

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO RENEW THE AXES OF THE SOCIAL FORUM

Some proposals by Mikael.Book@kaapeli.fi

The WSF needs to reach out and expand. Millions of people should become involved in the process. The global *open space* which grows alongside the Neoliberal world order comes from an authentic political innovation. It prefigures a global public space beyond state propaganda and war lies. The form of the social forum can give birth to another world system, if only we succeed in keeping it alive and growing.

But the form of the forum, its open space, is not given once and for all. We have to make it easier to comprehend and more effective. That the forum is an open space must not be taken to mean that it lacks, or should be lacking, structure and organisation. In short, we need to develop our open space.

This is why it is so important to renew *the axes* of the forum. Firstly, we need to agree on what the axes are, and what we expect them to do. Secondly, we should see how the axes combine with our current notions of the “co-organised” and the “self-organised” activities of the WSF.

The axes have hitherto often been understood to be *objectives*. The 11 axes of the Dakar WSF, for instance, were formulated like universal, general goals towards which we are working. In this way, the axes become a set of common value statements, like “*For a human society founded on common principles and values of dignity, diversity, justice, equality between all human beings...*” (quoted from axis 1, Dakar WSF). Such statements signal to others what we are *for* and what we are *against*. Most of us would probably also agree that the 11 axes from Dakar really are *our* values and objectives. It is not bad or wrong to try and state our objectives openly - on the contrary! But do the axes-as-objectives help us to structure the physical space of the forum events? Can they improve the organisation of the social forum? The answer is in the negative. Nor are they particularly useful for the organisation of the forum's *memory* which is very important if we want to guarantee the continuity of the forum.

Instead of equating the axes of the WSF with its objectives, it is recommendable to see them as *actionable themes*.¹ Such thematic axes are global problems (or problem-areas) -- like *Water; Food; Housing; Education; Health, Culture; etc.* -- to which the participants in the social forum are proposing their own solutions and actions. They resemble, for instance, the list of departments of the government of a modern nation-state. But the axes of the WSF differ radically from state departments because the state is ultimately based on a military apparatus while the social forum is based on the open space.

Axes-as-actionable-themes can indeed help us to structure and organise our open space, especially if we decide to stick to a particular set of themes for a while. Obviously, the list ought to be continually discussed, and probably also revised every now and then. However, it would be a significant step forward if we adopted from now on, something like the 21 actionable themes of Nairobi as the axes of the social forum.

In general we should worry more about facilitating the continuity of the forum than about facilitating the conversion or agglutination of the participating social movements, organisations, groups and individuals. The forum has indeed been quite successful as a conversion arena already, and it will certainly continue to generate important networks and actions on the condition that people do not get fed-up with its organisational chaos. The Dakar WSF last February, in particular, was an organisational failure. But the local organisers of the Dakar WSF do not deserve the blame. It is the whole organisation of the WSF which deserves critique, and which needs to be reformed.

A first step is to get rid of the distinction between “co-organised” and “self-organised” activities. Why not have only “self-organised” activities for a while? However, in order to facilitate the navigation, and to track of the activities and secure that they are properly documented, let's adopt a permanent set of axes, that is, actionable themes: a “table of contents” of the catalog of activities and proposals of action for the next WSF events to come! Finally, let's strive towards a convergence between the world social forum and *the public libraries of the world*. The librarians, being the employees of a public service, also need to position themselves alongside and in contradiction to the Neoliberal world order. Fortunately, one can already observe a growing awareness among library professionals of their own political mission.²

Wednesday 25th May: 17-30 -19.00, after the meetings of the WSF-IC and its commissions in Paris: meeting on the renewal of the thematic axes, convened by Francine Mestrum.

1 In December 2006, the Content and Methodology Commission of the WSF-IC decided on a list of 21 “actionable themes” for the classification of the “self-organised” activities of the Nairobi WSF (2007). Librarians have argued that these themes would be useful for the documentation of the WSF; see <http://www.wsflibrary.org/>.

2 Influential library scientist R David Lankes, in a recent keynote speech on the Grand Challenges of Librarianship, stated: “*the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their community*”. He also emphasized that *librarians ought to be radicals and agents of change*. See <http://vimeo.com/23732998>.