



Lauren Baker  
Memo on World Social Forum experiences and reflections  
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### **The World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela: Solidarity and Resistance, but to what end?**

The World Social Forum (for the Americas) was held from January 24<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> in Caracas, Venezuela. There were an estimated 60,000 to 100,000 people in attendance of the event, which was an incredible turnout, particularly given that this was just one of the three World Social Forums that have or will occur this year. The year, for the first time, the WSF has occurred in a regionalized fashion as a “polycentric” WSF, with Fora in the Americas (Caracas, Venezuela), Africa (Bamako, Mali), and one scheduled for the last week of March in Asia (Karachi, Pakistan).

The majority of participants of the WSF in Caracas were from Latin America, and therefore, the events were focused on experiences from Latin America and all held in Spanish, with occasional translation. The highest proportion of participants was from Venezuela, and there also were large delegations from Brazil, Colombia, the United States, Ecuador and Peru, and smaller delegations from elsewhere in Central and South America, the Caribbean, Canada and Europe.

The themes of the Forum were global power and politics (e.g neoliberal capitalism, role of state and new internationalism), imperial strategies and resistance (e.g. militarization, external debt and international finance institutions), resources and rights (e.g. access to resources, urban spaces/rights, rights to health/reproduction), diversity and identity (e.g. racism, local identity, indigenous/afrodescendants), work and exploitation (e.g. migration, ‘invisible’ workers, inequality and poverty), and communication and education (e.g. information technology, using communication for resistance, and the right to education).

I attended the WSF as a representative of CIEL, with the primary objectives of spreading the word about CIEL, the importance of law and communities and connection between human rights and the environment, and to be exposed to the benefits and limitations of alternative fora like the WSF. I attended a plethora of events over the 5 days of the forum, including smaller breakout sessions, larger keynote events, and several marches. Below I have descriptions and reflections of these myriad events, and while I only offer an individual viewpoint, I feel like these perspectives provide insight on the substance and value of the Forum as a whole.

*Kickoff march.*-- The WSF in Caracas was initiated with a march on January 24. An estimated 10,000 people attended (“Protests open Venezuela meeting”; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4645660.stm>). It appeared to be a good representation of the diversity of interests of participants, and how despite a wide range of focal concerns, people came together in the call for a different and hopefully more equitable future. Signs



and informational flyers abounded with messages ranging from women's rights, anti-war, national pride, and much more. And much like the forum more generally, there was both a mood of celebration and coming together, as well as dismay and anger about concerns over injustice.

One interesting dynamic that I noticed during the march was the divide between those that were getting their specific message out, and those that were observers – a viewer/viewed dynamic. There were clearly many participants in the march that were holding signs and staying (physically) with their groups of affiliates, while others roamed among the different groups to observe the various messages, take photographs with their digital cameras, and interview those with signs (I was part of the latter group). Much, although not all, of this divide seemed to be between participants from developed and developing countries, with the former being the 'viewers' and the latter being 'viewed'. This pattern was one that I noticed, and was questioned about by a Brazilian participant who after finding out that I was from the US asked me why 'all of the Americans stayed on the side'. This dynamic, in which the real messages of the event came from people from the South, while the role of those from the North was primarily to receive and record the messages, continued to hold through during much of the rest of the forum.

*Environment and human rights.*-- The first set of events that I attended had a focus on the environment and/or human rights, for example "Defense of the forests, water and indigenous lands of the Sierra de Perijá (Venezuela) y la Guajira (Colombia)", a workshop about "current ecologic struggles in Venezuela" and "advocacy on economic, social, and cultural rights before the Interamerican System on Human Rights".

Not surprisingly, given the focus on inequality more widely in the forum, these events focused first and foremost on social justice concerns and secondarily on the environment. In the several indigenous rights events that I attended, the environment was spoken about in clear and emotional terms, such as how the earth is their mother and must be respected, and that they want to continue to use the environment as they have traditionally, to grow all of the food that they needed using their land and water. But these descriptions were used primarily as a way to contrast their previous use of and relation to the environment with the current state of the environment after development projects, particularly mining, had ravaged their lands. They described contamination on land that was harming 'their mother', families, and dignity as a means to make an appeal for changes in the political system. Indigenous leaders expressed consternation with the common practices for governments to acknowledge indigenous territory yet still claim first priority for land use if subsurface resources were identified. Ultimately, the indigenous leaders wanted more impermeable land rights so that they could resist expulsion or contamination from unwanted mines in their territories. I will describe these concerns in more detail in the following section on the alternative forum, but first will reflect a bit more on ways in which the connection between the environment and human rights were described in the WSF.

