

# **A Movement of Ideas: The World Social Forum, is it a Model for Political Change?**

**By Jessica Corbeil**



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## **About the Author**

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# Preface

Too often institutional observers perceive a lack of youth engagement in social and political issues. Young people are often stereotyped as hedonists and materialists with little concern for the direction society is taking.

A recent exception to this trend was a workshop held in Regina by the Saskatchewan Council for International Cooperation whose purpose was to teach young people effective strategies to engage their peers in community and global issues.

This paper is another demonstration of the concern young people have about the very serious global issues we are facing. And it also illustrates their willingness to think about potential political strategies and solutions.

CCPA Saskatchewan is publishing *A Movement of Ideas: The World Social Forum, Is It A Model for Political Change?* in the hope it may lead to greater reflection of what the future holds for us all. It also shows that young people are willing to look at solutions that involve greater collaboration of social movements and social justice groups and that perhaps the model of regional, national and world forums are a part of that solution.

The 2009 World Social Forum takes place in Belem, Brazil from January 27 to February 1. At least 100,000 participants from around the world are expected.

To learn more about the World Social Forum visit [http://www.fsm2009amazonia.org.br/?set\\_language=en](http://www.fsm2009amazonia.org.br/?set_language=en)

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# Introduction

Mass media and popular culture constantly expose the general population to a wide array of beliefs and ideas. Predictions of doomsday, financial crises and conspiracy theories bombard us daily. The prevalence of new mass communications technology, most notably the Internet makes it nearly impossible to ignore the vast number of problems humanity is supposedly facing. Many of these predictions can simply be laughed off as mere superstition or irrational claims. But what about the problems that we face that are all too real? Authors such as Tim Flannery, George Monbiot, Jared Diamond, Jeffrey Sachs, Mike Davis and others have warned of global climate change, the failures of international economic development and the reasons states fail. Few, however, have synthesized the discussion of these issues as Thomas Homer-Dixon has in his groundbreaking work *The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization*. Homer-Dixon identifies five tectonic, earth shattering stresses that must be confronted in the next two decades to ensure the future of civilization. The stresses he identifies are:

- Over-population and the transmigration of populations
- The growing discrepancy between rich and poor in the world
- The destruction of habitat, loss of agricultural land and clean water and threats to the world's oceans
- The impacts of global warming and the looming destruction of the Arctic ice cap
- The transition from oil and natural gas to more sustainable energy forms.<sup>1</sup>

Homer Dixon argues, "It's the convergence of stresses that's especially treacherous and makes synchronous failure a possibility as never before. In coming years, our society won't face one or two challenges at once. Instead, they'll face an alarming variety of problems — all at the same time."<sup>2</sup>

Responses to the global stresses from a Northern perspective come mainly in two forms. The first response can be classified as a *non*-response. In other words, some people choose to ignore the issues, believing our elected leaders will simply solve the problems by initiating the appropriate measures. The second response comes in the form of the development of social justice groups and social movements. Social movements originate in reaction to societal issues that are viewed as being harmful to group welfare. This paper suggests that Northern social movements may not always be effective in bringing about the real changes that are needed. Though the five tectonic stresses are explicitly connected to one another, social movements in the North often respond in a fragmented and competitive way, rather than acting through a united front. The response in the South is strikingly different than that of its Northern counterparts. For example, a multi-country mass movement called the World Social Forum (WSF) was created in 2001 in direct response to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. The participants at the World Economic Forum are mainly multi-national corporation executives and academic leaders meeting to discuss solutions to economic issues and to further the aims of neo-liberalism. The differences between the approaches of Northern social movements and the World Social Forum are

striking. Whereas the WSF addresses issues with the realization for the need of a global response, Northern social movements are often disjointed and fragmented. Future implications of Homer-Dixon's five tectonic stresses are also apparent and alternative strategies such as those modeled by World Social Forum require closer examination. A re-assessment of neo-liberal economics is also necessary as neo-liberal economics exacerbates the impacts of the five tectonic stresses.

This paper is organized as follows. After a brief discussion of neo-liberalism and the five tectonic stresses, a description of the typical responses of social movements of the North as they relate to global issues will follow. It will then turn to a discussion of the World Social Forum and how the South is responding to neo-liberalism. Concluding reflections show the differentiation between responses of the North and the South.

