

The U.S. Social Forum in Context:
Summary of Research on US and World Social Forum Process
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The US and World Social Forum's commitment to creating spaces for diverse groups to come together, and its work to privilege and empower those voices that have been systematically excluded and marginalized by dominant economic and political structures is particularly urgent at this political moment of global economic and environmental crisis. We should see our work as part of this larger struggle, and this requires attention to both the larger US context and to the relations between the USSF and the WSF process.

In this report we summarize findings that emerge from research on the US, European, and World Social Forums, identifying themes that might assist USSF organizers as we make important decisions about possible ways forward.

With the slogan "Another World is Possible," the WSF process expands people's "political imaginations allowing them to consider other possible worlds. This vital first step helps mobilize people around national and global political projects of social justice and community rather than competition, greed, and individualism/nationalism. "Another United States is Necessary" reminds US activists of our special responsibility to

people and movements around the world affected by our government's policies. The WSF process has also created a context of norms and roles that are supportive of peace.

**The WSF process contributes to
Making Another World Possible by:**

- Addressing the major injustices that form the roots of violence and exploitation—such as racism, sexism, patriarchy, and persistent inequalities;
- Cultivating dialogue that can lead to greater understanding, tolerance and social cohesion;
- Socialization in democratic norms, values, and practices;
- Developing cross-cutting alliances;
- Developing shared analyses of social problems and their solutions.

Cultivating New Norms

New politics require new assumptions, values, and practices—or norms to help us coordinate the work being done by lots of different people across vast distances. Some norms we can see developing in the WSF process are:

Solidarity—this is a more complex and mature form of international solidarity than seen in previous movements. We've learned that alliances don't develop through top-down processes and superficial or paternalistic forms of solidarity, but rather through mutual understanding, empathy, and commitment to shared struggle.

Intentionality—is a norm that the US Social Forum has advanced in the WSF process. It is expressed through close attention to the operation of power and through a commitment to following the leadership and voices of those most harmed by economic globalization.

Norms of solidarity and intentionality emerge for the Social Forum organizer's deep commitment to the *WSF process* and its guiding *Charter of Principles*. Experience and research attests to the importance of *trust in the process* that animates the World Social Forums. This trust motivates and keeps activists connected to the WSF process despite the high costs of participation and the frustrations that often accompany coalition-building and transnational and cross-movement activism.

Open space vs. action?

Should the WSF process remain focused on creating open spaces for dialogue/engagement across movements and peoples, or should it take a more active role in generating collective action

for change? While the US and World Social Forums do not take collective action, there is evidence that participants in these open spaces very often go home from Forums to engage in actions at local levels or to join action campaigns.

Initiatives like the **People's Movement Assemblies** help expand the models of action available to citizens and activists in the US and in other parts of the world while also providing spaces for individuals to develop analyses of their experiences and to work collectively to solve problems. In this sense they expand the work of the social forum process. They help build grassroots capacity for social change, building the foundation for movement building that is essential to the social forum process's effort for social transformation.

Developing Innovative Political Roles

Another possible world requires new sorts of political actions and roles. The WSF's open space enables activists to develop and strengthen new kinds of leadership roles in our movements. **Grassroots brokers** are activist-leaders whose actions and political intention, in different place-specific settings, served to improve the inclusivity and equality of deliberation and extend the network of involved groups. These activist leaders use their skills to enhance communication and build bridges between socially and geographically distanced people and organizations. They help socialize activists to listen carefully and in new ways. They are leaders who speak in ways that value diversity and that run counter to Western cultural norms of speed, action and efficiency. In other words, they sensitize activists in the submerged traditions and practices that are key to realizing "another world"

Examples of grassroots brokers include:

- Language access activists who contribute their time and skill to help make the US/WSF process inclusive of diverse linguistic groups.
- Information/ communications/technology activists who dedicate considerable time and skill towards helping design and operate the communications infrastructure required to do long-distance and low-budget organizing work.
- NPC members who help "translate" between the USSF and their base constituencies. Some NPC members are also involved in "translating" between the USSF and World Social Forum process, helping US-based organizers learn ways to connect with and support global struggles.

Learning from European Experiences with the Social Forum Process

The European Social Forum (ESF) was first held in Italy in 2002, then France, England, Greece, Sweden, and this year, Turkey. It has been a networking space for European movements mobilize against war in Afghanistan and Iraq and it remains Europe's largest grassroots democracy network. While conflict between different groups often ended cooperation in many of the national and local Social Forum organizing processes, the European preparatory process has survived.

The big challenge for ESF organizers in their European preparatory meetings was to actually be able to talk to each other and take joint agreements in a culturally diverse setting with very unequal resources. But it was probably the challenge of diversity and the positive and careful recognition of different identities and ideologies that made the ESF grow into a participatory democracy able to survive crises that national Social Forums did not.

What some see as a failure of the ESF organizers is that they became too close of friends, making it hard for newcomers to get involved in the process. After one year, local grassroots activists did not feel included in the European preparatory meetings as facilitators and participants addressed each other by name but did not welcome new members. By 2006 emerging movements worked together in separate national networks, or create their own transnational meetings—outside the ESF.

Europeans can learn from US organizers how to better include new members. Europeans may also learn to stress a *process* of building grassroots leadership over the organization of specific Social Forum events. This has helped the USSF mobilize *and support* new emerging movements of excluded people. Americans may take from Europeans the lesson that Social Forums are unique networking spaces that can unite geographically dispersed and issue specific social movements whose members have had no occasions to meet each other before.

New Identities

As activists come together in the WSF context, they encounter others from different countries, sectors, classes, and cultures, generating what some have called “flexible identities,” and encouraging “multiple belongings” (della Porta 2005). These identities are needed to resist the headline-grabbing xenophobic and racist identities fueled by right-wing political leaders and mass media. They are also part of a search for ways to transform conventional identities, which are based in a capitalist world-system based on patriarchy, exclusion and exploitation.

References

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