

WORLD SOCIAL FORUM IN TUNISIA 2013 AND 2015 - REFLECTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The 2013 World Social Forum (WSF) was held in Tunisia (26-30 of March), for the first time in the Arab world. The choice of location was no surprise as it was Tunisia that had started the domino effect of Arab uprisings. In its meeting in Casablanca in December 2013, the International Council (IC) of the WSF has chosen Tunis again as the location for the 2015 edition.

How do young activists from the region evaluate the 2013 edition and what do they expect from the upcoming one? During the Tunisian Youth Social Forum (27-30 March 2014), the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) North-Africa office interviewed activists from the region to find out about their take on those issues.

In the second part of this text, Christian Schröder analyses the WSF 2013 as a space providing for broad political participation by social movements and activist groups and provides recommendations for improvement.

ACTIVISTS' VOICES

Looking back

Most activists RLS has spoken to agree that there were major organizational deficiencies in the 2013 edition. Nonetheless they believe that there were many benefits as well. Hager Salah Eddin from the "Shobra Hilm Bokra" neighbourhood committee in Cairo/Egypt believes that the WSF workshops were not advertised well. Therefore for example, workshops organised by Egyptian actors were only attended by other Egyptian participants, i.e. they heard of it only through word of mouth.

Marouen Ben Mahdi, a Tunisian student and a member of the executive bureau of UGET (Union General des Etudiants Tunisiens), believes that the forum has helped Tunisian social movements and civil society associations enlarge their networks and move forward, through experience sharing with likeminded organisations from different parts of the world.

"In contrast with the edition that took place in Dakar in 2011 with its very international approach, the WSF in Tunis was very Tunisian and very Arab. This could be seen in the fights within the left about the different positions vis-à-vis Syrian president Bashar el Assad", explained Yacine Bezzaz, founding member of "Mouvement du 20 Fevrier", Morocco, and the coordinator of the coalition of freedoms and human rights.

Yacine states the fact that on the political level there was no joint action following the WSF 2013, while subsequent to the 2008 Maghreb Social Forum there were agreements between different actors with regards to Western Sahara. Mohamed Tahzima from Action Jeunesse (AJ) du Forum Marocain des Alternatives (FMAS) says that the WSF 2013 lacked a clear objective as priorities were not set and thus assemblies did not reach specific recommendations.

Whereas Yacine believes that the 2013 forum had a festive carnival feeling about it, which could be harmful to the forum dynamic; Mohamed believes that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Mohamed argues that the international social movement has the right to discuss their action, exchange views on the struggle of the people from all over the world, and celebrate its successes of working on the grassroots level.

Mohamed thinks that regardless of the shortcomings on the strategy level in 2013, it was a very good opportunity for the region. Yacine agrees with him as he believes that WSF 2013 was an opener for the

region on the struggle of different social movements, especially Latin American ones as they are far more advanced when it comes to the struggle for economic rights.

Sofiene Belhaj, a blogger and activist from Tunisia believes that as a result of the last WSF that took place in Tunisia and the networking that took place during it, there are local organisations that are still collaborating with foreign ones till today. Sofiene himself is currently working for Alternative-Canada an organisation, which, following the WSF, saw the importance of starting an office that works on digital security.

Khalid Chahid (AJ, FMAS, Morocco), appreciated the big number of participants (especially from the Maghreb region) during the 2013 forum, but criticised the small attendance from activists from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin-America who were not able to travel to Tunisia for different structural reasons. He, as other interviewees, brought up the issue of the carnival feel of 2013, the attendance of a big number of organisations who had no knowledge on the values of the WSF and the Porto Alegre charter of principles (as the charitable Islamic organisations). He did however point out that the organisation of the WSF in a country and a region where Islamists are in power was very difficult. However, it should be considered as a success that the WSF 2013 was organised in Tunisia under the rule of the Troika (ruling coalition of three parties: En-Nahda with two smaller, secular ones) and what it represents.

