

## Article by Alessio Surian

# Article by Alessio Surian „The five skills it takes to build another possible world – learning from and for the World Social Forum“

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**Abstract** – *Over 35,000 participants from 125 countries took part in the 12th edition of the World Social Forum in Montreal on August 9– 14 2016. Activities were clustered around 13 “axes”. The article focuses on the learning and organisational dimension of activism towards another possible world.*

### **A social movements forum towards another possible world**

Three features marked the worldwide impact (Hammond 2007) of the first World Social Forum in January 2001: it took place at the same time as the World Economic Forum, establishing the opportunity to convey a “social” vs. an “economic” message; it took place in Porto Alegre (Brazil), providing the “social” message with a “South” vs “North” dimension; it was run by a network of social movements and organisations, trying to emphasise the “grassroots” vs. the institutional (i.e. territorial authorities, parties) initiative.

Only the third feature – the grassroots vs. the institutional – was still present in the World Social Forum that took place in Montreal (Quebec) between August 9 and 14, 2016. The WSF acknowledged Montreal as indigenous territory of the Mohawk people. This acknowledgement made visible the colonisation of these territories and encouraged participants to take collective responsibility of the challenges faced today by indigenous peoples, including the Energy East pipeline project that would be instrumental to a rapid expansion of the oil sands complex and would further strengthen the grip of the extraction industries on western Canada. Enhancing the socio-cultural and environmental challenges raised by the indigenous peoples and focusing on issues of patriarchy and colonialism, linked the 2016 WSF to the 2009 WSF held in Belém (Amazonas, Brazil).

Over 35,000 participants from 125 countries took part in this 12th World Social Forum. About 15,000 people participated in the opening march on August 4. The forum was made possible by the work of around 1,000 volunteers.

26 self-managed committees contributed to give shape to the WSF programme: for example, the Democracy Committee, the Committee on Social Protection and Human Rights, and the Committee on Education. Activities were clustered around 13 “axes”:

1. Economic, social and solidarity alternatives facing the capitalist crisis
2. Democratisation of knowledge and right to communication
3. Culture of peace and the struggle for justice and demilitarisation
4. Decolonisation and self-determination of peoples
5. Rights of nature and environmental justice
6. Global struggles and international solidarity
7. Human and social rights, dignity and the fight against inequalities
8. Struggles against racism, xenophobia, patriarchy and fundamentalism
9. Fight against the dictatorship of finance and for resource distribution
10. Migration, refugees and citizenship without borders
11. Democracy, social and citizen movements
12. Workers against neoliberalism
13. Cultural, artistic and philosophical expressions for another possible world

On August 14, the forum organised an Agora of Initiatives that included 26 convergence assemblies, sharing more than a hundred initiatives promoting basic rights such as education as well as the defence and promotion of public services. All of the initiatives are collected online at <https://fsm2016.org/en/> in a calendar where the different actions of social change that were put forward are presented. This can be used as a guide for citizens worldwide by providing a concrete basis for ideas and events for change, beginning with the World March of Women 10th International Meeting in October in Maputo, Mozambique. One fear concerning the organisation of the WSF in a “northern” country concerned potential visa issues. In fact, according to the organisers, of about 2,000 potential participants who received official invitation letters to attend the Montreal WSF, around 70% had their applications for temporary visas to come to Canada denied. The WSF Collective declared its commitment to portray all those who were refused to show the government and civil society, what these participants could have brought to the WSF. “We also want to use the case of Montreal in order to question the accessibility of countries of the North”, explained Raphaël Canet from the WSF organising committee.

In spite of these denied visas, most well-established social movement networks such as Via Campesina and the World March of Women were able to participate and to discuss and highlight the role played by social movements, the struggles for socio-economic, environmental and political change in different regions of the world.

The WSF was also an opportunity to bring human rights (Frezzo, 2009) to media attention, as well as the murder and disappearance of many activists. Take for example Berta Cáceres, indigenous feminist who in her country, Honduras, struggled against the construction of the Agua Zarca hydro electric dam in Rio Blanco. She was well aware of the dangers involved in her struggle, with threats coming from private security guards working for the company building the dam, as well as the

police and army protecting the project: “The army has an assassination list of 18 wanted human rights fighters with my name at the top. I want to live, there are many things I still want to do in this world but I have never once considered giving-up fighting for our territory, for a life with dignity, because our fight is legitimate. I take lots of care but in the end, in this country where there is total impunity I am vulnerable... when they want to kill me, they will do it,” she stated to international press already in 2013. In March this year she was murdered. Two of her daughters, Bertita and Laura participated in numerous WSF activities and made their mother’s voice heard: “Berta did not die, she multiplied! Berta lives, the struggles continues!”

