

Consensus Decision-making

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Introduction

Participatory democracy, strengthening of civil society, popular initiatives through NGOs—all these have now become a part of the current political discourse. That the base of democracy—and therefore participation of the people in the democratic process—should be widened, is being appreciated, at least at the theoretical level. In fact, as long as equal participation of all the people is lacking, ‘democracy’ is just a misnomer. Vinoba had written in 1941,

“There is a polity that calls itself ‘democracy’ and poses as *sarvayatan* (Rule by all). Its show is going on in Europe and America. But no system based on violence can be termed *sarvayatan* even if it pretends to work on the principle of ‘one man - one vote’”

‘Rule by all’ is what should be aimed at. And to advance in that direction, ways and means ought to be developed for the equal participation of all in making and implementing decisions that concern them.

It is here that consensus decision-making is crucial. Any other decision-making process is bound to be violent. Branding consensus decision-making as Utopian will therefore take us nowhere. If it is desirable, then what is needed is to think with wisdom and creativity and make experiments to make it a reality.

During the great *Gramdan* Movement, Vinoba exhorted the people, again and again, to work in this direction; for therein lies the key to the success of the self-governance of the village community—the *Gram-swaraj*. Thousands of villages declared their resolve to follow this path. But the Movement unfortunately stagnated, and ultimately petered out in the absence of grassroot work, which would undoubtedly have included experiments in consensus decision-making.

There are five possible methods of decision-making :

Autocracy —

One person makes the decisions for everyone.

Oligarchy —

A few people make the decisions for everyone.

Representative democracy —

A few people are elected to make the decisions for everyone.

Majority rule democracy —

The majority makes the decisions for everyone.

Consensus democracy —

Everyone makes the decisions for everyone.

The first four methods have been tried, and are being tried everywhere for making decisions.

They have proved highly unsatisfactory in solving the people’s problems; they have rather aggravated conflicts. Instead of empowering the people, they have strengthened the forces that exploit them, dominate over them.

Consensus decision-making has hardly been tried; it is dismissed as Utopian.

This booklet seeks to show that it is not so; it is possible. In fact, this is the method that must be tried if human emancipation is the goal.

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It is heartening in this context that the issue is again being debated in the West. The efforts in the West, however, are limited to groups of like-minded people or intentional communities. Reaching consensus in village communities much more heterogeneous is certainly much more challenging and much more difficult. But that is what needs to be attempted.

Revolutions have failed because the revolutionaries tried to 'make' revolutions 'for' the people. If the end being sought is the freedom for all, then the means must be commensurate to it. It is high time that we realize that 'process is the key'.

The spectre of globalisation has made the search for consensus decision-making all the more urgent. States are kneeling down before the evil forces of market, and collaborating with them, abandoning the interests of the people which they pretend to guard. Now people must rise against this unholy alliance; for not only their freedom but also the very existence of human values is at stake. And consensus decision-making is the only process that can bring and keep the people together by harmonising their varied sentiments, interests and viewpoints.

This little booklet is therefore timely. This is a commendable initiative on the part of 'Vrikshamitra' and its convener Mohan Hirabai Hiralal. Let us hope that it generates discussion on this issue.

- Parag Cholkar

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(From ACT UP : Civil Disobedience Training Manual)

What is consensus?

Consensus is a process for group decision-making. It is a method by which an entire group of people can come to an agreement. The input and ideas of all participants are gathered and synthesized to arrive at a final decision acceptable to all. Through consensus, we are not only working to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust.

Consensus vs. voting

Voting is a means by which we choose one alternative from several. Consensus, on the other hand, is a process of synthesizing many diverse elements together.

Voting is a win or lose model, in which people are more often concerned with the numbers it takes to “win” than with the issue itself. Voting does not take into account individual feelings or needs. In essence, it is a quantitative, rather than qualitative, method of decision-making.

With consensus people can and should work through differences and reach a mutually satisfactory position. It is possible for one person’s insights or strongly held beliefs to sway the whole group. No ideas are lost, each member’s input is valued as part of the solution.

A group committed to consensus may utilize other forms of decision-making (individual, compromise, majority rule) when appropriate; however, a group that has adopted a consensus model will use that process for any item that brings up a lot of emotions, is something that concerns people’s ethics, politics, morals or other areas where there is much investment.

What does consensus mean?

Consensus does not mean that everyone thinks that the decision made is necessarily the best one possible, or even that they are sure it will work. What it does mean is that in coming to that decision, no one felt that her/his position on the matter was misunderstood or that it wasn’t given a proper hearing. Hopefully, everyone will think it is the best decision; this often happens because, when it works, collective intelligence does come up with better solutions than could individuals.

Consensus takes more time and member skills, but uses lots of resources before a decision is made, creates commitment to the decision and often facilitates creative decision. It gives everyone some experience with new processes of interaction and conflict resolution, which is basic but important skill-building. For consensus to be a positive experience, it is best if the group has (1) common values, (2) some skill in group process and conflict resolution, or a commitment to let these be facilitated, (3) commitment and responsibility to the group by its members and (4) sufficient time for everyone to participate in the process.

Forming the consensus proposals

During discussion a proposal for resolution is put forward. It is amended and modified through more discussion, or withdrawn if it seems to be a dead end. During this discussion period it is important to articulate differences clearly. It is the responsibility of those who are having trouble with a proposal to put forth alternative suggestions.

The fundamental right of consensus is for all people to be able to express themselves in their own words and of their own will. The fundamental responsibility of consensus is to assure others of their right to speak and be heard. Coercion and trade-offs are replaced with creative alternatives, and compromise with synthesis.

When a proposal seems to be well understood by everyone, and there are no new changes asked for, the facilitator(s) can ask if there are any objections or reservations to it. If there are no objections, there can be a call for consensus. If there are still no objections, then after a moment of silence you have your decision. Once consensus does appear to have been reached, it really helps to have someone repeat the decision to the group so everyone is clear on what has been decided.

