



Consensus Decision Making is a powerful tool used by the peace movement. While most people would generally agree with the idea of Consensus Decision Making, people often dismiss it as unrealistic or fail to realise its carefully developed process, which has evolved over many years. Formative to the way many peace activists work, Consensus Decision Making has grown from the philosophy of nonviolence and the belief that means must be consistent with ends, or the process is as important as the result. This article provides a brief introduction to Consensus Decision Making.

CDM: What it is and How it Works

Consensus Decision Making (CDM) is a creative decision making process by which participants are empowered to discuss, explore and decide upon the best way forward collectively. CDM is based around all participants having the opportunity to voice their opinions and objections, in the hope of uniting on the way forward, and avoiding power struggles within the group. It is based upon mutual respect, listening, cooperation and a commitment to the philosophy of the process.

There are many ways of using CDM, but generally most models follow a similar process, where a group comes together to look at a specific issue with one/ two people facilitating.

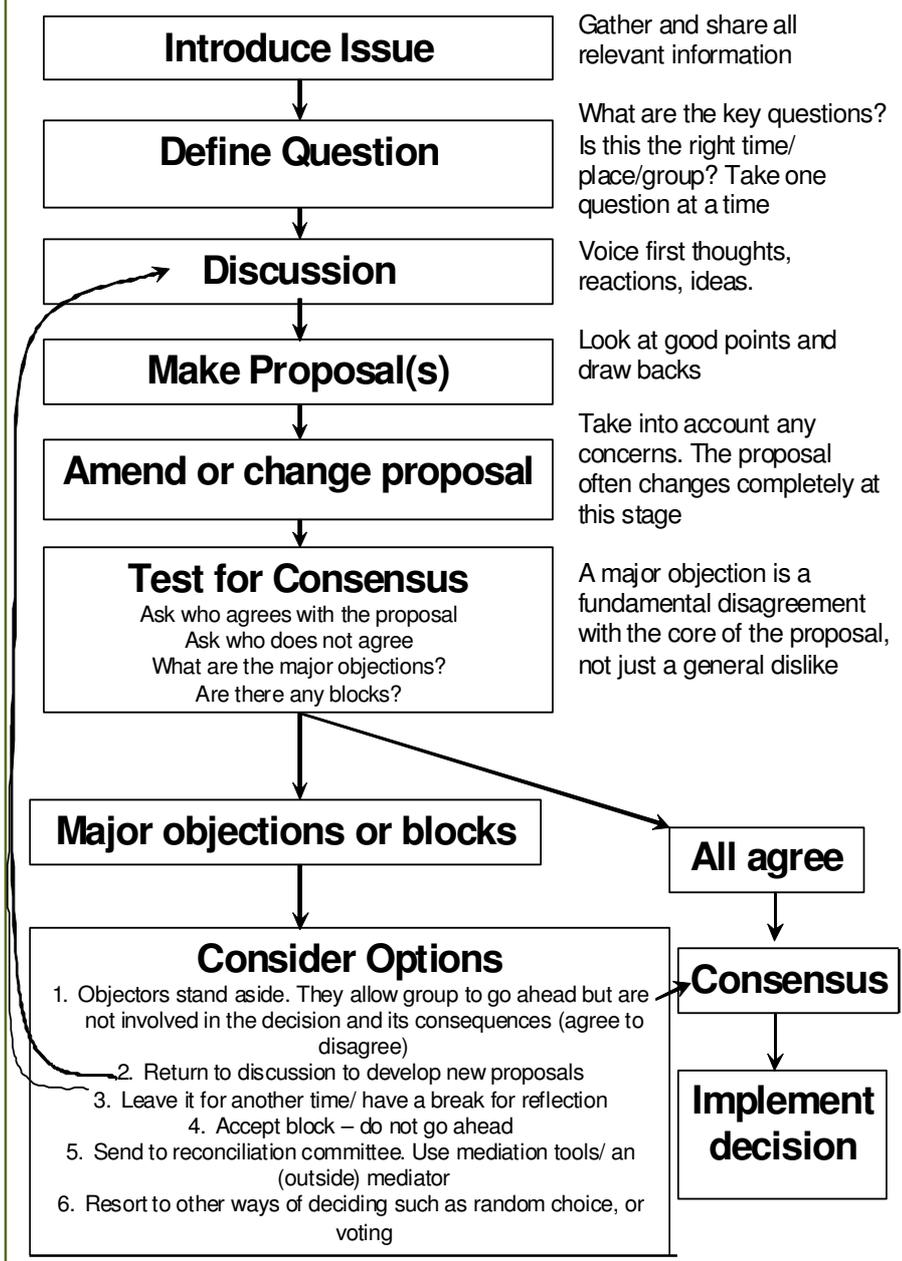
- The issue is presented to the group with all the relevant information shared and understood, and from this, the questions which need to be resolved are clarified.
- Each question in turn is discussed by the group and when appropriate, suggested solutions are made.
- These proposals are then discussed with further questions asked, advantages and concerns articulated and addressed and amendments made.
- The group is then asked whether they have come to consensus and participants have a number of options available to them. They can agree to the proposal, stand aside (which means they personally do not agree with the proposed solution, but are happy for the group to go ahead if they wish) or object.

