3   why do it without leaders
the seeds for change collective

The alarm clock rings. Shower, dress, listen to the news. Get irate: war in Iraq – no one's asked me! Tax increase, great. Yet another step closer to privatising the health service. Local elections coming up, politicians make new wonderful promises. Why bother? Rush to work, another dull day in the office. Get called in by the boss – new targets from head office, work overtime this week. That's my day off gone. Get home, microwave some food. Letter from the landlord: pay more or move out. Too tired to go out, just switch the television on for some light relief. Had a good day?

This chapter is about how we relate to each other and how we organise society. We are all, to some extent, controlled by others who don't understand or care about our wants and needs – managers, landlords, city councils, creditors, police, courts, politicians. And all of us exert power over others in varying degrees – in the home, at work, at school. How do we break out of this system of control, where we all, willingly or unwillingly, exert power over others, forcing them into actions they'd rather not do?

One solution is to challenge and provide alternatives to the rules, leaders and hierarchies that largely direct our daily lives and shape the way our societies function. We need to develop a different understanding of power – where people work with each other rather than seeking to control and command. And we need to find ways of relating to each other without hierarchy and leaders. These ideas are far from new and this chapter is a journey into a different world, where people have always striven for control over their own lives, struggled for self-determination and to rid themselves of their rulers and leaders. At the core of these struggles for liberty lies the desire of every human being to live a fulfilled life, following her interests, fulfilling her needs. A desire that extends towards creating a society where this is possible not just for a few, but for everyone. What follows is an exploration of ways of making decisions collectively and why it's important to organise society without leaders.

what's wrong with leaders?

> We all know that happiness comes from control over our own lives, not other people's lives. (CrimethInc 2000, 42)

Many of us have been brought up in a culture which believes that Western-style democracy with one-person-one-vote and elected leaders is the highest form of democracy. Yet in the very nations which shout loudest about the virtues of democracy, many people don't even bother voting anymore. They feel it doesn't make any difference to their lives.
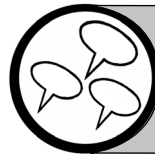
When people vote for an executive they also hand over their power to representatives to make decisions and to effect change. Representative democracies create a system of hierarchy, where most of the power lies with a small group of decision makers on top and a broad base of people whose decisions are made for them at the bottom. People are often inactive in this system because they feel that they have no power and that their voice won't be listened to. Being allowed to vote 15 times in our lives for an MP or senator is a poor substitute for making decisions ourselves.

Even though our government may call itself democratic, there are many areas of our society where democratic principles have little influence. Most institutions and workplaces are hierarchical: students and employees don't usually get a chance to vote their superiors into office or have any decision-making power in the places where they spend the greatest part of their lives. Or consider the supermarket chain muscling its way into a town against the will of local people. Most areas of society are ruled by power, status and money, not democracy.

A desire for something different is nothing new. People have been refusing to accept the "god given" world order and struggled for control over their own destiny in every society humanity has known.

taking back control

> We have these moments of non-capitalist, non-coercive, non-hierarchical interaction in our lives constantly, and these are the times when we most enjoy the company of others, when we get the most out of other people; but somehow it doesn't occur to us to demand that our society works this way. (*CrimethInc 2005*)

The alternatives to the current system are already here, growing in the gaps between the pavement stones of state authority and corporate control. We only need to learn to recognise them as seedlings of a different kind of society. Homeless people occupying empty houses and turning them into collective homes, workers buying out the businesses they work for and running them on equitable terms, friends organising a camping trip, allotment groups growing vegetables on patches of land collectively; once we start looking there are hundreds of examples of co-operative organising that we encounter in our daily lives. Most of these organise through varying forms of direct democracy. Direct democracy is the idea that people should have control over their lives, that power should be shared by all rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. It implies wide-ranging liberty, including the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in forging a common destiny.

This ideal is based on two notions: first, that every person has the right to self-determination, the right to control their own destiny and no one should have the power to force them into something; and second, that as human beings most of us wish to live in society, to interact with other people. Direct-democratic systems aim to find a way of balancing individual needs and desires with the need for co-operation. Two forms of these systems are direct voting and consensus decision making.

Direct voting

It is only because people are not claiming their own power, because they are giving it away, that others can claim it for their own.

Direct voting does away with the need for leaders and structures of control. Decisions are made through a direct vote by the people affected by them. This ensures that decision-making power is distributed equally without giving group members absolute vetoes. When group members disagree, majority rule provides a way to come to a decision.

One of the problems with this is that the will of the majority is seen as the will of the whole group, with the minority expected to accept and carry out the decision, even if it is against their own needs, beliefs and desires. Another problem is that of a group splintering into blocs of different interests. In such cases decision making can become highly competitive, where one group's victory is the other group's defeat.

On the odd occasion people may find that acceptable, but when people find themselves in a minority they lose control over their own lives. It undermines commitment to the group and to the decisions taken. This often leads to passive membership or even splits in the group. Many groups using direct voting are aware of this problem and attempt to balance voting with respect for people's needs and

desires, spending more time on finding solutions that everyone can vote for, or pro actively protecting minority interests.

Consensus decision making

No one is more qualified than you are to decide what your life will be.
Another form of direct democracy is making decisions by consensus. At its core is a commitment to find solutions that are acceptable to all. Instead of voting for an item consensus works creatively to take into account everyone's needs. Consensus is about finding common ground with decisions reached in a *dialogue between equals*, who take each other seriously and who recognise each other's equal rights. No decision will be made against the express will of an individual or a minority. Instead the group constantly adapts to all its members' needs.

In consensus, every person has the power to make changes in the system, and to prevent changes that they find unacceptable. The right to *veto* a decision means that minorities cannot just be ignored, but creative solutions will have to be found to deal with their concerns.

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Another benefit of consensus is that all members can agree to the final decision and therefore are much more committed to actually turning this decision into reality.

