Preliminary Notes on the World Social Forum 2011, Dakar by Giuseppe Caruso

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The latest World Social Forum took place in Dakar from the 6th to the 11th of February. It was followed by a two-day meeting of its International Council which began the assessment exercise, that will continue in the next months, and reflected on the way ahead for the next two years. The WSF had a special flavour this year. Whereas the “usual suspect” issues of world activism recurred predictably, though often articulated in new and inspiring ways as I will say below, the overall mood of WSF 2011 was inspired by the exceptional success of the Tunisian and Egyptian Intifadas. Activists followed with trepidation the events unfolding and a gift from fate (may the aulic tone be excused) that on the day of the closing ceremony Hosni Mubarak finally gave in and fled in front of the unrelenting, un-intimidated and growingly confident crowds of Egyptian citizens that washed the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and all Egypt of the grim remains of thirty years of brutal dictatorship.

After a year of networked events taking place in the four corners of the planet during 2010, activists convened once more in a unique venue to reconnect, meet and organise, discuss, share experiences and imaginations of another possible world. The recent events in Tunisia and Egypt and to different extents in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan and Yemen gave an added relevance to this forum. Roaming in the lush avenues of the Cheick Anta Diop University campus activists exchanged comments on the development in the Maghreb-Mashreq and those from the region were courted for news, explanations, analysis, inspiration. Some just wanted to know how they could do the same, bring about democracy, justice, equality, rights in their oppressed countries. And soon the forum became the backdrop of opportunity against which activists come together to project into the future plans and activities of change imbued with a new sense of hope. The WSF was and is, after all, the space where activists meet and share experiences, knowledge, imaginations and practical plans for action. The full mandate, the full vision, of the WSF seemed to have been given a renewed, compelling, illustration.

The Maghreb-Mashreq Social Forum has developed into a key dynamic of the World Social Forum process. Developed in the past few years it has gained momentum and it is now enjoying unexpected successes in the struggle along human rights and democracy activists in the whole region and in particular in Tunisia and Egypt where MMSF activists have been involved in the successful revolts. The African Council acknowledged its growing relevance and its momentum by choosing to hold the next Maghreb social forum in Tunisia and activists are considering that soon Egypt will become a welcoming place for a World Social Forum event after having hosted last year a thematic Forum on Health, Environment and Land Towards a Collective Action.

In the meantime a delegation of the African Council will soon visit both Tunisia and Egypt to express solidarity and offer assistance to the activists of both countries during the period of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. Activists are concerned that while the revolts have succeeded in freeing the countries from their dictators the democratic path is neither necessary nor granted. Opening the second day of the IC meeting, after a touching song performed by a Tunisian trade union activist to a standing, clapping, moved crowd, another Tunisian activist warned of the possible corporatist drift that might affect the democratization process in both Egypt and Tunisia. Real risk exists, he said, that radical activists might be displaced by liberal forces with a passion for neoliberal policies and a shrewd ability in formulating superficial discourses revolving around demagogies of democracy and human rights.

Against the backdrop of such renewed confidence and the glare of possibility opened to committed progressive activism the World Social Forum 2011 was a space of experimentation and reflection on the overall WSF movement, its challenges and potentialities, its regional rootedness, its organisational capacity, its ambition and limitations. It was not an easy forum for its organisers and for many participants. It was a WSF that stretched imaginations but also frustrated expectations, that addressed past challenges and exposed new ones, that hesitated on problems that afflict WSF activists since its inception and that ten years of experience have not yet fully resolved.

A thorough assessment of the Dakar forum can hardly be conducted here, for that the Methodology Commission of the International Council has set up a dedicated working group that will exercise itself in the
next months to present a pondered evaluation at the next IC meeting in May in Paris. In what follow I will mention some of the most debated issues that might be addressed in the overall assessment exercise.