# The Impact of Neoliberal Economics

Neo-liberalism is a relatively new "set of economic policies that have become widespread during the last twenty-five years or so."<sup>3</sup> It refers to the re-emergence of economic liberalism, which supports free markets, free trade and the rapid expansion of the global financial sector.<sup>4</sup> Some have argued that neo-liberalism emanated from Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics and was further disseminated by U.S. think tanks in the 1980s and 1990s. Neo-liberal economics have predominated since the Reagan/Thatcher governments and have spread world wide through policies and programs of international agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The main components of neo-liberalism are:

- The rule of the market means that governments should not interfere with the movement of the market. Mainstream economists argue that an unfettered market is the most likely way to produce optimal economic growth. Components of neo-liberalism include the invisible hand of the market, openness to international trade and removal of tariff barriers.
- Cutting public social and health services expenditures and reducing government involvement in the economy goes hand in hand with the first point as it requires governments to step back and simply allow the market to do as it pleases. International trade agreements are forced onto countries and curtail the powers of states to control their economies.

- Deregulation of government controls and standards are significantly reduced and private multi-national corporations are given a freer hand to maximize their profits.
- Privatization of government owned industries allows private companies or individuals to purchase or become partners in public enterprises such as hospitals, airlines and railways. Though the reason for privatization is said to be efficiency, the results often prove to be detrimental, distributing wealth to only a few.
- Eliminating the concept of the 'community' by citing the need for individual responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

To many commentators such as Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Stiglitz, neo-liberal policies and programs are counter productive for the majority as they often lead to extremely unequal distributions of income and wealth. Stiglitz recently argued "For a quarter-century, there has been a contest among developing countries, and the losers are clear: countries that pursued neo-liberal policies not only lost the growth sweepstakes; when they did grow, the benefits accrued disproportionately to those at the top."<sup>6</sup> The recent financial crisis in the United States followed by the failure of investment banks and then a total freeze on lending has spread across the globe. Stock market values have declined by 20 to 30

percent, while individual pensions and savings have suffered major losses. Unfortunately, the current reliance on neo-liberalism has failed to create a robust economy for the majority, and to date we have not identified a new way forward. British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has recently proposed the development of a new international organization as an enduring answer to the current global economic state of affairs. Brown's six point plan offers a contrast to the major points of neo-liberalism. The six points of Brown's new international organization which suggest a new way forward are:

- Establish a universal norm of regulation
- Supervise international corporations as they engage in cross border transactions
- Defend all markets against unnecessary behaviour of speculators
- Ensure there is no conflict of interest and regulate pay and bonuses of corporate executives
- Globalize the model for accounting
- Ensure transparency during major financial transactions.<sup>7</sup>

According to sources, however, major world leaders such as President George Bush are not interested in a new international organization.<sup>8</sup>

**"For a quarter-century, there has been a contest among developing countries, and the losers are clear: countries that pursued neo-liberal policies not only lost the growth sweepstakes; when they did grow, the benefits accrued disproportionately to those at the top."**



# Global Issues 2008

Sociologists, climate scientists and many academics from a variety of fields argue that there are a variety of problems that we face that are becoming increasingly complex and intertwined. What Homer-Dixon sees as different today is that the five tectonic stresses are becoming a severe threat to the global order of the world. What is particularly worrisome for Homer-Dixon are the lack of ingenuity and problem solving capability in our societies and the response of the Northern world to these stresses; more precisely there does not seem to *be* any organized and coherent response. Many Canadians seem to be blissfully ignorant of the harsh realities of our situation.

Homer-Dixon demonstrates how all of these problems are interconnected and should not simply be considered as independent problems with similarly independent solutions and further argues that we have the tendency to 'silo' our problems, which equates to focusing on them in isolation, rather than viewing them as part of a greater picture. Often, people in the North argue that to contemplate too many unsettling, worst-case scenarios at one time is simply alarmist and unnecessary. It is exactly such an attitude, however, that has the potential to aggravate the problems because when we recognize the severity of the situation, it may well be too late.<sup>9</sup>

The first stress discussed in *The Upside of Down* is demographics. Though many preach the Malthusian concept of the problem of overpopulation, Dixon argues that this is not the issue. Rather, what should concern the world's population is differential population growth. While one region or area is experiencing little or no growth or even a decline in the population, the population growth in a neighbouring region may be experiencing the exact opposite.

