Another world is needed; together it is possible: The experience of the Social Forum in Ivry sur Seine (France)

By Marie-Thérèse & Jean-Guy Dufour

Brief history of the World Social Forum (WSF)

The first World Social Forum (WSF) was organised in Porto Alegre (Brazil) at the end of 2001 to send out a cry of hope at a time when it seemed that the world had no alternative but to submit to the law of markets. Following demonstrations in Seattle, the Forum stated that ‘another world is possible,’ contesting the notion of the intellectual orthodoxy disseminated by the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Calling itself a ‘social' and not an 'economic' forum, it declared that another world could and had to be built, not for money and profit but for the needs of human beings. Social Fora rapidly multiplied at all levels – world, continental, national, regional and local with the same objective: this alternative world had to be built by the actions of citizens and civil society. New practices were established based on horizontal approaches and continually seeking unity.

Social Fora are open, horizontal spaces where people can exchange knowledge and experiences, without leaders and without adopting a single, final declaration. Almost all the activities organised are now proposed and facilitated by the participants themselves and only movements, non-profits, NGOs and representatives of civil society are invited to these events. The organisers are not leaders but ‘facilitators’ of open discussion and meeting spaces. Decisions are made about actions only by those interested in implementing them. At the end of a social forum no one has the right to speak in the name of the gathering.

Gradually the WSF spread to all levels including to a small town like Ivry (in the suburbs of Paris). At all levels encounters are organised around discussions and actions about capitalism and the alternatives, common goods, migrations, food sovereignty, women’s struggle, and now the indispensable and urgent fight against climate change.

What does the future hold for the WSF? The most recent one, held in Montreal (video) in the summer of 2016 and the first organised in a country in the northern hemisphere, caused a lot of debate. There was an agreement to multiply the organisation of fora, but it was also agreed that the organisational forms have reached their limits and are no longer adapted to what is at stake globally. There is a lively debate in the World Council, a self-designated Assembly open to about 150 representatives of large groupings of non-profits and trade unions from across the world that exchange ideas on the development of the social fora and decide where the next World Social Forum will be held. A lively debate has arisen on the way to implement a horizontal approach. Should the open space be emphasised even more? Or should the activist aspect be strengthened through political debates, decisions and joint actions? The WSF needs to find new impetus.

Origins of the Social Forum Ivry (SFI)

The Social Forum Ivry (SFI) was established in 2003 when the European Social Forum was held in Paris. A total of 50,000 participants from all over Europe were expected and everything had to be organised for them in Paris and the surrounding suburbs. Because Ivry is very close to Paris it was chosen as a centre to accommodate and feed people as well as for organising many debates. The volunteers asked all the non-profits in Ivry, of which there are many, and the trade unions to participate. The municipality, which has been Communist for a long time, provided a large meeting space in the town centre equipped with computers, a telephone and photocopier. The absolute obligation to resolve all the logistics problems enabled the non-profits and unions that were not used to working together to meet, get to know each other and to meet the challenge together. Because the municipality was also engaged, it led to fruitful exchanges for everyone. After the end of the forum many links had been forged, people had participated in the debates and were intrigued by the objectives of the forum and its way of working. The experience led to
establishing the Social Forum Ivry (SFI). It has a meeting space provided by the municipality that is used by all the non-profits in the town for their own activities, as well as for joint projects with those that want to participate. The objective is to make known as widely as possible the principles and values of those supporting an alternative world to the citizens of Ivry. This is how in February 2004, 23 non-profits and unions in Ivry (now about 40) and individual citizens decided to establish the SFI based on a strict respect of the Charter of Porto Alegre. There is no umbrella organisation just a meeting space for organisations and individuals who share the values and aspirations of this immense wave of people from all around the world and want to make it known where they live.

Participants and functioning

The meeting space, provided free of charge by the municipality, has played an important role in the development of the Social Forum Ivry. It enables all the participants to hold their own meetings, use the photocopier and telephone and also to meet each other regularly and exchange information on what they are doing, the current situation and to start thinking about joint projects. Each organisation has a key to the meeting space and there is a calendar for reserving a room. Each organisation also takes their turn for the monthly cleaning. It is in a shopping mall in the centre of town with big windows on both levels so that information about the activities can be posted and seen by all those who pass by. All of this creates a very favourable situation for the local forum.

