

Popular Education



A necessity for
the progression of
social justice

A Practical Guide to Popular Education :
Getting Acquainted

First printed in 1992
Reprinted and reformatted in 1998
Translated from French in 1998

Contents

- Introduction *page 3*
- Definition *page 4*
- Instructions for use *page 5*
 - Exercise :
 - Variety of learning activities *page 6*
 - Critical reflections *page 8*
 - Citizens collectively take action *page 10*
 - Citizens, individually and collectively, to a heightened understanding of their working or living conditions *page 12*
 - To effect short, medium and long term *page 14*
 - Social, economic, cultural and political change *page 16*
 - Group democracy *page 18*
 - Choosing to work with powerless and disenfranchised segments of the population *page 20*
 - Freedom and independence in action and thought *page 22*

A Practical Guide to Popular Education : *Getting Acquainted*

Introduction

When asked about the group we're involved in, we most often answer : a community group. But what makes us different from other community organizations ? What distinguishes us?

Popular education, of course ! However, if asked about popular education would we be able to explain what it is ?

Despite being involved in the popular education movement, we rarely, if ever, discuss how the principles, although at the forefront of all our actions, are applied in our groups. Too often, we let the emergencies and necessities of every day life take over; leaving us little time to reflect on our raison d'être : popular education.

This guide has been designed to remind us about the nature popular education. More importantly, it tries to present the principles behind popular education and suggests how to apply them in our groups.

We hope this guide will be useful in getting you acquainted or reacquainted with popular education. Also, we hope that it will provide useful for questioning the way your group works and making the necessary adjustments.

In order for popular education groups to be more effective in advancing the cause of social justice, we must take time to consider the principles guiding our work and how we should apply them.

This guide was in and of itself a popular education activity. It was produced by a committee of the Round Table of Popular Education Groups of the Eastern Townships (TROVEPE or Table ronde des organismes volontaires d'éducation populaire de l'Estrie). Later amended and adopted by a general membership meeting in 1992, it has since been revised and reformatted to improve its presentation.

For more information about this guide or about the TROVEPE, call us at (819) 566-2727 or write to us at 187 Laurier St., Suite 314, Sherbrooke, Quebec, J1H 4Z4.

Definition of Popular Education

(from a document adopted by an orientation meeting of the Popular Education and Community Action Movement of Quebec (MÉPACQ or Mouvement d'éducation populaire et d'action communautaire du Québec) held in December 1990.)

Popular education covers a variety of learning activities and critical reflections through which citizens collectively take action. The activities further lead citizens, individually and collectively, to a “prise de conscience” (heightened understanding) of their working or living conditions, which motivates them to effect short, medium and long term social, economic, cultural and political changes in their milieu.

The principles

- To work for **social change** and to work on the root causes of social problems instead of on their effects ;
- To adopt a variety of **learning activities** that lead to **collective action** ;
- To reach segments of the population with **little or no control over their living or working conditions** ;
- To favour **empowerment** and a “**taking charge**” of the group and its learning activities by its members.

Complimentary issues

The following issues can also be associated with popular education :

- group democracy ;
- choosing to work with powerless and disenfranchised segments of the population;
- freedom and independence in action and thought.

How to use the guide

The guide has been assembled in such a way as to make finding one's way around easy. It is made up of six (6) sections, each dealing with one part of the definition and three (3) other sections touching on the complimentary issues associated with popular education.

Each section is divided into three parts :

- ▶▶ The significance of the aspect of popular education in question ;
- ▶▶ The possible consequences of taking into account that issue ;
- ▶▶ A series of questions to encourage you to reflect and clarify the principle in question.

Instructions

This activity, like all popular education activities, should have a collective component. Ideally, the group should set aside at least three hours to discuss all the principles. In order to provide enough time for everyone to get acquainted with the guide, we suggest that it be given to all the members of the Board or Collective at least one month before the meeting. The questions at the end of each section are examples that can guide the discussion. You can answer them one by one, globally or invent others.

A variety of learning activities

What does this mean ?

When we speak of popular education, we quite often think of knowledge gained through workshops or classes. Popular education, however, is much larger and more dynamic than that.

