by calling it an arrest of a barrel and saying that the police would give Miloševic the money for his retirement. No matter what the regime did, it lost.

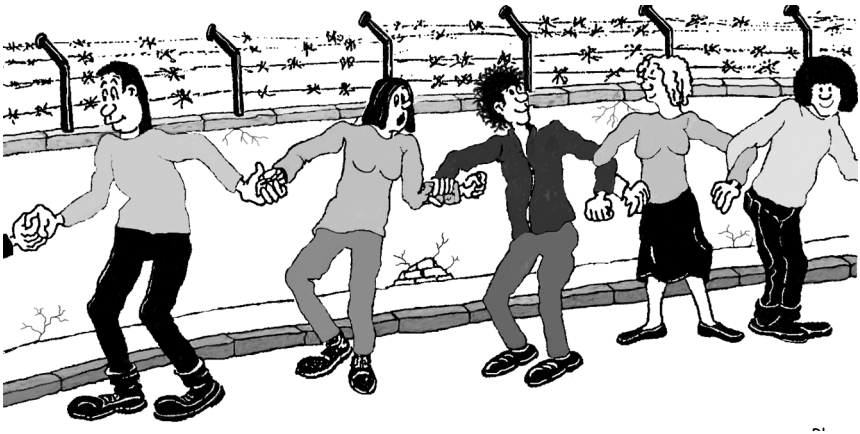
✱ *You can find Majken's dissertation on humour and nonviolence on the Website of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Coventry University http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/external/content/1/c4/11/36/v1202125859/user/Humour%20as%20Nonviolent%20Resistance.pdf*

Working in Groups

A challenge for any nonviolent movement is how to prepare its actions. Since the 1976 occupation of the Seabrook nuclear power site, in New Hampshire, USA, (see 'Seabrook-Wyhl-Marckolsheim', p96) a number of Western nonviolent campaigns have favoured using an affinity group model of action coupled with consensus decision-making. This section introduces that style.

Affinity Groups

'Affinity groups' are autonomous groups of 5 to 15 persons. An affinity group in this sense is a group of people who not only have an affinity for each other, but who know each other's strengths and weaknesses and support each other as they participate (or intend to participate) in a nonviolent campaign together. Affinity groups and spokescouncils (see p71) challenge top-down, power-over decision-making and organising and empower those involved to take creative direct action. They allow people to act together in a decentralised and non-hierarchical way by giving decision-making power to the affinity group. Affinity groups have been used constructively in mass anti-globalisation actions in the USA (Seattle 1997), anti-nuclear protests in Europe and North America (beginning in the 1970s), and other large and small nonviolent protest actions in many countries.



With Whom Does One Create an Affinity Group?

The simple answer is: with people you know and who have similar opinions about the issue(s) in question and the methods of action to use to address it. They could be people you meet at an educational seminar, work with, socialise with, or live with. The point to stress, however, is that you have something in common other than the issue bringing you together and that you have mutual trust.

An important aspect of being part of an affinity group is to learn each other's standpoints regarding the campaign or issue and your preferred methods of action. This can involve sharing time together, discussing the issues and methods of action, or doing some form of activist-related training together (like attending a workshop) or working out how to deal with an opponent's or the police's tactics (e.g., counter-demonstrations, misinformation campaigns, agents provocateurs). You should develop a shared idea of what you want individually and collectively from the action/campaign, how it will conceivably go, what support you will need from others, and what you can offer others. It helps if you have agreement on certain basic things about the action: how active, how spiritual, how nonviolent, how deep a relationship, how willing to risk arrest, when you might want to bail-out, your overall political perspective, your action methods, etc.

Group Process

Working in groups, whether in our own families, at workshops, or in continuing organisations, is one of the most basic social activities and is a large part of work for social change. Therefore, it is important that groups working for change develop effective, satisfying, democratic methods of doing necessary tasks, both for their own use and to share with others.

Eliminating authoritarian and hierarchical structures is a form of democratising groups, but it does not mean rejecting all structures. A good group needs to facilitate creativity, community, and effectiveness, in a combination that encourages nonviolence to flourish in ourselves and our society. Good group functioning is a product of cooperative structures and the intelligent, responsible participation of the group's members.

