

Do Space and Action have to be Contradictory?

Towards an inclusive WSF strategy

Vinod Raina

The following definite opinion of Walden Bello, couched as questions, at the end of his article would appear to be at the heart of the present debate about the future of WSF:

“Is the WSF still the most appropriate vehicle for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement? Or, having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism, is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?”

It would of course have been helpful if Walden had also indicated, then or even now, the *new modes* that would be better than the WSF; as appropriate vehicles for the new stage in the struggle of the global justice and peace movement.

The major problem in the present strategic debate regarding the future of WSF is that those who feel that it has outlived its utility, or has become stagnant as a ‘space’, have not provided a compelling alternative, except rather lamely proposing that it become a platform for action, rather than reflection. I call it lamely because it isn’t as if various movements for global action do not exist; by converting WSF into another such movement, is it clear that there will be a major addition to global struggles? Many such suggestions to convert WSF into an action platform therefore appear as somewhat off the cuff remarks, and not perhaps stemming out of serious analysis of the possible alternatives. It appears as if some people, somewhat disheartened by various organizational, and hence political, limitations of the Nairobi forum were so deeply disappointed that they began theorizing for the need of abandoning or transforming the WSF altogether! Which is not to deny that there persists an unease regarding the outcome of the seven year old WSF process; whether it has been successful in denting the neo-liberal World order, particularly when one considers the enormous resources, time and energy that goes in organizing each World forum. It is true that many participating movements have been beset with the question: Is it worth it? But from there to conclude that the Forum should be wound up suggests a big mental leap, perhaps not supported by general evidence. Where as the ‘fatigue’ factor in organizing and participating in forums has been generally going around for some years now, debated even in the IC in terms of its frequency, it is equally true that there is no dearth of enthusiasm to organize national, continental and even World forums! There was obviously no skepticism, fatigue or disappointment evident at the Berlin IC in May 2007 when a special session late at night had to be organized to sort out competing demands to hold the Forum after Belem!

Sectarian versus Broad-based

It has been pointed out by many that the immense diversity and plurality present in the forum process would make it not only difficult, but most likely a divisive exercise to work out joint actions. Joint action requires a certain amount of ideological cohesiveness; to demand that from a platform of political diversity like the WSF would most certainly bring in sectarian considerations to the fore, thereby diminishing the broad-based nature of the forum. Others have countered that joint action does not have to be carved out for more than a few issues – like global peace, trade regimes and so on, which may not pose insurmountable sectarian problems. That really is not immediately apparent to me.

Consider the defining agenda of the WSF – fight against neo-liberalism, and just one political tendency within the WSF opposed to neo-liberalism, namely the Left. Is it obvious that all shades of left would easily be able to carve out a joint action against neo-liberalism if proposed in the WSF? Not to me. There is the non-party left - the social left, and the party left – the political left. Where ever the political left is in power, except perhaps in Cuba, the stated or unstated attitude to neo-liberalism would appear to be to follow the Chinese path of ‘market-socialism’, ‘controlled capitalism’ or some other form of ‘socialistic neo-liberalism’ – whatever that means! This is in sharp contrast to radical positions of most of the social left, as also of the political left in some places where it is not in power, which is an unequivocal rejection of capitalism. For the rejectionists, WSF itself, as composed of ‘market-socialist’ left tendencies, NGO’s and ‘non-socialist’ movements is a major question mark, that was amply evident in the form of the parallel ‘Mumbai Resistance’ at the time of WSF2004. It is not therefore obvious that a joint action against, say the World trade regime, is likely to pose little problems even from the standpoint of one political tendency, the left; when one includes other tendencies present in the WSF, like fair trade, the Northern and Southern social movements and their differences in perceptions in relation to global trade, the obviousness recedes enormously.

That raises the other oft repeated question – if the diversity and plurality of the WSF is so enormous as to render it ‘impotent’ for any action, then is the idea of WSF of any value at all? Why invest resources, time and energy in an apparently impotent ‘space’?

Providing ‘Space’ to create Global Action Forums

Our ability to answer the above question is obviously critical in determining the future of the WSF. The intention of course has been that without being a forum for action itself, WSF must be the ‘space’ where many such Forums of Action are carved out by participating movements. It is true that we need an evaluation whether that has happened in any substantial manner since the first Forum in 2001, something various working groups of the IC are presently engaged in finding out. We also need to get a sense of that from the participating movements, again something that is being currently attempted by at least one working group.

