

THE CATALYST CENTRE

Promoting cultures of learning for positive social change



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Walking the Talk

*A Primer
On Tools for Democratic Social Change
and Inclusion*

V 2.0



THE CATALYST CENTRE

a zine for social change

INSIDE

Introduction 3
What Is Democratic Communication? 6
Setting The Stage for Democratic Communication..... 8
Guidelines for Participation 10
Facilitating Democratic Communication 12
Consensus Decision-making..... 14
Five General Principles of Coalition Participation 21
At a Glance: Guidelines for Consensus 22

TOOLS &HANDOUTS:

How Do We Exclude? 24
Collective Action Chart 25
Power Flower 26
Busses 27
X / Y Chart..... 28
Outreach Chart 29
Access Needs Questionnaire 30

NOTES:

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ACCESS NEEDS QUESTIONNAIRE

for democratic communication

Name:
 Address:
 Phone: H: W: TTY:
 Fax:
 E-mail:

1. Special Needs: Do you need any of the following:

- a. Sign language interpreter
- b. Oral translation
- c. FM system ___Have own ___Need one supplied
- d. Attendent care (please supply details)
- e. Dietary needs: (please specify)

2. Materials in:

- large print
- braille
- audio tape
- computer disc (please specify format/software)

3. Equipment:

- hooyer lift bath seat ___with back ___no back
- side transfer bacht bench
- commode chair

4. Personal data

- Smoker/Non-smoker
- allergies (please specify)
- type of disability
- do you use a wheelchair
- type of wheelchair
- do you use a scooter

5. Transportation

- How will you be travelling to the meeting: car, plane, train, bus?
- Are you able to transfer to a car or mini-van or do you require a wheelchair van?
- If you are travelling by WheelTrans will you need assistance from the van to the meeting room?

INTRODUCTION

The ideals of radical democracy (include) an equality in which no one is allowed to dominate others by such intangible qualities as verbal facility, flashy personality, or strength of ego. - *Bread & Roses Collective*

We live in democratic times. The major political powers of our world call themselves democracies. From the corporate board room to the annual general meeting of our many non-profits to the conference floors of trade union conventions we hear the word democracy. The Canadian political system is a parliamentary democracy while our neighbour to the south is a constitutional republican democracy. Activists and critics of our political culture call for better democratic processes through proportional representation or perhaps direct democracy. Some argue that participatory democracy is superior to representative democracy.

But what do we all mean by this so so popular term?

This is a big question (one that has much literature devoted to it) and one we would like to answer just enough to start thinking about the ways in which we communicate and how they can be connected to democratic principles. This zine/handbook sets out some starting points (including some guidelines) for a practice of democratic communication and participation. Most simply, we believe that for communication between people and groups to be democratic **there must be equal opportunity for all participants to participate**. But, though this is simple to state, it remains a complex and elusive ideal to achieve.

The Roeher Institute approached the Catalyst Centre to explore this issue of democratic communication using, as a starting point, the needs of people with disabilities. The Roeher Institute, having done research on how people with disabilities are excluded from literacy education, asked "why aren't people with disabilities more involved in adult education?" It became clear through this research that there is a whole group of people who won't read, write and communicate in the same way as the majority of the population and who are, therefore, classed as illiterate. And, given that active participation in our society requires literacy, illiteracy becomes a disability. If we advocate narrowly for literacy as a right, this group of people will remain disabled. It is only when we broaden our view to see that the necessary *right* is the "right to communicate" that we can create practices to overcome illiteracy as a disabil-

ity. We need to redefine literacy to include the many ways in which people of all abilities communicate. Thus we would look at literacy as a relationship and a communication environment.

While social movements have made great strides in developing processes of dialogue and participation that are critical about who is included and excluded there is still a lot of work to do. For example, there is still a widespread lack of respect for the needs of people with disabilities. Social movements need to learn to go beyond the most obvious needs of physical access and sign-language interpretation. Democratic communication is a wide net that is intended to include all people in our thinking.

The Roeher Institute and the Catalyst Centre conducted a one-day 'Seize the Moment' workshop (a popular education method) in order to create some guidelines for democratic communication. We believe this to be a powerful way to promote practices that will create a critical consciousness around the many different needs of people (not limited to people with disabilities) to be able to participate democratically in public life. Seize the Moment is a method of democratic dialogue that is used to look at specific issues (in this case democratic communication that includes people with disabilities) and, most importantly, also looks at itself in order to apply what is learned.

Seize the Moment is a form of democratic communication that has been developed from the practices of popular education which is participatory, critical of power relations and helps people to identify and change unjust situations. Contact the Catalyst Centre for more information.

