



Making decision-making in multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSP) more effective and more efficient

Challenges in MSP-decision-making

In multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs), stakeholders from the state, the private area, civil society and academia plan, coordinate and implement joint activities to tackle the challenges of sustainable development. They use an agreed steering structure that enables them to function strategically and operationally. Smoothly functioning decision-making mechanisms are, among other things, crucial to cooperate across organisation. Yet, depending on the complexity of the issues involved, decision-making can be a challenging process.

This guide describes the specific first steps that an MSP and its bodies can take to make its decision-making more agile – that is, more effective and more efficient. These steps are based on the organisational development approach of ‘collegial leadership’¹, which was developed for intra-organisational contexts. The guide describes the origin of elements of collegial leadership and applies them to the specific inter-organisational context of cooperation in multi-stakeholder partnerships.

“Collegial leadership means distributing leadership tasks across many colleagues in a dynamic and decentralised way rather than having centralised leadership solely by a small number of managers.”²

The document is structured as follows:

1. The basic elements of agile decision-making
2. Roles and election to a role
3. Decision-making tools
4. Decision-making within MSP bodies
5. Making less complex decisions: the universal decision-making procedure
6. Making more complex decisions: theme-centered objection integration (adapted to the MSP context)
7. Looking ahead

¹ Bernd Oestereich and Claudia Schröder: <https://kollegiale-fuehrung.de/> (website in German; for an English version, see the e-book <https://www.readfy.com/de/ebooks/390779-the-collegial-leadership-model/>)

² Bernd Oestereich and Claudia Schröder (2019): Agile Organisationsentwicklung (Verlag Franz Vahlen GmbH) (available in English as ‘The Collegial Leadership Model: Basic Elements for Agile Organisational Development’, Books On Demand, 2020)

1. The basic elements of agile decision-making

Basics of collegial leadership

One way of making decision-making more agile is to apply the **collegial leadership** approach to MSP bodies. This approach includes an appropriate attitude, knowledge based on experience in the areas of leadership and decision-making, and the use of related tools. The organisational approach of collegial leadership can and must be adapted creatively to the specific decision-making needs of the MSP's cooperation system if it is to be transferred to the inter-organisational context. Leadership in the sense of collegial leadership means first and foremost making decisions. And that is precisely the focus of this guide – more agile decision-making in the inter-organisational context of MSPs. An ideal MSP is based on cooperation on equal terms. In the context of an MSP, the agile decision-making tools of collegial leadership may help to achieve decision-making on a basis of equality despite or alongside official or unofficial hierarchies and differing organisational cultures.

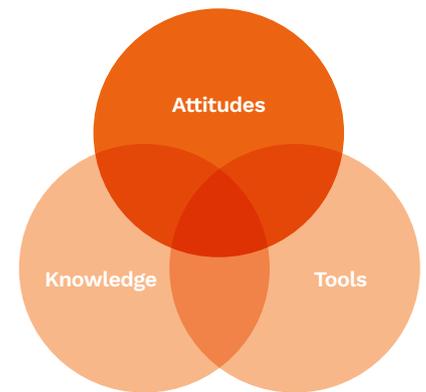


Figure 1:
Elements of collegial leadership

An **attitude** is a fundamental internal conviction based on our values, insights and patterns of thinking and feeling that guides our behaviour. The core assumption underlying agile decision-making – which underpins attitudes – is that human beings are co-operative by nature. This aspect is particularly relevant in non-hierarchical and self-organised cooperation. We have freedom of choice over our individual behaviour, but once we become part of a group, we voluntarily subordinate this individual freedom of choice and autonomy to the group in the interests of cooperation. If we are to act effectively, we need cooperation. Another aspect of attitude is proceeding on the basis of solution focussed action. Attention is focused as much as possible on solutions, possibilities and opportunities – and as little as possible on problems, deficits or shortcomings.³

It is also more efficient in agile decision-making to make use of existing **knowledge based on experience** rather than constantly devising new solutions. One relevant aspect is the adoption of roles. For example, it is advisable to elect an individual with experience of moderation to take charge of moderating complex decision-making processes. However, within an MSP body, it may be helpful to start with agile decision-making tools with which some members are already familiar. And the practical tips contained in this guide are intended to disseminate experience from the MSP context.⁴

The **tools** of agile decision-making are described in detail in the literature⁵. In the following sections, we explain two key elements, role election and decision-making tools, in detail and illustrate how they can be used in practice.

