

# After Mumbai

Advances and tensions of the alternative world movement  
The challenge of moving ahead towards a new phase

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World civil society is no longer the same following the WSF at Mumbai in India, and whatever the case, the movement started by the first WSF at Porto Alegre has undergone radical change and become considerably stronger. Henceforth, Mumbai has its place on the civic agenda initiated at Seattle, though others may say that this agenda kicked off in South Africa with the fall of apartheid in 1994. Nelson Mandela's speech broadcast during the closing ceremony stands out as a historic symbol. Now, when speaking of the Mumbai Social Forum, we shall recall a popular, dynamic event like no other in the short history of alternative world movements. Attempts to make the WSF genuinely global and develop it beyond its Brazilian roots have proved successful, since the quest to create truly global resistance and formulate alternative paths to capitalist globalisation aims at strengthening the combat of every actor, whether from the North, South, East or West. After Mumbai, Porto Alegre is even stronger. Thanks to the tenacity of the Indian organisers and above all to the strong presence and art of living of the Indians that gave life to this event, we are now stronger than before.

That being said, **several lessons stand out**, among which are the following:

1. When a group of citizens embarks on a new action, seeking to open up new paths along which this global process can progress, and when it does this by choosing an open, transparent approach in spite of the diversity (or should one say thanks to diversity) of its members, this action has every chance of succeeding. If, in addition, they are supported by partners in other regions of the world that provide their experience and express their solidarity through their presence and support, the chances for success are even greater. It should be said that, like any human adventure, the Mumbai WSF was made possible by a relatively small group of men and women, in this case Indian, helped by partners from other regions of the world, who have progressively expanded their approach to include hundreds and even thousands of organisers and volunteers.<sup>2</sup> In so far as the organisational methods and procedures of the Social Forums are based on the Charter of Principles and privilege openness and transparency, the risks of a small group taking over control of the process are slight.
2. The Mumbai Forum was above all a popular demonstration for and by the people. In comparison to Porto Alegre, but above all in comparison to the European Social Forums which have mainly mobilised the middle classes. At Mumbai the great majority of the people present were untouchables, peasants, and members of women's and young people's organisations. **Not only has the Forum become more "global" it is now also more "social".**

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<sup>2</sup> An article by the journalist Laurence Caramel published in *Le Monde* newspaper on 16 January 2004: *Two years of effort for a Forum "made in India"* gives information on the events prior to the WSF in India.

3. This forum was also the scenario for bringing together very different cultures and practices. **Several tensions** specific to massive meetings were blatantly obvious at Mumbai. They can lead to personal and collective enrichment, though they can also lead to more marked divisions between the different sectors that make up the alternative world movement and, through time, undermine the momentum triggered. Some of these divisions can be identified:
- **The divide between the activities set up by centralised organisation and those that are self-organised** by myriad groups, networks, unions and organisations. It seemed rather pitiful to see halls with 4,000 seats for the panels and 10,000 for the conferences occupied by only 100 to 200 people. The feeling of emptiness was obvious. These halls were equipped with interpreting services, and video and sound facilities fit for major conferences, but the public was missing! On the other hand, most of the self-organised seminars and workshops (nearly 1,000) were more lively and participatory. Already apparent at Porto Alegre, the division between a culture that expresses itself by speeches made (often from above) before a public that can but applaud and another that favours giving people the opportunity to express themselves, exchange experiences, debate ideas and proposals was blatant at Mumbai. As a corollary, it should be added that the self-organised activities springing from groups, organisations and networks based in India were often in the majority. In other words, activities "parachuted" from afar do not work at the Social Forums.
  - Another striking contradiction was that between the people who demonstrated in the streets, often shouting slogans and beating drums, and those that spoke in the conference rooms. There was something strange about the difference between the groups that sought to make themselves heard, saying "we're here", using slogans and drums, and those who painstakingly sought to make themselves heard in English, Hindi, Marathi, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese and so on. **Diversity is one of the striking features of the Social Forums and it was very clear at Mumbai, but without dialogue between the different cultures, the participants are reduced to expressing themselves on different wavelengths, deaf to what the others are saying.** Taming interculturalness requires time and cannot be improvised. Naturally, every chance must be given to allow the unpredictable and leave the way open for different forms of cultural expression; however, it necessary to prepare meetings between different cultures in order to prevent misunderstandings from gaining ground.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding this, in the framework of the Intercultural Dialogue between India and China organised by the Alliance for a responsible, plural and united world and supported by the Samvad India Foundation, the University of Jinan at Guangdong and the Foundation of Chinese Youth with the support of the FPH, a delegation of fifteen Chinese people participated at the Mumbai WSF. This delegation took the initiative of arriving in India a week beforehand to meet partners at Pune and in the State of Maharashtra. Then, together, they organised several workshops during the forum (in Chinese, Hindi, Marathi, and English). The WSF Charter of Principles had been translated into Chinese and the preparation for the arrival of the Chinese at the WSF had been organised several weeks previously. Thus a preliminary immersion permitted overcoming possible misunderstandings and encouraging the still fragile links between the two neighbouring countries that happen to be the most populated as well.

