

# Guiding Principles for Holding WSF Events

*(draft prepared and revised by Vinod Raina; based on comments received till 26 Oct 2007)*

## Introduction

The World Social Forum is not an organisation. It is a space, a platform for those who adhere to its Charter of Principles (CoP). The International Council and its Commissions merely guide and enlarge the processes and events undertaken under the CoP; it is not a controlling or accreditation body that may sanction and franchise events globally.

The Charter of Principles emerged after the first WSF assembly in Porto Alegre in 2001. The annual event continued to be held in Porto Alegre till 2003, before it traveled to Mumbai in 2004. Till its journey to Mumbai, most of the persons involved with organizing the event and understanding the political perspectives behind it were generally the same people, chiefly the Brazilian groups. There was therefore certain coherence between the event and the CoP. But once people from other parts of the World began organizing the events – the World events in Mumbai and Nairobi, continental events, regional and national events, there has naturally been a diversity of approaches in organizing the events, reflected by the differing political and regional realities and understandings.

During these years however, WSF has also evolved into some kind of a ‘brand’. One finds across the World people holding not just state or provincial events, but even sub-provincial events, attaching the WSF label to them. Where as this might in some ways signify the popularity and deepening of the WSF process, it could also be a matter of concern, since it is not at all clear that those who hold such events do so under the guidelines of the Charter of Principles, or are in fact even aware that such a charter exists and have studied it.

Since the WSF is not an organisation or an institution that has monitoring, investigative or sanctioning powers and mechanisms, the challenge is: how to spread and deepen the WSF process in a manner that it is not distorted from its Charter of Principles, and upholds the basic principles from which it was derived? Concerns have been raised about some of the organizing decisions of even the World events, which are otherwise so visible. What might be happening in national or sub-national events is therefore a matter of concern.

To address these concerns expressed at various meetings of the IC, it was decided to prepare a set of guidelines for holding WSF events, as a complement to the Charter of Principles, which is what this document attempts.

## The Guiding Principles

**1. Criteria for Participation :** One of the basic questions that arises while preparing for a WSF event, at any level, is to decide on the criteria of participation. Is the inclusion universal or restricted? The restrictions are clearly enunciated in the Charter of Principles thus:

*“The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that **are opposed to neo-liberalism** and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.....”*

*“Neither **party representations nor military organizations** shall participate in the Forum. Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity.”*

*“...the World Social Forum seeks to strengthen and create new national and international links among organizations and movements of society, that, in both public and private life, will increase the capacity for **non-violent social resistance** to the process of de-humanization the world is undergoing and to the **violence used by the State...**”*

Adherence to these principles implies, amongst other things, that a WSF event is primarily a gathering of organisations opposed to neo-liberalism. That by implication is also an exclusionary principle; that the WSF space would not be offered to organisations and institutions that espouse neo-liberalism, imperialism, capitalism, competitive electoral party politics or violent forms of resistance.

This would imply that the WSF space is not automatically open to organisations like the World Bank, IMF, or similar continental, regional or national institutions. The implication is also that the space would not be offered to corporate houses, banks and neo-conservative think tanks that support imperialistic ideas.

In addition, organizing committees would need to make decisions keeping in mind other factors that have not been anticipated in the Charter of Principles. For example, given the impact of religious fundamentalism, the India Organising Committee decided that for the WSF2004 in Mumbai, organisations known to support religious fundamentalism would not be offered space. Similar exclusions would need to be considered while examining the track record of organisations requesting for space at an event in relation to caste, racism, patriarchy and so on; that are not necessarily subsumed under the term ‘neo-liberalism’.

For World events, however, such additional exclusions must have the endorsement of the IC.

The exclusionary principle would apply to grant of space to such institutions and organisations, but not necessarily to individuals from such institutions and organisations. Individuals belonging to political parties, and other such excluded category of institutions, who register for participation in a personal capacity and not as representatives of their institutions, would normally not be debarred from doing so, unless there is specific information regarding their personal conduct. Similarly, the organizing committee or the IC could decide to give observer status to some organisations, or invite delegations from such institutions, but such decisions must be made collectively and transparently, and put up on web sites and other public notice boards.