Consensus can work in all types of settings: small voluntary groups, local communities, businesses, even whole nations and territories:

- Non-hierarchical societies have existed in North America for hundreds of years. One example is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, where in those situations when consensus could not be achieved, people were free to move and set up their own community with the support – not the enmity – of the town they were leaving.
- Many housing co-operatives and social enterprises use consensus successfully: a prominent example is Radical Routes, a network of housing co-operatives and workers' co-operatives in the UK, who all use consensus decision making.
- The business meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) use consensus to integrate the insights of each individual, arriving at the best possible approximation of the truth.
- Many activists working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, non-violent, egalitarian

society. In protests around the world many mass actions involving several thousand people have been planned and carried out using consensus.

Different processes have developed both for small and larger groups of people, such as splitting into smaller units for discussion and decision making with constant exchange and feedback between the different units. However, like any method of decision making, consensus has many problems which need to be looked at.

- As in any discussion those with more experience of the process can manipulate the outcome.
- There can be a bias towards the status quo: even if most members are ready for a change, existing policies remain in place if no decision is reached.
- Sometimes it can take a long time to look at ideas until all objections are resolved – leading to frustration and weaker commitment to the group.
- The right to veto can be a lethal tool in the hands of those used to more than their fair share of power and attention. It can magnify their voices, and be used to guard against changes that might affect their power base and influence.
- Those who do more work or know more about an issue will have more power in a group whether they like it or not. This is a two-way process – people can only dominate a group if others let them.
- Where people are not united by a common aim they will find it difficult to come to the deep understanding and respect necessary for consensus.

Most of these problems stem from lack of experience in consensus rather than being inherent to the process. It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Living without hierarchy does get easier with practice!
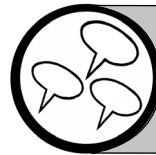
Box 3.1   Consensus ≠ Veto Power

Unlike 'veto power' decision rule, consensus is based on the desire to find common ground. The veto power model, used in the UN Security Council and in parts of the European Union, works on mutual distrust and an unwillingness to compromise. The motivation behind negotiations is to prevent deadlock rather than to create a sense of shared goals and mutual respect.

creating societies without leaders

A society which organises itself without authority is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, waiting for a breath of spring air to rise up in its full beauty.

Alternatives to the current system of decision making in our society exist. We need to extend these spheres of free action and mutual aid until they make up most of society. It is the myriad of small groups organising for social change that will, when connected to each other, transform society. Once we realise that it is within our power to shape our environment and societies we can claim a new destiny for ourselves, both individually and collectively. In this we are only limited by our courage to imagine what can be, and by our willingness to learn how to coexist and collaborate. Societies based on the principle of mutual aid and self-organisation are possible. They have existed in the past and exist today. Our challenge is to develop systems for decision making that remain true to the spirit of self-government and at the same time allow decisions to be made that not only affect 20, 50, 200 people, but potentially tens or hundreds of thousands of people.

Self-government

> Every kind of human activity should begin from what is local and immediate, should link in a network with no centre and no directing agency, hiving off new cells as the originals grow. (Colin Ward 1982, 10)

Self-government is based on the ideal that every person should have control over their own destiny. This ideal requires us to find ways to organise a society in which we can coexist with each other whilst respecting people's individuality, their diverse needs and desires. Direct democracy in small groups depends on group members sharing a common goal, building trust and respect, active participation, a clear process. Clearly these same conditions also need to apply to making decisions on a much larger scale. But when it comes to organising large groups (such as neighbourhoods, cities, regions or even continents) the following points are particularly important:

(a) Decentralisation
Decisions should be made by those that are affected by them. Only those with a legitimate interest in a decision should have an input. The more local, the more decentralised we can make decisions, and the more control we will each gain over our lives.

(b) Diversity is our strength

We all have different needs and desires. To accommodate these we need to create a fluid society full of diversity, allowing each to find their niche – creating a richly patterned quilt rather than forcing people into the same bland uniform. The more complex the society we create, the more stable it will be.

(c) Clear and understandable structures

While we need the fabric of our society to be complex, we want the structures of organising and making decisions to be simple and understandable. It needs to be easy for people to engage in decision making.

(d) Accountability

Being accountable means taking responsibility for your actions. This makes it more difficult to accumulate power and avoids corruption – common pitfalls of organising on any scale.

In practice this means developing a decentralised society, with decisions being made at the local level by the groups of people affected by them. These groups will be constantly changing and adapting to serve the needs of the people connected to them. Where we need co-operation on a larger scale groups can make voluntary agreements within networks and federalist associations. If the processes are easily understood, transparent and open, then accountability is added to the whole process.

So what would this society look like? How will services be organised, limited goods distributed, conflicts resolved? How can health care, public transport, the postal service be organised?

Neighbourhoods and workers' collectives – a federalist model

One model for structuring society is using neighbourhoods and workers' collectives as the two basic units for decision making. Within the neighbourhoods people co-operate to provide themselves with services such as food distribution and waste disposal. Workers' collectives work together on projects such as running a bus service, factories, shops, hospitals. Decisions in all these groups are made by direct democracy, each member being directly involved in making the decisions affecting their lives. Some of these groups vote, others operate by consensus but all are characterised by respect for the individual and the desire to find solutions that are agreeable to all. It may sound as if we have to spend all our time in committees and meetings, but in reality most things are worked out through informal and spontaneous discussion and co-operation: organising on a local level is made much easier through daily personal contact.