³ Bernd Oestereich and Claudia Schröder (2019): „Agile Organisationsentwicklung“, Verlag Franz Vahlen GmbH

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

2. Roles and election to a role

Roles

Roles are a basic element of self-organised cooperation. A role is an individual's temporary responsibility for certain tasks in the decision-making process. It describes a limited area of responsibility and activity carried out autonomously by the holder of the role. In the case of collegial (i. e. non-hierarchical) decision-making within a body, it may be helpful to work with the following four roles and their functions.

It is advisable to change the holders of these roles on a regular basis, for example, at the start of every meeting or every other meeting held by the body.



Host

takes care that all other roles are chosen and filled, and that the group is and remains functional.

Practical hint: In the context of an MSP, this role may, for example, be the equivalent of chairing a body. Where the activities are more restricted in number, this role may also be combined with that of the moderator.



Moderator

facilitates the decision-making process as needed, and assists with time-keeping.

Practical hint: The moderator's challenge is to achieve a balance between individual interests, to ensure the greatest possible neutrality, and to foster a sense of duty to the greater whole. It is advisable to avoid combining the role of moderator with a specific technical responsibility or else to separate the roles clearly. Where desirable, an external individual may be brought in as moderator.



Record-keeper

takes the minutes and documents results from the role selection and decision-making processes.

Practical hint: The record-keeper focuses on documenting outcomes. This includes interim results, such as proposals for resolving objections, but not the steps taken on the way to finding a solution.



Learning facilitator

ensures that the group learns from its operational work, and enables reflection on a regular basis.

Practical hint: This individual's key role is to select and use appropriate tools to facilitate reflection on what the group has experienced and learned. Many helpful tools for such a 'retrospective' can be found here: <https://retromat.org/>

Election to a role

The members of the body elect individuals to a role for a specific period or for a selected decision-making process. The individuals elected carry out the roles described above for this period. Normally, any member may serve in any role. Taking on a role is, in some ways, a small service to the body. The individual leaves their own or organisational interests to one side when fulfilling their role. Of course, the holders of roles may decline to carry the role out temporarily and revert to representing their own interests as a member of the body. Where necessary, one individual may assume several roles, for example host and moderator or moderator and record-keeper.

Electing individuals to roles may be done either by '**election from the center**' or by '**collegial role election**'.

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Process

Notes

Election from the center

All group members wishing to take on an electable role stand in the middle of the group (or simply stand up).

These members then agree among themselves which one of them will take on the role.

If the individuals cannot agree within about two to three minutes, another selection procedure is chosen (→ collegial role election).



Collegial role election

Round 1: Each member of the group takes a piece of paper and nominates a single candidate. Members may nominate themselves. Each member in turn then identifies their nominee, explaining briefly why they have nominated this person. The number of votes for each candidate is clearly documented.

The explanation offered by each member should comprise arguments in favour of this person rather than arguments against another person.

Round 2: Each member of the group again takes a piece of paper and nominates a single candidate. Their nominee may have changed following round 1. Once again, the members take turns to identify their nominee, explaining briefly why they have nominated this person. The number of votes for each candidate in round 2 is clearly documented. The person with the highest number of votes from round 2 is elected to the role.

