

Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice

World Social Forum

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The World Social Forum (WSF) is a constantly changing process dedicated to the idea that “another world *is* possible.”

The WSF process was born in 1999 as a response to the lack of democracy, accountability, and transparency of the World Economic Forum (WEF). The WEF is a global decision-making body that meets annually in Davos, Switzerland, to formulate global economic policies. The WEF is dominated by Western/Northern Hemisphere political and economic elites and not accessible to all interested parties. Therefore, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor activists, and political networks (primarily from Brazil) decided to create a particular venue in order to discuss current projects, struggles, and new forms of organizing in order to discuss and realize viable alternatives to current political, social, and economic relations and institutions. Initially, the WSF was envisioned as a counter-think tank, similar to NGO countersummits that had been held in order to critique the UN Summit Process in the 1990s. Because of political pressure by explicitly radical Brazilian political organizations and their NGO allies, the vision of the WSF process transformed into a meeting space for all individuals and collectives interested and engaged in the process of envisioning and realizing alternatives. The WSF process is therefore not a single event. Though there is an annual WSF, the WSF process aims to facilitate long-lasting transnational networks.

Building on the Brazilian tradition of cross-sector organizing, various Brazilian NGOs, labor unions, and social movements constructed the Brazilian Organizing Committee (BOC). The BOC is an eclectic group that formed a broad network that appealed to a large range of politically active organizations and individuals. The BOC decided that Porto Alegre, Brazil, would serve as the home of the WSF because it embodied the idea that another world is not only possible but present. Porto Alegre was famous in left circles because of the Orçamento Participativo, or the Participatory Budget Process (OP), a radical democratic experiment, which began in Porto Alegre and has since spread across the world, in which citizens collectively decide how funds should be allocated. Moreover, a leftist Brazilian political party, Partido dos Trabalhadores, or the Workers' Party (PT), had been in power since the late 1980s in Porto Alegre. In fact, the PT government provided the resources and infrastructure necessary to realize the first WSF in Porto Alegre, in 2001. This forum was the culmination of years of struggle on the part of individual activists, activist-intellectuals, cultural workers, politicians,

and others associated with the movement of movements, NGOs, political parties, and political, labor, and social organizations, much larger than the BOC and the first WSF itself.

The first WSF attracted more than 10,000 people. The following year, Porto Alegre was again home to the WSF and welcomed more than 55,000, and in 2003 the Porto Alegre WSF convened with roughly 75,000 participants. In 2004, the WSF moved to Mumbai, India. Various Indian NGOs and social movements joined the BOC, and the forum was held in January 2004 with more than 100,000 people. The fifth WSF returned to Porto Alegre and brought together 155,000 participants from 135 countries; more than 200,000 people joined the opening march. In 2006, rather than one large WSF in one site, there were various polycentric WSFs held around the world in order to strengthen local organizing and make the forum more accessible. The 2007 WSF will again be centralized, though in a new site, Nairobi, Kenya.

WSF participants come from distinct social, economic, cultural, and geographical locations and espouse various political ideologies: Some seek to reform official spaces such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the WB, some are anarchist organizations, some are direct action organizations, some lobby in designated governmental spaces, some are sectarian organizations, and some dream of a world in which many worlds can fit. In spite of these differences, all WSF participants endorse the WSF Charter of Principles, the only formal prerequisite for participation. The charter states that the WSF is a world process that cannot be reduced to the event of the forum. The WSF is an open space that opposes corporate globalization by nourishing and facilitating liberal and radical networks to construct a globalization based on solidarity. Participants are encouraged to situate their actions and speak from their particular experiences in an effort to promote debate and active participation across the various borders. The charter [p. 1496 ↓] also states that individuals and organizations are autonomous. Therefore, all are encouraged to make declarations, statements, and calls to action, but there is no party authorized to speak on behalf of the WSF itself. Moreover, the WSF is not open to military and party representatives, unless they relinquish their affiliation and participate as individuals.

The WSF is organized along transversal axes, themes that participants are meant to keep in mind as they engage in dialogue: social emancipation and political dimensions

of struggle, struggle against patriarchal capitalism, and struggle against racism and other types of exclusion based on ancestry, gender, and diversity. In addition, each year's forum is organized around a theme. There are also large events organized by the BOC, as well as self-organized activities and panels that are facilitated by individual and organizational participants. The WSF is more than a conference. It includes cultural events, such as concerts by famous musicians like Gilberto Gil and Manu Chao, as well as performances, plays, street theater, and art projects. The youth camp also is a central aspect of the forum, which offers a space for young people to stay together and create networks, conferences, music, and art.

Though the WSF process has become a great success, increasing in scope and size each year, it has stimulated a great deal of internal and external critique. First of all, there are many impediments to international dialogue present within the WSF process. Literal translation has been a constant source of frustration for participants. In 2003 and 2004, there were paid professional translators for the majority of the conferences. Still, in 2005 and 2006 the majority of the translation was voluntary and lacked organization. Moreover, figurative translation has also been a locus of significant critique. Many participants do not take sufficient time or make the effort to engage in active listening, to consciously articulate their positions—their worldviews and context—to culturally translate their positions so that they are coherent to others. Moreover, the WSF as an event takes place for less than a week. Participants are able to make various contacts in this time, but there is little time for concrete collective organizing. Last, many claim that it is dominated by academics and NGOs. In fact, both in India in 2004 and in Caracas in 2006, alternative and counterforums were created in order to represent the voices of those engaged in militant struggles, anarchist organizations, and other more radical groups.

There are also various tensions between recent and proposed changes in the WSF process and the Charter of Principles. First, many, including Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, argue that the WSF process is too much talk and too little action. There is no formal body or organization capable of speaking on behalf of the forum, and therefore, larger declarative statements and calls to action are difficult to make. For example, in 2005 there was an articulation of common principles, but this document was not well received because it was not collectively constructed. Second, the polycentric WSF held in Caracas was explicitly tied to the Chávez government. Though organizers

claimed that it was not representative of the government's policies, President Chávez spoke as the president of Venezuela rather than as an individual. Moreover, at each forum there are countless shirts, bags, books, and other items for participants to buy. Many feel that this has transformed the process into a consumerist tourist attraction. Last, the WSF process, in spite of its openness, has not been sufficiently self-critical. Many feminist, militant, and youth interventions have not been sufficiently discussed and integrated into the process itself.

Therefore, the WSF process exists in a state of many tensions. Questions remain whether this process and network can balance its ties to official political parties and government officials without losing its autonomy, whether it can produce affirmative declarations without undermining its core of diversity, whether it can respond and integrate internal and external critiques, and whether it can foster global dialogue. Because the WSF process is mutable, many have great hope that it will remain a space to dream that another world is possible.

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See also

- [Alternative Movements](#)
- [Anti-Globalization Movement](#)
- [Chávez, Hugo](#)
- [Coalition Building](#)
- [Multiculturalism](#)
- [Partido dos Trabalhadores](#)

Further Reading

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