Agreements/Ground Rules

Even if it is an informal group and everyone is relaxed, a group agreement about ground rules is wise. A group contract or a set of rules for the workshop or group, to which everyone agrees, is a very useful guide for the process of a group. It can be referred to if difficulties should arise. And it can, of course, be adapted or changed. The group decides what to include. For example, a group might agree to start meetings on time, to encourage equal participation, to make decisions with consensus, to take turns facilitating group work, to have only one person speaking at a time, to speak for yourself only, to respect confidentiality, not to bar any question or treat it as stupid, not to allow put-downs, to only volunteer yourself, etc. Many people are now familiar with these ground rules, so a facilitator might draw up a suggested list that the group can

adapt. It is important to have active agreement from everyone in the group to make a 'contract' with each other.

One issue that might require clarification is the meaning of 'confidentiality' for this group. Does it mean not sharing anything from the workshop, or does it mean that broad themes and what was done can be shared but that no quotes are given or attributed directly to anyone, or does it mean only not repeating personal stories of group members? The longer the workshop or the more intense or personal the issue, the less experienced people are in group work, or the more sensitive the topic, the more time you may need to spend on clarifying and agreeing to ground rules. Do remember that if the group's situation changes, it may review the 'contract' and decide change the 'rules'. This is an important difference between rules that are imposed upon a group and rules that a group contracts together to follow of their own free will.

✱ *See also 'Principles of Nonviolence', p30.*

Facilitating Group Meetings

Affinity groups often decide to use facilitators to help the group meet its needs. Members of the group often take turns playing this role. A facilitator accepts responsibility to help the group accomplish a common task, for example, moving through the agenda in the time available and making necessary decisions and plans. A facilitator does not make decisions for the group, but suggests ways that will help the group move forward. He or she works in such a way that allows the others to be aware that they are in charge, that their business is being conducted, and that each person has a role to play.

It is important to emphasise that the facilitator's responsibility is to the group and its work, rather than to the individuals within the group. Furthermore, a person with a high stake in the issues will have more difficulty functioning as a good facilitator.

✱ *For more detailed information about group facilitation, see 'Meeting Facilitation — The No-Magic Method' by Berit Lakey (http://www.reclaiming.org/resources/consensus/blakey.html) and the information in Section Four, 'Tasks and Tools for Organising and Facilitating Trainings' (p27).*

Special Roles in a Group Meeting

Taking turns at the various roles in a group helps individuals experience different facets of the group's behaviour and strengthens an affinity group. In addition to the meeting facilitator (who helps the group through its agenda), other roles support the work of the group. These special roles become very useful if the group is larger or if it wants to pay special attention to improving the group process on specific issues.

- A co-facilitator to aid the facilitator.
- A note-taker who records decisions and makes sure everyone has a copy so that they know what decisions the group has taken.
- A time-keeper to help keep the group informed about how well it is following its time plan and progressing towards completing its agenda.

Other roles may be useful at times, especially if the group has recurring problems. For instance, a 'process watcher' might observe patterns of participation in meetings and have suggestions on improving the dynamics or may raise issues about oppressive behaviour, power games, or discrimination (race, gender, class, age) in the group. A 'vibes watcher' might pay special attention to emotional undercurrents, non-verbal communication (including conflict behaviour), or energy levels in the group, making suggestions about improving the group atmosphere before something becomes a problem.

✱ *Adapted from* Tri-denting It Handbook*, Third edition, available at http://tridentploughshares.org/article1072#p26*

Roles in an Affinity Group During an Action

During a nonviolent action, an affinity group decides which roles the action requires and people choose what they will do. Support roles are vital to an action's success and to the participants' safety. The roles listed in this Handbook (see 'Roles In, Before, and After an Action', p86) are common but shouldn't be regarded as a blueprint for all actions. Different actions will need different roles. Each group should think about tasks it will need and how to ensure they're done early in the planning. Sometimes people can take on more than one role, e.g. a legal observer might also be a first-aider, police liaison, or even media contact. The key is to make sure that all necessary roles are covered, that all understand the extent of their commitments before beginning, and that no one takes on tasks (support or otherwise) that they are unable to carry out. (Source: http://www.scotland4peace.org/Peace%20Education/Handout%20Six%20-%20Roles,%20Safety%20and%20Afinity%20Groups.pdf)