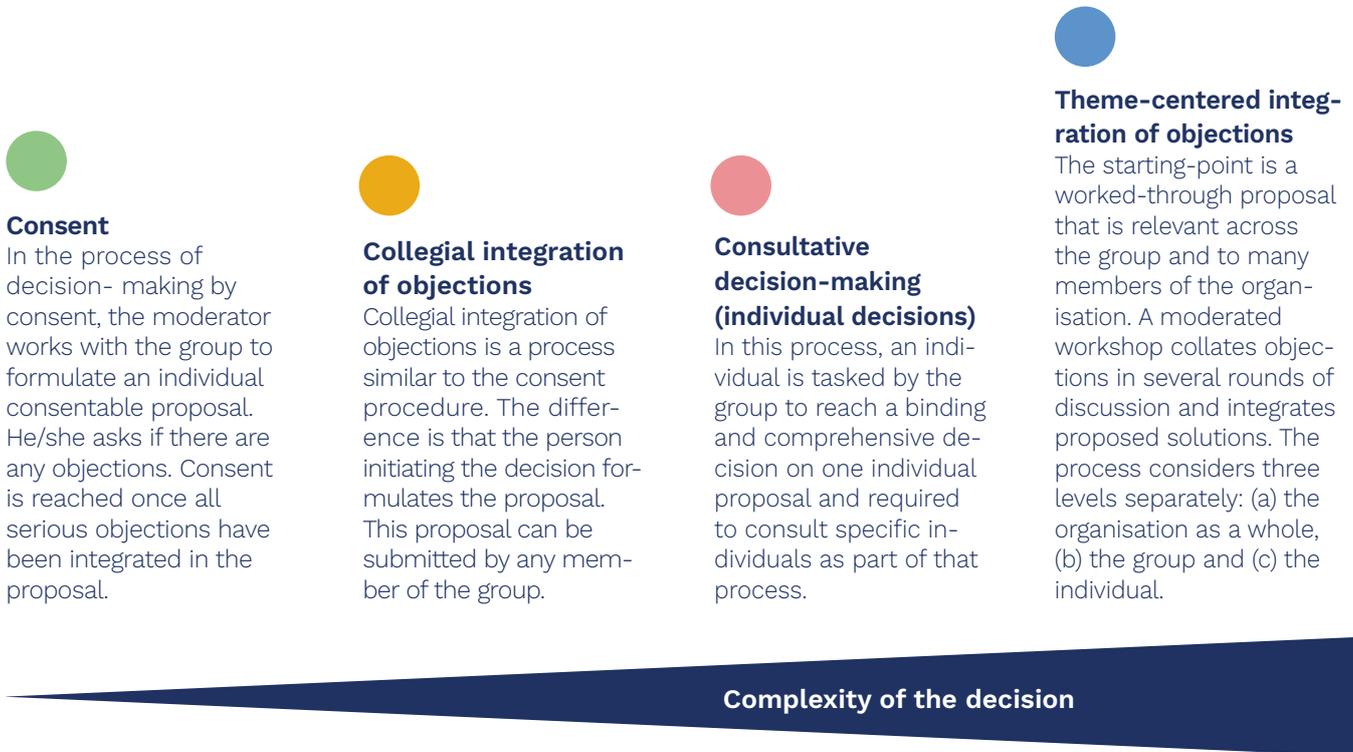
In the event of a tie between two or more candidates, an alternative election procedure comes into play, such as election from the center runoff vote, drawing lots or choosing the younger/youngest candidate.

3. Decision-making tools

Collegial decision-making procedures often create a new and unfamiliar element in traditional operational systems. Power relationships and indirect influences become more visible: collegial decision-making ensures greater transparency and accountability, while individuals must take clear and open positions. Individuals who have previously enjoyed substantial influence as a result of their position find these changes when the rules are made more transparent. To enable a body to reach high-quality decisions that are supported by the entire community, resistance to certain decisions and tensions must be recognised and minimised by further decision-making.⁶ The collegial leadership approach offers the following decision-making tools to support this process. The tools differentiate between issues of differing complexity. They also differentiate between individual proposals and instances where a decision must be made between a number of alternative proposals.

Below, we briefly outline the features of each decision-making tool.
Click [here](#) for a more detailed overview of the decision-making tools (in German only).

