STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO STARTING A MUTUAL AID GROUP

Mutual Aid Groups are springing up around the country right now. This is a good reaction to the crisis we are in; we are not assuming that the city, state or nation will pick up all the pieces, and these groups empower and connect people in the process. Even when we are self-isolating, we can still connect emotionally and cooperate at a practical level, to make our world better. We may not be starting a formal group yet, but many of us have been reaching out to neighbors, friends and family to help each other.

Starting a community mutual aid group is a good way to: find any people who may not have help close by; share ideas and tips for coping with the self-isolation; help with practical things as needed; build better emotional connections and build resilience for whatever comes next. None of us know how long this particular crisis will last, but one thing we know for sure, is that we can't solve this crisis, or the ultimate crisis, the climate emergency, *without doing all of these same things*.

In addition to helping each other in our neighborhoods, mutual aid groups work together to speak up for


their community and for other people who might be suffering, even more than us, thereby improving peoples' lives now and in the future. So many underlying issues are going to make this pandemic so much harder for us all to get through, and they also need to be addressed. Hopefully, people become more engaged and active (becoming activists) by joining these groups/ This *will* make the world better, one block at a time: #wegotourblock.

What is the purpose of a Mutual Aid Group? You can define your own purpose. This is the beauty of self-organized (autonomous and non-hierarchical) groups, they can be locally driven according to whatever your particular needs are. Here are some common purposes or aims of Mutual Aid groups:

- to cooperate for the sake of the common good
- to improve morale and social connections
- help with emotional and material needs
- to empower communities rather than disempower them
- to reduce fear and isolation and create a feeling of safety
- mobilize people to help each other and pressure local and national officials for common good
- build coordination to take on other issues that are causing harm
- helps us strengthen and prepare for any future disasters

History of Mutual Aid- Mutual Aid is nothing new, we have survived and evolved by cooperating with each other. It is in our instincts to help one another and build community. It is all of the structures around us that have forced us apart and stopped us from doing this, our cars, our separate houses, our phones, our media and politics, work we do not own or have a say in, and a society that currently values the individual, the corporations and short term profit, above community and cooperation. Even without a disaster, many people are already suffering, add something like COVID 19 and we need each even more.
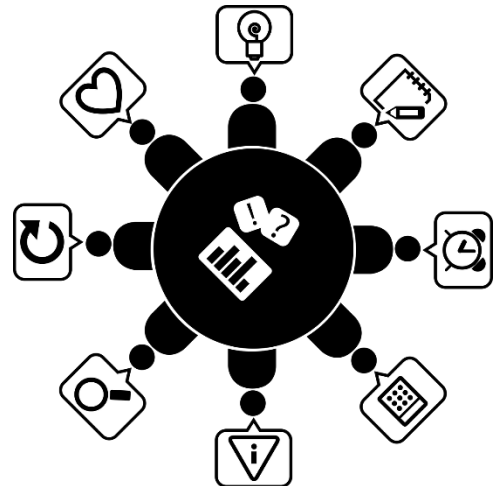
Mutual Aid was first mentioned in 1902, by a Russian, Peter Kropotkin, who emphasized the importance of "mutually-beneficial cooperation and reciprocity in the animal kingdom and human societies both past and present" over the "survival of the fittest" thinking, popular since that time. More recent examples of groups doing mutual aid are:

- The Black Panther Party for Self Defense in LA formed to resist the oppressive policies of the police and, while doing so, saw many other community problems they had including children not learning in schools because they were hungry. So, they started free school breakfast and lunch programs at their local schools. This practice spread across the state and was later adopted nationally.
- Food Not Bombs "is an all-volunteer movement that recovers food that would otherwise be discarded, and shares free vegan and vegetarian meals with the hungry in over 1,000 cities in 65 countries in protest to war, poverty, and destruction of the environment". They make their point, that trillions are spent on war in this country, yet millions still go hungry, and they feed hungry people nutritious food at the same time.
- Occupy Sandy this started from an Occupy group and drew on its former network to mobilize volunteers, open up distribution centers, keep track of individuals and remove trees from peoples' homes after Hurricane Sandy, in 2012. Through doing this they "also encouraged the creation of small projects, co-ops, and neighbor-led efforts" and used participatory budgeting "a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget", to distribute grants.

How to set up a Mutual Aid Group- by the way, feel free to call your group whatever name feels right to you all, the name mutual aid is more to explain what it is and isn't, i.e. it is more solidarity than charity, people helping each other rather than one group of people helping a separate group.

