

The Mediterranean Social Forum 2005: A First Step In The Process

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The year 2005 saw the first meeting of the Mediterranean Social Forum (FSMed), a process that forms a part of the World Social Forum and is in keeping with its Charter of Principles. Various events and concerns defined the postulations of the FSMed, but it is worth highlighting in particular the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process (or Euro Mediterranean Partnership), which generated various study groups and also a specific mention in the assembly of social movements celebrated just after the closure of FSMed. The FSMed was created in 2001, as a result of the concerns of a group of Catalan organizations, within the context of the spectrum of Regional Forums that emerged after Porto Alegre. As was also the case for the thematic forums, these regional forums were proposed by the International Council of the World Social Forum in order to propagate the principles that inspire its annual meeting in other regions of the world, so as to generate new alter globalization initiatives.

With this aim, it was decided to establish a structure in the Mediterranean region that could act as an interface to stimulate debate and hear the proposals of the organizations and individuals participating. In this sense, the FSMed has never claimed to be the only body representing the needs of civil society in the Mediterranean. Its main objective has been rather to create an open, pluralistic space, managed and organized autonomously by the organizations work-

ing against neo-liberal globalization in the region. The idea was to create a chance to reflect on the Mediterranean reality, its opportunities, conflicts and problems, with the conviction that solutions will be found by reducing the inequalities that exist between the individuals and peoples living there. The initiatives were intended to involve as much as possible the civil society that is trying to change the current dynamics, exercising influence on the policies of national governments and international organizations so as to achieve a level of economic, social and political development that is both sustainable and respectful of the environment and of human rights in other words, of a true dialogue between cultures. There was also the conviction that this will only be possible with the active participation of the sector of society which is not committed to the established world order and which in real terms has the will to work and cooperate together to subvert and transform the current world order.

The Importance of the Forum

The most important aspect singled out by many participants was the fact that it had been possible to hold the Forum at all. Despite all the difficulties its organization had involved, between 16th and 19th June, 2005 the first important step was taken to launch the FSMed process. Although various uncertainties had arisen throughout the period of preparation (which had lasted for over three years), the fact that the event was finally able to be held in Barcelona was a real success for the organizations and social movements which from the very

beginning had committed themselves to the creation of this space for holding dialogue, undertaking campaigns and seeking alternatives. In this sense, and in the international political context of the period in which we live, we should highlight the significance of the commencement of this process as a point of interface between the civil society of the Northern, Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, and with the real participation of the Arab world. Like at the beginning of any other process, there was of course a mixture of praise, criticism and reflection, but always bearing in mind the fundamental role that the Mediterranean has, and may have in the future, as a meeting-place between the North and the South, as a space where different cultures converge, as a place of continual migration and a place of interchange in the context of the economic relations that exist between the two shores. One of the conclusions to be noted is the importance of strengthening the relations between the organizations and social movements that are working to build another possible Mediterranean.

Participation in the Forum in Figures

The FSMed had over 5,000 participants, originating from more than 40 peoples or states all over the world. It should be noted that it was extremely difficult for persons from the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean to participate for reasons associated with obtaining the necessary visas (the figures show that they made up 13% of the total attendance). The technical service responsible for the event had to make an enormous effort to process visas for the persons who had requested them. Out

of a total of 728 visas requested, 472 were obtained (giving a ratio of 64.8%). On the basis of these figures and the difficulties experienced, it was and continues to be necessary to state explicitly the precarious situation of persons who wish to apply for visas to travel to Europe, and the urgent need to set up new systems and mount campaigns to allow free circulation of individuals throughout the Mediterranean and respect the human rights of the persons travelling.

One of the problems in organizing the Forum was to advertise the holding of the event. It was not easy to contact all the main organizations in the region, and if we also bear in mind that there was practically a complete absence of participants from some states (such as, for example, Lebanon and Egypt), we can state that in the future it will be essential to take action on this question, most probably by encouraging the internal structures that already exist in these states, and which are vital for the continuation of the process. In this sense, it will be important to be able to count on the presence of participants who did not attend the first meeting, and to react to the real struggles taking place in the different peoples or states.

Themes and Activities

During the preparatory period of the FSMed it was decided to build the programme around seven main themes: 1. Democracy, citizenship and the human rights of men and women; 2. Conflicts, military occupation, militarism and peace; 3. Economic, social and cultural rights and models of development: Work and conflicts; 4. Migration; 5. Cultural diversity and cross-cultural dialogue; 6. Development model and environmental

sustainability; 7. Women in the Mediterranean.

On the basis of these main themes, the organizations and social movements involved in the organization of the Forum proposed 194 activities (in the form of seminars and workshops) convened and managed autonomously by up to 347 organizations, thus following one of the norms of the type of organization that is used by the World Social Forum. Only one major conference on each of the main themes was the responsibility of the assembly, which was responsible for the political decisions connected with the workings of the process. It should be noted that the theme that registered the largest number of activities was "Economic, social and cultural rights and models of development," followed by "Democracy and human rights" and "Conflicts, militarism and peace". This list gives us an idea of what are the main concerns of the organizations and social movements which are actively working against neo-liberal globalization in the Mediterranean region. On the other hand, despite the enormous concern that the theme gives rise to, as a result of the incidents occurring every day in the region, the subject of migration was the one that attracted least activities. The theme dealing with women also requires a special mention: it was not in fact one of the themes that attracted most applications for activities but, contrary to what this objective statistic may lead us to suppose, the role of women and their contribution and importance in the Mediterranean region was one of the points on the agenda in various different talks, seminars and workshops. In the same way, a women's assembly was held which brought to the forefront at the Forum the campaigns undertaken by collectives from all areas of the Mediterranean region.

General Observations

In the current international political context, the Mediterranean is one of the "hottest" zones on the planet and in the coming years it could acquire an even more crucial importance than it already has at present. In this sense, the creation of a space by and for civil society in the Mediterranean region has led to, and can continue to lead to, the production of alternatives to the neo-liberal policies that have existed so far. If we also bear in mind that the World Social Forum is going to hold its next annual meeting in Kenya, we can continue to see the FSMed as a connecting-point between Europe and Africa which contributes to creating a new North-South relationship.

It will be necessary to reflect at length on how the process can be pursued. Cooperation and interaction between the organizations and social movements of the Northern, Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean has not been simple. The establishment of good relations between the various different groupings, the definition of common problems, the type of event to be organized and held, the finance required to do so, the participation that can be expected, etc. – all these will be essential issues for reflexion on the future of the FSMed process. There is no doubt that the process will continue, but will need to undergo a certain number of modifications. With the conviction that civil society has the capacity to mobilize support, to launch campaigns, to propose alternatives, and to initiate dialogue in order to resolve conflicts, we may hope that the space that was inaugurated in 2005 between all the peoples and states that make up the Mediterranean region will contribute to the construction of another possible Mediterranean.