

## **Occupy Melbourne Guide to the General Assembly**

The Facilitation Working Group of Occupy Melbourne has prepared this guide in order to explain the key aims, functions and processes of the General Assembly. It is by no means a closed model. Rather, it can and should be adapted by the General Assembly.

### **What is consensus building?**

Within the vast majority of political and economic institutions, the normal method of decision-making between two people with different opinions is confrontational. This means that both people defend their position with the aim of convincing their opponent until they have won or a compromise has been reached. It often involves one or both people exerting power to block their opponent from defending their opinions and interests.

In contrast, consensus building is a constructive process through which two people with differing ideas can work together to build something new that neither had envisaged before. It is based on the principle that an inclusive process of decision-making has the power to transform the initial opinions of all involved.

Ways to facilitate consensus building:

- Create a relaxed group atmosphere, which encourages participants to listen to, respect and support each other
- Make sure task that is currently being worked on is clear
- Identifying points that fall on common ground to begin building a proposal
- Not considering others as opponents, but rather components of the whole group
- Active listening, rather than focus on preparing an oppositional response

### **What is the General Assembly?**

The General Assembly is a gathering of people committed to making decisions by working towards consensus. Participants of the General Assembly must engage peacefully and respectfully.

Deliberation in the General Assembly should not centre upon ideological discourses or preconceived ideas. Instead it should deal with practical questions: What do we need? How can we get it?

The General Assembly aims to facilitate dialogue and getting to know one another, in order to establish common ground and encourage compromise through mutual recognition of difference. It is based on free association, meaning if you are not in agreement with what has been decided you are not obliged to carry it out.

### **How are decisions made in the General Assembly?**

All decisions made by the General Assembly will be reached through a process of consensus building. The following procedure aims to promote consensus building, while including the provision for a 90%, or minimum 66%, majority vote in special cases.

1. A Working Group or individual participant makes a proposal using the following format:

1. What is being proposed?
2. Why is it being proposed?
3. How can we carry out the proposal if it is approved?

Each proposal should be presented within 2 minutes, unless the General Assembly approves an extended time limit.

2. The Moderator will ask: "Does everybody understand what is being proposed?"

If there are questions relating to the proposal, a member of the Participants Team will relay the question to the person who made the proposal, who may answer within 2 minutes.

3. When there are no more questions, the Moderator will ask: "Are there any strongly opposed opinions?"

If there are, the Moderator will advise the Assembly that a maximum of 3 arguments against and 3 arguments for the proposal will be allowed.

Members of the Participants Team will approach participants who wish to speak and ask:

1. Is your intervention related to what is being discussed? (Remind the participant of the issue being discussed)
2. Is it a direct reply to something that has been said?
3. If so, is it for or against?

If the participant's proposed intervention bears no direct relationship to the issue at hand, she or he will be directed to the Speakers Forum, Working Groups, or noted down as a speaker for the Any Other Business round, depending on the nature of the proposal.

4. Following the arguments for and against, the Moderator will check consensus and if there are still strongly opposed opinions the Moderator will ask the assembly to discuss the issue for 3-5 minutes in small groups and invite people to suggest moderated proposals. Members of the Coordination team, Facilitation Support team or the Moderator may suggest moderated proposals.

5. If no moderated proposals achieve consensus, the Working Group or individual participant responsible for the proposal is asked if they wish to withdraw the proposal to be reworked and brought to the next General Assembly, or if they would prefer to attempt to have their proposal approved via a 90% majority.

6. A 66% majority is the minimum approval with which a proposal can be put to action. Without a 90% majority it should ideally be sent to an appropriate Working Group to be discussed and reformulated.

#### **Extra points on process...**

-Like the proposals, comments made in the “Any Other Business” section should be confined to 2 minutes, unless the Assembly approves an extended time limit.

-Participants hoping to speak in the “Any Other Business” section should be asked about the nature of their intervention to assess if it is more appropriate to the Speakers Forum or another Working Group, keeping in mind that the core business of the Assembly is to deal with matters related to the occupation (not broader ideological questions which should be fleshed out in discussion groups and other forums).