A lot of co-operation is required between all these collectives and neighbour-
hoods. Working groups and spokescouncils bring together delegates from different
interest groups to negotiate and agree ways of co-operating on a local, regional and
even continental level. Not everyone has to go to every meeting – an efficient and
sensitive communications network is developed between all groups
and communities. This involves sending recallable and directly
responsible delegates to meetings with other groups. These delegates
can either be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the group
or they might have to go back to their group to check for agreement
before any decision is made. Decision making is focused on the local
level, with progressively less need to co-operate as the geographical area becomes
larger. The details are resolved locally, only the larger, wider discussions need to be
taken to regional or inter-regional levels.
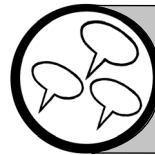
Box 3.2   Participatory Budgets

Participatory budgets are a process of democratic deliberation
and decision making, in which ordinary city residents decide how
to allocate part of a public budget. In 1989 the first participatory
budgeting process started in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil.
In a series of neighbourhood, regional, and citywide assemblies,
residents and elected budget delegates identified spending priorities
and voted on which priorities to implement. Participatory budgeting
is usually characterised by several basic design features: identifi-
cation of spending priorities by community members, election of
budget delegates to represent different communities, facilitation
and technical assistance by public employees, local and higher level
assemblies to deliberate and vote on spending priorities, and the
implementation of local direct-impact community projects. Since
their inception in Porto Alegre the concept of participatory budgeting
has spread to many other municipalities across the world (adapted
from Wikipedia and Participatory Budgeting websites).

Can it be done?

You might find it hard to imagine how collective services such as train travel or bus services through several communities can be organised without a central authority, particularly if each community is independent and answerable to its residents rather than a central government. But consider present day international postal services, or cross border train travel, which are organised across countries without a central authority. These are based on voluntary agreements – it is in everyone's interest to co-operate.

Throughout history there are many examples of people organising society themselves. Often this happens in those rare moments when a popular uprising withdraws support (and thus authority) from the state. This leaves a vacuum of power – suddenly it becomes possible for ordinary people to put ideals of self-government and mutual aid into practice on a larger scale.

The economic crisis of December 2001 in Argentina brought about a popular uprising that is still going on today. The gap left behind as the government lapsed into chaos and the local currency collapsed was filled by local people getting to know and supporting each other. Factories were squatted and owners evicted so that the collective could benefit from their own labours. Land was seized to grow food for the community. But perhaps the most interesting development was in the way people began to experiment with different ways of organising themselves, their workplaces and their communities. Traditional hierarchies have been abandoned as people become more confident in their own skills and in their rejection of government and bosses.

The remarkable events of the Spanish Revolution in 1936 were the culmination of decades of popular education and agitation. During the civil war, large parts of the country were organised in decentralised and collective ways. A famous example is the Barcelona General Tramway Co. which was deserted by its managers. The 7000 workers took over the running of the trams, with different collectives running the trams for different parts of the city. Citywide services were maintained by federalist co-ordination. The increased efficiency of the collectives led to an operating surplus, despite running more trams, cutting fares, increasing wages and new equipment! The general spirit was one of optimism and freedom.

Building a community based on voluntary networks and mutual aid

What follows are two case studies of contemporary self-organisation and voluntary association.

Case study 1: HoriZone ecovillage. A temporary village in resistance to the G8 summit, July 2005, Scotland   A recent example of people creating a society based on co-operation is the ecovillage in Stirling, Scotland. Having come together with the aim of protesting against the Group of 8 nations summit and the global power system it represents, the people living in the ecovillage were also aiming to experiment with, and experience, a free society. For ten days, 5000 people from different parts of the world lived together communally in a tented, temporary village and put their ideas into practice. The ecovillage offered a unique chance to experiment with consensus decision making on a large scale. This was particularly exciting as one of the criticisms always levelled at consensus is that it might work for 20 people but that it would be impossible to organise whole communities or even countries on this basis.
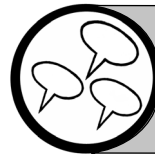
At the heart of the village were neighbourhoods of 50 to 200 people, where people lived, ate, discussed and relaxed together. Most neighbourhoods were based on geographical areas that people had come from (such as Manchester neighbourhood), others were based on shared interests (such as the Queer neighbourhood). People either arrived as part of a neighbourhood or joined one to their liking. Life in the neighbourhood was organised collectively, with shared meeting spaces, communal food, water and toilets. Work was done voluntarily, with the ideal that it would be shared out equally amongst everyone.

Working groups from different neighbourhoods with relevant skills and interests were set up and co-ordinated these activities. This included buying and distributing food, maintaining the water and grey water systems, first aid/medical care, camp-wide health and safety, refuse collection, and transport to and from the camp. Delegates from all working groups and all neighbourhoods met daily in the format of a spokescouncil for a site meeting, where this work was co-ordinated, policies agreed, and jobs identified and allocated. Delegates were generally rotated from day to day, were accountable to their groups and had limited decision-making power. Generally this worked well, everybody had enough to eat, enough water to drink and wash with, and a place to sleep in.

'Most people find it hard to imagine a whole society based on free association and co-operation, since most of us have only experienced societies based on hierarchy and competition. This is what was so amazing about the Ecovillage in Stirling. It was possible to catch glimpses of what a free society could be like: so many moments of co-operation, of people helping each other to overcome adverse circumstances' (participant at Stirling HoriZone)

There were a number of key challenges. First, while on a daily basis thousands of people took part in meetings both on a neighbourhood and site level, it was really difficult involving not just the majority of people but everyone. Some had no idea of how the camp worked, while others were busy organising actions or maintaining essential infrastructures. A facilitation group was formed and worked hard to make processes transparent and to involve everyone in the decision-making process. A second challenge we faced was balancing our own desires with the needs of our neighbours, especially in terms of setting agreed rules for things like quiet times and music volumes.

