



SOP TITLE:	Decision-Making Rules for TNI Committees and Boards
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1.0 Purpose and Applicability

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) specifies requirements for choosing decision-making rules and for documenting decisions made by TNI committees and boards. The SOP applies to all TNI committees and boards.

2.0 Summary

This SOP explains the significance of having clear decision points and requires TNI committees and boards to choose and use decision making rules and to document the decisions the groups make. Sections 9.0 and 10.0 provide guidance on types of decision-making rules commonly used and reaching closure in decision-making processes.

3.0 Related Documents

- 3.1 SOP-1 – 101, Operations of TNI Committees and Program Boards
- 3.2 SOP 1 – 103, Operations of TNI Board of Directors [To be drafted]

4.0 Definitions

Consensus:	A participatory process by which a group deliberates as it attempts to make a decision. <i>Note:</i> In this context, consensus is not synonymous with unanimity; unanimity is a decision-making rule. A group that follows consensus may have a different decision-making rule than unanimity.
Committee Member:	A TNI member with full voting privileges who is elected by a committee.
Decision-Making Rule:	The method used by a group to arrive at a decision.
Director:	A TNI member that serves on a Board.
Enthusiastic Support:	A rule by which a group arrives at a decision after measuring the level of support of a proposal using a gradient scale.
High-Stakes Decisions:	Decisions involving proposals, whose results have an expected high longevity, are not easily reversible, appear complex or contentious, affect many people, or require the ownership of members to be implemented.
Low-Stakes Decisions:	Decisions involving simple or routine proposals that do not meet any of the characteristics of high-stakes decisions.
Meta-Decision:	A decision made by a group or a person-in-charge that determines whether a decision on a proposal under discussion can or cannot be made.
Quorum:	The minimum number of group members that need to be present to make a vote valid.

5.0 Commitment to Inclusiveness in Decision-Making

TNI's mission is to foster the generation of environmental data of known and documented quality through an open, inclusive, and transparent process that is responsive to the needs of the community. To promote inclusiveness and to be responsive to the needs of the community it is necessary that TNI committees and boards involve all members as much as possible in making decisions. Participatory decision-making leads to sustainable agreements.

6.0 Significance of Having Clear Decision Points

- 6.1 In an open and transparent process discussion abounds. Through active discussion, inclusive groups create products that consider the needs of the many and that have a better chance of being useful to all.
- 6.2 To function effectively, TNI committees and boards need to establish clear decision points. The point of decision is the moment that separates deliberation from action. Discussion occurs before a decision is made and implementation happens after a decision is made.
- 6.3 Having clear decision making points ensures TNI committees and boards know that a decision has been made and can then concentrate their efforts on implementing what has been decided.

7.0 Choosing and Using a Decision-Making Rule

- 7.1 Committees and boards shall declare the type of rule they will follow to make specific decisions. (See Section 9.0 for descriptions of commonly-used decision-making rules.) The chosen decision-making rule should be commensurate with the importance of the decision to be made.

Example: A committee may decide to allow the Chair to make routine business decisions without discussion, require a simple majority for any decision not involving expenditures in excess of a declared amount, insist on two-thirds majority for electing committee members, and demand enthusiastic support for approving changes to the committee's SOPs.
- 7.2 Committees and boards shall establish clear decision points in their proceedings. Committee Members and Directors should know and understand when a decision has been made.
- 7.3 Committees and boards shall establish quorum requirements for making specific decisions. No quorum may be less than three Committee Members or Directors.
- 7.4 Committees and boards may change the rule used to make a decision at the request of a Committee Member or Director, following an established decision-making rule.
- 7.5 Committees and boards may consider procedures for allowing members who are not present when a decision is made an opportunity for registering a vote.

Example: The TNI bylaws allows absent members of the TNI Board of Directors to cast an electronic vote within seven days after the teleconference in which a vote occurred.

