



The World Social Forum between politics and NGOs

Simone Lovera-Bilderbeek

To cite this article: Simone Lovera-Bilderbeek (2020) The World Social Forum between politics and NGOs, *Globalizations*, 17:2, 237-244, DOI: [10.1080/14747731.2019.1670960](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1670960)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2019.1670960>



Published online: 03 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 43



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The World Social Forum between politics and NGOs

Simone Lovera-Bilderbeek

Global Forest Coalition, Asuncion, Paraguay

ABSTRACT

The WSF was established as a forum that gathered movements opposing a certain political ideology, neoliberalism, but it has refrained from openly supporting a political ideology. The WSF has empowered more radical leftist movements and thus played a role in the separation of these movements from more conventional left-wing parties that have embraced neoliberal capitalism as an undefeatable reality. Right-wing politicians have capitalized on this separation by promoting a populist rejection of capitalist elites. WSF itself has profiled itself as a forum of social movements rather than a forum of socialist movements. The article analyses to what extent the hegemonic role of NGOs in the WSF is at the roots of this apolitical positioning and to what extent rightsholder movements might have benefited from a more explicit embracement of a coherent socialist political alternative rather than the diversity that WSF has fostered as one of its central principles.

KEYWORDS

Movement of movements;
rightsholder movements;
apolitical nature of NGOs

Central to this undertaking is the critical acknowledgement of hegemonies, marginalities and alterative within the putatively horizontal and egalitarian spaces of encounter among the global justice movements. (Conway, 2011, p. 234)

Introduction: an apolitical movement of movements

The World Social Forum was established as

an open meeting space for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.¹

The Charter of the Forum explicitly rejects ‘capitalist globalization’, but rather vaguely supports ‘building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth’ and ‘the alternatives proposed to solve the problems of exclusion and social inequality’,² without embracing any specific alternative political vision (see also Simeant, Pommerolle, & Sommier, 2011). While it has been called ‘the most consistent manifestation of counter-hegemonic globalization’ (De Sousa Santos, 2008, p. 249), the WSF has been questioned for being too generic and all-inclusive in gathering a broad array of oppositions against global capitalism (Conway, 2013; De Sousa Santos, 2008). It has not even clarified whether the alternatives it proposes are

‘alternatives to capitalism or alternatives inside capitalism’ (De Sousa Santos, 2008, p. 253). The positive principles embraced by its Charter include principles like respect for universal human rights, sovereignty, social justice and equality, which are principles that are fully in line with mainstream liberalism and would probably be embraced by the overwhelming majority of the world’s political parties. In fact, it has been suggested the open space nature of WSF itself flows from the political tradition of liberalism rather than socialism (Conway, 2013).

While the WSF was deliberately established as a gathering, or ‘movement of movements’ against a certain political ideology, neoliberalism, the WSF has carefully avoided the pretension to be a political movement itself (Conway, 2011; Scerri, 2013; Simeant et al., 2011), despite being clearly progressive in aims and constituency. One can question to what extent this apolitical nature is genuine, as the WSF’s initial sessions in Porto Alegre, Brazil, were more or less openly supported by the Brazilian worker’s party (Partido de Trabalhadores, PT). Moreover, left-wing politicians like Evo Morales and Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva have been keynote speakers at the forum and have clearly used the WSF to strengthen support for what has been called Latin American twenty-first Century Socialism (Conway, 2011; Hosseini, 2015; Scerri, 2013; Simeant et al., 2011).

But the WSF itself has never formulated an explicit aim to support socialist or other progressive ideologies or movements. In fact, it claims to have no ties with political parties, and has explicitly positioned itself as an ‘apolitical’ forum that operates in a ‘non-party context’ and that explicitly bans ‘party representations’ from participating³ (Scerri, 2013). It is a forum of social movements, but has been careful not to profile itself too openly as a forum of socialist movements. While some have applauded the WSF for this rupture with the modern left (Conway, 2013), others have criticized this apolitical profile (Bond, 2008; Scerri, 2013).⁴ It is indeed questionable that the WSF as a ‘movement of movements’ (Scerri, 2013, p. 117) clearly opposes a political vision, neoliberalism, without choosing to support one (Conway, 2011).