This has the potential to lead to an increase in the risk of conflict. The population in third world countries is currently facing three issues. Though birthrates are falling in these countries, they are still far above the current replacement level. At the same time that this is occurring, death rates are actually declining. Finally, within the next several years, a 'demographic momentum' will occur in the developing world as much as the population is comprised of young girls just now entering reproductive stages.<sup>10</sup> Startling numbers are predicted including the fact that Bangladesh's population will have increased by 70 percent by 2050, while Kenya's will have increased by about 140 percent by the same year.<sup>11</sup> The same population growth cannot be said of the developed world, with populations actually declining or seeing no growth at all, particularly in Russia and Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the world population has been estimated at 6.7 billion and will grow by 2.6 billion within the next forty-five years. The majority of this growth will occur in the developing world.<sup>13</sup> Amazingly, of the current population number only 1.2 billion live in the United Nations defined 'developed world.'<sup>14</sup>

Economic imbalance, the second global stressor, is apparent both within and across every country. The growing gap between the rich and the poor has the potential to lead to the same consequences as that of population change. Conflict can quickly become reality as the gap between rich and poor widens. Many previously colonized developing countries struggle to pay back massive debt loads owed to countries of the North and to international organizations. Though colonization has formally ended, academics such as economist Larry Elliot argue that debt loads have allowed colonization to be informally perpetuated. Countries in the North



have more resources in which to develop technological advances and, in turn, countries in the South are becoming more and more subordinate to the developed world.<sup>15</sup> The World Bank recently released a study that showed one-fifth of the population in the developing world live on less than what a dollar a day would be able to buy in the United States. Approximately half of the population of the developing world lives on less than two dollars US a day. On the other side of the coin, the world has a current population of 793 billionaires, who hold a combined wealth of 2.6 trillion dollars. This staggering number is equivalent to twenty percent of the United States annual GDP.<sup>16</sup>

Environmental degradation is occurring worldwide but has its most serious consequences on those people who are living at a level that allows them to simply exist, rather than thrive. To the poor subsistence farmer in Latin America environmental degradation is a harsh certainty. With techniques such as slash and burn agriculture, forests such as those in the Amazon Basin are destroyed. This leads to a massive number of people moving to urban areas where the obstacles to success are even greater. The largest mega-slum, according to 2005 data is located in Mexico City, with a population of 4.0 million.<sup>17</sup> Deplorable examples of environmental stress are discussed in Mike Davis' *Planet of the Slums*. Many people are forced to forego safe living conditions. "Johannesburg's shantytown periphery ... conforms unerringly to a belt of dangerous, unstable soil contaminated by generations of mining. At least half of the region's non-white population lives in informal settlements of toxic waste and chronic ground collapse."<sup>18</sup> The slums of Johannesburg seem to be the rule, rather than the exception. Davis lists similar examples of people living in environments destroyed by human activity across the globe from Tokyo to Los Angeles and all points in between. As Homer-Dixon states, environmental degradation has led to "worsening damage of our land, water, forests

and fisheries."<sup>19</sup> An example of this can be seen in the development of the Three Gorges Dam in Central China. Over 1.3 million people have been displaced in the name of China's desire to shift to a market economy.<sup>20</sup> Natural habitats have also been destroyed as the disruption of water flow has led to a lack of necessary nutrients from reaching the various fish species that live in the Yangtze River. This has led to a significant decrease in the fish populations in this area.<sup>21</sup>

Climate change, population migrations and environmental degradation are interrelated. Global warming worsens droughts and desertification and the intensity of major weather patterns, which, in turn leads to the destruction of forests by infestations of pine beetles. According to David Suzuki, climate change is considered by many prominent scientists to be the most serious threat that our world is currently facing.<sup>22</sup> To bring this issue closer to home, Canada can expect to see temperature changes of 0.2 degrees Celsius over the next decade, which may seem quite miniscule. Leading scientists, however, view this as a very serious issue because it can lead to such things as flooding, drought and dangerous heat levels during the summer. The impacts of our current lack of action to reduce green house gas emissions have been predicted but slowing the rate of the climate change while imperative appears to be increasingly difficult.