The expectations of organisers, partners and participants, spoken and unspoken, varied enormously but some recurred. The Brazilian events and in particular the last one, in Belem in January 2009, the WSF that preceded this one in Dakar, were in many people’s mind the comparison inevitable. So it was the previous, controversial, African WSF held in Kenya in 2007. The key success of the Belem event for many was represented by the ability of the organisers to include a wide range of indigenous movements and that a close connection was established between the forum and those activists who worked in the region (the Brazilian Amazon). In this sense the Dakar success was just as resounding. A great participation of activists from Senegal, West Africa and the whole continent witnessed a thorough and inclusive mobilisation process.

The most painful memory of Nairobi was, for many, its relative closeness, the difficulties and costs in accessing the venue and the controversies on the role of some Christian organisations and large NGOs. Dakar was completely open and accessible and at the same time militant and unashamedly political as it was noted during the IC meeting. Whereas the expansion of the WSF in Africa is part of a process that has started in 2001 and has already produced two WSF in Bamako and Dakar (and a wealth of regional, sub-regional and national forums), renewed efforts have been put by the Senegalese conveners to make of the Dakar forum a welcoming, inclusive and sizeable event despite the small size of the overall host country. In this sense, Dakar was a confident step along the journey of the African chapter of the WSF.

The mobilisation of activists and resources compared to the size of the host country was nos less than impressive. It was of course not exclusive merit of the Senegalese organisers. In fact, a great contribution was given to the local hosts by the African Council and its ability to conduct thorough outreach in all regions of Africa. Partners from outside Africa joined in both in raising resources and in participating in big numbers to the event. Moreover, a key contribution to the accessibility of the venue and to the mobilisation of regional activists the caravans, twelve of them, that criss-crossed West Africa and brought thousands of activists to Dakar while, at the same time, engaged those who they met along the way on issues of justice, development, poverty, equality dignity and by telling them about this place, the WSF, where those ideas were not only not considered wishful thinking but in which activists join together to achieve them.

Inclusiveness and difference of participants made of the Cheikh Anta Diop university campus a truly open, diverse, accessible space. For the organisers and for the IC this was a crucial success and a sort of magic that removed the spell that the Nairobi event had, for some, put on the African chapter of the WSF. And this was evident from the first day, the day of the opening march. Tens of thousands of people marched through Dakar, local minorities and unions, Senegalese peasants and their regional partners. And the outreach continued in the following days with virtual experiments of decentralisation via the Internet (the Dakar Extended project which allowed remote participation) or by organising events in the banlieue as the conveners of the World Assembly of Inhabitants did in the neighbourhood of Guediawaye or by organising a delegation that visited the slum of Baraka.

And what the organisers and their international partners of the IC could not do, Dakar did. With its welcoming people, warm weather and the soft blow of the Harmattan over the sparkling ocean, it was the friendliest city in which a WSF had ever took place, as an enthusiastic IC member stated during the WSF evaluation session on the 12th of February expressing the feelings of all. Even more important was a comment that followed soon made by a women activist who acknowledged that this had been the safest forum for women. This alone would be enough to celebrate Dakar and the 2011 WSF. And the impressive cultural programme of the WSF complemented the endless options for inspiration, and dance, that the city offers.

An important trend in global activism perhaps highlighted by the Dakar forum and which contributed to its success, was that activists arrived already well prepared and networked among them and with local partners and with a key concern about further strengthening regional and global alliances on shared issues. Those convergences, at the heart of WSF’s mission, proved exceedingly successful, beyond activists’ expectations even, and for some seem to indicate a clear trend towards consolidation of struggles at the global level. If it is premature to state it confidently, it is nonetheless something to be closely observed in the months and years to come to capture the spirit of both converging and networked alliances, encounters, interactions and practices that could influence both the awareness of and the underlying values of a truly emancipatory global cosmopolitan society.

Some of these convergences took place before the WSF itself, others in its last days. The world charter of migrants, for instance was launched on Goree Island after two days of meetings that saw activists from all
corners of the planet converge on one of the most daunting symbols of the abominable slave trade to claim rights to free mobility for all individuals on the planet against boundaries that create segregation, exploitation and new forms of human trafficking. During the forum a solidarity convergence on Palestine, the first to be ever organised at the forum, proved to be one of the most resounding successes of WSF’s facilitated solidarities. And media activists converged on a communication assembly to take stock of communication activism in the era of wikileaks and the influence of social media on street protests as in the Maghreb and Mashreq region.