8.0 Documenting Decisions

- 8.1 Committees and boards shall document the decisions they make in meeting minutes. When decisions are made by considering motions, the motion, the originator, and the member seconding the motion shall be clearly stated in the minutes.
- 8.2 Committees and boards may, at the request of a Committee Member or Director, document the vote cast by each committee and board member, unless before such a request is received, a committee or board has agreed to reach a decision by secret ballot.
- 8.3 Committees and boards may, at the request of a Committee Member or Director, include a minority or dissenting opinion as part of the documentation of a decision.

9.0 Types of Decision-Making Rules

9.1 General Principles

- 9.1.1 A decision-making rule is a mechanism that lets all group members know that a decision has been made.
- 9.1.2 Decision-making without a decision rule is erratic, counterproductive, and can lead to over-dominance, resentment, unaccountability, apathy, and poor implementation of decisions.
- 9.1.3 Decision-making by clear decision rules promotes accountability and ownership.
- 9.1.4 Different rules can be applied to different types of decisions, but no decision should be made without an established and declared rule.
- 9.1.5 Not all decisions are equally critical and the type of rule chosen to make a decision should take this into account.

9.2 “Flip a Coin”

- 9.2.1 This is a name for any arbitrary, random method of making a decision, and includes common practices like drawing straws, picking numbers from a hat, or a lottery.
- 9.2.2 This method is obviously not appropriate to make high-stakes decisions, but is appropriate for making quick low-stakes decisions when alternatives are well matched, as for example, deciding how to divide a large group of peers into smaller subgroups.

9.3 Person-in-Charge Decides Without Discussion

- 9.3.1 When this rule is applied, the person-in-charge assumes complete responsibility for analyzing a situation and deciding a course of action. This rule connects authority with accountability, but can create blind spots and promote irrationality.
- 9.3.2 This rule can be applied to high-stakes decision when a group delegates specific authorities to a person-in-charge, as for example, by a job description, or an ex-officio capacity. The rule can also be applied in high-stakes decisions during a crisis, when failing to act quickly may have significant negative consequences. In an apparent crisis, the person-in-charge should understand the dangers of deciding without group discussion to evaluate capably whether the stakes are too high, or whether he or she can assume the risk of using this rule.
- 9.3.3 For low-stakes decisions, this rule can produce good results. Even if a low-stake decision is not a good one, it can be easily corrected or undone. Low-stakes decisions are not usually implemented by the person-in-charge; therefore, delegating decision-making authority to those responsible for implementation is a good alternative.

9.4 Person-in-Charge Decides After Discussion

- 9.4.1 This rule is well-suited when the stakes are high. The person-in-charge, having the authority and credibility to act on a decision, benefits from the counsel of group members and expands his or her knowledge to take the best course of action.
- 9.4.2 Sometimes this rule promotes giving false advice because group members may offer only what the person-in-charge wants to hear, instead of their true opinions. To prevent this, it

may be necessary to encourage “devil’s advocate” thinking, or to have a group meet without the person-in-charge and then provide him or her with recommendations.

- 9.4.3 For low-stakes decision, this rule produces results that are equivalent to other rules that encourage group discussion. Using this rule for low-stakes issues gives groups an opportunity to provide honest advice because there is less pressure involved in deciding and can encourage taking risks without reprisals. However, for very low-stakes decisions, insisting on group discussion can feel wasteful to some group members.

9.5 Majority Vote

- 9.5.1 Majority vote is the most common decision-making rule in groups and is used in Robert’s Rules of Order. Its most frequent variants are simple majority and two-thirds majority, although there are groups that require an 80% affirmative vote to approve a decision.
- 9.5.2 Majority vote, by definition, creates winners and losers and can be somewhat adversarial. When used properly in high-stake decisions, the competition of ideas creates pressure that improves the quality of reasoning as debate moves forward. At times, to increase the probability that people will vote on the merits of a high stake proposal and not vote simply for political reasons, using a secret ballot is a good option.
- 9.5.3 For low-stakes decision, where expeditiousness is more important than quality, majority vote strikes a good balance between the involved discussion needed to reach unanimity and the absence of deliberation when a person-in-charge makes a decision without discussion.