Democratic practice requires negotiating processes that are critical of power relations amongst the many interests in our society and within the groups we are a part of. There are many options to choose from in developing and adopting appropriate, effective and democratic processes for the many different situations we find ourselves in. This zine/handbook has some starter-lists of guidelines for democratic participation, communication, and popular education. Add your own experiences. Democratic participation is an art that is constantly changing and adapting to new circumstances. You will also find a detailed description of consensus decision-making and a simplified rules of order in these pages. It is all flexible and adaptable. Pick and choose what is useful. Copy it for handouts. Write us your feedback on how to improve this resource. Tell us your stories of success and failure.

OUTREACH CHART

Identifying individuals and groups to invite / involve

This is an example of a chart tool used in a coalition meeting to facilitate the sharing of information about who should be invited to future meetings. Each intersection of the chart suggests a critical question about what the group knows or doesn't know. Produced as a poster and using post-it notes (which are placed on the appropriate box), participants wrote out names, numbers, e-mails, etc.. of who to consider involving. In a half hour one group had identified over 100 individuals or groups to contact. This is a generative tool, the results of which then need to be critically examined and discussed.

	YOUNG	GEOGRAPHY	PEOPLE OF COLOUR	WOMEN	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
Labour					
New Canadians					
Racialized communities					
1 st Nations					
Poor neighbourhoods					
Organized neighbourhoods					
Politicians					
Students					
Co-ops (housing, food, consumer, etc.)					
Community associations (social services)					
Tenants					
Education					
Seniors					
Organizers, advocates, professionals					

- *The choices of categories should be culturally appropriate and relevant to the group and caution should be used if deciding to use categories such as gender, race, ethnicity or skin colour. Don't be afraid of these categories, but it is wise to check with representatives of a group if it is appropriate to use categories that might create tension or spark controversy.*
- *this game is usually light enough to end quickly and move on. However, be alert to moments of tension such as differences of opinion about what gender or ethnicity means. Should these tensions surface you may need to devote some time to debrief the exercise.*

X / Y CHART

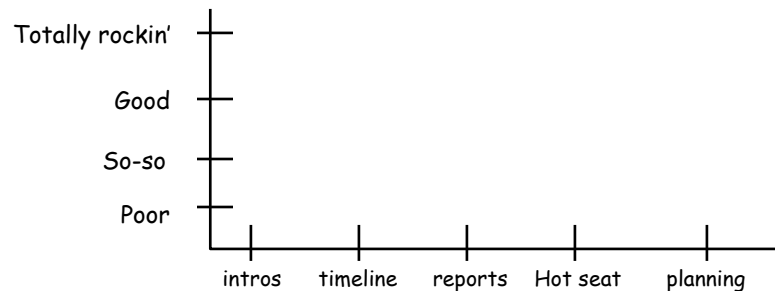
OBJECTIVE: to conduct a quick and energetic evaluation of a workshop

OF PARTICIPANTS: 5 or more

TIME: 5 minutes+

WHAT YOU'LL NEED: nothing

1. On a large piece of paper draw an X and Y-axis. Along the Y-axis, starting at the far left (zero point) write all the activities that took place during the session you wish to evaluate. On the Y axis, starting at the bottom (zero point) write a grading chart, naming evaluations on a scale with descriptions such as, poor, so-so, good, totally rockin'
2. Have each participant put a dot with a marker indicating his or her rating of each activity.
3. Find the centre of the range of where everyone put their dots, mark this spot and connect these dots together to see the averaged group opinion of where the highs and the lows of the session were.
4. Spend several moments asking for volunteers to share reasons why they gave the ranking they did, if time permits.



We offer this resource in solidarity with everyone struggling for more just uses of power. We also affirm that democratic communication necessitates the solidarity of all people with the struggles of marginalized people, especially those with disabilities. This zine/handbook is our small contribution to this.

NOTES:

WHAT IS DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION?

Democratic communication is an ideal that is hard, perhaps impossible, to reach. But we can get closer all the time. To be democratic we must recognize that all people have the right to equal opportunity to communicate. And we must not confuse treating people the same with treating them equally. To treat people the same means ignoring different needs. Treating people equally means keeping a focus on the principle of equal opportunity.

There are many rules of order and group processes that have been developed to facilitate participation. But no single set of rules can work for all situations. We must keep in mind some basic principles and always look at them critically in order to add and change them as we learn to improve our practice of democratic communication.