Energy scarcity and the transition from our dependence on oil and other fossil fuels is the fifth stress. We are consuming non-renewable resources at an alarmingly quick rate. According to the Lightcone Institute, an American research organization that seeks to "foster the organization of scientific research and its embedding into society," the demand the world has placed on oil and natural gas is becoming increasingly difficult to provide.<sup>23</sup> Peak oil refers to the time in which the maximum output of petroleum extraction is reached, followed by a permanent decline in

the production of oil. Once the peak has been recognized, production will go down, and costs will continue to increase.<sup>24</sup> Lightcone and other research institutes provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the energy scarcity crisis. Rather than simply running out of these resources, the concern is that there simply will not be enough to keep any economy afloat. The authors compare this idea to dehydration in the human body. Though we may not lose *all* the water in our body, a certain percentage

of loss will be enough to cause our collapse. The oil crisis of the 1970s was only a temporary one, whereas the forthcoming oil crisis has greater likelihood to become permanent. Across the world, people will be forced to change their entire way of life because of the reality of energy scarcity. The irony of this is that, the longer it takes us to gain independence from fossil fuels the more GHG emissions will be discharged into the global environment, which of course intensifies global warming.

# Global Issues and Social Movement Responses

In Holzer and Holzer's *Transparency in Global Change*, the authors aptly quote Bill McKibbin saying: "we need in these fifty years to be working simultaneously on all parts of the equation — on our ways of life, on our technologies, and on our population."<sup>25</sup> In other words, if we want to solve the problems our world is currently facing we must first acknowledge them as interrelated and cumulative.

Rather than looking at global issues in terms of their interconnections, too many of us seem to consider them from a single perspective. An example of this is our government's inability or unwillingness to develop a proper response

to global warming. Though both the Chrétien and Martin governments were supportive of the Kyoto Treaty, neither was able to reduce GHG emissions. The Harper government is absolutely opposed to Kyoto and its targets. As Canadians, our natural reaction seems to be either denial or an overabundance in social movements. The first reaction is quite worrisome because, as previously mentioned and as articulated by Thomas Homer-Dixon, it is a non-reaction; a denial. This non-response works very much in connection with the five main assumptions of neo-liberalism because it allows the general population to simply sit back and allow the economic system and government to make all the major decisions.

According to George Monbiot's blog "This is What Denial Does," global citizens should not be surprised at the current financial and environmental state of affairs. He argues, "In both cases, those who exploit the resource have demanded impossible rates of return and invoked debts that can never be repaid. In both cases we denied the likely consequences."<sup>26</sup> Monbiot goes on to argue that he had, at one point, believed that denial was unique to the problem of climate change. He has since come to understand it to be the initial response to all predictions of impending doom.

The second response to global issues is quite a different one, though one may argue, it is often nearly as ineffective. In the North and particularly in Canada, hundreds of individual social justice groups have been organized in the past three decades in the field of human rights, international development, world poverty, environmentalism, *et cetera*. Social movements come into existence when a number of groups focus on a single issue like the environment. A movement is defined as a group of people with similar ideologies and values working towards a common goal. There are many different types of social movements. Four of the most important types of social movements are as follows:

- An Identity Movement involves people with a particular similar identity, be it race, age, gender or religion. These movements come together in order to give the people of the chosen identity a voice. In "Identity Movements" Simon Langlois uses the example of Aboriginal Identity movements when discussing this type of social movement. First Nations across Canada, and across the globe, have long struggled with marginalization, cultural assimilation and poverty. Currently, many First Nations are challenging for control of several institutions in order to preserve their united characteristics.<sup>27</sup>

- An Integrative Movement looks to provide people with access to the central structures of power. Rather than all power being given to a dominant group, integrative movements hope to distribute some of the power to their own movement. The women's movement is the most obvious example of this type of social movement as it seeks gender equality.
- A Cultural movement hopes to bring about change within a culture through the organization of the powerful members of the movement. This is achieved by changing the outlook of people within the culture, which will in turn, change the way in which they behave. The civil rights movements of the 1960s are an example of a cultural movement. This movement hoped to change not only the outlook of the culture itself, but also that of the dominant culture at large so that human rights for black Americans would be recognized.
- Political movements are similar to cultural movements because their main objective is that of socio-economic or political change. Unlike cultural movements, however, these types of movements look to gain access to political institutions in order to recognize transformations. In Canada today Democracy Now and the Council of Canadians are examples of political groups seeking to attain political goals. The anti-globalization movement is also an example of a political social movement because its supporters seek to reverse the neo-liberal economic approach.<sup>28</sup>