Difficulties in reaching consensus

If a decision has been reached, or is on the verge of being reached that you cannot support, there are several ways to express your objections:

Non-support (“I don’t see the need for this, but I’ll go along.”)

Reservations (“I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it.”)

Standing aside (“I personally can’t do this, but I won’t stop others from doing it.”)

Blocking (“I cannot support this or allow the group to support this. It is immoral.” If a decision violates someone’s fundamental moral values he/she is obligated to block consensus.)

Withdrawing from the group. Obviously, if many people express non-support or reservations or stand aside or leave the group, it may not be a viable decision even if no one directly blocks it. This is what is known as a “lukewarm” consensus and it is just as desirable as a lukewarm bath.

If consensus is blocked and no new consensus can be reached, the group stays with whatever the previous decision was on the subject, or does nothing if that is applicable. Major philosophical or moral questions that will come up with each affinity group will have to be worked through as soon as the group forms.

Roles in a consensus meeting

There are several roles which, if filled, can help consensus decision-making run smoothly. The facilitator(s) aids the group in defining decisions that need to be made, helps them through the stages of reaching an agreement, keeps the meeting moving, focuses discussion to the point at hand; makes sure everyone has the opportunity to participate, and formulates and tests to see if consensus has been reached. Facilitators help to direct the process of the meeting, not its content. They never make decisions for the group. If a facilitator feels too emotionally involved in an issue or discussion and cannot remain neutral in behavior, if not in attitude, then s/he should ask someone to take over the task of facilitation for that agenda item.

A vibes-watcher is someone besides the facilitator who watches and comments on individual and group feelings and patterns of participation. Vibes-watchers need to be specially tuned in to the group dynamics.

A recorder can take notes on the meeting, especially of decisions made and means of implementation and a time-keeper keeps things going on schedule so that each agenda item can be covered in the time allotted for it. (If discussion runs over the time for an item, the group may or may not decide to contract for more time to finish up.)

Even though individuals take on these roles, all participants in a meeting should be aware of and involved in the issues, process, and feelings of the group, and should share their individual expertise in helping the group run smoothly and reach a decision. This is especially true when it comes to finding compromise agreements to seemingly contradictory positions.

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*(Extracts from the book 'On Conflict and Consensus : A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision-making'
by C.T. Lawrence Butler and Amy Rothstein)*

Formal Consensus

We must learn to live together cooperatively, resolving our conflicts nonviolently and making our decisions consensually. We must learn to value diversity and respect all life, not just on a physical level, but emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We are all in this together.

We believe that it is inherently better to involve every person who is affected by the decision in the decision-making process. This is true for several reasons. The decision would reflect the will of the entire group, not just the leadership. The people who carry out the plans will be more satisfied with their work.

Formal Consensus has a clearly defined structure. It requires a commitment to active cooperation, disciplined speaking and listening, and respect for the contributions of every member. Likewise, every person has the responsibility to actively participate as a creative individual within the structure.

Avoidance, denial, and repression of conflict is common during meetings. Therefore, using Formal Consensus might not be easy at first. Unresolved conflict from previous experiences could come rushing forth and make the process difficult, if not impossible. Practice and discipline, however, will smoothen the process. The benefit of everyone's participation and cooperation is worth the struggle it may initially take to ensure that all voices are heard.

Conflict

While decision-making is as much about conflict as it is about agreement, Formal Consensus works best in an atmo-

sphere in which conflict is encouraged, supported, and resolved cooperatively with respect, nonviolence, and creativity. Conflict is desirable. It is not something to be avoided, dismissed, diminished, or denied.

Majority Rule and Competition

Generally speaking, when a group votes using majority rule or parliamentary procedure, a competitive dynamic is created within the group because it is being asked to choose between two (or more) possibilities. It is just as acceptable to attack and diminish another's point of view as it is to promote and endorse your own ideas. Often, voting occurs before one side reveals anything about itself, but spends time solely attacking the opponent ! In this adversarial environment, one's ideas are owned and often defended in the face of improvements.

Consensus and Cooperation

Consensus process, on the other hand, creates a cooperative dynamic. Only one proposal is considered at a time. Everyone works together to make it the best possible decision for the group. Any concerns are raised and resolved, sometimes one by one, until all voices are heard. Since proposals are no longer the property of the presenter, a solution can be created more cooperatively.

Proposals

In the consensus process, only proposals which intend to accomplish the common purpose are considered. During discussion of a proposal, everyone works to improve the proposal to make it the best decision for the group. All proposals are adopted unless the group decides it is contrary to the best interests of the group.

The least violent decision-making process

Traditional nonviolence theory holds that the use of power to dominate is violent and undesirable. Nonviolence expects

people to use their power to persuade without deception, coercion, or malice, using truth, creativity, logic, respect, and love. Majority rule voting process and parliamentary procedure both accept, and even encourage, the use of power to dominate others. The goal is the winning of the vote, often regardless of another choice which might be in the best interest of the whole group. The will of the majority supersedes the concerns and desires of the minority. This is inherently violent. Consensus strives to take into account everyone's concerns and resolve them before any decision is made. Most importantly, this process encourages an environment in which everyone is respected and all contributions are valued.

The most democratic decision-making process

Groups which desire to involve as many people as possible need to use an inclusive process. To attract and involve large numbers, it is important that the process encourages participation, allows equal access to power, develops cooperation, promotes empowerment, and creates a sense of individual responsibility for the group's actions. All of these are cornerstones of Formal Consensus. The goal of consensus is not the selection of several options, but the development of one decision which is the best for the whole group. It is synthesis and evolution, not competition and attrition.

Formal consensus works better when more people participate

Consensus is more than the sum total of ideas of the individuals in the group. During discussion, ideas build one upon the next, generating new ideas, until the best decision emerges. This dynamic is called the creative interplay of ideas. Creativity plays a major part as everyone strives to discover what is best for the group. The more people involved in this cooperative process, the more ideas and possibilities are generated. Consensus works best with everyone participating.