Some principles of democratic communication

Democratic communication occurs when:

- the individual is respected over the particular mode of communication they are using
- we resist the way that our society limits or denies power and privilege according to categories such as gender, race, class, ability, sexuality, age, etc.
- we don't define through limitation; we see the person as possibility; we see the person before a disability
- we recognize that treating people equally, isn't necessarily treating them the same
- we recognize that power and oppression can exist across diversity and that it needs to be named (we recognize that diversity is what is normal)
- we resist the way our biases and/or preconceived ideas of something prevent us from seeing the uniqueness of a situation (we actually do believe that people are equal)
- we recognize that the issue of disability affects understanding and communication and is extremely broad in one's life

BUSSES

OBJECTIVE: energizer, share knowledge about the make-up of the group

OF PARTICIPANTS: 12 or more

TIME: 10 - 20 minutes

WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Nothing

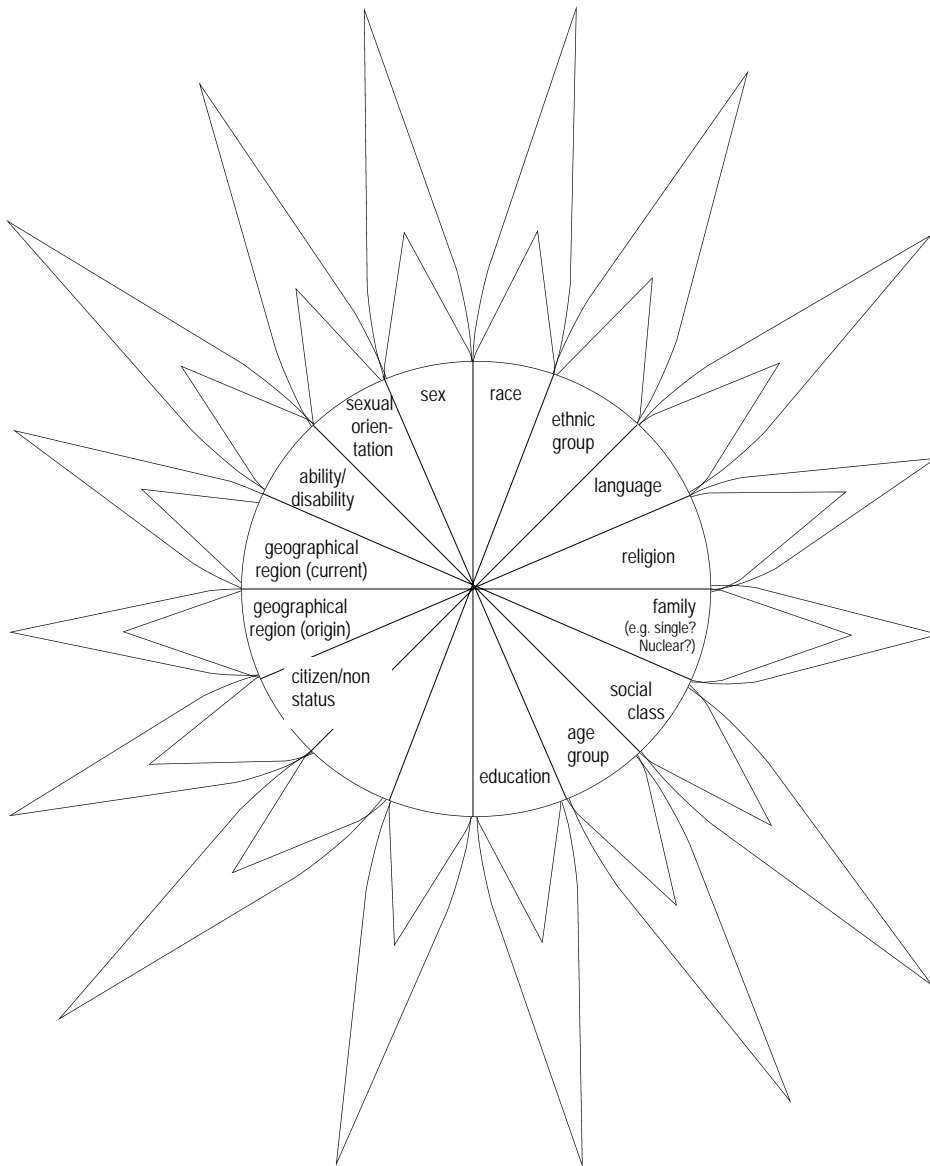
1. The facilitator explains to the group that you are all at a very chaotic bus station where the busses have different destinations that what you are used to. The facilitator will call out the destination (category) of the busses and everyone is to quickly self-organize to "get on the bus that *matches* their destination".
2. Start with a simple category that everyone is likely to share and be comfortable with such as eye colour or zodiac symbol (assuming most people are familiar enough with the zodiac). Once the facilitator calls out the category everyone must find those people in the group who match their choice and form a small group. E.G. For eye colour, all brown-eyed people must find each other, all blue-eyed must find each other and so on.
3. Once the chaos has settled, the facilitator can call for attention and do a go-around to ask what exactly the groups are. You can also take a moment and ask participants to introduce themselves to each other in their bus.

Other possible bus destinations (categories) include: Number of languages spoken, number of siblings, country (or continent or province/state) of birth, decade of birth, number of children, gender, birth order in your family, number of years with the organization your in, ethnicity, etc.