Local and Regional Expectations

Yacine believes that for the WSF 2015 preparation work needs to start as soon as possible by identifying priorities to combat neoliberal forces, while focusing on socio-economic rights. Moreover he thinks that preparatory and thematic forums are really important for mobilisation and that actors should work on a joint action to promote the Maghreb-Mashriq dynamic.

Mohamed from his side is very happy that WSF is taking place in Tunisia once again: "At FMAS we wish to encourage the youth who are struggling in revolutionary contexts, this is illustrated by the return of WSF to Tunisia".

Sofiene stressed on the importance of the attendance of Latin-American social movements for the benefit they can provide for local struggles. Moreover, he thinks that the Tunisian civil society that currently undergoes an auto-filtering process will surely benefit from the next forum. However, he stressed the importance of looking for a more concrete approach in the workshops so as to be able to find an understanding for cooperation on alternatives.

The importance of including organisations and movements from the region in the organisation process is a point brought forward by Hagner. She believes that since the Tunisian organisations are swamped with work, youth from the region should be part of the organising team. In Egypt for example, two Youth Social Forums took place, which has given the organisers a lot of expertise.

On the WSF Process

Sofiene believes that the WSF has lost its quintessential role as the space where joint action on the international level is planned. He believes that WSF should go back to its principal mandate of being the focal point for the struggle against the unjust state policies and politics.

Mohamed on the other hand believes that the WSF is a space for movements, groups, and organisations to discuss, reflect, and search for alternatives. He believes that this is not a space for struggle but rather to reflect on the different struggles. From his point of view, without the WSF it wouldn't be possible to coordinate amongst the different actors in the region. He used the example of the Tunisian Youth Social Forum through which he was introduced to the fight in Tunisia against shale gas. Although this is not a problem that affects Morocco yet, being introduced to it and learning about the struggles against its dangerous effect prepares Moroccan activists for upcoming challenges.

Who gets to travel and attend the WSF event is a recurrent theme with all the activists we have spoken to. While some criticised the small attendance of Sub-Saharan African and Latin American activists, others like Khalid thought that even important movements from the region were not able to take part in the forum due to the lack of resources.

“PREVAILING POWER STRUCTURES”

AN EVALUATION OF THE WSF 2013 IN TUNIS¹

By Christian Schröder

WSF impact on Tunisian Civil Society

The World Social Forum (WSF) in 2013 took place in Tunis, a country that had been under a dictatorship for decades. After the revolution in 2011 democratic elections were held and the new freedom of expression was manifested by the foundation of more than 80 political parties in addition to the establishment of many associations and non-governmental organisations (NGO).

The first edition of the WSF took place in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2001. With its philosophy of ‘open space’ it primarily provides space for mutual exchange. Any form of representation or final declaration in the name of the WSF-movement is prohibited by its Charter of Principles. Ever since, the WSF has brought together a great diversity of civil society from all over the world and struggling for different ideals such as gender equality, social and environmental justice or the struggle for the freedom of expression through alternative media. A shared critique on neoliberalism provides the umbrella for all these different groups.

Before the 2013 WSF-event many local and regional social forums have been organised in Tunisia and the Maghreb-Region which has helped bringing together different groups from Tunisian civil society. But what impact did the 2013-WSF leave on Tunisia and beyond?

A WSF-event certainly can be seen as a great opportunity for local groups and individuals to learn about international debates and to make new connections with like-minded individuals, movements, and organisations. The same applies for the international participants that, following the revolution, are given the chance to learn about current circumstances and struggles Tunisian activists are involved in. The organisation “Bread for the World” has for example helped bring together fishermen from different African countries to discuss with their Tunisian counterparts. The context is that after the revolution, the fishermen’s situation had radically changed because control and regulation of fishing were suspended. Consequently, many small fishermen had to sell their boats and attempted to migrate or find other jobs because they could not compete with the bigger boats fishing in their zones. In the discussion, African fishermen recommended and discussed the possibility to establish a collective or a union for defending the interests of Tunisian fishermen. This example shows that new debates and experience sharing can be stimulated through the open space the WSF offers. Existing international networks that had emerged at other WSF editions like the World Free Media Forum (WFMF) also forged local connections as some Tunisian groups got involved and will now help to organise the forthcoming edition of the WFMF which will be held during the WSF 2015 in Tunis.

