

# **Submission to the Democracy Commission: The Irish Social Forum Process**

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to give an account of how a process, now known as the Irish Social Forum process, emerged and grew to truly become a new and exciting opportunity for ordinary citizens to participate in a space where they could actively engage with the key issues facing Irish society.

In a nutshell, the Irish Social Forum is a process for the various sectors and individuals of Irish civil society to come together in the spirit of co-operation and mutual respect in the belief that “another world is possible”. Inspired by the international movement of social forums, the Irish Social Forum has become part of the global movement concerned with war, racism and the growing influence of corporate interests in shaping the social and political landscape of our world. The purpose of the social forum is to create the space where people opposed to the implications of corporate-led globalisation or neoliberalism can come together on a wide range of global and local issues impacting people’s livelihoods and environment. It is a space to engage in debate, share concerns and analysis, exchange ideas and experiences, and to build networks and alliances in order to offer alternatives and strengthen the global justice movement.

## **How was the ISF process established?**

The idea to set up an Irish Social Forum emerged at a feedback meeting in November 2002 by Irish participants who had just attended the first ever European Social Forum in Florence, Italy. The European Social Forum itself was inspired by the increasingly popular World Social Forum, which began in Brazil three years previously. The World Social Forum came about in response to the gathering energy and momentum of grassroots social movements, such as the landless movement, which were struggling for a better world. It was also a response to the corporate-led agenda of globalisation, otherwise known as neoliberalism, which was being advanced by the increasingly powerful World Economic Forum.

To ensure the success of an Irish Social Forum, it was felt that the process needed to be as broad, inclusive and as transparent as possible. For the first six months of the year 2003, Barry Finnegan, a member of Sustainable Ireland Co-op and a member of ATTAC (the Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions to Aid Citizens), was nominated to convene a series of open space dialogue meetings where a broad cross section of Irish civil society met to discuss and envision what the Irish Social Forum would be. From these discussions, the first events of the Irish Social Forum emerged and the Irish Social Forum itself was officially launched on July 6<sup>th</sup> 2003 in the Teachers’ Club in Dublin.

It was agreed that the first event organised under the ISF would be a counter summit on October 17-19<sup>th</sup> 2003, timed to coincide with a meeting in Dublin of the World Economic Forum. The WEF meeting was subsequently cancelled but it was agreed to proceed with the ISF summit. It was hoped that this event would create a space for all of Irish civil society to meet, exchange ideas, and search for alternatives and solutions

to issues that individual groups and organisations would bring to the social forum. In the words of the interim convenor, *“It’s a different way of doing politics; it’s an exciting and new way of doing politics. There’s no centre of control, there’s no bosses, there’s no leaders, because what it is is - it’s a place for the anti incineration groups, the groups trying to get the respite care back, the people trying to stop the pollution in the rivers and maybe get some fish back in the rivers, people fighting the health cutbacks, people promoting environmental awareness among school kids, people in trade unions, people in political parties who feel disillusioned, people who feel the hierarchy of the large political parties are turning their back on the grassroots of the parties, for us all to come together, to share our analysis of what we think is wrong in Ireland and to share our proposals and suggestions as to how we’re going to make it better, to impact on the media, to bring politics back to the people, to give us a say”*.

The October 2003 ISF Co-operation and Solidarity Summit, held in UCD Students Union Dublin, turned out to be a great success. Plenary sessions were organised around four key themes (Peace not War, Planet before Profit, Defending Public Services, and Equality) and over 25 workshops were hosted simultaneously by a variety of different groups and organisations allowing for greater discussion and debate. In total, over 400 people attended proceedings over the weekend.

Over the following year regional social forums emerged throughout the country and held similar though smaller events (the Northeast Social Forum, the Cork Social Forum and the South East Social Forum). During the Irish EU Presidency, the Southeast Social Forum organised an Alternative Environmental Social Forum Summit to the EU Environmental Ministers meeting in Waterford on May 14-15<sup>th</sup>. In Dublin, the working group of the October ISF Summit re-convened to meet as the Dublin Social Forum Working Group. On October 8-10<sup>th</sup> 2004, an all-island Irish Social Forum event was held once again in Dublin with a full programme of plenaries and workshops throughout the weekend.

Yet the original vision of the ISF was to go far beyond simply organising conferences or summits. The origins of the Irish Social Forum had its roots in the inspiration and energy from the international phenomenon of the social forums, which in themselves were strengthening and uniting civil society on a global scale, united in the belief that another world is possible. Thus, it was hoped that the ISF could facilitate bringing Irish civil society further into the this global movement, and that issues and campaigns brought to the ISF by Irish civil society could be explored and strengthened in the context of global issues and concerns. It would be a space where existing but different groups and individuals could meet one another but where new groups, alliances or campaigns could emerge and take on a life and energy of its own.

### **So how does the Irish Social Forum process work?**

In line with the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, the following is a brief account of the principles underpinning the process and practice of the ISF:

- The ISF is a local edition of the World Social Forum. The individuals and groups, who make up the participants of the ISF agreed on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2003 at the first all-island ISF get-together to sign up to, adopt and abide by the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum. (This was done with an addition of the consensus that we will not discriminate against individuals who are members of a political party).