Formal Consensus is not inherently time-consuming

Decisions are not an end in themselves. Decision-making is a process which starts with an idea and ends with the actual implementation of the decision. While it may be true in an autocratic process that decisions can be made quickly, the actual implementation will take time. When one person or a small group of people makes a decision for a larger group, the decision not only has to be communicated to the others, but it also has to be acceptable to them or its implementation will need to be forced upon them. This will certainly take time, perhaps a considerable amount of time. On the other hand, if everyone participates in the decision-making, the decision does not need to be communicated and its implementation does not need to be forced upon the participants. The decision may take longer to make, but once it is made, implementation can happen in a timely manner.

The amount of time a decision takes to make from start to finish is not a factor of the process used; rather, it is a factor of the complexity of the proposal itself. An easy decision takes less time than a difficult, complex decision, regardless of the process used or the number of people involved.

On Decision-making

Decisions are adopted when all participants consent to the result of discussion about the original proposal. People who do not agree with a proposal are responsible for expressing their concerns. No decision is adopted until there is resolution of every concern. When concerns remain after discussion, individuals can agree to disagree by acknowledging that they have unresolved concerns, but consent to the proposal anyway and allow it to be adopted. Therefore, reaching consensus does not assume that everyone must be in complete agreement, a highly unlikely situation in a group of intelligent, creative individuals.

Formal Consensus is presented in levels or cycles. In the first level, the idea is to allow everyone to express their perspective, including concerns, but group time is not spent on resolving problems. In the second level the group focuses its attention on identifying concerns, still not resolving them. This requires discipline. Reactive comments, even funny ones, and resolutions, even good ones, can suppress the creative ideas of others. Not until the third level does the structure allow for exploring resolutions.

Each level has a different scope and focus. At the first level, the scope is broad, allowing the discussion to consider the philosophical and political implications as well as the general merits and drawbacks and other relevant information. The only focus is on the proposal as a whole. Some decisions can be reached after discussion at the first level. At the second level, the scope of the discussion is limited to the concerns. They are identified and publicly listed, which enables everyone to get an overall picture of the concerns. The focus of attention is on identifying the body of concerns and grouping similar ones. At the third level, the scope is very narrow. The focus of discussion is limited to a single unresolved concern until it is resolved.

Try to encourage comments which take the whole proposal into account; i.e., why it is a good idea, or general problems which need to be addressed. Discussion at this level often has a philosophical or principled tone, purposely addressing how this proposal might affect the group in the long run or what kind of precedent it might create, etc. It helps every proposal to be discussed in this way, before the group engages in resolving particular concerns. Do not allow one concern to become the focus of the discussion. When particular concerns are raised, make note of them but encourage the discussion to move back to the proposal as a whole. Encourage the creative inter-

play of comments and ideas. Allow for the addition of any relevant factual information. For those who might at first feel opposed to the proposal, this discussion is consideration of why it might be good for the group in the broadest sense. Their initial concerns might, in fact, be of general concern to the whole group. And, for those who initially support the proposal, this is a time to think about the proposal broadly and some of the general problems.

If there seems to be general approval of the proposal, the facilitator, or someone recognized to speak, can request a call for consensus.

Call for Consensus

The facilitator asks, “Are there any unresolved concerns?” or “Are there any concerns remaining?” After a period of silence, if no additional concerns are raised, the facilitator declares that consensus is reached and the proposal is read for the record.

The length of silence ought to be directly related to the degree of difficulty in reaching consensus; an easy decision requires a short silence, a difficult decision requires a longer silence. This encourages everyone to be at peace in accepting the consensus before moving on to other business. At this point, the facilitator assigns task responsibilities or sends the decision to a committee for implementation.

It is important to note that the question is not “Is there consensus?” or “Does everyone agree?”. These questions do not encourage an environment in which all concerns can be expressed. If some people have a concern, but are shy or intimidated by a strong showing of support for a proposal, the question “Are there any unresolved concerns?” speaks directly to them and provides an opportunity for them to speak. Any concerns for which someone stands aside are listed with the proposal and become a part of it.

Rules of Formal Consensus:

1. Once a decision has been adopted by consensus, it cannot be changed without reaching a new consensus. If a new consensus cannot be reached, the old decision stands.

2. In general, only one person has permission to speak at any moment. The person with permission to speak is determined by the group discussion technique in use and/or the facilitator.

3. All structural decisions (i.e., which roles to use, who fills each role, and which facilitation technique and/or group discussion technique to use) are adopted by consensus without debate. Any objection automatically causes a new selection to be made. If a role cannot be filled without objection, the group proceeds without that role being filled. If much time is spent trying to fill roles or find acceptable techniques, then the group needs a discussion about the unity of purpose of this group and why it is having this problem, a discussion which must be put on the agenda for the next meeting, if not held immediately.

4. All content decisions (i.e., the agenda contract, committee reports, proposals, etc.) are adopted by consensus after discussion. Every content decision must be openly discussed before it can be tested for consensus.

5. A concern must be based upon the principles of the group to justify a block to consensus.

6. Every meeting which uses Formal Consensus must have an evaluation.

On Conflict and Consensus

Conflict is usually viewed as an impediment to reaching agreements and disruptive to peaceful relationships. However, it is the underlying thesis of Formal Consensus that nonviolent conflict is necessary and desirable. It provides the motivations for improvement. The challenge is the creation of an understanding in all who participate that conflict, or differing opin-

ions about proposals, is to be expected and acceptable. Do not avoid or repress conflict. Create an environment in which disagreement can be expressed without fear. Objections and criticisms can be heard not as attacks, not as attempts to defeat a proposal, but as a concern which, when resolved, will make the proposal stronger.

This understanding of conflict may not be easily accepted by the members of a group. Our training by society undermines this concept. Therefore, it will not be easy to create the kind of environment where differences can be expressed without fear or resentment. But it can be done. It will require tolerance and a willingness to experiment. Additionally, the values and principles which form the basis of commitment to work together to resolve conflict need to be clearly defined, and accepted by all involved.

