



Techniques for consensus decision making in large groups: the council's spokespersons method

27 Aug 2010 — Carlos

The processes and techniques which can be found below show/ prove that even in large groups of hundreds and thousands of people, it is possible to make decisions in a democratic, horizontal, participative manner, without hierarchy, delegations, hierarchies or votes/ voting.

These techniques are borne out of the experience of different social grassroots based movements over the past thirty years, mainly in the organization of mass civil disobedience actions.

This text focuses on consensus decision making using the assembly or spokesperson committee method, their variations and other dynamics which can be used in large groups. The experience in introducing these techniques allows us to anticipate the main problems faced when introducing this methodology, as well as suggestions as to how to overcome them.

At the end, a handful/ several exercises and dynamics are proposed in order to develop and practice the skills necessary for a group to be able to make group consensus decision making work.

Consensus in large groups...

Isimpossible: the maximum size of a group of people whereby everyone can be heard and answered totals about 15-20 people.

Therefore the key to consensus based decision making in large groups is to reduce the problem so that consensus is indeed possible: therefore by dividing the large group into small groups.

In small groups:

- Dialogue is possible
- Debates can happen
- Clear and well thought through conclusions are presented to the rest of the groups.

The process towards consensus in large groups uses the **assembly or spokesperson committee structure**.

The process has to be as *clear* as possible for everyone and must be *accepted* amongst all the participants.

Along with all these thoughts on methodology, one must not lose sight of the fact that it is the practice and experience of the participants which makes consensus based decisions possible.

Conditions for consensus based decision making

Consensus decision making depends (greatly so, in the case of large groups) on certain previous conditions being met:

- *Common Objective*: Everyone in the meeting needs to have a common interest/ objective (if an action needs to be carried out at a specific event or there is a shared ethical value). Obviously the more people in a meeting, the more opinions there will be. Therefore, by finding this common interest and going back to this point when differences emerge, it can help maintain a more focused/ united group.
- *Compromise with consensus*. Consensus requires compromise, patience, tolerance and determination to place the group above all else. In the consensus model, disagreement can be used as a tool in order to help reach a more solid final decision.
- *Enough Time*: All the decision making techniques need time if we want to ensure that the decision reached is of high quality. Consensus is not an exception. In international groups one needs to allow time for translation. In the spokesperson's committee, time is needed to consult with Affinity Groups so that they can reach their own consensus.
- *Clear Procedure*: It is essential that each group understand the procedure adopted at the meeting. As there are variations of this procedure, even if we have experience with these tools, it is possible that a group uses the procedure in a different way. There can be a *group agreement* or *basic rules* which are decided upon at the beginning of the meeting. For example, that consensus will be used, the manual signs will be used (see appendix), that one cannot interrupt if someone else is speaking, active participation, that we reject oppressive behaviour, that we respect everybody's opinion, that we will try and stick to the time available. Sticking up a piece of paper with a flow chart of the *consensus based decision making process* will help remind people in which phase of the procedure they are in at any given moment. It also helps to explain the consensus based decision making process at the beginning of a meeting because there could be some new people present.
- *Good facilitation and active participation*: Nominating one or more facilitators can help the meeting where there are a large group of people run more smoothly. The dynamics of the group needs to ensure that the group works in harmony, in a creative and democratic manner. They are also there so as to ensure that the objective of the meeting is achieved, that the decision made is implemented. In order for this to happen, active support by all those present is required.

Structure

In the consensus based decision making model through the Spokespersons committee, the large group divides into smaller groups: the so called **affinity groups** or **base groups (AG)**. The same issues are discussed in parallel within these groups.

Each one of these groups sends one or two spokespersons to the **spokespersons' committee or assembly of spokespersons (SC)**. In the SC:

- The whole procedure is coordinated
- The AG's conclusions are exchanged
- Decisions are made

The SC is a rather small group so as to enable *direct communication*. As in the SC, there is greater focus on the *exchange* of ideas rather than in the *deep debates*, there is the capacity to have even more participants (an SC made up of thirty people is still viable if certain restrictions are applied).