The role of the WSF in the decline of the political left

There is a popular assumption that the left is in crisis, although it should be noted that socialist victories have often been followed by strong waves of counter-revolution (Bello, 2018) and some have even stated that the left has been so often in crisis that it can be considered to be permanently in a state of crisis (De Sousa Santos, 2008). More importantly, it should be recognized that the loss of power of what is generalized as ‘the political left’ in continents like Europe, the US and Latin America has primarily been a loss of power of traditional center-left social-democratic parties like the mainstream US Democrats, the Brazilian PT, the Social Democratic Party in Germany and the French socialist party. More radical leftish movements and politicians, like Syriza in Greece and Bernie Sanders in the US – the first US Presidential candidate who openly dared to call himself a socialist – have received a remarkable amount of support. It has been suggested that the success of Sanders was actually a symptom of a much broader surge of socialism in the US, especially amongst young voters – a 2011 Pew poll revealed that 49% of US citizens under 30 had a positive view of socialism while only 47% fostered a positive view of capitalism.⁵

There has been little research so far to what extent the WSF has played a role in this contemporary trend, but it is undeniable that there is a clear similarity between the political agenda of these more radical socialist politicians, the discourse and political views reflected in the original WSF Charter of Principles, and many of the declarations that were produced by WSF participants since.⁶ Meanwhile, the mainstream conventional center-leftish social-democratic parties have failed to contest that neoliberal globalization is the only viable political model, and as a result they have often embraced

market-oriented and corporate-friendly policies that are clearly at odds with WSF discourse and proposals (De Sousa Santos, 2008).

As such, one could blame the WSF for having played a role in the defeat of the broader leftist movements at the polls in so far that it has played a role in radicalizing the more radical socialist groupings of the left, while strengthening critique amongst progressive social movements against the capitalist, business-friendly and market-oriented policies of more center-left mainstream parties. What cannot be denied is that the victory of some of the right-wing politicians in the past years was first and foremost a result of the often quite dramatic collapse in popular support for these more conservative social-democrat parties, which had embraced the market-oriented and business-friendly policies that the WSF has strongly rejected. The more radical leftist movements have in many cases benefited from this decline, but in most countries, they simply did not benefit enough.

Having that said, it is undeniable that populist politicians like Donald Trump have incorporated certain anti-neoliberal establishment positions, like the opposition against free trade agreements, into their own political messaging. Both radical left-wing politicians and populist right-wing politicians have capitalized on a strong discontent with ruling political elites, including social-democrat elites, and their acceptance of neoliberalist policies like trade liberalization and corporate-driven globalization in general. The aftermath of the global financial crisis has had particular hard consequences for marginalized rights holder groups like women, people of colour and economically poor classes and castes. And while some of these groups have clearly moved to the left in the political spectrum, others have been drawn in front of populist right-wing bandwagons. The counter-proposals of right-wing populist have often lacked any coherent rationale as far as defending the interests of these marginalized groups is concerned, but it should be admitted that by failing to embrace one coherent alternative to neoliberalism, the WSF proposals have not presented a coherent positive vision that goes beyond rather vague humanist principles either.

More importantly, the WSF has been notably bad in developing coherent social media and other communication strategies that would have ensured the grand diversity of alternatives proposed by the WSF movement (see also De Sousa Santos, 2008) was well understood by voters all over the world. It is important to realize the free digital media, including in particular social media, has become subject to the same capitalist power hegemonies as other technologies. Similar to other technologies with potentially far-reaching consequences like genetic engineering, synthetic biology, nanotechnology and geo-engineering, digital technologies have been developed without any functioning global governance structure (Mooney, 2018). Few if any internationally binding rules and only limited (and often controversial⁷) national regulations apply to these technologies, and the potential societal impacts of these technologies have not been profoundly assessed before they were introduced.⁸

As a result, social media and other digital technologies have been blooming in a classical capitalist free market environment, where the companies and individuals with the greatest capital do not only have more access to these technologies, but they are also able to use these technologies more effectively for their own gain (Hilbert, 2016). It is not accidental that the top 5 of richest men in the world⁹ include 3 owners of companies that have exploited these new digital technologies in a very profitable manner: Amazon, Microsoft and Facebook. Meanwhile, both social media themselves and the Big Data gathered through social media and other digital technologies are increasingly playing a central role in election campaigns and the politicians that are able to invest most in these technologies have a clear advantage over less wealthy competitors. In such a scenario, right-wing politicians were able to use and, perhaps deliberately, misinterpret concerns about mainstream economic policies for

populist gains, using the undifferentiated and unsubstantiated ‘twitter’, Facebook and Whatsapp culture that rule the world’s social media as a strategic misinformation tool.¹⁰

And while it goes too far to blame the WSF for these trends, it would be useful to do more research on the question whether the political ambiguity and diversity of the WSF, in combination with its failed communications strategy, might have allowed, or in any case failed to counter, right-wing politicians in their attempts to capitalize on the worldwide discontent with mainstream capitalist elites and the neoliberal policies they have been embracing.

