

The World According to Chico (The Right Livelihood Award 2006)

The aim of The Right Livelihood Award, according to its founder Jakob von Uexkull, is "... to help the North find a wisdom to match its science, and the South to find a science to match its ancient wisdom".

The Right Livelihood Award 2006 went to Chico Whitaker (Brazil), Daniel Ellsberg (USA), Ruth Manorama (India), and the International Poetry Festival of Medellin (Colombia).

Chico Whitaker was awarded "...for a lifetime's dedicated work for social justice that has strengthened democracy in Brazil and helped give birth to the World Social Forum, showing that 'another world is possible'"



Finnish social forum-goers met Chico Whitaker and his wife Stella when they visited Helsinki on their way to the ceremony in Stockholm, early December 2006. From left to right: : Stella Whitaker, Thomas Wallgren, Otto Bruun, Mikko Sauli, Ansku Ylä-Anttila, Tuomas Ylä-Anttila, Mikael Bök and Chico Whitaker. (Photo: Mika Rönkkö)

A Biographical Note

Francisco ('Chico') Whitaker Ferreira is a Roman Catholic activist, who has worked for democracy and against corruption throughout his life, both at home and in exile. He is one of the key people behind the burgeoning World Social Forum.

Early career and exile

Chico Whitaker was born in 1931 and received his diploma in architecture and urban planning in 1957. He left architecture school to participate in research on the standard of living of the inhabitants of São Paulo at the Research Institute SAGMACS. Whitaker joined the Planning Office of the State Government of São Paulo and became, in 1963, the director of planning for the Federal Government's Land Reform Superintendence, SUPRA. He left this function with the military coup in 1964, joining the opposition to the regime. During 1965-66 he could still work in Brazil, as planning advisor of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB). But at the end of 1966 the military forced him into exile with his wife Stella and their four children.

During 15 years abroad, Whitaker initially lived in France, where he worked as a teacher in the training of Third World public servants, as researcher and as UNESCO consultant. He also worked in Chile for the UN Economic Commission for Latin America for four years, and lived through the overthrow of Allende. When returning to France after his stay in Chile, he coordinated in Paris, during six years, the "International Study Days for a Society overcoming Domination", launched by the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops with the support of four other Bishops Conferences and the International Commission of Jurists. This project facilitated the exchange of experiences among people fighting in 100 countries against all types of oppression. Work for democracy and against corruption in Brazil

Back in Brazil from 1982, Whitaker first worked as political and social affairs advisor to Cardinal Evaristo Arns in São Paulo. He was one of the founders of the São Paulo Association for Solidarity in Unemployment and, always with his wife, was one of the main activists in organising the popular participation process during the drafting of the Brazilian constitution: The "Plenaries for popular participation", created all over the country for this purpose, presented 122 amendments to the Constitution project, with 12 million citizen signatures.

From 1989 to 1996, Whitaker was elected twice as local councillor in São Paulo for the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT). In 1996 he left this function to return to work with civil society. He remained a member of the PT until early 2006, resigning when he considered the party was no more faithful to the principles of its foundation.

As Executive Secretary to the CNBB's Commission of Justice and Peace (CBJP) Whitaker both conceived the idea, and was instrumental in the implementation, of a Bill of Popular Initiative: One million signatures were collected against electoral corruption, and particularly the purchase of votes. The Bill was approved by Congress in 1999. Whitaker sits as the CBJP's representative on the National Committee of the Movement Against Electoral Corruption, created after the approval of the Bill, which involves more than twenty of the major national civil society organisations in Brazil. The Bill has already had great impact: Since the first election respecting it, in 2000, more than 400 mayors, deputies and councillors, who were found to have been involved in electoral corruption, have lost their mandates.

The World Social Forum

In 2000 Whitaker was one of those who conceived the idea of the World Social Forum (WSF) and played a key role in bringing it to realisation. The idea was to hold a large conference event, a parallel to the World Economic Forum in Davos, to share the various insights of those from around the world who were working for alternatives to "world domination by capital, within the parameters of neoliberalism." The slogan was 'Another World is Possible'. The idea was taken forward by eight leading Brazilian organisations, operating by consensus.

The first World Social Forum was held in 2001 in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil, attracting 4,000 delegates and 16,000 individual participants from many countries - far more than the organisers had anticipated. People came from Porto Alegre and other places in Brazil and neighbouring countries, as well as from Europe, North America, Asia and Africa. It was such a success, that a second event was held in 2002, attended by 15,000 delegates representing 4,909 organisations and movements in 131 countries, with another 35,000 'non-delegate' participants. During 2002 several regional or national forums were organised in all continents, and a World Social Forum took place again in Porto Alegre in 2003, with 100,000 participants. That year also saw the first Asian Social Forum being organised in Hyderabad. In January 2004, the WSF itself moved to Mumbai, and attracted 120,000 to take part. In 2005 the WSF was back in Porto Alegre, with 150,000 participants, and in 2006 was decentralised in three regions of the world: Mali, Caracas and Karachi. The 2007 WSF will be in Nairobi.

From the beginning, the Forums have been much more than just meeting places. They have become platforms for civil society organisations from all around the world to exchange views, form coalitions, work on concrete strategies and coordinate campaigns.

The success is explained by Whitaker by the principles adopted to organise the Forums: horizontality, non-directivity, respect of diversity, no spokespersons, no final document or orientations, self-organisation of the participants' activities in the forums. These were defined in 2001 after the success of the first Forum, in a Charter of Principles, which is now the sole criterion for participating in the

Forum events. It provides for anyone to take part, except government representatives, military organisations and political parties.