Decision-Making

Within nonviolent movements, and especially during nonviolent (direct) actions, decision-making requires special attention. Nonviolence is more than the absence of violence; it is closely linked to issues of power, to the methods of decision-making. To avoid new forms of dominance within a group, its discussion and decision-making processes need to be participatory and empowering. Consensus decision-making aims to encourage all to participate and express their opinions, trying to find support for decisions in the group by involving all of its members. It is likely that group members will much more strongly support a decision made with the consensus process. Consensus can be

used in many different group situations and is especially useful when a group is preparing to carry out nonviolent actions with each other. Some groups adopt a system where first they try to reach consensus, but if they cannot within a reasonable time limit, then they will vote. However, this is not usually necessary in small affinity groups.

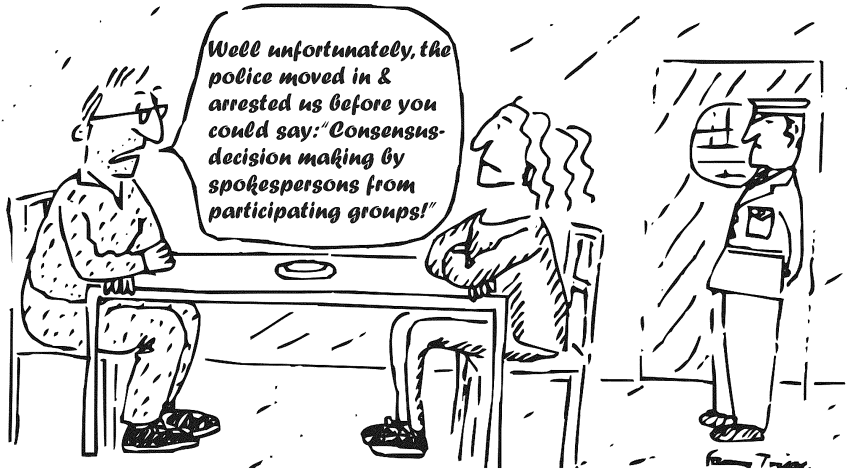
Participating in actions at the Women's Peace Camp in Greenham Common in England in the 1980s, the U.S. feminist writer and nonviolence trainer Starhawk found herself in culture shock. 'In contrast to our [U.S.] West coast style of consensus, involving facilitators, agendas, plans, and formal processes, their meetings seemed to have no structure at all. . . . I found a delicious sense of freedom and an electricity in discussions unhampered by formalities. The consensus process I had known and practised seemed, in retrospect, overly controlled and controlling. . . . At the same time, the Greenham-style process also has drawbacks. The group's preference for action rather than talk produces an inherent bias toward more extreme and militant actions. With no facilitation, louder and more vocal women tend to dominate discussions. Women who have fears, concerns or alternative plans often felt unheard. Each group needs to develop a decision-making process that fits its unique circumstances. The balance between planning and spontaneity, between formal processes and informal free-for alls, is always alive, dynamic, and changing. No one way will work for every group' (Starhawk, Truth or Dare : Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery. [Harper Collins 1987]).

What follows is mainly concerned with consensus decision-making, but it is important to heed Starhawk's warnings about when not to use consensus: a) When there is no group mind (e.g., when members don't value the group's bonding over their individual desires, consensus becomes an exercise in frustration); b) When there are no good choices (e.g., if the group has to choose between being shot and hung); c) When they can see the whites of your eyes ('appointing a temporary leader might be wisest'); d) When the issue is trivial ('flip a coin'); e) When the group has insufficient information.

Consensus Decision-Making is a Process

Consensus is a process for group decision-making by which an entire group of people can come to a common agreement. It is based upon listening and respect and participation by everyone. The goal is to find a decision to which all of the group's members consent; everyone in the group is willing to support the final decision. Be clear, however, that full consent does not necessarily mean that everyone must be completely satisfied with the final outcome: in fact total satisfaction or unanimous agreement is rather rare.

Majority decisions can lead to a power struggle between different factions within a group who compete rather than respect each other's opinions. They use their brilliance to undermine each other. In contrast, the consensus process taps into the creativity, insights, experience, and perspectives of the whole group. The differences between people stimulate deeper inquiry and greater wisdom.



