

**“Thinking Globally, Acting Locally within the World Social Forum Process:
Prospects and Challenges”**

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The World Social Forum (WSF) process is arguably one of the most important political developments of our time (Sen 2007). Begun in 2001 as an initiative of civil society leaders in Brazil and France, the World Social Forums have grown rapidly in their numbers of participants and in their geographic scope. The idea of the WSF “process” emerges from the fact that the WSF is not an event or an actor, but rather a series of convenings of the multiple actors involved in struggles for global economic and social justice at multiple levels between the local and global. The forums thus extend across time and space, providing opportunities for participants to engage in dialogue, learning, experimentation, and collective action aimed at advancing a global justice movement (see Smith and Karides et al. 2007).

The WSF Charter of Principles articulates its mission:

The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth. [...]

The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalisation commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations’ interests, with the complicity of national governments. They are designed to ensure that globalisation in solidarity will prevail as a new stage in world history. This will respect universal human rights and those of all citizens—men and women—of all nations and the environment and will rest on democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples.

This presentation explores the significance of the World Social Forum process for global politics and for the development of global civil society. As the primary focal point for contemporary global justice activism, it serves both as an incubator of new models of global political action and association as well as a forum where some of the world's most challenging conflicts are confronted in an inclusive way. Perhaps the most important aspect of the WSF process is that it has led to a proliferation of local, national, and regional social forums as it seeks new ways to involve local activists in conversations and actions that are global.

The WSF International Council has taken a number of important steps to nurture connections between local and global civil society. In addition to encouraging and supporting the proliferation of national and local social forums, it moved in 2005 to encourage and facilitate self-organized workshops at the global forums. In 2006, there was a move to begin decentralizing the global forums by holding a "polycentric" forum with sequential meetings in Venezuela, Mali, and Pakistan. This form evolved into the "decentralized" forums where activists are encouraged to organize local social forum activities during the same time as the World Social Forum meeting. Now the World meeting will alternate with these decentralized actions to help strengthen the local-global connections. Finally, this year the Forum introduced a new experiment to further ties to local communities, and this experiment was called "Belem expanded." Meeting rooms at the world meeting in Belem were set up to enable activists to link directly to local communities via the Internet, skype, and other technologies. And a website was set up to encourage organizers to organize sessions that took place simultaneously in the global forum and local settings. I expect this type of activity to continue as activists continue to innovate and use new technology to expand local-global connections.

In the rest of my talk, I will first look closely at a local example of the WSF process, and here I will draw from my participant observation research in the "Michiana Social

Forum,” which is active in the Midwestern United States. Then I will step back to reflect on the larger picture of the World Social Forum and its larger significance in the global polity. Specifically, I will consider how it might work to nurture a global human rights culture and what challenges it must face in doing so.

Michiana Social Forum

The Michiana Social Forum was launched in January 2008, following the call by the World Social Forum’s International Council for activists to organize local actions that would be part of the first “decentralized” World Social Forum. It reflects a new experiment by the WSF to strengthen connections between global and local activism. The case illustrates how activists are working to “translate” the WSF Charter’s values and visions into a local political context. My work in the MSF has shown me that such translation requires extensive work to build trust with community leaders and to frame issues in ways that resonate with local concerns and ongoing policy debates.

What has become clear in both the local and global context is that the language of human rights can be a powerful tool for helping overcome the many divides that prevent people from working together more effectively for social justice (see, e.g., Santos 2007). The Michiana Region –like many communities in the United States and elsewhere-- is characterized by class, racial, gender, and national/ethnic divides that have made it difficult for those concerned with social justice to work together. The MSF process has sought to overcome some of the ignorance and mistrust that divides people and to build alliances around shared goals.

I have learned two other important lessons in doing local organizing work. First, the success of the WSF process, and global civil society- building more generally, requires dedicated and creative leaders to help build bridges across both the geographic as well as class, racial, cultural, and political divides that characterize our society. Second, I have learned the importance of being patient and with being content about ambiguity. The WSF is more about relationships than events or collective actions, and I have learned to scale back expectations to allow the process of building relationships and trust to develop

over time. Along with other activists in the WSF process, I often find myself saying “we are making the path by walking.”

