Common Problems in Small Group Decision Making

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ALTHOUGH EVERY COUNTY AND CULTURE is different, small group decision making has some of the same problems across the globe. These problems are serious because they can lead groups to make flawed or undemocratic decisions, prevent groups from reaching decisions, or cause groups to break apart. A group promoter (GP) who learns to recognize and address these common problems can help groups improve their decision making process and become successful, self-reliant bodies. Among the many decision making problems groups encounter, some of the most serious are vague or inconsistent goals and procedures, long meetings, unequal group involvement and commitment, group conflicts, low communication and literacy skills, different communication styles, extreme power differences, poor memory of the group's past, and poorly constructed inter-group associations.

1. Setting goals and establishing procedures

Reaching agreement on goals

Perhaps the most serious problem in small group decision making is the failure to identify a clear and consistent set of goals. A group without basic objectives is aimless and unproductive, but a group with a well-defined purpose can be very innovative and effective.

The primary purpose of self-help groups is income generation. GPs should not assume, however, that group members have a clear and shared understanding of this goal, nor should GPs assume that this is the only goal that group members have. These assumptions may prove mistaken, and vague or conflicting goals will limit a group's success.

The cost of uncertain goals. If goals remain vague, the group will probably not focus on creating income generating enterprises. Instead, group meetings will be disorganized, mixing discussions of future plans with questions about the group's purpose. The group may also turn from one activity to another like a ship drifting at sea. The group will be less effective if group members have different personal objectives and never agree on their basic goals. For instance, some members may seek emotional support and companionship during meetings, while others wish to discuss specific plans designed to generate income.

In extreme cases, member goals may directly conflict. Some members may wish to form a group that seeks the assistance of non-governmental organizations, but other members may want to remain entirely self-reliant. Or some members might hope to increase group income to address immediate needs, whereas other members intend to build up group savings over a period of years.

Setting group goals. Instead of assuming that group members already share clear and common goals, the GP can encourage group members to discuss their goals at one of their first meetings. All group members can state briefly what general objectives they hope to reach by joining the group. Encourage members to speak in
simple and broad terms, such as "raising my family income" or "working together as a community", instead of specifics, such as "building a new fence".

If members have trouble identifying goals, the GP can ask what is important to them. What do they value in their lives? Some groups will reach agreement on basic goals in a one hour discussion, and other groups may need to meet more than once and talk with friends and family members to find one or two common objectives. Group members may have the same goal before the group forms, but identifying that goal in a face-to-face meeting will increase group commitment and involvement.

Ultimately, the group needs to perform specific tasks, but the initial goals can be clear without being too specific. If members can agree on a broad goal like income generation, they can better understand why they are working together. One group member may wish to plant corn, while another may wish to plant beans, but both can agree on the same general goal of making their farms more profitable. Later, the group can decide upon more specific objectives within this broader goal.

**Managing multiple goals.** If group members decide that they have more than one goal, the group needs to prioritize these goals as clearly as possible. The GP can encourage group members to rank the goals in order of importance. Ask members what they would do if the two goals conflicted. If a government organization offered the group members a valuable agricultural grant in exchange for partial control of their crop selection, would the group sacrifice self-reliance to increase its income? Which goal would be more important?

The GP might also ask if the group should pursue both of its goals at the same time. Sometimes it is better to work on one goal first. For example, the group may want to increase family savings and establish a village health clinic, but members may decide that they should not work on the clinic until annual family incomes reach a certain level. Or if poor health is severely limiting family income, the group may decide to set aside a portion of its work hours and initial savings to build the clinic.

**Changing goals.** Some groups will always pursue the same goals over the years, but many groups change course. A group may have formed to generate income and savings, then largely achieve this goal in five years and turn its attention toward improving community health or the education of its children. Group members need to decide when and how they will reexamine their basic goals. A group may choose to reconsider its goals every year, possibly on or near a holiday that is associated with reflection about one's life and village.

**Reaching agreement on procedures**

Once a group has a clear set of goals, it needs to decide how to achieve these goals. One way or another, the group will make decisions, but not all decisions are equally sound and democratic. Some group members may be reluctant to talk about the decision making process because such a discussion does not produce immediate results and may seem unnecessary. Explain to the group that procedural problems can cripple a group's progress.

**The consequences of flawed procedures.** If a group fails to agree on its procedures, it will reach decisions in a disorganized and inconsistent manner. Some members may make different decisions on their own, and members may disagree.
about whether the group has reached agreement on an issue. The most persuasive or dominant group member may try to make all of the group's decisions, or the group may fall apart.