In sessions that primarily addressed human rights or justice concerns the link to the environment was almost never mentioned, as was the case in the session about the Interamerican System on Human rights. I was glad to provide a perspective and literature



on CIEL and our programs, particularly law and communities and human rights and the environment, which highlighted the connection between environment and social justice; and people seemed very interested and responsive to these ideas and happy to receive literature and contact information for CIEL.

Overall, I did not see much in the sessions that I attended or in the descriptions of other sessions offered that had a primary focus on the environment, such as conservation or sustainable use of resources by communities. The environment seemed to only be described in situations with a direct threat, rather than management or conservation as goals in themselves. The themes of environment and community would occasionally come out in private conversations – for example I spoke with a Venezuelan man who works on issues of community based natural resource management, sustainable development, and managing for biological corridors – but these types of discussions did not seem to have a place in the forum events. International environmental law was also a theme that was not mentioned much, if at all, in forum events.

*Alternative forum.*-- For the first time, an alternative forum to the WSF was held this year. The organizers purported to want a space that was open and independent, with the main difference between this forum and the WSF being the distance it had from the Venezuelan state. The alternative forum did not accept funds or donations from the state, which was different from the WSF, which received a great deal of support from the state. The alternative forum also allowed for a space to criticize what they saw as contradictions or shortcomings in the Venezuelan government. These desires for state separation were an indication and manifestation of a wider sentiment among many participants of the WSF that the Venezuelan government played too big of a role in the WSF, both in funding and in propagating pro-Chavez messages in forum spaces, through booths, shirt sales, and having representatives at WSF sessions.

The events that I attended as part of the alternative forum included a presentation about ‘radical ecology’, a workshop on mining and affected indigenous people in Venezuela, and a march in support of indigenous land rights and resistance to mining. While in some ways these themes were similar to events that occurred in the WSF, there did appear to be slight differences in the form or content between the alternative forum and WSF. First of all, the ‘radical ecology’ presentation was on the tactics of EarthFirst!. This presentation was the only one that I had seen in which someone from the United States was featured as a main speaker, and the presentation was focused on the experiences and evolution of an organization carrying out actions within the US. Audience members seemed to appreciate the perspective and new ideas of the US speaker, and may have also felt that this ‘outside’ perspective was not readily available elsewhere in the WSF.

The events on indigenous resistance to mining were also slightly different from WSF sessions. The workshop ran all day, from 9am to 5pm, and featured many speakers and discussions on the same theme, which was unlike the other events of the WSF which were 2.5 hours. They questioned the policies of the Chavez government, and pointed out the contradiction between the pro-indigenous rhetoric of the government, yet continuing prioritization of mining exploration and development at the expense of traditional land rights



and the health of community members. These same themes were addressed in a march the day after the workshop. The alternative forum march was very focused on indigenous or traditional community concerns in Venezuela. It was a call for action for the Venezuelan government to honor the land rights of indigenous groups and not lease out indigenous territory for mining, and allowed for direct action by participants –participants were asked to sign a letter to Chavez about the above concerns. Unlike the WSF march, which was huge and had disparate messages, the indigenous march was smaller but focused on a clear message; it was also different because it questioned the governmental policies despite the otherwise pro-Chavez environment of the WSF.

I found these events to be very intriguing and thought-provoking. Firstly, they called to question why there was a need for an alternative forum and made explicit problematic aspects of the role of the government in directing the forum. It also asked the question – what is actually accomplished during these meetings?, and provided a way to encourage more direct or concrete action through the use of the petition. Lastly, it was a beneficial experience to attend several of the alternative forum events because with fewer events there was a much higher degree of overlap among the participants, and more of a sense of community, which was not as existent in the huge and somewhat disorienting WSF.

*Keynote events, particularly the speech by President Chavez* -- I attended keynote events on most of the days of the forum. These were generally at night, featured more prominent speakers, were attended by hundreds of people, had a strong media presence, and had translation into several languages. Examples of these larger events were “Hegemony, Neoliberal Governance and Social movements” and “World Assembly of Social Movements”. As is evident from the titles, these large events generally focused on the overarching themes such as neoliberalism and the role and direction of social movements. They spoke a great deal about the injustices related to free trade agreements, concerns of militarization, and themes such as the rights of women.

One of the major events, and certainly the most well attended event of the forum with an estimated 18,000 participants, was the speech by Venezuela’s president Hugo Chavez. He gave an incendiary and compelling hour plus long speech. Several notable guests such as Cindy Sheehan and Blanca Chancoso of CONAIE (an important indigenous organization in Ecuador) were also in attendance and present on stage. Chavez spoke of the importance of the forum and how he encouraged other major leaders in Latin America, such as Brazilian president Luis Inacio Lula da Silva and Bolivian president Evo Morales to also attend the Forum. He spoke about the militarization of the United States, George Bush (who he called ‘Mr. Danger’) as the number 1 terrorist of the world, and of neocolonialism of developed countries. Chavez also presented his alternative vision for development, and especially trade, in Latin America – these included principles of cooperation and exchange, especially through his proposal, ALBA, which will be described more below. Interestingly, he also spoke about the environment and noted that humans are the only creatures on earth without the propensity for preservation of the species.