But as we await some definite findings from the working groups, and based on the fairly large literature available, my perception is that the processes of action emanating from the WSF space could have been more widespread, inclusive and effective than they have been.

One major initiative to that end has been the Assembly of Social Movements, which was expected to become the 'action platform' linked to the WSF 'space'. It has, in my opinion - which of course can be contested - not been able to organize itself into an effective and inclusive Forum of Action.

Ideally, more than one sustained, visible and effective global action forum should have emerged out of the WSF space – for labour, peasants, women, against war and for world peace, neo-liberal economy and so on. Amalgamating all these into a single Assembly of Social Movements, which produces a single statement following each World Forum, indicates exactly the tepidness that would drip from a single omnibus statement of action were the WSF to issue an action statement at its conclusion, with the added problem that without a due process, neither is the Assembly of Social Movements statement binding and inspiring to the movements, nor certainly would a WSF statement of action be.

So what should be that due process? For the Assembly of Social Movements, it has to be the way the Assembly itself is constituted and organized. Right now, it is a haphazard and motley collection of people who happen to be present at the WSF who read out a fairly hastily prepared statement – it is more like using the opportunity of being present together than any sustained organizational or well-thought out conceptual positioning. If the ASM is to be a Global Action Forum, it must exist independent of the Forum and not merely meet only during the Forum; and if its actions include calls for demonstrations, picketing, rallies and so on, and not merely issuing statements, it must have an organizational structure that ensures that it is in fact facilitated and led by representatives of movements who have constituencies that can undertake mass action, rather than by academicians, individuals from research and advocacy groups, or NGO's. There must be primacy to movements that have 'victims' amongst them – the Southern people, indigenous people, the most oppressed women, dalits, workers and peasants. An action forum dominated by individuals from Northern groups who have 'partners' in Southern countries is unlikely to provide an effective and sustained political platform of action. In order to be effective vehicles of global solidarity, new Global Forums of Action will have to be politically conscious to avoid being the harbingers of new colonial relationships. That implies doing away with the traditional forms of funder, leader and ideas (North) and receiver, actor, subordinate (South) forms of relationships.

It is difficult to perceive that the WSF, or even the omnibus Assembly of Social Movements, can easily imbibe these politically imperative modes of functioning, in order to emerge as the true Global Forms of Action for all the important issues facing the people of the world today. Therefore specific attempts to create coherent Global Forums of Action for Peace, Economy and Trade, Women, Indigenous People, Workers, Peasants and so on need to be made; who in addition to their constituency based actions, may

come together for joint actions from time to time. It is not as if Global forums for action in various areas do not exist today, who even have their own calls for annual global action days – Jubilee South is an example in relation to Debt - the point is that the WSF process could be used more vigorously to enlarge and deepen them, rather than turn WSF into an omnibus forum for action, which in a way could cause problems by encroaching on the political space various movements have already carved out for themselves.

If various forums for global action already exist, having played its little role in aggregating them, should the WSF fold its tent now? The space the WSF provides is, in my opinion, vital to enlarge the existing action forums and forge new ones; therefore the WSF has not exhausted its historical role. The potential for ‘space – action’ symbiosis that the WSF has innovated should in fact not be a transitory phase at all, but an ongoing new form of political organisation. What is necessary is to pay heed to the organizational and political shortcomings and limitations of the WSF process, rather than suggest abandoning it altogether. These shortcomings and limitations relate to the participation in the decision making processes of the WSF, the restricted nature of its IC, the organizing principles of the various forums, and the facilitation and liaison processes of the WSF.

In that respect the WSF2008 as a Global Day of Action has provided a uniquely new modality which can be combined with the World Forum effectively in future. The GDA does not have to be seen as a replacement of a physical forum, as in 2008. It could be part of the forum in future – for example along with the Belem forum in 2009, a Global Day of Action could be designated so that actions all over the globe could accompany the Belem events. The advantage of decentralised action being that movements and groups are free to make them as effective and radical they feel like. That could effectively answer the criticism that the WSF event is a festival of talks rather than a forum of action. It could also be a way to respond the ‘fatigue’ factor voiced by many groups regarding the annual frequency of the event. The physical event could be held every two years, but the GDA each year. The 2008 modality therefore opens new and creative ways to craft out new political processes, and hopefully, that could change the strategic discourse from the binary ‘space versus action’ to an inclusive one, of ‘space and action’.

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