- Activities organised during Irish Social Forum events do not necessarily reflect the views of the individual affiliates and participants. The ISF is not a group or an organisation and no one individual or group can speak on its behalf.
- In the interest of openness and transparency, all speakers are invited to state their name, what groups/organisations they are members of, and what, if any, political party they are members of.
- It does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings, nor does it intend to constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the groups and movements that participate in it.
- It is not a think-tank, but a forum for the democratic debate and public expression of the views of groups working on the key issues felt and experienced by ordinary Irish people.
- It is not restricted e.g. to voluntary activity, particular professions or centres of a particular kind, but aims to make links across our different ways of organising and operating.

### **But what does a Social Forum do?**

The World Social Forum Charter of Principles facilitates organisations or groups of organisations to formulate actions arising from meetings at the WSF. However, the Charter also states clearly that participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body. No one will be authorized on behalf of the Forum, or any editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. Otherwise the process risks dis-engaging people who do not feel comfortable with being asked to vote on particular proposals. In building the Irish Social Forum, likewise, it was felt that something as broad and inclusive as a social forum would not be able to articulate solutions but that it could be able to facilitate a space where different solutions could emerge. It's a space where the problems are analysed, solutions are suggested and discussed, and subsequently may then be developed by groups that are working together. Worldwide there is huge potential to see the strengthening of coalitions and the strengthening of campaigns (e.g. debt relief, the environment), as a result of the social movements, and political solutions may emerge which would not have otherwise come about, because of the energy that the social movements are able to exert. Thus, the appeal of the social forums is the very fact that *“you come, you have your say, you tell like minded people where you're coming from, you ask them to help on your campaign, you listen to them, you help their campaigns, we work together, we share our analysis, we build new alliances - but we don't demand that everyone agrees with us, we don't demand that everyone supports our proposals. We go with respect, with humility, with dignity, to bring respect and dignity back into politics”*.

*(Barry Finnegan, interim convenor, 2003 Irish Social Forum Invitation CD)*

### **Who's involved so far?**

To date, members of the following groups have participated in ISF events: Alliance for Choice, Amnesty International, ATTAC, Anti-Iraq Sanctions, Ballybeg Youth Project, Campaign Against Service Charges, Community Workers' Co-op, Comhlámh, Debt and Development Coalition, Dublin Council of Trade Unions, Dublin Food Co-op, Dublin South FM, Feasta, Friends of the Earth (Ireland), Globalise Resistance, Gluiseacht, Grassroots Gathering, Green Party, ICTU, Indymedia, Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Irish Anti-War Movement, Jesuit Faith and Justice Committee, Labour Youth, Latin American Solidarity Centre,

Oxfam, Residents Against Racism, Sinn Fein, Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Sustainable Ireland, Tools for Solidarity, Trocaire, UCG Ecosoc, The Village, West Papua Action, Workers Solidarity Movement and more.....

**For further information on the Irish Social Forum process, contact:**

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For more information: [www.IrishSocialForum.org](http://www.IrishSocialForum.org)

## Appendix

### Background to the World Social Forum

The concept of social movements working to influence change and world opinion has been around for a number of decades with notable successful movements being the women's movement and the environmental movement. In the late 1990s, people in the global human rights movement started to explore the idea of the space where a social movement could go beyond a specific theme - a social movement that could be mobilised around a much greater idea than the rights of one constituency, a space where another world, or a vision of another world, becomes the agenda. This question found the most resonance in Latin America, because Latin America is perhaps the continent where grassroots activism has been most fruitful in terms of shaping people's lives and shaping people's identity. In particular, it was the landless movement in Latin America, which came very quickly to identify with this idea of a global social movement as something to create a space within which their campaign could be legitimised. As a result, a number of major international NGOs decided that this idea was worth backing and that it could emerge to be a space on the global political agenda.

But this idea also had another motivation. It grew as a particular response to the World Economic Forum and out of the growing concern of its strength to shape corporate influence on the world and onto the political agenda. The World Economic Forum, comprised of the captains of industry and the major Fortune 500 chief executives, was emerging as the engine house of economic and political globalisation. It promoted neoliberalism, an ideology that promotes business interests first and that attempts to restrict the role of governments from every single economic activity other than the police and the military. There was a concern amongst social movements that social or ethical globalisation was not on this agenda and this led to the agreement to hold the first social forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Thus, the idea was that while the World Economic Forum was meeting in Switzerland, that civil society would meet in Brazil to have a social forum instead of an economic forum. The first World Social Forum proved to be a tremendous success, with over 25,000 people coming together from all over the world to actually explore for the first time this shared space. Over 60,000 people turned out for the second social forum in 2002 and numbers have continued to grow since.

*(Colm O'Cuanacháin, Irish participant at the World Social Forum, currently the General Secretary of Amnesty International Ireland)*