YOUTH IN
Empowering youth and organisations in solidarity work

Deciding together

Type of tool: Decision-making facilitation

Date of creation: /

Created by : collectiv-a

Duration (if relevant) : flexible

Targeted audience: youth and organizations
Number of participants: 5 to 20 people

Number of facilitators: 1 to 2 facilitators depending on group size and depth of the process
Material :

- Printed or digital version of the tool (e.g., diagrams, decision path, participation levels)
- Whiteboard or flipchart
- Markers and sticky notes
- Handouts on decision-making methods (vote, consent, consensus)

DESCRIPTION

This tool helps groups clarify who decides, where, how, and using which method, in alignment with their governance model. It highlights the phases of the decision-making process (divergence, emergence, convergence) and possible levels of participation. It presents various decision-making methods (voting, consent, consensus), with their benefits, limitations, and success conditions. The tool emphasizes the importance of clear delegation and adapting to legal contexts (e.g., board, general assembly). Finally, it encourages finding a conscious balance between deciding alone, together, or postponing a decision.

OBJECTIVES

For the group
Adopt one or more decision-making methods that are clear, fair, and effective, aligned with the group's governance.

For the facilitator
Gain clarity on different decision-making approaches and support the group using agreed-upon methods.

Funded by the European Union

PART 1

Explanations

The question of decision-making within a group goes beyond simply choosing a method, it is primarily part of a broader process, carried out by certain people within appropriate meetings. It is therefore important to first consider a series of specific questions, each offering a possible entry point for clarifying this process:

1. WHO DECIDES?

Roles with clear mandates structure the organization and are held by one or more individuals. (See the "Mandates & Roles" document from Collectiv-a.) These mandates clarify the scope of autonomy for each role and give it the legitimacy to make certain decisions, potentially involving specific members or the entire organization depending on the appropriate level of participation (see below: “levels of participation”).

2. WHERE ARE DECISIONS MADE?

Decisions are made during meetings:

- During meetings of the relevant group or working body, if the decision falls within their scope of autonomy.
- During meetings inspired by the Holacracy model, which allows for distinct meeting spaces or moments based on the type of topic or decision. Each space addresses a specific theme, and therefore decisions differ in nature (operational, strategic, etc.). Clarifying the type of decision helps determine the best place and way to handle it:
    - **Operational meeting/space**: for day-to-day operational and organizational matters.
    - **Strategic meeting/space**: to reflect on why we do what we do.
    - **Governance meeting/space**: to define who does what and how things are done.
    - **Tensions/regulation meeting/space**: to address interpersonal dynamics and group functioning.
    - **Learning meeting/space**: to reflect on what we are learning from our work.
- In more traditional meeting formats, it’s useful to distinguish (and separate) information sharing, consultation/discussion, and actual decision points. At minimum, for decision items, it’s helpful to specify who is bringing the item, the time allocated, and sometimes the decision-making method to be used.

