

The Ford Foundation and the World Social Forum

By Lisa Jordan,
Created 2004-01-15 00:00

openDemocracy: What is the relationship between the World Social Forum (WSF) and the Ford Foundation ([FE \[1\]](#))?

Lisa Jordan: The [WSF \[2\]](#) is the creation of some very thoughtful, innovative people. They hit upon a creation that looks to have been wildly successful beyond their dreams. It is not a Ford creation.

openDemocracy: Why did Ford get involved in the WSF in the first place?

Lisa Jordan: We value global civic dialogue around global problems. We don't necessarily believe solutions lie with any one sector. Government, business and civil society cannot solve problems separately. There must be dialogue between and amongst these three groupings.

The WSF is an attempt to support a vast and complex array of public space for an integrating world. You can see how the WSF has been very important in putting issues on the map – of equity, distribution of resources, sustainability. These issues, and related questions like trust, have influenced the agenda of other social actors including the World Economic Forum at [Davos \[3\]](#).

It's worth saying that the euphoria attending the evolution of the WSF at Porto Alegre was profound. "Hope and inspiration and valid outcomes" – one of my colleagues at Ford has this saying from the WSF pinned on her office door. These are not qualities you can measure with some kind of regression analysis! But I do think they are truly valid.

People have come away from forums with their batteries recharged – with new ideas, new networks of solidarity, new ways of solving problems in their communities.

A good example is the [Miami Workers' Center \[4\]](#). The people here were opposing moves by city officials to demolish or sell public housing. Going to the WSF gave them a new framework within which to place their campaigning: privatisation. This helped them to go on and win their case.

openDemocracy: This year the forum is moving from Brazil to India. What difference could this make?

Lisa Jordan: India is the [right place \[5\]](#) for the forum to go. It is time to reach out and move beyond the Latin American context. Arguably, the two greatest civil societies that all others can learn from are Brazil and India. They both have worldwide reputations. They are both tremendously vibrant, and rich in tradition, ethnicity, experience.

But this move carries with it big challenges. India offers a very different culture and context. The dynamics are very different from Latin America, and there are matters that are very specific to south Asia, including the India/Pakistan relationship, issues of caste, and sectarian conflict [5]. These regional manifestations of global problems are going to be felt much more strongly in the Mumbai forum.

It is still, on the eve of the forum, too early to tell what India will produce. I think that India is a much more contentious political space than Brazil. This is particularly true for Mumbai (formerly Bombay), which is a very uncomfortable place for Muslims. It's a great credit to the organisers of the forum [5] that they have really reached out to the city – and, moreover, insisted that there be a transport link so that people can attend from Pakistan via land as well as air.

We can already see some of the differences with previous forums. For example, there is more input from groups based in the communist Left in India into the Mumbai forum – something which was not necessarily an important part of the WSF in its Brazilian manifestation.

Social movements in India are tremendously energetic. Dalit organisations [6], peoples' movements, and NGOs are concerned as to whether the tenor of the forum is appropriate to their form of struggle.

They are different from organisations like the Landless Workers' Movement (MST [7]) and the Movement of Dam-Affected People (MAB [8]) in Brazil.

Another difference is that Brazil plays a particular role in the South American context which is not mirrored in India. Brazil [8] is something of a leader for progressive change in the region. And there are few if any significant regional tensions in its neighbourhood.

Many people will be going to the WSF for the first time. There is likely to be a huge amount of networking, a finding of common ground. We don't know how much "hope and inspiration and valid outcomes" people will find there, but I am optimistic [9].

openDemocracy: In previous years the Ford Foundation has provided financial support to the World Social Forum. But it is not doing so this year. Why not?

Lisa Jordan: We have made two kinds of contributions to the World Social Forum since it began. First, we have supported the institution itself. Second, we have helped to globalise the forum, to extend its reach beyond Brazil and South America.

We are not supporting this year's forum because the Indian Organising Committee (IOC [10]), which represents a comprehensive attempt to bring together a large cross-section of Indian society, includes some groups who have objected to Ford's activities in India since 1953 – especially support for the Green Revolution [11] in the 1960s and 1970s. They feel that contributions made by the Ford Foundation helped to prevent India from undergoing communist revolution.

In the beginning the idea for the WSF in India had been for a very broad funding base with Ford, Britain's department for international development (DfID [12]), the MacArthur Foundation [13], the European Union and others. But in the end, the IOC chose not to seek funding from any of these.

Some groups, including those taking part in Mumbai Resistance [14], a counter forum organised by those who think the World Social Forum is not radical enough, say previous World Social Forums have been anti-revolutionary. In fairness, the WSF has never said it is a revolutionary

grouping. Its stated principles are those of non-violence. Non-violence is fundamental to how it defines itself. There has always been a very strong peace agenda at the forum; last year's forum issued a very beautiful and profound statement in favour of peace.

They wanted to keep the tent as big as possible. It was their decision not to ask for support this year. As a result they have been able to diversify their sources of funding in a profound way, which is nice to see.

openDemocracy: Will Ford be present at the WSF?

Lisa Jordan: I'll be in Mumbai as an observer. We are eager to see how the Forum fares in an Asian context [15]. Also, a number of Ford Foundation grantees have paid their own way to attend, and we want to catch up with them and see how they are doing.

openDemocracy: Will Ford support future forums?

Lisa Jordan: That will depend on two things: first, whether the organising committee asks us to; second, our evaluation of the forum as an innovation in global governance [15].

Our evaluation will draw on analysis by others, including participants themselves, and third party perspectives from academics, sociologists, political scientists. We will examine how much they think it affects public agendas, especially for a global public [16].

There are different ways of measuring effectiveness. Whether or not the forum is the best way to get public voices engaged in global debates in a way that is not to do with violence and is much more than protest. We don't *know* how profound its effect is. We think that it is significant. Indications suggest that it is. But we still have lots to learn.

*This interview was conducted by Caspar Henderson, globalisation editor of **openDemocracy.net**, on 6 January 2004*

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-world/article_1678.jsp

Links:

- [1] <http://www.fordfound.org/about/mission.cfm> target=_blank
- [2] <http://www.wsfindia.org/whoweare.php> target=_blank
- [3] <http://www.weforum.org/> target=_blank
- [4] <http://sft.radicaldesigns.org/article.php?list=type&type=2> target=_blank
- [5] http://www.infochangeindia.org/infochange_wsf05.jsp target=_blank
- [6] <http://www.dalits.org/> target=_blank
- [7] <http://www.mstbrazil.org/> target=_blank
- [8] <http://www.irn.org/wcd/mab.shtml> target=_blank
- [9] http://www.fordfound.org/publications/ff_report/view_ff_report_detail.cfm?report_index=391 target=_blank
- [10] http://www.brazilnetwork.org/?mod=PageMod.showComponent&component_id=306 target=_blank
- [11] <http://www.indiaonestop.com/Greenrevolution.htm> target=_blank
- [12] <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/> target=_blank
- [13] <http://www.macfound.org/> target=_blank
- [14] <http://www.mumbaioresistance.org/> target=_blank
- [15] <http://www.fntg.org/events/index.php?op=view&eventid=199> target=_blank
- [16] <http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/CivilSociety.htm> target=_blank



Copyright © Lisa Jordan, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.