Though the development of a social movement seems an admirable task, the problem with social movements in Canada is that their response is often fragmented, rather than united. Dominique Clement's *Canada's Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change, 1937-82* provides stunning examples of the array of social movements that have arisen in this country. One need only to glimpse through the book's index

to understand that a history of social movements in Canada can best be described as fragmented. Organizations include Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights, Canadian Métis Society, Coalition of People with Disabilities, Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Amnesty International to name just a few. Differences exist across movements, but they also exist amongst the different movements. Environmentalist Paul Hawken believes that there is likely anywhere between one and two million different world wide organizations working towards ecological sustainability. These organizations are also often quite competitive, vying for funds and memberships from the same potential donors. While some movements have succeeded in attaining some of their goals, more often they struggle to overcome powerful obstacles.<sup>29</sup>

**Paul Hawken believes that there is likely anywhere between one and two million different world wide organizations working towards ecological sustainability. These organizations are also often quite competitive, vying for funds and memberships from the same potential donors.**

One of the most common obstacles used to describe social movements in Canada is elitism. Elitism is best described by Clement as being a strategy by activists who speak on behalf of the people they are claiming to help, rather than giving these people their own voice. As Clement argues, very few organizations truly have a legitimate claim to speak for whom they are speaking. While the South seems content to lean in the direction of grassroots organization, the North is seemingly moving in quite the opposite direction, apparently much more comfortable with allowing their voice to be expressed by professionals and experts, such as academics, scientists, lobby groups and lawyers.<sup>30</sup>

This very same attitude seems to extend to the way many of us seem to feel about being politically involved. Although it is accurate to say that many citizens are politically *aware* and are likely to always exercise the democratic right to vote, beyond that, however, in *Democracy, Rights and Well-Being in Canada* author Don Carmichael sees a marked flaw in Canadian political and social involvement. He argues that the level of involvement is inconsistent with true democracy. Too many choose to be inactive and uncommitted.<sup>31</sup> For example, in the most recent federal election the lowest turnout (59 per cent) in history was recorded. Studies have shown that the vast majority of young people (aged 18-24) choose to refrain from voting because they believe that their vote will make very little difference.<sup>32</sup>

This general cynicism has allowed governments to be elected throughout the world who favour neo-liberal economic policies, which exacerbates global crises. Why are so many people so complacent? As discussed earlier, a vast number of citizens live in a state of denial, a denial that neo-liberal capitalism is accelerating the impacts of our global problems.<sup>33</sup> In the South, a much less placid approach has begun to evolve. A movement named World Social Forum (WSF) originated in 2001 as a response to the daily inequality that the majority of people living in the developing world are faced with.

# The World Social Forum: A Global Movement

The WSF is not considered an organization, but rather “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debates of ideas, formulation of proposals ...”<sup>34</sup> WSF has been developed as an open meeting place for discussions surrounding issues such as the nature of democratic ideas, and how movements of groups and individuals can create change. It firmly opposes neo-liberal thought and believes that the only way there can be a more rich relationship between humans and the world they live in is a rejection of these neo-liberal principles and an embracing turn to alternative measures.

The WSF was formed as a response to what has been seen as the failure of such organizations as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both of which implemented principles of neo-liberal economics and globalization during the 1980s and 1990s. The World Bank and IMF coerce countries into adopting neo-liberal policies and programs as a pre-requisite to receiving needed loans, but most often to the detriment of countries in the South. The WSF set out to prove that a new form of social movements is possible and can achieve its aims through alternative measures. Through the WSF Charter of Principles it is constitutionally bound to be a diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan body. Its first meeting was held January 25<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The choice to hold the first meeting of this kind in Brazil was not an unconscious one. Brazil has long been a country with an important history of grassroots organization. “The richness of Brazilian grassroots organizations represented a source of

inspiration for the development of the World Social Forum.”<sup>35</sup> Porto Alegre was a particularly significant location because of the support that existed from the government in the city, particularly the mayor who wholeheartedly supported citizen-based participatory initiatives and the presence of WSF in his city.<sup>36</sup>

An International Council (IC) was developed within the same year of the first forum. The IC was given the remarkably important mandate of both enhancing and increasing the diversity that is the WSF. The IC consists of a variety of different networks across the developing world and works on several important issues, such as economic rights, women and youth rights and environmental concerns.

The Charter of Principles was developed after the initial WSF meeting following an evaluation of the ideas and expectations that had been raised during the Forum. It contains fourteen important points and must be respected by all those who choose to participate in the forum. In order to fully understand what is important to WSF participants, an examination of each of the parts the Charter of Principles follows.