Decision-making tools for individual proposals



Decision-making tools for several alternative proposals



Figure 2: Overview of decision-making tools



A veto is an objection that delays or prevents acceptance of a decision. By expressing a veto, an individual is saying 'I have serious concerns. I cannot accept this proposal.' The group must agree to accept vetoes in general or in specific cases. Any proposal may include specific veto provisions, for example, 'Where more than two participants represent 5 resistance scores, my proposal is withdrawn.'

4. Decision-making tools

The bodies, relevant to decision-making within MSPs are typically the general assembly (also known as member forum or membership platform), the steering committee (also known as board, board of directors or steering group), working groups and the secretariat. These bodies have the following role or fulfil the following purposes in decision-making by MSPs:

General Assembly: All stakeholder groups are represented at the general assembly, which shapes opinions, facilitates exchange and makes decisions.

Steering Committee: The steering committee is responsible for strategically steering and developing the MSP. It determines decision-making mechanisms and makes decisions. Typical decisions include accepting new members or setting out the MSP's overall strategy.

Working groups: Some MSPs incorporate working groups into their governance structure. Working groups are tasked by the steering committee with working on specific issues and reporting back to the general assembly and the steering committee.

Secretariat: The secretariat is officially appointed by the steering committee. Among other roles, it supports the steering committee in its decision-making.

Below, we illustrate this by considering two decision-making tools in detail (sections 5 and 6). These tools reflect the complexity of the decision and whether one or more alternative proposals require a decision. We start by explaining a procedure for making decisions where there are alternative, less complex proposals. We then explain a tool for making decisions on more complex individual proposals. The latter will be illustrated using a specific practical example.

Overview of sample decisions within two MSP bodies

MSP body	complexity		
	low	medium	high
members' meeting			
determining the vision and mission			●
determining the steering structure			●
electing the steering committee		● ●	
preparing the agreement and signing of (MSP's own) obligations (e. g. declaration of intent)			● ● ●
determining topics, objectives and activities (e. g. at annual meeting)			● ● ● ●
Steering committee			
determining a decision-making mechanism (consent, majority voting, right of veto, etc.)		● ● ●	
determining the partnership's strategy			● ●
deciding on the legal form			●
Deciding on modes of financing (long-term or short-term)			●
budgetary decision-making			● ●
admitting new members		● ●	●
agreeing on meeting agendas/ approval of the meeting's agendas		●	
deciding on a learning and exchange format	● ●		
deciding on pilot projects			● ● ●
convening working groups		● ● ●	●
adoption by working groups of themes/introduction of new working groups per topic		● ● ●	

Figure 3: Overview of sample decisions within two MSP bodies

- consent
- collegial integration of objections
- consultative decision-making (single decisions)
- theme-centered group integration of objections
- polling objections (systemic consent)
- universal decision-making procedure

5. Making less complex decisions: the universal decision-making procedure⁷

The universal decision-making procedure enables the option attracting the least resistance to be selected from a number of proposals. Proposals may be of differing types (e. g. content, decision-making procedures, approaches, etc.).

1. Determining the moderator and tellers:

Who will moderate the decision-making and steer the group through the subsequent stages? Who will be the tellers (counting the number of hands raised / resistance scores)?

2. Checking the requirements:

The status quo (everything remains as it currently is) is always an explicit alternative.

For each alternative (apart from the status quo), who (and with what further support if required) takes responsibility for implementing the decision and, where appropriate, enabling the organisation to engage in a 'retrospective'? When should any retrospective take place?

Each proposal may include specific provisions for veto and procedural provisions (e. g. 'More than two votes representing four resistance scores constitute a veto.') The moderator may also, where necessary, determine veto options for some or all of the alternatives (where there are no standard veto options).

3. Presenting the proposals:

The various proposals are briefly read aloud, and any questions are answered. The moderator does not permit participants to express views or discuss the proposals. Where possible, only the individual who has made a proposal may answer questions relating to meaning. If one individual feels a discussion of opinions, adjournment etc. is required for this issue, they may make a proposal to this effect and this will be voted on.