There are about 40 more or less active member organisations; the annual subscription for an organisation is 30 euros and 10 euros for an individual. As the municipality gives an annual subsidy to each of these organisations, this means that the forum is correctly funded. Among the organisations there are local branches of national and even international organisations (e.g. ATTAC, Droit au Logement, La ligue des droits de l'Homme, le Comité de soutien au Sahara Occidental). There are also support groups for non-documented migrants, an organisation of young people from local council estates, a local radio (GLOB RADIO), ecologists, the local branch of a trade union, a theatre troupe, and many organisations of people from other countries, especially African (Mali, Niger, Madagascar, Central Africa, etc.).
Relations with other local and international social fora

Ivry is not the only town where local social fora have developed in order to work towards the objectives of the WSF within local populations. They allow local initiatives to be part of the international dynamic towards human emancipation often known as an ‘alternative world.’ Exchanges of experience and cooperation among French-speaking local social fora have thrived since 2008 due to this network. Through its links with the WSF, the Ivry SF has also developed by sending delegations to many of the fora, including to facilitate activities, which in some cases drew a large number of participants (Dakar 2007, Belem 2009), as well as by bringing back information and experiences, and through Skype exchanges with fora in other countries on specific themes.

Some significant experiences

In general, the local social fora whether organised at different geographic levels or thematically are one-off events, usually one per year or every two years. In Ivry activity is on-going which makes it unique. (For more information in French: https://fsivry.wordpress.com.)

Furthermore, since the beginning, there has been a constant concern to organise an annual event designed and implemented by as many local non-profits, unions and citizens as possible. It aims to attract as many people as possible beyond the usual participants and reach out to citizens beyond groups of activists. In order not to fall back on routine and to address people’s needs every year, we have had to continually re-invent these initiatives.

a. The first years …
We quite simply organised a Local Social Forum Ivry over one or two days using the same model as the WSF: workshops, presentations, cultural activities, etc. Thus in 2005 there were several themes and in 2006 we focused on ‘What Europe do we want?’ In 2007 there were again several themes as well as an ‘international’ football tournament. These events brought together 300–600 participants depending on the year.

b. Another World Film Festival:
Since 2008 we have organised a one-day film festival every year in cooperation with the local cinema, showing three films around a theme and including for at least one of them a debate with the film director or a specialist on the subject. These events attract an audience of several hundred. We often also show films in neighbourhood community centres. (See the programme for 2016 on the website of the SFI.)

2 For more information in French: openfsm.net/projects/presentation-rapide-du-reseau and openfsm.net/projects/annuaire-des-fsl_et_openfsm.net/projects/les-sites-fsl
c. Participation in WSF and bringing the WSF back to Ivry:
We have sent delegations of different sizes to some of the WSF and on their return organised meetings to bring the experience back to Ivry: the ‘World Social Forum comes to Ivry.’ A memorable experience was when 15 young people from an organisation based on a council estate in Ivry went to the WSF in Belem (Brazil) in 2009. During the week before the forum they worked with an amateur theatre troupe from a favela in Rio to put on a play together about their own lives. They performed it three times to audiences of several hundred people who were very enthusiastic, making it a triumph for them! After the WSF in Tunis in 2015 we organised a month of activities in Ivry.

![Image of the WSF in Belem](image.jpg)

d. The ‘Alterparade’: participating in the dynamic of Alternatiba, the village of alternatives…

Alternatiba was the Basque name given to an initiative in October 2014 undertaken in the ‘French’ Basque Country (or North Basque Country as the Basques call it). A village of concrete experiences in all sorts of fields, that show us alternatives to the current dominant system was organised over a weekend in Bayonne with debates, events, etc. This experience was very successful and many activists wanted to reproduce the same event where they live, which led to the creation of a movement called Alternatiba in several European countries. In France an important date was the organisation of this type of village in the Ile de France (region around Paris). It was preceded by a ‘tandem tour,’ a bike rally of 5,000 kms promoting a pact for transition – 15 concrete measures that could be rapidly implemented were proposed to municipal councils ([http://www.transitioncitoyenne.org/le-pacte-pour-la-transition/](http://www.transitioncitoyenne.org/le-pacte-pour-la-transition/)).

We actively participated in this dynamic, welcoming the rally to Ivry with a carnival of animals threatened by climate change …! The Mayor of Ivry formally engaged the town by signing the pact publically on 6 April 2016 ([https://fsivry.wordpress.com/?s=alternatiba&x=0&y=0](https://fsivry.wordpress.com/?s=alternatiba&x=0&y=0)).
In 2016 we suggested to all interested organisations to organise together a ‘Village of Alternatives’ during the annual town festival. The aim was to reach the very large number of people who would come to the festival and to let them see the many very rich and concrete initiatives that exist in their town and how much hope they bring, acting as pilot sites for what society could look like — one that allows each person to flourish in the way they wish, in harmony with nature and in which every person can participate in their own way. Participation with many more people than at present is the only way to open the doors to another future which is different from the catastrophic one of the global oligarchy.

