

# Access in the Making (AIM) Lab Consensus-Based Decision-Making Protocol

## Acknowledgement<sup>1</sup>

As we write our Consensus-Based Decision-Making Protocol, we want to acknowledge in bold letters that it was the methodological work of **the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR)** that has inspired and guided us throughout the process.<sup>2</sup> We are extremely grateful to CLEAR Lab for the incredible amount of work that they have done in how to run a feminist and anti-colonial lab,<sup>3</sup> and their generosity in sharing this know-how with others. **We cannot cite you and thank you enough.**

## Citation

Inspired by CLEAR Lab's work, AIM Lab has worked on this document over almost a process of ten months (and we are still and will be working on it). This document is the

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in our *Manifesto* and *Protocols*, we make the deliberate decision to use, not endnotes, *but footnotes*. In order to subvert the design hierarchy scripted into footnotes (which automatically decreases their font size vis-a-vis the font size of main text) we choose to use the same font size for both footnotes and the main body of the text, with the same line spacing. These design choices reflect our commitments to feminist ethics of citation.

Through these choices, we seek to emphasize the shoulders we stand upon, and the various intellectual genealogies, activist, and artistic traditions that we draw from. Thank you, Annemarie Mol, Sara Ahmed, and Max Liboiron for teaching us about the importance of citations and the politics of footnotes (Mol, *The Body Multiple*; Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points,"; Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*).

<sup>2</sup> CLEAR, *CLEAR Lab Book: A living manual of our values, guidelines, and protocols*.

<sup>3</sup> For methodological projects of the CLEAR Lab, see:

<https://civiclaboratory.nl/methodological-projects/>

result of *labour*, including doing research, collective conversations, and editing. This document is a research output. This document is *a publication*. If you quote, use, or in any way benefit from this document, cite it.

Cite as:

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As a lab committed to disability justice and feminist citational practices, we are especially concerned that the intellectual labour of marginalized folks (including BIPOC, disabled artists, activists, scholars) and those occupying precarious positions in the academia (graduate students, adjuncts, emerging scholars) are not properly (sometimes, never) recognized. Our own citational practices seek to dismantle that ignorance and erasure, and we hope that you, the reader, will do the same.

### **Consensus-Based Decision Making publication co-authorship**

This publication emerged out of a series of numerous conversations within AIM as well as from a litany of members' own experiences in various academic and community spaces as well as activist and social movements. The writing of this manifesto was by and large produced by Yolanda Muñoz, Mitchell Rae Cousineau, and Sabrina Ward-Kimola in consultation with AIM's Steering Committee.

## Consensus-Based Decision Making

### 1. Key terms

**Consensus:** “A decision making process whereby decisions are reached when all members present consent to a proposal. This process does not assume everyone must be in complete agreement. When differences remain after a discussion, individuals can agree to disagree, that is, give their consent by standing aside, and allow the proposal to be accepted by the group.”<sup>4</sup> In practice, consensus involves a proposal, the identification and processing of concerns, followed by a negotiation and discussion of the original proposal based on these concerns.<sup>5</sup>

**Agreement:** Typically refers to the proposal or favored decision is someone’s ideal scenario.

**Consent:** Alternatively, giving consent does not imply that the proposal is ideal, but is a critical practice for cooperation with a larger group. It feels more like “I can live with this.”

**Active Listening:** If the presenter isn’t understood by everyone in the group, ask clarifying questions and allow them the space to expand or re-articulate.

**Conflict:** Because it is unlikely that everyone will agree, conflict should be welcomed into the space. “Conflict is desirable... it is not something to be avoided, dismissed, diminished, or denied.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Butler and Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Hartnett, “The Basics of Consensus Decision Making”.

<sup>6</sup> Butler and Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*, 14.

