



10th World Social Forum:

*Are we
heading
down the
right path?*

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Last January, Porto Alegre, where the World Social Forum (WSF) was born ten years ago, played host to another Forum. But the effusive celebration of the hope in another world, so striking in 2001, 2003, and 2005, was markedly subdued this year. Indeed, after this most recent WSF, held in many different cities around the world, it's hard not to wonder if the Forum is not in decline as a strategy, as a symbol of resistance, and, above all, as a platform for action. This question haunts even those who still strongly believe in the vision that "another world is possible." As I do.

The Forum's activities in Porto Alegre were divided among four nearby cities. This geographical

separation inhibited possibilities for discussion, debate, and mobilization. It was difficult for Forum participants, as well as the citizens of Porto Alegre, to get any sense of the event as a whole. It was also hard to come together and to make our voices heard as a group. The Health Area, called "The Mercedes Sosa Tent", was beautifully built and painted in a collective effort two days prior to the Forum. It was located in the middle of the Youth Camp. While the setting was full of energy, it was not particularly well suited as a venue for discussions on health. Many sessions were poorly attended despite some very interesting and important talks and the best efforts of the organizers.

The discussions about health issues focused on social participation and popular education. Brazil is currently celebrating the 20th anniversary of its National Health System, which, amongst other principles, includes universal access to health care, equity, and social participation. Social Participation has been institutionalized through Health Councils, formed by users of the health services, health providers and managers, on the municipal, state, and national levels. The right to health has been enshrined in the Brazilian constitution as a duty of the state for over 20 years. This constitutional mandate has encouraged social participation through the Health Councils and allowed social movements to pressure for the

achievement of this goal in reality. Nevertheless, in recent years, a generalized demobilization has been noticeable. We have been questioning, and this has been discussed in this Forum, if this is not a consequence of a messianic belief in left-wing leaders, such as our President Lula, who once elected will take care of all our problems. Debates in the health sessions of the Forum included central questions such as “Why do our efforts at mobilization seem blocked?” “Why are we demobilized?”, “What’s wrong with the strategy of our social movements?”, and a call for self-criticism in the creation of a wider social movement for change.

In this Forum, health movements seemed to be highly fragmented. The feeling is that there are so many beautiful struggles alive, yet each individual cause, association, union, and NGO seems to be in competition with the others; they hardly act as if they were nurturing the same ultimate dream. It is as if the broad struggle for *Health for All* had been shattered into hundreds, even thousands, of small pieces that no longer fit together. Certainly, each struggle is legitimate and very important in its own right, but the fragmentation distances us from the convergence and united force needed for strategic action.

Even before the event, the lack of coordination among the networks at this Forum was pronounced. The Forum is supposed to be a

permanent movement, allowing for ongoing organization, and continual strengthening of a wider social movement. If this does not happen, there is not sufficient organization for the encounters; this is what happened this year in Porto Alegre. I’m using the health movements as an example, but this seemed to be the general picture.

Never has the Forum in Porto Alegre been so quiet. Publicity was almost non-existent, and very few people really knew about the event. This is another point worth emphasizing. Many people had heard about this WSF, but, given the lack of media coverage, people were not motivated to seek out information and learn more about what was going on. Many who had participated in the previous, larger Forums were not involved this time. It was as if they needed the impetus provided by the huge crowds at earlier forums. Well, this time, there was no such big wave. It’s interesting to consider how much of this decline related to a lack of communication “magic” and how much of it was linked to a lack of hope or belief in the WSF itself. Or perhaps there are other reasons. Nevertheless, it’s important to note that the Porto Alegre Forum was not organized on the same scale as the previous ones held in the city. Given that Belem’s Forum last year was quite massive, it may be prudent not to interpret this year’s decline as evidence of a general trend.

Another aspect worth noting is

that social movements in Rio Grande do Sul (of which Porto Alegre is the capital) have recently been attacked by the right wing state government through open repression of activists and street demonstrations. The impact of this wave of criminalization of social movements on participation in the Forum must be taken into account

Despite all this, and most importantly, the World Social Forum remains alive. It’s alive because so many people and movements still see it as a place for mobilization. To think critically about the Forum is to care about how it can be used in a more empowered way. As a citizen of Porto Alegre and health activist, I feel convinced that this Forum let us down a bit and forced us think critically about the WSF’s future. Our ultimate goal in a broader network of social movements is to realize people’s rights. This means we must play an important role in pressuring governments, but also implies that we are not always the government’s enemies. Alliances and unity are very important, even essential, tools for struggle.

What is really clear is that to legitimate the World Social Forum as representative of the peoples’ voices, it’s time to keep working, more and more, to increase *real* popular participation. The great majority of the people, oppressed as they are, know nothing of the World Social Forum, nor of mobilization, nor of their rights as human beings.