NOTES:

- *keep the game moving fast; if some people have failed to find their fellow bus-riders, use the go-around to unite them.*
- *some people will probably ask for a definition of one or more categories. Remember that this game allows people to self-organize, therefore, they can, if they wish, create their own definition. Encourage this if necessary.*
- *this game is not about judging people's abilities, therefore, when participants ask if they must be fluent in a second or third language to justify joining a group, the facilitator can respond that it is up to them to determine their ability.*

THE POWER FLOWER



- we recognize that different cultures have different means of communication and that these differences do not mean that one way is right or wrong
- we recognize that growing up with a disability is like being in another culture
- we use our experiences of exclusion to empathize with others with different disabilities. Connections must be built while not destroying the uniqueness of the individual disability
- the disability category is named by and for oneself, and not ascribed by others
- we recognize that an act of abuse is unique to the individual person, but the issues behind discrimination/abuse/exclusion belong to society
- we recognize that persons with disabilities are a resource, not a burden
- the perspective and voice of people with disabilities are on the table
- our thoughts are framed such that we develop and understand a protocol that is multi-sensory and of a universal design which would act as a navigator's guide. This can be used to set up a meeting to achieve the maximum comfort level

NOTES:

Some of the above principles overlap with each other. This is not an exhaustive list and is meant to provide assistance to your own reflection on what principles of communication you value. It can be useful to discuss some of these in a meeting in order to have some basic agreements.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION

No one is born knowing how to communicate democratically. It is something we must learn to do with the many groups with which we participate throughout our lives. One of the first things anyone learns who practices democracy is that it takes time. It can take *lots* of time. Just doing something yourself can take a moment. Doing it with a group with whom you need some agreement takes time. There's no way around this reality. But good planning can make the time taken much more effective than no planning.

The degree to which the ideal of democratic communication is reached is directly related to the time taken to prepare or, as this section is titled, "to set the stage". The importance of this stage is reflected in the Seize the Moment process outlined above. While the steps of STM cannot necessarily be applied in the order that they are laid out, the first step of "setting the stage" does deserve first consideration in any planning process. Ensuring that communication needs are met for all participants, including those who can't read, write or communicate in the same ways as the majority of the population requires considering many things including who should be invited (individually and organizationally), what type of meeting should happen, where a meeting will be held, the timing and duration of a meeting, what communication support is required and much more. The three STM questions are merely the tip of the iceberg and are relevant to many different types of meetings.

Checklist of considerations to support democratic communication:

- ◆ What communication needs do participants and potential participants have?
 - How are you equipped to meet the needs of people whose disabilities are:
 - Perceptual (e.g. visual or hearing impaired)
 - Illness-related (e.g. multiple sclerosis)
 - Developmental (e.g. Down Syndrome)
 - Psychiatric (e.g. bi-polar, chronic depression)
 - Mobility (e.g. quadriplegia, paraplegia)
 - Environmental (e.g. asthma, sensitivities to allergens, chemicals - including perfumes)
- ◆ How do we understand the concept of democratic communication?

COLLECTIVE ACTION CHART

On their own or with a partner, participants are asked to reflect on themes (between 3 and 5 derived from group brainstorm, use of the power flower or other issues generation method) in terms of what they can do, what their local can do and what the union can do. Stickies and markers are provided. Ideally a different colour sticky will be used for each theme. People fill in as many suggestions as they can - for about 20 minutes. The participants then take a "museum tour" of the chart to look at suggestions. Participants are invited to discuss a contribution they made. If no one speaks the facilitator will ask about specific postings (people can pass if they don't wish to discuss). [time permitting can do a dotmocracy on priorities - such as for union]

	You	Your Local	Union
1. (e.g. Gender)			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

HOW DO WE EXCLUDE?

Explain that we will ask the group to look at five of the categories represented in the Power Flower (such as Gender, Dis/Ability, etc). To determine the categories we will do a "Dotmocracy" (or "dotacracy") exercise. Everyone is given five sticky dots (or a marker which can be used to make dots). They are to put a dot on the five petals they think the group should focus on today. This is a quick and fun voting method with public results. (10 minutes)

This is not a consensus exercise.

In small groups ask participants to think of examples of behaviors, organizational structures/systems, and ideas/ideologies that exclude participation based on the categories. We will ask people to record things they have experienced, witnessed and know and also, if they wish (are willing) to write down things they have participated in. For example for "Gender" people record behaviors they have experience/witnessed /participated in (sexist jokes), organizational structures (policies that put extra burden on women,), and ideas/ideology that exclude women (assertive women viewed negatively).

Each group is asked to spend a few minutes on one topic (assigned) for about 10 minutes and then spend the rest of the time on any topic. People can work in pairs in the groups. The point is to get out as many concrete examples as possible.