The speech was very well received – it legitimized and energized forum participants. People that were not very familiar with Chavez before coming to the WSF seemed to appreciate his words, and those that were familiar with him seemed proud and excited about Chavez as a leader of the country and a major player in the region. He had a unifying voice, and was able to capture the ideas stressed in the Forum, and in doing so gave a sense of hope that actual change could be achieved in the future. He voiced the same concerns of militarization and economic injustices of free trade, but also was able to suggest concrete policy alternatives that if more widely adopted would lead to changes on the national and regional level. He also described ‘the movement’ as advancing not only at the grassroots level, but also at the regional level, as could be seen with the recent election of Evo Morales in Bolivia. Chavez also acknowledged some of the criticism that the government was too involved in the WSF, but rationalized the governments’ involvement by saying that the Forum was very important to them and that they wanted to do as much as possible to make it a success. All in all, Chavez’ speech was successful in motivating participants and in giving weight to the Forum.

*Other examples of breakout events* -- Although I focused on environment and human rights breakout events for the first couple of days of the WSF, by the end of the forum I also attended breakout events with other themes. For example, I attended a *Via Campesina* and MST (Brazilian landless movement) event about farmers movements, an event about militarization in Latin America, and a session about ALBA – the Venezuelan alternative to free trade. These events were more typical of the spectrum of events offered at the forum. These events, along with the other breakout sessions and larger events mentioned before, gave me insight on trends and reflections about the forum as a whole, which are listed below.

## **WSF Observations and Conclusions**

*Global or local* -- A first observation that I had about the WSF was that people seemed to speak and focus on one of two levels – the global level or the local level. At the global level, discussion was usually about Latin America and its relation to developed countries (primarily but not exclusively the US). Also, the global or ‘macro’ issues tended to focus on economic issues, especially trade, and international trends and policies, such as concerns with ‘neocolonialism’ and militarization. These were generally spoken about in an abstract way – as if opposing neoliberalism and free trade were key words for opposition to hegemonic powers in a more general sense. The local, or ‘micro’ issues occurred at the level of the communities. People concerned with issues at this level generally focused on social and cultural aspects, particularly about maintaining traditional livelihoods, often in the face of external threats. These issues were often spoken about in a very focused, and almost exclusionary, manner since concerns and hopes for change were centered on specific communities or districts.

Incredibly, there was not a lot of discussion on issues that straddled these themes, nor exchange of ideas between people in the two ‘camps’. Rather, people seemed to choose

a camp and stick with it, while those who were not strongly situated in one of the camps were relegated to observer status. Accordingly, a disconnect seemed to be evident – one that was not only global vs. local, but global, economic and abstract versus local, social and narrowly-focused. I found the polarization to be a false one. People concerned primarily with the local level can speak very well to the impacts of global problems while those on a global scale can reflect and support those on local scales, and those concerned with economics and state policies can and should speak about social and cultural impacts and vice-versa. It was disconcerting that people did not try harder to bridge the real and conceptual divides or build partnerships across those working at different levels – local, national, regional, and global. The lack of discussion about partnerships also relates to my second wider observation - that participants focused on problems and complaints rather than solutions or alternatives.

*Few alternatives* -- The official slogan of the WSF is “another world is possible.” Despite this, I found that there was very little discussion of what this other world might look like or what could be done to get there. Rather, discussion was primarily focused on problems and complaints that might be more accurately described under the slogan “another world is necessary,” which was also occasionally quoted by participants.

By describing problems rather than alternatives I think that the tone of many of the events tended to be more negative and carried a weight or burden of distress. This was particularly the case during the open comment and question periods that occurred during many of the smaller events during which the participants would give testimonials and mini-speeches (bandstanding) denouncing real and perceived injustices.

I think that it would have been more positive if people focused their testimonials more to describe how changes have or could occur. The comment periods during breakout sessions could also have been framed around brainstorming for alternatives, with comments responding to questions such as: What is your vision for how things could be different? Do we have different visions for how to move forward?, and, Can these become a reality?

Of the alternatives that were provided, these tended to fall under the umbrella of resistance. At the local level, communities described how they would or could resist external threats, including banding together to form community networks of resistance. At the global or macro level, participants called for greater resistance by developing countries of neoliberal policies, and for solidarity of developing countries to form regional networks of resistance. For the most part, however, discussion of resistance was done in an abstract way, rather than as a concrete alternative or plan.

