FOOD & AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION
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UNDERSTANDING CONSENSUS

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Once students have a basic understanding of what consensus is from the pizza activity, they need to apply this to a real negotiation process. This brief on consensus aims to help them comprehend their role in reaching consensus during the debate of amendments.

During the debate of amendments, the delegate who originally proposed an amendment to the text is given an opportunity to explain why the other delegates should accept this change. If there are no objections, the amendment is incorporated into the text and the delegates move on to the next amendment.

If there are objections by one or more delegates, they the delegates who have an objection are given an opportunity to explain why they object. Once an objection to an amendment has been raised there needs to be a debate until the delegates can agree on an alternate version of the amendment that takes into consideration the objection(s) that have been raised or until the delegate who proposed the amendment agrees to withdraw it in the spirit of consensus if there are strong objections raised by other delegates. Most often, consensus is reached when objections have been raised by finding an alternate version of the amendment that all delegates can agree on.

In is very common that when there is a debate, only a subset of the delegates participating in the simulation are actively involved in the debate. When a subset of the delegates reach agreement on what to do with an amendment, no changes can be made in the text until it is clear that all delegates agree. Before making any final changes, the Facilitator must ask all the delegates if there are any delegates who disagree with the change that is being proposed. If there are no objections from any delegates, then the change can be made. If there is one or more delegates that still object, negotiations must continue on that amendment until it is clear that no one has any objections to what is being proposed.

In order to reach consensus, delegates have to make their best efforts to find common ground. What does “finding common ground” mean?

Finding common ground means focusing on what you and someone else agree on, even if you have different opinions or ideas about other things. It’s like saying, "We might not see eye-to-eye on everything, but here’s something we both care about or want."

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS (CONT.)

For example, imagine you and a friend are deciding what movie to watch. You want to watch an action movie, and they want a comedy. Finding common ground might mean choosing a movie that's both funny and has some action in it. It's about working together, listening to each other, and finding a solution that makes everyone happy. It's an important skill for teamwork and problem-solving!

Debating amendments is never just a matter of adopting or rejecting the amendment as proposed. Sometimes finding common ground involves making compromises.

The negotiation process that leads to consensus needs to be understood from three perspectives: 1) the delegate who proposes a change or amendment, 2) the delegate who opposes a change that is proposed, 3) the delegate that neither proposed or opposed a change. Each of these perspectives will be described below.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS (CONT.)

A. DELEGATE FAO PROPOSED A CHANGE

If a change that is proposed is accepted without opposition there is nothing more than needs to be done because the change is incorporated into the text.

When one or more delegates oppose the change, the delegate has a few options.

Option 1: If the delegate finds that explanation for why the amendment should not be made has merit, the delegate should consider withdrawing the amendment. If many delegates oppose the amendment for whatever reason, the delegate should consider withdrawing it in the spirit of consensus.

Option 2: If the delegate feels that the proposed change is important and does not find the objections persuasive, the delegate can elaborate why the the change should be adopted.

Option 3: If the delegate finds something in the objection that is worth considering, the delegate can find common ground with the delegate(s) that oppose the amendment by trying to come up an alternative version of the amendment that everyone might agree on.This is called a sub-amendment to the amendment. Most of the time, consensus is reached by revising the original amendment to address any objections that have been raised by other delegates.

Delegates that support the amendment should follow the same guidelines when making recommendations to the consensus process.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS (CONT.)

B. DELEGATE FAO OPPOSES AN AMENDMENT

When one or more delegates oppose a change, the delegate that opposes the change also has a few options.

Option 1: The delegate that opposes the amendment will have an opportunity to explain why. If the delegate rejects their explanation for opposing the amendment, they should see if there is some aspect of the why the amendment was proposed that the delegate agrees with and point this out. Opposing an amendment is not always an all or nothing situation. If there is some element in the explanation of why an amendment has been proposed that the delegate who opposes it can agree with, this can become an anchor for finding common ground. For example, during a simulation of the Commission on the Status of Women, a delegate wanted to insert the word 'girl' in the title of an international convention called the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Other delegates objected because you cannot change the name of convention that has been adopted by Member States. But in the course of explaining why they opposed the amendment, one delegate also emphasized that they agreed with position taken by the delegate who proposed the amendment, that it was important to include girls in the outcome document but that there was a better way to do it than changing the name of convention that has been already been adopted. This then because the basis for finding common ground that led to consensus. Eventually all delegates agreed on inserting a new paragraph that focused on including girls in all programmes that aimed to achieve gender equality equality for women.

Option 2: The delegate that opposes the amendment should make an effort to understand the reasons why the amendment was proposed and think about whether there is a subamendment or alternative version of the amendment that would remove their objection to the original amendment.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS (CONT.)

B. DELEGATE FAO OPPOSES AN AMENDMENT (CONT.)

Sometimes finding agreement involves shifting the focus of the amendment to an issue that has broader support among the delegates. For example, in a simulation where delegates were discussing biodiversity loss, one delegate proposed creating a website to collect data on biodiversity. Other delegates opposed the amendment because they felt that these website already exist. When on the delegates who opposed this amendment asserted that the real issue they should be looking at is whether these databases are accessible to all countries and another delegates proposed that in addition, they should be concerned about wether the information on existing databases are up to date, they were well on their way to find consensus because they identified an issue that they all cared about. This is what the consensus process is all about.

Other delegates that oppose an amendment should follow the same guidelines and look for opportunities to find common ground and propose subamendments that could contribute to the consensus process.

C. WHEN DELEGATES ARE NOT FOR OR AGAINST AN AMENDMENT

In those instances where a delegate did not propose an amendment and does not have a strong position in favor or against it, they still have an important role to play in the consensus process. When there are different positions taken on a particular amendment, delegates should listen carefully to both sides to understand where the positions differ and try identify elements in the arguments where common ground may exist and think about whether there are alternated versions of amendments that everyone can agree on.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CONSENSUS (CONT.)

D. EXPLANATION OF POSITION

When it comes time to decide whether to sponsor a resolution or not, delegates should decided to be a sponsor if they don't have any strong objections to any part of the text. If a delegate has objections to a particular paragraph in the text, they can make a statement after the resolution is adopted called an Explanation of Position where they can identify one or more paragraphs that their government wants to disassociate from. Delegates can agree two adopt a resolution without a vote and still inform the other Member States that they disagree with the text in one or more paragraphs. If an amendment was incorporated into the text that a delegate did not agree with, they could state their government's dissatisfaction by making a statement that they disassociate from the paragraph where the amendment was included in the text. This is an very important component of the consensus process because it gives each government the possibility to

The Explanation of Position can also be used to express disappointment that some text was either removed or that a particular amendment was withdrawn during negotiations. If a delegate had proposed an amendment that was withdrawn in the spirit of consensus because many delegates opposed it, that delegate can use the Explanation of Position to express their disappointment.