Though the first meeting was held in Brazil, organizers of the event did not want people to believe that the discussions and ideas developed here were meant to stay in Brazil. Rather, they developed the motto of “Another World is Possible” in order to denote that WSF is an ongoing process that cannot be simply reduced to the particular event of the first meeting in Brazil.

WSF recognizes the important of international communication. Though the first meeting was held in Brazil, it did not simply address Brazilian issues. All the meetings that would come to pass would instead have an international aspect to them. No one country or delegation was to be viewed as being more powerful than the others.

The alternatives that were discussed and proposed by WSF participants were done so in direct opposition to the current course of globalization, which has been charted by G-8 countries and international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The fourth point of the Charter of Principles proposed a new form of globalization, which was defined as “globalization in solidarity.”<sup>37</sup> This would mean that all human rights would be respected no matter what policy or program is being considered. In order for this to be possible WSF argues that there is a need for “democratic international systems and institutions at the service of social justice, equality and the sovereignty of peoples.”<sup>38</sup>

The fifth WSF principle is that it does not proclaim itself to represent civil society. Instead, it brings together different organizations concerned with human rights from a variety of different countries working together to bring together various parts of civil society with similar concerns.

No one person or organization can act as spokesperson for WSF. No one participant, in other words, can say that *their* views are the views that are held by *all* other participants of the WSF. One of the major differences between WSF and a variety of organizations that may initially seem comparable is that members would never be expected to take part in any votes or declarations that would force them to take any action that has been decided by the majority.

Though no individual will be expected to participate in action decided by the majority, country participants are afforded the right to debate

and discuss actions that they have decided to take. Groups within these countries are empowered to discuss ideas and issues amongst themselves, but are also encouraged to confer with other participants from various countries. It is the responsibility of the other countries to not knowingly direct fellow participants into a particular discussion. Rather, the meeting space is meant to be open and trustful; one that will allow said country to come to the conclusion that will prove most effective for the benefit of its citizens.

An important aspect of the WSF is that of decentralization. The forum is meant to be “plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party.”<sup>39</sup>

Since the WSF professes to be plural and diversified, there must be certain steps that are taken in order to ensure this arrangement comes to fruition. Military organizations and party representatives are banned from participating in the Forum because both of these participants tend to have very narrow loyalties to their organizations and act in the best interest of their organizational goals, rather than for the greater good. However, those government leaders who have openly accepted the Charter of Principles are welcome to participate.

As may already seem self-evident based on the other points of the Charter, the WSF is opposed to all forms of totalitarianism or views that allow violence of the State to be justified. Human rights are of the utmost importance, according to the tenth point of the Charter of Principles, and the WSF seeks to show their respect for humanity through such practices as open dialogue and peaceful relations amongst all, regardless of race or gender. In turn, it openly denounces all types of supremacy.

Going hand in hand with the tenth point, the eleventh statement of the Charter of Principles reads that the WSF views itself as a “movement of ideas.”<sup>40</sup> This movement is responsible for



discussing ways in which to oppose and defeat domination as well as developing alternative ideas that will solve the serious issues of exclusion and social inequality.

As well as being a “movement of ideas” the WSF is also defined as “a framework for the exchange of experience.”<sup>41</sup> This means that WSF recognizes the importance of verbal exchanges between all participants with particular importance placed on open dialogue and free speech that focus on meeting the political and economic needs of humanity both now and in the future.

Due to the belief that intercommunication is imperative, an emphasis is placed on the development of stronger international links that will ideally have the ability to decrease instances of violence and increase the ability to participate in non-violent social movements.

The fourteenth and final point in the Charter of Principles reads that participants are encouraged to place their actions, which would normally be only at the local level, into an international level. Members of WSF should seek to vigorously contribute to issues relating to the ‘global agenda’ which will help bring about a world based on camaraderie.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the most successful WSF mobilization came about in 2006, which saw events across the globe, rather than in one central location. This was known as Days of Action. The 2006 WSF took place in three separate cities, namely Bamako, Mali, Caracas, Venezuela and Karachi, Pakistan. Spanning three continents, the Days of Action succeeded in achieving a decentralized event across the globe and demonstrated its rallying cry, “Another World is Possible”. In the same year, a variety of forums inspired by WSF also began to develop in places such as Europe and the United States. WSF more recently called for further Days of Action on January 26, 2008. This day was an invitation for all men and women to participate in actions, events and activities

that address such issue as violence, exploitation, exclusion, poverty and hunger.<sup>43</sup>

Literature surrounding WSF is often inspirational. Activist Jai Sen calls the WSF “one of the most significant civil and political initiatives of the past several decades, and perhaps even of these past hundred years.”<sup>44</sup> One of the greatest indicators of WSF’s success stems from their decision to move their annual meetings to countries outside of Brazil. This decision was a symbolic recognition of a widening of the Forum’s perspective.<sup>45</sup> Rather than focusing simply on the concerns of South America, the Forum sought to address what they believe to be universal concerns.