- Another contradiction involves the means of expression. **Some people expressed themselves by speaking and writing while others did it through art.** During the Mumbai Forum, there were nearly 5,000 street art events several of which did not appear in the programme. These events took place at crossroads, in streets and on the land next to the stands. Street theatre and open air singing events were genuine topical workshops where the widest range of issues, such as fair trade and the exclusion of women, were treated as pertinently, if not more so, as they were in the "official" workshops. In fact this is not really a contradiction. However, the task remains to create dialogue and links between types of exchange based on speech and those based on different forms of artistic expression.

## Several challenges for the future

We can mention at least two:

### 1. The visibility and legibility of debates and proposals

It has been accepted that the Forums should not end with final declarations. Furthermore, it is humanly impossible to draft a single joint and final declaration. This procedure, clearly set out in the WSF Charter of Principles, was one of the keys to its success. Nonetheless, means for obtaining a global vision, to facilitate legibility sufficient to highlight the wealth of the debates and proposals, also remains a task on standby. Efforts have been made in the sectors of documentation and systematising the ideas formulated at the Forums since the first forum at Porto Alegre in January 2001, though the inevitable improvisation has left little trace of the first event. A new attempt was made in 2002 and the debates and proposals stemming from the conferences were recorded and have since been published on the web site. A more solid system was set up for the WSF of 2003.<sup>4</sup> Similar initiatives have been taken at different continental and topical forums. We must now wait for the reports on the Mumbai forum.<sup>5</sup>

There is no nostalgia in this quest to keep archives on the forums. An amnesic movement is liable to become diluted, or else others will write its history. The work of archiving, documentation and systematisation is essential for emphasising the intercultural, social and political wealth contributed by the participants themselves. This effort permits proposing the new ideas and alternatives that social actors are implementing in order to respond to and overcome the policies dictated by the proponents of neo-liberal and neo-imperialist globalisation.

Increasingly, the tasks of archiving, documentation and systematisation are being carried out by several teams and the content and methodology commissions of the International Council have also become involved. The capacity to innovate

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<sup>4</sup> On behalf of the Organisation Committee, IBASE mobilised dozens of reporters and investigators. This initiative was further strengthened by a systematisation support team ("mapeadores") made up of coordinators from the Alliance for a responsible, plural and united world with the support of the FPH. A collection of five volumes was published (in Portuguese) and a CD-ROM in the four languages of the forum is being distributed with all the reports and analyses of the third forum (conferences, panels, self-organised activities, discussion and debate groups and surveys on the profiles of the participants).

<sup>5</sup> An initial effort to give greater legibility to the topics discussed at the Mumbai WSF was made by Françoise Feugas of the documentation and systematisation team that had already begun working at Porto Alegre 2003. An analysis based on the keywords in the database of the WSF in India (The Top Ten Keywords and The Main Keywords per Continent) can be consulted on:

[http://allies.alliance21.org/fsm/article.php3?id\\_article=231](http://allies.alliance21.org/fsm/article.php3?id_article=231)

to ensure that the programmes and methods of the forthcoming forums are genuinely original and participatory will be one of the key elements for continuing the alternative world movement.

## **2. Historic and political challenges. Are we standing between the devil and the deep blue sea?**

Reflecting on historic and political challenges demands a longer detour than a note written immediately after Mumbai permits. A large number of publications distributed during the forum in India already shed light on this issue. The conviction that we must break through to begin a new phase grows increasingly stronger.