So how does cooperative decision-making work? The opinions, ideas, and reservations of all participants are listened to and discussed. Differing opinions are brought out and noted. No ideas are lost and each member's input is valued as part of the solution. This open and respectful discussion is vital in enabling the group to reach a decision on the basis of which — in nonviolent action — people will put themselves and their bodies 'on the line'.

Consensus can be exciting because the members of the group actively look for ways to create a common agreement. It can also often be difficult, because everyone needs to overcome the attitude that 'my idea is the best solution'. Consensus not only works to achieve better solutions, but also to promote the growth of community and trust within the group. Consensus is an ongoing process and not simply a different method of voting.

Positions Within a Consensus

Since the goal is not a unanimous decision, consensus must have a place for members of the group who do not totally embrace a proposal. Participants in a decision-making process are more willing to support an idea to which they might have some reservations or objections if the group actively accepts and hears their concerns. If a person is given only the choice of support, non-support, or standing aside, it leaves much less room for being part of the consensus.

Within a group consensus five positions might exist:

- This is a great idea and I support it completely. (Full agreement)
- I have some reservations, but will support it. (Support)
- I have serious reservations, but can accept it. (Acceptance)
- I have objections, but I can live with this. (Tolerance)
- I cannot do this, but will not stop the group from doing this. (Standing aside)

Of course, if a large number of persons do not support or accept the decision or stand aside, then the consensus is weak and will probably end up with weak results.

In any case, the group should encourage people to express their reservations and objections and should try to address these opinions. This can be done by modifying the proposal or perhaps by offering reassurance or clarification on certain points. At the same time, individuals who do not totally agree with the item under discussion should examine their opinion to see if they could either support, accept, or tolerate the proposed decision or if they might perhaps even stand aside.

It is possible for individual group members to have strong objections or disagreements but at the same time participate in and consent to the decision that a large number of the groups members can support. This is a key awareness and is an important part of coming to consensus. There is a big difference between disagreement with others in the group and blocking consensus. Disagreement is part of the discussion process.

Blocking Consensus

An individual's decision to block a consensus should not be lightly taken. If you block a decision that has strong support by the rest of the group, you are essentially saying to the group that this decision is so seriously wrong that you do not want to permit it to proceed. If, after discussion, the group comes close to a common agreement, but one or more individuals have such a very strong objection that they cannot be part of the consensus, then they have one of the following opinions:

- This is a totally unacceptable or immoral or inhumane decision. I cannot support this in any way, and I cannot allow the group to proceed with this decision. (Blocking)
- I am completely opposed to this and can no longer work together with this group. (Withdrawing from the group)

If a person has strong objections, and especially if she or he decides to block a consensus, it is important to carefully and clearly express the specifics about the objection and the reasons for blocking consensus. In fact, the person should feel obliged to make a better suggestion, one that may be accepted by all. This will help others to understand the objection and may lead to a clarification of the differences. In any case, it is very important that a person review objections and concerns to see if she or he can withdraw the block and just stand aside for this decision, allowing the group to accept the decision.

Minuting a Consensus Decision

After coming to a consensus decision, it can be useful to ask everyone who did not take the position of 'full agreement' to express his/her concerns, reservations, or objections. Recording these concerns, reservations or objections in the minutes, together with the decision itself, demonstrates clearly that the

group values the diversity of opinions and encourages everyone to be aware of these concerns in future discussions or follow-up to the decision. Groups that take minority opinions seriously in this way usually enjoy increased cohesiveness in their activities and actions.

If the Group Cannot Come to a Consensual Agreement

If the group cannot come to consensus, maybe the group does not have enough information to make a decision. Perhaps more discussion time is needed? Should the decision be postponed? Does the group want to ask for a new proposal? Would it help for a smaller committee to draw up some alternative proposals?