Other groups have problems because they agree upon a procedure that is unfair or ineffective. A group can choose to let one member make all of its major decisions, but some members might leave the group because they believe the one member is biased, ignorant, or corrupt. Another group may choose to use a time-consuming process that slows it down so much that the group's activities are not profitable.

**Finding fair and sound group procedures.** Groups can develop democratic and effective procedures by following a series of four steps. First, group members need to recognize the kinds of decisions they will make together. For instance, will they make joint decisions about only general activities, or will they reach agreement on the details of their projects?

Second, the group members need to decide how much they value fairness and effectiveness. In the long run, a democratic procedure may also make the group most successful at achieving its goals. Nevertheless, a democratic process can sometimes limit short-term efficiency, and group members need to learn to respect group procedures even in these situations. For example, a group may have to make a quick decision while three group members are out of town. Should the group wait until the others return and possibly miss some deadline or economic opportunity? The GP can provide group members with hypothetical situations and ask them what they would do. If they can agree on how to proceed in these scenarios, the group will know what to do when these circumstances actually arise.

Third, the GP can help the group weigh the advantages and disadvantages of two or more basic decision making procedures. There are many different ways of reaching decisions, and only three simplified procedures are listed here:

- **Consensus.** Using consensus, group members seek to reach full agreement, and a single member can block the group from making a decision. Consensus usually involves careful listening and full member participation in discussions. This procedure ensures full group support for decisions and protects group minorities from stronger majorities, but it can result in long meetings and delays.
- **Majority.** Using majority rule, a group needs the agreement of a majority (51% or more of the membership) to reach a decision. Groups often reach majority decisions through brief and somewhat formal discussion, then a final vote where members raise their hands. This procedure often moves forward more quickly and creates clearer debates, but it can result in group factions and a dominant and "permanent" majority.
- **Decision Division.** This procedure allows groups to "divide" decisions. The members of a group might disagree about how to spend 100 units of money, with six members wanting to buy wood and four members wishing to purchase cement. The conflict might be resolved successfully by spending 60 units on wood and 40 units on bricks. However, this could also result in a half-finished, useless wooden stable and a half-finished, worthless brick storage room.
Fourth, the group pulls together these three discussions. The group decides which procedure to use for reaching decisions in different situations. The group may decide to use the same procedure for all of its decisions, or it may use different procedures for different decisions. For example, a group that normally uses the 51% majority rule may safeguard its savings by requiring a full consensus (or a 75% majority) to withdraw any of its savings.

Once a group agrees on its procedures, the group needs to record these procedures (and the group's basic goals) in a written constitution. The final constitution should be read aloud and discussed before the entire group so that all hear and understand it. If this is done, members are more likely to take responsibility for the goals and procedures they have set.

**Solving other problems**

Clear objectives and procedures will steer a group around many obstacles, but they cannot protect a group from every decision making problem. An effective and democratic group will continue to experience some difficulties, but it will recognize, address, and sometimes (but not always) solve these problems.

**Long meetings**

One of the most notorious problems of group decision making is long meetings. When meetings last too long, group members become frustrated, impatient, and too tired or distracted to think clearly. If long meetings become typical for a group, members may begin to show up late or skip meetings. Long meetings can decrease group productivity by delaying decisions or causing members to make unwise decisions due to exhaustion. Long meetings can also make the group less democratic because the group members with more stamina can dominate the members who become more quickly.

**Keeping meetings short.** There are many methods for keeping meetings reasonably short. These include:

- The group chairperson can "facilitate" meetings by encouraging members to stay focused on the agenda items. The chair might have to interrupt a member who speaks too long or strays from the issue at hand. It may be helpful for each member to perform the role of group facilitator once because this makes members appreciate the need for group facilitation during meetings. Rotating the facilitator role can also teach members to facilitate themselves by developing their ideas before meetings, speaking only when necessary, listening carefully to others, and thinking clearly about decisions.
- It is often wise to agree on a meeting deadline before beginning a meeting and never go more than a few minutes over the deadline. This will give group members confidence that meetings will end on time, and if they fail to get through their meeting agenda in time, they will learn the importance of being efficient during meetings.
- For similar reasons, groups may find it useful to limit the amount of time for discussing each individual agenda item. Otherwise, a group might use all of its meeting time to address only the first items on its agenda. Setting time limits for individual items also helps the facilitator pace the group through the entire agenda.
Groups can often shorten their meetings by limiting their meeting agendas. Meeting time is precious, and groups should use it only for things that have to be done face-to-face as an assembled group. In general, meetings should be used only for building group cohesion, sharing important information and ideas, and reaching group decisions. Anything that can be done outside of meetings should be done elsewhere.

