

# *Governance and decision-making*

In a spirit of **mutual respect, trust** and **cooperation**, we want a **participatory** and **inclusive** mode of governance, valuing **collective intelligence**, and based on **accountability** and **self-organization**. This is why we have chosen to base our mode of governance on **sociocracy**.

Our **strategic decisions** will be taken by **consent**, ideally tending **towards consensus**.

As far as **operational decisions** are concerned, and in a desire for **fluidity** and **accountability**, we are inspired by "teal organizations" by setting up an "**advice process**".

## *Mode of governance: sociocracy*

"**Sociocracy** is a mode of **shared governance** which allows an organization, whatever its size, to function effectively in a self-organized mode, characterized by decision-making distributed throughout the structure. [...] Sociocracy is based on the **freedom** and **co-responsibility** of the actors, in a logic of **self-organization trusting people**, it will put the power of **collective intelligence** at the service of the success of **common objectives**. This approach therefore makes it possible to achieve a shared objective together, with **respect for people**, while **preserving the diversity** of points of view and contributions of each, by relying on quality **interpersonal relationships**."<sup>1</sup> (Wikipedia)

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<sup>1</sup>Traduced from the French Wikipédia page about sociocracy

## *Decision-making methods:*

### *- Strategic decisions by consent*

In sociocracy, a difference is made between consensus and consent.

**Consensus** is to work out, together, the **best solution** that will **reflect everyone's vision** and beliefs.

**Consent**, on the other hand, means that **no one objects** to the proposal: it doesn't necessarily reflect my vision and I'm not sure that's the best solution, but I have no tangible objections, and "I can live with" the proposed solution.

Decision-making by consensus is obviously ideal and very satisfying when it is successful: the more people adhere to the proposal, and find themselves in it, the more they will be enthusiastic and motivated to implement it.

But the process is often long and tedious. This is why, at the Ermitaj, we have chosen the method of **decision-making by consent**, which has many advantages, and requires qualities of listening and detachment from oneself in order to focus on the **needs of the group**.

We wish, initially, to lay down a framework but to keep a certain fluidity and flexibility in the process of decision-making by consent. We detail below how the process works in general terms.

However, we remain in a process of experimentation, and we therefore offer ourselves the possibility of evolving within this framework: if we notice that problems arise in the process, or if the group becomes considerably more numerous, we could decide move to a more formalized method of consent decision-making, or even - in some cases - institute a "fallback solution" if consent cannot be achieved.

### **How does it work<sup>2</sup>:**

Meetings are not "chaired", but moderated by the **agenda planners** and a **facilitator**. In order for the meeting to be efficient and fluid, the planners will have drawn up an

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<sup>2</sup>Extract freely adapted from the book "Creating a life together" by Diana Leafe Christian, chapter 6, as well as tools on "the management of consent" from the "University of Us" (Université du Nous)

agenda so that the group can discuss the topics in an orderly fashion and according to a specific schedule.

The task of the facilitator is to take into account the needs of the group, to create a climate of trust and security, to get those who wish to participate in the discussion to do so (and to make sure there is no one dominating the discussion), to help the group stick to the agenda and stay focused on the work to do, measure and verify the degree of consent among members.

At the start of the meeting, a **scribe** will be designated to write up the minutes, which he will then communicate to everyone. One person will also be the "**time keeper**", and will make sure that the meeting proceeds according to the allotted time.

Time may be taken to **formulate the elements relating to the point treated**. You can express your **preferences**, your **limits**, or your **ideas**. From this discussion, a **well-argued proposition is developed**. The proposal can be made by a single individual, by a designated sub-group ("working committee"), or by the entire group. This phase can potentially take place before the meeting.

The members do not vote "for" or "against" a **proposal**: it is presented, **the members discuss it** and eventually take a decision. The proposal does not necessarily stay as is: **it is improved or modified** to meet the needs and concerns of the people and the group. When the time comes to decide, **members have the choice of consenting to the proposal, objecting, or abstaining**.

**To consent** does not necessarily mean to like all aspects of the final version of the proposal, but **being able to live with it** and being **ready to support it**.

**To abstain** is to do something sometimes called "constructive abstention" or "of principle", which means that, without personally supporting the proposal, a member **does not wish to prevent** the rest of the group from adopting it. The names are noted in the minutes and, depending on community agreements, non-voters may not have to participate in the application of the proposal (although they will have to submit to it later).

**To object**. You don't oppose a proposal for personal reasons, or because you don't like the impact of the decision on your life. We only object **when we sincerely believe that if adopted, the proposal will contravene the morals, ethics or security of the group**, or if we have good reason to believe that **its implementation is not feasible** or would have **too many negative impacts**.

The objection must be **concrete, precise and well-argued**; we then say that it is "reasonable".

Sometimes the objection is due to a lack of information or a misunderstanding. A discussion providing additional information or an explanation can sometimes be enough for the person to "lift" (withdraw) their objection.