The WSF process provided a broad set of ideas that have guided our efforts to build coalitions. It also has highlighted the potential for human rights to serve as a unifying framework for our activities. Drawing from the experience of the WSF, our local social forum participants decided to organize around a “Human Rights City” initiative. The idea of the Human Rights City is one that has been discussed by various groups at previous World Social Forums (see www.pdhre.org), and we found local residents very receptive to its ideas.

To begin advancing discussions of human rights, we planned to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) with a party, which we held at a local union hall. We enlisted a student to design a layout for a pocket-sized version of the UDHR text, which included a Spanish summary translation, which we have been using to raise awareness of the UDHR in the community. A local bank printed a few thousand copies of our “pocket declaration,” and we’ve found this a very useful tool for inspiring people to know their rights and in some cases to become more active in social justice work.

It took some effort to get a diverse array of people to attend the UDHR anniversary celebration, but we managed to get around 200 people to attend. The party helped inform people about the human rights issues in our community—and speakers representing immigrants, racial minorities, labor, and gay and lesbian groups spoke about local challenges for various rights. After a year of organizing, we’re starting to get more multi-racial involvement, but there is still room for improvement.

As part of our work to raise awareness of the UDHR, we also began working with the county’s human rights commission to develop a human rights speakers bureau, which is now training volunteers to speak in schools and community groups about human rights. And a team of volunteers has been writing letters to our local newspaper on human rights

themes. This aims to expand human rights discussions in the community and to challenge dominant discourses that would deny rights to particular groups. These activities also allow us to build trust among community activists and expand our coalition, as we actively work to support other groups' campaigns and demonstrate their links to human rights. For instance, we supported the work of another group to convince local legislators to pass an ordinance that would allow legislators to grant tax abatement only to those businesses that provide minimally acceptable wages to their workers and that can demonstrate that they are contributing to the community. The prevailing discourse had been that legislators must engage in a race to the bottom, providing tax breaks to any companies wishing to invest in our region. MSF's participation in the campaign helped bring public pressure that eventually helped pass this legislation and added a human rights perspective to the debate.

Building a Global Human Rights Culture

In the Michiana Social Forum and in the World Social Forum, a key goal is to help foster a human rights culture. I mentioned earlier that discussions in the social forums have highlighted the power of human rights language for helping bring diverse people and struggles together in a common project. The more I do this work, the more I am convinced that the project of building a human rights culture must be the focus of civil society actors who desire a more just and peaceful world.

The future of our world depends upon a global civil society that can enable the human race to share a sustainable Earth. But we cannot build a durable civil society or advance the aims of the WSF process without confronting the problem of nationalism. This "backward-looking ideology," as Kaldor (2004) calls it, has consistently been used to put boundaries around human rights, protecting them for some and denying them for others. Nationalism thus helps justify horrific violations of universal human rights. It has helped rationalize the inexcusable inequities in the distribution of the world's resources. And it has enabled governments to amass military capabilities that can destroy the planet many times over. It reproduces itself by focusing civil society's attention on what divides us

rather than on what we have in common. And most tragically, it prevents us from coming together to address the very real threats that exclusionary, ethnocentric nationalism and globalized capitalism pose for our survival. As we increasingly bump up against the physical limits of our planet, it is ever more critical that we consider how the operation of nationalism affects the work of global civil society in both global and local contexts.

In my country, many civil society activists are eager to engage with the world in new ways. The Bush administration did great damage to the United States' reputation in the world, but its actions were, unfortunately, consistent with the predominant assumption of "American exceptionalism" that has (mis)guided U.S. foreign policy for many decades. Thus, despite our hope in the Obama Administration, we still have much work to do to make our government's policies more consistent with international law and the values of human rights and sustainability. Civil society has to mobilize around the task of reminding leaders that no people can be secure in a world where human rights are denied to so many. We have to hold our leaders to account for violations of human rights outside our borders as well as inside our borders. If we fail to do this, both our physical security and our political liberty are at risk.

One thing civil society in the United States has in common with Israeli civil society is that we are also divided by the nationalism that has wrought such havoc on this region of the world. The recent escalation of violence in Gaza and southern Israel has made it increasingly clear that we need to do more to support an end to militarized nationalism and its endless cycle of violence so that global civil society can unite around the noble goal of improving our human condition. I believe that only a stronger global civil society can offer us any hope for peace in this region and in our world.