The combination of **affinity groups** and **spokesperson committees** makes it possible for:

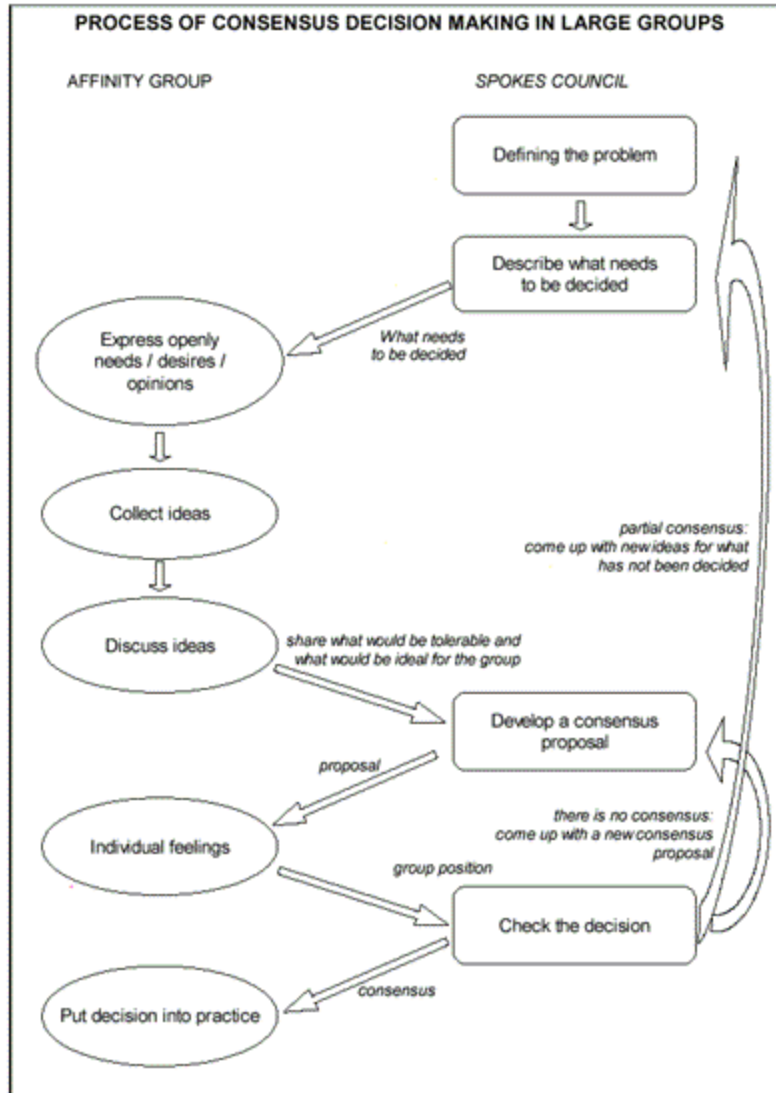
- Everyone to hear about the results and conclusions without being present at the debates.
- Good ideas and important arguments of one AG to reach the other AGs through the SC
- Reflection on a greater number of suggestions because the large group is not having to listen to each person individually.

Procedure

The decision making process can be divided into 8 steps. These steps are divided between the SC and the AG.

The SC needs to coordinate the work within the AGs: in order for the results of the AGs to be brought together, the same steps need to be followed.

This is not a linear process. There are points which one goes back on. For example, when the SC does not reach a consensus, it is agreed that the next step is to get back into AGs in order to develop new ideas.



An issue or question is addressed in the SC: or an AG puts forward a proposal to the committee, or from the outside a question is put forward, or a problem relating to the current situation is revealed.

Before beginning, **the problem needs to be sufficiently explained** so that all the participants understand it and can explain it to their groups. If they are unaware of an important bit of information, the spokespersons ask within their AG or someone takes on the task of finding out this information.