1. *Contact your own close family and friends* before you start a group- probably you have already done this, if not, please do so. Be open with each other about how you feel - afraid, nervous, worried and what you are most worried about. You will feel better just by talking about your feelings with people who care about you. See NOTES (at end of document) on how to "communicate with feelings"

2. *Find another person who is also interested in setting up a mutual aid group*, this immediately doubles your contacts, helps you to be accountable, and you can encourage each other with things you might not have done before. This isn't to say you can't start a group on your own.
3. *Discuss or decide what particular group of people you will organize with*. Maybe it is the floor in your apartment block, the row in your condo community or the street you live on. Maybe it is not a geographically local group, maybe it is your family, your work, church or school friends. Keep in mind that the ideal sizes for a group is 5 to 20 people. Therefore, you might want to organize a larger community into smaller groups or "pods" if you will.
4. *Organize an online meeting* (see NOTES on how to set one up) so you can get to know each other. Building relationships is the first step of any group. Let people know that you are meeting, by whatever means you can, except knocking on their door. It is better to post flyers in central locations that people don't have to touch them. Keep the flyer simple, with a number to call/text and then you can send out more information to anyone who responds.
5. *Make sure you all have each other's phone numbers and/or emails* whether you have formal meetings or not. Ask for peoples' permission to start a group text or email group and post useful information in an online place that is accessible to most people.

What can Mutual Aid Groups do? The point of these groups is that you do whatever is needed in your group or community. Here's a list of ideas to get started:

- Share updates on who is sick and who isn't and if anyone needs immediate help
- Educate each other on what are the symptoms of COVID and what to do if you get it.
- Track down local, state and national resources if you have lost your job or business
- What local stores have toilet paper or other supplies
- Discuss personal and community preventative health actions
- Encourage each other to support local businesses that are still open
- Grocery runs, food or medicine deliveries if someone is sick (always leave at door)
- Advocate for people not in your community who are suffering more: homeless, incarcerated people, migrants, low paid service workers and people without any health insurance
- Tech support- older people especially might need this right now to stay in touch
- Remote skill sharing- you can provide help people might not be able to afford or access now
- Borrowing/sharing items (sanitized first) to save going out to the store or buying them
- Share emergency contact numbers
- Identify who might be at risk, feeling isolated or having mental health challenges
- Call local and national representatives and councilors to urge better support/help
- Discussion of wider issues that lead to personal and community vulnerabilities

Once you have a few committed individuals who come together, there is no limit to what you can do. Remember, getting "together' in online meetings and talking about how you feel is an excellent way *to avoid getting sick*; staying socially connected (beyond "social" media) is one of the many things we can do to boost our immune system, as well as, doing meaningful things and having a laugh about it, which invariably happens when you get with a group of people and try to do something together. Connecting with others, having the feeling of a safety net, and all of the others things you will do as part of this group will reduce your stress, *which will also help your immune system*.

Please keep in mind that anyone who is in the "room" with you, even if they are disagreeing with you or have different ideas on how to go about things, *will have the same overall goal as you*, to help each other and your community get through this crisis.

Organizing Your First Meeting- you have identified your group and maybe got someone else to help you organize a meeting. What next?

Preparation

1. Check in with others on times- you may not be able to find a time everyone can make, go ahead anyway and have a meeting when most people can come, send summary notes to those who couldn't come and try to plan future meetings at the best time for everyone.
2. Write a simple agenda (see NOTES) and distribute it to everyone. Welcome feedback. Let people know it is a draft (likely they will just be happy you wrote an agenda) and you will review it again when you "meet".
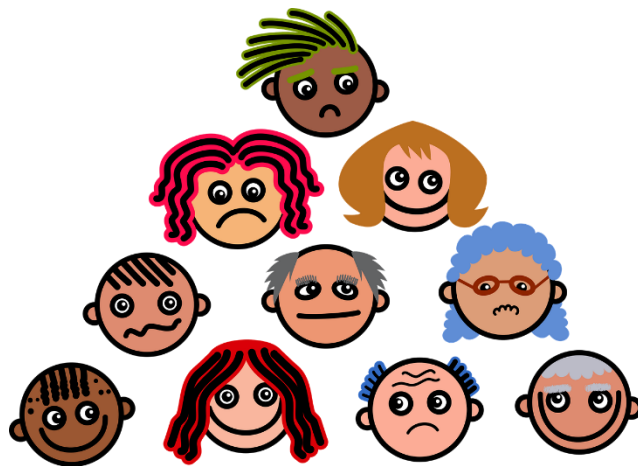
First Meeting

