

# Doing It Without Leaders

## Introduction

The alarm clock rings. Jump up, shower, dress, listen to the news of the day on the radio. Get irate: war in Iraq – no one's asked me! Tax increase, yeah great, to buy more weapons to kill more people. Yet another step closer to privatising the health service. Local elections coming up, politicians make new fresh wonderful promises. Why bother? Rush to work, another dull day in the office. Get called in by the boss – new targets from head office, work overtime this week. Oh heck, that's my day off gone, will I ever get to the beach? Get home, microwave some plastic food. Letter from the landlord: pay more or move out. Too tired to go out, just switch the television on for some light relief. Had a good day?

Do you enjoy being controlled by others who don't understand or care about your wants and needs? Managers, landlords, city councils, creditors, police, courts, politicians – a myriad of people have power over your life, regulating what you can and can't do. Power you gave them willingly? Where do they have this power from, who gave it to them and does it have to be this way?

Those with power over us would have you believe that having a system of hierarchy is the only way to organise society. People are by nature selfish, therefore we need a set of morals, rules and laws to control ourselves. These rules are enforced by a system of hierarchy, where some people have more power than others. Leaders are necessary to tell people how to live their lives, direct them at work and structure society.

But scratch the surface and you can discover a different world – where people have always striven for control over their own lives, struggled for self-determination and rid themselves of their rulers and leaders. At the core of these struggles for liberty lies the desire of every human to live a fulfilled life, following her interests, fulfilling her needs. A desire that extends itself towards creating a society where this is possible not just for a few, but for everyone. What follows is an exploration of ways of making decisions collectively and organising society without leaders.

## What's wrong with leaders?

“We all know that happiness comes from control over our own lives, not other people's lives. As long as we are busy competing for control over others, we're bound to be victims of control ourselves.” *CrimethInc*

Many of us have been brought up in a culture which believes that the western-style system with one-person-one-vote and elected leaders is the supreme form of democracy. Yet in the very nations which shout loudest about the virtues of democracy, many people don't even bother voting any more; they feel it doesn't make any difference to their lives.

When people vote for an executive they also hand over their power to make decisions and to effect change. Representative democracies create a system of hierarchy, where most of the power lies with a small group of decision-makers on top and a broad base of people whose decisions are made for them at the bottom. People are often inactive in this system because they feel that they have no power in the system and that their voice won't be listened to anyway. Being allowed to vote 20 times in your life for an MP or Senator is a poor substitute for making decisions ourselves.

Even though our government may call itself democratic, there are many areas of our society where democratic principles have little influence. Most institutions and work places are entirely hierarchical: students and employees don't usually get a chance to vote their superiors into office or have any decision-making power in the places where they spend the greatest part of their lives. Or consider the supermarket chain muscling its way into a town against the will of local people. Most areas of society are ruled by power, status and money, not through democracy.

A rejection of this system is nothing new. People have been refusing to accept the "god given" world order and struggled for control over own destiny in every society humanity has known. This struggle has been a powerful force in shaping our value system.

## Taking back control

"We have these moments of non-capitalist, non-coercive, non-hierarchical interaction in our lives constantly, and these are the times when we most enjoy the company of others, when we get the most out of other people; but somehow it doesn't occur to us to demand that our society work this way." *CrimethInc*

The alternatives to the current system are already here, growing in the gaps between the pavement stones of state authority and corporate control. We only need to learn to recognise them for the seedlings of the different kind of society that they are. Homeless people occupying empty houses and turning them into collective homes, workers buying out the businesses they work for and running them on an equitable terms, groups of friends organising a camping trip, allotment groups growing vegetables on patches of land collectively; once we start looking there are hundreds of examples of cooperative organising that we encounter in our daily lives. Most of these organise through varying forms of direct democracy. Direct democracy is the idea that people should have control over their lives, that power should be shared by all rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. It implies wide-ranging liberty, including the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in forging a common destiny.

This ideal is based on two notions: that every person has the right to self-determination, the right to control their own destiny and no one should have the power to force them into something. And that as human beings most of us wish to live in society, to interact with other people. Direct-democratic systems aim to find a way of balancing individual needs and desires with the need for co-operation. Two forms of these are direct voting and consensus decision-making.

