The Communication of the WSF

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We are the message!
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Communication has been one of the central issues at the WSF International Council meeting in Mexico City, 7-9 May 2010. A vibrant debate, started several months before, converged in a four-hour long session on the WSF communication facilitated by the members of the Communication Commission. The concerns discussed revolved around issues of internal and external communication and the politics of communication and explored some alternative methodologies to interact and generate debate and transformation while producing useful material for the communication practices of the IC member organisations.

Issues of concern were explored on how to broaden and deepen the reach of the WSF idea, both within its space and to a larger audience. It was highlighted how the communication among the different spaces that make the WSF could be further developed on the principles expressed in its Charter and with a view to generate a new culture of politics. As far as the communication with potential partners it was suggested that more coherence among the WSF communication tools available at the moment might help strengthening the overall communication strategy and the outreach and inspire new participants.

In order to explore the principles that should inspire the communication of the WSF, it was widely recognised that communication does not only refer to information, but has to do as well with the inclusiveness and openness of the its process and that politics, information, communication and an emancipatory pedagogy such the one at the heart of the concept of open space cannot be understood separately. Media can be weapons and instrument of control and domination due to their purchase on vast audiences but at the same time they can be tools of political engagement, transformation and emancipation.

In this sense, communication has to do with the way in which the WSF expresses itself in its relationship with mainstream and alternative media. Some of the tools developed by the WSF activists can contribute to express the multiplicity of the WSF without provoking fleeting amazement or generating fragmentation and eventually, information overload. During the presentation of the communication commission alternative forms of communication were used that involved songs, music and dance: Welsh and Brazilian songs, smiling faces and dancing bodies at the centre of the austere meeting room wrapped in blood-red velvet were an unseen before show of hope and lightness. Intertwined with the dances and the songs, the presentations supported by the canonic projection on the white screen of slides that highlighted history, process, values and outcomes of the work of the Communication Commission and its members, such as Ciranda, WSFTV, Terraviva, the experiment of Expandida Mexico, the Virtual Media Centre, the work of the techies involved in generating tools and opportunities of engagement, and the Flame of Africa.

Communication hubs as those presented seemed potential ways to establish virtual spaces of convergence which resemble in their virtual form the spaces facilitated by the WSF events. Establishing a connection between the two dimensions of the WSF, the real and the virtual, could

generate virtuous cycles of exchange between spheres that at the moment are not fully explored. At the same time, such hubs could contribute to document the expressions of the new culture of politics *in fieri*, its challenges and its opportunities.

The development of these virtual spaces is at the heart of the current activity of the Communication Commission of the IC, the Communication Commission of the Dakar process and the San Paolo Secretariat. Whereas the coordination of the three instances has generated a web of intense exchange it was stressed how further convergence could generate a more incisive communication strategy in view of the next global event to take place in Dakar in February 2011. In the next few months the reflection on the issues explored in the Mexico meeting will be followed up and new moments of shared discussion will take place in July in Dakar, during a technical workshop focusing on the practical issues related to the organisational process toward Dakar, and later in October again in Dakar during the next IC meeting.

Some aspects of the WSF communication will be at the heart of the conversations to come, including the following. A focused communication plan towards Dakar which could develop into a communication plan for the future of the WSF while at the same time facilitating the access to the Dakar event from larger audiences who will not have the chance to travel to the Senegalese capital. While the immediate needs to outreach to interested partners will be plaid by the current existing tools, further attention, it was felt, should be put on exploring the potential residing in taking advantage of the help of experienced press officers and of common social networking tools like Twitter and Facebook.

While these tools are explored and strategies are designed in the next weeks, other issues related to the politics of communication will be kept at the centre of the attention to avoid deceptive practices of depoliticisation which little represent the core values of the WSF. It has been mentioned that a great value is given, consciously or unconsciously, to the communication processes which made turn them into spaces of covert power. The IC members are acutely aware of the fact that communication of the WSF tend to be considered as the representation of its message and this generates, on the one hand, a misunderstanding over the nature of the WSF as an open space rather than a social movement with a unique voice and, on the other hand, it can generate, by virtue of the exposure of its communicators, a perception of influence, representativeness and, eventually, power.

Further political issues may be related to the articulation of the different spaces of the WSF communication network: whereas there is clearly no intention to generate hegemonic processes or to impose dominant positions, it is necessary to remain vigilant to underlying cultural, social and political configurations and the unexpected consequences of the process generated among different communication actors, local and global.

The methodology presented tried to balance horizontal participation, recognition and executive mode, stimulating dialogue without providing any pre-packaged content, raising possible issues without being directive while at the same time engaging the disarming feeling of not having produced anything. During the second part of the session on communication this last crucial ambiguity of the WSF communication was explored. The members of the commission facilitated small group discussions focused on the matters of concern around the constitutive activities of the IC and convened the final plenary hoping to expand the reach of the explorations of alternative practices of communication and engagements among colleagues and fellow activists. This activity, while exploring new forms of interaction, exposed a crucial ambiguity of the Communication Commission of the IC, that between facilitating communication and producing content. This tension expresses one of the constitutive ambiguities of the WSF and its potentialities are enormous in facilitating the construction of the new transformative culture of politics that the WSF wishes to explore.