The World Assembly of Inhabitants, whose final declaration was signed by over 200 organisations and movements and which organised a wealth of events, seminars and workshops both at the university and in the banlieue, constitutes one of the most inspiring alliances of activists at a global level. A new paradigm, a new way of conceptualising the struggle for a better world, is being developed as outcome of this alliance and as outcome of the practical engagements to join forces in concerted campaigns and actions. A paradigm that both opposes the neoliberal model of urban development and replaces it with a social, human, centred one and one that, further, decries the so-called urban bias of decades of international development and rethink the dualist and reductive separation between the urban and the rural. This is no mean achievement by such a composite set of partners which bring to such process enormous cultural, intellectual, ideological, strategic differences but share a common aspiration of justice and equality for all world inhabitants, and an unfaltering resistance against those processes of land-grab (so painfully current in the African continent) and market-led dynamics of slum upgrade that deny to the weakest sections of society the right to a livelihood and a habitat in which to thrive. Among the conveners and participants to these initiatives are Habitat International Coalition, the International Alliance of Inhabitants, No-Vox. Their first common objective is to organise a day of mobilisation coinciding with the World Habitat Day: an international alternative Habitat Day on the 3rd of October.

One more impressive event was the convergence of the Assembly of Social Movements, a regular event at the forums since the first edition, that gathered in the biggest auditorium of the university and saw the participation of thousands of activists that gave life to moments of true shared elation to celebrate being together and in such numbers and from so many different places. The success of the assemblies moved in the direction of addressing some of the long standing concerns of some WSF organisers and critics, namely the fragmentation of the programme and the atomisation of the different strands of global activism with the perceived outcome of weakening the resistance against neoliberalism and reducing the impact of imaginations and practices aimed at building a new world.

However, as some noted, among the processes that did not work as expected in the organisation of the Dakar forum was the process of agglutination of self-organised activities. Part of the event methodology since 2005 this process would facilitate the convergence of different workshops and seminars organisers towards shared activities. Whereas the practice does not oblige anyone to work with undesired partners, it does convey information around converging or similar topics to activists and organisations who might be interested in networking and finding potential new partners. If the agglutination had been more successful, it was argued, a considerably small number of events would have to compete for the fewer spaces available at the university and perhaps no competition for those spaces would have happened (as an Indian activist put it, the open space this year had become a grab-a-space space).

And this was the hardest reality that confronted participants, organisers and IC members who tried to assess what happened. Yes, what happened in the first few days of the forum? Why people were welcomed by a mayhem of moved rooms of lacking definitive schedule and new impromptu locations? Simple, the new university rector did not fulfil the commitments taken by the previous who had promised both the suspension of classes during the forum to allow students to be exposed to the WSF events and the allocation to the organisers of the forum of the entire campus for their activity. When such opportunity was denied, at the very last moment, a wave of panic spread among the organisers and soon enough that became confusion and even frustration among some participants. New tents were pitched to host the events and a lot of creative scheduling had to be performed by all but it took a while for all to become familiar enough with spaces and schedules (posted daily in notice boards around the campus). In the end some suggest that only 80% of the planned could take place as originally planned.

Whereas both creativity, expediency, ingenuity and, most important of all, genuine solidarity marked the trajectory of many lost souls in the avenues of the campus, fiddling with their phones and escorted by the most welcoming volunteers, a darker side to the initial confusion was highlighted by many. Competition for spaces and the differential ability to convene audiences by activists generated a phenomenon profoundly at odds with the values of the forum. It generated conditions of privilege among those activists and organisations with tighter networks and larger resources and it excluded and alienated those who joined the forum for the
first time or those not closely connected with other activists and with those “in the know”. As someone said during the IC meeting, the culture and the aspiration of the Forum’s activists do not deserve such contradictory organisational processes.