By "learning activities", we mean all activities designed to develop knowledge or new skills. Of course, workshops and classes are useful means for acquiring knowledge, but we also want to focus on learning by experience (preparing the group's newsletter, hosting a community radio show, looking after the books, organizing activities, etc.). Also included as a learning activity, are all those which involve the internal life of a group (being a member of a group, of the Board or Collective, or a committee, being the spokes-person on a particular subject, taking the minutes, overseeing the finances, etc.). In fact, any and all of these activities can be ways through which the participants can learn the principles of a truly democratic process.

Visiting the local member of parliament or participating in a demonstration can also be considered a learning process. Imagine, demanding your rights a metre away from your member of parliament : an interesting learning experience, no ?

1



¹ Most of the caricatures and comic strips were taken from Canadian Dimension magazine.

Consequences

▶ If we take this issue into account:

- It encourages creativity in the activities we take on ;
- We consider each action, activity and job as an opportunity to learn ;
- It makes the activities accessible to those with less education or fewer recognized "skills" ;
- In adapting the work and activities, more people are encouraged and invited to participate.

▶ If we don't take this issue into account :

- We limit the potential for learning that can be found in all aspects of the work of the group;
- It is possible that we limit our learning activities to workshops and classes ;
- Learning about and applying democratic principles might be neglected ;
- We might forget or choose not to provide documents or tools (in the preparation of activities or facilitation of meetings, for example) adapted to those who will be using them.



What do we think ?

1. Do we think of participation at the General membership Meeting as a learning opportunity ? Why ?
2. Do we think of participation in a committee or Board/collective as a learning opportunity ? Why?
3. Does our group support people participating on the Board, on committees or in the preparation of activities? If yes, how ?
4. Does our group verify what people have learned after an action, an activity or after participating on a committee or Board ? If yes, how ?

Critical reflections

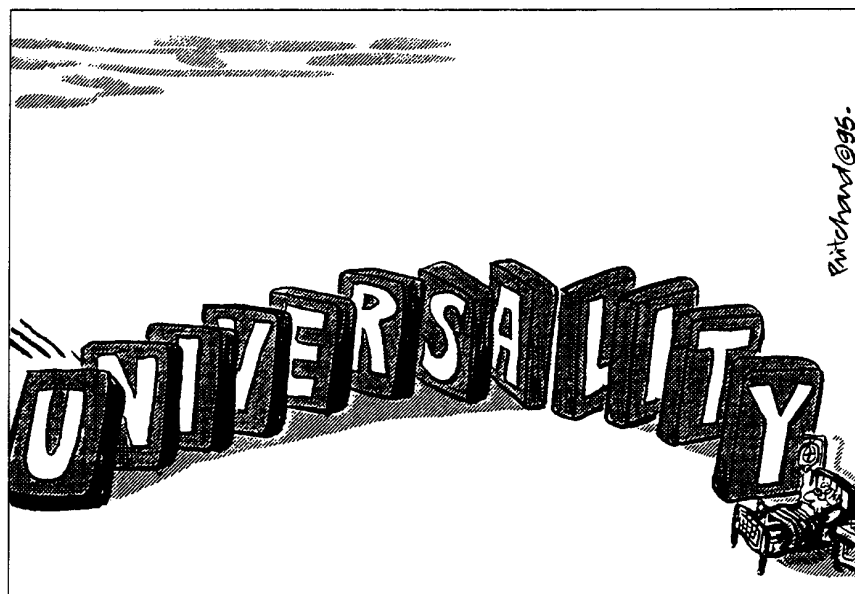
What does this mean ?

Popular education groups have a role to play in analysing and reacting/acting critically in the face of the social events confronting them : economic situation, social injustices, laws and bills at various governmental levels (municipal, provincial, federal), etc. As a result, we must encourage our members to think critically.

By "thinking critically", we mean : an increased understanding and questioning of the events that surround us without accepting at face value what the media, politicians and others might say. We encourage members to adopt this same attitude when it comes to the group : its positions, the way it works, etc.

Moreover, we want to encourage people to challenge their first impressions, become better informed about the causes of their situation and improve their understanding of how the world works.

In short, we don't want people to complain for complaining's sake. We urge them to be more conscious of their surroundings. At the same time, we want to increase their capacity to analyse and understand.



Citizens collectively take action

What does this mean ?

We speak here of citizens because we often forget that we are more than just the consumers and tax payers that our politicians like to call us.