A large chart is placed in the front of the room:

	Gender	Age	Race	Disability	
behaviors					
org struct/ systems					
ideas/ideol					

- ◆ How can we better promote broad democratic communication?
- ◆ What type of meeting is to be held? A meeting can be focussed on one process or involve a variety. Being clear about which process is being used can help keep a group focussed and committed (e.g. is the meeting in decision-making mode or in creative discussion mode?). Meeting types include:
 - decision-making
 - information
 - public dialogue
 - negotiation
 - coalition building
 - project planning
 - creative brainstorming
 - workshop
- ◆ How does the physical meeting space affect communication (see accessibility checklist Appendix B)?
- ◆ What budget or other resources are available to support participants' needs for democratic communication?
- ◆ Is it necessary to get agreement on the agenda before the meeting happens?
- ◆ Who is the best person to facilitate the meeting? Should the meeting be co-facilitated?
- ◆ Who is the best person to open the meeting (welcome participants, set the tone, introduce facilitators)?
- ◆ What are the necessary pre-meeting materials that participants should receive?

NOTES:

GUIDELINES FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Each time we participate in a democratic communication we must put our principles into action. This action will change from situation to situation. But there are some basic guidelines for participation and facilitation that are worth considering. Guidelines are not rules that must be followed or broken. A guideline that works in one situation may be inappropriate in another. And guidelines are not intended to prevent communication and, if they are doing so, they must not be treated as unquestionable rules.

Unique guidelines can be created, shared and agreed upon as each situation demands. Feel free to write some or all of these guidelines on a flip chart at the beginning of a meeting. Add new ones. Check with the group if the guidelines assist their democratic participation.

Some useful guidelines for participation include:

- Asking the individual how they would like to proceed with a situation (for example, how would a person like to have their messages communicated)
- respect that there are different abilities to communicate in the group
- respect that there are different cultural ways to communicate in the group
- listen more
- speak for yourself; don't volunteer other people to speak
- turn off cell phones and pagers during the meeting
- Don't interrupt when someone else is speaking
- if the process is unclear ask the facilitator (or a fellow participant) to clarify
- respect the process
- minimize cross talk

FOUR "YESses" AND TWO "Nos"

There are six identifiable options in consensus decision-making:

OPTION	FOR EXAMPLE
1. SUPPORT	"I support the proposal as stated."
2. LUKEWARM SUPPORT	"I'm lukewarm. I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along."
3. SUPPORT WITH RESERVATIONS	"I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it."
4. STANDING ASIDE	"I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."
5. BLOCKING	"I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." <i>If a final decision violates someone's fundamental moral values they are obligated to block consensus</i>
6. WITHDRAWING FROM THE GROUP	"I feel that this group does not and will not represent my interests. I believe it is best if I leave the group at this point."

AT A GLANCE**GUIDELINES FOR CONSENSUS**

- Consensus requires a good degree of trust within a group.
- Consensus decision-making requires effective facilitation. The facilitator is responsible for ensuring that everyone's rights to participate are respected and that everyone is encouraged to act from a position of responsibility. The facilitator is always responsible for ensuring (through recommending and/or negotiating changes) that the process is serving the interests of the group.
- It is both a right and a responsibility of each participant to challenge the process if it is not serving the interests of the group.
- Not all decisions require consensus. Be critically-minded about how and when to use formal consensus.
- Any participant can suggest that consensus be tested. (i.e. the facilitator then has the option to allow debate to continue; to test consensus using a straw poll; to test consensus by asking people to state their position.)
- A straw poll is not a vote and should not be used, even informally, as a voting process. If a straw poll is called (and agreed to) it is a means of providing information to the process of dialogue. The results of the straw poll should be addressed and those who did not express an opinion should be asked for more information. Even if the straw poll reveals unanimity, this should not stop debate. The group should be asked if they are ready to test for consensus and, if ready, then consensus should be tested.
- Once debate on an issue is complete the facilitator (or chairperson) will test or call for consensus (e.g. "Can I ask everyone to state their position on the proposal?" It is always advisable when groups first start using this process to ask people to state their position verbally.)
- Participants in a formal process of consensus decision-making have four different ways to say yes, two ways to say no or five ways to dissent:
- N.B.: Obviously, if many people declare themselves as lukewarm or stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it.

- take your turn to speak
- listen actively
- consider when it is best to speak from your experience
- take responsibility for your own participation
- offer assistance to the process, if appropriate
- look at the person to whom you are speaking
- be aware of using acronyms and other jargon that may need translation or explanation for other group members (i.e. take responsibility for the language you use)
- give space for people who haven't spoken yet; your point may be shared by someone else
- think about what you are going to say before speaking

NOTES:

FACILITATING DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION

A good meeting is a rare thing. As the previous sections indicate, there is a great deal of preparation work that is necessary. But once the work is done and you are at the meeting there is then the need to run the meeting well and democratically.