Important Aspects When Using Consensus

There are many different formats and ways of building consensus, and a wide range of experience shows that it can work. However, a few conditions must be met for consensus building to be possible:

- Common goal or interest: All members of the group need to be united in a common goal or common interest, whether it is an action, living communally, or greening the neighbourhood. It helps to clearly establish what this overall group goal is and to write it down. In situations when consensus seems difficult to achieve, it helps to come back to this common goal and to remember what the group is all about. Consensus requires commitment, patience, and willingness to put the common goal or interest first.
- Commitment to consensus building: The stronger the commitment to using consensus, the better it works. It can be very damaging to a group's process if some individuals want to return to majority voting and are just waiting for the chance to say 'I told you it wouldn't work'.
- Sufficient time: It takes time to learn to work in this way. As a group become more proficient in the process, the time needed for consensus decision-making will decrease. If the group has divergent strong opinions, more time might be needed to reach a consensus.
- Clear process: Make sure that the group is clear about the process it will use for tackling any given issue. Agree beforehand on processes and guidelines. In most cases, this will include having one or more facilitators to help the group move through the process.

Processes for Finding Consensus

- Subjects for discussion need to be well prepared. The issue to be decided should be clearly stated.
- Different opinions need to be openly expressed. Everyone should be given a chance to state his or her opinion or concern.
- Agreed-upon norms may limit the number of times a person asks to speak and or the amount of time a person speaks, to ensure that each participant has a chance to be fully heard.
- Discussions involve active listening and information sharing. Multiple

concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.
- Dissenters' perspectives are not only listened to but are embraced and actively included in the discussion.
- Differences are resolved by discussion. Facilitators aid this by identifying areas of agreement and pointing out disagreements to encourage deeper discussion.
- Facilitators help the consensus process by articulating the sense of the discussion, by asking if there are other concerns, by asking for polls of the positions in the group, and by proposing a summary of the consensus decision.
- Ideas and solutions are shared with the group and do not belong to an individual. The group as a whole is responsible for the decision, and the decision belongs to the group.

