Empowering the Movement

XRUK’s Self-Organising System (SOS)

There’s a climate and ecological emergency. We can’t waste time. We need to organise in the most effective way to achieve our demands, to be the most successful we can be.

So what works?

XRUK has adopted the self-organising system, because we recognise that this is the best option available to us. It empowers everyone to contribute, it enables people to work autonomously but with accountability to our Principles and Values and to each other. It allows for agility and flexibility, so we can respond to events quickly. XRUK needs empowerment and it needs flexibility.

Let’s learn from those who have gone before us in other civil disobedience movements. A huge amount of research has been done, on all the major civil disobedience movements of the last 100 years. Four main principles seem to be universal:

1. We need to be large and broad based. We need many more people to join us, and when they do we will need a robust system that can absorb and empower them.
2. Non-violence is much more effective than violence. The SOS enables us to build a non-violent culture in the way we work and communicate with each other.
3. We need a large variety of non-violent methods. XR is good at being creative, different, eye-catching, and that is why so many people are drawn to us.
4. We need to be highly organised, maintain discipline, and maintain our organisational infrastructure even under pressure. This is where the SOS comes into its own.

The importance of structure

Well-known feminist Jo Freeman has written a lot about this, the tyranny of structureless groups, and how informal structures allow for informal hierarchies to develop. Small groups may be able to organise themselves effectively, but when about ten or more people are trying to organise, they need a structure. And we have to actively choose the right structure before the wrong structure chooses us.

Mitigating power

Having the right structure is important because number 7 of our Principles and Values says that we actively mitigate power. We are against hierarchical power, which we are all familiar with, from

school, from work and many other places, and it takes a change of mindset to work in a different way. We need a cultural shift. We can't swap the structural power of hierarchy for a vague idea, it simply won't work. We have to find something equally powerful to act against it. Without that, what tends to happen is that the loudest voices in a group rise to the top, and with no system, it's difficult to change that. If an unelected person is running things, people will become unhappy and start leaving the group. We have to actively work for group cohesion, because without that we will achieve nothing.

In fact we can't mitigate power. Power exists. Power exists in groups as much as anywhere else. It's power concentrated in just a few hands that's damaging, because it means everyone else is disempowered. If power is spread to everyone, that is empowerment, which is good. 'Power to the People' we say. The self-organising system is about spreading power through the whole movement, so that the people doing the work have the power to make decisions. We don't have bosses. We are all in charge, which means we have to work things out together, which can be hard sometimes, but it's worth the effort.

Autonomy and decentralisation

Number 10 of our Principles and Values is about autonomy and decentralisation. These things are at the heart of the self-organising system, and in fact we need a self-organising system in order to live according to this principle.

So how do we go about this?

What non-hierarchical options are there? We could work by consensus, where everyone has to agree to every decision. Again with a small group this can work, but with a large group it is very slow, cumbersome, laborious. With the thousands of rebels we have in XRUK as it is this clearly wouldn't work, and as we grow bigger it would obviously be daft.

Distributing power

The self-organising system works by spreading power to different roles or working groups, who can make decisions within their roles. They have complete autonomy within their roles, while being accountable to the shared purpose we have, and our principles and values. We see XRUK as a circle (The Hive), with smaller sub-circles within it (e.g. Operations circle), and yet smaller circles within those (eg Actions circle, which again breaks down into more specific roles). The nations and regions of the UK are also represented on the Hive, and the local XR groups are smaller groups within them. The smallest circles communicate with the next widest circle, which communicate with the circle above them and so on. Circles within circles, each having power to fulfil their specific roles. The bigger circles set up the smaller circles, give them roles, written down as mandates or role descriptions, and give them the authority to perform their role.

Consent-based decision making

Most decisions are made within the roles or working groups, but decisions about how we organise things need to be made by the whole group. These decisions are made by **consent**. If someone

wants to set up a new role or working group, the group asks not ‘Do we all like this?’, but instead ‘Is it safe enough to try? Will it cause harm?’. Harm, here, means that it will prevent someone fulfilling their role, or will act against the shared purpose we have. By saying ‘Is it safe enough to try?’ we set the bar low for proposals to get passed, and decisions can be made quickly. The person given the role can then go and work on their role with confidence, autonomy, and creativity, and be innovative. They have no power over anyone else, and no-one has power over them. Everyone knows who’s doing what, which should avoid confusion and the things that need to be done falling between the cracks. If things don’t work, we can change them. A role holder can ask advice from those with more expertise than them, or from people who might be affected in their roles by their decisions, but if we take the advice process too far we end up with a consensus type of working, which will slow us down.

Keeping the self-organising system healthy

Once a self-organising system is set up, it will need constant revision. Needs will change, capacity will increase or decrease, but the system is designed to adapt to change. It is fluid, evolving, and like a garden it keeps growing and we have to choose what work we’re going to do in it, and how it’s going to look.

Healthy Groups

Healthy ways of working lead to healthy groups, where every voice is heard. Inclusivity is important in XRUK. Groups have meetings. The way we conduct our meetings is fundamental to a well-running self-organising system. Some people feel more confident at speaking up in meetings than others, which may be to do with culture, language, personality or background. A good **facilitator** will make sure that the meeting is efficient, so as not to waste people’s time (we don’t have time to waste), that everyone has their say, and the meeting isn’t dominated by a few people.

Groups also need good coordination, and should elect an internal **coordinator** to manage the good functioning of the group and its roles, and an external coordinator to represent the group to the next widest circle. Elections every 3 or 6 months are important, as they allow for other people to take a turn at coordination, and prevent power building up with one person.

Building a Regenerative Culture

Good facilitation and coordination mean we can have a good working culture within the group. We need to take care of each other. This means thinking of people’s needs, and spending time together socially, whether in person or otherwise. This is how we build a regenerative culture in practice. We say ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’. If we don’t have a healthy working culture then however good our strategy is it won't work. We work at the speed of trust.

And more...

There is much more to say about the self-organising system, and the Self-Organising Systems team in XRUK can provide training, advice, and more resources.

Find our reception channel on Mattermost or email us at sos@extinctionrebellion.uk.

Let’s organise to be the best we can be.