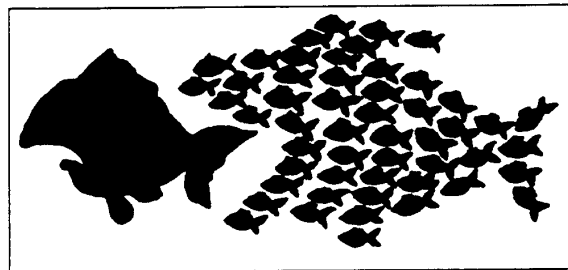
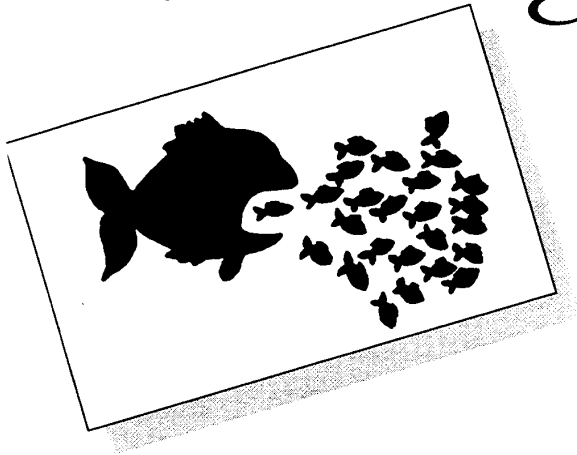
Citizenship (of Quebec, of Canada or the world...) means having the right, even the obligation, to intervene when it comes to political decisions that influence the development of our society.

In fact, in popular education, we favour, not only knowledge and criticism of what surrounds us, but a transformation of society. This implies taking action.

Individual action is necessary, but we also promote collective action because it is a logical outcome of the democratic and participatory process. Through collective actions, we find strength in numbers, more support and pleasure.

Taking on collective actions, means deciding them together, organizing them together, participating together, criticizing and evaluating them together.

New Organizing Strategies



**Citizens, individually and collectively,
to a “prise de conscience” (heightened
understanding) of their working or
living conditions**

What does this mean ?

In a popular education group, we discuss many issues (to be honest, almost all issues...) by linking them to our working conditions (salary, health risks, unionisation, unemployment, etc.) or to our living conditions (housing, environment, violence in all its forms, culture, information, consumerism and indebtedness, etc.).

In basing their work on these two fundamental aspects of our lives, popular education groups favour activities and actions that lead people to better understand and grasp the situations in which they find themselves.

Popular education groups bring people together who share similar circumstances and experiences. Together they try to find solutions. This dynamic between individuals and the group allows them to develop a greater awareness of their situation. It contributes to decreasing their isolation. At the same time, it identifies the common causes of their problems.



"The greatest thing about a free market is the slave labor."

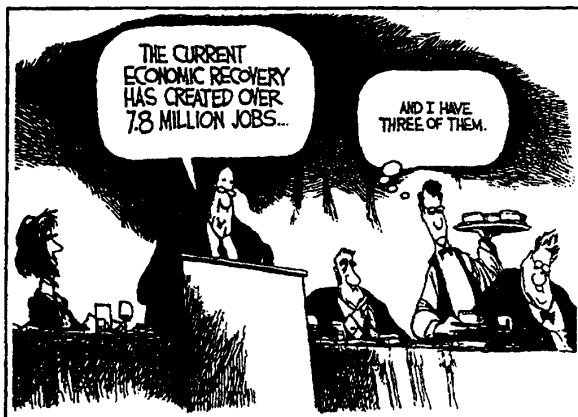
Consequences

▣ If we take this issue into account:

- We put an end to the feelings of isolation and guilt associated with our situation ;
- It makes us more aware of our situation and of the root causes of our problems ;
- We develop support for and among people dealing with the same problem or situation (guidance, support, exchange, accompaniment, ...) ;
- Increased knowledge and awareness are the first steps towards action ;
- By having a holistic perspective on our situation, we gain a better understanding of ourselves as individuals.

▣ If we don't take this issue into account :

- We isolate people in their situation and individualise their problems ;
- We restrict the opportunity for people to communicate with others living in similar circumstances and as a consequence we deny them the opportunity to create the solidarity necessary for them to act ;
- By not placing our work in a collective perspective when dealing with problems, we can't offer collective solutions or alternatives.



What do we think ?

1. Specifically, are the people who are part of our group provided with the opportunity to discuss their experiences with others (collectivising) ? If yes, how?
2. Do we hold only individual sessions or do we have group meetings ?
3. Do we encourage people to realize that their situation is similar to "hundreds" of others? If yes, how ?
4. Do we encourage people to reflect on the connections between the different problems they experience ?