The moderator asks whether there are further proposals/alternatives and then repeats the steps set out above (checking the requirements and clarifying any questions). Alternatives may also include proposals for another selection procedure (such as the integration of objections or consultative decision-making), for adjournment/resubmission or to refer the decision to existing bodies.

4. Gauging resistance:

The moderator explains the voting (participants display one or more fingers as an expression of their resistance) and, for each alternative in turn, asks 'How strong is your resistance to this alternative?' Each participant votes and the teller counts the total number of fingers displayed. The total is noted. Any member not expressing a vote counts as having displayed one finger (= no resistance). In the context of MSPs, and in line with conventional decision-making procedures, numbers of objections are counted not for the total number of participants but for each organisation represented. This maintains a balance between the various member organisations.

5. Determining acceptance:

The moderator asks whether anyone has a serious objection on procedural grounds. Any individual objecting on such grounds must then propose a solution. This is followed by the procedure of polling resistance between a) 'adopting the proposed solution' and b) 'accepting the outcome as it is'.

6. Noting the outcome:

The moderator clearly documents the proposal with the lowest total resistance score and reads the decision aloud once more.

⁷ Bernd Oestereich and Claudia Schröder: <https://kollegiale-fuehrung.de/> (in German)

How strong is your objection to this option?



1 none



2 low



3 medium



4 high



5 extremely high

What is the difference between gauging resistance, formulating objections and a points-based voting procedure? The former two procedures indicate that some participants do not agree with a proposal. Where resistance is being gauged, this takes a quantitative form in which points are allocated. In the case of formulating objections, objections are translated into qualitative statements. If necessary, levels of objection can also be expressed quantitatively by means of a show of hands.

A veto can be built into a procedure for gauging resistance but not into a points-based voting procedure. In other words, a proposal is automatically deemed to be rejected if it attracts a pre-determined number of high or extremely high votes (4 or 5 fingers displayed). This option is not open to majority decision-making on a points basis.

6. Making more complex decisions: theme-centered objection integration (adapted to the MSP context)

This workshop concept enables objections and ideas from a large group to be integrated into a proposal where, for example, a working group or the Secretariat submits a proposal to the general assembly or the steering committee. A single large-group workshop (or a series of workshops for sub-groups) is organised. The individual stages of the process are described and illustrated below on the basis of a constructed practical example.

Process	Practical example
Preparation	
<p>The starting point is a formulated proposal submitted by an individual or a body that has overarching relevance and applies to many members of the body, e.g. a draft constitution drawn up by the steering committee and adopted by the general assembly. This decision must be genuinely open and capable of amendment. It must also always be clear who will take the decision and assume responsibility for it.</p> <p>A moderation team is required, which is responsible to invite everyone who is concerned with or involved in the decision. The proposal and supporting information must be circulated in advance (ideally in written form/by email), so that all participants can consult on it within their organisation.</p>	<p>Using the consultative decision-making procedure (including obtaining expert legal advice), the steering committee of an MSP has drawn up a draft constitution. The proposal is further developed at the general assembly and then adopted by the steering committee. The proposal is sent to all members by email two weeks before the large group workshop. Each member organisation prepares for the large group workshop as follows: through a process of achieving consent, all objections specific to an organisation are collated and proposed solutions are devised. Using collegial role election, two individuals are elected to represent the interests of the organisation at the large group workshop. Only one individual from each organisation has a vote. Members agree this between themselves in advance.</p> <p>The large group workshop on theme-centered objection integration is led by two external moderators.</p>

Process

Practical example

Introductions and forming small groups

The moderator introduces the process and working methods (e. g. the meaning of the colour coding for the subsequent group work). The steering committee representative (elected in advance) explains why a decision is required and outlines the proposal. The workshop is then divided into small groups of between three and five members.