As it has been noted above, there are great differences in relations and expectations in the world events of the WSF and also imbalances of connections and social capital. Some network on the basis of their relations extend their reach and feel and are more included, others feel they depend more on structured programmes and feel lost when they fail to take place as scheduled. Many thought, for instance, that it was lost opportunity that of being unable to involve to a greater extent students and teachers of the university and of wider Dakar. But university students were often directed with tact and smiles, just as we all were, by enthusiastic volunteers who explained “the rules of the game” as one told me: this is not a normal conference, everything happens everywhere all the time, so you may as well stop running around looking for other things (not that I was anyway) and enjoy what’s around you (which I was thoroughly doing, included talking to him and hearing what he had to say about the North African Intifadas: he said there should be one in each country in Africa).

Impact Assessment and Responsibility

The logistical issues were not the only ones. Great attention and cries of outrage were raised by the confrontations between Moroccan activists and supporters of the Saharawi people. Repeated intimidation and violence involved the two groups that extended from the opening march to the university halls (where an event hosting two European parliamentarians was violently shut down by outraged Moroccans who would not allow space to discuss the demands of independence of the Saharawi people) to the women tent where Moroccan women attacked Saharawi women.

But a member of the Moroccan delegation of the Maghreb Social Forum warned activists that some of the activists who oppose the claims to independence of the Saharawis are not agents of the government as many have accused them to be (and the organisers that allowed that such a delegation was welcomed) but they were allies who held different political views on an issue whose history and roots make it a most complex one and on which assuming rigid political postures can only be divisive and counter-productive for activists in the delicate Moroccan polity. Alienating the support of those allies would cost strength to the movement in Morocco and beyond and would void years of patient negotiations and alliance building.

There were also problems with the ambitious Dakar Extended project that did not manage to go ahead with the entire programme as planned due to lack of resources and spaces. And there were some recurring issues raised by those who found unacceptable that Coca-Cola and Danone products were sold at the food stalls or that water, that had to to be freely distributed, eventually was sold at three times its main street price. Others, on the same vein, questioned the extent to which it is coherent with the WSF vision that activists house themselves in expensive hotels and whether it would have been more appropriate to stress the organisational commitment on solidarity accommodation with local activists or provide other local accommodation for rent as many indeed did. Provocatively someone suggested, then, that the forum could take place in a field where everyone would just pitch their own tent to sleep in or to organise events (and I saw visions of Burning Man events and Glastonbury festival which I am not sure I find entirely distressing – perhaps with farmer’s cooperatives from the region providing organic food…).

On the other hand, though, still on the front of resistance against multinational corporations’ monopolies, all computers in the press centre, donated by Oxfam, were running on GNU/Linux to stress the research and practices that many in the WSF are conducting on common creation and ownership of intellectual rights. In this sense focusing on the commons, in ways that were stressed at the Science and Democracy forum organised at the Top of Form

Bottom of FormÈcole Polytechniqueof the University before the beginning of the WSF, has not only a limited import with reference to the world of technology (however, given the increased relevance of technology not only in the wider world but in the life of activists, it might deserve increasing attention), but is a practical engagement with a crucial trend on common resource (material and symbolic) management from neoliberal institutions (World Bank as often ahead of the rest) who may use such approach to deepen the reach of privatization and disciplinary practices of production, exchange and consumption of knowledge.

Other complaints were discussed during the IC meeting, but there were also alternative views about them. For
instance, the reduced coordination and agglutination of events, the lack of spaces and of programme, and the technical failures affecting, for instance, the translation system or the registration computers did also produce remarkable solidarity and showed a huge ability to self-organise and to take advantage of the Egyptian tested practice of mobilisation via text messages and cell phone calls. A Palestinian activist stressed at the IC meeting that, while he fully enjoyed the forum and considered it the best of all those he had attended, of all things it was solidarity among strangers that he most appreciated. He continued, “if we do not help each other when we are in crisis” (and we do not find the room where our event was supposed to take place) “when are we supposed to show the richness of our solidarity? And,” he added “apportioning responsibility and culpability is something that needs to be done with care to avoid divisive dynamics.”

Many reflected on these words and the considerations on the failures of the forums became sophisticated reflections on causes and responsibility and on criteria to assess outcome and impact in way that were coherent with WSF’s values.