## Direct Voting

*It is only because people are not claiming their own power, because they are giving it away, that others can claim it for their own.*

Direct voting does away with leaders and structures of control. Decisions are made through a direct vote by the people affected by them. This ensures that decision-making power is distributed equally without giving group members absolute vetoes. When group members disagree, majority rule provides a way to come to a decision.

One of the problems with this is that the will of the majority is seen as the will of the whole group, with the minority expected to accept and carry out the decision, even if it is against their own needs beliefs and desires.

Another problem that you may encounter is that of a group splintering into blocs of different interest. In such cases decision-making can become highly competitive, where one groups victory is the other groups defeat.

On the odd occasion people may find that acceptable, but when people find themselves in a minority they lose control over their own lives. This undermines commitment to the group and to the decisions taken. This often leads to passive membership or even splits in the group. Many groups using direct voting are aware of this problem and attempt to balance voting with respect for people's needs and desires, spending more time on finding solutions that everyone can vote for or pro-actively protecting minority interests.

## Consensus decision making

*No one is more qualified than you are to decide what your life will be.*

Another form of direct democracy is making decisions by consensus. At its core is the commitment to find solutions that are acceptable to all. Instead of voting for an item consensus works creatively to take into account everyone's needs. Consensus is about finding common ground and decisions are reached in a *dialogue between equals*, who take each other seriously and who recognise each other's equal rights. No decision will be made against the express will of an individual or a minority, instead the group constantly adapts to all its members' needs.

In consensus every person has the power to make changes in the system, and to prevent changes that they find unacceptable. The right to *veto* a decision means that minorities cannot just be ignored, but creative solutions will have to be found to deal with their concerns.

Consensus is about participation and equalising power. It can also be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals. Another benefit of consensus is that all members can agree to the final decision and therefore are much more committed to actually turning this decision into reality.

Consensus can work in all types of settings: small voluntary groups, local communities, businesses, even whole nations and territories:

- Non-hierarchical societies have existed in North America for hundreds of years. One example is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, where in those situations where consensus could not be achieved, people were free to move and set up their own community with the support - not the enmity - of the town they were leaving.
- Many housing co-ops and social enterprises use consensus successfully: a prominent example is Radical Routes, a network of housing co-ops and workers' co-ops in the UK who all use consensus decision-making.
- The business meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) use consensus to integrate the insights of each individual, arriving at the best possible approximation of the Truth.
- Many activists working for peace, the environment and social justice regard consensus as essential to their work. They believe that the methods for achieving change need to match their goals and visions of a free, non-violent, egalitarian society. In protests around the world many mass actions involving several thousand people have been planned and carried out using consensus.

Different processes have developed both for small groups and for larger groups of people, such as splitting into smaller units for discussion and decision-making with constant exchange and feedback between the different units. However, like any method of decision-making consensus works better in theory than in practice:

- As in any discussion those with more experience of the process can manipulate the outcome.
- There can be a bias towards the status quo: even if most members are ready for a change, existing policies remain in place if no decision is reached.
- Sometimes it can take a long time to look at ideas until all objections are resolved – leading to frustration and weaker commitment to the group.
- The right to veto can be a lethal tool in the hands of those used to more than their fair share of power and attention. It can magnify their voices, and be used to guard against changes that might affect their power base and influence.
- Those who do more work or know more about an issue will have more power in a group whether they like it or not. This is a two way process - people can only dominate a group if others let them.
- Where people are not united by a common aim they will struggle to come to the deep understanding and respect necessary for consensus.

### **Consensus ≠ Veto Power**

Unlike “veto power” decision rule, consensus is based on the desire to find common ground. The veto power model, used in the UN Security Council and in parts of the EU, works on mutual distrust and an unwillingness to compromise. The motivation behind negotiations is to prevent deadlock rather than to create a sense of shared goals and mutual respect.

Most of these problems stem from lack of experience in consensus rather than being inherent to the process. It takes time to unlearn the patterns of behaviour we have been brought up to accept as the norm. Living without hierarchy does get easier with practice!