If a group desires to adopt Formal Consensus as its decision-making process, the first step is the creation of a Statement of Purpose or Constitution. This document would describe not only the common purpose, but would also include the definition of the group's principles and values. If the group discusses and writes down its foundation of principles at the start, it is much easier to determine group versus individual concerns later on.

The following are principles which form the foundation of Formal Consensus. A commitment to these principles and/or a willingness to develop them is necessary. In addition to the ones listed herein, the group might add principles and values which are specific to its purpose.

Foundation Upon Which Consensus Is Built

For consensus to work well, the process must be conducted in an environment which promotes trust, respect, and skill sharing. The following are principles which, when valued and respected, encourage and build consensus.

Trust

Foremost is the need for trust. Without some amount of trust, there will be no cooperation or nonviolent resolution to conflict. For trust to flourish, it is desirable for individuals to be willing to examine their attitudes and be open to new ideas. Acknowledgment and appreciation of personal and cultural differences promote trust. Neither approval nor friendship are necessary for a good working relationship. By developing trust, the process of consensus encourages the intellectual and emotional development of the individuals within a group.

Respect

It is everyone's responsibility to show respect to one another. People feel respected when everyone listens, when they are not interrupted, when their ideas are taken seriously. Respect for emotional as well as logical concerns promotes the kind of environment necessary for developing consensus. To promote respect, it is important to distinguish between an action which causes a problem and the person who did the action, between the deed and the doer. We must criticize the act, not the person. Even if you think the person is the problem, responding that way never resolves anything.

Unity of Purpose

Unity of purpose is a basic understanding about the goals and purpose of the group. Of course, there will be varying opinions on the best way to accomplish these goals. However, there must be a unifying base, a common starting point, which is recognized and accepted by all.

Nonviolence

Nonviolent decision-makers use their power to achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating with others. In this environment, it is considered violent to use power to dominate or control the group process. It is understood that the power of revealing your truth is the maximum force allowed

to persuade others to your point of view.

Self-empowerment

It is easy for people to unquestioningly rely on authorities and experts to do their thinking and decision-making for them. If members of a group delegate their authority, intentionally or not, they fail to accept responsibility for the group's decisions. Consensus promotes and depends upon self-empowerment. Anyone can express concerns. Everyone seeks creative solutions and is responsible for every decision. When all are encouraged to participate, the democratic nature of the process increases.

Cooperation

Unfortunately, Western society is saturated in competition. When winning arguments becomes more important than achieving the group's goals, cooperation is difficult, if not impossible. Adversarial attitudes toward proposals or people focus attention on weakness rather than strength. An attitude of helpfulness and support builds cooperation. Cooperation is a shared responsibility in finding solutions to all concerns. Ideas offered in the spirit of cooperation help resolve conflict. The best decisions arise through an open and creative interplay of ideas.

Conflict Resolution

The free flow of ideas, even among friends, inevitably leads to conflict. In this context, conflict is simply the expression of disagreement. Disagreement itself is neither good nor bad. Diverse viewpoints bring into focus and explore the strengths and weaknesses of attitudes, assumptions, and plans. Without conflict, one is less likely to think about and evaluate one's views and prejudices. There is no right decision, only the best one for the whole group. The task is to work together to discover which choice is most acceptable to all members. Avoid blaming anyone for conflict. Blame is inherently violent. It attacks dignity and empowerment. It encourages people

to feel guilty, defensive, and alienated. The group will lose its ability to resolve conflict. People will hide their true feelings to avoid being blamed for the conflict. The presence of conflict can create an occasion for growth. Learn to use it as a catalyst for discovering creative resolutions and for developing a better understanding of each other. With patience, anyone can learn to resolve conflict creatively, without defensiveness or guilt. Groups can learn to nurture and support their members in this effort by allowing creativity and experimentation. This process necessitates that the group continually evaluate and improve these skills.

Commitment to the Group

In joining a group, one accepts a personal responsibility to behave with respect, goodwill, and honesty. Each one is expected to recognize that the group's needs have a certain priority over the desires of the individual. Many people participate in group work in a very egocentric way. It is important to accept the shared responsibility for helping to find solutions to other's concerns.

Active Participation

We all have an inalienable right to express our own best thoughts. We decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Since consensus is a process of synthesis, not competition, all sincere comments are important and valuable. If ideas are put forth as the speaker's property and individuals are strongly attached to their opinions, consensus will be extremely difficult. Stubbornness, closed-mindedness, and possessiveness lead to defensive and argumentative behavior that disrupts the process. For active participation to occur, it is necessary to promote trust by creating an atmosphere in which every contribution is considered valuable. With encouragement, each person can develop knowledge and experience, a sense of responsibility and competency, and the ability to participate.

Equal Access to Power

Because of personal differences (experience, assertiveness, social conditioning, access to information, etc.) and political disparities, some people inevitably have more effective power than others. To balance this inequity, everyone needs to consciously attempt to creatively share power, skills, and information. Avoid hierarchical structures that allow some individuals to assume undemocratic power over others. Egalitarian and accountable structures promote universal access to power.

Patience

Consensus cannot be rushed. Often, it functions smoothly, producing effective, stable results. Sometimes, when difficult situations arise, consensus requires more time to allow for the creative interplay of ideas. During these times, patience is more advantageous than tense, urgent, or aggressive behavior. Consensus is possible as long as each individual acts patiently and respectfully.

Facilitator

The word facilitate means to make easy. A facilitator conducts group business and guides the Formal Consensus process so that it flows smoothly. Rotating facilitation from meeting to meeting shares important skills among the members. If everyone has firsthand knowledge about facilitation, it will help the flow of all meetings. Having two (or more) people facilitate a meeting, is recommended. Having a woman and a man share the responsibilities encourages a more balanced meeting. Also, an inexperienced facilitator may apprentice with a more experienced one. Try to use a variety of techniques throughout the meeting. And remember, a little bit of humour can go a long way in easing tension during a long, difficult meeting.