Trust and Transparency

But what were the criticisms raised and towards whom were they directed? There were growing concerns among international activists about issues that went beyond the logistic failures. Many IC members, with whom I spoke, for instance, were concerned about decision-making practices, transparency, collegiality, collaboration among different structures of the WSF organisational architecture. Others reflected that the workings of spaces of the WSF like the IC, its commissions, its Liaison Group and the local (Senegalese) organising committee and the regional African Council, are not always easy to gauge.

Many were unhappy that Evo Morales was invited to open the WSF, this is patently against the principles stated in the Charter because the compañero Presidente Evo is nonetheless a head of state. But those concerns were even more focused, beyond the specific issue, on the process by which this decision was taken. It was impossible for many to understand who and when had taken this decision, not to mention the choice to invite former Brazilian president Lula to speak at the same time as other forum activities were taking place (fact that contradicts previously agreed guidelines) or the local president who was keen, as someone reminded during the IC meeting, to clarify that he had nothing to do with the WSF and proceeded to give a fully neoliberal speech.

Criticisms escalated during the first morning of the IC meeting and many members protested energetically that the IC was not aware of any of the organisational decisions made by the local steering committee and that no commission of the IC was allowed to contribute to the actual design and implementation of the final programme. Members claimed that the methodology commission had met in Dakar before the forum but no African members had joined, the same was told of the strategy commission and one of the members of the Senegalese steering committee confirmed that the separation between local and IC communication commission was due to not better identified power struggles that prevented them to work together (a member of the Communication Commission of the IC lamented that after over four weeks of work in Senegal she had no contact with local journalists because they were prevented from meeting them).

Whereas contingent frustration might exaggerate the extent of the separation between local organisers and international partners and whereas certain comments used rhetoric hyperboles and paradoxes to make a strong impact on the audience over issues of commonly recognised great importance, it became soon clear, and the cry of the Palestinian member reported above might have contributed to certain extent to sober the mood and relax the atmosphere, that an alternative path to assessing the Dakar forum might have proved more fruitful for all involved. It was, after all, a shared conviction that collective spaces of decision-making were necessary to help activists to address issues that would overwhelm them individually. In this sense, what needed to be considered where how to facilitate the work of such spaces and, even more importantly, accept that whatever at the Dakar forum did not met the expectations of different activists (each, it has to be stressed again, for different reasons related to their desires and their political culture) was due to a collective responsibility. I lost count of how many times the expression “collective responsibility” was voiced in the first morning of the IC meeting. It seemed to me, after a certain number of times, it had become a mantra, an exorcism of the confrontational and potentially divisive considerations that had been articulated that pointed at the local steering committee as the sole responsible of all that did not match the activists’ expectations.

And later on, a prominent member of the local organising committee, who had previously tried to explain, and
with him several others of his colleagues, the complexities of the Senegalese polity and the idiosyncrasies of the governmental and university organisational culture which ultimately caused most of the confusion and logistical mishaps, closed the meeting by apologising for all those that they could not offer to match the expectations of their guests and acknowledged that several mistakes had been done. It did not take much for all to remember of the many mistakes that were made in the previous forums and some, later told me that while heartened by the quality and depth of the conversation (that was supposed to be not more than a preliminary assessment of the Dakar forum) suggested that perhaps the WSF methodology could reformulate its use of the term failure as a different form of learning success.

But perhaps it was not so simple, as if good will and years of shared activism in the WSF had so easily washed away days of complaints and frustration with some wholeheartedly felt apologies and considerate calls for shared responsibility. There are other conflicts and perhaps deeper and not fully conscious that underpinned some of the difficulties experienced by the global organisational architecture of the WSF. Guidelines for organising events have been agreed and consensually approved, resources constraints are too familiar to all, cultural, ideological and political differences are widely acknowledged. It all seems in order, so what is missing? Why there was so strong the feeling that a crack was opened between local organisers and international partners? Why did I feel strong deja-vues from previous WSF events that reminded me of the difficulties in negotiating local cultural and political contexts and the political interests of those convening the event and both of these with the aspirations of the international partners?