## Creating societies without leaders

*A society which organises itself without authority is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, waiting for a breath of spring air to rise up in its full beauty.*

Clearly alternatives to the current system of decision making in our society exist. We need to extend these spheres of free action and mutual aid until they make up most of society life. It is the myriad of small groups organising for social change that will, when connected to each other transform society. Once we realise that it is within our power to shape our environment and societies we can claim a new destiny for ourselves, both individually and collectively. In this we are only limited by our courage to imagine what can be, and by our willingness to learn how to co-exist and collaborate. Societies based on the principle of mutual aid and self-organisation are possible: they have existed in the past and exist today.

Our challenge is to develop systems for decision-making that remain true to the spirit of self-government and at the same time allow decisions to be made that not only affect 20, 50, 200 people, but potentially tens or hundreds of thousands of people.

### Self-government

“Every kind of human activity should begin from what is local and immediate, should link in a network with no centre and no directing agency, hiving off new cells as the originals grow.” *Colin Ward*

Self-government is based on the ideal that every person should have control over their own destiny. This ideal requires us to find ways to organise a society in which we can co-exist with each other whilst respecting people's individuality, their diverse needs and desires. Direct democracy in small groups depends on group members sharing a common goal, building trust and respect, active participation, a clear process. Clearly these same conditions need also to apply to making decisions on a much larger scale. But when it comes to organising large groups (such as neighbourhoods, cities, regions or even continents) the following points are particularly important:

### Decentralisation

Decisions should be made by those that are affected by them. Only those with a legitimate interest in a decision should have an input. The more local, the more decentralised we can make decisions the more control we will each gain over our lives.

## **Diversity is our strength**

We all have different needs and desires. To accommodate these we need to create a fluid society full of diversity, allowing each to find their niche - creating a richly patterned quilt rather than forcing people into the same bland uniform. The more complex the society we create the more stable it will be.

## **Clear and understandable structures**

While we need the fabric of our society to be complex we want the structures of organising and making decisions to be simple and understandable. It needs to be easy for people to engage in decision-making.

## **Accountability**

Being accountable means taking responsibility for your actions. This makes it more difficult to accumulate power and avoids corruption – common pitfalls of organising on any scale.

In practise this means developing a decentralised society, with decisions being made at the local level by the groups of people affected by them. These groups will be constantly changing and adapting, to serve the needs of the people connected to them. Where we need co-operation on a larger scale groups can make voluntary agreements within networks and federalist associations. If the processes are easily understood, transparent and open then accountability is added to the whole process.

So what would this society look like? How will services be organised, limited goods distributed, conflicts resolved? How can health care, public transport, the post be organised?

## **Neighbourhoods and workers' collectives – a federalist model**

One model for structuring society works on the basis of neighbourhoods and workers' collectives as the two basic units for decision-making. Within the neighbourhoods people co-operate to provide themselves with services such as food distribution and waste disposal. Workers' collectives work together on projects such as running a bus service, factories, shops, hospitals. Decisions in all these groups are made by direct democracy, each member being directly involved in making the decisions affecting their lives. Some of these groups vote, others operate by consensus but all are characterised by respect for the individual and the desire to find solutions that are agreeable to all. It may sound as if we'll have to spend all our time in committees and meetings, but in reality most things would be worked out through informal and spontaneous discussion and co-operation: organising on a local level is made much easier through daily personal contact.

A lot of co-operation is required between all these collectives and neighbourhoods. Working

groups and spokescouncils bring together delegates from different interest groups to negotiate and agree ways of co-operating on a local, regional and even continental level. Not everyone has to go to every meeting – an efficient and sensitive communications network is developed between all groups and communities. This involves sending recallable and directly responsible delegates to meetings with other groups. These delegates can either be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the group or they might have to go back to their group to check for agreement before any decision is made. Decision-making is focussed on the local level, with progressively less need to co-operate the larger the geographical area becomes. The details are resolved locally, only the larger, wider discussions need to be taken to regional or inter-regional levels.

## **Can it be done?**

You might find it hard to imagine how collective services such as train travel or bus services through several communities can be organised without a central authority, particularly if each community is independent and answerable to its residents rather than a central government. But consider present day international postal services, or cross border train travel, which are organised across countries without a central authority. These are based on voluntary agreements – it is in everyone's interest to co-operate on these services.