Case study 2: Zapatista autonomous municipalities   Since their uprising in January 1994 in the Mexican state of Chiapas, the Zapatista movement has been quietly building a parallel system of government based on local autonomy – linking present politics to traditional ways of organising life in indigenous communities. The Zapatista system of 'good government' contrasts sharply with what they call the 'bad government' of official representational politics in Mexico City. Zapatista villages are clustered into autonomous municipalities. These are run by an autonomous council (*consejo autonoma*) and everyone has to take turns in running them. In turn, clusters of about six municipalities form Good Government Juntas in a particular region (which acts like a mini-parliament). These juntas are based in physical places called the 'Caracoles' (which act like mini town halls) and form the first point of contact for the outside world.

The main function of the juntas is to counteract unbalanced development and mediate conflicts between the autonomous communities. Each junta also levies a 'brother tax' of 10 per cent of the total costs of all external projects undertaken in their zone which helps pay for the expenses of the junta. The juntas also organise rotas of volunteer interns to run the zone hospitals, schools and workshops. What makes this system of government special is that it is based on rotation of the delegates – it is not the people or personalities that endure but the functions they fulfil and pass on to others. The delegates have to learn how to govern and pass on the collective knowledge and information to the next team, which means that more knowledge and skills are spread throughout the community. At the heart of the juntas is the Zapatista idea of 'governing by obeying' – that governing is about listening and responding, not dictating, and that if people govern poorly they are recalled immediately. It all sounds complex and at times it is. The fact that everyone takes part often makes it confusing and slow and means there is less consistency. But this is real democracy in action where everyone takes part.

These case studies highlight areas we need to continue to develop:

(a) The first issue is a wider one around balancing our own desires with the needs of others. If we are to be free to make our own choices this will sometimes impact on what others can and can't do. The concept of having a multitude of different neighbourhoods and working collectives from which to choose from helps in this context: what is socially acceptable will be different in each neighbourhood. People will choose their place to live with that in mind. However if you can't fit in with your neighbours, it is not always easy or practical to move away. And we don't want to create lots of mini-ghettos which don't communicate. We need to find effective ways of resolving such conflicts without recourse to a 'higher authority' even in a diverse society. The next chapter on consensus decision making outlines some practical ways of dealing with this problem.

(b) The second issue is about how we make decisions that involve many different groups. Not everyone can be in each meeting at the same time (nor would they want to be!). We need to find effective and simple ways to delegate and make decisions on a large scale. The spokescouncil is one option and is explained in more detail in the next chapter. But we need to work hard, as the Zapatistas have done, to ensure openness and accountability – especially when the spokescouncil consists of thousands of people and there are several tiers of delegates. Experience tells us we need to develop ways of delegating, learning to trust each other and also how to take account of the needs and views of those not present when making decisions. We may be able to combine concepts such as spokescouncils and making decisions online to provide an answer to the challenges posed by large-scale consensus-based decision making.

turning our dreams into reality

Let us put this ideal – no masters, no slaves – into effect in our daily lives however we can, creating glimpses of free society in the here and now instead of dreaming of a distant utopian age.

In this chapter we've looked at how society might be organised more equitably. But these ideas aren't going to become reality by magic. The case studies and examples show that people have been doing it without leaders in many places around the world. It's up to all of us to learn the lessons from these experiences and apply them to organising our daily lives, our neighbourhoods and places of work. We need to

continue to come up with creative solutions to the challenges that working without leaders throws up. Above all we need to share and build on our experiences of doing it without leaders, helping us to avoid creating new forms of hierarchy and control

This need for research and skill sharing on making decisions without leaders has given rise to training collectives such as RANT in the USA and Seeds for Change in the UK. Such collectives are themselves examples of self-help and mutual aid where, based on their own experience, members offer free workshops, resources and advice to community and action groups. Everyone has skills that are worthwhile sharing with others. Here are eight steps that you can take for gaining control over your life:

- Get to know your needs and desires and learn to express them.
- Learn to understand and respect the needs and desires of others.
- Refuse to exert power over others. Look at your relationships with your family, friends and colleagues.
- Start organising collectively and without hierarchy – in community groups, in unions, at work.
- Start to say no when your boss is making unreasonable demands. Stop making demands of others.
- Learn about power and the true meaning of democracy. Get to grips with the ins and outs of consensus decision making.
- Share your knowledge and skills with the people around you.
- Don't give up when the going gets rough. Work out what's going wrong, make changes, experiment.

Seeds for Change are a UK based collective of activist trainers providing training for grassroots campaign groups. They also develop resources on consensus, facilitation and taking action, all of which are available on their website www.seedsforchange.org.uk.

4 making decisions by consensus the seeds for change collective

Chapter 3 looked at different ways of making decisions, and how a society based on direct democracy might look. This chapter provides a detailed guide for using consensus in your group. The tools described below are based on decades of experience in groups such as housing and workers' co-operatives. With commitment, they really do work and making decisions by consensus can be the bedrock of transforming our world and our relationships with each other.

what is consensus decision making?

Consensus is a decision-making process that works creatively to include all the people making the decision. Instead of simply voting for an item, and letting the majority of the group get their way, the group is committed to finding solutions that *everyone* can live with. This ensures that everyone's opinions, ideas and reservations are taken into account. But consensus is more than just a compromise. It is a process that can result in surprising and creative solutions – often better than the original suggestions. At the heart of consensus is a respectful dialogue between equals, helping groups to work together to meet both the individuals' and the group's needs. It's about how to work *with* each other rather than "for" or "against" each other.

Making decisions by consensus is based on trust and openness – this means learning to openly express both our desires (what we'd like to see happening), and our needs (what we have to see happen in order to be able to support a decision). If everyone is able to trust each other and talk openly, then the group will have the information it requires to take everyone's positions into account and to come up with a solution that everyone can support.

It may take time to learn how to distinguish between our desires and needs: after all most of us are more used to decision making where one wins and the other loses. In this kind of adversarial decision making we are often forced to take up a strategic position of presenting our desires as needs.