Rightsholders and the apolitical nature of NGOs

In this light, it is also worth analyzing why the WSF has refrained from more openly associating itself with one political alternative to neoliberalism. As Conway (2011) points out, there is a need to recognize and address power imbalances between the different WSF constituent groups: ‘Treating the WSF as if it is an open space free of power relations simply allows for the reproduction of hierarchies that the movement claims to be opposing’ (Conway, 2011, p. 218). Several scholars and other writers have expressed concern about the dominance of, especially Northern, NGOs in the WSF (Conway, 2011; De Sousa Santos, 2008; Hosseini, 2015). It is clear that the WSF faces a power concentration around larger NGOs, which are often based in the global North. These NGOs have far more resources for travel, participation, effective communication, and networking in general (Hosseini, 2015; Simeant et al., 2011). The WSF is ‘indelibly marked by unequal power relations and, in particular, by largely unacknowledged legacies of colonialism’ (Conway, 2011, p. 233). Especially the two global WSF meetings that were organized in Africa, the WSF 2007 in Nairobi and the WSF 2011 in Dakar, have received significant criticism as being relatively badly organized ‘trade fairs’ where wealthy Northern NGOs were able to participate and organize their events much more effectively than grassroots movements (Conway, 2011; Hosseini, 2015; Scerri, 2013). This dominance of NGOs has also been highlighted as a cause of the apolitical nature of the WSF. As an African participant described the 2007 WSF in Nairobi:

This event had all the features of a trade fair – those with greater wealth had more events in the calendar, larger (and more comfortable) spaces, more propaganda – and therefore a larger voice. Thus the usual gaggle of quasi donor/International NGOs claimed a greater presence than national organisations – not because what they had to say was more important or more relevant to the theme of the WSF, but because, essentially, they had greater budgets at their command. Thus the WSF was not immune from the laws of (neoliberal) market forces. There was no levelling of the playing field. This was more a World NGO Forum than an anti-capitalist mobilisation, lightly peppered with social activists and grassroots movements . . . There was much discussion about policies and alternatives to existing policies. But one couldn’t help feel the absence of politics. It’s as if many believe that nice policies (or human rights legislations) get made by nice people. But the reality is that what ends up as policy is the outcome of struggles in the political domain – fundamentally between the haves and the have-nots. But in a week in which the voices of the have-nots were under-represented, I guess we should not be surprised by the absence of politics. (Manji, 2007)

A lot of analysis has been written about the power imbalances between Northern and Southern activists (Conway, 2011; Simeant et al., 2011), but there has been less analysis about the significant tensions between two other clearly distinguishable groups in gatherings like the WSF: movements of rightsholder groups like women, Indigenous Peoples, peasants and workers, who participate in global activist movements to defend their own rights, interests and aspirations, and NGOs and social movements that participate in global activist movements for cognitive, often altruistic motivations. Conway (2011) describes how rightsholder groups like women, dalit and Indigenous Peoples felt

‘intellectually and politically marginalised’ in the WSF (Conway, 2011, p. 227). Yet even Conway limits her analysis to the power imbalances between Northern and Southern groups separated by ‘colonial difference’ (Conway, 2011, p. 232) rather than the, closely related, difference between well-organized NGOs and the often less-resource rich rightsholder movements they claim to represent in their campaigns. While such altruistic NGOs can be lauded for speaking up for the rights, interests and aspirations of others, there is an inherent risk of misrepresentation when NGOs and social movements aim to defend the rights, needs and aspirations of other groups than themselves (Bohmelt & Betzold, 2012; Lovera-Bilderbeek, 2017).

In fact, in certain policies the interests of such intermediary NGOs can be juxtaposed to the interests of the assumed beneficiaries of their activities, for example when donors need to choose whether they provide funding to the rightsholder beneficiaries themselves, or to the intermediary NGOs that try, or at least assume to try, to support these beneficiaries (Lovera-Bilderbeek, 2017). In her analysis of the WSF in Dakar Simeant et al. (2011) and colleagues describe WSF events where the voices of the African beneficiary groups of Northern charity organizations were clearly marginalized.