Throughout history there are many examples of people organising society themselves. Often this happens in those rare moments when a popular uprising withdraws support (and thus authority) from the state. This leaves a vacuum of power - suddenly it becomes possible for ordinary people to put ideals of self-government and mutual aid into practice on a larger scale.

The economic crisis of December in Argentina brought about a popular uprising that is still going on today. The gap left behind as the government lapsed into chaos and the local currency collapsed was filled by local people getting to know each other and supporting each other. Factories were squatted and owners evicted so that the collective could benefit from their own labour. Land was seized to grow food for the community. But perhaps the most interesting development was in the way people began to experiment with different ways of organising themselves, their workplaces and their communities. Traditional hierarchies have been abandoned as people become more confident in their own skills and in their rejection of government and bosses.

The remarkable events of the Spanish Revolution in 1936 were the culmination of decades of popular education and agitation. During the civil war, large parts of the country were organised in decentralised and collective ways. A famous example is the Barcelona General Tramway Co. which was deserted by its managers. The 7000 workers took over the running of the trams, different collectives running the trams for different parts of the city. Citywide services were maintained by federalist co-ordination. The increased efficiency of the collectives led to an operating surplus, despite running more trams, cutting fares, increasing wages and new equipment! The general spirit was one of optimism and freedom. George Orwell, in Barcelona at the time wrote: “Every shop and café had an inscription saying that it has been collectivised; even the boot blacks had been collectivised and their boxes painted red

and black. Waiters and shop workers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal.”

An example of self-government existing within a Western state is Christiania. This district in Copenhagen, Denmark was self-governed by its inhabitants using consensus from 1970 onwards. They self-regulated economic, cultural and educational issues, water and electricity supply, health and security. The community had a long-running struggle with drug dealers in part of the district, but used community action to turn the situation around. Sadly Christiania has now been evicted but it remains an inspiring illustration of people's ability to deal with adverse conditions collectively.

What follows are two case studies of contemporary self-organisation and voluntary association. The case study of the Stirling Eco-Village is an inspiring example of how working collectively by consensus can work on a village level. The case study of *Doing it on the 'net without leaders* provides exciting insights into how technology can help making decisions by consensus when people aren't based near each other.

## **Building a community based on voluntary networks and mutual aid**

*Case Study: Hori-zone Eco-village. A temporary village in resistance to the G8 summit, July 2005, Scotland.*

A recent example of people creating a society based co-operation is the Eco-village in Stirling. Having come together with the aim of protest against the G8 and the global power system it represents, the people inhabiting the Eco-village were also aiming to experiment with and experience a free society. For ten days five thousand people from different parts of the world lived together communally in a tented, temporary village and put their ideas into practice. The Eco-village offered a unique chance to experiment with consensus decision-making on a large scale. This was particularly exciting as one of the criticisms always levelled at consensus is that it might work fine for 20 people but that it would be impossible to organise whole communities or even countries on this basis.

At the heart of the village were neighbourhoods of fifty to two hundred people, where people lived, ate, discussed and relaxed together. Most neighbourhoods were based on geographical areas that people had come from (eg Manchester neighbourhood), others were based on shared interests such as the Queer neighbourhood. People either arrived as part of a neighbourhood or joined one to their liking. Life in the neighbourhood was organised collectively, with shared meeting spaces, communal food, water and toilets. Work was done voluntarily, with the ideal that it would be shared out equally amongst everyone. In most neighbourhoods people came together for daily meetings, discussing the practical aspects of running the

“Most people find it hard to imagine a whole society based on free association and co-operation, since most of us have only experienced societies based on hierarchy and competition. This is what was so amazing about the Eco-village in Stirling. It was possible to catch glimpses of what a free society could be like: so many moments of co-operation, of people helping each other to overcome adverse circumstances.”

neighbourhood, for resolving conflicts and for wider political debates and action planning. All neighbourhoods aspired to make decisions by consensus and to working collectively.