The one major exception to the scarcity of alternatives was ALBA, the Venezuelan Alternative to Free Trade. ALBA was mentioned in all of the keynote events, particularly the one by Chavez since it is his brainchild, and also came up frequently in conversations among participants. ALBA is a trade policy that is promoted as being built upon concepts of cooperation rather than competition. It would allow for trade that is based upon exchange of goods or services rather than money, and would allow some flexibility for countries that still have weak economies. For example, Chavez proposed that Venezuela trade oil (since they





are oil-rich) to Bolivia, in return for products that they are strong in such as soy or chickens (rather than dollars). Tenets of ALBA are also reflected in a current program between Venezuela and Cuba in which Venezuela provides oil to Cuba, and Cuba sends doctors to Venezuela to carry out free health care in poor communities. ALBA would also include social programs or elements, such as initiatives for education.

A benefit of ALBA is that this was a concrete plan and an alternative to free trade (that rejects many of the tenants of neoliberal economics) and also promoted solidarity among South American countries (and therefore addressed concerns of neocolonialism). While many people did not seem to know much concretely about ALBA, such as how long it has been around or what exactly it would include, many people seemed to be very excited about it. ALBA was often discussed in conversations, and people seemed positive about having a real alternative that is based on ideals that they supported. While it was unclear about the amount of traction ALBA was gaining in other parts of Latin America, it seemed like a good sign that people were moving toward alternatives rather than concentrating on gripes.

*What is actually achieved?* -- The question that I asked myself throughout the WSF was - What can actually be achieved after a forum like this? On the global or macro level of concerns it seemed like the issues are on such a wide scale that it would be hard to achieve change. On a local level, change needs to occur within scattered local communities so it seemed hard for outsiders, like the other forum participants, to support those specific struggles. Also, at both the global and local level discussions, people essentially expressed the same message and concerns – they were preaching to the choir rather than getting the message out to others such as ‘decision makers’ that might not agree with them. I often wondered - if they are not changing their own minds and they are not changing other peoples’ minds, then what is the point of all of this discussion?

While I had some doubts about the ability for an event such as this to affect change, I do think that the WSF led the way for notable achievements and possibly initiated societal change, and certainly has value as a benchmark.

A first achievement of the forum was that it allowed participants to build networks and exchange experiences. Since people often agreed with each other it was relatively natural for them to feel like they were part of a global coalition. Some networks, such as the Global Youth Action Network, were formed or strengthened at the forum. Other networks, such as between indigenous people being affected by development projects in different countries, or farmers in different countries, or women’s groups in different countries, seemed to be more ad hoc and informal. Whether or not there were plans to maintain the networks after the forum, the development or strengthening of multinational contacts had the potential of being useful in the future. And finally, the multinational sea of voices gave strength to their words, and harkoned back to a well-known quote by Robert F. Kennedy: “each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance”.

A second achievement of the forum is that it supported capacity building and leadership development of the participants. Many participants had the opportunity to speak at events as a panelist, and those that did not still had the opportunity to speak at events during the question and answer session. These types of public speaking events allowed people to verbalize their concerns in front of receptive audiences, who would often encourage speakers through exclamations of “¡Viva!” (Live! or Right on!). I could see how participating in the forum was a valuable personal and professional event, particularly for local leaders from developing countries. Local leaders were they able to represent their organization in a global forum, and furthermore, develop their skills by speaking forcefully to participants from a global audience. Local leaders and other participants described at many points throughout forum breakout events and conversations who they were, their affiliations, and their primary objectives. These skills at articulation and spreading the message about the cause are important in developing the capacity and leadership development of participants.

While the above achievements are mostly regarding individuals, they do lay the groundwork for building leaders in the movement and forming networks with potential partners. These are already important objectives. Concrete policy changes were more elusive. At the same time, there did not seem to be many expectations about actual changes resulting from the forum. People understood that problems being addressed in the forum were wide in scope and that change would be slow to come. Along this vein, several speakers referred to problems of the past, such as colonialism or slavery, which despite being immoral or unjust, existed for long periods of time. Like these former problems, participants generally felt that it was just a matter of time before justice prevailed and actual change was achieved. Participants have been able to see a shift in perspectives and growing sense of solidarity in the region, as expressed by the popularity of events like the WSF or election of leaders like Evo Morales, and understand that these small shifts are important precursors to more widespread or substantive societal changes.

Upon reflection, I found that the WSF achieved several important goals. It served to empower participants through capacity building, strengthened global networks, and promoted regional and global solidarity. The WSF also serves as an annual benchmark for the global activist movement. The well attended forum marches and events reinforced that there is an undercurrent of dismay with many international policies, particularly those that benefit the more developed countries at the expense of people or resources in developing countries, as well as hope for a different and more equitable future.