

# Focus on the agenda

## Purpose

- illustrate agenda problems by making an inventory of current political issues and discussing them in *Focus groups* (see Method Bank)

## Background

Once there were three boys fighting over a bar of chocolate. Then an old man appeared:

- Boys, boys! You shouldn't fight. Violence simply breeds violence.
- This is none of your business!
- It certainly is, says the old man. I am a teacher here at school.
- And? says Peter.
- We don't tolerate fights here!
- And? says Paul.
- This is a decision made by the whole staff!!
- Well, says the third boy, do you know who we are? The Three Musketeer Alliance! And we have unanimously decided to fight over the bar in a glorious battle.

Real world disputes may be less absurd and about more important issues. But if you want to avoid not only violent solutions but also authoritarian ones, then one often faces a similar difficulty: the parties belong to different communities claiming the right to decide for themselves. This agenda problem may be solved if the parties can be made to accept one, common democratic structure. There are different varieties, for example:

- rules of conduct are taken in a general assembly where all staff members and musketeers participate as full and equal citizens
- the rules are decided by a democratically elected body representative of all concerned groupings

### 1. Focus on:

“Issues that it is important to deal with”

### 2. Inventory

- groups of up to 6 persons perform individual brainstorming: each person writes down 5 issues – on separate post-it slips – that she thinks it is important to deal with

### 3. Sorting and priorities

- Each person presents the issues to the rest of the group. Related issues are placed side by side. Slips that mention the same matter are piled on top of each other
- each person gives one third of the issues priority by marking those slips with a cross
- the seven post-it slips that get most crosses are selected by the group

#### 4. Assessment of the present situation

How and where are the jointly chosen issues tackled at present? Place each of the seven priority post-it slips in one of the columns in the following table.

1. **Individually** by the participants.
2. **Internally** by the participants' own group/organisation.
3. **Negotiations** with external parties but no decision by a public authority.
- 4-6. **Decisions locally/nationally/internationally**: issues that in addition require a public authority's decision at any of these levels.
7. **Uncertain**: use this column if it is not clear at what level the issue can be settled.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individually	Internally	Negotiations	Local authorities	National authorities	International authorities	Uncertain

#### 5. Joint analysis

Compare the groups' results. Concentrate on the political issues (columns 4–6) and try to work out those that are not clear:

- Are decisions required at more than one level? How can such a situation be solved without disputes about competence?
- May be there is no body that has the issue on its agenda at present. If so, what should be the strategy for achieving a solution?

#### Comments

If there are unclear issues for which the group has difficulty in finding an appropriate column, this is no doubt mainly because agenda problems are complex and tricky.

No single body, not even a more or less sovereign state, is completely self-governing in the sense that its members control an *open agenda* so that they can deal with any issue. A group is often affected by what others do, just as others are affected by the group's own decisions. This problem – that *those who are affected* and *the people* are not identical (see *An ABC of Democracy*) – could in principle be resolved if:

- everyone has access to a variety of communities that between them are entitled to decide all relevant issues
- and the communities do not decide issues of the same type

#### Federalism

This requires a system with a number of clearly differentiated levels for decision-making: nations, for instance, are fairly independent entities, with relatively open agendas, that mostly delegate issues to do with education, social services, medical care and so on to a

lower level, for example a local authority. These smaller entities then have a more limited agenda; their decisions are restricted to certain types of issue. Similarly, nations can refer more universal issues – security, trade, etc. – to an international institution.

Such a system with a number of entities at different decision-making levels could be fairly democratic provided there is a clear, orderly structure that connects the entities in such a way that the agenda of all entities on one of the lower levels is fairly open, while the agenda on all other levels is clearly delimited.

This is often not the case. It is not clear who has delegated what to whom; thus, no one is accountable. There will then be many important issues that do not belong anywhere.

This agenda problem is accentuated in large-scale, representative systems with a wide gap between the rulers and those who elect them. When the representatives become “them there” who mostly seem to look after themselves, the way is open to populist pseudo solutions where the principle of *Equal consideration* only applies to one’s own group and a charismatic leader makes hay of the presumption of *Personal autonomy*.