

## **Input on UUA General Assembly Processes for Consideration of Resolutions, AIWs, CSAIs, etc.**

My name is Dana Fisher Ashrawi, and I am on the board of UUs for Justice in the Middle East. I was at GA 2016 observing and participating in the General Session during which the “divestment/human rights investment screen resolution” was considered. At GA 2016, our resolution suffered an attempt at tabling using Robert’s Rules of Order, which was actually out of order under our meeting rules, and was certainly not in a UU spirit of wanting to listen to people with concerns. This motivated me to revisit a book that I learned of in past governance work and share some key aspects and my thoughts about them.

*Roberta’s Rules of Order*, by Alice Collier Cochran, was written to assist groups in better running nonprofit meetings, to “deep six the laborious meetings and heavy formal structures”. A cartoon displayed at the start of the book captures the spirit of its guidelines. A man is depicted standing at a podium with a gavel, saying, “A motion has been made that we dispense with the pompous formalities of parliamentary procedure & communicate like human beings. Does anyone second the motion?” I share highlights from the book and my suggestions for improving the processes and rules by which the UUA GA delegates may consider proposals for justice-related actions and resolutions.

The author notes that in “Western cultures groups have a tendency to jump directly into the *solution* space” and not spend sufficient time in the problem space”. She recommends a different process in which more time is spent understanding proposals before any votes are entertained. This approach seems to fit perfectly with a frequent UU focus on discernment, deep listening, and covenant.

In *Roberta’s Rules of Order*, there are no resolutions. All issues for discussion are called proposals, and are conceived of as needing a full airing of a perceived problem, the proposed solution, and a full hearing of arguments for and against before any amendments. There are no motions, either, and therefore there are no motions to table.

For complex or controversial situations, a delegate would present an in-depth proposal with extensive problem analysis. The outline for an in-depth proposal could be required for all such proposals. If these items are spelled out, it may be more helpful for delegates than the way resolutions are currently presented. There could be a new requirement that any resolutions, CSAIs, AIWs and responsive resolutions are written in this format and presented for signatures in this format also.

In *Roberta’s Rules*, the author suggests “structured written proposals” rather than motions for situations that are complex and/or controversial. A proposal should answer these four questions:

1. What is the situation that needs changing, and why does it need to be changed?
2. What are the probable causes of the situation?
3. What is the recommendation (with costs and benefits), and why?
4. Who will carry out the change, and by when?

In the case of the “Divestment” resolution, the proposal could have been phrased like this:

1. There is no official UUA GA policy set directing the UUA to use a human rights investment screen. While the UUA has implemented a human rights screen for its investment analysis, through the work of its committees, this could be changed in the future. Furthermore, human rights screens only recently started including analysis of Palestinian human rights. It is important

to ensure that these rights continue to be analyzed in any future human rights screen selected by the UUA and its committees. Our UU principles should guide us to not be complicit in our investments in the severe human rights abuses against Palestinians that are carried out with the complicity of corporations that sell equipment, materials, and services to the Israeli government. When the UUA SRIC announced its divestment from several corporations complicit in abuses of Palestinian rights, there was no inclusion of the Palestinian rights issue in the announcement. Furthermore, the divestment from Caterpillar was undertaken for labor and environmental concerns, with no mention of Palestinian human rights. Caterpillar sells equipment used by the Israeli army to demolish Palestinian homes as collective punishment in contravention of international law. *[Continue with examples of other companies and how they are complicit in human rights, similar to how some of the Whereas clauses were written in the resolution.]*

2. Human rights investment screens have only recently started including analysis of Palestinian human rights. It is possible that some individuals are concerned that supporting Palestinian rights would constitute lack of support for Israel. It is possible that some do not want to be seen as supporting the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which is a call from over 170 Palestinian groups asking the world to boycott Israeli settlement and other goods, divest from corporations that enable the occupation, among other actions. It is possible that some UUs are not fully aware of the scope and severity of human rights abuses against Palestinians.
3. A clear guideline by vote of the GA delegates will ensure that a human rights screen continues to be applied and that the UUA will vet human rights screening tools to ensure that analysis of Palestinian rights is included in such tools. There is a small additional cost of time spent inquiring about the scope of human rights investment screens, and checking up on their status. The benefit of passing this policy will be assuring UUs that we are investing compassionately in accord with our principles.
4. The Socially Responsible Investing Committee will ensure that the required human rights investment screening tool is in place, and will report this status annually to the Board of Trustees, the UUA President, and future General Assemblies.