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Box 4.1   *Guidelines for consensus building*

- Be respectful and trust each other. Don't be afraid to express your ideas and opinions.
- Don't assume that someone must win and someone must lose. Look for the most acceptable solution for everyone.
- Think before you speak, listen before you object. Listen to others' reactions, and consider them carefully before pressing your point.
- Remember that the ideal behind consensus is empowering not overpowering, agreement not majorities/minorities.

Conditions for good consensus

For good consensus building to be possible a few conditions need to be met:

Commitment to Reaching Consensus on all Decisions: Consensus requires commitment, patience, tolerance and a willingness to put the group first. It can be damaging if individuals secretly want to return to majority voting, just waiting for the chance to say 'I told you it wouldn't work.'	Active Participation: If we want a decision we all can agree on, we all need to play an active role in the decision-making.	Clear Process: Everyone needs to share an understanding of how consensus is being used. There are lots of variations of the consensus process, so even if people are experienced in using consensus they may use it differently to you! Explain the process at the beginning of the meeting.	
	Good Facilitation: Appoint facilitators to help your large group meeting run more smoothly. The facilitators are there to ensure that the group works harmoniously, creatively and democratically.		Trust and Respect: We all need to trust that everyone shares our commitment, and respects our opinions and equal rights.
	Common Goal: Everyone at the meeting needs to be united in clear common goal — whether it's the desire to take action at a specific event, or a shared ethos. Being clear about the shared goal helps to keep a meeting focused and united.		

Figure 4.1   Conditions for good consensus

Source: Seeds for Change

The consensus process

The dialogue that helps us to find common ground and respect our differences can take different formats. Some groups have developed detailed procedures; in other

groups the process may be more organic. What process you use depends on the size of the group and how well people know each other. Below we outline a process for groups no larger than 15–20 people. Later on we discuss the spokescouncil process, which works for groups of hundreds, and even thousands, of people.
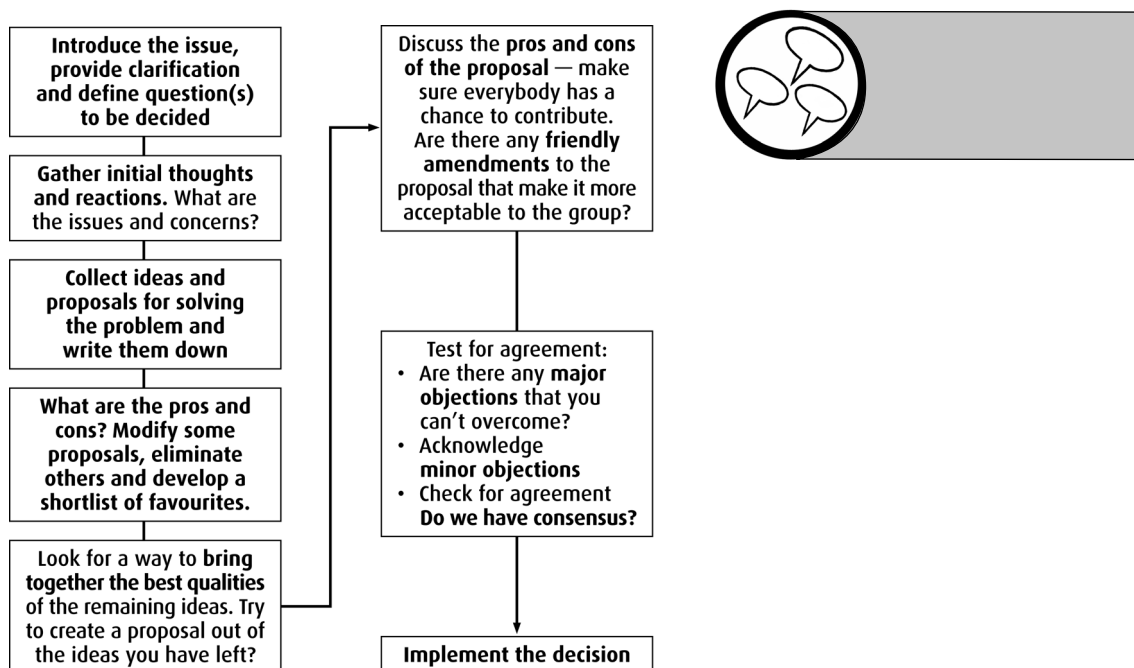

Figure 4.2   A model for small group consensus

Source: Seeds for Change.

Dealing with disagreement in consensus

Consensus aims to reach a decision that everyone can live with. So what can be done when we need to reach agreement and we seem to be poles apart? To find a solution that works for everyone we have to understand the underlying problems that lead to the differing points of view and then come up with ways of addressing them: there are often specific problems causing the failure to reach agreement. These can often be dealt with by facilitation and are explored later in this chapter.

For those times when there is continued disagreement over a decision that needs to be taken, consider the following options:

- The major objection (block or veto): Using your veto will stop the proposal going ahead, so think carefully before doing it. But don't be afraid to veto when it's relevant. A veto means: 'If this decision went ahead I could not be part of this project'. If someone expresses a major objection, the group discards the proposal and starts working on a new one. People often ask what happens if the rest of the group is unwilling to respect the veto. This is a difficult situation where the group needs to decide whether the proposal is so important to them that they will risk the person who objects leaving the group. The ideal is never to be in a situation where a major objection is being raised in the first place. the key to consensus building is to identify areas people feel strongly about early on in the process, so that any proposals already take them into account.

- The minor objection (stand aside): There will be times when you want to object, but not veto. In those situations you can 'stand aside'. Standing aside registers your dissent, and says clearly that you won't help implement the proposal. A stand aside means: 'I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it.' The person standing aside is not responsible for the consequences, but also isn't stopping the group from going ahead with the decision.

