

Assessment of the Belem WSF 2009

Belem Social Forum: the construction of another world is already underway!

With record attendance numbers largely exceeding expectations (drawing 133,000 participants compared to the anticipated 80,000) and 2,400 organized activities, the World Social Forum in Belem demonstrated the vigor of social movement in all its diverse forms to rally against the ecological, food, financial, environmental and other crises. Enthusiastically hosted by the city of Belem and its inhabitants, the Forum was solidly anchored in local realities, namely those concerning the Amazon region (unlike past Forums that may have seemed to appear “generic”).

The Forum was launched with a Pan-Amazon Day to provide a space where indigenous populations from nine countries of the Amazon region could meet. This gathering represented a critical stake, as nearly 4,000 representatives from 120 ethnic groups, Quilombolos and Maroons were present, making for an impressive sight during the Forum’s grand opening march. Some had to travel by bus and by boat for more than eight days to attend the WSF. Characterized by a vaster scope than preceding pan-Amazon events, this mobilization proved to be a successful venture, enabling the Amazonian peoples to fully benefit from the WSF space as a platform to address their issues and be heard by others, including by public authorities. As the Forum continued over the next several days however, communication with other participants of the Forum was met with challenges due to language barriers and unfamiliar styles of expression. Many became first and foremost preoccupied with selling their crafts or tattoo arts. Yet, the alarm sounded by the representatives of these peoples rang loud and clear during the entire Forum, playing a key element in discussions and proposals which strived to respect the cultural, spiritual and material foundations of every individual, all while protecting nature and the planet.

The Forum highlighted the allure and energy of the social movement during this time of crisis, but at the same time revealed the obstacles resulting from the choice of such a remote city and insufficient financial means (despite the massive support contributed by the State of Para and the city in infrastructure and services). In the midst of the crowds of Brazilians, including many students from the two universities hosting the Forum, the international dimension - 142 nationalities and 4,900 organizations were represented - was nonetheless prominent, although to a lesser extent than at past Forums. Organizations from all of Latin America dominated the scene, trailed by a European delegation of 491 organizers (28 in the CRID delegation). However, one of the shortcomings of this Forum was the underrepresentation of delegations from Africa and Asia.

There was an undeniable impression of two parallel, co-existing forums: a Brazilian Forum, vibrant with youth and energy, alongside an international Forum, more staid although just as dynamic. Indeed, to avoid a potential deficit (the first WSF to have successfully done so!), the organizers of the Forum were forced to make drastic budgetary choices with regards to translations and the solidarity fund which is intended to allow a greater number of organizations from the South to attend. As a result, a number of debates were inaccessible to many, even if translations could at times be provided with the resources on hand.

The unexpected level of popularity of the youth camp, which drew in over 20,000 young people, created certain problems concerning logistics, hygiene, etc. that were exacerbated by heavy rains, but they only made for a more festive atmosphere! And despite these logistical

setbacks, there were virtually no acts of violence or delinquency committed during the Forum which ran smoothly in a friendly environment.

More than 400 cultural groups took part in this Forum. While the aim was to underscore the cultural dimension as a political form of expressing alternatives and not a mere occasion to relax and enjoy oneself, the point did not always get through.

Regardless of these challenges and limits, this 8th World Social Forum testified to the energy of a social movement receiving a new breath of life. First, this event was massively attended by young people who arrived as participants, activity leaders or speakers. Moreover, there was no lack of enthusiasm in the desire to forge ahead and confront the stakes to develop responses to the current crises and establish a common link. Each year, the Forum throws down this challenge: advance dialogue among NGOs, union activists, researchers, Amazonian Indians, peasants, women, young people, from the North and the South, local groups and international networks, radicals and reformers... to determine a view of the world and reach coherent proposals, while striving to overcome languages and approaches proper to each. Inspired by this force, other Forums such as the World Forum for Theology, the Local Government Forum, the World Education Forum, and the newcomer, the Science and Democracy Forum for scientists, continue to be organized in parallel and enrich the World Social Forum.

The arrival of five Latin American heads of State at the Forum, skillfully managed by the Forum to avoid overwhelming or disrupting its own dynamics, provided a concrete illustration of the connection between political figures and the social movement. Luiz Ignacio Lula (Brazil), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Hugo Chavez (Venezuela) reminded 10,000 people that they emerged from social movements, unions and the demands of indigenous peoples. Declaring themselves to be products of the WSF process, they emphasized their willingness to pursue the process towards new economic and financial governance, first at the regional level and in close association with civil societies.

The majority of the activities at the Forum focused on finding solutions to the various crises in finance, food, energy, climate, the Palestinian conflict, etc., encouraging a cooperative reflection on the crisis of the development model which, for some, is a "crisis of civilization". There was criticism concerning the dispersion of activities with the same themes or objective that could have been merged together. The Forum did, however, feature a new methodological advance which consisted in organizing thematic assemblies to produce 29 declarations on defined topics that were presented in a variety of formats, from analysis documents to detailed policy briefings to be signed. Most of these declarations shared a common approach whereby they put forth alternative proposals, rather than simply condemning those of the governments. These declarations reflected a greater acknowledgment of the relationship between the ecological and social dimensions, as well as the increasing convergence between all of the different themes.

The event was well attended by the international press, and in particular the economic press, such as *Les Echos*, *The Economist*, and the *Financial Times*, which underlined the relevance of the proposals conceived during this Forum to the financial crisis. *Der Spiegel* went as far as to suppose on its cover that "the answer may lie in Belem more than Davos". On the contrary, Western television was practically absent, as usual deterred by the complexity of the messages and the absence of "personalization". The written press and French radio stations provided rather comprehensive coverage of the event, exposing a wide spectrum of different

viewpoints, from the most zealous to the most disillusioned. In addition, new information and communication tools facilitated widespread broadcasts of up-to-date happenings at the Forum through Websites and blogs for those who wanted to remain informed.