Formulate the issue you are deciding on.

The SC formulates the question upon which a decision is to be made. This question is passed on to the AGs.

To express opinions, interests, desires and needs. Gather ideas. Debate ideas.

Here there is no difference between the large group procedures and the normal model of consensus decisions.

It is very useful if the AGs first clarify *what their interests, desires and needs are in order to reach a final decision*.

The *ideas* are then collected which will enable us to avoid problems. No ideas are evaluated until all of them have been collected.

In the debate the *viability* and *consequences* of each proposal are analyzed. The members of the group form an opinion. The group talks amongst each other until *possible solutions* to the problem are found.

Finally, a group develops *decision proposals*.

Creating a consensus based proposal

The AGs' proposals and opinions are reunited again with the spokespersons in the SC. It is here that the results of the different groups are adjusted.

In the SC, the interests and needs behind the proposals need to be expressed. The same applies to theories, arguments and evaluations which have influenced the opinion of the group. Knowing all this will facilitate the rest of the groups to find a solution which is well accepted by everyone.

In cases where not everyone proposes the same thing, a *proposal based on the results of the AGs* will be formulated which has a good chance of being accepted by the groups.

If it is a matter of choosing between different alternatives, these alternatives should be stated as concrete proposals.

Personal Assessment

The spokespersons pass on the *consensus based proposal* (or the choice between various alternatives) to their respective AGs. Each member of the group expresses their personal opinion.

When it comes to judging between various alternatives, the group must put them *in order of preference*. If the AGs only mention their preferred choice the SC will not have enough material with which to create a new proposal.

Making a decision

With the AGs' preferences, the spokespersons convene once again in the SC. Now the committee must identify whether consensus has been reached.

If the consensus is *partial*, only on some points, any other points which are disagreed upon will be part of a *new question to be decided upon*.

If consensus is not reached first time round, a back and forth game begins between the SC and the AGs:

- As a result of the groups' previous feedback another consensus based proposal is formed in the SC.
- Due to new information coming from the SC, some people or groups change their position.

A question is decided upon through consensus, in the SC which is then passed on to the spokespersons via the AGs.

In the procedure so far we have solely focused on the minimum exchange between the SC and AG in all cases. In determined situations an additional exchange between the SC and AGs may be useful:

- When there is *unclear information* on the starting question, information can be passed on to the groups when clarifying what the problem is about exactly.
- If there are *individual needs of significant importance*, these need to be expressed in the SC before the idea gathering stage.
- If an AG has *very opposing ideas*, the ideas of all the other AGs must be discussed within each group, before the SC can draw up a consensus based proposal.

What should the groups and participants pay attention to?

The participants

The major difficulty in the consensus based decision making process in large groups demands a greater challenge for all the participants. A balance must be found:

- Between the individual self determination against the pressure to conform, and the will to pay attention to the needs and desires of others and taking their thoughts seriously.

- Between arriving at a proposal with major support and perseverance in order to keep debating in search of the best solution.

Afinity Group

The AG has the role of creating consensus amongst its members. In this procedure other points of view, which are not represented in their own group, must be addressed. Equally for the participants, the AG must strike a balance between self affirmation and the attempt to understand the opinions of others.

Spokespersons

The spokespersons represent their AG in the SC, not their own personal opinions. This means that the spokesperson must consult with his/ her AG when issues have been raised in the SC which had not been raised in their group.

One group must give permission to their spokesperson to make decisions on their behalf, without consulting the group. This can be useful when the group's answer is predictable regarding an issue brought up in the SC. This permission does not mean that the spokesperson does not consult with the group at all. It is therefore up to him/ her to decide when it is necessary to go back to the group and when it isn't. This scenario is only recommended when the spokesperson knows the group sufficiently well in order for the group to decide this.