To effect short, medium and long term

What does this mean ?

At the heart of popular education is the idea of placing our actions in a long term perspective. Of course, short term actions are essential for responding to short term problems.

However, all too often we are confined to only dealing with the short term, with what is the most urgent or emergencies created by factory closings, laws or by-laws, reforms, cuts or public policy, etc.

Although emergency interventions and reactions are necessary, only a long term vision can allow us to go beyond the effects of social problems by addressing their causes. Moreover, having a long term perspective allows us to question our short term actions: are we coherent with what we want to accomplish in the long term ? How do our actions help us accomplish the change we desire for the long term ? Do our actions work against what we want to accomplish in the long term ?

Lastly, placing our short term actions within a long term framework makes us reflect more broadly on the type of society we want. Within this context, it is possible to make connections between the various social changes desired by the popular education, union, feminist, youth and international solidarity movements. This enables us to collectively define our common social project.

In order to give meaning to our activities and to our daily interventions, one must clearly state the long term objective : a society based on greater social justice. We shouldn't be embarrassed and certainly not afraid to express this objective "loud and clear" and to integrate it into our daily work.

In short, to know whether to go through Coaticook, Lake Megantic, Asbestos or Magog to get to one's destination, one must first and foremost establish whether the destination is Quebec City or Vermont. A question of simple logic, don't you think ?

The type of short, medium and long term change desired should not be evaluated within a time frame (two years, fifteen years, etc.) but in a political perspective.

Let's take employment insurance (formerly known as unemployment insurance) as an example. A popular education group might fight, in the short term, for an improvement in the employment insurance regime ; in the medium term, for adoption of a full employment policy and in the long term, for true full employment with no discriminatory hiring practices.

Consequences

▶ If we take this issue into account:

- It provides the necessary perspective within which to question our short term actions and activities (helps the group make choices) ;
- The group is forced to develop a global perspective of the present situation and of the type of society we want ;
- We make sure we regularly return to our original mandate : the struggle for and the promotion of social justice ;
- We encourage the creation of connections between groups : this allows for the sharing and confrontation of ideas and analyses ... for a global change.

▶ If we don't take this issue into account :

- It limits our actions and activities solely within a short term perspective. This attitude creates the illusion that it is possible to obtain greater social justice in one's sector or more globally without dealing with the root causes of social problems ;
- We tend to forget the importance of consciousness raising based on identifying the root causes and the necessity of a more generalized action ;
- The group limits its actions to bandaid solutions only and tends toward individual interventions ;
- The group isolates itself given that it sees little interest in working with others.

What do we think ?

1. Does our group keep in mind long term change when organizing its activities and actions? If yes, what are the desired long term changes ?
2. What concrete means do we use to check whether our short term actions contribute to long term change ?
3. I identify the changes we want : on a short term basis, on a medium term basis, on a long term basis ?

Social, cultural and political changes

What does this mean ?

Changing society is one of the goals of popular education. But why change it ? For the betterment of all of society, to obtain a more equitable redistribution of wealth, for greater justice, so that our society is not sexist, racist, violent or discriminatory. A different society would allow a greater number of people to participate in making decisions that concern them.

At present, only a tiny portion of the population make decisions about social, economic and cultural policy on behalf of the majority. Voting once every four or five years does not constitute true participation in the decisions that will affect the future of our society.

All members of society are interrelated and interdependent ; so much so that a change at one level is often accompanied by a change at another level. For example, a change in the financial conditions of the poorest people of our society is likely to bring about some changes at other levels. With fewer concerns about their survival, those same people might contribute in the social, political or cultural life of their community.

Participation in collective actions within the context of a popular education group, provides some of the necessary tools to increase active participation in all other aspects of one's life.



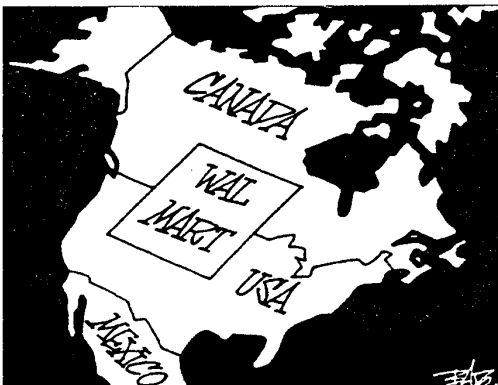
Consequences

▶ If we take this issue into account:

- Aiming for social change means using pressure tactics to improve people's quality of life ;
- We can awaken curiosity in and desire for collective discussions regarding the challenges we face today and those we might face in the future ;
- We choose to put into practice the values we put forward in our social project ;
- We facilitate real "empowerment" and participation within the group and in society.