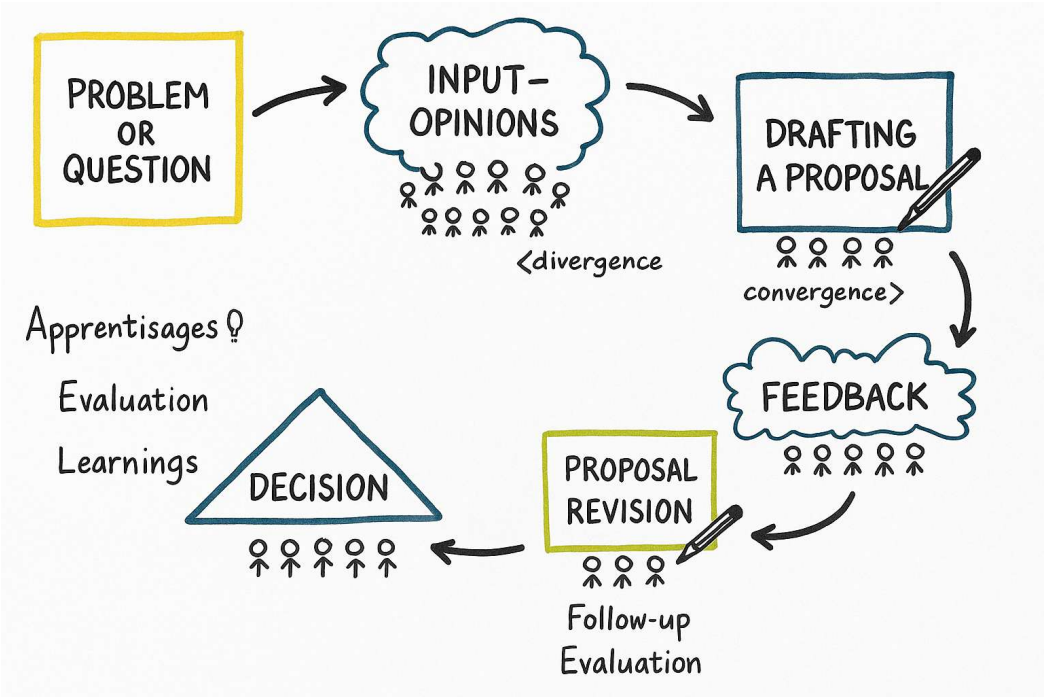
PART 2

3. HOW? — THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OR PATH

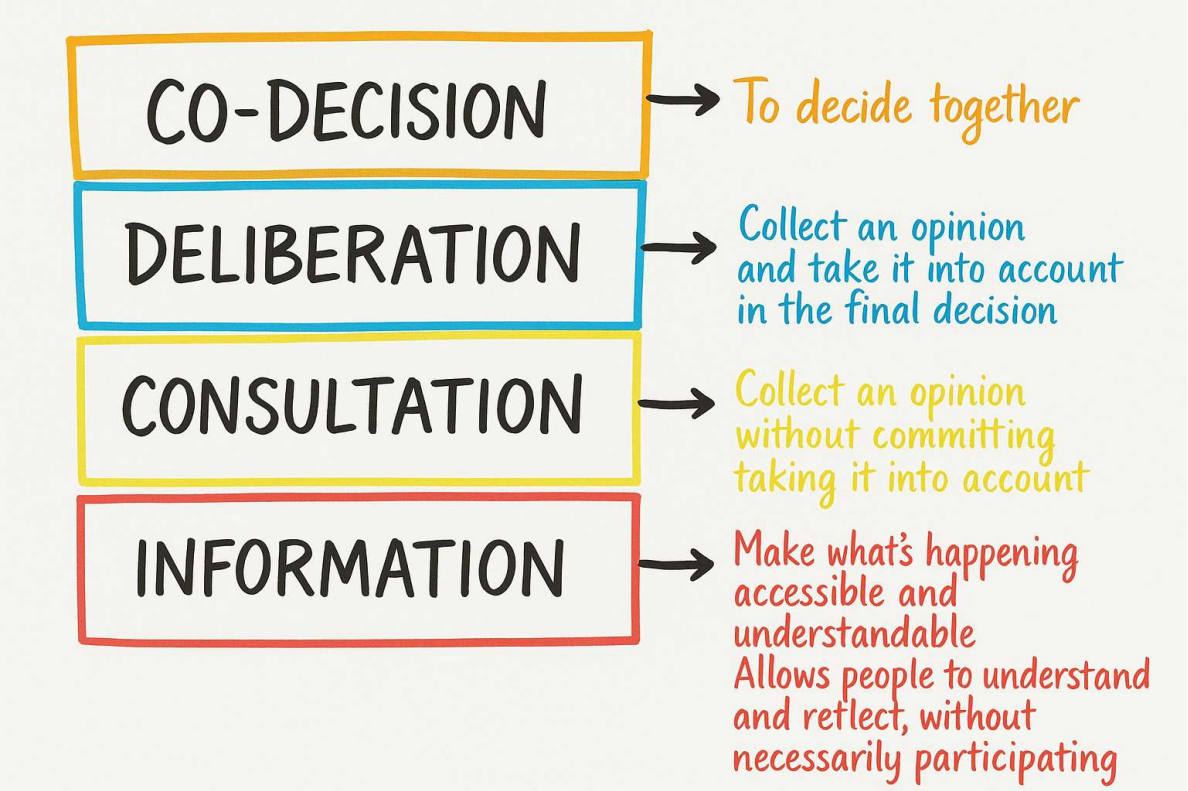
Decision-making itself is just one step in a broader decision path that starts well before the moment of decision. This process may involve several stages, extend over time, and include back-and-forth exchanges between different (sub-)groups.

If this path is not already structured by a mandate, rule, or policy, it can be useful to design a clear and appropriate decision path so that the proposal is sufficiently mature when it comes time to decide.

