

RESISTANCE & RECONSTRUCTION: NOTES FROM TUNIS

What I brought back from my meeting with practitioners & visionaries

Interactions at the WSF, Tunisia with activists and thinkers from vastly diverse fields, united only by their dream for transformation and alternatives to well-being, inspire Ashish Kothari to hope for another world.



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In a horrific attack at the Bardo Museum in Tunis on 18 March 2015, 21 people (mostly tourists) were killed by three armed people. The incident put a question mark on the hosting of the World Social Forum, due to happen the following week at a venue very close to the museum. But the immediate response of the Forum organisers was that this attack was *all the more reason* for the event to go ahead; it would send a clear signal to all those who spread oppression and terror that mass mobilisation for peace and harmony will *not* be derailed by such heinous acts.

And so, an estimated 70,000 people from over 4000 movements and organisations gathered at the El Manar University in Tunis, from 24 to 28 March. This was the 14th World Social Forum (WSF), a process that started in the Brazilian town of Porto Alegre in Brazil, and has since then had editions in many parts of the world (including one in Mumbai in 2004).

Reiterating the slogan of ‘Another World is Possible’, these people represented all kinds of causes: feminism of various kinds, climate justice, peace, ecology and environment, spiritual engagement and personal transformation, recycling and upcycling, anti-capitalism and imperialism, free-the-internet, inter-faith and ethnic harmony, peasant and worker rights, food sovereignty, global citizenship, community health, alternate sexualities, unlearning and radical learning, poverty eradication and anti-consumerism, equity and equality, solidarity economies and the commons, and many more.



A rally at the World Social Forum held in Tunis. Pic: Ashish Kothari

Interestingly, the 13th WSF had also taken place in Tunis; one reason the venue was repeated is that prior to and after the WSF in 2013, Tunisia went through an amazing revolution, led largely by youth and workers, demanding greater democracy, secularism and religious tolerance. It was the first of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings.

As in all of them, though, the post-uprising scenario has not been nearly as hopeful as the movements would have wanted, with new regimes in power often betraying the cause of the revolutionaries. Holding the WSF again in Tunisia was perhaps also a signal that movements and civil society across the world were with Tunisian movements in advocating a push for greater democracy, voice and accountability.

The WSF has always been an open space for people to do all kinds of things as they feel appropriate: serious seminars, art and music performances, display and sale of alternative products, exhibitions, spontaneous gatherings to celebrate diversity and harmony and peace and love, practical demonstrations of recycling and upcycling, sign-on petitions on any of the above causes, joint declarations of whoever you can gather together, and more.

It is so eclectic and open that some people feel there is no cohesive, comprehensive message emerging, no grand political declarations that can move the world, and that this is a weakness. Others say that the open nature is conducive to the presence of a great diversity of causes, and the feeling that this is truly democratic with no central body dictating terms, and that in the long term this is what will drive change. Also at this WSF, there was greater attempt at ‘convergence’ of various movements.

Unfortunately, of the hundreds of events taking place over these four days, I could substantially participate in only two. I have only an indirect sense of what happened in the rest of the Forum, from talking to colleagues and reading a few reports. But even these two events themselves encompassed significant diversity, possibly forming a tiny microcosm of the Forum.

One of these was a small gathering on ‘Radical Well-being Alternatives to Development,’ organised by Kalpavriksh, Global Diversity Foundation, Centre for Environment and Development and SADED. Panelists and participants from South Africa, Sri Lanka, Canada, Finland, India, Morocco Tunisia and France described a range of inspiring examples of communities, civil society or others achieving positive change.



The session on ‘Radical Well-being Alternatives to Development,’ organised by Kalpavriksh, Global Diversity Foundation, Centre for Environment and Development and SADED. Pic: Ashish Kothari

For instance, in Tunisia, an oasis was taken over from its absent elite owner by local workers, who then managed it democratically for enhanced livelihoods. In Morocco a more culturally sensitive education for girls was achieved building on the traditional notion of *agdal* (collective management of the commons). In the poor settlements of Johannesburg, water and electricity were ‘commoned’, that is brought under collective governance, similar to what many Indian communities have done with seeds, water, forests and land.

Participants also mentioned a number of documentation and mapping exercises of such initiatives, such as the Environmental Justice Atlas (<https://ejatlas.org>), Alternatiba (<https://alternatiba.eu/en/>) and Transformap (<http://transformap.co/>).

These and thousands of other initiatives are also yielding diverse worldviews and approaches to well-being, some ancient (like *buen vivir* and *sumak kawsay* in Latin America, *ubuntu* in southern Africa, and *swaraj* in South Asia), some very new (like *degrowth* in Europe, and radical ecological democracy in South Asia).

In India, the [Vikalp Sangam](#) or Alternatives Confluences is a process of converging such initiatives and social movements for mutual learning and collaboration, and building a framework or paradigm of a sustainable and just society.

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The second event I attended was called ‘Towards a World Citizens’ Movement’, with over 200 civil society members and movement activists from various countries. Organised by CIVICUS, Action/2015, GCAP, and CONCORD/DEEEP, it built on two previous global conferences in Johannesburg that produced ideas for how a convergence of movements aimed at systemic change could take place.

At Tunis, it brought together diverse perspectives and experiences: alternative learning and education, labour activism, spiritual living, activist art, structural eradication of poverty, climate justice, ‘degrowth’ and radical ecological democracy, post-2015 sustainability advocates (targeting the ongoing United Nations process to adopt Sustainable Development Goals as a successor to the Millennium Development Goals).

Joining us were also a bunch of Tunisian youth, some of whom had taken part in the recent revolution there. It was a heady mix, full of exciting potential. But there were also conspicuous absentees: the global movements of small peasants and fishers (e.g. Via Campesina, otherwise prominently present at the WSF) and indigenous peoples (weakly represented in the WSF as a whole), or of workers and trade unions.

As a dialogue and exchange forum, it would perhaps be better labelled as an attempt to facilitate or support a global citizens’ movement, and not pretend to be one itself.

These were only two of several hundred events at the WSF. There was much more, and more diverse stuff happening in those four days. An attempt was made to bring some of these together in ‘convergence assemblies’, one of which saw a declaration of solidarity with the attempts of the revolutionary new government in Greece to challenge the hegemony of capitalism. There was also reportedly greater convergence of the struggles against corporate impunity and those for climate justice.

A new process was initiated to continue the dialogue, build coherence, and rescue the Internet from corporate and state control, called the [Internet Social Forum](#). Hundreds of old collaborations must have been renewed or strengthened, hundreds of new ones forged, electric currents of change must have passed through these and other nodes to thousands of people.

But does all this add up to the making of ‘another world’? No one can say for sure what will trigger global change towards sustainability and equity. But if drops make an ocean, if the ripples of a pebble thrown into a vast lake can touch, even if invisibly, the far shore, if the fluttering of a butterfly can cause a storm at the other end of the earth, then who is to say that such gatherings are not part of what makes global change possible?

For me, being able to interact with a diversity of activists, practitioners and thinkers on the issue of radical well-being alternatives, expanded my horizons and strengthened my resolve to contribute what I can towards transformation. My interactions with some of Tunisia’s youth reinforced my hope that there are revolutionary elements in the generations taking over from us.

I am sure that such learning, hope, and excitement would have been the experience of many more thousands of people coming to the WSF, and that they in turn can transmit this energy to many millions more, as part of the ripples of change.

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URL for this article

<http://indiatogether.org/ruminations-on-meeting-with-visionaries-at-world-social-forum-tunisia-op-ed>