These examples demonstrate that the WSF-event has mutually reinforced civil society actors and established ongoing relationships between them. New international connections and profound debates about the situation in Tunisia following the start of the revolution have truly had positive impact on Tunisian civil society.

Still, the event only lasted a couple of (intensive) days, whereas in the organising process many more local movements and individuals could have become involved and learned about how to work together and organise such international activist events. My main argument is that the organisation of the WSF-event could have had a much more sustainable impact for civil society in Tunisia if the organising process had become more transparent and more individual and groups could have become involved and even taken ownership of the WSF-event. Analysing the organising process of the 2013 WSF-event in Tunis, I will focus on some obstacles and burdens that have to be confronted for exploiting the whole potential of the WSF.

¹ The following analysis is framed in a PhD project about the WSF. To this end, data collection was done at IC Meetings, during a two months stay in Brazil at the WSF-office in São Paulo, and an observation of the preparatory work for the WSF 2013 at the office in Tunis. Some data from interviews and field notes is used.

Setting up an organisational structure

In July 2012 at the WSF preparatory meeting in Monastir, Tunisia, members of the International Council (IC)², and the Maghreb-Mashrik-Committee³ announced that the 2013 WSF will take place in Tunisia.⁴ It was said that the *Forum Tunisien Pour Les Droits Économique et Sociaux* (FTDES, NGO) would install a WSF office and manage financial issues (fundraising, contracts, etc.) for the WSF-event in Tunis. All decisions regarding the organisation of the WSF would be taken collectively by a steering committee (Tunisian Secretariat) consisting of the following Tunisian civil society actors:

- FTDES
- UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail – Tunisian General Labour Union)
- ATFD (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates – NGO)
- UDC (Union des diplômés chômeurs – Association)
- Raid-Attac (Association)
- AFTURD (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Development, Association)
- CNLT (Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie, NGO).⁵

In the same meeting eight commissions were set up – Communication, Mobilization, Methodology, Finances, Logistics, Women, Culture, and Youth – that would be open for everyone to join in order to integrate movements into the organising process and to build a work force for the WSF-event in Tunis. People present at that meeting in 2012 in Monastir were given the possibility to enrol in one or more commissions of their preference and, thus, become involved in the relevant organisational process from the beginning. There is, however, a number of lessons that can be learned from the organising process of the 2013 WSF.

Organising the WSF – Barriers of Participation

Getting involved: some common problems

The organisational structure for the 2013 WSF-event in Tunis was a classical pattern that had been used in other events before and it is similar to the international level (WSF international council and its commissions): One steering committee consisting of several civil society actors from Tunisia and commissions that are open for people to join. Most of the commissions (and their descriptions) were taken (copy-and-paste) from past WSF-events. Three WSF commissions were set up in Tunis for the first time: Logistics, Women, and Youth. There was generally a lack of description of commissions published on the website, if a committee coordinator or others did not personally work on mobilization, it was almost impossible to find out about ways for participation. The website did not offer explanation on how people could join commissions and this hindered participation.

No progress in the commissions

When the commissions had started working after July 2012 there were more discussions about *how* to work together and about what the task and objectives of the commission are, rather than actually starting to work on concrete projects.

The first reason given for that was a missing work frame for the commissions. Issues like budget, concrete tasks, technical frames (space, logistic etc.) for planned projects remained unclear. This made it for the commissions almost impossible to develop self-organised activities and projects.

Second, people initially struggled a lot about how to work together, taking into consideration ‘horizontality’ as described in the Charter of Principals. The committee coordinator position was criticized and the steering committee was accused of capturing available scarce resources. Subsequently, many commission members left.

² The main organising body of the WSF.

³ The Maghreb-Mashrik-Committee consists of representatives of regional and national social forum organisers from that region.