But how can we begin to think and act as a truly "global" civil society? Nationalism is clearly a very powerful force in human history. And the history of my country and of Israel is one that celebrates nationhood as liberation from oppression. So the question we must ask is, how can we redefine national identities to emphasize virtues and values that

nourish and support a more unified global civil society? Can national identities be recrafted to encourage multiple belongings and embedded, interdependent identities? As Jan Aarte Scholte has argued, one of the major obstacles to global democracy today is the fact that “national identities constructed in relation to a modern territorial state tend to squeeze out other kinds of collective solidarities” (2007). We need to redefine nationalism to emphasize democratic values and our interdependence with the larger world community. Kaldor calls for “cosmopolitan nationalism” to address this (2004).

If we believe in the universality of human rights, how can we organize ourselves so that we can force our elected governments to act in ways consistent with this belief? Israeli and Palestinian civil societies face some enormous challenges in attempting to hold their governments accountable to universal human rights principles. To be fully human, people must be free of want as well as fear. What can “global civil society” do to help support Israeli and Palestinian civil societies to advance the cause of peace and justice? How can civil society in the United States lead that government away from the destructive and one-sided policies that have contributed to the escalation of violence in the Middle East and the polarization of our world?

If the World Social Forum and global civil society more generally are to achieve the aims of making another world possible, we must find ways to make our *human* identities a priority in global policy discourses.

One of the most exciting aspects of the social forums are their calls for a “new politics.” By creating space that is independent of the state and that articulates a critique of global capitalism, the WSFs open opportunities for expanding people’s “political imaginations.” If “another world is possible,” as the WSF motto holds, then people first need to have some vision of what such a world might look like. Political imagination is a vital resource in helping groups articulate and share their visions of the possible as they develop strategies aimed at realizing these ideals. It helps nurture a culture of human rights to replace the culture of consumerism. Given that the history of the state is one of violence

and inequality, we should think about the potential for this space to be used to craft new understandings of the state and its role in shaping our collective identities.

While the aspirations of the WSF and the practices of open space provide hope that we might make some progress in realizing a better world, it is clear that we have a ways to go to close some of the gap between the world as it now is and how we might like it to be. Many participants in the WSF are still trapped within nationalist discourses, and they continue to divide along national or other geographic divides such as North vs. South. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is a particularly acute example of this, and so far discussions within the Forum have paralleled the polarized discourses we see in the larger global policy arena. But the WSF Charter provides guidelines that can help us move beyond the dualistic and polarizing debates to find solutions that advance human rights and peace. I believe that greater involvement of Israeli human rights and social justice activists in the WSF process can contribute to our effort to find new ways of addressing this long-standing struggle. Such involvement may begin in local social forum settings like the one I just described. It may also expand to participation by individual organizers in other local and national social forums as part of an expanding global dialogue.

A key point is that, although the ideals of the Forum have not been fully realized in practice, the WSF provides a unique space where global civil society can be nurtured and its connections to local spaces of civic life strengthened. Leaders are needed to consciously take up the work of translation to help transform both our languages and our collective identities. This translation is essential to preventing civil society from replicating the conflicts among states and allowing another possible world to emerge.

Kaldor identifies some basic steps towards the reinvention of civil society:

- First, we need to challenge the notion that security trumps human rights
- Second, civil society must cultivate a constituency for international law and its consistent application

- Third, we need to cultivate “cosmopolitan patriots” who are committed to promoting the universal realization of the core democratic values of tolerance, dialogue, and inclusion

I hope that during this conference we can engage in further discussions about how we might think more strategically about global civil society and its potential to be, as Mary Kaldor claims, “an answer to war” (2003). In what ways, for instance, can “global civil society” support those defending human rights and peace within Israel? How can we draw more attention to the constructive and hopeful work that is happening in civil society despite all of the violence and destruction being sown by those enthralled by nationalism? How can we replace nationalism with a new, forward-looking ideology that can unite people around a shared vision of a sustainable and just world? The multiple crises we face today demonstrate that nationalism and globalized capitalism have run their course. It is up to global civil society to define new identities and forms of social organization that can unite us and ensure a future for us all. I have identified some of the potential the WSF process offers to help build a global civil society that might better overcome the divisions between global and local and among different national actors. But it only offers potential. It is clear from my work in the WSF process that it will take dedicated and persistent leaders to help realize the ideals of the forum and strengthen the links between local and global civil society.

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