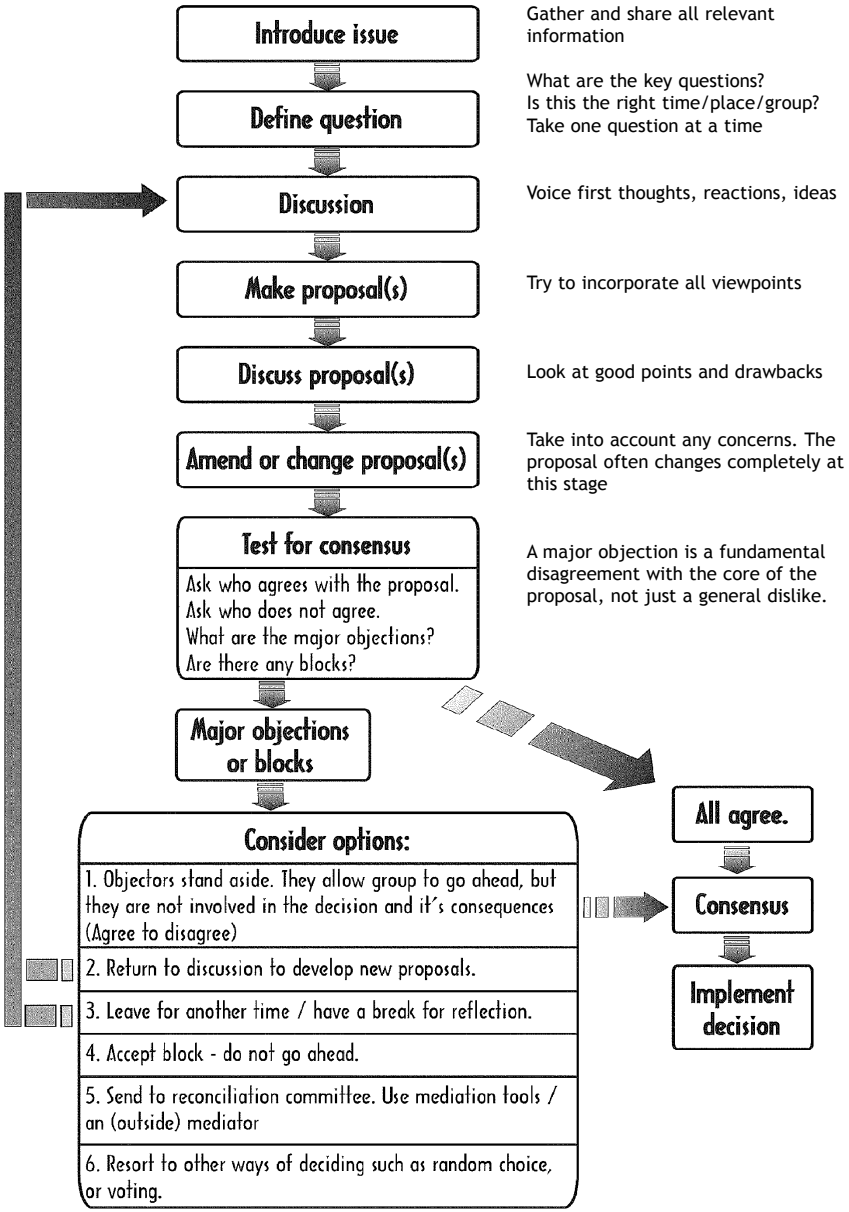
Practical Steps to Reaching Consensus

There are lots of consensus models (see flowchart on p80). The following basic procedure is taken from *Peace News*, a magazine for peace activists, June 1988:

1. The problem, or decision to be made, is defined and named. It helps to do this in a way that separates the problems/questions from personalities.
2. Brainstorm possible solutions. Write them all down, even the crazy ones. Keep the energy up for quick, top-of-the head suggestions.
3. Create space for questions or clarification on the situation.
4. Discuss the options written down. Modify some, eliminate others, and develop a short list. Which are the favourites?
5. State the proposal or choice of proposals so that everybody is clear. (Sometimes it might be useful to break into small sub-groups to write up each proposal clearly and succinctly.)
6. Discuss the pros and cons of each proposal, and make sure everybody has a chance to contribute.
7. If there is a major objection, return to step 6. (This is the time-consuming bit.) Sometimes you may need to return to step 4.
8. If there are no major objections, state the decisions and test for agreement.
9. Acknowledge minor objections and incorporate friendly amendments.
10. Discuss.
11. Check for consensus.

Especially with controversial issues, it may be helpful to take a straw poll of the group's consensus positions at different times during the discussion. A straw poll of consensus positions is just a test of the positions in the group, not the final call for consensus positions. One easy way to do a quick straw poll is ask for a show of hands with 5 fingers showing full agreement, 4 fingers showing support, 3 fingers showing acceptance, 2 fingers showing tolerance, 1 finger showing standing aside, and a fist showing blocking.

Consensus Decision-Making Flowchart



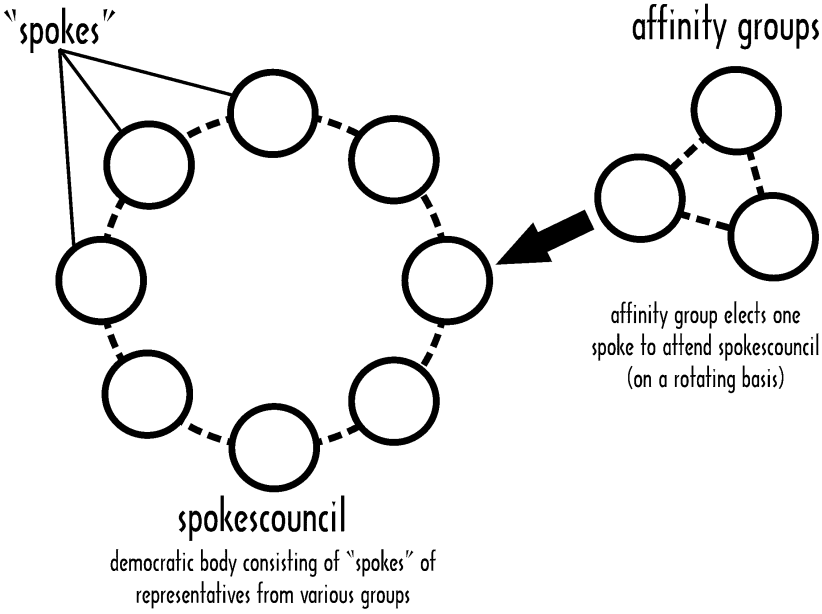
For an exercise in practising consensus, see 'Decision-Making', p133.