The Brazilian delegation denounced the coup d’état in Brazil and the sexist, racist, authoritarian features of the new government that has the support of mainstream media who refuse to call it a coup while attempting to criminalise social movements. The diversity of actors represented in the WSF International Council became very evident as the Council failed to reach consensus about condemning the coup.

### **The educational dimension**

In the same way, the final convergence assemblies often encountered challenges in the sharing of common languages and agendas, especially when more “institutional” actors such as labour unions took the lead – focusing on labour issues – in reporting the results of the self-organised activities and workshops.

The educational issues in relation to social movements’ agendas were clustered, in the convergence assembly, around three main themes: access to free and equitable education; activism and diversity; co-ordination and exchanges among educational social actors.

The World Education Forum (active within and alongside the WSF since 2001, see Surian 2013) addressed issues such as the right to education and popular education. Another issue was the linking to and involvement of local and international actors such as AELIÉS\_, the Latin American Council of Adult Education (CEAAL), the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), the educational radio network ALER, the Sao Paulo based Instituto Paulo Freire.

WEF activities provided an opportunity to discuss issues of popular education in adult education and offered insights into inspiring local practices such as the Indigenous Requirement at the University of Winnipeg. Kevin Settee, President of the University of Winnipeg Students’ Association introduced participants to the Mandatory Indigenous Course Requirements (ICR) at the University of Winnipeg. The proposal was developed in consultation with Indigenous elders, staff, faculty and students. The proposal was then passed “in principal” by the Senate in April 2015, introducing the mandatory requirement for all undergraduate students to participate in some form of Indigenous learning prior to their graduation. The course will be implemented for the first time in the 2016 fall term.

According to Kevin Settee, the University of Winnipeg Students’ Association has been a driving force in indigenising the university, advocating for popular education and the importance of learning about indigenous culture within the indigenous environment.

### **Relational and meaning-making skills towards another possible world**

The experience at the University of Winnipeg helped to clarify an understanding of all knowledge as “positional” and to take into consideration the capacity of individuals and groups to trigger awareness about their own position and the type of abilities that require further development in the quest for creating sustainable conditions for another possible world. An explicit metaphor comes from the Canadian Leap Mani festo:

“We could live in a country powered entirely by renewable energy, woven together by accessible public transit, in which the jobs and opportunities of this transition are designed to systematically eliminate racial and gender inequality. Caring for one another and caring for the planet could be the economy’s fastest growing sectors. Many more people could have higher wage jobs with fewer work hours, leaving us ample time to enjoy our loved ones and flourish in our communities. We know that the time for this great transition is short”.

What are the skills that would be instrumental to support such a leap forward? Among the many examples of workshop and campaign materials provided by educational movements it is worth mentioning and quoting five skills clusters suggested by the Global Campaign for Education (2015) at the workshop held in Johannesburg, South Africa, April 2015:

- sharing narratives
- sharing relational commitment
- sharing structure
- sharing strategies
- sharing actions.

***We could live in a country powered entirely by renewable energy, woven together by accessible public transit, in which the jobs and opportunities of this transition are designed to systematically eliminate racial and gender inequality.***

### Creating a Shared Story

GCE states that: “Stories draw on our emotions and show our values in action, helping us feel what matters, rather than just thinking about or telling others what matters. Because stories allow us to express our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience – they have the power to move others”.

Therefore the basis for organising can be found in shared values expressed as public narratives, ways to bring alive the motivation that constitutes the necessary pre-condition to act for change. GCE distinguishes three story dimensions:

- the “story of self”, i.e. the values of the community within which we are embedded
- the “story of us” or what calls us to promote collective leadership, and the
- “story of now”, addressing the challenges to those values that demand present action.

As GCE put it: “By learning how to tell a public narrative that bridges the self, us, and now,

organisers enhance their own efficacy and create trust and solidarity within their campaign, equipping them to engage others far more effectively”.