When someone objects (sometimes called blocking) this means that they believe the proposed solution is unacceptable, inhumane or do not want to participate and disagree with the action suggested.

At this point, stages of the process may need to be repeated a few times before consensus is reached. There are a number of ways of proceeding including taking a break for reflection, the group deciding not to go forward with the proposed action, reconciliation methods could be used to bring the group to consensus, or another form of decision making could be used instead. In most cases once the steps are repeated a few times, consensus can be reached. See the diagram for a visual representation of this process.

For CDM to work there needs to be certain conditions in place. These not only allow the process to be used most effectively, but without them, the process will fail:

Consensus Decision-Making Flowchart





Actions to Take and Resources

- **Fellowship of Reconciliation** is holding a practical training weekend in July 2009 on Nonviolence as a (Practical) Tool for Change. The weekend will provide training on many of the methods of nonviolence used by the peace movement, including CDM. Email Martha@for.org.uk, visit www.for.org.uk/tw2009 or phone 01865 250 781 for more details.

- **Seeds for Change** is a non-profit activist co-op which works with activists and campaigners in the UK to help them organise for action and positive social change. They offer some free workshops and training for grassroots campaigners, and briefings and resources on practical campaigning skills and working in groups. Their website is <http://seedsforchange.org.uk/>.

- **Turning the Tide**, a programme of Quaker Peace and Social Witness, explores and promotes the understanding and use of active nonviolence for positive change. TTT offers resources and workshops. More details on www.turning-the-tide.org, by phoning: 0207 663 1064/ 1061 or emailing denised@quaker.org.uk or stevew@quaker.org.uk.

- **War Resisters International** have published the Handbook for Nonviolence Campaigns with discussion and exploration of how social change happens, and practical examples and exercises from previous nonviolent campaigns. Their website can be found at <http://www.wri-irg.org/>.

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- The group need to be committed to the process of CDM. The process is based upon respect and cooperation for one another and the issue being openly addressed. If people are not committed to it, then the process will not work.
- The group need to have a collective goal around which they are united. They need to be committed to this goal and returning to it during CDM is often found to be useful.
- CDM is not a quick and easy tool: for the whole group to be involved in the process in a constructive way, time and patience are needed.[1]
- A clear process needs to be followed for CDM to work in the most effective way. This process will need to be adapted to the individual needs of the group concerned, but it is important that everyone in that group understands what's happening and the stages of the process.

For many CDM is a revolutionary process which allows 'thinking outside of the box' as ideas are developed and modified into a solution the group can agree with. *On Conflict and Consensus* describes how "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." [2]

CDM also seeks to create a safe space for concerns, differences and conflicts within the group to be openly addressed and overcome, so that when a solution is found, the group as a whole will own the solution.

The Difficulties of Consensus Decision Making

CDM is by no means an easy way of working and making decisions. However it is one which empowers all participants. It requires practice and participants to exert discipline. Individually this means recognising that the group may decide not to follow your suggestions, or may decide to take actions which you do not want to participate in. It is natural that disagreements occur, and these can help the process by teasing out alternative solutions and challenge participants to actively cooperate.

CDM is also not always appropriate to use, for example:

- When there is no group unity or focus on an issue
- When the group have no good choices available to them and so is choosing between two evils
- In emergency situations when immediate action is necessary, it may be better to have a leader to make decisions on the group's behalf
- On trivial issues
- When the group has insufficient information and so cannot make an informed decision.

As in all decision making processes, CDM can be manipulated by participants who are not fully committed to the process. However, unlike in other decision making processes, this is more obvious to the group as a whole in CDM, and thus can be openly addressed.

As described by Seeds for Change: "Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Don't be discouraged if the going gets rough. For most of us consensus is a completely new way of making decisions. It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Consensus does get easier with practice and it's definitely worth giving it a good try." [3]

References

[1] Unless Quick Decision Making, a form of CDM is used, This involves a pre-arranged facilitator and uses a slightly different process.

[2] <http://www.consensus.net/ocac1.html>.

[3] <http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consens>.

With thanks to Seeds for Change and Jon Dorset for use of the images.