**2. Equality of Access:** Given the vast disparity in civil society institutions, in terms of their financial capacity, use of dominant language, and other resources, the Charter of Principles emphasizes on solidarity and local level initiatives; that should guide the organizers of events to make conscious efforts to ensure equal access to the WSF space:

*“The World Social Forum is a process that encourages its participant organizations and movements to situate their actions, from the local level to the national level and seeking active participation in international contexts, as issues of planetary citizenship, and to introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world in solidarity.”*

Such a principle has many implications. For example, if the space at a WSF event is available only on payment of money, it is likely that rich organisations shall corner most of it. If the registration fees are too high, that will bar the participation of grass roots organisations. Such organisations coming from outside may also not be able to afford even the cheap hotels in the venue city.

It therefore becomes imperative that the organizers of an event ensure that:

- i) Participation of grass roots social movements and organisations is ensured; and space is made available to them even without any payment, if required.
- ii) That rich organisations do not corner all the space. If necessary, a limit is decided upon on the amount of space any organisation can hire.
- iii) Registration fees are kept in a cascade form, even allowing free entrance to those local groups who are unable to pay.
- iv) Proper arrangements, with drinking water, latrines etc. are made for the subsidized or free stay of grass roots activists. Cheap or subsidized food and water is available for them at the venue.
- v) Language needs of such activists are given utmost attention.
- vi) Proper space is provided for their modes of expression and articulation, which may be in a variety of cultural forms, rather than through lectures and conferences.

**3. The Venue :** Though there can be a variety of constraining factors in the choice of a venue, nevertheless, the choice must reflect consciousness regarding the underlying political agenda of a WSF event. The approach can not be that of a commercial event management company. Lifestyles, levels of comfort and aesthetics have strong links with capitalist and neo-liberal ideologies. Though standards vary from continent to continent and country to country, yet, at each location, the cultural and political dimensions of the choice do exist, which need to be taken into consideration. For example, one has to take a conscious decision regarding the excessive use of air-conditioning or wasteful methods of heating, as they are intrinsically linked to market driven lifestyle choices in an increasingly energy deficient and globally warming world. Similar considerations need to be given to the transportation to and from the venue, the environmental conditions – plastic bags and bottles, overuse and misuse of paper, use of recyclable materials and so on, and levels of cleanliness and hygiene. It would be highly desirable to make the space for the duration of the event into a ‘common’, to which not just the organizing committee but all the participating organisations have a responsibility in manner of use, maintenance and upkeep.

The farming out of services at the venue, for food, water, sanitation, communications etc. must be done in a completely transparent and open manner, with controls on pricing and ensuring equal access. It must be ensured that contracts are not given to firms and institutions owned by corrupt politicians, criminal and undesirable elements.

**4. Funds:** The total resources of an event are composed as follows

- i) Raised by the organizers from foundations and other agencies
- ii) Raised through registration and other fees, for space etc.
- iii) Raised by the participating groups for their events, travel etc.

We are here concerned with the first two, but they have a relationship with the third component. The major expenditure for the organizing committee should be on preparing the space and venue, with all the facilities, including translations. However, the organizing committee can also decide

to hold a number of events. Larger the number of events the organizing committee holds, higher will be its expenditure, and it will also block more time and space that could be used by the participants. One of the important decisions that the organizing committee therefore has to make is the number of events it will hold; reducing them implies passing on the time, space and hence expenditure to the participating organisations.

Raising funds from foundations etc. is the major resource. But it is deeply political, since in each region and country, there can be differing opinions regarding the desirability of raising funds, from a particular or different funding sources. Following the Charter of Principles however, one may conclude that sources that are champions of neo-liberalism must remain excluded, namely: International Financial Institutions like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Africa Development Bank etc.; multinational commercial agencies and corporations, and sources with known links to drugs, mafia and crime. Another excluded category would be sponsorship fees from private corporations for allowing them to advertise or sell products at the venue, which is a classic form of raising funds in the neo-liberal paradigm.

The grey areas are funds from the governments and public sector enterprises. One may argue that since government funds come from taxpayers mostly, citizens have a right to access them, irrespective of the kind of government in power at a particular time in a particular country. The caution is that while accessing government funds, the WSF event should not be seen to be hijacked by the party in power, as that would be against the Charter of Principles. Similarly, public sector enterprises are symbols of resistance to private corporations, and seeking their support would be aligning with the forces of resistance. But here too the caution would be to assess the record of a particular public sector enterprise, since many of them are also multinational, and their record in their own country and in other countries – environmental, land use, pollution etc. can sometimes be a matter of concern.