⁴ The International Council took the decision in May 2011 at a meeting in Paris that the next WSF will take place in the Maghreb-Region (specifically due to the so-called “Arab Spring”). The decision to host the WSF in Tunis was taken after consultation with candidates from the North-Africa region (especially Morocco, Egypt, and Tunisia).

⁵ The UGTT had already a longer experience with the WSF, being a member of the International Council.

The third reason for not being able to advance in the commission work was that there were just a few people involved and those present were not always committed. Therefore it took time to establish a stable working group.

There was a *missing link between steering committee and the commissions*, as there was not enough information given by the steering committee to the different committees. There was also no clear structure for inter-commission work provided by the steering committee.

Exclusion inside the commissions

Even though the global justice movements are considered to be progressive and fighting for human rights values, many prevailing social patterns have been reproduced in the organising process. One dominant aspect is gender inequality. While most of the members of the steering committee were males, most of the workers and volunteers were females. This became especially obvious during a press conference a month before the WSF-event, when just older men talked about the WSF and the progress organising it.

Volunteers

Volunteers were recruited two weeks before the WSF due to the small workforce inside the commissions. These volunteers helped dealing with the heavy working load shortly before and during the WSF-event. They clearly did not know much about the WSF and its idea nor were they political activists. They just helped to organise an international meeting that could as well have been an international academic conference or any other such event.

Including people only shortly before the WSF-event as a mere work force does not help creating sustainable impact for the WSF. There was thus a failure in exploiting the potential of the WSF as a tool for having real debates about neoliberalism and its consequences on local struggles.

Political Activists or Cheap Work Force?

In other WSFs, 'human resources' (paid employees) were usually provided by the organisations in the steering committee. In the Tunisian WSF case, most civil society actors seemed to concentrate much more in taking advantage of the WSF (money, political space, visibility) compared with their willingness to contributing to collective organisation. Many arguments in the steering committee were about decision-making (power) and budgeting.

In the WSF office in Tunis there were foreign individuals working on a daily basis for the WSF-event, while only a few Tunisians were contracted by 'the WSF' (UGTT or FTDES).

The lack of resources and the disinterest of the organisations in providing employees for the WSF office gave little possibility for Tunisians to participate on a daily basis in the WSF office. Some European activists were in the position to spend much more time without getting paid, in comparison with Tunisian activists. This might have been possible to be resolved by fundraising for the process rather than just for the event itself. This would have made it possible to contract or refund the Tunisian activist that worked on a daily basis in the office.

Prevailing Power Structures

a. "Do not do anything wrong!"

The closer it came to the WSF date, the more hierarchical the organisational structure became. This can partly be explained by the fear of not fulfilling the demands of the 'international level'. Although the International Council had no formal influence in the local organising process, the 'international level' nevertheless seemed to have had some latent impact as someone experienced in the organisation of social forums that came from abroad to follow the process put it:

I think that they [the steering committee] fear the international council's judgment. They were a bit scared of not doing well (Interview, AI, Par. 91).

This fear is also shown by the fact that meetings of the steering committee were neither publicly announced, nor open for everyone to participate. This fear of doing something 'wrong' was also shared by the commissions. The concept of demands from 'the international level' went for having a 'perfectly' organised event. This contradicts with 'the' concept of the WSF as a self-managed event.

Relying on collective work and joint problem solving seemed to be more risky than contracting an enterprise to do the job or spending more on expensive equipment. On the other hand, without trust in the skills and knowledge of activists these would hardly get a chance to develop their own projects and capacity.

b. "Primitive Democracy"

Other reasons for reproducing the hierarchical structure in the organisation of the WSF were expectations from people trying to get involved with their own projects. In the steering committee people had some hard arguments about the budget. Obviously, there was no clarity about how big the budget would be and how much money each commission could spend for their activities. A member of the steering committee called that "primitive democracy": People just see their right to demand money but they don't see that they have a responsibility to fundraise themselves as well. The responsibility of managing the budget relies on those who sign the contracts. However, as the commissions were not in the position to sign any contract (in the name of the WSF-Office) they were totally dependent on the steering committee. The commissions 'Finances' as well as 'Logistics' play the most important role for the organisation of a WSF-event. These were controlled by members of the steering committee and were not open for participation.