▶ If we don't take this issue into account :

- We limit the possible impact of our actions;
- A group that does not aim for social change takes the risk of looking like a government service with little or no concern for democracy, for empowerment, taking charge or the development of collective consciousness and awareness ;
- The group isolates itself by not being part of the larger popular education movement;
- We separate our work from the larger social context.



What do we think ?

1. Can we identify the social, economic, political and cultural changes put forward by our group ?
2. What power do we have over the social, cultural and political decisions of our municipality, province or country ?
3. Does our group work towards an improvement of the situation by staying within the same economic and political system or does it want a more profound change in the system itself?

Group democracy

What does this mean ?

Popular education groups try to work in a democratic manner for a number of reasons : we apply the principals with which we want society to function ; we encourage a take charge attitude by those concerned ; we consider learning about democracy and how it works an important process in encouraging independence in people ; etc. The democratic process involves two important elements : vertical democracy and horizontal democracy.

Vertical democracy

This is the most formal kind of democracy that is used in groups. At general membership meetings, it consists of : electing people to different positions within the group (board of directors, executive, committees, external representations) ; voting on the financial report, the budget proposal, the goals and objectives of the group and lastly the plan of action.

Horizontal democracy

By multiplying the areas in which people can influence and make decisions, can exercise power in order for more people to increase their ability to participate in all aspects of the life of the group. This can be achieved through a variety of methods : educational activities, participation on a committee, helping with a job (answering the phone, photocopying, being part of the phone chain) ; circulating information ; activities that help integrate new members and participants, etc.

True democracy cannot be reduced to "one person = one vote". It must be "one aware person who is ready to participate = one active contribution".



Consequences

▣ If we take this issue into account:

- We encourage members' participation in the life of the group ;
- We encourage real taking charge of the group by those directly affected by the problem;
- We encourage a better understanding of the notion of democracy ;
- We avoid the risks associated with the appearance or arrival of "owners of the group" (the staff or board who do what they please with the group) ;
- It reduces the chance that the group becomes run by any one individual ;
- We increase people's ability to debate and make enlightened decisions.

▣ If we don't take this issue into account :

- The group risks disappearing (members become less involved or even abandon the group, etc.) ;
- It weakens our ability to mobilize and affects the visibility and credibility of our group ;
- We risk isolating ourselves from the rest of the popular education movement.



What do we think ?

1. How do we put into practice vertical democracy in our group, in the Rules and Regulations and in reality ?
2. How do we put horizontal democracy into practice in our group ? Do we have ways to integrate new people (history of the group, the laws that deal with our issue, etc.) ? Do we provide workshops and support for new and old participants ?
3. How does information flow in our group (between staff and the board, between staff and members, between the board and the members, between support staff and coordinators, etc.) ?
4. Are our members active or do they simply support the group by buying memberships ?
5. In what ways do we encourage our members to participate in the group ?

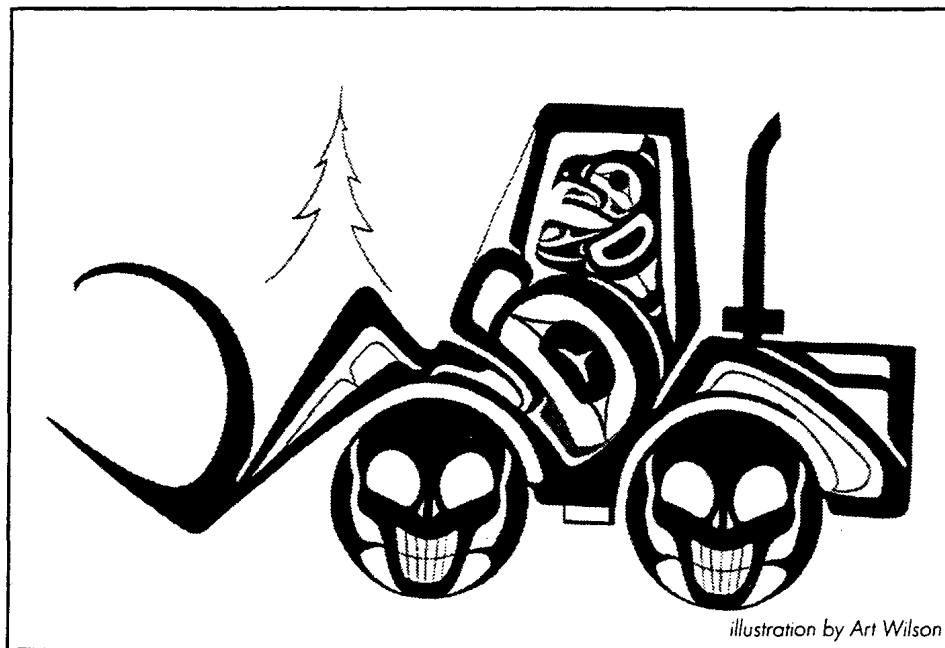
Choosing to work with powerless and disenfranchised segments of the population