- Agree to disagree**:** The group decides that no agreement can be reached on this issue. Imagine what will happen in six months, a year or five years if you don't agree. Is the decision still so important?

- The Fridge**:** Put the decision on ice, and come back to it in an hour, a day or a week. Quite often when people have had a chance to cool off and think it through things can look quite different.

- Backup options: Some groups have fallback options when no agreement can be reached.

    (a) Allow the person most concerned to make the decision.
    (b) Put all the possibilities into a hat and pull one out. Agree in advance on this solution.
    (c) Some groups have majority voting as a backup, often only after a second or third attempt at reaching consensus, and requiring an overwhelming majority such as 80 or 90 per cent.

- Leaving the group: If one person continually finds him/herself at odds with the rest of the group, it may be time to think about the reasons for this. Is this really the right group to be in? A group may also ask a member to leave.

Facilitating the consensus process

Facilitation helps a group to have an efficient and inclusive meeting. Facilitators are essentially helpers. They look after the structure of the meeting, making sure everyone has an opportunity to contribute, and that decisions are reached.

Facilitation is a vital role that needs to be filled at every meeting. In small groups this function may be shared by everyone or rotated informally. Difficult meetings or meetings with a larger number of participants (more than eight or ten people) should always have clearly designated facilitators. However, all members of the meeting should always feel responsible for the progress of the meeting, and help the facilitator if necessary.

Box 4.2   A Facilitator's Skills and Qualities

- Little emotional investment in the issues discussed. If this becomes difficult, step out of role and let someone else facilitate.
- Energy and attention for the job at hand.
- Understanding of tasks for the meeting as well as long-term goals of the group.
- Good listening skills including strategic questioning to be able to understand everyone's viewpoint properly.
- Confidence that good solutions will be found and consensus can be achieved.
- Assertiveness that is not overbearing – know when to intervene decisively and give some direction to the meeting.
- Respect for all participants and interest in what each individual has to offer.
- Clear thinking – observation of the whole group.
- Attend both to the content of the discussion and the process. How are people feeling?

Depending on the group a facilitator might:

- Help the group decide on a structure and process for the meeting and keep to it.
- Keep the meeting focused on one item at a time until decisions are reached.
- Regulate the flow of discussion – drawing out quiet people and limiting over-talking.
- Clarify and summarise points, test for consensus and formalise decisions.
- Help the group in dealing with conflicts.

Facilitation roles

One facilitator is rarely enough for a meeting. Depending on the size of the group and the length of the meeting some or all of the following roles may be used:

- The facilitator helps the group decide on and keep to the structure and process of the meeting. This means running through the agenda point by point, keeping the focus of the discussion on one item at a time, regulating the flow of the discussion and making sure everyone participates. The facilitator also clarifies and summarises points and tests for consensus.
- The co-facilitator provides support such as writing up ideas and proposals on a flip chart for all to see or watching out for rising tension, lack of focus, flagging energy. They can also step in and facilitate if the facilitator is flagging, or feels a need to take a position on an issue.
- Keeping a list of speakers and making sure they are called to speak in turn can either be taken on by the co-facilitator or it can be a separate role.
- The minute taker notes down proposals, decisions and action points for future reference. They also draw attention to incomplete decisions – for example who is going to contact so and so, and when.
- The timekeeper makes sure each agenda item gets enough time for discussion, and that the meeting finishes at the agreed time.
- The doorkeeper meets and greets people on the way into the meeting, checks that everyone knows what the meeting is for, and hands out any documents such as minutes from the last meeting. This makes new people feel welcome, and brings latecomers up to speed without interrupting the meeting.

Common problems and how to overcome them

These two examples show how important it is to get to the bottom of the underlying issues when things get tricky in a meeting. Develop your ability to spot problems, the underlying reasons for them, and how to deal with them. The more trust and

understanding there is in a group the easier it will become to overcome problems. Facilitation can help supply the tools to avoid problems in the first place and help deal with them creatively if they do occur.

Box 4.3a   Problem 1

Tom, with lots of experience, confidence and a loud voice, is talking all the time and dominating the meeting. Hardly any one else gets a chance to speak.

Underlying causes

- A lack of understanding of the consensus process on behalf of Tom coupled with an unwillingness of the rest of the group to challenge his behaviour.

Possible solutions

The facilitator can equalise speaking time by using tools such as:

- Introduce a go-round – each person speaks in turn for a set amount of time.
- At the beginning of the meeting set a limit on how many times a person can speak.
- Pro-actively ask other people for their opinion: 'Thank you, Tom, for your great ideas. What do other people think?'

Box 4.3b
Problem 2

People are coming up with lots of ideas, but the discussion is going nowhere. People keep going off on tangents.

Underlying causes

- Lack of structure and focus for the discussion.
- Weak facilitation.

Possible solutions

The discussion can be moved on from its creative phase to making decisions:

- Write all ideas up on a flip chart for all to see.
- Discuss one idea at a time, recording pros and cons for each one.
- When people bring up tangential issues, record them for discussion later. Avoid getting sidetracked.
- Check if the facilitator needs a break or support.

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tools for meetings

Here is a selection of tools you can use at various stages of a meeting to make it efficient and enjoyable for all. It is always a good idea to explain to people what tools you are using and why.

