

BUILD LOCALLY, LINK GLOBALLY: THE SOCIAL FORUM PROCESS IN ITALY¹

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ABSTRACT

Considered an innovation because of its capacity to develop transnational processes, the World Social Forum however also has strong local roots as well as effects on organizational models and collective identities at the domestic level. Focusing on the Italian case, this article shows how local social forums, as arenas for exchanges of ideas, played a cognitive role in the import, but also the translation of new ideas, as well as helping the emergence of dense network structures and tolerant identities. The first section of the article examines how local social forums contributed to innovation in the organizational formulas of the Global Justice Movement – considering both structure (organizations) and process (methodologies) aspects—through the development of different, more participatory conceptions of internal decision making. It then addresses the innovations in the definition of collective identities, stressing the linkages of local struggles and global framing as well as the development of a cross-issue discourse around an anti-neoliberal frame. The final section will discuss the contribution of local social forums to contemporary social movements, stressing the role of these new arenas for the cross-fertilization among different movement families and spreading a method of working together that becomes part of the repertoire of action of local social movement organizations. The empirical research consists mainly of in-depth interviews and focus groups with activists from social movement organizations which were involved in local social forums.

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