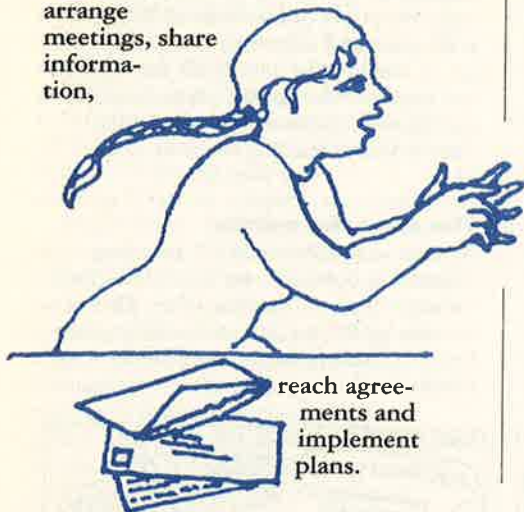# Strengthening comm

● **Schweik Action Wollongong**

Communication is essential to the effective operation of groups, in order to arrange meetings, share information,

reach agreements and implement plans.

Furthermore, improving communication is a way of building the group itself. When we talk of "groups" we are thinking about grassroots groups seeking to promote justice and equality, but really the same applies to all sorts of others.

There are many potential problems that can adversely affect group communication:
● surveillance, for example phone tapping by security forces;
● infiltration by informers or agitators;
● disinformation: the spreading of false information in order to cause difficulties;
● interpersonal tensions due to different personal styles (common enough even when there are no external threats to the group);
● group dysfunctions, such as domination by cliques, a culture of malicious gossip, unspoken acceptance of abusive behaviours or excessive dependence on particular individuals;

Exercise 1

"How would I contact you?"

Aim: to encourage group members to think about how they make contact with each other.
Requirement: most group members should know each other. Everyone should trust one another.
Optimal size: 4 to 8 people. With more than 8, it is probably better to break into sub-groups.
Time: 30–60 minutes (10–20 minutes for answering questions individually; the remainder for discussion of answers)

The exercise

● Each person thinks up a scenario in which it is urgent to have a meeting attended by everyone in the group tomorrow. (Alternatively, the group agrees on a standard scenario.) Some possible scenarios are the unexpected arrest of a group member, report of a dangerous corporate initiative, or government declaration of martial law.
● On a sheet of paper, without discussion, each individual writes down their personal answer to each of the following questions for each other member of the group plus one or two additional people (eg friends) who you'd like to attend the meeting. If there are 6 people in the group, there will then be 6 or 7 answers for each question — 24 or 28 answers in all. (A standard answer sheet makes things easier.)
● After everyone has finished writing down

their answers individually, go through questions one by one, comparing answers.
● What is written down is not for circulation. Sharing answers is voluntary. Be careful about private information.
Q1. For each other person, write down what method (eg telephone) you'd use to contact them personally to tell them about the meeting — and what method you'd try to contact them personally if the first method wasn't successful.
Q2. Assume that you couldn't contact the person directly. Who else could you contact to help you find the person or pass on a message? (Examples: friends, family members, neighbours.)
Q3. Assume that you still can't contact the person. What activities or locations do you know about which might provide ways to contact them? (Examples: meetings, sporting activities, restaurants, travel.)
Q4. Assume that you still can't contact the person. What do you know about the person that might help explain why they are not contactable? (Example: dangers, threats, health problems.)

Comment

We've tried this out with ourselves and several other groups. It has always been stimulating. Writing down answers first is helpful so that each person thinks independently. There can be some imaginative responses, such as contacting the rail authority to page someone travelling by train. People may answer Q2 in doing Q1. It doesn't matter. One spin-off is sharing of practical information, such as

Exercise 2

"When you're not there"

Aim: to encourage group members to think about how they would make contact with each other in difficult situations.
Requirement: group members should know and trust each other. This exercise requires more trust than exercise 1.
Optimal size: 4 to 6 people.
Time: 30–60 minutes.

The exercise

● Each person writes down two to four regular situations (or vulnerabilities) when they might not be easily contactable by others in the group, such as visiting
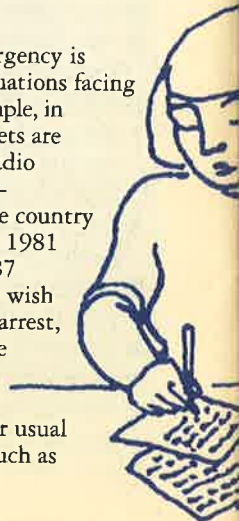
● lack of resources for communication, for example access to email or mobile phones;
● poor communication systems, for example unreliable information about meetings or decisions;
● lack of preparation for communicating in an emergency.

In our own small group with five members, we set out to investigate how to improve communication systems. The initial impetus came from the last item on this list: communicating in an emergency.

Our special interest is nonviolent resistance to aggression and repression, with a vision for society of nonviolent defence as an alternative to military defence. The group is named after Jaroslav Hasek's fictional character Schweik, a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. Nonviolent activists may want to cause (nonviolent) havoc among aggressors, but they need to have their own systems running as smoothly as possible.