1. *Roles in Meeting:* At the start of the first meeting ask if anyone would like to volunteer for the following roles, if people don't volunteer, ask people if they could try it this time. Be willing to facilitate the meeting yourself, at least for the first meeting.
   a. Facilitator: make sure everyone is heard, encourage mutual understanding in the group, follow the meeting structure (see below) and keep the agenda moving so the meeting can end on time.
   b. Time Keeper: supports the Facilitator (setting times for each agenda item helps this process), giving a 2 minutes warning before the end of each agenda item is also helpful.
   c. Note taker: this person keeps the memory for the group, what is decided, what people say they will do, or any other information the group wants to note and share.

   d. Coordinator(s): this might be one or two people, one might organize the meetings and write the agendas, the other might coordinate with other mutual aid groups or any outside agencies. Coordinators will have more of a role in between meetings.

2. *Decision-making.* This is important, even for an informal group. One recommended way to make decisions is, by consent, which is well explained by Sociocracy (see NOTES), which is a method of running groups, organizations or businesses that makes sure no one is ignored and things also get done. Do a little homework on this before the meeting so you can explain it to the group. Suggest that you try it and see how people feel about it at the end of the meeting. Be open to other peoples' ideas on this, feel free to try out another method. This matter could also be addressed later in the first meeting, after you have had the chance to get to know each other better, when you get to the point when you might want to decide something- see Proposals (3f) below.

3. *Meeting Structure:* This is one of the keys to a pleasant and productive meeting and it comes again from Sociocracy. Having an agenda, agreeing who will do the facilitation, having some guidelines on how to conduct the meeting- these are all the things that make up the structure of the meeting and, despite taking a little time to prepare, will make the meeting itself, much easier. Let people know why you have prepared an agenda and make sure they feel included in putting it together so they are not put off by it. One of the most useful meeting structures is to go in "rounds" to get peoples' input, i.e. taking it in turn to talk. Why does this work so well? It takes the stress of wondering if you will get a chance to speak, off the table, it allows you to listen better to the others, it is inclusive- you hear from everyone, not just the usual few who speak up. Please ask the group if they would be willing to try this method and explain why you would like to try it.

   a. **Checking In** (rounds) - we have found this to be an essential element to a good meeting. The simple question is asked of everyone, "How are you feeling?" We encourage people to share emotional and physical feelings plus a few words about what is going on in their life right now. For the first meeting this might be the most important thing you do, so please allow time in the agenda for this. At later meetings, if you have a lot to cover, you can keep this down to a few words, like "I feel tired", "I feel anxious", but don't ever skip this part. By sharing this information, you will make better accommodations for each other during the meeting. For example, you will now know that someone is not necessarily irritated with you, they are just worried about a family member. Sharing how you feel also starts the process of bonding within your group.

   b. **ADMIN**-this gets some housekeeping out of the way and is useful in case anyone has to leave the meeting early. ADMIN is an acronym for:
      i. *A*ttendance – is everyone here who said they would come? If you are expecting more people to imminently arrive, maybe wait a couple of

minutes for them, but no more than that; starting a meeting on time is respectful to those who did come on time.

    i. *D*uration- when will the meeting end, ask if anyone has to leave early- adjust the agenda accordingly

    ii. *M*inutes -did everyone see the notes from last time, was there anything left over from that mtg (not applicable for the first meeting).

    iii. *I*nformation- - announcements separate from the mtg agenda

    iv. *N*ext Meeting- for the first meeting you might need to wait to decide when you are going to meet next. By then, people will know if they want to meet again and when. For ongoing meetings decide the next meeting time now before people drift away at the end.

c. **Review and Consent to Agenda** (could do this as rounds if time): Do a quick recap of the agenda for the meeting, especially if people do not have it in front of them, ask the group if anyone has an objection to anything on the agenda or any additions to add to it.

d. **Reporting/Sharing** (rounds): This is the part of the meeting where you share information, or give reports or updates to the group. For example, what has been happening in your work, family and life since COVID 19 and what is happening in your community, neighborhood, city, state, nation or world.

e. **Exploring/Brainstorming** (rounds): Explore what needs your community might have and what ideas you have for the group in general. It is likely, that by sharing information in the prior agenda item, you will have already fulfilled some of the aims of your group.