Goodwill

Always try to assume goodwill. Assume every statement and action is sincerely intended to benefit the group. Assume

that each member understands the group's purpose and accepts the agenda as a contract. Often, when we project our feelings and expectations onto others, we influence their actions. If we treat others as though they are trying to get attention, disrupt meetings, or pick fights, they will often fulfil our expectations.

A resolution to conflict is more likely to occur if we act as though there will be one. This is especially true if someone is intentionally trying to cause trouble or who is emotionally unhealthy. Do not attack the person, but rather, assume goodwill and ask the person to explain to the group how that person's statements or actions are in the best interest of the group. It is also helpful to remember to separate the actor from the action. While the behavior may be unacceptable, the person is not bad. Avoid accusing the person of being the way they behave. Remember, no one has the answer. The group's work is the search for the best and most creative process, one which fosters a mutually satisfying resolution to any concern which may arise.

Generic Vision Statements

Common unity is faith in action. We recognize that with sovereignty of the individual comes personal responsibility for the community. Collectively, we are committed to open and honest communication. Together, we can create an environment where conflict and differences are expressed openly and safely.

Individually, we practice nonviolence. As individuals and as a group, we are constantly in the process of evolving the ability to resolve conflict without violence.

We are committed to living simply. We do not own people or things. We have open, non-possessive, honest, egalitarian relationships with consenting peers. We are all students and teachers. We give unconditional support to those dependent upon us. We are stewards of the earth and all her relations. We strive for sustainable systems in all our endeavors.

Within our community, we are creating a social order

which is based upon honesty and trust, nonviolence and self-empowerment, and equality and democracy. Within the larger society, we are an alternative society with a vision of encouraging the outbreak of peace. We are not turning away from the existing society; we are the hope and the future of society.

Generic Principles

The following is a list of words and phrases from the Vision Statement. Each needs to be defined, in two or three paragraphs (or more), by the membership. This would be a living document, meaning the definitions would evolve, over time, to more accurately reflect the intent and consent of the group.

- Common unity
- Faith in action
- Sovereignty of the individual
- Personal responsibility
- Community
- Collective
- Committed
- Open and honest communication
- Create an open and safe environment
- Conflict
- Nonviolence
- The ability to resolve conflict without violence
- Living simply
- Non-possessive
- Honest
- Egalitarian
- Relationships with consenting peers
- All students and teachers
- Unconditional support to those dependent upon us
- Stewards of the earth and all her relations

- Sustainable systems
- Social order based upon honesty and trust, nonviolence and self-empowerment, and equality and democracy
- An alternative society
- Vision
- Outbreak of peace
- The hope and the future of society

A Revolutionary Decision-Making Process

If you were asked to pick one thing that might bring about major social, political, and economic change in this country, what would you pick? Most people would pick their favorite issue; be it civil rights, demilitarization, environmental sustainability, or whatever. Some people would choose a system of values to replace the capitalism system such as socialism or the Ten Key Values of the Greens. But few people would even think of changing group dynamics (the way people treat each other when interacting with one another in a group); or specifically, the process they use when making decisions.

Process is the key to revolutionary change. This is not a new message. Visionaries have long pointed to this but it is a hard lesson to learn. As recently as the 70s, feminists clearly defined the lack of an alternative process for decision-making and group interaction as the single most important obstacle in the way of real change, both within progressive organizations and for society at large. Despite progress on many issues of concern to progressive-minded people, very little has changed in the way people treat each other, either locally or globally, and almost nothing has changed about who makes the decisions.

The values of competition, which allow us to accept the idea that somebody has to lose; the structure of hierarchy, which, by definition, creates power elites; and the techniques

of domination and control, which dehumanize and alienate all parties affected by their use, are the standards of group interaction with which we were all conditioned. There are but a few models in our society which offer an alternative.

All groups, no matter what their mission or political philosophy, use some form of process to accomplish their work. Almost all groups, no matter where they fall on the social, political, and economic spectrum of society, have a hierarchical structure, accept competition as “natural”, acceptable, and even desirable, and put a good deal of effort into maintaining control of their members. It is telling that in our society, there are opposing groups, with very different perspectives and values, which have identical structures and techniques for interaction and decision-making. If you played a theater game in which both groups wore the same costumes and masks and spoke in gibberish rather than words, a spectator would not be able to tell them apart.

So what would an alternative revolutionary decision-making process look like, you ask? To begin with, a fundamental shift from competition to cooperation. This does not mean to do away with competition. Ask any team coach what the key to victory is and you will be told “cooperation within the team”. The fundamental shift is the use of competition not to win, which is just a polite way of saying to dominate, to beat, to destroy, to kill the opposition; but rather, to use competition to do or be the best. In addition, the cooperative spirit recognizes that it is not necessary to attack another’s efforts in order to do your best; in fact, the opposite is true. In most situations, helping others do their best actually increases your ability to do better. And in group interactions, the cooperative spirit actually allows the group’s best to be better than the sum of its parts.

Cooperation is more than “live and let live”. It is making an effort to understand another’s point of view. It is incorpo-

rating another's perspective with your own so that a new perspective emerges. It is suspending disbelief, even if only temporarily, so you can see the gem of truth in ideas other than your own. It is a process of creativity, synthesis, and open-mindedness which leads to trust-building, better communication and understanding, and ultimately, a stronger, healthier, more successful group.

The next step is the development of an organization which is non-hierarchical or egalitarian. A corresponding structure would include: participatory democracy, routine universal skill-building and information-sharing, rotation of leadership roles, frequent evaluations, and, perhaps most importantly, equal access to power. Hierarchical structures are not, in and of themselves, the problem. But their use concentrates power at the top and, invariably, the top becomes less and less accessible to the people at the bottom, who are usually most affected by the decisions made by those at the top. Within groups (and within society itself), there becomes a power elite. In an egalitarian structure, everyone has access to power and every position of power is accountable to everyone.

This does not mean that there are no leaders. But the leaders actively share skills and information. They recognize that leadership is a role empowered by the entire group, not a personal characteristic. A group in which most or all of the members can fill any of the leadership roles cannot easily be dominated, internally or externally.

