
Putting Some Order in the Chaos of Brazil's World Social Forum

Contributed by Bruno Bocchini
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The Fifth World Social Forum (WSF), which will be held in Porto Alegre from January 26 to 31, will embody significant modifications in comparison with the previous forums.

One of the most important of these changes is in the process of choosing the central themes, the major issues that will be debated during the event.

This time, the choice of "thematic guidelines" was made by the participants themselves, instead of by the organizers, which was the case in previous years.

"There was a very powerful change in approach. We held consultations with more than 100 of the organizational participants, and the 11 thematic spaces we constructed were based on the approximately 1,860 ideas that were proposed. A process that amounts to building the Forum from the bottom up," explains Cândido Grzybowski, director of the Ibase (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses) as well as being a member of the WSF Organizing Committee.

According to Grzybowski, the previous Forums were split in two directions: one, coordinated by the Organizing Committee, which determined the themes of the major debates; the other, organized by the participants themselves and comprising the so-called "self-directed" activities, which came to over a thousand in 2003.

"We had erected a Forum that was leading us to a nearly certain impasse in the sense that we had a Forum planned by the Organizing Committee, with focussed events, and another [parallel one], in a process that was expanding, given that there were already over a thousand activities in Porto Alegre [in 2003]," he remarks.

In the new approach, the organizers will act merely as expeditors of the space and operating conditions. All the themes to be debated at the meeting were suggested by the participating bodies.

Nevertheless, making it possible for these thousands of activities to take place remains a challenge for the organizers.

"[In previous years], the activities were extremely segmented. A bedlam, let's call it that. A happy, creative one, but still a bedlam. It was mad diversity rather than constructed diversity. There were over 100 activities concerned with water, for example, with no dialogue among them," Grzybowski observes.

In the 2005 edition, the proposed activities were subjected to a process of agglutination and were organized around more general themes.

The process required nearly a year of dialogue among the various social organizations, mostly via the Internet, points out Antônio Martins, one of the representatives of the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions on Behalf of Citizens (ATTAC) and also a member of the WSF Organizing Committee.

In his opinion, the result of this new approach will be discussions that are richer and denser.

"The debates are stronger, the issues are being discussed in a more profound way, with more perspectives and a better chance to produce actions and not just discussions," Martins underscores.

Translation: David Silberstein
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