e. **Proposals** (could do as rounds if time) Ask if anyone wants to make a proposal for any further actions for your group to take. It might be that people are happy just to have met and exchanged information, and got some emotional support in this meeting, and do not have anything more they need at this point. If you do think there is something further to decide and act on, encourage others (or have a go yourself) to sum up a proposal for an action for the group to take, based on what

was discussed. It is good practice for your group to do this to even if you don't have a burning action or plan. Your first proposal can just about whether and when to meet again. Although it sounds formal to call a plan or idea, a proposal, this wording

keeps it clear that you are serious about asking the group whether it would like to proceed on your idea or plan. Being clear in this process is essential to your group's success. How you make decisions in your group is of course up to your group. Other people might suggest voting, where the majority gets to decide, or "consensus", when everyone, typically, needs to like and agree with the proposal. We have been using "consent" in our group, which is subtly different from consensus. People seem to be satisfied with it and it appears to be effective. (see NOTES for further details on decision making)

f.   **Next Meeting and Action Items:** If you didn't already decide when the next meeting will be, please do it now. Also decide who will organize it, write the agenda and then review and list any action items you decided to do, what they are and who is going to do them (Notetaker to list)

g.   **Checking Out and Feedback:**
Ask people how they feel again before the meeting ends and encourage feedback on the facilitation or organization of the meeting. These observations will benefit the group, some things can be improved or changed the next time. Like the Checking In at the beginning, don't skip this stage, it is a nice way to close the meeting.

NOTES

Communicating with Feelings: Whether you are starting a meeting or just calling one of your friends, or family members, it is good idea to start by asking how they are feeling. You are seeking, a deeper answer than, "OK" or "good", we want people to really share how they are feeling, whatever it is. This is how we connect to each other and understand how we are really doing. We might think we can guess or read how people are feeling, to a certain extent we can, but we often assume someone is upset because of something we did, when, in fact, it is nothing to do with us. Saying exactly how we feel and why, clears up any potential misunderstanding.

We are all under more stress now, whether it is the reality of whether we can pay our bills at the end of the month, whether our jobs will end or businesses fail, or whether someone in our family will die from COVID 19. And, for

those of us who are lucky enough to be at home working right now, we are all a lot more on top of each other than we were, so, things are likely to get more heated as a result. When this happens, try doing this: take it back to how *you* feel and share that with the other person. Be prepared to listen then to how the other person feels. For example, if you are in a meeting and you feel frustrated with how it is going, it is better to say, "I feel anxious/frustrated we won't get through the agenda" than, "this meeting isn't going anywhere". If you feel like someone is doing all the talking (hopefully a facilitator would also be managing this) say, "I don't feel heard", rather than, "you're not listening to me". Feelings are real and we should value them. Expressing them avoids saying judgmental and hurtful things about other people. Of course, when your feelings are very strong, people might feel uncomfortable about you expressing them; be mindful of this, but equally, keep this in mind: expressing our feelings is better than never coming back to a meeting or harboring a resentment against a family member or friend. Also, try to look at where you might have contributed to the problem or upset, by something you did or didn't do.

This advice is a simplified version of [Non-Violent Communication](#) which has been used and adopted around the world with great success. It originated from a psychologist, Marshall Rosenburg who grew up in the 1960's watching the clashes between the civil rights movement and police, wishing there was a better way for people to communicate. The Center for Non-Violent Communications has an excellent list of [feelings](#) if you need help expanding your feelings vocabulary.

Online Meetings: even if we can't sit next to each other, seeing each other's faces on the screen is the next best thing. [Zoom](#) seems to be reliable and fairly simple for others to join. You can get a free 45-50 min. meeting with a free account, ask around, someone may already have an account they can use to set up the meeting for longer periods. Here is a an online guide to [free online video conferencing apps](#) and of course there are options with Google Hangouts, What's app and FB.

Sample Agenda for First Meeting of Mutual Aid Group: First meetings will be difficult to do within an hour, this meeting agenda is for 75mins, next mtgs can be shorter 45-60 mins, ask for feedback from your group on this.