The representative of the steering committee, who has been elected by collegial role election, explains the need for the steering committee to adopt a constitution for the MSP and requests the collaboration of the general assembly. This individual refers to the proposed draft constitution that has already been circulated. He/she introduces a legal expert who is an advisor and has been consulted on the draft constitution. The moderator then divides the large group up into small groups. In this case, working groups comprise representatives of the same stakeholder groups. In other cases, cooperation in mixed groups may be a better option.

Validating what the group has understood

Each small group spends between 10 and 15 minutes discussing the question ‘What is my understanding of the proposed decision?’ Groups may discuss in an unstructured way or in turn, with other members listening actively.

If the group has between three and five members, no moderation is needed, and members can exchange views in an unstructured way. In our case, the small groups decide to speak in rounds according to each issue. That is, each individual in turn reports what s/he has understood until all grounds have been covered or the time is up. All members ensure that their input relates solely to the specific issue. Only the individual from each organisation entitled to vote takes an active part in small group work, to ensure a balance of the views represented. This individual consults regularly with the organisation’s other representative(s).

Identifying and collating questions, objections and ideas

The small groups are then asked by the moderator ‘Which issues, objections and ideas do I have in relation to the proposal that absolutely must be clarified before implementation?’ The groups moderate themselves. First, each individual considers the question silently for between one and three minutes, noting down points. In turn, each small group collates its contributions: each individual is required to speak, to identify a point that has not yet been raised and to express on its own behalf (and without passing judgement on the contributions of others). This is repeated until the time is up or nobody has anything new to say.

In response to each individual contribution, the moderator asks: ‘Is the tension or the issue so urgent or so important that it absolutely must be resolved before implementation?’

Participants remain in their small groups and ensure the process is efficient, for example by managing their time carefully. In this case, participants elect a moderator from the group by election from the center for the further work in small groups. The moderator starts by explaining the colour coding and objection system set out below that will be used to categorise and sort ideas, questions and objections.

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Process	Practical example
<p>If – but only if – this is the case, the discussion continues, and the moderator asks: ‘Would this cause unacceptable harm to our MSP?’</p> <p>The person raising the point then writes their contribution down on a sticky note (see colour coding below) and attaches it to the appropriate segment of the pinboard provided (see illustration below): serious issues are close to the center, the less important around the edges.</p>	<p>While all group members are sharing their contributions, the moderator ensures that they do not evaluate or assess contributions. In this practical example, the group is asked the question ‘Is the idea/question/objection so urgent or so important that it absolutely must be clarified before the constitution is adopted?’ The moderator then asks: ‘Would this risk cause unacceptable harm to our MSP or to my own organisation?’ Contributions are then sorted on the pinboard in line with the system set out below. In this practical example, a distinction is made between the following levels: 0) general benefit; 1) the MSP as a whole; 2) an MSP body; 3) an MSP stakeholder; and 4) an individual.</p>

