the latest financial, economic and social crises; the convergence and encounter of the people's struggle against the effects of the crises and finally, the proposals for another way out of the crises centred on the values of solidarity, equity and justice. The Dakar event will stress particularly the African history of subjection and domination extending those analysis to the diaspora violently uprooted from the continent or forced to move away as economic refugees. Through the view

at the global conjuncture from a Southern perspective, one that is not only geographic but political, economic and cultural, the activists converging in Senegal will contribute to design and articulate what the facilitators of the event proposed could be understood as a new universality. The project of a new emancipatory universality would rewrite the possibility for convivial existence on the planet of fully empowered and autonomous communities and individuals. This ambitious project will constitute the cultural and political aura of the 2011 WSF and will offer concrete spaces of convergence and political actions to actors committed to imagining a new world beyond the hegemony of the neoliberal paradigm.

The Work of the Commissions

As far as the resources of the WSF process are concerned the **Resource Commission** has started a process to rationalise their mobilisation and use. Some proposals were shared with the IC referring to the process towards Dakar. Given the funders' reluctance to invest resources in the WSF process, some reflections were conducted on how to streamline it even further between one event and the next. It was, for instance, proposed that the technical workshop scheduled to take place in Dakar in July were organised along the next IC meeting to take place in the Senegalese capital later in October. Another proposal to lighten the burden on the African process, that following the tradition is expected to shoulder the financial weight of organising the IC meeting, was to perhaps organise the October meeting somewhere else. On the other hand it was suggested that that an IC in Dakar before the event could play a crucial mobilising role. It was generally recognised that combining strategic consideration regarding the location of the IC meeting vis-a-vis the expansion of the WSF process, the mobilisation towards the next WSF event and as rational use of the IC resources as possible, would deserve further creative reflection which would have been inappropriate to rush during this IC meeting. Further deliberation will therefore take place over the internet and will engage all those members involved in the IC meetings planning process, the expansion commission, the resources commission and the facilitators of the new WSF event in Dakar. Later the renewed LG group will follow up on the decisions taken.

The **Strategy Commission** met several times during the days of the IC meeting. It focused its work on its general methodology, on how to link the WSF events of 2010 and make them all point towards the future of the process and Dakar in particular, and on how to strengthen the WSF process as a whole. As far as the general methodology is concerned it was paid attention on how to further focus its vision while facilitating further engagement with the other commissions of the kind that has taken place with the methodology commission. The articulation of the WSF events during 2010 was considered crucial to give the overall process more visibility and to inspire those movements and organisations that are not still involved in the WSF process while at the same time explore further reciprocity between the strategy of the forum and that of the movements and organisations that constitute it. In this last sense, while facilitating a process of accumulation of the experiences of the WSF events, it was suggested that the strategy commission facilitates reflections on the conjuncture focusing on the analysis of the current crises and of the solutions proposed by the global activists. A crucial tool in light of the accumulation of the experiences of the forum is the WSF website which should gather the contributions of all IC members so defining a common communication strategy of the WSF towards Dakar and beyond.

The communication of the WSF was given crucial attention by the participants to the meeting. A four-hour plenary session was held that while addressing the complexities of communication also produced some creative reflections on the internal and external communication of the forum, on the cultural politics of communication and its links with a new pedagogy of emancipation and transformation, and on some implications for the practice of a communication coherent with the new culture of politics at the heart of the WSF vision. The **Communication commission** presented its work over the past few

months and the tools it has devised to facilitate the work of the IC mixing songs, dance, music to a more traditional slide presentation. It then facilitated a discussion in small groups with a focus on all aspects of communication as relating to the strategic and methodological work of all the IC commissions. The final plenary discussion gave further space to an open conversation on the challenges and the opportunities of the WSF communication that exposed limits on the understanding of the role of communication by the IC and pointed towards the continuation of this process of open engagement on communication issues and practices towards Dakar. In particular while the commission will continue its work in the months ahead, further moments of convergence will be defined in the technical workshop to take place in July in Dakar and in the next IC. The strengthening of the communication process was declared by all at the centre of the responsibility of the whole IC and its members and further commitment was sought to support the work of the commission.

The **Expansion commission** reported its efforts to outreach to movements and organisations in areas still marginally involved in the WSF process. In particular, efforts have been focused on reaching out to activists in Russia, East Europe, Central Asia, China and South East Asia. The young and already promising process in the Maghreb-Mashreq region will be strengthened by the thematic forums in Palestine on Education, in Egypt on health and environment and in Jordan forum on women. An initiative in Korea will be organised along the protest against the G20 in November. The group has also received three applications to join the IC but the applications were submitted too late so they will be considered at the next IC meeting. As far as the IC meetings after the Dakar forum a mention was made of the Kurdistan, but this suggestion will be further explored in the months to come.

The Liaison Group

Considerable attention was given to the renewal process of the Liaison Group of the IC. The process started in Montreal in October with the setting up of a working group that worked online, met in presence in Porto Alegre in January and further defined its proposal over the Internet in the months leading to the Mexico City meeting. The mandate and the terms of reference of the group were discussed and some challenges to its work exposed that brought up some of the most complex ambiguities of the WSF, of its process, of its IC and the LG itself, the tension between technical mandate and political influence. It was highlighted that the role of the LG is purely technical and centred on providing support to the IC, following up on its decisions and facilitating its work. Further questions were raised on its composition and its mandate and contributed to generate sophisticated reflections on issues of representation and delegation, responsibility, commitment, power, influence, visibility, perception and practices of its democratic structure and procedures and in general of its political culture.

While imperfect as other aspects of the WSF process, it is precisely in those imperfections that were its main promises of further development. Moreover, it was suggested from many sides, its imperfection had to do with its novelty not only in the WSF process but in social movement organisation more widely. Such ambitious experimentation was fulfilling the role of the WSF as the space to elaborate the organisational forms coherent to a new culture of politics. Such group, was stressed, is innovative because all its members have to resign at the end of each mandate and submit new applications to be involved again; the group does not have an office but it is supported by an office which is now in a region of the world but may as well be somewhere else at some other time in the future; its members are not representatives of their organisations but they are supported by their organisations to do their work for the LG; they need to provide presence and continuity of work, but without a strict work contract, valuing responsibility and efficiency, experience and knowledge as function of each other, extolling guidelines over rules, intimacy over exclusivity, and stressing several other such cultural and organisational aspects. On the political front of its perceived power, it was suggested that special

attention must be given to the amount and scope of work to be conducted by the LG which might eventually consolidate an influence that could have political aspects. Further it was noted that more transparency to its work must be given in order to dispel the perception by those who may suspect it is a centre of obscure and opaque power dealings. A further complexity of the LG relates to its regional and sectoral balance. Whereas its composition reflects still the Brazilian origins of the WSF movement and its immediate expansion into Latin America and Europe, energetic attempts are made to show the further expansions into Africa and the Middle East and further into Asia. The gender balance is slightly in favour of women (7 to 6) and the sectoral affiliation is the following, 2 human rights activists, 3 women, 2 trade unions, 1 youth, 1 debt, 1 working on education, 1 on communication and 1 member of a regional forum.

Another concern was that, as no member can be part of the LG for more than two terms there might be a problem of knowledge continuity when next time all the most experienced members of the IC will have already served twice. But it was noted as the IC has a great number of experienced activists and that some of the members of the past LG will be able to rejoin later on to ensure continuity. Overall in the words of an IC member, the LG “is a delicate puzzle that has to be handled with care and creativity”. Moreover, its limitations and its strengths are mirror of the limitations and strengths of the IC as a whole and should be taken as opportunities to transform them into opportunities.