## 2. Benefits of Consensus Based Decision-making

Establishing a clear structure for active cooperation of all members involved in a meeting allows everyone to feel comfortable, heard and free to share their perspective. Once made by a presenter, proposals become property of the group, which can lead the way to a more horizontalized structure. This structure also requires everyone to be accountable for their positions, which can ultimately benefit the group with new perspectives (notably, in the context of negotiations or re-negotiations). Consensus based decision-making, as opposed to majority rule, is an important ethic to maintain as the latter promotes competition and the dilution of possibility into a few possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. Principles of Consensus Based Decision-making

- Trust
- Respect: Everyone is allowed to speak, although not everyone is required to talk: however, everybody must listen without interruption.
- Unity of Purpose: Implies “a basic understanding about the goals and purpose of the group”.<sup>8</sup> Of course, there will be varying opinions on the best way to accomplish these goals. However, there must be a unifying base, a common starting point, which is recognized and accepted by all.
- Nonviolence: Nonviolent decision-makers use their power to achieve goals while respecting differences and cooperating with others. In this environment, it is considered violent to use power to dominate or control the group process. The greatest degree that someone can exert influence is through revealing their truth and opinion.

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<sup>7</sup> Butler and Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Butler and Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*, 35-36.

- Self-Empowerment: “Anyone can express concerns. Anyone can ask questions. Everyone seeks creative solutions and is responsible for every decision. When all are encouraged to participate, the democratic nature of the process increases.”<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Voting Practices

### 4.1. Proposal

- A member presents an item requiring a vote (for example, a new project, or a project that is in stand-by for any reason, or any matter that requires the consensus of all the members of the AIM Lab). Then they explain the objectives and relevance of the project, and clarifies how the item conforms with AIM’s values and principles
  - The types of decisions requiring this voting procedure should be discussed case by case.
- It is recommended that a summary of the project is distributed to the members beforehand, so they can prepare questions or concerns prior to the voting process.
  - If this is not possible, the vote will be delayed until the next group meeting or facilitated by email using AIM’s email list.
- Before starting the voting process, someone other than the person who suggested the voting subject needs to second the motion.

### 4.2. The setup

- Flexible timelines
  - Default up to 2-week time frame for scheduling/feedback
    - If someone needs more time, it is up to them to ask for it. It is also up to the event organizer to give this time.

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<sup>9</sup> Butler and Rothstein, *On Conflict and Consensus*, 35-36.

- Any absentees are given the opportunity to vote either in advance or retroactively. In the meeting notes, the notetaker writes or tags the names of those who were absent during a vote, issuing them the opportunity to vote afterwards.
- Allow for a hybrid system with multiple channels of possible participation (whether it is a hybrid facilitation technology (i.e., Owl), a conference call, or a write up in absentia).

### 4.3. Meeting rules

- True consensus, meaning everyone must agree.
  - This means replacing a Y/N system in favor of levels of consensus:
    - (1) An unqualified “yes”
    - (2) Acceptance
    - (3) Apathy
    - (4) Disagreement
  - Ideally, the group both uses hand gestures and vocalizes their number in a round-robin (the number indicating the level of consensus). This is a robust method that works across Zoom and in-person settings.
- When dissent arises:
  1. The dissenting parties are accountable for explaining why they disagree. There should be space for either clarification or discussion.
  2. The group votes a second time.
  3. If there is still dissent, there should be a re-negotiation of the proposed item, however small or large it may be.
  4. Once this re-negotiation takes place, consensus is only reached if everyone agrees. If not, the proposed item is shelved for the time being. If the member wants to re-propose the item in the future, they must revise it in accordance with the concerns raised during the previous discussions.

### 4.4. Resolutions

When the proposal is adopted or rejected, a one-page resolution must be drafted and kept in the records of AIM Lab for reference and transparency. The person taking notes for that week will write up the resolution. The resolution must include:

- a. Number
- b. Date of approval or rejection
- c. Name and brief description of the proposal
- d. Allocated budget, if applicable
- e. Any observation related to possible follow up

#### **4.5. Consensus Blocking**

This aspect provides motivation for the group to ensure that everyone consents to a proposal. Further, this only works if there is collective trust and good faith that everyone is putting the needs of the group ahead of individual desires. Consensus blocking requires responsibility, vetoing is not considered a good-faith practice; the consensus blocker is expected to provide an additional proposal, and to participate in collaboration until agreement can be reached. To limit consensus blocking, we propose two qualifiers:

- Limiting one's ability to consensus block to 2 times during their term at AIM.
- Alternatively, members can "stand aside" from the voting process entirely.



## References

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