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**

- **Introduce Issue**
  - Gather and share all relevant information
- **Define Question**
  - What are the key information?
  - Is this the right time/place/group? Take one question at a time
- **Discussion**
  - Voice first thoughts, reactions, ideas.
  - Look at good points and draw backs
- **Make Proposal(s)**
  - Take into account any concerns. The proposal often changes completely at this stage
- **Test for Consensus**
  - Ask who agrees with the proposal
  - Ask who does not agree
  - What are the major objections?
  - Are there any blocks?
  - A major objection is a fundamental disagreement with the core of the proposal, not just a general dislike
- **Major objections or blocks**
  - All agree
  - Consensus
  - Implement decision

- **Consider Options**
  1. Objectors stand aside. They allow group to go ahead but are not involved in the decision and its consequences (agree to disagree)
  2. Return to discussion to develop new proposals
  3. Leave it for another time/have a break for reflection
  4. Accept block - do not go ahead
  5. Send to reconciliation committee. Use mediation tools/ an (outside) mediator
  6. Resort to other ways of deciding such as random choice, or voting
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 Consensus Decision Making describes how “Consensus is more than the sum total of ideas of the individuals in the group. During discussion, ideas build upon 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.

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