The role of spokesperson has two main problems:

- Freedom in relation to the group
- Failure in transmitting the information

In order to solve these problems, there are three solutions:

- Write everything down: the groups' petition must be written down and brought to the SC. Notes also should be taken in the SC so as to then inform the group.
- Double representation: if the SC is small it is recommendable to send a spokesperson per group plus a silent observer. In large SCs, this can be impossible due to the noise level.
- Rotation: the group can send different people to the SC, This avoids the danger of breaking away. However, an SC without rotation has the advantage that, with time, the spokespersons get to know one another and this makes communication more effective.

Spokepersons' committee

In the SC the decision making process is coordinated in different meetings.

- In order to do this, clear agreements need to be made on what the next step is for the groups.
- There should also be agreement on how much time groups have in order to reach a conclusion and when the next SC begins.

Variations and extensions of the procedure

In order to tailor the process for each individual context, various variations and additions have been developed.

Multi-level spokespersons' committee

In very large groups it is possible for there to be a multi-level committee: the whole group divides into sub-groups, which often is divided according to geographical proximity. These partial groups organise themselves respectively through their own SC. Then the SCs send their own spokespersons to the joint SC. In this way, there can be many groups made up of thousands of people.

Fishtank spokesperson committees

In not too large groups the SC takes place in the middle of the joint group. Given that only the spokespersons are allowed to speak, the communication situation is manageable but, as everyone is listening, everyone is equally informed. Furthermore, the AGs can communicate with their spokespersons through written form during the SC.

Committee with moderation

The CS meeting can be strengthened with the role of a moderator. The moderation:

- Prepares the meeting, gathers and prioritizes the points to be addressed
- Collects petitions from outside groups
- Structures the dialogue in the committee
- Proposes appropriate facilitation methods
- Accompanies the decision making process through several meetings
- Reminds others of what issues are being addressed and at what stage of the process one is in.

Beyond the facilitator role, it is also useful for the present roles to be present at the meeting:

- *Facilitator* (see role of moderation on the previous point)
- *Coordinator*: when the facilitator is flagging or feels the need to express his/her opinion
- *Doorman*: to welcome people and explain to those entering the meeting what is being talked about, hand in minutes or documents which are needed, ensure that the late arrivals do not interrupt proceedings when entering, explain the consensus based model which is being followed in the meeting...
- *Secretary*: take minutes of the meeting, of the proposals and important decision made, as well as drawing attention to incomplete decisions (who will be in charge of/ responsible for this, that or the other...)
- *Observer*: observes the atmosphere of the meeting, in the rise of tensions, the straying of the debate, the lows in enthusiasm, and they can make suggestions to the group in relation to this problem, for example, that of taking a break.
- *Taking the floor*: they have the list of people who wish to take the floor and ensure that they speak when it is their turn
- *Timekeeper*: they ensure that each item on the agenda is given enough time for debate and for the meeting to end at the agreed time.

Plenary

In order to simply transmit information to everyone, it is simpler to convene a plenary instead of doing so through the SC. Sometime, issues can be debated in the plenary so that everyone can receive a direct impression of what is being discussed.

The true debate should take place in the AGs as an in depth dialogue with ample participation in the plenary is almost impossible to carry out. It is also difficult to work in large groups in the decision making stage because the debates rarely follow a coherent path.

However, for decisions where little debate is required, the plenary is easier and quicker to use.

Interest circles

When there is a great need for a small part of the joint group to debate an issue, it is recommended that they separate from the rest of the group in order to have a more in-depth debate. The interest circle does not make any decisions on the part of the whole group, but it can contribute the conclusions of their debates to the general procedure.

Delegation

Not all decisions need to be made in the plenary. The decision making structures can be less burdensome if certain decisions are delegated to a small group. It is important in

this case to establish which matters can be decided in this group and how these decisions can be adjusted and approved by the joint group.

The flood

This exercise requires time but it is very useful for large groups. The best is to set very strict time limits for each stage.