There are many approaches to facilitation and no single one is the right way. Circumstances are all-important. Facilitation is a form of group leadership that puts the emphasis on the participation of group members in both the tasks and processes of the meeting. A facilitator can act according to a range of styles from very hands-off to very interventionist. Generally, when facilitating for democratic participation, you should keep in mind:

- watching the time (keeping to the agreed schedule and pacing things well)
- keeping the group focussed on the agreed short & long term objectives
- providing adequate opportunity for all to participate
- encouraging active participation
- affirming and drawing on the full range of experience and knowledge in the group
- making sure that the time and space is being shared (not monopolized by any one person or interest)
- identifying conflict frankly and not being afraid to address it
- offering process suggestions whenever necessary (e.g. be willing to re-negotiate agenda if necessary)
- name issues through problem posing
- keep an eye on people's energy levels and, regardless of agenda and schedule, be willing to suggest changes
- remind group members of participation guidelines if and when necessary

FIVE GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF COALITION PARTICIPATION:

Coalitions of groups require articulating shared principles in order to work democratically and effectively. Coalitions often use some form of consensus since groups whose interests are not being served always have the option to leave. The following five principles are adapted from Filipino coalition experiences:

1. **Democratic Pluralism:** the coalition will include many democratic forces with different but some overlapping goals. We acknowledge that we don't all know each other.
2. **Consensus:** the coalition will work by consensus and use a formal process of consensus decision-making. We agree to work by persuasion not coercion.
3. **Independence and initiative:** coalition members unite on common issues while remaining free to pursue other activities outside the coalition according to their missions (as long as these don't violate principles and objectives of network unity). Unaffiliated individuals who are members of the coalition are encouraged to seek affiliation through a member group or otherwise self-organize with others (individuals can form a new group that could formally join the coalition or use an affinity group process to represent like-minded allies).
4. **Shared responsibility:** each coalition member must share in coalition work on a basis of ability according to size and resources and not on a basis of reward. We are all responsible for creating and maintaining a culture of participation.
5. **Unity and struggle:** no member of the coalition can advance at the expense of others. Although programs and lines may vary, coalition members should welcome and encourage dialogue on matters related to realizing higher levels of political unity and understanding. We agree to open sharing of information amongst members and we encourage healthy and democratic debate and discussion.

might become a defacto voting process.

It is also important to consider group size. Consensus decision-making can take more time than majority vote processes. For each participant of a large group to have the opportunity to speak can take more time than a group has. Groups should consider using small group discussions (from pairs to groups of five) to facilitate decisions.

A group should also be critical and creative about how voices get represented in a discussion. In coalitions it is common for each organizational member to have one voice regardless of the number of members of that group present (each individual can still be granted full rights to speak while limiting each organization to one voice when testing for consensus). Unaffiliated individuals in a coalition effort can be asked to form affinity groups for the same purpose. These are processes for democratically balancing mutual interest with individuals' interests.

It is also important to always consider the needs of newcomers. Consensus decision-making requires a constant process of education and critical reflection. Newcomers should receive an orientation to the process and should be expected to agree to the responsibilities of consensus if they wish to enjoy its rights. A group might oblige newcomers to attend one or two meetings before being granted the right to exercise a voice in consensus decision-making.

Groups using consensus decision-making should be vigilant about resisting groupthink which is always a risk when silence is assumed to mean consensus. If time has been used poorly, if an issue has dragged on too long, if a few vocal people have dominated, many group members may simply submit rather than continue to resolve differences.

NOTES:

- share responsibility for sharing information (ask if someone else in group can answer a question raised)
- share process responsibility when possible (e.g. keeping time, recording notes, filling in late-comers about what has happened so far)

Facilitating a good meeting should include:

- starting on time
- starting with introductions
- reviewing the agenda
- making sure that all are being given opportunity to participate
- ensuring that note-taking is useable by all participants (e.g. for visually-impaired is the writing large enough to see, or posted low enough on a wall to read)
- setting an ending time and sticking to it (or re-negotiating as soon as possible)
- establishing guidelines
- reminding all participants that everyone has different preferences and abilities regarding communication and that this takes time, patience and cooperation
- finish one thing before moving on
- affirm decisions (re-stating as necessary)
- set next meeting time (make sure you leave enough time to negotiate this)
- keeping your sense of humour

NOTES:

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING

Consensus decision-making is a democratic and rigorous process that radically respects individuals' right to speak and demands a high degree of responsibility to ensure mutual benefit.

Consensus, like democracy, has many meanings. When we use consensus as a decision-making process we must narrow this range. And *even* as a decision-making process there are many interpretations of what consensus means and how it can be applied. What it comes down to is what a group agrees upon as a definition and practice of consensus. Take a page from those who advocate for the use of appropriate technology. Despite its lack of cogs and wheels consensus decision-making is as much a technology as any tool or practice fashioned by humans. And, as with all technologies, we should exercise caution and critical mindedness in its use. To this end, it is worth drawing on the wealth of experience with consensus around the world.