**A proposal is accepted when all the participants agree, even if one or more people abstain.**

**If someone raises a reasonable objection**, there are two possibilities. Either the objection " **Cancels**" the proposition, that is to say it makes it impossible to realize. In this case, we start the process again with **another proposal**. Either the **proposal is reworked and "improved"**, until the modifications made "lift" the objection. If there are multiple objections, they will be treated one by one.

We then make sure that the new proposal is accepted by all. If so, it is validated.

### *- Operational decisions: the advice process<sup>3</sup>*

At Ermitaj, each stakeholder has the possibility, if he wishes, to make a decision (in his field of action<sup>4</sup>), whether it is when he encounters a difficulty or when he wishes to take an initiative, to experiment a new idea, or carry a new project.

However, if this decision impacts other stakeholders, or permanently modifies the land / infrastructures or common resources of Ermitaj (or their allocation), it is necessary to carry out an "advice process".

This advice process will be done in a written form: the proposal will be detailed and shared publicly, by posting in a dedicated space, and / or by email.

The requester has the duty to consult and question at least the people concerned and potentially affected by the proposal, as well as any experts on the subject.

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<sup>3</sup>Inspired by "teal organizations" (Frederic Laloux, "Reinventing organizations")

<sup>4</sup>See the guidelines for each kind of stakeholders

All stakeholders will have the opportunity to express themselves on the subject if they wish, by asking questions, making suggestions (which the requester is not forced to take into account) or by expressing an objection.

After making sure that everyone has had the opportunity to review and express their views on the advice process, and if no one has objected, the requester can then validate and apply the proposal.

If someone issues a "reasonable" objection (concrete, precise and reasoned), the proposal is discussed in plenary and a decision will be taken on consent: either the proposal is canceled or it will be amended until the objection be lifted.

Once the proposal has been validated, the requester will notify all the stakeholders. It will publicly inform the decision, and the timetable for its implementation. He will be solely responsible, unless there has been a clear agreement, providing for a sharing or delegation of responsibility.

## *Governance framework: the different types of meetings / committees*

### *Strategic meetings (council):*

Purpose / subjects covered: to take strategic decisions concerning Ermitaj, its missions and poles. This is where the main orientations of the project are decided.  
Frequency: monthly? In any case, they take place before operational meetings, and are supposed to be less frequent than the latter.

Participants: the stakeholders concerned (it therefore depends on the subject and the type of decision to be made)

Decision-making method: consent. With an ideal goal of consensus.

### *Working committees*

Purpose / subjects covered: a "working committee" is a sub-group which has been mandated to work on a specific, often technical, subject. They will then communicate

their results (feasibility, costs, etc.) and their possible proposal(s), so that a decision can be taken by consent with all the people concerned during a strategic meeting.

Frequency: when needed

Participants: people chosen to be part of the committee

Decision-making method: committee participants choose how to work among themselves. However, it is strongly recommended to operate on consent.

### *Operational meetings (briefings):*

Purpose/ subjects covered: the goal is not to discuss or decide what to do! But how we do it. It is a meeting for organization, coordination, planning of one or more planned task(s).

Frequency: when needed. Ideally they are quite frequent (at least when there are collective tasks / activities planned), but short.

Participants: any person taking part in the task(s) concerned.

Decision-making method: the project leader(s) or responsible stakeholder(s) decide(s) - and choose the way to decide. However, it is strongly recommended to listen to and take into account the opinions of all participants.

### *Plenary sessions:*

Purpose / subjects covered:

- a) When someone objects in a advice process, and an agreement must be reached.
- b) Request for inclusion / exclusion of a member
- c) Very important subjects for which general consultation is desired

Frequency: when needed

Participants: everyone is invited (whoever wants to come)

Decision-making method: consent, but only the relevant stakeholders decide.

For a), it depends on the subject.

For b), these are the owners.

For c), everyone is listened to, but the decision can be postponed and taken during a strategic meeting

### *General Assembly of Ermitaj:*

Purpose / subjects covered: make a feedback of the year and talk about the following year. Celebration of the past year.

Frequency: once a year

Participants: everyone is invited

Decision-making method: no decision-making, but discussions that can lead to discussions on a strategic meeting.

### *Administration Council of the SRL:*

Purpose / subjects covered: management of the SRL. Distribution of tasks, feedback of the year, financial and accounting balance sheet.

Frequency: annual (or more if necessary)

Participants: the owners (candidate-owners can potentially attend)

Decision-making method: Consensus (officially it is a vote, or unanimity for certain points, but we have agreed among ourselves to operate by consensus). For decisions with little impact, an advice process (during AC or outside AC) may be sufficient.

### *Accountability Committee:*

Purpose / subjects covered: find a solution if a member seriously violates standards of behavior, or repeatedly violates community agreements (guidelines, regulations, charter), and dialogue is not enough.

Frequency: when necessary

Participants: the committee is made up of a minimum of 3 self-appointed people, preferably representing each type of stakeholder of Ermitaj. An external person, neutral and having mediation skills, can also be invited if necessary.