- Draw up a list of proposals
- Get into pairs. Each pair discusses the list of options and they are asked to agree on three main priorities (or however many there are).
- Each pair joins up with another pair to form a group of 4. The two pairs compare their lists and try to agree on a list of three priorities.
- Each group of 4 joins up with another group to form a group of 8. Each group once again takes their two priority lists and tries to cut them down to a single list.
- Repeat until the whole group has the whole group has reunited and has a shared list of only 3 priorities.

The double wheel

This allows everyone to express their opinion and listen to everyone else. In contrast to the normal wheel, the exercise does not end when everyone has spoken. Instead, the wheel continues allowing everyone to respond to what they have heard. The meeting continues until consensus is reached. This tool is good in order to ensure that everyone's voice is heard, even if it takes a lot of time.

What should be focused on when introducing the consensus process in large groups?

When introducing the process, one needs to think whether to integrate it into the *pre-existing structures* in the group.

In less experienced groups in consensus one can't only communicate the process itself, but must also introduce a *general introduction to consensus based decision making*.

Integration into pre-existing structures

Sometimes subgroups exist within a large group. There are other reasons why groups can be formed with representatives of all the subgroups. Therefore there is an

opportunity to integrate the roles of grassroots groups and spokesperson committees into pre-existing structures. In relation to direct nonviolent action this means for example:

- Each group is not only a group where debates are held and decisions made, but it is also an affinity group: people who stay together during an action take care of one another and they support each other. Many activists organise themselves into affinity groups, irrespective of whether there is a spokespersons committee for an action.
- Information can be disseminated effectively to the activists through the SC. In other cases the announcements made over a loudspeaker are often not heard by anybody and, furthermore, the spectators can listen more easily.
- In the inter-regional meetings the affinity groups are both local groups who have worked together.

The integration into other structures facilitates the creation and maintenance of this type of decision making model. Organizing oneself into groups also entails a certain complexity, as many people will not participate in the decision making system if they are not already integrated in some other way. On the other hand, it is possible that the additional tasks overload the groups and the committee, so that there is not enough time left for the decision making process.

Dissemination of the model

When consensus based decision making is introduced into a group for the first time or when new participants are included, the procedure and the management of consensus based issues must be introduced. It must be clear to everybody at what point in the procedure people will be able to express their needs and support their proposals or opinions.

As the proceedings for large groups are more complex than for small groups, their description is more extensive. Through a detailed presentation of the rules of the process it is easy to create the feeling that consensus based decision making is a normal and reliable procedure and that if the rules of the procedure are respected, consensus can be achieved.

Therefore certain fundamental concepts need to be addressed:

- It is important to ensure that the same consideration is paid to all the participants.
- One must know how to use the creativity and skills of the whole group in order to reach a good decision.
- The need to reach a real decision
- This decision needs to be adopted as concretely as possible by the participants

The perception of the group that these demands are fair, will depend on how the participants interact with each other, whether they have an attitude which is truly oriented towards consensus and whether, along with defending their own opinions, they are also responsible in ensuring that the procedure progresses.

Experience and training

It will be easier for the group to reach consensus decisions when all the participants are aware of their role in the decision making process and they can therefore carry out their role in a productive manner. This can be significantly strengthened by making the group reflect upon its own experience. Furthermore, training can be organized so that they can practice with concrete decisions.

Common difficulties in the search for consensus

For the majority of people, decision making according to the consensus model is a completely new way of learning which can be learnt overnight. We are immersed in the cultural tradition of authoritarian or majority based decisions, in which everyone has been socialized/ "trained." Only in some cases and often subconsciously is it usual to create consensus amongst participants.

In order for the consensus based decision making process to become a viable and convincing alternative for "new arrivals", practice and constructive assessment of the experience is needed.

As an aid for this process, we have listed below the most common difficulties of seeking consensus.