Per definition, NGOs can be distinguished from non-NGOs by having a clear organizational structure. This also provides them with enhanced access to financial resources, as most donors require recipients to have a legally registered structure. Moreover, because they are organized, most professionalized NGOs require financial resources to sustain their organizational structures, whereas non-organized social movements and grassroots activist groups can often sustain themselves for a major part on basis of the voluntary time and efforts donated by their members. There is thus an incentive for NGOs to pay careful attention to their financial interests, including their financial interests to be seen as apolitical actors by their donors (see also Simeant et al., 2011).¹¹ Especially large charity organizations which, by their own nature, are highly dependent on capital, have a clear incentive to subtly moderate their political agenda so that it does not compromise their financial base, even though the assumed beneficiaries of their charity might have a much more pronounced political agenda.

The apolitical profile of the WSF is thus in line with the self-identity of most of the NGOs that play a dominant role in the governance and implementation of the WSF. The overwhelming majority of NGOs profiles itself as apolitical organizations. The reasons for this are not just ideological, but also practical, as many of the larger professionalized NGOs rightfully fear that they would lose part of their, often non-partisan, donor constituency if they would profile themselves as socialist or otherwise political organizations. In fact, many institutional donors to the NGO movement, which directly or indirectly include countries ruled by center-left or even conservative governments like the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France and Sweden, have established this apolitical nature of recipient organizations as a pre-condition for their funding (see also Bond, 2008). Large charity NGOs can go as far as profiling themselves openly to be part of social movements, or activist movements. But they would unquestionably lose part of their funding if they would openly profile themselves as part of a socialist movement, even though their anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse tends to leave no question about their political alignment.

It should be emphasized that the distinction between rightsholder movements and NGOs is not black and white. On the one hand, rightsholder groups are not necessarily political, in fact, some rightsholder groups like Indigenous Peoples embrace political visions that cannot be classified in conventional left or right terms (De Sousa Santos, 2008). On the other hand, rightsholder movements have often organized themselves in the form of NGOs or other organizational structures, thus requiring – often significant – financial resources to sustain their institutional structures. This has sometimes incentivized them to adopt an apolitical stance as well.

It has also been pointed out that there is a need for different social movements to collaborate closely in their joint struggle against capitalism, which means they need to embrace the wide diversity amongst rightsholder groups, even though conventional leftist theories have often considered diversity as an obstacle (De Sousa Santos, 2008). This has also led to rightsholder movements adopting altruistic agenda's. The global feminist movement, for example, has embraced much broader ideological visions than the empowerment of women and defense of women's rights alone (Conway, 2011; Hosseini, 2015). But most rightsholder groups have in common that they are clearly marginalized by neoliberal capitalism and an enhanced collaboration between these rightsholder groups could also generate a stronger global movement, not just to oppose neo-liberalism, but also in favour of one coherent alternative political vision.

Conclusion

In his 2008 analysis of the relationship between the WSF and the Global Left, De Sousa Santos argues that the diversity of visions and movements has been the main strength of the Forum. Yet, 10 year later one could conclude that this diversity might have been its main weakness as well. While more research is needed on the contemporary relationship between the WSF and the Global Left, this paper concludes that the dominance of NGOs in the WSF process has been an important factor in the relatively apolitical nature of the WSF and its failure to provide more explicit support to left-wing political movements. There is an inherent financial incentive for many NGOs not to be seen as a political organization, so while many NGOs have been openly critical of neoliberalism, and even capitalism, few have been openly supportive of socialism. As NGOs have been quite dominant in the WSF so far, this has refrained the WSF from embracing one coherent alternative to neoliberalism.

Some radical leftist movements were able to strengthen themselves by embracing some of the visions developed at the WSF and similar spaces. However, right-wing populist politicians were also able to pick and choose between the multitude of critiques on corporate-led globalization, incorporate some of these critiques in their political messaging and, through their hegemonic position in modern communication technologies, they succeeded to capitalize on the overall discontent with mainstream capitalism.

The significantly failure of the WSF to develop a strong social media strategy, even in its home country Brazil, can be seen as an important cause of the defeat of left-wing political movements in what can be seen as a new 'social media infocracy', a global political system increasingly dominated by manipulative and even fake information. There should also be more analysis on appropriate governance structures for social media and digital information systems in general. In the meantime, it is clear that left-wing movements and their gatherings, including the WSF, need a much more proactive social media strategy to counter right-wing populism.

