Student handout 2.1
The dilemma concept

What is a dilemma?

A dilemma is a situation in which we face two alternative choices, and we must make a decision. Each of these choices has consequences that we do not want, or that we cannot justify for important reasons, for example:

– Moral or religious obligations;

– Role expectations (how others expect us to behave, e.g. as teacher, student, brother, friend, or president);

– Legal prescriptions (rights and duties);

– Respect for human rights;

– Personal ties to our family and friends;

– Financial reasons (the need to save money, the opportunity to make a profit);

– Practical reasons (supporting or obstructing the solution of a difficult problem).

In a dilemma we face a conflict between principles or goals that are both important for us. Dilemmas occur in daily life, and also in politics. Political decision making very often has to deal with dilemmas, and every choice has far-reaching consequences. We must therefore solve a dilemma by defining priorities – opting for one goal, violating the other. In some cases it is possible to find a compromise.

Case stories

Lena's promise

Lena is eight years old. She loves climbing trees, and she is the best climber in her neighbourhood. One day she falls off a tree, but she is not injured. Her father sees the accident, and is very concerned. He asks Lena to promise that she will never climb trees again. Lena promises, and she shakes her father's hand to seal the promise.

The same afternoon she meets her friends. Paula, her best friend, is very worried. Her young kitten has climbed high up in a tree and is too afraid to come down again. Something has to be done at once before the kitten falls out of the tree. Every child knows that Lena is the best climber around, so Paula asks her to save her kitten.

But Lena remembers the promise that she has given to her father. What should she do?

The prisoner's dilemma

Two suspects have been arrested by the police. The police have insufficient evidence for a conviction, and, having separated both prisoners, visit each of them to offer the same deal. If one testifies for the prosecution against the other (betrays the other) and the other remains silent (co-operates with the other), the betrayer goes free and the silent accomplice receives the full 10-year jail sentence. If both remain silent, both prisoners are sentenced to only six months in jail on a minor charge. If each betrays the other, each receives a five-year sentence. Each prisoner must choose to betray the other or to remain silent. Each one is assured that the other would not know about the betrayal before the end of the investigation. How should the prisoners act?

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prisoner's_dilemma)