Difficulties and effects

- The problems are not formulated or contextualized clearly
- The common points agreed upon in the meeting are not shown and the conversation just goes round in circles
- There is lack of awareness when it comes to recognizing solutions which could generate consensus
- A supposed consensus is reached very quickly, with some very important aspects going unaddressed.

Possible Solutions

- It is very useful for the development of dialogue if the moderator continuously summarizes at what stage of the debate the meeting is in.
- Everyone must feel responsible for the course of the dialogue and to contribute in a positive manner.

As it is not enough to only identify the problem in order to solve it, here are a couple of further suggestions on how groups can get around these problems. In this regard, in the next part, we recommend the following practical exercises.

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Appendix

A. Exercises to practice consensus decision making

Active listening

In order to understand what the other person has said, it is not merely enough to wait until that person has finished speaking. Active listening means adopting an interested stance and show an interior and exterior acknowledgement towards the person who is speaking.

In order to strengthen active listening, it is useful to repeat what the other person has said using our own words, without entering into any discussions, but rather to seek confirmation of what has been said. One must cater for the emotional part rather than on the factual side of what has been said, as well as ask for clarification when necessary.

A good exercise in order to practice active listening is *the mirror*. In this type of conversation the following rules must be followed:

- Reproduce the point of view of the other person
- Compare the facts and emotions
- Do not start to make value judgments
- Be brief, much more than the other person.

Active listening does not mean that we agree with the opinion of the person we are listening to. It is about trying to correctly understand the other person and what they have said.

Presentation

Participants are invited to evenly space themselves out in order to reflect the spectrum of opinions, for/ against a specific proposal. The discussion continues and one's position can change if one changes opinion.

Fishbowl

Two concentric circles, only the inner one can discuss one proposed issue. If a person in the outer circle wishes to say something, they have to move into the inner circle, changing places with another person. This form of debate makes it possible for there to be an intense exchange of ideas on controversial topics.

Wheel

This is done in order. Everyone expresses their opinions, feelings, ideas, according to the stage of the debate. The only rule is to not make a comment which has already been made by others previously, nor enter into any debates. The wheel allows the whole group to express themselves.

Ball

Only the person who has the ball in their hand can speak. Therefore everyone can be sure that they will be listened to when it is their turn to speak and everyone will be paying attention as they know they will have an opportunity to speak.

Snapshot

A snapshot for the opportunity to express opinions, feelings, states of mind or experiences. The interventions need to be short. The participants themselves decide if they want to have responses. The moderator also participates in the flash.

Brainstorm

A good method for a warm up at the beginning of a discussion on an issue. With short questions or key-words, equally short opinions or immediate responses are given. You go round in a circle and the ideas are written down on a board or a flipchart. The only rules for brainstorming are the following:

- Quantity over quality: the idea is to try and make as many spontaneous associations between ideas as possible. Good associations can even emerge from strange thought processes.
- Time limit: maximum 5-10 minutes, which creates the mental tension necessary for such an exercise.
- Neither criticisms nor self-criticism: an atmosphere of trust needs to be created in order for everyone to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas and suggestions, however inappropriate or out of place they may seem.

- Neither debate nor judgment: For the same reason. In the stage there will be opportunity for analysis and approval.

There are variations to this method:

- *Imaginary brainstorm*: a brainstorm is made on an invented topic but which is related in some way to the real issue being addressed (and then as we go back to the real issue we try to trace the links between the real issue and the ideas established for the imaginary topic)
- *Revolving brainstorm*: the large group is divided into groups of 4-6 people and they simultaneously note down their ideas on a sheet of paper for 2-3 minutes. They then pass on the piece of paper to the next group who write their notes down on the other sheet of paper and so it goes on. The ideas of some groups will influence those of others.

The Pause

This method comes from the Arca movement. It is the best exercise when emotions are running high and people are at an impasse. The group establishes that any participant can ask for a pause. This means that everyone has to stand up and keep silent for a couple of seconds or half a minute. They can therefore “let go”, gather their thoughts, “get back down to earth”. The result can be that everyone who had lost their tempers, have now calmed down.