A continuing process

Beyond its festive atmosphere and despite the logistical and attendance mishaps, this Forum was engaged in real work, enabling struggles and urgent needs to be incorporated into the debates. This WSF properly played its role as an arena in which to raise resistance and create new practices and systems. It is certain that the extraordinary opportunity the WSF represents is only effective if regarded as part of the overall context that encompasses national and regional network meetings that have preceded and that will follow, to promote stronger alliances, ongoing dialogue and mobilizations. As such, several thematic assemblies have found other opportunities calling for mobilizations and gatherings, for example against the G20 held on March 28 and in April 2009, for migrations in May 2009, and a global day of action on December 12 for climate justice on the occasion of the Copenhagen summit. Lastly, Forums on specific themes, as well as national, regional or continental Forums are other spaces that broaden, deepen and ground proposals in the different realities specific to each social movement.

The day after the Forum, some 120 members of the International Council (including CCFD-Terre solidaire, representing the CIDSE) and observers met for two days to evaluate this 8th World Social Forum, and make improvements for the future. This is truly a wide-scale work in progress that thousands of organizations participating in the Forum contribute to on a daily basis.

Catherine Gaudard,
Advocacy Director

Assessment of the participation of CCFD-Terre solidaire at the Belem WSF 2009

At the Belem Forum, the CCFD-Terre solidaire delegation and its partners from the South acquired many experiences on alternatives to ultra liberal globalization and worked towards converging with other actors for solidarity in the North and South to build a fairer world (for all and especially the most impoverished). Two topics in particular were developed: the consolidation of responses to the financial crisis and deliberation on energetic models related to the sustainable management of natural resources.

Financial Crisis: proposals and mobilizations

CCFD-Terre solidaire played an active role in organizing meetings to convene the major international and specialized NGO networks and unions focusing on issues concerning debt, and financial and tax regulations. After overcoming barriers of language, nature and culture, the organizations succeeded in producing several joint proposals. The text was finalized at a Thematic Assembly, and to date, has been signed by 230 organizations. A unanimous decision was made to challenge the legitimacy of the G20 as a response to the crisis and to demand that this task be entrusted to a wider and more democratic body, within a reformed UN. Proposals on global taxes, the creation of a new system of international reserves, the elimination of tax havens, strict monitoring of the movement of capital, the fight against

speculation on commodities markets are as many proposals put forward during the final thematic assembly. A more specific workshop on advocating at the G20 was held, and an international mobilization was scheduled for March 28, prior the meeting of G20 heads of State.

Launching a trend towards energy alternatives

The objective of CCFD-Terre solidaire was to facilitate contacts among organizations from the South that are active in issues relating to major energy projects (hydroelectricity, extractive industries, biofuels) and to promote the development and consolidation of alternative proposals. The workshop series organized around this theme stimulated a rich and diverse debate, in particular between some 15 organizations from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and Brazil's Movement for Dam-Affected People that came with its 30 years of experience of combat and alternative proposals. The projection of a film directed by the CIDSE on the mobilization against extractive industries in Latin America, and the contributions by Michel Doucin, ambassador for France for CSR, on the existing mechanisms for confronting companies about their responsibility, equally inspired ideas on the courses of actions that could be elaborated. In Brazil, a joint mobilization for food and energy sovereignty has been launched and the partners of CCFD-Terre solidaire were requested to take part in driving this trend. The need for a cooperative effort with scientists involved in these initiatives was stressed. CCFD-Terre solidaire then presented the recommendations resulting from these three days at the thematic assemblies on climate justice.

Experiences to share with French civil society

The 21 volunteers of the network or movements, two-thirds under the age of 40, had received a mandate from their delegations or movements to live the WSF experience, which entailed meeting with civil societies from around the world. Their participation was a genuine investment for their delegations, as they were subsequently entrusted with the task of acting as vectors of growth on behalf of the CCFD-Terre solidaire network. The volunteers wholeheartedly embraced this mission by closely following the core work carried out by CCFD-Terre solidaire and a large number of other movements in the Forum. They were able to broaden their knowledge and analysis of the development issues defended by CCFD-Terre solidaire, and use informal opportunities to meet many members of civil society from around the world. They recorded their observations of this very enriching and motivating experience by posting daily entries on an exciting blog on the CCFD-Terre solidaire Website. They are now set to render this experience at meetings and conferences in France to their delegations and the general public.

Opportunity for partners from the South to build and reinforce alliances

The 12 organizations invited directly by CCFD-Terre solidaire, as well as other partners that joined them on site at the Forum, were able to engage discussions among themselves and speak at numerous debates and meetings. For some, it was a chance to consolidate their work within already existing alliances. For others, the challenge laid in discovering new topics, approaches, considerations or new organizations, to compare their experiences and means of action, and to get to know various networks with which they are not closely associated today. The work begun at the Forum was only a preview of what they will be pursuing in the months to come with the support of CCFD.

French media underrepresented, but ample coverage by written press

The absence of special correspondents from the audiovisual media and the low priority assigned to the subject by the French media, already overwhelmed with other social events

occurring in France, did not prevent CCFD from announcing its positions, those of its partners in the South and the outcome of its projects on several radio stations (France inter, France info, RFI). CCFD even appeared during a live simulcast with Davos on the TV channel, France 24, and more broadly in all the print press that covered the WSF (Le Monde, Les Echos, La Croix, Libération, La Vie, Réforme...).

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