**Outcomes and perspectives**

Over the last 12 years has the practice of the Social Forum in Ivry really been able to start addressing the obstacles which block access to a sustainable society? Putting the question in that way, the answer is certainly ‘yes.’

We estimate that, out of an adult population of about 50,000, several thousand citizens have benefited from the existence of the SFI. Thanks to the activities they have been able to better flourish as empowered citizens with the desire to contribute to building the more humane society that is more and more urgently needed. They have been given the opportunity to understand that such a society of ‘Bien Vivre’ (translating into French the concept of ‘Buen Vivir’ that comes from the Andes and has been integrated into the constitutions of Equator and Bolivia) will not come about without their contributions and that they will never experience well-being in their lives if they do not take an interest or if they feel disempowered.

But our activities have only reached a few of the 50,000, which remains too few! There is still a long road to travel even in an exceptional context where a major effort has been made over a long period. While we feel that our work has been worthwhile, we are well placed to measure how far we are from overthrowing the dictatorship of a small global oligarchy that is leading humanity to disaster. Furthermore, with the current speeding up of climate change, time is running out.
A mix of satisfaction and anguish! This is felt by all those people the world over who are fighting for an alternative society and seeking the best ways forward. Though the social fora have been very useful for a number of years, some organisations and individuals think that they are no longer needed or that they are the most adapted tools. At the beginning of the 2000s, they initiated an innovative way of working that is commonly used today—horizontal networking and a focus on action by organisations, local groups and individuals coming together around ad hoc or long term objectives. What can they still bring that is specific and can they help to accelerate the transition towards a society where people can flourish? In addition, even though at local level we have continually tried to reinvent, it is difficult to avoid running out of steam when there is not a qualitative leap in the size of the circle of people involved. This situation can be observed throughout the network of local social fora that is less active today.

Nevertheless most of us remain convinced that social fora cannot be replaced, even if they need to evolve in order to be more efficient. They are the only structures using emancipatory practices through which people the world over can recognise themselves as part of the same developing force. By working together ways can be found to oblige oligarchies to greater and greater compromises, while moving towards societies that correspond to the needs and possibilities of the 21st century. In Ivry we are convinced that the social fora can only succeed if they stay ever more deeply rooted in the participation of local populations.

So, let’s continue!

In the words of Edouard Glissant ‘Agis dans ton lieu, pense avec le Monde’ (‘Act in your place, think with the World’)

Authors

Marie-Thérèse Dufour: I was born in May 1941 in Tour and participated in youth movements from when I was very young: first the scouts and then the Young Women’s Christian Student Movement (JE CF), very present in schools and universities. At the age of 20 I became the General Secretary of the JE CF and moved to Paris. This was a time of great effervescence among young people and not long before the movement of May 1968 which split open strong social constraints. In 1965 I got married and went with my husband as part of the civil cooperation service to Algeria, shortly after its independence. I finished my public law studies in the University of Algiers. We returned to France as the events of May 1968 were starting. I then started to work as an Inspector in the Labour Inspectorate where I worked until my retirement. Since then I have stayed actively engaged in the altermondialist movement. I’m a member of ATTAC, participate in the Ivry sur Seine Social Forum, work with a committee supporting undocumented workers and participate in a movement supporting local agriculture (Association pour le maintien d’un agriculture de proximité).

Jean-Guy Dufour: I was born in Senegal in November 1939. I qualified as an engineer from the Ponts et Chaussées (Paris) and spent the first four years of my professional life in the recently independent Algeria. I then worked in research services in France until my
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retirement. My life has been mainly devoted to the struggle for a world where all men and women could actually live as stated in Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights. Before going to Algeria I was active in JEC (Christian Student Movement) and since then I’ve had many successful or less successful experiences mainly through the trade unions and the non-profit sector. Over the last 15 years I have been engaged in the Social Fora, ATTAC, etc. And always with the same strong feeling of revolt as I felt at the age of 6 years old when, on arriving in Paris from my village in the Pyrenees, I saw someone obliged to sleep in a corridor of the Paris metro.

This article was written in French and translated into English by Jean Gordon. The French version is available in pdf.