Join heads

Simply get up from your seats and place your heads together. The physical movement stimulates, activates and physical contact improves communication. You are only allowed to sit back down in your seat when the decision made is close to pleasing everyone.

Conflict lines

Two groups put themselves into lines. One group has to represent a specific opinion or individual, the other group adopts the opposing stance or plays the antagonist. A debate on the controversial points is developed. The discussions take place at the same time, which leads to quite high noise levels, which can help to represent an aggressive figure. Then, in pairs, the style of the discussion and the arguments used are then analysed and then the roles are switched over. To finish, in a plenary you discuss what was learnt in pairs. This exercise is used a lot in nonviolent direct actions, in order to practice how to interact with officers, the public, workers etc.

Circle of whispers

Very useful and relaxing in meetings where there are lots of participants or in conferences. Every so often, there are breaks in which you can talk to the person next to you about what you have just heard. Therefore, some questions of understanding and objections can be cleared up or verified, which may make a future round of debate a lot more relaxed and effective. The possibility of being able to express one's thoughts, thanks to this exercise, will help increase the listening capacity in the next phase of the meeting.

Question with cards

Work using cards is one of the most used exercises. Each participant or group notes down ideas or proposals on a specific issue on small cards which are then collected and placed so that everyone can see them on a flipchart or on a wall.

- Only one idea per card
- The number of cards can be unlimited or limited, depending on the context
- They need to be written down clearly so that they can be easily seen from a distance

The card exercise gives each participant within the group the same opportunity to participate and it leads to a gathering of a vast amount of ideas and proposals in the quickest time possible. The individual work of filling in the cards allows each participant to develop their thoughts and put them on paper without being influenced by the rest of the group.

The collection of cards can also be worked on afterwards, grouping them together by similarity of topic, which could give a better overall view. A title can be given to each group of cards. This grouping method will make the following phase of evaluation of the different proposals a lot easier.

Opinion barometer

A controversial opinion or theory is proposed for a decision proposal. People who 100% agree with this proposal will stand at one far end of the room and on the other far side of the room, those who are 0% in favour. The two extremes label their positions using cards. In the middle are those who are undecided (50%). Each participant is invited to position themselves along a line, according to their own opinion. In this way, we get an image of whether the group is accepting or rejecting a proposal. Each participant is then asked to explain why they have placed themselves in that particular place.

The barometer can be "changing". If the arguments of other people make participants change opinion, they can change position in order to reflect their change of opinion.

There are variations to this activity:

- *Consensus barometer*: The activity can be used in a modified way, so as to seek consensus. Now each participant has to place themselves quite close to a far side of the room according to whether they partly share or completely share an opinion or proposal. This activity is especially useful when there is more than one proposal because one can immediately see what the group's opinion is. This is not about voting because the process carries on.
- *Conflict barometer*: People who are in conflict place themselves in diametrically opposed spaces and at a certain distance. The rest of the group distributes itself according to the personal proximity or according to their opinions relating to those of the people at the two extremes. These people then begin a dialogue based on clarification between them. As soon as they feel that they have resolved an aspect of the conflict and the confrontation calms down, they can move slightly closer together and the rest of the group can follow them. The conversation continues until the participants feel that the conflict has been sufficiently resolved or has been sufficiently clarified. This can be sensed in the dissipating tension in the atmosphere and it is visible through the two opposing sides having moved physically closer together.

Small groups

In large groups, as time goes by, there is often a sense of discontent which is produced. Furthermore the potential of the group is not exploited appropriately if only a few members are actively participating. It is therefore recommended that the large group exercises be interspersed with small group work every once in a while. Therefore the more shy or withdrawn people can also participate. The investment of time required for small group work and then the presentation in plenary of the results of each group, is recouped through increased satisfaction of each participant, better quality of the proposal content and a quicker path towards consensus.