Decision-making method: consent

## *Managing tensions within Ermitaj*

We are aware of the primordial importance of the human factor in the success of a collective project. Interpersonal tensions and conflicts can become so overwhelming that they lead to the explosion of the community, and sometimes sign the end of great projects.

We cannot avoid tensions, they are inherent in social life. They are even exacerbated by community life: contacts are more frequent and closer, and avoidance is no longer a possibility.

"Living together" is not an easy choice. It requires willpower, emotional maturity and resilience. It forces us to face our own faults as much as those of others, and to work on ourselves and our relationship to others. It forces us to be able to express our needs, and to express ourselves in general. It requires patience, tolerance, and ability to question yourself and accept that everything will not always turn out the way you would like it to. Giving yourself enough time and energy to work on yourself and on your social relationships becomes something essential and natural. It is only then that "living together" can become a precious tool of development and bring us many advantages, joys and wealth.

The PFH, "Problematic Human Factor" (*Put\*\*n de Facteur Humain* in French), then becomes the "Precious Human Factor"!

The risk of "**structural**" **conflict** can be limited by clarifying, from the start, a series of elements, including the vision of the project (its values, its objectives), the type of governance and the mode(s) of decision-making, as well as clear agreements on legal, financial, and organizational aspects. This is what we are trying to do by writing this document!

As for **interpersonal tensions**, they are inevitable, and if we do not act, they can degenerate into conflict, and become unbearable to the point of making some members of the group leave. To prevent this from happening, and to maintain a friendly and caring atmosphere in the community, special attention should be paid to communication, and to put in place processes to manage tensions.

We also encourage all stakeholders to **learn** about non-violent communication methods, sociocracy and consensus / consent decision-making.



Many other **facilitation tools** exist (restorative circles, zegg forum, "peeling" meetings, ...), and we encourage those interested to take training on these subjects, so that we can use them at the Ermitaj!

### *The mechanisms for the management of tensions*

#### **- The "talking sticks":**

Each week, at a set time, all stakeholders present at Ermitaj are invited to participate in what we call the "talking stick".

These sessions aim to avoid conflicts by trying to defuse tensions quickly, sometimes even before they appear. Everyone is encouraged to express themselves with an open heart, honesty and authenticity, allowing the emergence of the emotions that inhabit us.

Some people will spontaneously do this informally, but the talking stick helps ensure that even the most introverted people have a safe space to express themselves. Often speaking from an open heart has the effect of allowing others to do the same.

It is therefore a moment of sharing emotions, tensions and personal feelings, in a framework ensuring respect, benevolence and listening.

Participants sit in a circle, and a stick is placed in the center. Each person is invited, whenever they feel it, to speak: they take the stick and keep it until they finished speaking. No one interrupts him (except in case of misunderstanding, for example due to language or sound level) nor reacts verbally. Everyone has the possibility to take the stick as many times as they want.

The session ends when no one else wishes to speak. The talking stick can be followed, as desired, by a moment of informal sharing and / or a moment of convivial celebration.

#### **- Mediation:**

In case of a conflict between 2 people (or more) within Ermitaj, it is advisable to call on a neutral person to play the role of mediator. This mediator can be requested by one of the parties to the conflict, or requested by the other members, indirectly affected by the tensions.

In case of a major and generalized conflict, there is the possibility of calling on a mediator external to Ermitaj, preferably having proven skills in mediation.

The mediator will then set up one or more space-time dedicated to understanding and resolving the conflict, in a framework of benevolent listening, non-violence and respect.

If the mediator is trained in the practice, he can set up, for example, a "[restorative circle](#)".

### *Consequences of non-compliance with the guidelines*

What if a member seriously violates standards of behavior, or repeatedly violates community agreements (guidelines, regulations, charter)?

We have decided to copy (apart from a *few details*) the process imagined by the ecovillage "Community Alternatives Society" of Vancouver, and explained by Diana L. Christian in her book "Creating a life together"<sup>5</sup> :

1. One person talks with the member in question about the problem and asks him or her to make changes.
2. If this doesn't work, four people meet about the problem — the first two and a trusted friend of each, again, requesting that the person make changes.
3. If this doesn't solve it, the person meets with the Accountability Committee to resolve the problem.
4. If this still doesn't solve it, the Accountability Committee creates a contract, *for a fixed term*, with the member that outlines how he or she will make the necessary changes, and meets with the member monthly for updates. The purpose of the contract and meetings is not to punish or humiliate the member, but to encourage and support their making the changes.
5. If even this doesn't work, the whole community meets specifically to decide what action to take, which may include asking the person to live somewhere else for a while, and possibly also *exclude him from the community*. The member can participate in this meeting, but has no blocking power.

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<sup>5</sup>Diana Leafe Christian "Creating a life together", p. 216

6. If most members want to take this action but one or more people block it, the committee meets with the member in question and the those blocking the proposal to seek resolution together.

## **ANNEX: TO GO FURTHER**

Zegg Forum :

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBm5TobmL\\_I&t=127s&ab\\_channel=GlobalEcovillageNetwork](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBm5TobmL_I&t=127s&ab_channel=GlobalEcovillageNetwork)