

Communities based on “democratic relationships”

This document presents the principles of “democratic relationships” and their application to communities. Here is a short overview on what these principles can bring:

- They allow for more depth in relationships, with less risks of exhaustion (using them, it's easier to be authentic, to offer and receive support, and to take a step back if needed).
- They increase global efficiency (even if the decision-making processes are more complex, tensions and conflicts are more likely to be visible and handled).
- They increase the possibilities to develop strong interests in various domains of life
- They reconcile persons who thought their values were incompatible (for example: a person who is focused on freedom with a person who is focused on equality)
- They foster trust in other people (even unfamiliar people).

The “democratic relationships” are based on 4 principles. The first three depend on the type of problem, the fourth one applies to every type of problem. It's also possible to describe this with a “primary value” for each principle. A “primary value” that applies to a type of problem (for example “Equality”) is mostly irrelevant in the other types of problems (that's why they are crossed out in the table),

	Principles		Primary values	
Paternalistic problem	1. Priority to the person who endures paternalism	4. No constructing nor maintaining relational dependency through psychological control	Self determination Consent Equality	Individuation
Human link intensity problem	2. Priority to the person who wants less intensity		Self determination Consent Equality	
Cohabitation problem	3. Equal consideration of the voice and the interests of each person		Self determination Consent Equality	

To keep this table simple, I only mentioned the 4 “primary values”. We can also consider some more values: “Freedom” and “Individualism” are only relevant in the 2 first types of problems (they are not relevant in the 3rd!) ; “Non discrimination” is only relevant in the 3rd ; etc.

These principles and values are illustrated with examples and a diagram at the end of this document (see also the book “The guide of democratic relationships”¹). For now, let's start with short clarifications:

- Paternalism: I'm being paternalistic when I don't trust that a person will make the right choice for their own life.
- Human link intensity: I'm looking for human link intensity when I try to fulfill my need of relatedness (I want to develop or maintain the link with a specific person or I want to enjoy the existing link). The problem appears if this specific person wants more (or less) intensity than I do.
- Cohabitation: If the type of problem is not “Paternalism”, nor “Human link intensity”, then it's “Cohabitation”! The problem is not dependent on the singularity of the other person, it would exist even if they were to be replaced by a random person (for example a participant doesn't contribute to the cleaning at the end of a meeting).

¹ Guilain Omont (not published yet), “Le guide des relations démocratiques” [in French]

- Priority: If I have the priority, anyone who would force me (coercion), or even insist on trying to influence me, would breach the “democratic relationships” principles. And if I accept to try to find a no-lose solution, it’s a favor that I do for the other person.
- Relational dependency: I experience a relational dependency if I am depending so much on a relationship with one person, that’s it’s difficult to imagine I could distance myself from this person.
- Psychological control: It’s a concept used by researchers in psychology. It “reflects a type of interpersonal interaction in which [one person’s] psychological status and relational position to [another person] is maintained and defended at the expense and violation of the [other person’s] development of self”².

Application to communities

These principles and values can be used individually in one’s own life (with friends, for example). But in this document, we’ll only focus on what they imply for a community.

1. Priority to the person who endures paternalism:
 - No one can insist that a member do something for that member’s own good.
2. Priority to the person who wants less intensity:
 - No one can insist that a member do something for more intense human connections in the community, or for its cohesion.
3. Equal consideration of the voice and the interests of each person:
 - The governance should be transparent and fair.
 - ◆ The processes to join should be clear (how open? Is there a co-optation? Is there a selection, and if yes, which criteria?)
 - ◆ The roles in the governance processes (if any roles are defined) should be open to any member, with a transparent and fair process to appoint someone if too many members want a given role.
 - ◆ Strategic decisions should be made outside of the roles perimeters, in assemblies, with the principle: one person, one voice. The way the assembly is conducted should be decided by the participants during the assembly, with appropriate processes³ (among other things, the people who prepare and facilitate a given assembly should have as little decision-power as possible during this assembly).
 - Anyone can insist and/or force a member, only if the member hasn’t respect the 3rd principle or the group culture (group culture can be for example internal regulations, it has to be compatible with the 3rd principle).
 - [Transition period] After the creation of a new community, decisions can be made by the Source⁴, until a few members are ready to invest some time and energy in the community.
4. No constructing nor maintaining relational dependency through psychological control:
 - No attack against the importance of developing a strong sense of self:
 - ◆ advocating the total submission of the self to a “higher” cause.
 - ◆ devaluing the individual need of a member.
 - ◆ invalidating the emotion of a member.
 - The following negative means should be prohibited, if the goal is to strengthen the link with a member:
 - ◆ making fun of, belittling or ridiculing this member.
 - ◆ ghosting this member.
 - ◆ dramatizing the outside world.

² Brian K. Barber (2002), “Intrusive Parenting”, page 46

³ See www.eudec.fr/notre-organisation-1 [in French] for examples of such processes.

⁴ Tom Nixon (2021), “Work with Source”

Examples:

Here is what you can hear in communities based on “democratic relationships” (column “Democratic”) and what you can hear in communities that are not (column “Non-Democratic”).

Principle	Democratic	Non-Democratic
1.	Facilitator: “I propose to do this activity, I think you will benefit from it. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll try to find some time to propose something different that fits better to what makes sense to you.”	Facilitator: “I propose to do this activity, I think you will benefit from it. If you don’t want to do it, I insist that you do it anyway: you’ll see after a while how good it is, and I bet you’ll thank me afterwards.”
2.		Facilitator: “I propose to do this activity, I think you will benefit from it. If you don’t want to do it, I insist that you do it anyway: you risk breaking the group’s good vibes if you refuse to do it.”
2.	Facilitator: “I invite you to open yourself and talk about your emotions, but it’s ok if you need time to do it, or if you see you’re not ready to do it.”	Facilitator: “Please make efforts! We cannot go anywhere if you don’t open yourself and don’t talk about your emotions.”
3.	Member: “It was clearly stated that the members will have to clean the venue after the stay. You cannot just chill while others are cleaning.”	Member: “Nobody can tell me what to do. If I want to chill and not to clean, it’s my right, I’m a free person.”
3.	Chairman: “You cannot keep interrupting people when it’s their turn to speak. If you do that again, you’ll be excluded from the assembly.”	Chairman: “We value spontaneity, so we refuse to settle a structure for turns to speak.”
4.	Facilitator: “Now, try to see if you can connect with a gratitude feeling in you!”	Facilitator: “Now, let’s all feel gratitude!”
4.	Facilitator: “We value the community feeling, but the most important thing is each of us as a person.”	Facilitator: “The most important thing is the community.”
4.	Leader: “To better serve the cause, I propose we try to reflect on our own personal motivations.”	Leader: “Put the interests of the cause before your own interests! Become a hero! It’s pathetic anyway to take care of your ego and of your own egoistic interests.”
4.	Facilitator: “It’s ok to be sad!”	Facilitator: “Contain yourself, grit your teeth!”
4.	Facilitator: “Try to connect to your own feelings and needs.”	Facilitator: “Don’t try to resist destiny! Surrender! We are all one, anyway!”
4.	Leader: “Other communities bring diversity.”	Leader: “Beware of all other communities.”

For schools: these 4 principles lead to “democratic schools” (cf. [Wikipedia article](#)).

Key diagram of democratic relationships