Many aspects of daily living required co-operation on a village wide level. Working groups from different neighbourhoods with relevant skills and interests were set up and co-ordinated these activities. This included buying and distributing food, maintaining the water and grey water systems, first aid/medical care, camp-wide health and safety, refuse collection and transport to and from the camp. Delegates from all working groups and all neighbourhoods met daily in the format of a spokescouncil for a site meeting, where this work was co-ordinated, policies agreed and jobs identified and allocated. Delegates were generally rotated from day to day, were accountable to their groups and had limited decision-making power.

Generally this worked well, everybody had enough to eat, enough water to drink and wash with, a place to sleep in. Crises such as overflowing grey water channels and an outbreak of dysentery were dealt with effectively. If something needed doing, if someone asked for helpers to clean the toilets, to unload wood, to chop vegetables, people would volunteer. Mutual aid and co-operation seemed to happen naturally and this atmosphere was one of the things that really excited people at the camp.

### **Challenge 1: How to involve everyone in decision-making and avoid informal leadership**

“On the whole the decision-making process worked well – on a daily basis thousands of people took part in meetings both on a neighbourhood and site level. Many people who had never used consensus before took to it intuitively and enjoyed the freedom that the decentralised structures offered. However one of the challenges we faced was involving not just the majority of people but everyone. This was made harder by the fact that many people coming to the camp had only limited experience of organising and making decisions collectively, which created a barrier to their involvement. Some people never did get involved in running their neighbourhood, either because they had no idea of how the camp worked or because they were too busy organising actions or maintaining essential infrastructures. We also had to pro-actively dismantle any informal leadership that grew out of the relatively small group of people who organised the set-up of the camp and had more knowledge and experience of how things worked. There was a lot of awareness around these issues. A facilitation group was formed and worked hard to make processes transparent and to involve everyone in the decision-making process. This is how a lot of things worked in the village – people noticed something needed doing and got together to tackle the problem.”

### **Challenge 2: How to live with your neighbours**

“Another challenge we faced was that of learning how to balance our own desires with the needs of our neighbours. An example is the controversy about the camp-wide agreed power down time (curfew). One of the neighbourhoods autonomously decided to continue playing music beyond that time and party throughout the night. Some people left the neighbourhood because they wanted a quiet night, others moved to the neighbourhood because they wanted to party. But the music also affected lots of people in surrounding neighbourhoods, who could not just move somewhere else. A conflict ensued between these neighbourhoods that wasn't resolved in the short lifespan of the

camp. No doubt with more time practical solutions agreeable to all would have been found, such as moving that neighbourhood to a different part of the site or putting up sound proofing.

“We are learning from the mistakes we made – giving working groups more autonomy, deliberately developing an atmosphere of trust, delegating responsibility away from the whole group to the working groups who are actually doing the job. The challenge for all of us is to learn how to be responsible, how to work independently, without someone constantly telling you what to do. We've just not been taught this by our parents and society. It's a steep learning curve, but it's surprising how fast people grow into their responsibilities, meeting challenges. And we are learning how to explain our way of working, of making decisions better. New people are picking up the ideas much faster and run with them.”

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## **Case Study: Doing it without leaders on the 'net**

One place where we can look for ideas on how to deal with making decisions outside our own local area is in the Free (Open Source) software community. Software projects are often made up of contributors from around the world and this 'distributed decision making' is usually done using chat rooms and mailing lists. In many projects decisions and changes require unanimous voting or consensus.

Not only does the Free Software community make decisions across the internet, but they have shown us how to deal with problems such as potential splits. Free Software explicitly encourages third party development of code. This means that when people disagree on the direction a project is going, or how code should be written they can and often do set up parallel software developments (known as forking). The Free Software community is generally supportive and understanding of forks. This has saved many projects from stagnation, for example Xfree86 which has been left behind by developments of the X.org project which started out as a fork.

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These case studies highlight two areas we need to continue to develop:

- The first issue is a wider one around balancing our own desires with the needs of others. If we are to be free to make our own choices this will sometimes impact on what others can and can't do. The concept of having a multitude of different neighbourhoods and working collectives from which to choose from helps in this context: what is socially acceptable will be different in each neighbourhood. People will choose their place to live with that in mind. However if you can't fit in with your neighbours, it is not always easy or practical to move away. We need to find effective ways of resolving such conflicts without recourse to a 'higher authority' even in a diverse society. The next chapter on consensus decision-making outlines some practical ways of dealing with this problem.
- The second issue is about how we make decisions that involve many different groups. Not everyone can be in each meeting at the same time (nor would they want to be!)