**Unequal group commitment and involvement**

The sustainability of a small group depends on equal involvement and commitment among its members. Fining members for missing meetings or failing to pay dues may ensure full attendance and equal financial contributions, but there is no simple way to make members put the same amount of energy into all of the group's activities.

When the differences in individual member involvement become extreme, many things can go wrong. The members who become most active may begin to dominate group meetings, and the knowledge and energy of the more active members may intimidate other members. The least involved members might begin to resent, envy, or fear a more involved member, and they may behave irresponsibly during meetings and feel less responsible for group decisions.

**Balancing member involvement.** Sometimes unequal member involvement is due to member apathy, but other times it is caused by one or two members becoming too involved. The GP need to help the group decide what amount of involvement is too little and what amount is too much. Ask members what makes a member "lazy" or "irresponsible"? Can a member be "too eager" or "over-committed", or is more involvement and commitment always desirable?

Even if members reach agreement on how involved and committed they should be, some members may continue to show "too little" or "too much" involvement. The GP can talk to uncommitted members to find out whether they believe in the group's basic goals and procedures, and it may be necessary for the group to reexamine these issues. Less committed members might also increase their involvement if they are given clearer and more specific tasks and responsibilities. Otherwise, it might be appropriate for uncommitted members to volunteer to leave the group. In talking with "over-involved" members, the GP might emphasize the long-term value of relatively equal member involvement.

**Group conflicts**

Each culture has a unique understanding of conflict. Some cultures encourage open and emotional disputes, while others value strict politeness and very cautious disagreement. Every culture, though, makes a distinction between "productive" and "unproductive" conflict. Good conflicts are those that help the group understand difficult problems and choose among alternative solutions. Bad conflicts cause only confusion, bad decisions, hurt feelings, anger (and possibly violence), and the breakup of the group.

**Resolving conflicts.** The best approach to destructive conflict is to prevent it from happening. To do this, encourage the group to devote some of its time to building
friendships and group cohesion by working together, playing games, telling stories, and sharing other common activities.

Once conflicts arise, the GP’s response will depend upon the cultural setting. Openly and directly discussing the conflict will work best in some cultures, but in other settings conflict resolution may need to take place outside of the group through a formal ceremony or private discussion. Learn how members are accustomed to resolving conflicts. Hopefully, members will all know good examples of successful conflict resolution, and the GP can build a solution that draws upon their shared knowledge and experiences.

**Weak communication and literacy skills**

In many groups, members will have different levels of literacy and communication skills. Some members will be better at reading, speaking in public, persuading others, listening, and thinking during meetings.

When some but not all group members are literate and have experience with group discussion (or when there is only one literate and verbally skilled member), many problems may arise. The most skilled people may dominate or manipulate discussions, withhold important information, and cause other members to leave from the group. Illiterate and inexperienced members may fail to understand group discussions and then make uninformed decisions.

**Dealing with illiteracy and weak communication skills.** In most cases, it will be important for the GP and any other literate and skilled group members to understand what behaviors can upset other members. The group needs to use the abilities of its most skilled members, but sometimes verbal abilities are misused for personal reasons, such as impressing or intimidating others.

The best solution, however, is raising the abilities of other group members. Even if other members do not have the time or willingness to learn full writing and reading skills, they can become adept at speaking, listening, and thinking during meetings. The more skilled members should be encouraged to set good examples for other members, provide instruction when appropriate and, most of all, offer reassurance and encouragement to other members.

Some group members may be accustomed to remaining passive and quiet in public, and some may question the value of learning communication skills. Point out that as each member develops these abilities, the group will make better decisions and hold more efficient meetings. Communication skills can also benefit the group in the village and the marketplace, where a persuasive speaker can win sales and bargains. When one more member becomes more skilled at participating in group meetings and speaking with people, in general every member of the group benefits.

**Different communication styles**

Although every group member may belong to the same culture, members may play different cultural roles, especially if the group has both men and women. Different cultural roles often have different communication styles. Some people are expected to be polite and shy whereas others are supposed to interrupt and speak loudly.
When group members have different communication styles, they may frequently misunderstand one another. What sounds like an order to one person may only be mean suggestion. One member may misinterpret another person’s silence as agreement when a quiet member is actually angry and disagrees with the group’s plans.

