Participation

Methods - collecting, clustering, prioritizing, voting, consensus seeking

Collecting and clustering

In a democratic decision-making process, many points of view, suggestions and ideas may arise. Thus, the chair has to process these issues and cluster them. This can be achieved in plenary sessions by simultaneously taking notes on the board or flipchart when the participants raise their points. In groupwork, participants write down their points on the flipchart and present them. After having raised and discussed all points, it is necessary to cluster overlapping aspects and clearly distinguish them from each other.

Voting and prioritization

Voting is the typical procedure to make a democratic decision, whereby the majority usually determines the outcome. There are different procedures of majority vote.

We are most familiar with voting by raising one's hands or marking one of several options on a ballot. A useful way of voting after collecting and clustering several views, ideas or suggestions from an audience is to distribute a number of colorful sticky dots per person. The participants then paste their dots to their preferred options on a form. They may use all dots for one option or distribute them for many options. You can also set a limit of three dots for one option if this makes sense. It is important to recognize that the participants may mutually influence each other when they can see what others vote for, e.g. when raising hands or openly assigning dots to certain options. To prevent mutual manipulation, it is possible to ask the participants to close their eyes before raising their hands or to hand out little stones to the participants and ask them to cast them into boxes next to the given options. The latter procedures have proven especially useful when working with young children who tend to look what others do before they think for themselves.

Consensus seeking

Majority votes always produce winners and losers. When voting for certain issues, it is necessary to keep in mind that the potential losers must also participate in implementing the decision. That is why one should attempt to include their interests if possible, e.g. through compromise. One way of seeking such a consensus is to provide four options that the participants can vote for. It has proven to be motivating when the corners in the room represent different options (you may mark the corners with small posters) and the participants move to the corners of their choice.

Options:

1. I totally agree
2. I have some doubt about it, but I actively take part in putting it into practice.
3. I can't agree with it in this form. We have to change something (e.g. in the wording).
4. I totally disagree (veto)

If one person votes for option 3, the group has to amend and improve the current proposal. If a person votes for option 4, the proposal has been turned down. The advantage of this procedure is that nobody can withdraw from decision-making or be ignored. Everybody has to come up with a statement and openly take a position. When applying this method with (small) children only two options should be offered „agree and disagree (veto)" in the beginning. If only one child disagrees, the children need to look for a new solution.