Those who were in the position to fundraise and distribute resource lost their confidence in the use of resources by members of the commissions. But also inside the steering committee people were fighting for resources. The budget was therefore kept secret. This lack of transparency ultimately resulted in a hierarchical form of organisation in which the steering committee reserved all the decisions about the event organisation. The members of the commission lost the faith in the organisers of the WSF and blamed them for betraying the ideal of the WSF of being a horizontal and inclusive movement.

Only a few months before the event, representatives of the commissions were invited to report on their work. Until that point, relevant information (budget or venue) for the commissions to organise their activities was not provided by the steering committee. This caused a strong conflict between members of the commissions and the steering committee. Members of the commissions criticized the work of the steering committee by referring to the non-compliance with the WSF Charter. A message was sent through all mailing lists with the title 'WSF 2013: SOS from Tunisia', signed by several Tunisian movements.

The current situation is no longer acceptable: there are four people deciding in the name of others, a deplorable practice, creating a real cult of secrecy and they are adopting an arrogant, insulting and dictatorial behaviour (Mail of 19.12.2012).

The demands made in the letter are based on criticism of the hierarchical structure in the organisation of the WSF-event. From now on everything was to be made transparent. In particular, the commission 'Finances' should have had open meetings and provide budgetary transparency. Ultimately, it did not come to a restructuring of the process but to the fact that the self-proclaimed defender of the ideals of the WSF partly organised themselves in parallel structures to plan activities independently from the steering committee. In the end the frustration caused a split between Tunisian civil society actors rather than bringing them together. The gap eventually led to the futile attempt of establishing a movement against the WSF 2013 in Tunis.

Lessons to be learnt – Recommendations for Organising the WSF 2015

- The WSF website should include a clear description of how to become engaged in the WSF process and what the tasks of each commission are. This should also be explained by a facilitator who accompanies the process.
- There should be fundraising for the commissions with a transparent budget for projects and activities.
- There must be transparency regarding fundraising, the use of money and decisions that are taken (especially by the steering committee).
- 'Funding' should be created for those working in the office on a daily basis (Minimum payment to guarantee the coverage for the costs of living).
- There is a need for a team (employees) that takes responsibility for facilitating the commissions' work:
 - Providing information and helping in the fundraising for activities and projects);
 - Giving a clear framework for the commissions (what is possible and what is not);
 - Contacting international groups and helping them to get involved in the organisational process;
 - Promoting and defending the concept of the WSF as a movement (and not a logistically perfectly organised event).

Activists are the most vital resource for the success of a movement. The main impact of a WSF-event can be seen as a learning process of how to work and how to organise joint militant action. Even though the WSF-event could be organised without any connection to local movements, the potential effect of the WSF wouldn't be utilized. The 'open space' concept of the WSF must be realized during the organising process. A clear and transparent work frame with regards to budget and space must be provided to those who want to become involved. This would ensure that local movements can become involved and can also take real ownership of the WSF.

About the author:

Christian Schröder has researched the WSF since 2011 and is about to finish his doctoral thesis: 'Organized Movement or Moving Organization? The case of the WSF' (forthcoming 2014). His main fields of expertise are 'transnational civil society networks', 'development cooperation' and 'transnational social work'. Currently he is a researcher with the University of Luxembourg. Contact: chr_schroeder@arcor.de

At the WSF 2013 in Tunis, Schröder co-organized the seminar "Decolonizing the WSF" and will continue to do so at the 2015 edition. While the WSF has enabled an unprecedented diversity of movements to come together and learn from one another and to a significant extent succeed in giving voice to marginalized groups, it also suffers from its own hierarchies and exclusions, which reflect the colonial, capitalist and patriarchal power relations that structure the world as a whole. Decolonizing the WSF means both to reflect on knowledge production and formation of power relations in the WSF movement and to construct more sustainable, inclusive, and reflexive processes of knowledge production that can contribute to decolonizing the WSF.