Integrating objections and ideas

<p>In the next part of the workshop, the small groups collate ideas for integrating the objections raised. First, the serious objections relating to the MSP as a whole are tackled, followed by the serious objections relating to the group (e.g. an MSP body), an MSP stakeholder or an individual (as representative of their own organisation). Depending on the number of objections and the time available, the same approach may then be used to consider the less serious objections. Groups form parallel mini-groups of around three people, and each mini-group tackle one objection. Each mini group has around five to ten minutes to consider one objection.</p> <p>The key question for serious objections affecting the MSP as a whole is ‘What ideas do we have for minimising the objection so that we are able at least to experiment with the proposal without causing unacceptable harm to the MSP?’</p> <p>For all other objections, the key question is ‘What is our response or our idea for resolving the questions or objections appropriately?’</p> <p>After collating ideas in the mini-groups, the mini-groups share these with the small groups, also on sticky notes (orange or yellow), and add these to the objections already on the pinboard.</p>	<p>In this practical example, new mixed groups are formed to integrate the objections and to devise cross-stakeholder solutions. One individual from each former group remains in place while all the other members change. The new groups then start discussing the serious objections that have an impact on the MSP as a whole. The key question in relation to serious objections that affect the MSP as a whole is ‘What ideas do we have for minimising the objection so that the constitution can be drawn up without causing unacceptable harm to the MSP?’</p> <p>Groups have five minutes to propose a solution for each objection. In many cases, these will be specific proposals for the constitution or for resolving specific legal issues, written on yellow sticky notes and attached to the objections. Once all serious objections regarding the MSP as a whole and the member organisations have been addressed, all participants return to their original groups and briefly share their proposed solutions.</p>
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Process	Practical example
Agreement and return to the plenary	
<p>The representative of the decision-making body (for example, a member of the steering committee) reads the contributions from each of the groups and, if necessary, asks questions of individual groups. This is a good time to have a lengthy break.</p> <p>Then all participants reconvene and the representative of the decision-making body reports on the contributions. He/she reports what he/she has understood, his/her reaction and the questions and ideas that seem particularly helpful. The individual should thank the participants for their contributions.</p>	<p>During the break, the steering committee representative and the legal expert look at the contributions.</p> <p>After the break, the representative asks questions relating to content. The legal expert reports on his/her initial assessment of the statutory aspects of the proposals made. The steering committee representative reports on the contributions and highlights those that seem particularly relevant to the steering committee.</p>
Decision	
<p>The representative of the decision-making body then decides on the next stages, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working with a team (e. g. a working group) to further develop the issue on the basis of the ideas and contributions generated • provisionally or definitively withdrawing the proposal or • submitting an (amended) decision to the steering committee, even if some of the objections have not been taken into account. <p>The decision is taken transparently in full awareness and consciousness of all the issues, objections and ideas raised by members of the body, especially those considered essential to resolve before implementation.</p>	<p>The representative of the steering committee thanks all those involved for their active participation and announces that, following the assembly, the steering committee will present a fuller and adapted version of the constitution to the general assembly by email for e-voting and adoption, even if not all of the objections have been taken into account.</p>