An important part of what consensus is about is hidden in the history of the word - its etymology. Taken apart, consensus becomes "*com*", Latin for "with" or "together", and "*sentire*" meaning feeling. So consensus means "to share the same feeling." An interesting hidden meaning in our hyper-rational world that all-too-often values reason at the expense of emotion.

WHAT CONSENSUS IS NOT

It's important to recognize a couple of common sense meanings of consensus. The first is one that circulates widely in the mass media and within public political culture. We often read about the "consensus" of the people, political consensus, the Washington consensus and even the "manufacture of consent". Each of these uses refers to some form of widespread agreement about the way things are or ought to be. But this type of "agreement" results from the complex ways in which some voices and opinions are privileged while those of the majority are silenced or ignored (see the work of Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* - the film or the book - and Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*).

Another unhelpful meaning of consensus is "no one disagrees strongly enough to speak up" - i.e. silence is interpreted as consent. And, while this may be true after a fashion, it is a dangerous interpretation of consensus if you wish to use consensus decision-making democratically.

Consensus is not unanimity. It is not 100% agreement on every aspect of a decision. Consensus, to state the obvious, is not voting. Consensus is also not

taken for voting - it is NOT voting and should not be allowed to be used in this way. It is easy to slide from a straw poll into a hasty reading of consensus. This can easily silence many people. An individual who indicates support for a proposal in this way is not committing themselves at this point in the debate. A straw poll should only be used if there is time to respond to the results. If there are five minutes left in a meeting it is probably unwise to use a straw poll. In this event it would probably be better to test for consensus or table the decision to a later date.

BLOCKING AND HOLDING A GROUP HOSTAGE

Blocking is one of the strengths of consensus and, like any strength, it can also be a weakness. Blocking is an extreme choice and should never be used lightly. Anyone or any party considering blocking has the responsibility to ensure that all other options have been exhausted and that they are not acting out of self-interest, bias, vengeance, fear, etc.

Many people unfamiliar with consensus fear that blocking will lead to impasse. And, in truth, if a group is inexperienced with consensus, this is a possibility. It is the responsibility of both the group and the individual to sustain an understanding of the many choices available in a consensus decision-making process as well as to promote the critical awareness that consensus is about rights *and* responsibilities.

If a decision (that has been fully discussed and is ready for testing) violates someone's moral principles or if they feel that a decision violates an agreed-upon principle of the organization then they have an obligation to block. If this implies that deciding to block is close to deciding to stay in or leave a group this is often the case. If someone is choosing to block it is because "standing aside" is not satisfactory and a group is about to make a decision that crosses a line. If a group fails to respect the right for someone to exercise blocking then this *is* a point that someone might want to consider the final option of consensus decision-making: withdrawing from the group.

NOTHING IS ABSOLUTE

If a group feels that one person or party should not have the power to block a decision it is possible only to allow blocking by two people or parties. One person blocking would not be enough to stop consensus. Some groups call this "consensus minus one". Depending on the size of the group it is conceivable only to allow blocking by three people. This should be done very cautiously. Should a group increase the limitation on blocking thoughtlessly you could end up with a situation in which it requires 25% of the participants to block which

One of the great strengths of consensus decision-making compared to voting is the amount of information shared about the quality of the decision. A "yes" vote does not communicate much about what a person might mean by that "yes". Perhaps they are heartily enthusiastic or perhaps they are simply so fed up with the debate that they just want it to be over with. Both positions are equally well-represented by a simple "yes" vote. Consensus recognizes both of these positions as supporting the proposal but also gives people a few choices with which to represent their position: from fully supporting to being lukewarm to expressing cautions or provisos to standing aside to allow the group to go forward because one doesn't feel strongly enough to stop the group from going ahead.

The information about the quality of people's support can be very helpful to a group in making effective decisions. How often have we seen groups decide to do something only later to complain that, despite a majority "yes" vote, no one showed up to carry out the decision. Using consensus decision-making a group might have seen that only two or three people were fully supportive while many were lukewarm and many stood aside. Seeing this, someone could have advocated for revisiting the proposal and changing it to win stronger support. Or the group could still stand by its decision - which tells the few who were strongly supportive the likelihood of their compatriots showing up to follow through. For some decisions a group might consider it acceptable to support an enthusiastic minority while with others the group might deem it essential to have majority enthusiastic support.

Sometimes the position of a single person (or a critical few) is crucial. Consensus allows a group to gauge the quality of that single person's support. If that person is supportive with reservations or chooses to stand aside, the decision might not be workable. The group could continue to work on the proposal to make a decision for which that person would be more enthusiastic.

TESTING FOR CONSENSUS AND STRAW POLLS

The process of testing for consensus often stumps people and groups that are used to voting (by asking for a show of hands, saying "yes" or "no"). One advantage to "testing" is that once a consensus is reached the group can evaluate the quality of the consensus. If too many people are lukewarm, even though consensus has been reached, some people might wish to change their position or move to re-visit the decision.