9.6 Enthusiastic Support

- 9.6.1 Enthusiastic support strives toward unanimity but recognizes that achieving unconditional agreement is not always possible. This rule is best used when high-stakes decisions are involved.
- 9.6.2 The rule requires group members to register the support for a proposal on a gradient scale. Expanding voting choices beyond a simple affirmative or a negative portrays the level of support for a proposal more accurately. Groups can decide on their own scale, but the most common gradients of agreement scale has five levels:
- 9.6.2.1 Endorse – complete agreement.
 - 9.6.2.2 Agree with reservation – agreement with some objections but not significant ones.
 - 9.6.2.3 Mixed feelings – similar to an abstention vote.
 - 9.6.2.4 Don’t like, but won’t block – many objections, but will allow others to implement the proposal.
 - 9.6.2.5 Veto – cannot live with a proposal.
- 9.6.3 A group decides what level of enthusiastic support is needed to approve a proposal and uses the gradients of agreement scale to quantify it.

Example: A group may decide that to approve a proposal 80% of the votes must fall on the first three gradients with no vetoes.

9.7 Unanimous Agreement

- 9.7.1 Unanimous agreement requires group members to understand each other’s perspectives until all are integrated into a common understanding. To reach unanimity everyone must agree with an affirmative and so each individual has veto power.

- 9.7.2 Unanimous agreement takes the most effort but has the best chance of producing sustainable agreements when the stakes are high. However, in some groups it is difficult for all members to search for inclusive solutions, people feel pressure to live with decisions they do not fully support, and the group may end with a weakened compromise.
- 9.7.3 Unanimous agreement is not the most productive decision rule to invoke when groups require buy-in from all members but still need to reach a decision quickly. Unanimous agreement takes time because it requires synthesizing diverse perspectives to create ideas that work for all.
- 9.7.4 For low-stakes issues, unanimous agreements produce decisions of comparable quality to those obtained with other decision-making rules.

10.0 Reaching Closure

- 10.1 Reaching closure is the last phase of decision-making.
- 10.2 To reach closure, a group or a person in charge needs to decide whether or not to end discussion and make a decision. This is accomplished by an established meta-decision, which prompts groups to conclude deliberations and to determine whether closure can be reached.
- 10.3 Once discussion reaches a stopping point, a group or a person in charge determines whether the discussion has been adequate and brings the issue to closure by making a final decision, or determines that important aspects have not been discussed and decides that a final decision cannot be made yet.
- 10.4 Different groups may agree to use different meta-decisions, or a group may use different meta-decisions depending on the type of proposal under consideration. The following are examples of some meta-decisions and how they can be used to attempt to reach closure.
 - 10.4.1 The person in charge sets time limits for discussion of topics. During that time, the group strives to reach unanimous agreement. If time runs out, the person-in-charge makes the meta-decision: she will bring the discussion to closure and make a final decision; or she will set a new time limit and resume discussion.
 - 10.4.2 A meta-decision can be devised to allow a group which uses unanimous agreement as its decision rule to switch from unanimity to majority vote. For instance, it could be agreed that any group member can call for a vote to close discussion and switch from unanimity to majority. If 80% of the members favor the change, discussion ends and the group uses majority rule to reach a decision on the proposal discussed; or if fewer than 80% want to switch, the unanimity rule remains in effect and discussion continues.
 - 10.4.3 After several rounds of discussion a group may agree to allow the person-in-charge to close the discussion, clarify the proposal, and poll the group using a gradients of agreement scale and then make a meta-decision: the person-in charge decides whether he will make the decision or whether the group needs additional discussion.

Note: The decision-making rule in this example is a composite of two, “enthusiastic agreement” and “person-in-charge decides after discussion”. The meta-decision in this example is sufficiently generic and can be tailored to meet a group’s specific needs.

11.0 References

- 11.1 Kaner, Sam; Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making; New Society Publishers; Gabriola Island, British Columbia; 1996

12.0 SOP Approved Changes

Prev. SOP No.	New SOP No.	Date of Change	Description of Change
	1-102	1/31/08	New Document.