The last and most visible step toward revolutionary change in group process is the manner in which members of the group interact with each other. Dominating attitudes and controlling behaviour would not be tolerated. People would show respect and expect to be shown respect. Everyone would be doing their personal best to help the group reach decisions which are in the best interest of the group. There would be no posturing and

taking sides. Conflicts would be seen as an opportunity for growth, expanding people's thinking, sharing new information, and developing new solutions which include everyone's perspectives. The group would create an environment where everyone was encouraged to participate, conflict was freely expressed, and resolutions were in the best interest of everyone involved. Indubitably, this would be revolutionary.

- 3 -

(Excerpts from the speeches of Vinoba in the 1950's during his Bhoodan [Land-gift] Movement)

The will to power in men needs to be rooted out. To rein in this will to power, everyone has been given the right to vote in a democracy. This implies that distribution of power is the first step.

When men differ from each other in every respect, what could be the basis for granting this right to all? Unity of soul could be the only basis for it.

But although democracy has given the right to vote to everyone, it stipulates counting of votes and the power is entrusted to those securing majority, howsoever thin it may be. The ideologues of democracy should, in fact, understand that this is not a question of arithmetic; for the idea of the unity of soul is a metaphysical rather than a mathematical idea.

Sarvodaya removes this anomaly. It says that everybody's ideas should be respected. It is wrong to consider that three out of five are right and two are wrong; it is the unanimous opinion of all the five that should be upheld. It is because of the rejection of this principle that the whole world is now torn with conflicts between majorities and minorities.

We want decision-making by consensus. We should think over the ways and means to bring this about. The UN Security Council has adopted this principle. The Quakers too follow this principle. This is just a beginning. We should make further experiments in this direction.

All may not agree on all the points. There may be some difference of opinion. Those having a different opinion may express it, but may not stand in the way of the rest. We can call this '*sarvanumati*' (consent by all) as against '*sarvasammati*' (total agreement).

An objection is often raised that a single man may be able to block any decision, defying all others. What could then be done? The man may be right or he may just be obdurate. If he is right, he will make others understand his point of view. If he is obdurate, the village community should devise ways to bring him round. It should be creative enough to do so.

Consensus may not be reached in a few village communities; but that would obstruct their progress, while the communities that succeed in doing so would go ahead. That would make the former sit up and set them thinking. It is through love that real progress takes place; not through fear. One has to be patient. A child sows a seed, but has no patience to let it take its own time for germination. This is not how the adults should behave. When the people realize that one should not stick to one's views obstinately at the cost of the village unity, consensus will not be difficult to achieve.

In fact, majoritarianism is against human nature; consensus is more in keeping with it.

- 3 -

Mendha (Lekha) and the Theory and Practice of Consensus

(Mohan Hirabai Hiralal)

Consensus decision-making has been and is being attempted in some intentional communities. Gandhian thinkers have advocated its use in the village communities governing themselves; in fact, they have held that it is an essential condition for the village community to become and remain self-governing. However, this is, more often than not, dismissed out of hand as Utopian. Consensus decision-making is not deemed possible in a village community.

Mendha (Lekha) has proved that it is possible.

And if one village can do it, any village or any small community—even urban community—can do it.

People of Mendha (Lekha), a village in the Gadchiroli district in Maharashtra, have declared that '*We have our government in Delhi and Mumbai, but in our village we ourselves are the government*', that is, while they send their representatives, like all Indian citizens, to the State Assembly and the Central Parliament, they govern themselves at the village level. They have made their own laws, rules and regulations for their governance. All decisions regarding the village affairs and its development are taken in the village assembly—the real *Gramsabha* or the *Gaon-samaj sabha*—consisting of all the adult men and women in the village. Every issue is thoroughly debated therein. Everyone's active participation is sought and encouraged and valued. And all the decisions are taken by consensus.

The villagers of Mendha had no knowledge of the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi—hearing about C.T. Lawrence Butler and

Amy Rothstein was out of question—when they decided on their own accord to take decisions about the village affairs by consensus. It was their own innate wisdom that made them take this decision. And they have since stuck to that resolve against all odds. It was only in 1987 that they came to know about Mahatma Gandhi and his seminal work 'Hind-Swaraj' during the Participatory study on People and Forest. And only recently did they learn that writers like C.T. Lawrence Butler and Amy Rothstein in the West have written extensively on the theory of consensus as the only worthwhile method of decision-making in human groups.

The residents of Mendha can learn much from such thinkers; and they too can make their own contribution to the theory as well as practice of consensus. They have, in fact, already made singular contribution.

The method of Consensus decision-making is being successfully practised in Mendha. What could be the reason?

The easy answer is—Because it is a homogeneous community with all the residents belonging to a single tribe—the Gonds.

But is it so?

Mendha (Lekha) is not the only village which is homogeneous. Then why does't this happen in all homogeneous villages?

Clearly, it is not a potential that is an exclusive prerogative of any caste, class, religion, race or gender. It is a human potential. That it is dormant now is a fact. But it can surely be activated, just as a seed gets germinated when proper conditions are provided for the same. Proper conditions need to be provided for the activation of human potentials too.

Mendha's experience shows that a particular structure and a particular way of working are conducive to the success of the consensus model.

In Mendha, the forum for decision-making is the Village Community Council (*Gaon-Samaj Sabha*). All the adult villagers participate in it. Such participation is possible because the number of the members is limited. Everybody knows everybody else. The geographical area of the village is such that the villagers can assemble at any time with short notice. These, then, are the key factors. The number of the persons in the group and the geographical area in which they live should be such that active participation by all is possible.

The villagers in the Mendha have resolved to take decisions by consensus only. Everybody is aware of it. So consensus is not tried half-heartedly and abandoned at the slightest pretext. Participation of those with different views is not only tolerated or encouraged, but deliberate efforts are also made to ensure it, and their views are respected. Such persons know this. This serves in preventing the formation of groups.

