WHAT is consensus?

1) A decision-making process.- Consensus is an inclusive and participatory model of decision making that seeks to address the concerns and needs of an entire group, and synthesize these into the best possible solution. By using consensus, we engage in a cooperative approach to decision-making, and seek to build sustainable and mutually satisfying decisions through discussion, creativity, and compromise.

2) Consensus is a non-coercive, egalitarian mode of communication. There are no leaders, and all are empowered to affect the decisions that affect them. As we use consensus, we are deconstructing hierarchy and authority in our daily lives and interactions, and actively seeking to replace them with relationships of trust, equity, support, and strength. Consensus builds community and trust by involving and valuing all in the decision making process.

3) The process has several basic steps. First the groups formulates or accepts a proposal. This is followed by clarifying questions. Does everyone here understand what is being proposed. Next there are concerns. There is often discussion around concerns. The original proposal is then developed or modified through this process. Once all concerns appear to be addressed there is the final call so to speak. Are there any other major reservations, stand asides, blocks and if not then CONSENSUS – which is often accompanied by a twinkling of fingers – the “silent clap” in American Sign Language.

The latin root-word of "consensus" is consentir: con meaning "with" or "together with", and sentire meaning 'to think and feel" consentire effectively translates as "to think and feel together"

Consensus is a participatory process by which a group thinks and feels together en route to a decision.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The tradition of consensus decision-making employed by North American activists seems to go back originally to the Quakers, who in turn say they were inspired by Native American practices. Some civil rights and peace groups of the '50s and '60s used consensus decision-making, but much of the current interest emerged in the '70s, largely, in reaction to some of the more macho leadership styles typical of the '60s New Left. The feminist movement played the crucial role here. More elaborate forms of consensus decision-making, involving affinity groups, spokes councils and the like, first emerged within anti-nuclear groups like the Clamshell Alliance. These forms have proved so spectacularly effective in Seattle and elsewhere, and so
libratory for those who operate within them, that most activists involved in direct action—notably within the globalization movement—see the forms in which their actions are organized as themselves the most promising existing models for what a truly democratic society might be like. Consensus also tends to hold a particular appeal to both anarchists and pacifists, since it is the form of decision-making most consistent with a society not based on compulsion. In fact, there is no known case of a stateless society which used majority voting as a form of decision-making; whether in Asia, Africa, or Amazonia, all developed one or another form of consensus.

*WHAT'S WRONG with just voting?* conventional, majority rules models work with several negative behavioral patterns:

**COMPETITIVE:** voting is a win or lose model that pits one decision against the other rather than seeking to synthesize the two into a mutually satisfying decision. This mentality is very divisive, and can become aggressive – a win/lose model has the potential to disrupt an entire group.

**QUANTITATIVE:** as opposed to qualitative. Voting is a quick and more mindless procedure that tends to work with the easiest solution rather than seeking to create the best, most sustainable agreement.

**UNCOMPROMISING:** In majority rules there is rarely room for compromise or amendment of an idea - an individual is forced to make a distinct, inflexible choice between two options. It is one or the other, support or oppose.

**IMPERSONAL:** voting does not take into account an individual’s feelings needs, or desires. Majority rules models tend to dissociate the decision from everyday life, and the individual from the decision-making process.

**DISEMPOWERING:** the individual is left to the tyranny of the majority, and is left no empowering forum to address decisions that affect them. One individual’s concerns, no matter how strong or relevant, can be completely disregarded.