Breaks

The positive effects of breaks are always underestimated. Breaks not only revive states of mind and re-energise participants. It also allows for informal conversation which takes place during the breaks and which lead to quicker clarifications compared to "official" regulated dialogue. A break is a "time out" in which conversation will flow in a very different way and, more often than not, in a more constructive manner. The waste of time is made up with the time gained with the dialogue towards the end of the session.

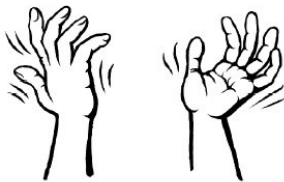
B. Manual signs

When a large group wants to make a decision it is not necessary for everyone who wishes to say something, to do so using words. Hand signs are developed in order to communicate important things without interrupting the person who is speaking. Furthermore, through these signs we get an image of the group's opinion. Speaking from

experience, the need to express one's own opinion is great. At the same time it visibly shows how many people are actively participating to the process. If there is no manual sign this is an indication that the majority of people are no longer concentrating. For some people manual signs can seem stupid but when they are clearly introduced, they can clearly improve the debating process. It is important that they not be used as a way of voting. Manual signs are a very useful tool for debate in large and small groups, but they do not necessarily guarantee a fair debate. Depending on the needs of the group, new signs can be introduced or rejected, as required.

Please find below some signs which can be used to express one's own opinion, to ask for the floor or to contribute something in order to further aid the understanding of an issue.

Signs for giving opinions



•
«I agree with this and I want to say this right now »:

You raise your hands and you shake turn them quickly in both directions.

Therefore you are applauding silently. In consensus based debates you express if you are in agreement with what is being said, and you get an image of the opinion of the group, if it is close to consensus or not. You also avoid unnecessary taking in turns to speak.



•
«No. My opinion is completely different»:

Hands making an x shape.



•
Here one can express disagreement with what has been said.



«My opinion in relation to the consensus proposal is...» (level of agreement on what has been said)

You show one, two, three, four, five fingers or closed fist.



•
«Veto. I block the proposal»:
Raised fist.

The veto means: I veto the group from adopting the proposal, because the consensus proposal goes entirely against my ideas.

Signs to take the floor

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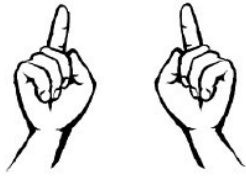
«I would like to add/ ask something in relation to the contents»:

Raised open hand.



•
«Comment on the debate procedure»
Hands form a T shape.

With this sign, one announces a proposal on the process. For example, that certain aspects of the problem be discussed in small groups, or that there be a break. In general, these proposals take priority over people taking the floor to talk about the contents of the debate.



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«Direct response»

Two index fingers raised.

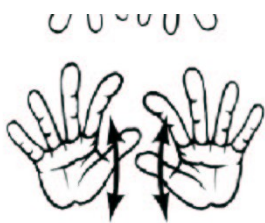
If the intervention is directly relevant. This allows one to jump the queue. There is the risk of taking advantage of this.

Signs relating to comprehension



•
«Speak louder»:

Repeatedly moving palms upwards.



•
«Speak more quietly»:

With palms facing down, repeatedly move hands downwards.



•
«I don't understand»:

Move fingers in front of the face.

Thereby showing that you do not understand the contents of the discussion.



•
«You are repeating yourself. Summarize.»

Two hands rotating around each other.

This sign is important in order to avoid repetitions. If the sign appears several times this means the debate is going round in circles.



•
«Language»

Form an L with the index finger and thumb.

In order to request translation or that simpler language be used in interventions.

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Translated and adapted for the most part from "Konsens: Handbuch zur gewaltfreien Entscheidungsfindung" (Werkstatt für gewaltfreie Aktion Baden, 2004) and partially from "Consensus in Large Groups" (Seeds for Change): <http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/r...>