WSF does not come without its critics. One of the most common criticisms of the forum is that it is simply too chaotic and disorganized. Some people believe that the presence of too many participants means that there is no clearly defined agenda and, therefore, no real ability to implement any change.<sup>46</sup>

Another common criticism of WSF is that it seems to be working towards the very thing that it claims to be working against. Owen Worth’s *The World Social Forum: Post-Modern Prince or Court Jester?* argues that the Forum has already made itself useless because of its exclusivity, rather than being inclusive. He calls it an “elitist tool for NGOs and certain developing nations.”<sup>47</sup> Worth argues that the agenda of the WSF has been developed by only a small group of people participating in the Forum. Furthermore, those people who are able to participate in the Forum are, themselves, from fairly privileged background. According to Worth, nearly thirty percent of the participants have university education and a startling eighty percent have daily access to the Internet.<sup>48</sup> Though those numbers may seem to contradict the goals of WSF, the number of participants in the first Forum in 2001 (20,000 gathered from 117 countries) is also difficult to ignore.<sup>49</sup> The numbers continue to grow with each WSF event;



one hundred thousand are expected at the 2008 Forum. WSF seeks to limit top down leadership by the elite and is characterized by its plurality and diversity. The WSF does not issue a political platform or an agenda at the conclusion of its events.

A final common criticism of the WSF comes in the form of its repetitiveness and failure to move forward. Some argue that every year the same arguments are expounded, yet it does not seem to be progressing. Active participants respond to

this through the claim that they must be able to start somewhere in order to recognize viable alternatives to the current evolution of global issues. Proponents of WSF believe that it is heading in the correct direction. The issues addressed by WSF participants may seem redundant to the outside, but the topics discussed continue to remain relevant to said participants year after year. As well WSF may remain relevant because the issues related to the five tectonic global stresses require long-term planning, strategizing and struggle.

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# Conclusion

Despite the criticisms of the WSF, it is difficult to deny its strengths. Unlike the World Economic Forum, WSF promotes ideas of open and frank discussions which include people from a variety of different cultural and economic backgrounds. Rather than acting on behalf of a single agenda (as is often the case in organizations such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund) the WSF, instead, chooses to give the masses a voice. A comparable organization of such a grand scope is simply not present in the Northern hemisphere.

Have Canadians placed themselves in a hermetically sealed bubble which simply allows us to ignore the five tectonic global stresses and, therefore we feel WSF would not fulfill our needs? Though Canada generates wealth and prosperity for some, the lack of a forum comparable to WSF is worrisome. If global issues are so obviously tightly coupled, would we not benefit from a response that is also interconnected, rather than the disjointed response some are currently supporting? One may argue that the WSF or the development of more collaboration, concentrated strategies and actions amongst our social movements would only serve to benefit Canada and the rest of the developed world. Such an organization has potential to lead to a greater awareness of the issues and greater likelihood of concerted political action. In other words, the development of the WSF has the potential

to burst the bubble and the self-denying behaviour practiced by too many Canadians. The activities that one country chooses to participate in, will unquestionably affect the rest of the world. Rather than close-minded and narrow reforms, any country (both in the developed and the developing world) would benefit from participating in an open forum that generates global solutions.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for the success of WSF in the developing world stems from the types of governments that generally exist in these countries. Social democracy and socialist ideas, by and large, call for people to understand things from a collective, rather than an individual perspective. One of the main criticisms of neo-liberalism is that it allows and even expects people to act too much in their own self-interest, rather than considering how that action will affect the rest of the population. The critiques of WSF that it is too large, disorganized and does not produce a single political agenda for action may have some validity; however, it is still a neophyte, experimental organization. Its attempts at open communication are beyond commendable when compared to our divisive and fractious politics. Canadians, and others living across the developed world, would undeniably benefit from looking to the WSF as an impressive way of giving those who have long been silent a voice.

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