Raising money from registrations, use of space and facilities can of course be a major source. But it has to be ensured that these fees do not act as tariff barriers to keep the less rich organisations and activists out, and a sensible cascade structure that may even allow free access and use to the most deprived needs to be put into place.

A possible way to ensure equality and solidarity would be that all participating organisations contribute (not only Foundations) to a common pool of solidarity funds, depending on their capabilities. The organising committee could then allocate adequate subsidies and residential, food, facilities as part of the commons to those who need it.

The consolidated budgets of the WSF event should be made public on the WSF web sites within three months of the event for transparency and memory.

**5. Formation of an Organising Committee:** Inclusiveness, broad-basing, and a process that leads to forming an organizing committee, rather than a few persons or organisations first making one organizing committee and then seeking participation from others, would be in the spirit of the Charter. This involves putting into practice a process of mobilization and consultation throughout the region/country in which the event is to be held, and forming the committee at the culmination of such a process.

Amongst the primary tasks of the Organising Committee, like organising the venue and logistics, the committee must pay adequate attention to forming proper and broad-based commissions and functional groups for carrying out various tasks, involving professionals like architects, IT personnel, artistes, film-makers etc., ensure raising volunteers nationally and globally, ensure

proper media linkages and outreach, a wide consultation for deciding on themes and axes providing horizontal linkages for movements and groups, and adequate attention to print and audio-visual documentation for purposes of memory.

**6. Overall commitments of the organizing committees:** WSF is a space where proposals and experiments for alternatives to the world, as against those being proposed or reinforced by neo-liberalism, emerge. Accordingly, the organization of a WSF event should put into practice the alternatives described in the CoP: to “*uphold respect for Human Rights, the practices of real democracy, participatory democracy, peaceful relations, in equality and solidarity, among people, ethnicities, genders and peoples*”. The CoP particularly “... *condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another*”. The commitment to equality between women and men is central to building this other world. It implies, in particular, that no form of violence against women shall be tolerated on the premises of the WSF event and support shall be given to the women who come forward to denounce such occurrences.

It also implies that the WSF space would provide dignity, respect and a feeling of equality to the dalit, persons of colour, indigenous people, the poor and similar marginalized sections of society.

**7. Local WSF events:** Many national and sub-national WSF events have taken place in recent years. Though the Charter of Principles states that “*The World Social Forum is a world process; All the meetings that are held as part of this process have an international dimension*”, it is unclear what kind of international dimension such Forums are able to bring in. But since WSF and its slogan ‘Another World is Possible’ have become kind of ‘brand’ names, perhaps local groups feel that they have more visibility and credibility by calling something ‘WSF’. Since there can be no monitoring of such events, and no ‘authority’ can give ‘permission’, it may yet be mandated that groups holding events (any kind of event except the World event) must ensure that six months prior to the actual event, they inform by email or ordinary mail the national WSF process of the country (if it exists, applicable only for sub-national events), and the World Social Forum secretariat of their intention to hold such an event. This will at least ensure peer information sharing and inputs that the Secretariat or the Liaison Group could provide to the organizing committees. Since the name WSF may mislead the funders of local events, they may be asked to check with the organizers whether they, the organizers, have fulfilled this requirement of at least informing the WSF Secretariat about their forthcoming event or not.

**8. Space for Horizontal Interconnectedness of Movements:** The impact of the World Social Forum has to become visible through concrete actions following an event. The WSF itself, not being an organisation, can not engage in such actions. It is chiefly the movements, that are engaged in such actions on a sustained basis, that can carry forward the action agendas they devise at WSF events.

Where as the WSF must provide a platform for exchange of ideas, talks, workshops, lectures by world leaders and so on, the outcome of concrete actions would however greatly depend on the degree of interconnectedness achieved by movements and mass-organisations by using the WSF space. This would also ensure a subaltern ‘resistance from below’ to neo-liberalism and imperialism. Consequently, it is imperative that the organizers and the IC while crafting a particular event pay adequate attention to facilitate the assemblies, tribunals and other forms of horizontal interconnectedness of different movements and mass-organisations, by devising appropriate themes and axes, as also in the decisions regarding the allocation of space, subsidy and so on.

All efforts must be made by the organisers to ensure that a WSF event acts as a catalyst for the forces of direct action, to further empower and interconnect their actions, and that it is not allowed to be reduced to a festival of talks.