It seems as though those who organise the local events have to face reality against the encouragements of the partners not directly involved who remind them that the sky is the limit of their dreams and they would not settle so easily on the grinding path towards the fulfilment of the WSF vision. It may not be necessarily any Us v. Them divide, it may be another incarnation of the Reality v. Aspiration tension. Whereas spur and encouragement by international partners may be very useful it may also be crucial to evoke trust towards the local partners especially when things do not look easy to decipher, and in Dakar there were many of those things, but not more than anywhere else the WSF has been organised before. At a rather more abstract level, the apparent contradictions between calls for transparency on the one hand and trust on the other, so crucial in the neoliberal discourse, might indeed embodied in the activism of the WSF as well.

What next for the WSF process?

Few hours of the IC meeting were dedicated to the beginning of a conversation on the next location of the global meeting and to some of the next commitments for the years to come. There were three candidates to host the world event with official invitations, Montreal, Porto Alegre and Santiago de Compostela but a wider debate has just started on whether to allow the forum to move from a location in the global south to the north of the planet.

Some suggested that the WSF should unmoor itself geographically and reclaim a fully global scope. Moreover, it was suggested that the WSF should move to where neoliberalism has its institutional and social cores. Another IC member reflects that indeed it would be crucial to take the WSF to the place where the current civilisation, the civilisation that has brought crisis and destruction to the world and risks to annihilate it, has been generated. I saw some older comrades sneer at the memory of painful debates on the primacy of the struggle in the capitalist world over that in areas where capitalism was still following the pioneering steps of imperialism and I saw some feminists shiver at the thought of the debates between the strategic feminist of the north v. the tactical feminism of southern women. I’m sure it was not this that the activists suggesting a move of the forum to the North had in mind but a genuine intent to globalise a solidarity beyond geographical boundaries.

In fact, a compelling argument was articulated by an Indian activist that summarised the sentiments of many. A forum in Europe or in Canada could be very useful to establish new forms of solidarity between northern and southern activists grounded on new foundations. Such solidarity would not be constructed between dependent actors tied by social relations of domination and exploitation in which activists are not involved but in fact struggle against from both south and north but between fully autonomous individuals stressing the shared desire to struggle together for collective emancipation.

A forum in Europe, someone mentioned could help a shattered WSF process and movements that struggle to resist austerity measure that affect the most vulnerable sections of the populations imposed because of the
crisis generated by a greedy and irresponsible minority. In North America and especially in the US, instead, the
WSF seems to be experiencing an inspiring moment following the successful Detroit USSF. A forum in Montreal,
a region that has produced two very successful local social forums and impressive mobilisation against Free
Trade Agreement Treaties (among others), would contribute to the momentum and to consolidate both
organisational dynamics and activists’ confidence.

There are of course stringent conditions that need to be met for a forum which is truly global could take place
in the North: visas. Several southern activists reminded everyone of the frustrating experience that is
associated to their repressed mobility. If these issues are not addressed and resolved it won’t be possible to
even imagine a forum in Montreal (or Santiago de Compostela for that matter, or anywhere else in the north).
And visas are not the only ones, as several Europeans suggested that Europe is not prepared to host a WSF
and such an event cannot be imposed on unwilling organisers, it goes without saying.

But before 2013 there is 2012 and what is left of 2011. In the consolidating tradition of the alternating world
events and years of decentralised actions, thematic, regional and local forums will take place, some of which
have been announced in Dakar. There seems to be a double trend in the WSF process with two complementary
currents that reach new geographical areas of the world and deepen the debate through thematic forums.

The mission of the WSF is not to lead the movements but to anticipate their moods, to read the trends of
global activism and to provide a space where organisations and movements can meet and build on shared
moods and common priorities. The next months seem to suggest a converging trend towards Rio + 20, which
will discuss current and alternative development models, and a mounting wave of regime changes in the
Maghreb and Mashreq the consequences of which will have global impact and could greatly inspire and
transform global activism.

Among the activities of the forum process that will take place in the next months there will be a World Food
Sovereignty Forum that will take place in Haiti, a Palestinian Solidarity Forum in Brazil and a South Asia Social
Forum in Dakar in November 2011.

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