Mendha has resolved that at least one male and one female member of each household must attend the meetings of the *gaon-samaj-sabha*. If they fail to do so, they are fined. Participation of women in the village affairs is at best token everywhere. Reservation for them in the *panchayat* bodies have hardly made any difference. That Mendha has made participation of at least one woman from every house compulsory is significant in this context.

Decisions are taken in the village assembly. But it is not possible to debate all the issues thoroughly there. Sometimes, help from outside experts and knowledgeable friends is necessary to know the relevant facts and different facets of the issue. So Mendha has complemented the village assembly with a study circle. Alongwith the villagers having an appetite for knowledge and interest in debating various issues, friends from outside the village too can participate in the study circle; and, at times, their participation is sought to know more about the

issue at hand. The study circle is not a formally structured body; it has no definite membership. Participation in it is voluntary, not compulsory, unlike that in the village assembly. It can meet as many times as the people want; as the situation warrants. And it meets at a public place openly. When consensus eludes the village assembly, the issue in question is referred to the study circle for review and more in-depth discussion. The study circle is not supposed to take any decision; that is clearly the prerogative of the village assembly. Its function is to help the village assembly in taking proper decisions.

While consensus model is adopted for decision-making, it logically follows that implementation should also ensure maximum possible participation. In fact, it is an essential corollary. Mendha is aware of it. The system of Bank account operation may be mentioned in this context. The community authorises two persons to operate the account, a third person to keep the pass book, and a fourth one to keep the accounts. This authorisation is not for any specific period; any time it can be changed. This also ensures transparency in financial matters and obviates corruption which is the bane of the present democratic and bureaucratic structures.

Appendix :

Extracts from the book 'HIND-SWARAJ' or INDIAN HOME RULE by M. K. Gandhi (1909)

CHAPTER V THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND

Reader: Then from your statement I deduce that the Government of England is not desirable, and not worth copying by us.

Editor: Your deduction is justified. The condition of England at present is pitiable. I pray to God that India may never be in that plight. That which you consider to be the Mother of Parliaments is like a sterile woman and a prostitute. Both these are harsh terms, but exactly fit the case. That Parliament has not yet, of its own accord, done a single good thing. Hence I have compared it to a sterile woman. The natural condition of that Parliament is such that, without outside pressure, it can do nothing. It is like a prostitute because it is under the control of ministers who change from time to time. Today it is under Mr. Asquith, tomorrow it may be under Mr. Balfour.

Reader: You have said this sarcastically. The term "sterile woman" is not applicable. The Parliament being elected by the people, must work under public pressure. This is its quality.

Editor: You are mistaken. Let us examine it a little more closely. The best men are supposed to be elected by the people. The members serve without pay and therefore, it must be assumed, only for the public weal. The electors are considered to be educated and therefore we should assume that they would not generally make mistakes in their choice. Such a Parliament should not need the spur of petitions or any other pressure. Its work should be so smooth that its effects would be more apparent day by day. But, as a matter of fact, it is generally acknowledged that the members are hypocritical and selfish. Each thinks of his own little interest. It is fear that is the guiding motive. What is done today may be undone tomorrow. It is not possible to recall a single in-

stance in which finality can be predicted for its work. When the greatest questions are debated, its members have been seen to stretch themselves and to doze. Sometimes the members talk away until the listeners are disgusted. Carlyle has called it the "talking shop of the world". Members vote for their party without a thought. Their so-called discipline binds them to it. If any member, by way of exception, gives an independent vote, he is considered a renegade. If the money and the time wasted by Parliament were entrusted to a few good men, the English nation would be occupying today a much higher platform. Parliament is simply a costly toy of the nation. These views are by no means peculiar to me. Some great English thinkers have expressed them. One of the members of that Parliament recently said that a true Christian could not become a member of it. Another said that it was a baby. And if it has remained a baby after an existence of seven hundred years, when will it outgrow its babyhood?

Reader: You have set me thinking. You do not expect me to accept at once all you say. You give me entirely novel views. I shall have to digest them. Will you now explain the epithet "prostitute"?

Editor: That you cannot accept my views at once is only right. If you will read the literature on this subject, you will have some idea of it. Parliament is without a real master. Under the Prime Minister, its movement is not steady but it is buffeted about like a prostitute. The Prime Minister is more concerned about his power than about the welfare of Parliament. His energy is concentrated upon securing the success of his party. His care is not always that Parliament shall do right. Prime Ministers are known to have made Parliament do things merely for party advantage. All this is worth thinking over.

Reader: Then you are really attacking the very men whom we have hitherto considered to be patriotic and honest?

Editor: Yes, that is true. I can have nothing against Prime Ministers, but what I have seen leads me to think that they cannot be

considered really patriotic. If they are to be considered honest because they do not take what are generally known as bribes, let them be so considered, but they are open to subtler influences. In order to gain their ends, they certainly bribe people with honors. I do not hesitate to say that they have neither real honesty nor a living conscience.

CHAPTER XVI BRUTE FORCE

Reader: This is a new doctrine, that what is gained through fear is retained only while the fear lasts. Surely, what is given will not be withdrawn?

Editor: Not so. The Proclamation of 1857 was given at the end of a revolt, and for the purpose of preserving peace. When peace was secured and people became simple-minded its full effect was toned down. If I cease stealing for fear of punishment, I would recommence the operation as soon as the fear is withdrawn from me. This is almost a universal experience. We have assumed that we can get men to do things by force and, therefore, we use force.

Reader: Will you not admit that you are arguing against yourself? You know that what the English obtained in their own country they obtained by using brute force. I know you have argued that what they have obtained is useless, but that does not affect my argument. They wanted useless things and they got them. My point is that their desire was fulfilled. What does it matter what means they adopted? Why should we not obtain our goal, which is good, by any means whatsoever even by using violence? Shall I think of the means when I have to deal with a thief in the house? My duty is to drive him out anyhow. You seem to admit that we have received nothing, and that we shall receive nothing by petitioning. Why, then, may we not do so by using brute force? And, to retain what we may receive we shall keep up the fear by using the same force to the extent that it may be necessary. You will not find fault with a continuance of force to prevent a child from thrusting its foot into fire. Somehow or other we have to gain our end.