(a) At the beginning of the meeting

- Consensus training: Running pre-meeting 'introduction to consensus' sessions can make meetings more inclusive for everyone, and avoid conflict that arises from a misunderstanding of the process.
- Setting up the meeting venue: It's important that the space, and the way you use the space, doesn't isolate or alienate anybody. Is everyone able to hear and see clearly? Some rooms have very bad acoustics that require people to shout to be heard. Others have fixed seating or columns that restrict people's view and their ability to participate. Is the venue accessible to everyone?
- Group agreements and ground rules: Agree at the beginning of the meeting on how the meeting will be run. This prevents a lot of problems from occurring in the first place. It also makes it easier for the facilitators to challenge disruptive behaviour, as they can refer back to 'what we all agreed'. Possible ground rules might include: using consensus, hand signals, not interrupting each other, active participation, challenging oppressive behaviour, respecting opinions, sticking to agreed time limits, and switching off mobile phones.
- Clear agendas: These can help make a meeting flow more easily. Sort out the agenda at the start of the meeting or even, with the participation of the group, in advance. Be realistic about what can be achieved in the time you've got, and decide which items can be dealt with at a later meeting. Set time limits on each agenda item to help the meeting end on time. Make sure that everyone has an up to date copy of the agenda or write it up on a flip chart for everyone to see.
- Using hand signals: These can help meetings run more smoothly and helps the facilitators spot emerging agreements. It is important to explain what hand signals you will be using *at the start of the meeting* to avoid confusion!

(b) When making a decision
Not every tool is suitable for every stage of the consensus process. Think carefully about when you would use which tool and why.

- Go-rounds: Everyone takes a turn to speak without interruption or comment from other people. Go-rounds help to gather opinions, feelings and ideas as well as slow down the discussion and improve listening. Make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak.
- Idea storm: Ask people to call out all their ideas as fast as possible – without censoring them. All ideas are welcome – the crazier the better and helps people to be inspired by each other. Have one or two note takers to write all ideas down where everyone can see them. Make sure there is no
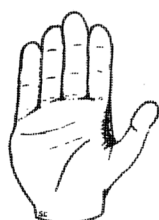
I want to contribute to the discussion
Raise a hand or forefinger when you wish to contribute to the discussion.

Technical point
Make a T-shape with your hands to indicate a proposal about the process of the discussion, eg. 'let's have a break'.

'I agree' or 'Sounds good!'
Silent Hand clapping. Wave your hands with your fingers pointing upwards to indicate your agreement. This gives a very helpful visual overview of what people think. It also saves time as it avoids everyone having to say 'I'd just like to add that I agree with...'.

Figure 4.3   Consensus hand signals

Source: Seeds for Change.

discussion or comment on others' ideas at this stage. Structured thinking and organising can come afterwards.

- Show of hands or straw poll: An obvious but effective way of prioritising items or gauging group opinion. Make sure people understand this is not voting, but to help the facilitators spot emerging agreements.
- Clear process: Used when dealing with multiple proposals. For example, if you plan to consider ideas in turn, let people know they'll all be considered and given equal time. Otherwise some people may well be unco-operative because they can't clearly see that there is time set aside to talk about their idea and may feel like they're being ignored. If you're putting some ideas to

one side, after a prioritisation exercise for example, you might like to ensure their 'owners' have agreed and understand the reasons why.

- Pros and cons: Got several ideas and can't decide which one to go for? Simply list the benefits and drawbacks of each idea and compare the results. This can be done in a full group, in pairs or small groups, working on the pros and cons of one option and reporting back to the group.

- 'Plus-Minus-Implications': A variation of the simple 'pros and cons' technique. It will help you decide between a number of options by examining them one by one. Create a simple table with three columns titled Plus, Minus, and Implications, and write 'positives', 'negatives', and 'implications' in each.

- Breaks: Taking a break can revitalise a meeting, reduce tension, and give people time to reflect on proposals and decisions. Plan a 15 minute break at least every two hours and take spontaneous breaks if the meeting gets too heated or attention is flagging.

(c)   At the end of a meeting

- Evaluation and constructive feedback: Evaluation allows us to learn from our experiences. It should be a regular part of our meetings and workshops as it gives us the chance for honest feedback on the process and content of the event, allowing us to improve in the future. Everyone who participates in an event should be encouraged to take part in its evaluation.

consensus in large groups – the spokescouncil

When making decisions in a large group there is a tendency to have one large meeting with hundreds of people. One of the problems with this format is that the large majority of people do not have a chance to speak due to time constraints. Instead it is usually dominated by a few confident people. This is not a good starting point for reaching consensus, which depends on mutual understanding and trust. Good consensus building is based on working in small groups where everyone contributes to the discussion.

The spokescouncil was developed to address this problem. It enables large numbers of people to work together as democratically as possible, allowing the maximum number of opinions and ideas to be heard in an efficient way. Many groups such as social centres and large workers' co-operatives use this process successfully as well as peace, anti-nuclear and environmental movements around the world.

How a spokescouncil works

In a spokescouncil the meeting breaks up into smaller groups to enable everyone to express their views and take part in discussions. Small groups can be either based on working groups, in regional groupings based on shared political analysis, or be entirely random. People in each small group discuss the issues and come up with proposals and concerns.

Each group sends a delegate (or *spoke*) to the spokescouncil meeting, where all the spokes present the proposals and concerns of their group. The spokes then come up with proposals that they think might be acceptable to everyone and check back with their groups before a decision is taken.
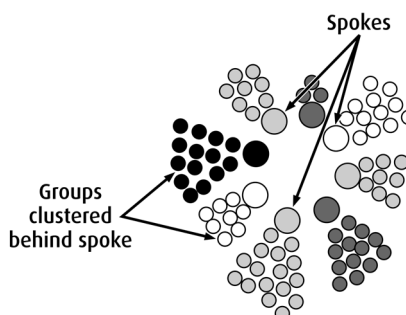

Figure 4.4   A typical spokescouncil

Source: Seeds for Change.

For a spokescouncil to work effectively the role of the spoke needs to be clearly defined. A group can choose to use the spoke as a voice – feeding back to the group the collective, agreed thoughts. Or the small group might empower their spoke to make certain decisions based on their knowledge of the small group. Being the spoke is not easy – it carries significant responsibility. You might like to rotate the role from meeting to meeting or agenda item to agenda item. It also helps to have two spokes, one presenting the viewpoints and proposals of their small group, the other to take notes of what other groups have to say. This helps to ensure that ideas don't get lost or misrepresented in the transmission between small groups and the spokescouncil. Spokescouncils require good facilitation by a team of at least three facilitators, which work well together and who are skilled at synthesising proposals.

