

In a follow-up to the 5th World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, some thoughts on the positive impact of the energy generated by the Forum process

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The World Social Forum is an event organised with very modest means in relation to its scope, but which mobilises a great deal of energy. Some people ask themselves, quite legitimately, whether the impact of this energy is positive. The author's response is a resounding 'Yes', even if only thanks to the multiple interactions that provided impetus to the international civic community's countless working and debating processes. The most important step to take now in order to use all this accumulated energy is to make these ideas and proposals come to life; we need to take them out of the WSF context and make them visible and accessible in a memoria viva that will nourish and stimulate public debate.

There is no doubt at all in my mind that the WSF is an extraordinary example of positive energy generation. But as with many innovative processes, the visible effects are not always easy to spot. Change only strikes out on the big avenues once it has spent a long while exploring the alleyways, and is often only perceptible to those who believe in it.

Which company or institution would organise an event for over 150,000 people with resources as limited as those of the FSM, and without seeing any immediate profit? None!!

The Forum's budget actually represents the sum that a multinational would spend on arranging a meeting for a few hundred people. This means that the organisation is often a little chaotic, but the activists adapt to the furnace-like heat of the tents and to toilet facilities reduced to their most basic form. The organisation is obviously not perfect, and there are always going to be a few mistakes, but when it comes down to it, things get done. There's plenty of goodwill and, over and above any disagreements, the determination to succeed and the shared goals galvanise the energy and drive it as far as it can go!

The energy produced springs firstly from the fact that everyone who can make it does make it to this major annual meeting, and that interactions are made far easier. Unlike an event or meeting focused on one theme or objective, everything at the Forum is multiplied. Possibly this means that less progress is made on each separate issue, but at least progress is made on a great many issues in a very short period of time.

From this point of view, the Forum's alleyways, catering stands, hotel lobbies and café terraces are as important as the tents themselves. The autonomous events are as important as the numerous parallel meetings.

Nevertheless, everything within the official organisation that contributes to improving interactions, creating new contacts on the same theme or linking themes together is contributing to improving the energetic impact. Major progress was made this year in this area with the creation of thematic terrains, the priority given to autonomous activities, and the abolition of the big mass events covered by the media. Some may feel that the glass is half empty, pointing the finger at the segmentation between themes due to the separation of terrains, without seeing the half-full glass represented by the enormous advantage of having theme interaction within the same terrain. Change always provokes conflict. The step forward taken this year represents real progress, without hiding the fact that, in the future, progress

needs to be made in strengthening links and exchange mechanisms between thematic terrains... one thing at a time, especially when we are tackling such delicate issues.

The energy impact can also be assessed in the actual results. On what level is the Social Forum so important? At the Forum, the idea that another world is possible is an article of unwavering faith; but, when it comes down to it, once the tents have been packed away and the banners taken down, what has changed in the world? What sort of impact does what comes out of the Forum actually have on ordinary communities? Do alternatives have real potential to effect change? In what way does the Forum influence global governance of the planet?

What concrete political forces are at work within the WSF?

The issue of the real influence of the civic efforts and alternatives promoted at the Forum is one that raises a great many questions.

* What is the political role played by new social movements and new civic processes? What is the WSF's place in this process?

* What is an alternative? How should alternatives be classified? Do they have the power to cause change and under which conditions? Does the sum of alternatives constitute a global alternative?

There is clearly a desire to identify the concrete and practical impact of the Forum process, and the civic process in general, especially in the political arena. The WSF Charter prohibits all official political declaration or statement, and it is hard to get a clear idea of the concrete results that come out of the Forum.

However, there is no getting away from the fact that the movement is growing despite all the organisational difficulties, that an increasing number of people attend the Forums, that politicians from both North and South are aware of the events, that the sort of innovations that are still unknown to many people are well-entrenched in the Forum's alleyways. The arrival of Lula and Chavez raised a great deal of interest: even though they did not come to attend the Forum as such, their presence at the Gigantinho during the Forum spoke volumes. A lot of attention was also paid to the solidarity-based economy, which was present in force throughout the Forum (featuring, to take one example, its "Chai", an alternative currency used for transactions in the Fair Trade stalls). It represents a concept that is totally unknown to some people, but that is a burgeoning reality which is even given political recognition by some governments and really does provide food for thought.