Example of a decision path with several identified steps, involving varying numbers of people:



And for each of these steps, it is important to identify the **level of participation** of the different people involved.
Here are four commonly used levels of participation in collective decision-making processes:



4. HOW? THE METHODS

Once a proposal has been thoughtfully developed by the right people and brought to the appropriate space for decision-making, the next question is: **which decision-making method should be used?**
Here are three major modes of collective decision-making: **voting**, **consent**, and **consensus**.

◊ Voting
Voting is fast and can be appropriate for less critical decisions. For more significant matters, however, it's worth asking:

- Is this method fair?
- How will those who vote against feel if the decision is approved anyway?
- Has the group had the opportunity to engage with the proposal and its implications?
- Will the vote outcome truly help the group move forward?

There are many ways to vote. In addition to simple voting (anonymous or not, majority or other thresholds), some variations allow for more nuance:

- **Weighted voting**: Each person has a set number of votes to distribute across different options (including giving multiple votes to one option).
- **Majority judgment**: Each person rates the options using a scale (from "reject" to "excellent").
- **Moving debate / temperature check**: Participants indicate to what extent they are for or against a proposal using degrees of agreement.
- **Motivated voting or nomination voting**: Useful when assigning roles or mandates to individuals.

These methods can be particularly useful during the “input/feedback/reaction” phase of the decision-making path.

PART 3

◊ Consent
Consent-based decision-making means that a proposal is approved as long as **no one raises a reasoned objection**. It differs from consensus, which requires unanimous agreement before moving forward.
The "**Consent Decision-Making Process**" (also called "Governance by Consent") comes from **Sociocratic governance**, formalized by Gerard Endenburg. It typically follows these steps (see the University of Nous factsheet):

1. Presentation of the proposal
2. Clarifying questions
3. Reactions
4. Amend / Keep / Withdraw the proposal
5. Objections – Refinements
6. Celebration

Making decisions by consent requires collaboration, trust in the group, alignment with the group's purpose, and the ability to let go of personal preferences.
It also requires distinguishing between **preferences** and **objections**. A "reasonable objection" is a well-founded concern that presents a clear limitation for implementing the proposal — either for the group or for the individual raising it. These skills can be developed over time, but without them, it can be hard to function by consent.
That said, trying out this method on less critical decisions is always worthwhile. It allows proposals to improve, reinforces equality among members, respects personal preferences while enabling people to set them aside, and results in collective validation.
A quicker version of consent can be done with an adapted **temperature check**. Rather than stopping at a visual check, the facilitator explores the meaning behind **lowered hands** (typically signaling disagreement) and **neutral hands** (uncertainty or hesitations), to address concerns and potentially work through them. It's essential to clarify what each hand position means:

- A **lowered hand** might mean "I don't like it" or "I have a clear objection".
- A **neutral hand** might mean "I can live with it, but I have a concern" or "I have strong hesitation".

◊ Consensus
A decision is only made if **everyone agrees**.
In practice, consensus can follow the same steps as consent, but instead of asking, "Do you have any objections?", the question becomes: "Do you agree with this proposal?"
This method can be appropriate for **fundamental decisions**, as it ensures the whole group is fully aligned. More than just acceptance, consensus implies full support.
However, consensus can also **paralyze a group** if misused.
In some cases, groups simplify consensus by asking "Is everyone OK with this?" and interpreting a few nods or silence as agreement — but this can discourage honest disagreement and create a false sense of unity.

