

What is the World Social Forum? Oded Grajew



Let tolerance defeat discrimination



In order to explain the World Social Forum, it is worth relating its origin. In February 2000, I was in Paris with my wife, Mara, at the same time that the World Economic Forum was being held. I was very impressed by the agenda of debates and the repercussions in the media of the Davos meeting. Everything was centered on the economy and it appeared that the world was merely a big market. People appeared as consumers or producers. The environment was simply an area for the extraction of resources for production. Culture, education and health were considered merchandise and business segments. The global indicators were all connected to the economy: variations of GDP, of commerce, of stock exchanges, currency exchange rates, Internet deals, etc. Globalization was simply the free circulation of products, services, and funds. The protests were attributed to those who had nothing to propose and social ills were due to the limitations on the free global market that still endure. It was at that time I had the idea of the World Social Forum (WSF) that, taking place at the same time as the World Economic Forum (WEF), would provide a counterpoint, setting forth alternatives, discussing priorities and demonstrating that another world is possible.

The objective of the Forum is to show, through concrete proposals and the presentation of successful experiences, that the world should be a space, which emphasizes the social and not the economic issues and that the economy should be at the service of people and the people should not be at the service of the economy. That the concept of globalization should be broadened to include human rights (housing, health, education, nutrition, security and employment for all), and not limited to the current concept that is limited to merchandise and financial flows. That development should be sustainable so that the current models of production and consumption do not lead humanity to the environmental disaster widely proclaimed by all the international organizations. That peace should reach the furthest corners of the planet not through the force of arms, but by the elimination of poverty and social inequality. That democracy should reign in all the countries of the world and its international bodies. That culture should reject the single path, and contemplate the diversity and richness of all societies. That tolerance should do away with

discrimination and oppression, and dialog should replace violence. That the media should dedicate the same space that was given to the terrible attacks on the World Trade Center to the tragedy that kills 30 thousand children through starvation every day.

With this in mind, the 2001 WSF brought together 20 thousand participants, with 5 thousand delegates from 2 thousand organizations in 112 countries, with 430 workshops, seminars, and conferences; and in 2002 there were 50 thousand participants, with 15 thousand delegates from 5 thousand organizations in 132 countries, with 800 workshops, seminars and conferences. In the two gatherings, we had thousands of representatives of social, labor and business organizations and movements, officials of governments and international bodies and political parties, legislators, intellectuals, artists, academics, and researchers. There were 2800 journalists (half foreign) covering the event. This is very important because the objective of the WSF is to alter the international agenda. It has succeeded to such a degree that this year the members of the WEF finally changed the program and in many panels discussed subjects such as poverty, social inequality, environment and human rights.

Businessmen are also discovering that their interests do not lie in the savage competition that cuts employment and therefore eliminates consumers, that concentrates income and therefore generates social tensions, that exhausts the state and therefore threatens democracy and erodes society, and that disrespects the environment and therefore wastes natural resources.

When I explained to a journalist the purpose of the World Social Forum he summed it up saying: you want a world with social responsibility. It is quite so. In the same way that business social responsibility is a management culture that submits all the actions and relationships of a company (employees, consumers, suppliers, community, environment, government, investors, shareholders and competitors) to ethical principles, a socially responsible world restricts all the relationships and politics of the society to the promotion of peace and of human rights. The success of the World Social Forum filled everyone with hope. Countless proposals were presented for all those who had ears to listen and the heart to feel (in the same way that a lot of alternatives exist for a company that wants to be socially responsible). It always depends on the choice of priorities and of the political will to implement them. Another world is possible. The number of organizations of civil society, governments, parliaments, international institutions and companies that commit, in speeches and mainly in actions, to the construction of a peaceful world that is socially just and economically prosperous and sustainable is growing.

Oded Grajew is the Director-President of the Ethos Institute for Business and Social Responsibility and President of the Abrinq Foundation for Children's and Adolescents' Rights and a member of the Organizing Committee of the World Social Forum.

E-mail: <mailto:%20ograjew@ethos.org.br>