Different styles can also lead to undemocratic meetings. Even if they do not intend to take over the discussion, group members accustomed to interrupting, speaking directly, and thinking quickly will often dominate other members who speak in a more reserved, cautious, and reflective style. As a result, the more forceful members will make most of the group’s decisions, even though the other members have an equal chance to participate.

**Respecting and blending speaking styles.** Many people have never recognized and discussed their own "communication styles", and the GP can help the group by simply showing group members how they communicate differently. Once members understand these differences, it may be easier to respect and appreciate members' different styles.

If members are willing and able to alter their communication styles, the group can integrate different styles into a single group discussion process. For example, the group might decide that interruptions are often helpful but that members should raise their hands if they wish to interrupt a speaker. Or a group might decide to have fast-paced discussions, but with a five minute silence in the middle to allow time for quiet reflection.

**Extreme power differences**

Group members usually do not have exactly the same amount of power or influence in the group, but sometimes one or two group members have far more power than other members:

- One member might possess an income or social status that others lack.
- The group chairperson might build up too much executive power.
- The group treasurer might be the only literate member and become the only one that clearly understands the group's finances.

When power differences are extreme, it is difficult for the group to make democratic decisions. The powerful members can have an unfair share of influence on group decisions, and they can intimidate members who feel economically or socially vulnerable. Power differences can also lead to bad decisions because less powerful members might be reluctant to raise important issues or suggest good ideas that the more powerful members would not support.

**Balancing power or changing the group.** It is desirable to form relatively homogeneous groups, and this problem often can be prevented by forming a group consisting of individuals with roughly equal wealth and social status. However, extreme power differences can also emerge after the group has already formed.

In these cases, it is possible that the most powerful member has taken on too many of the group's responsibilities. To solve this problem, the GP can encourage the
group to distribute the it's work more evenly among the members. Sometimes the most powerful member wants such a change but does not trust that other members will do their share. Other times the less powerful group members have become accustomed to doing less work. Often the best solution is redistributing the group's tasks one at a time, slowly building up trust and new group habits.

The GP can also help group members distinguish between criticizing a person's ideas and questioning their status. Explain how personal criticisms are very different from constructive criticisms of ideas. Both the most and least powerful group members must be willing to let them disagree with the information and suggestions they provide during meetings.

**Poor group memory**

An effective group keeps careful and detailed written records in bound books. When groups fail to keep records, it is more difficult for members to recall what ideas they discussed, what they decided, and how they implemented their decisions.

Some groups will have good records but so many changes in membership that the members do not fully understand their records. In either case, poor memory of the group's past will limit both group cohesion and the quality of the group's decisions.

**Recording the group's past** If the group's membership is changing too rapidly, the GP needs to look for the causes of high member turnover. This may reveal more serious underlying problems, such as low group productivity or severe member conflicts.

When membership is relatively stable over time, group memory can be improved by regularly reading and discussing the group's records. Every time the group meets, the secretary can briefly review the previous meeting. Every two or three months, the group can reexamine its major decisions and reflect upon its past mistakes and successes. Perhaps the group can draw a descriptive symbol on a wall or in the record book for each important event in the group's history. In addition, these formal group reflections and symbolic drawings might be integrated with the participatory monitoring and evaluation process.

**Forming inter-group associations**

More mature groups often benefit by forming or joining inter-group associations (IGAs). IGAs have many advantages, but they can also create new problems. The IGA might require member groups to use procedures for running the inter-group association that conflict with their own decision making processes, or the IGA's goals may not match those of the group.

Working with other groups might result in too many conflicts or power imbalances, and joint projects might prove more inefficient than separate group enterprises. As groups enter into IGAs, the GP can prevent many of these problems by making certain that entering groups first agree on the goals, procedures, and other details of the IGA they would like to join, namely:
• **Reach agreement on IGA goals.** Just like small groups, IGAs must have clear purposes. Individual groups need to discuss their own goals and look for any broad objectives they share. Group members must understand exactly how an IGA will help them pursue their shared goals. Bigger is not always better, so the group must have one or more clear reasons for becoming part of an IGA. To develop such reasons, groups should carefully discuss the issues during their meetings:

• **Reach agreement on IGA procedures.** The groups forming an IGA also need to learn how their decision making procedures differ. If possible, they should reach agreement on the procedures they will follow when making IGA decisions. If a group is joining a previously formed IGA, the group should not join until it understands and accepts (or asks for changes in) the IGA's procedures.

• **Reach agreement on details.** Most of all, the GP should make certain that the groups forming an IGA make clear decisions about how IGA committees will function, about its constitution will operate, and how all other key issues will be dealt with, such as the sharing of IGA income.