-If the Assembly is taking too long, it can be ended by a simple majority vote (Moderator and Coordination Team responding to the mood of the Assembly) and any unsettled matters will be taken up at the following Assembly.

#### **What roles and functions are involved in general assemblies?**

##### **📌 LOGISTICS TEAM:**

-A minimum of three people responsible for the equipment of the Assembly

-Organise the crowd with corridors running towards the speakers’ floor

-In charge of the PA system (in case of a breakdown in the people’s microphone)

-Provide seating for people with disabilities (or who are very tired), water and shade (umbrellas) if temperatures are high and sunshine is direct, etc.

### **ASSEMBLY PARTICIPANTS:**

- Actively listen to the proposals and arguments of different speakers
- Participate in small group discussion when consensus is not reached
- Make individual proposals or subjective evaluations (having requested the Participants Team to do so) during the “Any Other Business” round at the end of the Assembly

### **PARTICIPANTS TEAM:**

- A minimum of two people (depending on the size of the assembly) positioned amongst the participants and next to the corridors
- Carry signs that say “TURNS TO SPEAK” which they lift above their heads when required and note books for jotting down the names of those requesting to speak and a 1-2 sentence summary of their argument
- Responsible for noting any request from the moderator(s) to be relieved
- Conciliatory, positive, neutral and patient
- Try to involve people who have not yet intervened in the debate
- Conscious of resisting power imbalances that exist in broader society (i.e. around race, gender, etc.)

### **COORDINATION TEAM:**

- Two people who organise requests to speak that are forwarded to them by the Participants Team before passing them on to the Moderator
- Select speakers so that the same message is not repeated, as well as mediating between people with similar arguments with the aim of presenting a unified proposal for debate
- Once the intervention has been coordinated, the floor-time coordinator informs the Facilitator who informs the Moderator so that they can call on the speaker to intervene in the right order

### **FACILITATION SUPPORT TEAM:**

- Two people who back up the Moderator

-Only people in direct contact with the Moderators in order to help them maintain their concentration and impartiality

-Help the Moderator synthesise and reformulate proposals in an objective and impartial way

-Prevent the assembly participants from distracting the moderator, make the moderator aware of any errors in their vocabulary or summaries, inform them of any last-minute announcements, help them stick to the agenda, etc.

☒-May assist the Moderator (with her or his consent) by intervening when there are silences, over-heated discussions or serious digressions

### **ROTATING TEAM OF MODERATORS:**

-One or more people who are responsible for welcoming the participants to the assembly, explaining the nature and workings of the assembly, conciliating distinct positions without aligning themselves personally with any of these, summarising each intervention during the rounds of debate if needed and repeating the consensus as recorded in the minutes

-Can ask to be replaced or be removed via consensus of the Assembly

-Responsible for ensuring an atmosphere favourable to the exchange of ideas and for establishing a positive tone

-Should the need arise they might also release tension with motivating interjections

### **INTERPRETER TEAM:**

-One or two people who translate oral interventions into sign language for the hard of hearing and vice versa

### **MINUTES TEAM:**

-Two people responsible for noting all interventions that do not have a script

-In the case of consensus resolutions the Minutes team can ask for any resolution to be repeated word-by-word and subsequently ratified by the assembly

### **What will be the layout of a general assembly?**

☒The Speakers' Area is a rectangle marked out with chalk (or coloured tape stuck to the floor) in front of the assembly area like a type of 'stage'. The Participants Team is visibly

placed amongst the participants. Within the Moderators' Area, the Moderator and the Speaker will stand in the middle, flanked by the Interpreter(s) and Facilitator(s) who may sit on the floor when not taking part, and always within reach of the Coordination Team.

To one side of the Moderators' Area sit the Spokespeople of the Working Groups who will be intervening in the different parts of the Agenda; on the other side an area will be provided for the Coordination Team who will always be within reach of the Facilitation Support Team. The Minutes Team will sit as far away as possible from the Coordination Team (yet still close to the Speakers' Area) to avoid distracting their attention with the conversations that take place before each turn to speak, making their job easier.