

Balance of the World Social Forum 2021: More Certainties than Doubts in a Successful Virtual Forum

The last Sunday of January was the culmination of a nine-day marathon of almost 800 activities proposed by 1,300 organizations that animated the virtual World Social Forum (WSF) 2021. Nearly 10,000 people from 144 countries participated in this edition. The next step: the next WSF to be held, pandemic permitting, in 2022, in Mexico.

“What we have just experienced is a link in this 20-year long chain of the World Social Forum. A step of confirmation and reinforcement,” explains Rita Freire, journalist and communicator, head of Ciranda.net – an alterglobalization information platform created in 2001 – and member of the Facilitation Group that set up this virtual forum. She does not hide her surprise and enthusiasm for the size of the event, which exceeded all estimates, even the most optimistic ones.

Starting point and dilemmas

Freire looks back and seeks a starting point to take stock: the Porto Alegre Social Forum of the Resistances in January 2020. “There we imposed great challenges on ourselves. We reached the consensus that in order to continue we had to ensure a reactivated, vigorous WSF, with a real capacity for convening, advocacy and coherent commitment to social struggles,” she recalls.

The pandemic forced a change in the road map, although not in the demanding objectives proposed. The key question was whether this edition would strengthen the WSF, she recalls.

And today, the answer is positive: “from the first day, January 23, when the opening virtual march took place, we realized that what we were experiencing was truly amazing. With exchanges of experiences, videos, reflections of people from the farthest corners of the world, in languages we sometimes did not understand, as well as rich contributions from social movements and organizations”.

It was confirmed that “the virtual can be an ally of living, real processes. Although it must be recognized that the digital is not a viable medium for many people, especially in countries that do not have the means to connect to the Internet.”

We are confronted with a second contradiction, for the moment of difficult resolution. “To communicate we use cell phones whose components use raw materials that come from countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the appropriation of these natural resources motivates wars and clashes.

Another additional contradiction: we still have to rely on monopolistic media, such as Facebook, Zoom or YouTube, without having our own free, strong and sovereign tools”.

We can use the virtual, without forgetting that it is not necessarily wonderful, nor fair, and that in many cases it reflects a privilege resulting from an unacceptable system of exploitation”, she reflects. And she recalls that the very birth of the forum in 2001, in Porto Alegre, was achieved thanks to the call launched to the world via the Internet. And then began to create and strengthen essential media and social networks that were essential for the alterglobalization movement.

Rita Ferreira- World Social Forum 2018

Convergences to dispute power

Rita Freire claims that it was a success to have organized the

current WSF on the basis of precise thematic axes. The activities organized required “prior dialogues between organizations, consensus, convergences, which reinforced an important exercise for the social actors. Without ignoring the differences and possible conflicts that must be resolved within. For months this forum has been a broad participatory process”.

Many of the debates in the current WSF reflected on the alternatives in the post-pandemic planet, both in the environmental, economic and informational aspects, in the construction and strengthening of democracy, in the feminist struggles, migration, of native peoples and ethnic minorities.

The essential thing is, precisely, to understand this constant dialogue between social actors not only as a simple intellectual rhetoric, but from the perspective “of reinforcing convergences, imagining common future actions and mobilizations, in short, designing global proposals that allow us to dispute the power of those who hold it back,” she emphasizes.

Many of the possible proposals discussed at the WSF reinforce this future hope, she points out. And she lists some illustrative examples: knowing that Google workers are moving forward with the idea of building a single global union; that indigenous communities in Mexico are developing alternative forms of Internet; that the free media are seeking to strengthen themselves; that there are organizations proposing a major campaign to outlaw poverty and anticipating concrete proposals at the national level to move in that direction. Without forgetting also the debates on the essential role of the States in situations like the current one, the importance of public services, the suffocating weight of the debt for our peoples -and the options to counteract it-, the original forms at the level of media and cultural struggle to counteract the vision of the world and society imposed by the monopolies.

Next steps

The process continues and the future of the WSF points to a stop in Mexico next year if the pandemic permits. "Nothing replaces hugs. We can't dance together over the Internet," says the Brazilian communicator. Convinced that the face-to-face and the virtual will have to be combined. Mexico could be like a center, a heart of the event connected to the rest of the world. A multicenter, polycentric formula.

A World Social Forum configured as a global subject. Where the strength of movements and organizations is expressed in a real incidence. That is to say, reflects Freire, who is also a member of the WSF International Council, "the WSF must build a non-hegemonistic, profoundly democratic decision-making methodology. One that essentially respects the divergences that exist within it, but without being paralyzed by them. It is necessary to recognize that the debate on the necessary evolution of the method of being and doing is the way to build convergences in diversity".

If the internal discussion is lively and intense, one of the issues that motivates it refers to the very essence of the WSF, as a space for meeting-reflection-debate or as a social actor.

And Rita Freire is not afraid of the answer, referring to the position adopted by the Collective of Brazilian organizations in the International Council: "we see no contradiction in the WSF being a space for meeting, debate and articulation of actions and, at the same time, an actor on the international scene. We feel that the process opened 20 years ago has sought to fulfill this role in these two decades". And she exemplifies: "countless networks and articulations have emerged in the WSF spaces and countless proposals have been developed and implemented since its birth in 2001, many of them even contributing to develop public policies implemented by governments in several continents".

The WSF has already acted as a global actor, she stresses, “publishing declarations, leading global actions, defending ideas and values, even though there are controversies about it. As the Brazilian organizations in the International Council affirm, it has been a dynamic process, which multiplied in thematic, regional and national forums, social assemblies, of women, and of different convergences; a space of diversity, of the richness and breadth of social movements, as happened at the WSF 2018 in Salvador de Bahia; and in the dialogues that marked the various extended meetings of 2020...But, however, it can more”, reflects the responsible of Ciranda.net.