### **Creating Shared Relational Commitment**

A second area of skills concerns the ability to acknowledge that organising for social change is based on relationships and creating mutual commitments to work together. This perspective prioritises collaboration and learning how to recast our individual interests as common interests. It is also a matter of acknowledging the role of one-on-one meetings and small group meetings to create relationships based on trust, to lay the foundation of local campaign committed teams, enhancing commitments people make to each other, not simply to an idea or a task.

***By learning how to tell a public narrative that bridges the self, us, and now, organisers enhance their own efficacy and create trust and solidarity within their campaign, equipping them to engage others far more effectively.***

### **Creating Shared Structure**

Effective team building creates the conditions for a third area of skills in relation to shared leadership, focusing on a shared structure instrumental to effective local organising, taking into account the integration of the local action with state-wide, nation-wide and even global purpose. Shared leadership and structure create the conditions that energise activists in tackling challenging work. Key team challenges are concerned with how to strive to meet the standards of those served by the team, learning how to be more effective at meeting outcomes over time, and enhancing the learning and growth of individuals within the team.

According to GCE, team members work to put in place five conditions that lead to effectiveness – real team (bounded, stable and interdependent), engaging direction (clear, consequential and challenging), enabling structure (work that is interdependent), clear group norms, and a diverse team with the skills and talents needed to do the work.

### **Creating Shared Strategy**

While based on broad values, effective activism also means learning how to focus on a clear strategic objective, i.e. how to turn values into action and creative deliberation. The WSF suggested a 4-step process including:

- Announce your initiative: A wide range of actions is needed to change the world (awareness, education, legislation, protests, claims, awareness...). An initiative is a collective action that contributes to social change.
- Join an Assembly of Convergence for Action: 26 convergence assemblies on diverse themes are carried out by organisations participating at the WSF. By participating in these

spaces, you will consolidate and share your ideas with groups working on similar themes to yours.

- Participate in the Agora of Initiatives for Another World to share your initiatives, stimulate citizen commitment and contribute to the construction of the calendar of shared action plans. The WSF Agora will build synergies between the organisations and participants to work together for a better world.
- Contribute to the collective memory of the World Social Forum 2016 and document your activities on the ContActiva platform: [wsf-contactiva.esy.es](http://wsf-contactiva.esy.es/) /.

### Creating Shared Measurable Action

A final suggestion by GCE is to produce an understanding of activism outcomes that is clear, measurable, and specific in order for progress to be transparent and to be evaluated, accountability practised, and strategy adapted based on experience. Examples of such measures include volunteers recruited, money raised, people at a meeting, voters contacted, pledge cards signed, laws passed, etc. Two key process features are (a) regular reporting of progress to goal in order to create opportunity for feedback, learning, and adaptation; (b) training to be provided for all skills to carry out the programme.

The Indigenous Peoples participation at the 2016 WSF helped to question a purely quantitative approach to the last assessment dimension and helped to highlight the importance of a perspective acknowledging commons and circular relations.

### References

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**Global Campaign for Education (2015):** Leadership, Organising and Action. Campaign manual adapted from Marshall Ganz's work. GCE, Johannesburg. Available at: <http://www.campaignforeducation.org/en/resources#GPG>

**Kestler-D'Amours, Jillian (2016):** Canada visa problems cast cloud over World Social Forum. 9 August 2016, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/canada-visa-problems-cast-cloud-world-social-forum160809163256770.html>

**Surian A. (2013):** From a Postcolonial to a Transmodern World Social Forum discourse. In: Postcolonial Directions in Education, Vol. 2–1. Available at:

<http://www.um.edu.mt/pde/index.php/pde1/article/view/25/45>

## Further reading

A small selection of tips for further reading and useful online-links:

**Blin A. et al. (2006):** 100 propositions du Forum Social Mondial. Éditions Charles Léopold Mayer, Paris, available at: [http://docs.eclm.fr/pdf\\_livre/309CentPropositionsDuFSM.pdf](http://docs.eclm.fr/pdf_livre/309CentPropositionsDuFSM.pdf)

**De Sousa Santos B. (2004):** The World Social Forum: A User's Manual. [Available at: http://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/fsm\\_eng.pdf](http://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/fsm_eng.pdf)

**The Leap Manifesto.** Available at: <https://leapmanifesto.org/en/the-leap-manifesto/>

**World Social Forum**, Wikipedia:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Social\\_Forum#2016\\_World\\_Social\\_Forum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum#2016_World_Social_Forum)

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