A number of people have trouble grasping how this new vision of the economy, born of countless alternatives designed to repair the damage caused by the system in a variety of areas, can actually change the system. They are more attracted to the alternative-globalisation campaigns that oppose the system, and cannot yet really see how this solidarity-based economy carries the seeds of a new set of rules that will give the system a different way of operating, based on different values. But people's curiosity has been aroused, and there is a feeling that the status quo is not only changed from a global perspective, that there is a need to

bring together all the actors working in the field who share a belief in this new vision of an alternative economy.

Things change on the global level when you start to have a political impact. They also change when you start to witness a visible evolution in current thinking and the images people have of how the world should be. The Social Forum can be questioned on the first point, as we have just seen, as well as the second.

More than a venue that encourages innovative thinking, the Forum capitalises on it and gives it collective expression

It is certainly not the most favourable platform for this, although nothing can be discounted. On the other hand, it is an excellent venue for seeing how ideas progress from one year to the next. Even if there does not tend to be an in-depth debate on a given question, exceptions aside, the participants take stock of the point they have reached in their thinking. Which means that we see themes that remained relatively marginalized two years ago now moving centre stage. Certain movements, such as the solidarity-based economy, are in the habit of working collectively, a process that has been in place for many years now, and communicating to an increasing extent between the WSFs via platforms for exchanging and discussing ideas, such as the Workgroup on Solidarity Socio-Economy (WSSE), part of the Alliance for a responsible, plural and united world, or the other major events that fill up the civil society schedule. We can thus see that, slowly but surely, a number of changes and movements are becoming established. To mention but two areas, actors on every level are committed to:

* linking up socio-economic themes with other issues; in other words, coming up with another possible economy that is rooted in a global project for society;

* switching from alternative proposals to political proposals addressing specific actors.

Rather than a venue for developing innovation, the Forum is a place where innovation is capitalised and where ideas are expressed collectively, reinforcing civic dynamics. This function has an extremely important role to play within the dynamics of change, since, although innovatory thinking is what causes conceptions of the world to change and provides the blueprints for tomorrow's world, the emergence and consolidation of an international civic community serves as the springboard to give ideas concrete form and take them to a larger audience.

The Social Forums are not the only place where the international community can develop and grow, but they play an essential role in the process. They allow the civic-minded from all walks of life who together form this community to take stock of their strengths, weaknesses and complementary aspects and, step-by-step, to map the next phases needed to bring about change. They provide the ideal venue for creating a popular political force that does not seek to take power, but at endowing power and meaning. This force cannot be organised according to the usual criteria, a fact which gives rise to doubts and difficulties of understanding. It brings together NGO activists and local councillors, religious leaders and company directors, journalists and soldiers, and many many others, even if some categories are only represented by a handful of pioneers.

In my view, it is the creation of an invisible, but perceptible, force that represents the incontrovertibly winning outcome of the World Social Forum's energy equation. Only such unifying and huge-scale events can create such a force and provide a sense of identity to those termed Cultural Creatives by a famous study carried out by American sociologists, so that politics can be transformed not only by parties and unions, but by non-partisan citizens.

A memoria viva for the Social Forums

This accumulated energy now needs to be channelled and applied to the right areas so that its impact can be properly and progressively measured, both politically and in terms of current innovative thinking, and how that thinking influences the behaviour of all citizens. This is where the most important work needs to be done right now, the task that the WSF sponsors should focus all their attention on. The task consists of promoting and displaying the proposals set out at the Forum. They also need to be translated into a new type of plural political discourse, far removed from the exhausting and exhausted views expressed by current politicians.

This is not about promoting a single viewpoint or political programme, but demonstrating the plurality of proposals relating to the various fields of human activity, and enabling them to be debated in public arenas that address an increasing number of citizens, and not exclusively by political professionals or well-informed practitioners. We need to gather and save in memorial form the ideas and proposals which were expressed collectively in the Forum's tents so that they can take on active form and be disseminated in other circles. What we need is not a storage memorial but a 'living' memorial, a memorial where the active developments of an emerging international community are deposited. This is the route taken by the *memoria viva* team, officially in charge of creating the Forum memorial.

This represents a trend that we also see amongst the networks promoting the solidarity-based economy present at the WSF, around sixty national and international networks. As part of a cooperation process in place since 2002, the networks are taking this approach a little further this year by setting up, for the first time ever, a team in charge of collecting and summarising the proposals and events supported by them.