Short of testing for consensus, the group could decide to call a straw poll. This is usually done by asking for a show of hands of those who support the proposal so far. A straw poll is a non-binding opinion check. This is often mis-

the lowest common denominator that a group can agree on.

Consensus decision-making does not need to be the only form of decision-making used by a group. It's up to the group to name and affirm appropriate forms of decision-making for various things. Decisions can be made by voting, compromise, bargaining, committees, facilitators, leaders, volunteers and by self-selection.

SO WHAT IS CONSENSUS ALL ABOUT?

Power! It's all about power.

As usual.

Whether we use consensus or voting, cooperation or competition, whether we rely on executive decisions or go-with-the-flow, whether we acquiesce or collude, passively or actively resist, you name it— it's about power. About how we share it, use it, abuse it, are oppressed by it, resist it or create more just uses of it. Being in relationship with humans and human societies is about power. We ignore this at our peril.

Democracy through voting creates minorities who will always have at least three choices: support the the will of the majority (by deferring, submitting, etc.); withdraw from the group (mentally, emotionally and/or physically); and work against the majority (either openly or in secret).

Consensus decision-making is a different democratic use of power - one that resists creating minorities that lose. Different from democratic voting (commonly based on one-person-one-vote) consensus is not necessarily better. This depends on the circumstances and the type of decisions that are required. Consensus is as open to being abused as any other practice. Consensus decision-making is an appropriate technology for certain situations.

While the goal in voting is to win majority support (usually defined as "simple", meaning 50%+1, or, for some things, "two-thirds") for a position, the goal in consensus decision-making is to develop a position for which there is a maximum amount of agreement from all participants. When it comes down to voting for a position participants have only three choices: in favour, against and abstain. It can be very difficult to gauge the will of the group when voting is used. Consensus, however, has many choices.

While there are six identifiable choices in consensus decision-making (we can give support, lukewarm support, support with reservations, we can stand aside,

block, withdraw from the group) in truth it is more like a continuum along which people can find numerous places to stand. The plain wording of the six choices is important in promoting clear communication that works well with limited amounts of time. And the six clear choices make it easier when calling for consensus to quickly determine the will of the group.

It is worth noting that the first four choices in consensus decision-making could all be expressed in a voting process as a "YES" (although some might use abstention to express an opinion). You could say that consensus decision-making has four ways to say "yes" and two ways to say "no."

FOUR "YESses" AND TWO "NOs"

There are six identifiable options in consensus decision-making: (See pages 22-23 for handouts on consensus, which are followed by a number of popular education exercises designed to increase democratic participation)

OPTION	FOR EXAMPLE
1. SUPPORT	"I support the proposal as stated."
2. LUKEWARM SUPPORT	"I'm lukewarm. I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along."
3. SUPPORT WITH RESERVATIONS	"I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it."
4. STANDING ASIDE	"I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."
5. BLOCKING	"I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral." <i>If a final decision violates someone's fundamental moral values they are obligated to block consensus</i>
6. WITHDRAWING FROM THE GROUP	"I feel that this group does not and will not represent my interests. I believe it is best if I leave the group at this point."

FIVE WAYS TO DISSENT

Consensus decision-making values dissent – it welcomes it, recognizing its creative force. You could say that consensus decision-making has five ways to dissent.

Dissent requires a willingness to argue, disagree, even getting passionate. If a group is committed to developing a proposal for which there is the maximum shared feeling, it is hard to imagine that this could happen without some good and passionate arguing. Conflict can be creative, provocative, challenging. It can help participants in a debate test their own clarity of thought and emotion; it can help reveal the depth of commitment to an idea, a position, a feeling.

Many people think that strong emotions prevent consensus. This is because strong emotions are often equated with aggression or violence and, while they can be used to silence and intimidate, they can also be used with respect. It is especially important to recognize different cultural (including gender, race, class, age, etc.) choices and values regarding expressing emotion. Some cultures value reserving expressing strong emotions only in private places while maintaining a calm and rational demeanor in public. Some cultures expect strong emotion to be expressed publicly as a demonstration of commitment while still others see this as a loss of control.

Strong emotion is often linked to violence and coercion. And this should be acknowledged. For example, it is a commonplace for North American men to raise their voice as a means of intimidation. It is also common for some people to drop their voice to force people to ask them to repeat. Both of these are examples of manipulation that is unhelpful (even damaging) to a consensus process.

What is important for consensus decision-making is to be conscious and critically-minded about the many ways emotion is legitimately expressed and for the group (at some point) to negotiate some forms that are acceptable without unduly silencing any of its members. It can be a huge mistake simply to accept and affirm that the only form of debate and communication is cool, calm, collected, never-raise-your-voice, rational speech.

ENSURING HIGHEST QUALITY DECISIONS

People are more likely to carry out and/or defend a decision that they accept. What obliges a person who lost a vote to implement or defend that decision?