Visualisation of thematic-centered integration of objections

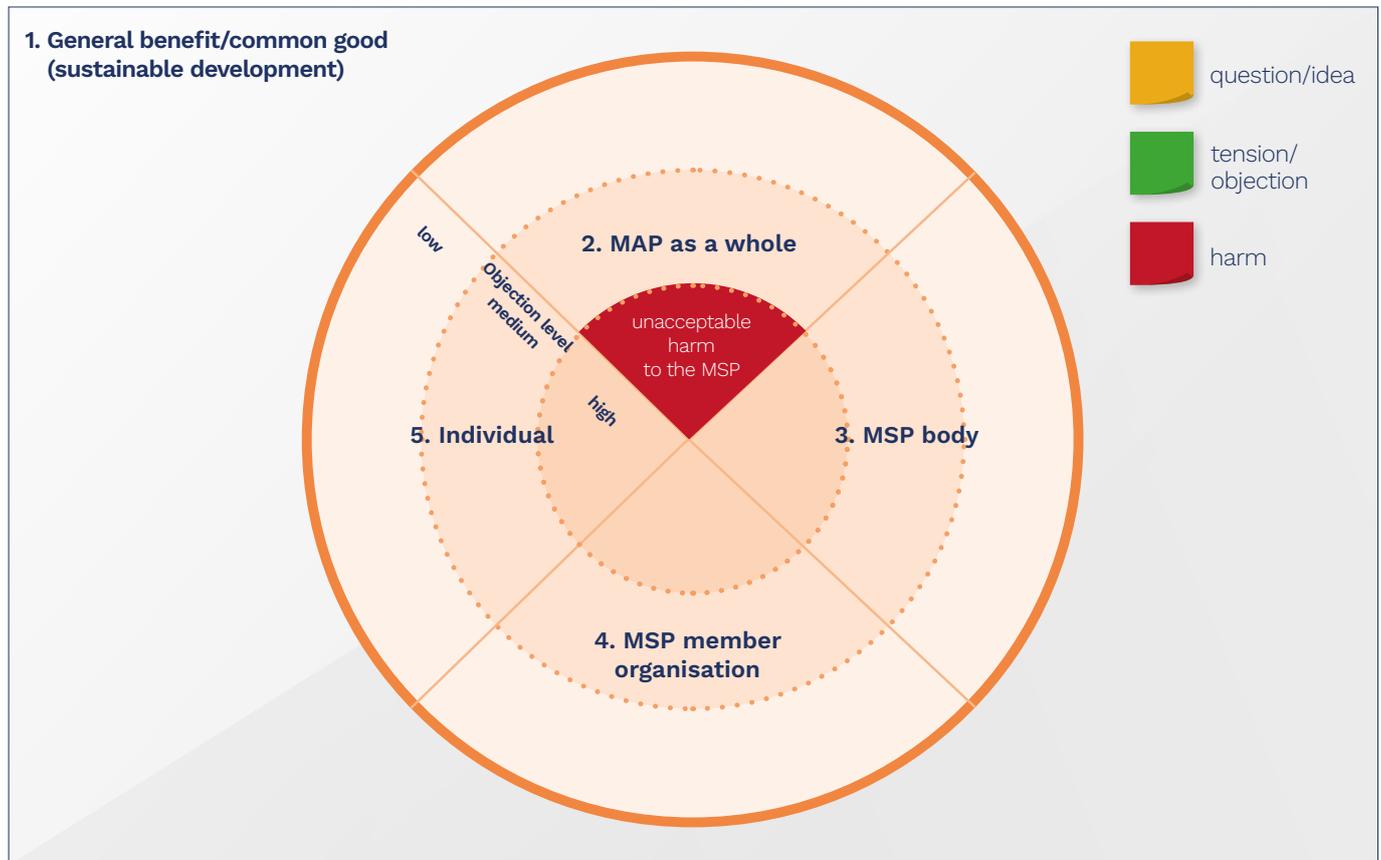


Figure 4: Visualisation of thematic-centered integration of objections

Whiteboard segments:

1. General benefit/Contribution to the common good: Does the issue concern the MSP's immediate environment or framework, society or issues of sustainable development (the SDGs)?
2. MSP as a whole: Does the issue concern the interests of the MSP as a whole or its vision and the achievement of its objectives?
3. MSP body: Does the issue concern a specific MSP body?
4. MSP member organisation: Does the issue concern a member organisation?
5. Individual: Does the issue concern an individual interest?

Helpful colour coding:

-  Yellow: This is a question or an idea.
-  Green: This is a tension or an objection.
-  Pink/red: This would cause unacceptable harm to our MSP.

7. Looking ahead

Once you have experimented with some of the tools described here in the context of your MSP, you may wish to consider what else would help to make your decision-making more agile. We would therefore like to conclude with a few final thoughts. Please get in touch with us if you have any questions.

- Changing the decision-making culture of an MSP is a deliberate process in shaping its cooperation system. The first thing that is needed is to raise awareness of the advantages of more agile decision-making. Depending on the context, cognitive tools (such as 'Agile Quick-Check' to enable self-assessment using response scales) or experience-oriented experiments (e. g. experimenting with and explicitly evaluating agile decision-making tools) may be used.
- Changing established cooperation mechanisms can cause tensions in an MSP's cooperation system. Hence, it is advisable to obtain professional support from an agile coach who can support all those involved in revealing these tensions and making them productively usable. This form of support can also be useful in the concrete application of the tools and in taking the first steps.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that decision-making has already become more agile in some MSPs. An overview of positive experiences and existing needs for development may help many MSPs to develop in the right direction. To process and portray these experiences and requirements, in-depth consideration of the issue is needed, maybe in the form of a case study; this needs to go beyond the guidance provided here on the first stages.

Further practical tips and studies in relation to MSPs are available on our website:

www.partnerships2030.org

Contact: info@partnerships2030.org

This document has been drawn up in cooperation with Michael Beyer of Como Consult GmbH.

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