The decision-making process on a proposal in *Roberta's Rules* is this (could be modified to fit the UUA GA needs), with UUA related comments in italics.

#### Discussion of Issues

- A motion or second is **not required** to introduce an issue for discussion (“motion” which is called a “proposal”). *This would save some time as important background is given up front – sort of a pro with some hints about the possible cons. If the petition signature minimum is met, the item is on the agenda, and is effectively already “moved” by the signatories.*
- The person who presents the issue must have a written proposal that addresses the problem and the proposed solution according to the four points above. *Our current rules require petition, and the proposed resolutions, AIWs, etc., are in the Program Book.*
- All delegates have an opportunity to speak or ask questions. *This is somewhat of a Congressional hearing format. The presenter of the issue possibly could have a seat at a table on stage to answer questions, alongside the attorney and the moderator. If an identified opposition has organized, a representative could be at the table also.*

- A leader or “Egalitarian” will guide the discussion from “opening (idea generation) to narrowing (evaluating ideas) to closing (making decisions).
- The leader ensures that discussion is balanced between pros and cons.
- Anyone can suggest changes to a proposal. The assembly can agree to a change in the wording of the proposal by “group concordance” (defined as a substantial majority, which could be the 67%) first by non-binding show of hands straw vote, and if that looks like the required %, a formal vote. If there is not concordance, up to two more changes can be suggested and considered in the same manner.
- After discussion of up to three changes, the discussion portion is finished.

#### Decision Making

- Now that the proposal has been presented, thoroughly discussed, and possibly modified in the above step, the leader asks if the group is in agreement with the proposal by a non-binding show of hands straw vote.
- If there is no concordance, the leader will call for further discussion for a time. Based on the discussion (pro and con), the leader may suggest or request modifications and check again for concordance.
- If there is not enough time or interest to continue discussing the proposal, the group can “vote whether to vote”, and based on the outcome of this vote can vote on the proposal a final time.

It would be interesting to consider adopting something more consonant with UU values than Robert’s Rules. A “Roberta” approach to discussing issues and proposals is somewhat like a cross between a Congressional hearing and a democratically facilitated discussion. Perhaps the Mini Assembly should be something like a Congressional briefing or issue hearing, rather than a venue for introducing amendments. Perhaps the Mini Assembly could be held twice: once online as a webinar format where people have an opportunity to argue for and against, and to ask questions and suggest amendments, and a second time at GA. The gradient support method can be used in Mini Assembly as recommended by the author of Roerta’s Rules:

- The leader can ask for a show of gradient levels of support for the proposal in a multiple-choice, nonbinding poll. The author suggests this should be done before any modifications are proposed.  
How this works: The leader explains the gradient levels and probably displays a chart. The leader then says, “Raise your hand if you are at level 5, ‘I endorse it enthusiastically,’” and assesses the number of hands. “Raise your hand if you are at level 4, ‘I support it with minor reservations.’” Then say “Raise your hand if you are at level 3, ‘I have mixed feelings.’” Then say “Raise your hand if you are at level 2, ‘I really don’t like it.’” Then say, “Raise your hand if you are at level 1, ‘I can’t support it.’” Then say, “Raise your hand if you are at level 0, ‘I don’t like this but I won’t stand in the way of the group.’ *This step might be better for a Mini Assembly that adopts a discussion style.*
- After the gradient support poll, the leader asks members to voice their concerns and suggest a change that would result in their support or greater support for the proposal. *This step might be better for smaller annual gatherings or could be used in a Mini Assembly that adopts a hearing and discussion style.*

A similar set of processes could be used for learning about Actions of Immediate Witness, Responsive Resolutions, and CSAIs. I think once these items are on the agenda or the ballot, there should not be a limit to the number that can be adopted. We should not have to choose between supporting racial injustice or environmental injustice, youth or others. The main actions on CSAIs seems to be creation of a web page of hyperlinked resources, and an email that goes out to the UUA congregations with a short study guide. Perhaps the top vote getter can receive this package, and the others that are approved can get a web page on the UUA for two years.

The UUA GA rules could add the following statement adapted from Cochran's book:

"The business meetings of the UUA GA will be run by the attached (to be developed) agreed-upon Special Rules for Meetings adopted from Roberta's Rules of Order. For situations that warrant more formal parliamentary procedure, we will use [choose one] *The Modern Rules of Order* [or] *Robert's Rules of Order*."

The UUA could greatly benefit from learning about the principles in *Roberta's Rules of Order* and implementing those that could streamline processes while also being more inclusive, more compassionate, and more democratic.