Reflection

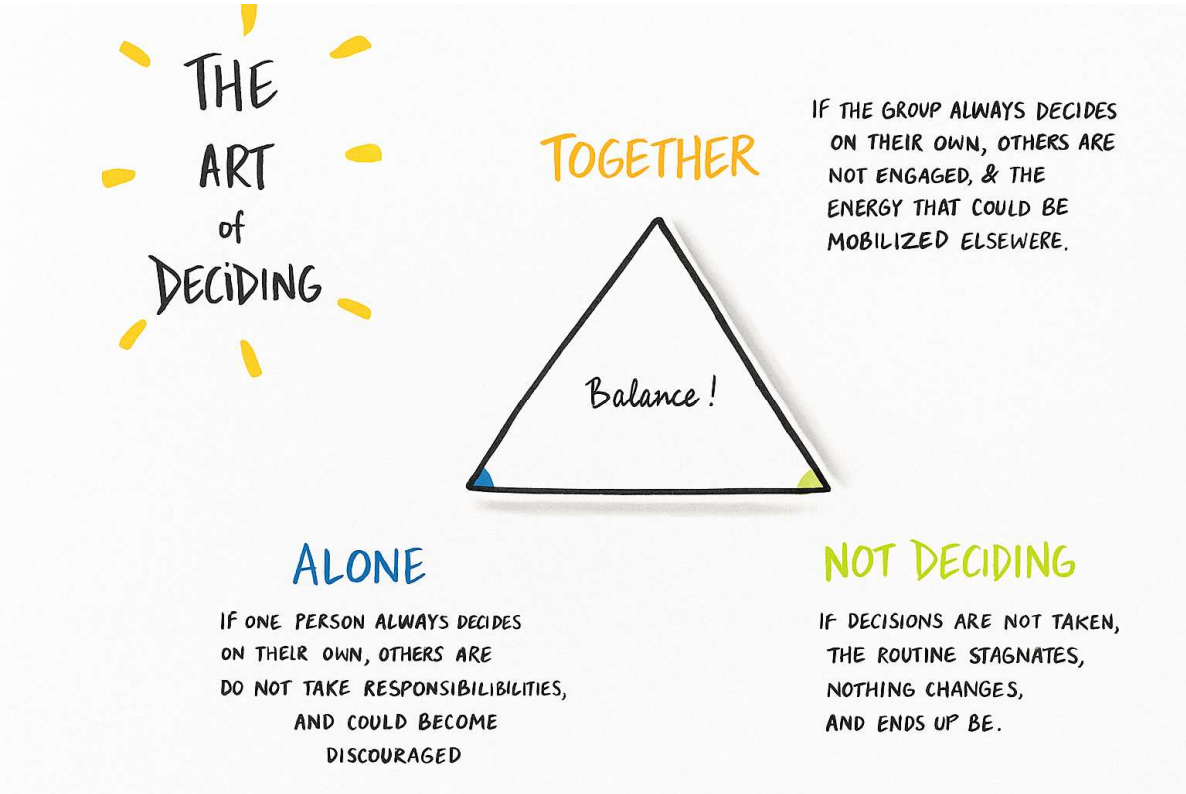
When supporting a group in defining its decision-making processes, some people hope to learn a sort of "magical" collective method. This is often the right moment to explore the group's assumptions about **horizontal governance**. Deconstructing the ideal makes it easier to clarify **why** we choose to make decisions collectively.
As external facilitators, we are often called upon to support the **choice of a decision-making mode**. In doing so, we typically adopt two distinct and complementary roles, which should be made explicit:

- On one hand, we facilitate the conversations that lead to a decision.
- On the other hand, we support those conversations by **sharing useful frameworks and reference points** that help the group shape its own decision-making methods.

It's also helpful to remind the group of the **inherent balance involved in the art of decision-making**. This means finding a balance between:

- **deciding alone**,
- **deciding together**, and
- **not deciding (yet)**.

None of these three approaches should be rejected outright — the goal is to **balance them consciously**, with awareness of the risks that lie at each corner of this triangle.



The idea that **horizontal governance means deciding everything together** still persists in many people's minds. However, **delegation** — meaning that certain individuals are **mandated (for a set period)** to propose or make decisions on specific topics — can lead to faster decision-making.

Even if a decision is made by one person or a small group, it can still **integrate the perspectives and collective wisdom** of the whole group. Since the group has **collectively chosen the mandates and the people filling them**, members are generally more inclined to support the decisions made. More broadly, the group remains **sovereign**.

This dynamic is, of course, quite different from that of a **hierarchical group**. In such cases, decisions are also made by one or a few people — but **always the same ones**, and **not necessarily the ones most affected by or involved in the issue**. These decisions might involve some team consultation, but often result in **less buy-in** and potentially **less wisdom**.

Beyond the aspects of **speed and alignment**, it's important to consider: **what kind of decision-making process will best serve the organization's purpose and lead to high-quality decisions**?

Contexts of use

The choice of decision-making method can sometimes seem at odds with the **legal powers** of the organization. For example, a team may operate through **self-management**, while officially an **external board of directors (BoD)** holds all formal decision-making power.

Each situation is unique. Here are a few ideas and organizational arrangements that can be adapted depending on the legal structure (nonprofit, cooperative, company, etc.):

- The **board of directors** can be composed partially or entirely of team members.
- The **general assembly (GA)** can be made up mostly of the team — without necessarily being on the board — and thus be responsible for appointing the board.
- The team (or part of it) may be **invited to board meetings** without being official members.
- It can be an opportunity to **rethink the ideal composition** of such a body (external perspective, expert, team members, beneficiaries…), in what proportion and with what mandate.
- A board may be **minimally active or dormant**, meaning it agrees to let the team make decisions, stepping in only in the event of a major dysfunction.

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