1. Pick Facilitator, Time keeper and Note keeper 5 mins
2. Admin 5mins
    a. Attendance
    b. Duration of Meeting
    c. Minutes- not applicable for first mtg
    d. Information- announcements
    e. Next Meeting- see below
3. Review of Meeting Structure - 10 mins
    a. discussion about decision-making and consent *(can also be done in #7 below)*
    b. any additions or edits to agenda
    c. consent to agenda
    d. consent to use of rounds- taking it turns to speak in the circle
4. Introduction and Checking in 10 mins
5. Exploring what has been happening in your lives, community and your city and state 10 mins
6. Brainstorming community needs and ideas for this group 20 mins
7. Proposals for group – can be as simple as deciding whether to meet again and when 10 mins

8. Checking out 5 mins

Sociocracy*:* Many groups, organizations and businesses (particularly in the cooperative and employee-owned sector) are using Sociocracy as a method of governing and organizing themselves, including how to run meetings, coordinate between groups and make decisions. Don't be put off by the name or imagine it comes with a lot of dogma, it is a just a well-developed set of tools that have been used and practiced around the world, since it was conceived as an idea in 1851 by Auguste Comte, who believed that, in order to "apply the scientific method to society, states would be governed by a body of sociologists". Sociocracy, or dynamic governance (as it is also known as), was then picked up by Quakers and Reformist Educators in the Nederlands. It wasn't until 2007, when a book about Sociocracy was published in English, called, "We the People" , by John Buck and Sharon Villines, that it became more widely known and used.

Sociocracy helps to distribute the "power" in a group. Even in small groups there is a power distribution; like water, it will always flow somewhere. Unless we make the effort to dig some "irrigation ditches" to send the water to everyone, it will tend to flow to the same few people.
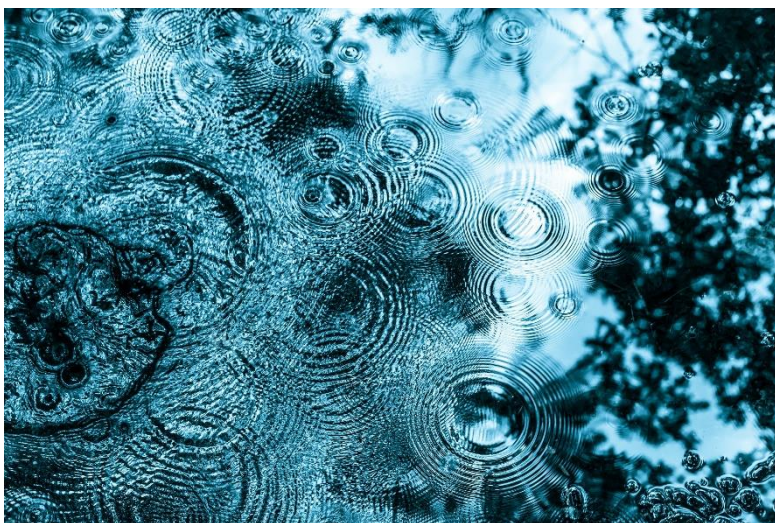
If you followed the steps above to run your meeting you will have already used several of the Sociocratic principles, and gone a long way towards having an enjoyable and effective meeting. In meetings, Sociocracy works by using some simple processes that give everyone a chance to speak, express their opinions and make decisions, without getting hung up on personal differences or small details. Outside of meetings, Sociocracy provides a framework for organizing within larger organizations or groups, with a series of interconnecting circles, that allows coordination, but also autonomy within the groups. If you want to connect with other mutual aid

groups, or form a coordinating group for all of your groups, Sociocracy has a useful structure to consider. The non-profit social enterprise, Sociocracy For All, based in the US, provides training, coaching and community resources for more information. Here is a also 4-minute video for a quick overview: Sociocracy- The Operating System for the New Economy

Decision Making using Sociocracy So, how *do* you make decisions by consent, as recommended by Sociocracy and others. And, how do you try this out in your group? Here are some steps you can take:

1. Ask people if they would be willing to try this method out for the first meeting. Reassure them that it is a trial and make sure to collect feedback at the end, on how it "felt". For example, did it feel fair, inclusive and efficient?
2. Explain to the group what the consent-decision-making process is:
   a. *Consent* has a small but significant difference to *consensus*, the latter of which we might all have heard of, for better or worse.
   b. *Consensus* seeks a general agreement, asking everyone in the group if they like/agree to the proposed decision.
   c. *Consent* asks if anyone has an *objection* to the decision. When we first started an Extinction Rebellion (see NOTES) group in Phoenix, we would ask the group as a whole, "does anyone object to this?" However, there is a risk to this "group ask", that we do not give people enough time to really think about it. So, now, we ask each person in turn if they object or consent. The words, "I consent", are powerful to say and do help to seal the decision to move forward on something within the group. Smaller decisions can still be made quickly by the group ask, for example, "does anyone object if we take a 5-minute break?"
3. The consent-decision-making process is broken up into an important series of steps as follows:
   a. *Proposal:* Someone makes a proposal (suggests an idea they would like the group to do). For example, someone might propose "to collect all of our contact numbers and share them"
   b. *Clarification Round:* In this round, everyone gets a chance to ask clarifying questions about the proposal. Be clear that opinions, criticisms or any other kinds of feedback are to be avoided, they will come in next round. An example of a clarifying question for the above proposal might be, "will you send these telephone numbers just to our group in the meeting or the whole community?" Someone else might ask "how will you share them, i.e. by text or email?" See how all of these clarifying questions are starting to help the proposal become clearer and more fine-tuned.
   c. *Reaction/Opinion Round:* Find out what people think about the proposal, encourage opinions and input from everyone. For example, it might be, "yes, great idea", or "I don't feel comfortable sharing my number with the whole community".
   d. *Amendments to Proposal:* From the clarifications and opinions you have just heard, you may well want to go ahead and make amendments to your proposal to accommodate the feedback. For example, the proposal might be amended to the following: "Let's share our phone numbers through a group text and only share them with people who come to our meetings".

e. *Objection/Consent Round:* Ask everyone if they object or consent to the proposal. If everyone consents, the proposal is passed/agreed and the group can move forward on making it happen. If there is an objection that cannot be resolved with further amendments, the group completes another round of consent, to drop the proposal. This is unlikely to happen very often, when it does, it is worth taking the time to carefully go through all of these rounds and hear everyone's opinions; this may well change the mind of the person making the proposal, so that dropping it starts to look like the best option for everyone.

4. *Further Notes on Amendments and Objections:* all objections should be encouraged, when someone objects, most likely it is something that deserves consideration, it just hasn't been thought of by others yet. Equally, it is worth saying that everyone should keep in mind that individual small personal preferences *can* be given as feedback but do *not* make great final objections. Firm objections should really be kept to things that might go against the group achieving its' aims or purpose. A balance is needed. People will quickly get tired of the group if it doesn't make forward progress. Small personal objections *can* however also improve a proposal. For example, in the example proposal above, if someone offered to send all the phone contact numbers out in a group text, and someone else would have preferred emails, the proposal could be easily amended to do both. A good mantra to keep in mind, when evaluating any proposal is:

"good enough for now, safe enough to try"

What this means is that one can never know how exactly something will play out, there are more benefits to trying things, than waiting to get every single detail right. Plus, you can learn from something from trying it. There are also some other ways proposals can be amended to address remaining concerns as follows:

- *Modify the proposal:* use the input you have just heard to modify or expand the proposal you made, so it might then be more acceptable to more people and you can move forward on it

- *Set a time limit (shorten the term)* on the suggestion. For example, maybe your proposal was to suggest "the group meets once a week in an online mtg", people might be concerned about this commitment and so you could amend this proposal to "we will meet once a week in an online meeting for a month and then review whether or not we want to continue and at what frequency".
- *Measure the concern*: this is a valuable additional idea that brings with it, an essential pillar of Sociocracy and self-organizing (another term for autonomous and non-hierarchical organizing): that the ideal is to keep moving forward, learning as you go. So, back to our example, one way you could measure the success of meeting once a week, would be to track how many people keep attending the meetings.

Extinction Rebellion

Extinction Rebellion is a worldwide climate action group and a self-organized movement. When it started in the UK in 2018 they set out 3 demands (the US added a 4th) and 10 principles to follow which included: autonomy and decentralization; mitigating for power and welcoming everyone and every part of everyone. Since having two high-profile actions in London, 5 bridge and 5 major road intersection blockages, the government of the UK declared a Climate Emergency; Extinction Rebellion (XR) groups have sprouted up across the world following XR UK's lead.

XR Phoenix is about 6 months old. We just recently formally agreed to use Sociocractic principles in our group, for three months, as a trial. It is essential to have a set of tools for the new world we wish to create. It takes active intervention to reverse the "business as usual" way of organizing ourselves and communicating, in our work, community and home lives and *it is well worth the effort*; relationships improve, meetings are richer (and more interesting) and whatever you do as a group, business or organization *is* more inclusive, hopefully- more effective and definitely stronger. As one enlightened XR New York member, who is busy organizing online teaching for us all, on self-organizing, said, "The Rebellion will be Facilitated".

stay
HOME