Moreover, it would be good to explore how NGOs could embrace a more modest, facilitating rather than hegemonic role in the WSF. Such a facilitating role would be based on an enhanced awareness of the different forms of marginality, including the marginality of grassroots rightsholder movements vis-à-vis well-organized charity foundations and other altruistic NGOs. Such enhanced awareness of the difference between rightsholder movements and NGOs would allow rightsholders to get a stronger, independent voice in social movements. Such an empowerment of rightsholder movements could strengthen the political alignment of altruistic activists with the rightsholders they claim to defend. This would also allow for a more open discussion about the political positioning of the WSF, and perhaps generate a more coherent global movement of rightsholder groups and

other social movements that strive for one alternative political vision. A coherent political vision should not only oppose neoliberal capitalism, but present and widely disseminate a coherent alternative environmentally conscious and socialist vision to counter the populist right-wing discourse that has sprouted from the rejection of corporate-led globalization.

Notes

1. http://ciranda.net/World-Social-Forum-Charter-of?lang=pt_br.
2. http://ciranda.net/World-Social-Forum-Charter-of?lang=pt_br.
3. http://ciranda.net/World-Social-Forum-Charter-of?lang=pt_br.
4. See also for example, <http://www.alterinter.org/spip.php?article4654>.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/29/why-are-there-suddenly-millions-of-socialists-in-america>
6. http://ciranda.net/World-Social-Forum-Charter-of?lang=pt_br
7. Examples of national regulation include the Great Firewall in the People's Republic of China.
8. See also http://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/ETCGroupBriefing_Case4TA%40Rio_170312_0.pdf.
9. <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/list/#version:static>
10. See also for example, <https://www.cartamaior.com.br/?/Editoria/Eleicoes/Sua-tia-nao-e-fascista-esta-sendo-manipulada-/60/41968>.
11. Please note there are important exceptions here, especially the foundations established by political parties, and some of the organizations they support, are in a position to foster a clear political profile.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Simone Lovera-Bilderbeek is a researcher. She also works as director of the Global Forest Coalition, a coalition of 97 Indigenous Peoples' Organizations and NGOs from 32 countries striving for rights-based, socially just forest policies. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily represent the views of GFC or its members.

References

- Bello, W. (2018). Counterrevolution, the countryside and the middle classes: Lessons from five countries. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45(1), 21–58.
- Bohmelt, T., & Betzold, C. (2012). The impact of environmental interest groups in international negotiations: Do ENGOs induce stronger environmental commitments? *International Environmental Agreements*, 13. doi:10.1007/s10784-012-9180-3
- Bond, P. (2008). Reformist reforms, non-reformist reforms and global justice: Activist, NGO and intellectual challenges in the World Social Forum. *Societies Without Borders*, 3(1), 4–19.
- Conway, J. (2011). Cosmopolitan or colonial? The World Social Forum as 'contact zone'. *Third World Quarterly*, 32(2), 217–223.
- Conway, J. (2013). *Edges of global justice: The World Social Forum and its 'others'*. New York: Routledge, p. 203.
- De Sousa Santos, B. (2008, June). The World Social Forum and the global left. *Politics & Society*, 36(2), 247–270.
- Hilbert, M. (2016). Big data for development: A review of promises and challenges. *Development Policy Review*, 34(1), 135–174.

- Hosseini, S. (2015). Transversality in diversity: Experiencing networks of confusion and convergence in the World Social Forum. *International and Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(1), 54–87.
- Lovera-Bilderbeek, A. (2017). *Agents, assumptions and motivations behind REDD+*. Amsterdam: UvA-DARE, University of Amsterdam. p. 242.
- Manji, F. (2007). World Social Forum: Just another NGO fair? *Pambazuka News*, 288. Retrieved from <http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/39464>
- Mooney, P. (2018). *Blocking the chain*. Val David, Canada: ETCGroup, Glocon, Inkota and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Scerri, A. (2013). The World Social Forum: Another world might be possible. *Social Movement Studies*, 12(1), 111–120.
- Simeant, J., Pommerolle, M. E., & Sommier, I. (2011). *Observing protest from a place. The World Social Forum in Dakar (2011)*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 271.