Quotes:

Whitaker wrote for a French publication for the 2003 World Social Forum:

"Porto Alegre is not a 'summit of grassroots organizations' nor is it a world congress of a new international movement, but rather a free-form context designed for encounters to enable mutual recognition and learning, which respects all individualities. The Forum brings together delegates from social organisations that are striving the world over to build a world centred on people instead of on accumulating wealth. Today the Forum's organisers are certain they are on the right track to helping citizens rid themselves of their feeling of powerlessness".

Liberation Theology, the inspiration underlying Whitaker's life's work, is the radical Catholic theology, which - as he puts it - says that

"true religion, especially Christianity, basically means working for the upliftment of the poor, fighting for their rights and against the exploitation of the have-nots by the haves."

Publications: A book written by Whitaker in 2005, "The challenge of the World Social Forum", has been published in Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and French. Editions in English, German and several Indian and Kenyan languages are on the way.

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Interview with Chico Whitaker

Questions asked by Ole von Uexkull on September 22, 2006

Q: You have worked your entire life for the democratisation of Brazil. Are you hopeful about the situation today?

A: We have lived, in last century in Brazil, two long periods of dictatorship: from 1930 to 1945 and from 1964 to 1980. Each time, when we have again a period of democracy, we must re-learn how it functions. Many distortions remain, and people take a good bit of time to believe in the possibility of solving our problems through the democratic institutions. And we have a lot of problems to solve. Our country is champion in social inequality. And democratisation is not only guaranteeing political rights, elections, etc, but especially the right for all to live with dignity. Nearly half of the Brazilians are still half-citizens: the Constitution guarantees to them all these rights but they don't even know they have these rights...

Democratisation is really a long process. In between new problems appear, like now, for example, with a big corrosion in the credibility of the parliament because of corruption scandals. I am nevertheless hopeful because we are progressing. Slowly, but progressing. If political parties are in crisis, civil society begins to emerge as a political actor with more autonomy. We have very much to do, but there are much more people than we can imagine wanting to change things. If we arrive to define strategic objectives of change, we will go more quickly.

Q: You quit the workers' party (PT) earlier this year. Why?

A: This is also a long history. When I returned from exile in 1981 the PT was starting to get organised. With people having many dreams. It was really a new type of party, in its way of functioning and in its composition. It attracted effectively the poor of the country, giving them the opportunity to play a political role in the fight for equality and justice. The respect of ethical principles was also essential in its practice, in a country where corruption is nearly endemic and enters everywhere. But as the party entered in the electoral process and began to conquer positions in the administration, pragmatism – all means are good – to conquer the power became dominant inside the party. I saw this tendency arriving already ten or fifteen years ago, when I was elected councillor in São Paulo. As the party won the Presidency of the Republic, these distortions exploded, changing it entirely. It became only one more party among the others. Many of us – nearly half of its members – decided to work in the re-foundation of the party. Myself, as I had always worked with popular participation and civil society organising, I thought I could be more useful in this type of work, outside any party.

Q: You were in Paris with Oded Grajew when he conceived the idea of the World Social Forum in January 2000. What did it take to make this idea come real?

A: Returning to Brazil, we presented the idea to others, coming from various types of work in society. A group of us – from eight different organisations – decided to face the challenge. We deepened the idea of Oded, that we considered brilliant, and from then on we had no more time to stop or to think about what to do. The first Forum was a big surprise also for us. We were expecting 2,500 participants and they were 20,000. We then wrote our Charter of Principles, based on the reasons we identified for this success. From then on, there were still less possibilities to stop. The WSF was a real political invention. And it is now a global process that brings hope to more and more people.

Q: The slogan of the World Social Forum is „Another world is possible“. - How does this world look like?

A: Very frequently people ask us this question. I always say to those who ask the question: you know it. The “other” world we would work to build is the utopia of all human beings: peace, justice, dignity of life for all, cooperation and not competition as rule of life, solidarity as main value, no kind of oppression, respect of diversity, no more wars and violence between human beings, respect of the nature to protect our planet and thinking of future generations, etc, etc.

Q: What about the impact of the World Social Forum? Isn't it just a big fair with little concrete outcomes?

A: The first big impact is the perspective of hope the Forum opened, encouraging people to rise up to work for a new world. A second impact is in the action of those who come to Social Forums. All those who come – at the world level as well as at the regional, national and local levels – are already working for this or are being invited to do it. When they return home after having experienced the openness and horizontality of the event – when it functions according to our Charter of Principles – they continue their work enriched with the experiences of others they have got to know during the Forum, the exchanges they have experienced, the convergences they have discovered with the struggles of others, the articulations they were able to build to initiate new actions to change the world.

All this makes people feel happy – like in the joyful fairs – also because they discover that it is possible to do politics without having to fight for power, and build a type of unity based on friendship, solidarity and cooperation. As in good networks, not depending on orders coming from above, as in the traditional pyramidal and disciplined political organisations. In this sense many new initiatives in the struggle against neo-liberalism and the domination of money were born in the Forums, and they already have concrete results. But the deepest impact of the Forum will appear in many more years, as its process

expands all over the world, rooting itself in all countries and continents, through the regional, national and local forums that are already multiplying everywhere.

Q: What is your aspiration for the future of the World Social Forum?

A: My aspiration is this multiplication of Forums all over the world, creating the conditions to overcome the frustrations we had in the attempts to change the logics of economic, social and political life in the XX century. My aspiration is that the Forum becomes really a door opened to hope in a new century free of all types of domination and oppression, for the happiness of mankind.

Source: <http://www.rightlivelihood.org//interviews/chico-whitaker--2006-09-22.htm>