Whereas the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall foretold of a new organization of the world, founded on international multilateralism based on law and democracy, we have been plunged into a completely different scenario. That of the undivided rule of the American Empire over the rest of the world. Neoliberal globalization is spreading its tentacles out unceasingly, reaching every last corner of the planet and doing nothing but aggravating inequalities between the rich and the poor, and between the North and the South. This early twenty-first century scenario—become even more explicit after the September 11, 2001 events—is marked by the passage from neoliberal globalization (in which the will for power was hindered by the Cold War) to neo-imperial globalization (in which the logic of war is added to the logic of competition, laying bare the interests of the United States and their allies).

History has taught us that all empires fall, though it also teaches us that empires can last several centuries! Although we are not at the beginning of the American empire, we are neither witnessing its final crisis nor its imminent fall.

Up to now, history has outlasted empires but the North American empire has a special feature that confronts us with a historic challenge: its methods of production and consumption, and the scientific and technical systems it exploits are harmful to humanity, not only because they harm the environment but because they aim to exploit life itself via the changes they are capable of introducing into our species. We are not simply talking about methods of production and consumption, what is at stake is our very condition as human beings.

We now know that this empire is undergoing recurrent economic crises, passing from one crisis to another. It could even be said that this empire fuels itself through crisis and has succeeded in recovering up to now. Naturally, it leaves behind it an economic and social situation worse than that caused by an earthquake, leaving societies even more fragmented and decomposed, with worsening inequalities and exclusion.

This empire is also going through crises of governance. We have long said that the need to reform the United Nations is obvious, though none is being made. The system of international security has not only become obsolete but, what is more, under the authority of the North American empire, it constitutes a danger for the security of nations and harmonious relations between them.

Furthermore, this empire seeks to impose a new ideological and religious order by launching genuine crusades that merely result in strengthening religious fanaticism. In particular it possesses a special characteristic that although shared by other empires makes it stand out, i.e. every time a crisis occurs, it reacts by waging a war. It is a warlike empire that acts with violence and imposes wars. This is demonstrated by the most recent conflict that we are still witnessing in Iraq.

That being said, the current situation also has another singular feature that cannot be ignored, that of the strong growth in the number of spectacularly violent acts committed by groups operating in networks. We have got to the point where every year we commemorate terrorist attacks that have left several thousand dead. Henceforth we will live through an era in which every year is marked out by the anniversaries of massacres. This feature is specific to our era: the North American empire dictates but amidst explosions, as proved not only by those in Iraq but elsewhere in the Arab world, the big cities of the North and also certain cities in the South.

Since this is the context in which we must situate ourselves, we must ask ourselves whether we are standing between the devil and deep blue sea? On the one hand, there is an empire that dictates its rationale of "pax Americana" through war and the social and political organisation that it comprises and, on the other hand, there are groups that organise repeated terrorist attacks and organised Mafia type networks that operate clandestinely and determine the lives of millions of human beings who survive in conditions of slavery. Given this rationale (the term is debatable), the civil society now emerging and that we are seeking to develop must avoid becoming a hostage.

Naturally, we have progressed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and apartheid in South Africa. New values have been brought to the fore, a new relationship between humanity and the biosphere has been formulated, and relations of respect between men and women have been emphasised. During the last decade we have made progress on human rights. We even believed that Pinochet was going to be judged at one point! The International Criminal Court is now a reality. Large networks have developed, hundreds of meetings have been organised and dozens of proposal papers have been produced.

All the above are significant advances and the social forums and different alliances are important, but the question remains: "What are we going to do with these forums and alliances to be equal to our hopes and expectations? Can we really topple the empire? Will we be able to get humanity away from its position between the devil and the deep blue sea?"

The twenty-first century will have to be one of great transformations. Changes in our way of thinking, feeling, producing, consuming, being together, and governing ourselves. Every man and woman knows this but feels overwhelmed by his or her helplessness and isolation. It is against this helplessness that we need to react and this reaction is coming from all over the world in many forms.

To overcome this challenge, social forums and different civic movements in many regions of the world have launched wide-ranging debate on ideas and proposals. They can and must not only provide answers to these questions but also contribute towards immediately opening up new perspectives so that humanity can live in peace. This challenge has now become a question of life or death.