

## **My Tunisian experience**

There were for me, two clearly separate parts of my experience in Tunis: that within Global Square and that within the rest of the WSF.

### **GLOBAL SQUARE**

#### **Positive:**

Many things account on the positive side here. There was a general can-do attitude. Nothing could stop us, and the more we worked the more positive energy flew. We took responsibilities and assumed them. We embraced criticism openly from within and outside in the cases when there was. We continued to learn and improve our methods to facilitate.

We managed to have assemblies and workshops in a very difficult environment: with no translation means and no sound at the beginning, but through collaboration we managed to have live translation, something almost none else dared to do on their own. This helped create a unique space for interchange between Arabic and non-arabic “northern white” cultures. We also delivered a huge amount of activity around our square despite of limited means. Also thanks to the willingness of some of the organizers of the WSF (especially Amelie), we managed to have a sound system.

Contact with Tunisians was constant, fruitful and looks as future collaborations are already happening. Personally, I think I will continue to have contact with Rami, Santa and many more afterwards. We did learn a lot about the variety of views on the situation in Tunisia and on the revolution issues. We connected with locals, not only activists, especially through our activities on the Saturday on the Avenue Habib Bourgiba.

I was happy to promote a debate on how to avoid manipulation in horizontal movements and it took very long and hard way to get started due to the language and cultural differences (many weren't familiar with the concept of manipulation) but it was productive and a first of, I hope so, many such debates. Also, in an assembly on Avenue Habib Bourgiba, the content was on the parallel privatization of educational systems in Tunisia and Spain and its relation with corruption, defects in democracy and the debts towards countries like Qatar and Germany, and the whole thing became clearer to many participants, including myself.

We strengthened our own network, especially the Tunisian branch of it and extended it to some contacts on places like Austria, Georgia, South Africa or Australia.

I enriched my understanding of differences between facilitation between the teams from continental Europe, Tunisia, the UK, US and Canada. I learned from my colleagues in many aspects such as communication tools, unions or dynamics of revolutions.

I broke some of my prejudices on the status of women in Arabic countries, I perceived a much more modern society than I expected and I liked to meet the spirit of Tunisians, full of wish to go further than what happened, full of energy despite frustration.

I found more synergies for future work with certain people and a sort of meaning on the process we have done. I see the whole thing makes a lot of sense.

The feedback received is by far most of the times very positive. People liked the openness and real horizontality of our practice. We were waited for at the activities organized by others where I showed up, and many valued our opinion on issues about the organization of the WSF and other topics.

We had a great influence on a few participants, particularly young Tunisians like Saif, Mouna or Nawres. I think we actually gave them a lot of tools to empower themselves. Also, the ambient we created on the Saturday in downtown was something that has only happened in Barcelona in very special moments, like the beginning of the 15m or the "Forum dels Pobles" (during the first anniversary of the movement) and its long-term impact is not easy to measure but I give for granted it was positive.

### **Neutral:**

It seems to me worth noting a high individualism within team-work, which makes us unable to take any complex decision together, but protects each of us from manipulation by small subgroups. This is not a defect but a choice of our group, anyway a choice that has never been actually taken or spoken about.

I think we should reflect towards the future on whether we want to continue to be a platform of individuals, which organize activities independently, or rather be a collective, however horizontal and however inclusive towards individuals, and organize activities and perhaps have an opinion on issues in common.

The criticism of the organization of the World Social Forum was very present as an issue. I think we have many differences on this amongst ourselves and with others. I think that many people mix the idea of the existence of the WSF with the manipulation and organizational errors it has made. We should be careful with falling on populism on this particular topic because I think our influence on it can be bigger than it seems and as Uncle Ben said once to Peter Parker, "with great power comes great responsibility".

### **Negative:**

On the assemblies and workshops, there was too much talking about facilitation and about language issues, not so much about actual content. Only on the last activity (the one in Avenue Habib Bourgiba), I managed to participate on a debate that wasn't around topics such as facilitation or organization of spaces for debate or of networks, while keeping a global focus.

We lacked of free time to connect between ourselves and with the rest of the Forum, city and country, because we had compromised to too many things.