Editor: Your reasoning is plausible. It has deluded many. I have used similar arguments before now. But I think I know better now, and I shall endeavor to undeceive you. Let us first take the argument that we are justified in gaining our end by using brute force because the English gained theirs by using similar means. It is perfectly true that they used brute force and that it is possible for us to do likewise, but by using similar means we can get only the same thing that they got. You will admit that we do not want that. Your belief that there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake. Through that mistake even men who have been considered religious have committed grievous crimes. Your reasoning is the same as saying that we can get a rose through planting a noxious weed. If I want to cross the ocean, I can do so only by means of a vessel; if I were to use a cart for that purpose, both the cart and I would soon find the bottom. "As is the God, so is the votary", is a maxim worth considering. Its meaning has been distorted and men have gone astray. The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. I am not likely to obtain the result flowing from the worship of God by laying myself prostrate before Satan. If, therefore, anyone were to say: "I want to worship God; it does not matter that I do so by means of Satan," it would be set down as ignorant folly. We reap exactly as we sow. The English in 1833 obtained greater voting power by violence. Did they by using brute force better appreciate their duty? They wanted the right of voting, which they obtained by using physical force. But real rights are a result of performance of duty; these rights they have not obtained. We, therefore, have before us in England the force of everybody wanting and insisting on his rights, nobody thinking of his duty. And, where everybody wants rights, who shall give them to whom? I do not wish to imply that they do no duties. They don't perform the duties corresponding to those rights; and as they do not perform that particular duty, namely, acquire fitness, their rights have proved a burden to them. In other

words, what they have obtained is an exact result of the means they adopted. They used the means corresponding to the end. If I want to deprive you of your watch, I shall certainly have to fight for it; if I want to buy your watch, I shall have to pay you for it; and if I want a gift, I shall have to plead for it; and, according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation. Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?

Now we shall take the example given by you of the thief to be driven out. I do not agree with you that the thief may be driven out by any means. If it is my father who has come to steal I shall use one kind of means. If it is an acquaintance I shall use another, and in the case of a perfect stranger I shall use a third. If it is a White man, you will perhaps say you will use means different from those you will adopt with an Indian thief. If it is a weakling, the means will be different from those to be adopted for dealing with an equal in physical strength; and if the thief is armed from top to toe, I shall simply remain quiet. Thus we have a variety of means between the father and the armed man. Again, I fancy that I should pretend to be sleeping whether the thief was my father or that strong armed man. The reason for this is that my father would also be armed and I should succumb to the strength possessed by either and allow my things to be stolen. The strength of my father would make me weep with pity; the strength of the armed man would rouse in me anger and we should become enemies. Such is the curious situation. From these examples we may

It is a superstition and ungodly thing to believe that an act of a majority binds a minority. Many examples can be given in which acts of majorities will be found to have been wrong and those of minorities to have been right. All reforms owe their origin to the initiation of minorities in opposition to majorities. If among a band of robbers a knowledge of robbing is obligatory, is a pious man to accept the obligation? So long as the superstition that men should obey unjust laws exists, so long will their slavery exist.

- M. K. Gandhi

not be able to agree as to the means to be adopted in each case. I myself seem clearly to see what should be done in all these cases, but the remedy may frighten you. I therefore hesitate to place it before you. For the time being I will leave you to guess it, and if you cannot, it is clear you will have to adopt different means in each case. You will also have seen that any means will not avail to drive away the thief. You will have to adopt means to fit each case. Hence it follows that your duty is *not* to drive away the thief by any means you like.

Let us proceed a little further. That well-armed man has stolen your property; you have harboured the thought of his act; you are filled with anger; you argue that you want to punish that rogue, not for your own sake, but for the good of your neighbours; you have collected a number of armed men, you want to take his house by assault; he is duly informed of it, he runs away; he too is incensed. He collects his brother robbers, and sends you a defiant message that he will commit robbery in broad daylight. You are strong, you do not fear him, you are prepared to receive him. Meanwhile the robber pesters your neighbours. They complain before you. You reply that you are doing all for their sake; you do not mind that your own goods have been stolen. Your neighbours reply that the robber never pestered them before, and that he commenced his depredations only after you declared hostilities against him. You are between Scylla and Charybdis. You are full of pity for the poor men. What they say is true. What are you to do? You will be disgraced if you now leave the robber alone. You, therefore, tell the poor men: "Never mind. Come, my wealth is yours. I will give you arms, I will teach you how to use them; you should belabour the rogue; don't you leave him alone." And so the battle grows; the robbers increase in numbers; your neighbors have deliberately put themselves to inconvenience. Thus the result of wanting to take revenge upon the robber is that you have disturbed your own peace; you are in perpetual fear of being robbed and assaulted; your courage has given place to cowardice. If you will patiently examine the argument, you will see

that I have not overdrawn the picture. This is one of the means. Now let us examine the other. You set this armed robber down as an ignorant brother; you intend to reason with him at a suitable opportunity: you argue that he is, after all, a fellow-man; you do not know what prompted him to steal. You, therefore, decide that, when you can, you will destroy the man's motive for stealing. Whilst you are thus reasoning with yourself, the man comes again to steal. Instead of being angry with him you take pity on him. You think that this stealing habit must be a disease with him. Henceforth, you, therefore, keep your doors and windows open, you change your sleeping place, and you keep your things in a manner most accessible to him. The robber comes again and is confused as all this is new to him; nevertheless he takes away your things. But his mind is agitated. He inquires about you in the village, he comes to learn about your broad and loving heart, he repents, he begs your pardon, returns you your things, and leaves off the stealing habit. He becomes your servant, and you find for him honorable employment. This is the second method. Thus, you see, different means have brought about totally different results. I do not wish to deduce from this that robbers will act in the above manner or that all will have the same pity and love like you. But I only wish to show that fair means alone can produce fair results, and that, at least in the majority of cases, if not indeed in all, the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms. There is harm in the exercise of brute force, never in that of pity.

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