This process works regardless of whether everyone involved is in the same location or geographically dispersed. Where small groups are based in different places, the spokescouncil either involves a lot of travel for the spokes or the spokes communicate via telephone conferences and chat rooms.

   If all the people involved in making the decision are together in the same place, it works well if groups sit in a cluster behind their spoke during the spokescouncil. Groups can hear what is being discussed and give immediate feedback to their spoke. This can make the spokescouncil more accountable and reduce the need for repeating information.
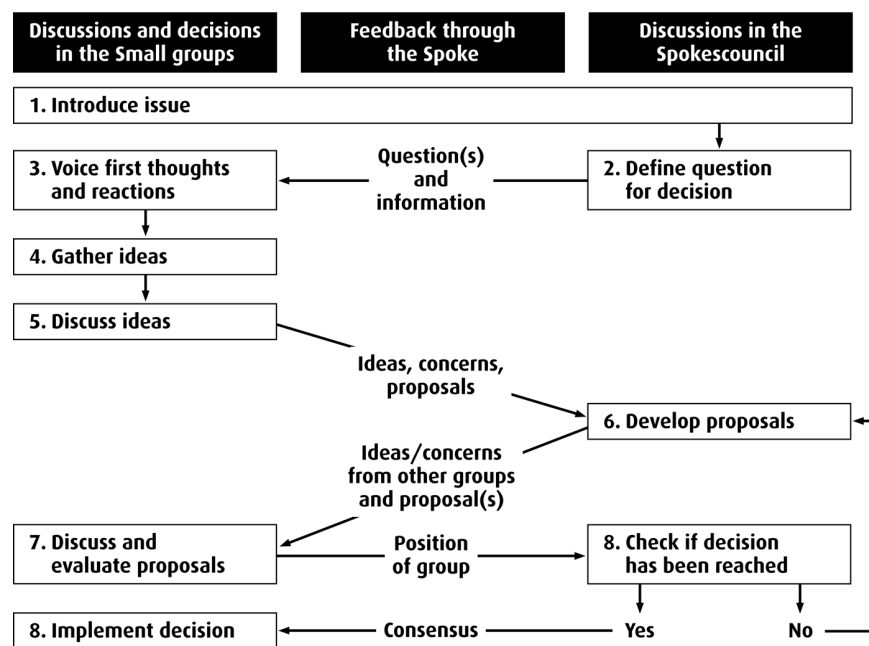
Discussions and decisions in the Small groups	Feedback through the Spoke	Discussions in the Spokescouncil

1. Introduce issue

3. Voice first thoughts and reactions ← Question(s) and information ← **2. Define question for decision**

4. Gather ideas

5. Discuss ideas

Ideas, concerns, proposals → **6. Develop proposals**

Ideas/concerns from other groups and proposal(s)

7. Discuss and evaluate proposals ← Position of group → **8. Check if decision has been reached**

8. Implement decision ← Consensus —— Yes   No

Figure 4.5   A model for spokescouncil consensus

Source: Seeds for Change.

Variations

If the issue impacts strongly on the needs of the people involved, then an additional step can be built in where small groups give information on their particular needs via the spokescouncil before starting to gather ideas. When there are just a few people with strongly opposing views that seemingly can't be resolved within the format of the spokescouncil we have successfully used the "back of the barn" technique. This involves those with strong views having a separate meeting with the aim of working out a proposal that they can all agree to. This definitely benefits from an

experienced facilitator who can help people express and listen to each other's concerns and needs.

Making consensus work with thousands of people

The spokescouncil itself is limited by the number of spokes that can have a meaningful exchange of information and discussion in the spokescouncil. In our experience a spokescouncil becomes much more difficult when more than 20 small groups are represented. If the maximum size of each small group is 20 people as well, this gives a natural limit of about 400 people for which the spokescouncil works.

To make consensus decisionmaking possible with thousands of people, peace and anti-nuclear movements have developed a three tier system, where small groups are affiliated in clusters who then send spokes to an overall spokescouncil.

The key to making this work is to make decisions at the most local level possible. Not every decision needs to be taken by everyone. The spokescouncil should be reserved for only the most important decisions, generally at a policy level. It is often the facilitators that will spot proposals that do not need to be decided in the whole group. For example, discussion around the wording of a press release should take place in the small working group that is actually writing it. This group can consult with everyone else for their ideas and preferences, but this is different from attempting to reach a decision with everyone. Consensus is based on trust and good will, even more so in a large group.

conclusion

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Despite sometimes taking longer to achieve, consensus can actually save time and stress, because the group doesn't have to keep revisiting past decisions – they were fully supported at the time they were made. Don't be discouraged if the going gets tough. For most of us consensus is a completely new way of negotiating and making decisions – it takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Consensus gets much easier with practice, and its true potential is often only recognised after a difficult decision has been reached in a way that everyone is happy with.

Seeds for Change are a UK based collective of activist trainers providing training for grassroots campaign groups. They also develop resources on consensus, facilitation and taking action, all of which are available on their website www.seedsforchange.org.uk

resources

Books

Try your local library first – they are generally quite happy to order or even buy books for you. If you decide to buy a book, get it from one of the radical/independent bookshops – they all do mail order! In the UK try News from Nowhere in Liverpool (0151 708 7270) or Housmans Bookshop in London (020 7278 4474).

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Websites
Blatant Incitement Project www.eco-action.org/blinc
Groundswell www.groundswell.org.uk
Participatory Budgeting www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk
Rant Collective www.rantcollective.net
Seeds for Change www.seedsforchange.org.uk
Skillsharing www.skillsharing.org.uk