Emergencies

Communicating in an emergency is obviously vital in many situations facing nonviolent activists. For example, in military coups the first targets are commonly television and radio stations. Sometimes all telecommunications outside the country are cut off, such as after the 1981 coup in Poland and the 1987 coups in Fiji. Activists may wish to alert people targeted for arrest, to call meetings, to organise rallies and to mobilise support in the community and around the world. Their usual communication channels, such as

another town, attending a meeting, shopping or driving to work.
● Start with someone's first situation.
● Everyone (including the person whose situation it is) writes down how they would change it to make contact easier (such as carrying a mobile phone or telling someone where you'll be).
● Go around the circle giving answers, finishing with the person whose situation it is.

Comment
After one or two situations, people may start to think more broadly, so it can be useful for a later person to pick a less usual type of situation.

phone and fax, may be disrupted or put under surveillance.

There is much that activists can do to overcome obstacles to communication. Rather than relying on a single channel, such as the telephone, they can practise using several modes, such as face-to-face contact, email and short-wave radio. They can develop systems that stand up in the face of disinformation and surveillance. They can sort out their ideas on openness, use of codes (such as encrypted email) and the extent of mutual trust. They can develop and practise their skills using simulations.

It soon became obvious to us that different groups will have quite different communication requirements. Members of some groups routinely see each other face-to-face; others only make contact occasionally by post or phone. Some groups operate in the face of serious surveillance and infiltration; others suffer benign neglect. Some groups are harmonious and tightly knit; others are fractured by power plays. Communication can be strengthened in every group. The question is how. We developed and tried out some exercises that worked well in our group. We describe them briefly here to illustrate the sort of things that are possible. Other groups may want to develop their own exercises, tailored to their own situation and needs.

Principles
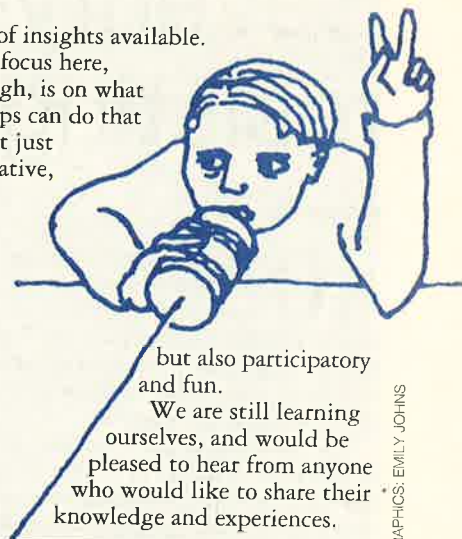Here are some principles we think are important for exercises to build communication in groups:
● Exercises should be chosen or designed by group members to be appropriate to the group's situation. There's no single best approach for every group. Exercises should be suited to what the group members think is important.
● Exercises should provide insight for everyone involved.
● Exercises should be fun. This encourages participation and helps build group cohesion.
● Exercises should have a practical purpose, such as preparing for an emergency or making routine communication more reliable.
Well-designed exercises not only strengthen communication: they also strengthen the group.

Study other struggles
Another way to develop better communication is by studying what others have done, such as systems developed by political prisoners, by oppressed peoples and by the anti-Nazi resistance in occupied Europe during World War II. There are lots of insights available. Our focus here, though, is on what groups can do that is not just educative, but also participatory and fun.

We are still learning ourselves, and would be pleased to hear from anyone who would like to share their knowledge and experiences.

GRAPHICS: EMILY JOHNS

Exercise 3
Personal contact sheets
Aim: to build group members' knowledge of each other.
Requirement: group members should have a high degree of trust in each other.

The exercise
Each person writes down on a sheet of paper how they can be contacted, including:
● address, phone, fax, email, etc.;
● housemates, family, neighbours, friends, etc (and how to contact them);
● activities, habits, places.
The sheets can then be given to other group members.

Comment
People may feel uncomfortable about providing certain information about themselves or about people close to them. That should be expected and respected. Participation should be voluntary.

Some people will take the initiative to write up their sheets. Others may require more prompting. One option is filling in information at a meeting (have a computer handy).

Exercise 4
Simulations
A simulation is like a practice run for the real thing. Simulations can be simple yet be quite informative.
● **Type A.** Each person attempts to contact and/or send a message to each other person, using whatever method they like, noting obstacles and outcomes.
● **Type B.** The group decides on a communication system. Then a message is sent using the system. For example, one system is the chain, where each person contacts the next — a system that is quite vulnerable to disruption. Another system is asking everyone to look at a noticeboard or web site. By trying different systems, the group can choose the ones most effective for the group.
● **Type C.** The group communicates using a "code" of its own choosing. For example, saying "yellow banana" might be used to signify that details should be confirmed with another member.
● **Type D.** The group tries to communicate in the face of disruption or disinformation. For example, the group might pretend that telephones cannot be used, so that contact has to be made using other media.
There are lots of other possible simulations. Anything important that regularly happens, or might happen, is worth simulating. Simulations can be opportunities for involving people outside the group, such as friends and neighbours.