

# World Forums Fighting for Water and Justice

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2004

In preparation for the fourth World Social Forum, held in Mumbai, India, January 16–21, a call went out around the world for people to come to Delhi to work out a program of protection for water and water access to be presented to the larger gathering.

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has met to challenge the rules of investment and governance dictated by the corporate World Economic Forum. It proposes democratic, people-centered alternatives to imperialist globalization. Except for this year, it has met in Porto Allegro, Brazil.

I attended as a representative of the Michigan based Sweetwater Alliance, which fights globalization and privatization, and met with water activists from over 63 countries at the first Peoples' World Water Forum. Most of the 200 people participating in the Forum came from the global south, where much of the corporate theft of the world's water has been taking place at an accelerating pace.

At the conclusion of the three day strategy session, the participants launched the Peoples' World Water Movement (PWWM) with two international targets, Coca-Cola and the Suez corporation, as the poster children of corporate water crimes.

We agreed upon six guiding principles as the "tributaries" of the water movement. They are, that water is life and is sacred; that all beings have an inherent right to water; that water privatization is a route to ecological and social disaster; that theft of groundwater by corporations must be stopped; that we oppose water diversion, dams and the relocation of communities; and that we uphold the necessity of a conservation ethic and seek to develop locally appropriate methods of sustainable water management.

With this program in place, we headed off to the World Social Forum, being held in India for the first time.

I traveled in India for a week prior to the WSF, and was able to see a little bit of daily life. Our host group introduced us to local people engaged in combating the encroachment of multi-nationals in their communities, and it became clear that people took an entirely different attitude towards the world economy, multinationals and even the purpose of a World Social Forum.

Representatives of two of the groups I spoke with, the National Alliance of People's Movement and Sainajwadi Jan Parishad, were very adamant in stating that globalization could never happen in a way that benefited their communities. They saw the only role being offered them was as providers of exploited labor and material resources. They were supremely uninterested in negotiating the terms of what they knew would always be a lop-sided agreement.

Instead, they advocated a total withdrawal from the world economy, and developing local economies only on a small scale. Many people told me that they had no desire to change their way of life for what constituted a European or American middle-class lifestyle.

They consider the constant demand for material things as unsustainable, and want small, appropriate technology, and self-reliant communities that produced the basic necessities of life in their own regions. In this way, they would not fall prey to the lure of money and trade offered by the IMF or World Bank, only to fall victim to the resulting corporate raiding of their natural and human resources to pay the debt incurred.

One discordant note came as some organizations, including the Mumbai Resistance 2004, charged that some of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) present were merely the friendlier face of neo-liberalism. The organizers said the World Social Forum process was initiated by supporters of globalization as a way to tame the anti-globalization wave.

The WSF, however, was such a diverse composite of political tendencies, grassroots groups and formulations involving 125,000 attendees that it was more of a “happening” than an overt and concerted effort to unite the world movements for a global resistance effort. There seemed to be as much dancing as discussion, as much about artwork as action. But even so, there was a genuine sharing of experiences and strategies, as well as efforts made to support movements internationally and especially the plight of political prisoners.

The list of 1200 workshops was long and exhaustive, from disability rights to domestic violence, ecological concerns and social justice issues, to war and peace. I found great inspiration in the sheer numbers of people interested in organizing resistance. Everywhere were spontaneous demonstrations, dancing, drumming, music and pamphleting. It was chaotic, but beautiful and in many aspects, ran surprisingly smooth for such an immense and diverse event.

Although my stay at the WSF was short, I am especially happy to have met so many people working from the ground up to reclaim their lives from technology and international capital through their day-to-day creation of a life that seeks to recreate a natural, organic, and sustainable relationship to Earth and their community.

# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/364-spring-2004/world-forums-fighting-for-water-and-justice>  
Fifth Estate #364, Spring, 2004

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