Consensus in Large Groups: The Spokescouncil

The model of consensus decision-making described above works well within one group. However, bigger nonviolent actions require the cooperation of several affinity groups; one method to do so is to use a spokescouncil. The spokescouncil is a tool for making consensus decisions in large groups. In a spokescouncil, spokespersons from smaller groups come together to make shared decisions. Each group is represented by their 'spoke'. The group communicates to the larger meeting through him or her, allowing hundreds of people to be represented in a smaller group discussion. What the spoke is empowered to do is up to her or his affinity group. Spokes may need to consult with their groups before discussing or agreeing on certain subjects.

Here is an outline process for using the spokescouncil method. (Note: steps 1 and 2 can also take place in advance within the individual small affinity groups.)

1. Whole group (all participants of all affinity groups): Introduce the issue and give all the necessary information.
2. Explain both the consensus and the spokescouncil process.
3. Form small groups (the affinity groups). These could be a random selection of people at the meeting, existing affinity groups, or groups based on where people live or on a shared language.
4. The small groups discuss the issue, gather ideas, discuss pros and cons, and come up with one or more proposals.
5. Each small group selects a spoke (a person from the group who will represent the group's view at the spokescouncil). Small groups decide whether the spoke is a messenger for the group (e.g., relays information between the small group and the spokescouncil) or whether the spoke can make decisions on the group's behalf at the spokescouncil.
6. Spokes from all groups come together in the spokescouncil. They in turn present the view of their small groups. The spokes then have a discussion to try to incorporate the various proposals into one workable idea. During this process, the spokes may need to call time out to refer with their groups for clarification or to see whether a modified proposal would be acceptable to them. The spoke is supposed to speak on behalf of the small group, not to present his or her personal point of view.
7. Once the spokescouncil has come up with one or more possible proposals, the spokes meet with their groups and check for agreement and objections. Groups can also suggest further modifications to the proposals.



8. Spokes meet back at the spokescouncil and check whether the groups agree. If not all groups agree, the discussion cycle continues, alternating between time for the small groups to meet and spokescouncil meetings.
9. Small groups can and often do change their spoke to give different small group members the chance to act as spokes for the group.

For an exercise in using a spokescouncil, see 'Decision-Making', p133).

Experiences and Problems

During the past 30 years the model of affinity groups and consensus decision-making has been used in a wide range of small and large-scale nonviolent actions, such as anti-nuclear power actions in the 1970s (Seabrook, New Hampshire, USA; Torness, Scotland), many anti-nuclear energy and disarmament actions in Germany in the 1980s and the 1990s, and anti-globalisation actions in 1999 (Seattle, Washington, USA). Some of the largest actions using the affinity group/spokescouncil/consensus decision-making model have grown

to 2000 or more participants (e.g., 1996 in Seabrook, USA, the 1997 protest against nuclear waste transports in Wendland, Germany; see http://www.castor.de/diskus/gruppen/x1000mal/5rundbri.html#Auswertung%20des%20SprechenInnenrates). Many of these experiences point to a changed political environment, especially a growth of decentralised participation in nonviolent actions and campaigns. This has consequences for the way groups now organise for large-scale actions.

Very few affinity groups work long-term. For example, the German anti-nuclear campaign ''X-thousands in the way' has few ongoing affinity groups, though they still exist and form the core of the action. Most activists join the actions of this campaign as individuals or in small groups, forming affinity groups only upon arrival at the action. Therefore, one or two days of preparation are needed before each action to create a community ready and able to act. And even this community is little more than an expanded core of participants. Most activists join spontaneously and without much preparation, and the action has to be planned in a way that makes this possible (Jochen Stay, *Preconditions and Social-Political Factors for Mass Civil Disobedience*, *The Broken Rifle*, No 69, March 2006: http://wri-irg.org/pdf/br69-en.pdf). This structure is more appropriate when one of the aims is to integrate a large number of new activists. The action is generally more low-risk and publicly announced.

Another option is to base larger actions on the autonomy of individual affinity groups, which plan and carry out a variety of small-scale actions simultaneously on their own. The 'large-scale' is then achieved through the number of parallel actions. This structure is more suited to high-risk actions or when a higher level of repression can be expected.

Although the affinity group/spokescouncil structure has been successfully used for various campaigns and actions, it could still be further developed. Groups that do not yet have experience with this structure could practise its use. There is also a need for further experience and evaluation when using it with even larger groups of people.