We need to find effective and simple ways to delegate and make decisions on a large scale. The SpokesCouncil, used at the Eco-village, is one option and is explained in more detail in the next chapter. But we need to work hard on ensuring openness and accountability - especially when the SpokesCouncil consists of thousands of people and there are several tiers of delegates. Experience tells us we need to develop ways of delegating, learning to trust each other and also how to take account of the needs and views of those not present when making decisions. We may be able to combine concepts such as SpokesCouncils and making decisions online to provide an answer to the challenges posed by large-scale consensus based decision-making.

## Turning our dreams into reality

*Let us put this ideal - no masters no slaves - into effect in our daily lives however we can, creating glimpses of free society in the here and now instead of dreaming of a distant utopian age.*

In this chapter we've looked at how society might be organised more equitably. But these ideas aren't going to become reality by magic. The case studies and examples show that people have been doing it without leaders in many places around the world. It's up to all of us to learn the lessons from these experiences and apply them to organising our daily lives, our neighbourhoods and places of work. We need to continue to come up with creative solutions to the challenges that working without leaders throws up.

Above all we need to pass on our experiences of doing it without leaders. We can't leave this to historians, who all too often focus on wars and the deeds of those in power.

This need for research and skill-sharing on making decisions without leaders has given rise to training collectives such as RANT in the USA and Seeds for Change in the UK. Such collectives are themselves examples of self-help and mutual aid, where, based on their own experience members offer free workshops, resources and advice to community and action groups. Everyone has skills that are worthwhile sharing with others.

Eight steps for taking control over your life:

- ✓ Get to know your needs and desires and learn to express them.
- ✓ Learn to understand and respect the needs and desires of others.
- ✓ Refuse to exert power over others. Reshape your relationships with your family, friends and colleagues.
- ✓ Start organising collectively and without hierarchy – in community groups, in unions, at work.
- ✓ Start to say no when your boss is making unreasonable demands. Stop making demands of others.
- ✓ Learn about power and the true meaning of democracy. Get to grips with the ins and outs of consensus decision-making.

- ✓ Share your knowledge and skills with the people around you.
- ✓ Don't give up when the going gets rough. Work out what's going wrong, make changes, experiment.

## About Seeds for Change

This chapter was written by Seeds for Change - a UK based collective of activist trainers providing training for grassroots campaign groups. We also develop resources on consensus, facilitation and taking action, all of which are available on our website.

For more resources on consensus decision making visit our website:  
[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

## Resources

**Seeds for Change:** [www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk) Information and briefings on consensus and related topics such as facilitation.

**Rant Collective:** [www.rantcollective.net](http://www.rantcollective.net) US based activist trainers, with resources and information on their website.

**Resource Manual for a Living Revolution**, V.Coover, E.Deacon, C.Esser and C.Moore; New Society, 1981. A complete manual for developing your group. Sadly out of print now, but its worth trying to get your hands on a copy!

**Days of War Nights of Love – CrimethInc for Beginners**, CrimethInc; Demon Box Collective, 2000. A book of thoughts, inspirations and texts – read this if you want to think more about the issues raised in this chapter.

**Taking Back Control – A Journey through Argentina's Popular Uprising**, N.Gordon and P.Chatterton; School of Geography, University of Leeds, 2004. Eyewitness accounts of the developing parallel institutions in Argentina.

**Anarchy in Action**, C.Ward; Freedom Press, 1988. Many of the ideas in these chapters have been developed and used extensively by anarchists. This is one of many books providing an introduction.

**Konsens – Handbuch zur Gewaltfreien Entscheidungsfindung**, Werkstatt für Gewaltfreie Aktion Baden; buero.karlsruhe@wfga.de, 2004. Probably the most current and comprehensive book on consensus decision making – includes exercises, detailed descriptions and exercises, in German.

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