



Just Talking : Democracy in multi-sectorial coalitions and *regroupements*

Last May, Coco members met to discuss how to address power imbalances in our coalitions and make our collective decision-making more democratic. This meeting was the first in a series of discussions called “Just Talking”.

This document presents some of the thoughts expressed at that first meeting.

Defining some terms

We asked participants to write down some words that came to mind when they thought about the terms “democratic” and “power imbalance”. Here's some of the things they wrote:

What do we mean by democratic? What characterizes a democratic space?

- (real) listening
- enough time for real discussions
- solution-oriented
- going forward
- creates positive energy
- understanding
- consensus
- talking with not at
- exchange, sharing
- collaborative agenda-setting
- equality
- openness
- respect
- safe
- inclusive
- engaged

What do power imbalances look like in your coalitions?

- Government vs. grassroots
- vertical management
- government and enterprise have more money!
- popularity
- seniority
- strong personalities
- situational leadership
- “rubber-stamp” decision-making
- racism
- ongoing colonialism
- gender and sexism

Obstacles to democratic decision-making

We asked participants to name some of the things that get in the way of democratic decision-making in the coalitions and regroupements. Here's what they said :

Fuzzy objectives

When our objectives are not well-defined, are too broad, shift often, or when we aren't united around a common goal

Funds

When funders are involved in the discussion, or when funding concerns influence our decisions

Inertia

When we're closed to new ways of thinking, are skeptical, or dismiss new ideas as naive or idealistic

Self-Interest

When we put our own interests and/or the interests of our organizations above the interests of the coalition/*regroupement*

Facilitation

When there's no facilitator, or no one to help make sure everyone has had a chance to speak

Training and expertise

We all have different levels of training and expertise. When we don't take time to bring everyone up to speed, the experts dominate the discussion.

Agendas

When we don't make the agenda together and don't distribute the agenda in advance

Rules

When rules for participating in the meeting are too rigid and formal, or too informal and unstructured -- both can make it hard to participate fully and speak our minds

Too many meetings!

When there are lots of committees and lots of meetings, only a few of us can afford to attend. Volunteers and organizations with fewer resources will have less power than professionals who are paid to participate.

Cliques

When we support our old buddies instead of welcoming and supporting newcomers

Systemic oppression

When we don't address racism, sexism, colonialism and other forms of system oppression that give some of us more power than others

Fear

When we fear strong reactions to our point of view, or use defensiveness to shut down the discussion

Continuity

When representatives change frequently, or organizations send people who aren't empowered or informed enough to fully participate