What does this mean ?

For the most part, popular education groups emerge in economically and socially disadvantaged milieus. Consequently, many of the problems they deal with are the result of economic poverty : welfare, unemployment, minimum wage, etc.

In the last decade, many groups have emerged that offer services to the entire population and not only to disadvantaged classes : violence against women, the environment, peace groups, etc. However, popular education groups are often limited by a lack of financial resources. In such a context, popular education groups choose to work primarily with the poorest segments of their target population.

What brings the majority of popular education groups together, regardless of the type of service offered, is the question of power. Popular education groups come from and serve populations with little or no power in society. The question of power is not defined solely in economic terms (income) but also in social, cultural and political terms.



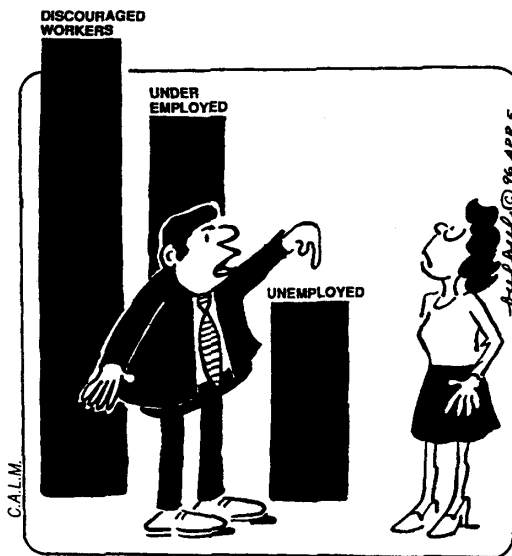
Consequences

▶ If we take this issue into account:

- The group is preoccupied with reaching out to disadvantaged milieus ;
- The group develops its activities and tools to address the needs of its members or
- The group makes sure that the people directly concerned with its activities and services are part of the structures (Board, committees, etc.).

▶ If we don't take this issue into account :

- We have a tendency to distance ourselves from the people we want to reach ;
- We distance ourselves from the principles of popular education.



"This is the official unemployment rate."

What do we think ?

1. Who do we reach ? What are the characteristics of the people we reach ?
2. How do we go about reaching the economically and socially disadvantaged ?
3. Are the people we are trying to reach present on the board or elsewhere in our decision making structures ?
4. Are the people we are trying to reach present at our activities ?

Freedom and independence in action and thought

What does this mean ?

Our groups must be independent from all other groups (government, public or financial institutions, unions or even other popular education groups) when it comes to making decisions or regarding our actions.

Being independent means giving ourselves the means to control our ideas, our positions, our activities and our actions.

Being independent means guaranteeing ourselves the power, in all situations, to make decisions in the real interest of our members.



DID YOU HEAR... WE WON THE COLD WAR

Consequences

▶ If we take this issue into account:

- The members are the heart and soul of the group ;
- The members have true democratic power;
- The group controls its own development and orientation.

▶ If we don't take this issue into account :

- The group loses its sovereignty ;
- The group risks being submitted to an ideological position or priorities with which it does not agree (whether government objectives or others) ;
- The members lose interest in the group.



What do we think ?

1. Does our group always make independent decisions ?
2. Does our group compromise its independence ? When ?
3. Does our board of directors reserve one or some positions for outside organizations ? Do the members have the right to vote on this person's candidacy or does the organization simply delegate someone of their choosing ?

réf. : c:\document\trovepe\épa.ang.wpd