We were unable to solve by ourselves most of the problems that we acknowledged months before as important: translation was a constant issue because of insufficient previous debate on it and sound was not available because we depended completely on the WSF organization to provide it.

We had way too many meetings and with little or no announcement, putting at stake the horizontality of the process. Also, after such meetings, facilitation teams took spontaneous decisions on-the-go, sometimes harming the feelings of others on the team, the whole situation ending on more and more meetings.

Finally, I am concerned that we didn't do everything we could to include the concerns of Kate or Piran on our work, and to collaborate with our Canadian colleagues.

## **THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM 2013 OUTSIDE OF GLOBAL SQUARE**

### **Negative:**

I came at a very tired-of-activism moment of my life to the WSF and the same patterns that I was tired of, seemed to repeat over and over again everywhere in the world: the absence of acceptance of the difference, the attempts to change a "let's work together" into a "why don't you all join MY club?" and the talking about problems and responsibilities in the third person while talking about merit in the first person.

There are clearly many contradictions in the WSF because it is a space of the left wing (however neutral it defines) and that implies internal contradiction, disapproval of errors and will to improve on different levels that clash with each other.

I tend to think that divergence is an objective of the left and not its problem. And so, I was really disappointed with some moments. For instance, the lamentable spectacle of the so called "Assembly of Social Movements", probably the worst spectacle of the left I've been physically present on. In this space, a preapproved text was read in front of an audience that would simply not shut up and listen. There was nothing wrong with the text but maybe with the people on stage reading it and for sure with the process through which that text was later on circulated as the conclusions of that one assembly.

Also, some unexpected downer was the fact that many activities of the Forum are organized by people from a given group towards the participants of that very same group, such as participants of the Catalan Social Forum or Ethiopian healthcare system trade unions members or so forth. Most activities don't have, in my opinion, any particular reason to be in the WSF as opposed to other spaces.

For sure, something to correct in the future was the fair concern that local authorities that had not done anything for the Tunisian revolution but to take credit for it, also took credit for the WSF. The presence of Petrobras within the Forum was also hard to understand as was the excess of events on the luxurious Majestic Hotel. And there were the problems of translation, and the organizational issues in general. And it was a terrible idea to put an open space like this within a closed and fenced entry-with-badge-only protected-by-the-army campus. And I strongly dislike the secrecy of the IC meetings and its organization as representatives of certain collaborating organizations only. Perhaps the worst about this secrecy is that they use patronizing excuses for it like "but if we were to announce these meetings we would be implying that they are important". Of course they are important and even if they weren't we have the right to build together whatever boring shit we want to build together. And it was a

mistake to organize the demonstration with the same route that Ben Ali used to take, generating a lot of dissent with local groups.

And to end with the negative part, little attention was put by the organization on the mixture of the Forum with the city it lives with. This was not as deep a problem as it was when we went to Florence for the Firenze 10+10. In Tunis, everyone knew at least that the WSF was happening and people were hopeful that the meeting would bring a bunch of new ideas and techniques to boost the revolution again. But once more the Forum was far away from downtown and the activities that had any content were all in the closed space of the campus, where Maghreb issues were on a separate space to “northern” issues.

It is bad that many of the expectancies of change are of the “let’s hope that someone comes and changes this” type, instead of the “let’s change this” type.

**Positive:**

But not everything was negative. I am actually happy with the experience. I perceive that people that were part of these problems have the will to become part of the solution and that these debates are complex and hard but they are ongoing. I saw that there was a lot of expectancy on what ideas “we the people” from 15M and Occupy movements would bring in and even the most conservative participants acknowledge the need for constant improvement of the processes. That is, for me, the main reason why I have hope in the future of the WSF: because it tolerates changes. It is difficult to create a large and horizontal space that accepts inner change over time. The 15M movement has failed to create it and it is therefore disappearing.

I think the WSF is important, necessary, and useful. It had a positive effect on the freedom of speech in Tunisia, it created useful spaces in the past and it will probably continue to create them in the future. It is not the solution to every problem in the world, but there is no such thing and I wouldn’t want it.