

Workshop n.1

Choosing together, choosing well, choosing (in) time: the value of youth participation

The essential role of youth civic engagement and participation in community development in order to address the challenge of sustainability in all its facets (economic, social and environmental). Experiences and effective practices of youth participation for the planning of sustainable solutions, against a backdrop of rapid, complex changes.

1. Starting from the basics: why focus on youth as a specific population group?

Youth are, by definition, in a period where they experience a series of transitions: from school to workplace; from childhood to adulthood; from a state of dependence to a state of independence and interdependence. It is during this period that they make important decisions about their lives and their ethical, social, economic, political and civic positioning and role. The choices they make during this period and the way they decide to pursue them have a significant impact not only in their lives and opportunities for human development but also in the lives of their societies and communities, both at mid and long term. In this perspective, youth can represent a significant asset for prosperity and development, particularly in the context of the current crises. At the same time, they are faced with a number of challenges which inflict upon their choices and decisions. This double-faceted reality should be considered in any effort to ensure sustainability (social, economic, environmental).

2. Youth as an asset for prosperity and peace: the potential and the challenge

The current generation of youth represents more than 18% of the world's population. As well as being the best educated generation so far, they are ambitious, flexible and best able to adapt to changing realities. Considering their energy, motivation, networking capacity and innovative spirit, youth have a significant potential of contributing towards addressing the social implications incurred by the current crises and ensuring sustainability. At the same time, it is these current crises that further aggravated the challenges relating to youth development: access to basic services, enjoyment of human rights, employment and education opportunities, health, socio-economic integration are some of the key issues that inflict upon youth development and could lead youth to adopting risk behaviours.

Addressing these challenges and harnessing the potential of youth to being agents of prosperity and sustainability can be effective only through a holistic/integral approach. Such an effort should both build the skills and capacities of youth and provide them with opportunities to effectively engage in their societies. When adequate and appropriate training and opportunities for youth development are provided in areas such as education, health, employment, and sports and recreation, both young men and young women are more likely to transition successfully into adulthood and contribute meaningfully to the development of their societies. In this context, ensuring the full, effective and meaningful participation of youth in designing responses and addressing challenges is a prerequisite for success and efficiency.

3. The importance of youth participation

Youth participation should be regarded as the active and meaningful involvement of youth in all aspects of their own development and that of their communities. It represents a situation in which youth are seen as important contributors to their countries' development—contributors whose efforts are recognized and whose involvement is nurtured. The effective engagement of youth as equal partners requires an enabling environment that provides opportunities for them to be seen and heard. This entails the recognition and exercise of their rights to actively participate at all levels of decision-making and to use their knowledge, perspectives and experience in a productive and sustainable manner. Of equal importance is the access to human development opportunities and capacity-building to ensure that youth have the skills needed to participate in society as individuals, members of families, communities and organizations and as active citizens.

Why listen to youth?

It is a fundamental human right: all people have a right to express their views when decisions are being made that directly affect their lives, including youth. Whether it is an individual decision or broader, collective issues, youth have a right to articulate their concerns, participate in the development of policies and be taken seriously

It leads to better decisions: youth have a body of experience and knowledge that is unique to their situation. Yet in many occasions and at all levels, decisions that impact directly or indirectly on their lives, are developed and delivered largely in ignorance of what the real concerns are and how these decisions will affect the present and future well-being of youth. Listening to their ideas and views would render such processes far more effective and meaningful.

It strengthens a commitment to, and understanding of, democracy: opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making processes at all levels enable youth to understand what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others and how their actions can affect the rights of others. Only by experiencing respect for their own views and discovering the importance of their respect for the views of others, will they acquire the capacity and willingness to listen to others and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy and the importance of abiding by subsequent decisions. It is through learning to question, to express views and having their opinions taken seriously, that youth will further develop the skills and competence to exercise their thinking and judgement in the myriad of issues that will confront them as they make the transition to adulthood.

It enables them to exercise and fulfil their rights: we only truly learn that we have rights and come to believe in them through the process of acting on them. Having a voice about one's rights is therefore essential to their fulfilment.

4. Principles of democratic participation

- Youth are entitled to **respect for their views and experience**. All projects need to be grounded in recognition that youth participation is a fundamental human right. It is not a gift on the part of sympathetic adults and should never be offered or withdrawn as a reward or punishment.
- Youth must have a **clear understanding** of what the project or the process is about, what it is for and their role in it: it is necessary to provide youth with appropriate information, in formats that are accessible and age appropriate, so that they can make informed choices or express reasoned views. This reduces the risk of confusions, misunderstandings and false expectations as well as them being brought in to promote an adults' agenda.
- Power relations and decision-making structures must be **transparent**: it is important to understand from the beginning what decisions can be made and by whom. If one discovers, after a project has started, that they lack the power that they thought they had, they are likely to feel resentful and cynical about the process.
- Youth should be **involved from the earliest possible stage** of any initiative. If they are brought in at the last minute, they have no opportunity to shape or influence either the process or the outcomes. Their presence will have little impact on the project as a whole. Even though it is not always possible to involve them from the very beginning, the earlier they are involved the more likely it is that the project will allow a genuine engagement and contribution from them.
- **All youth should be treated with equal respect** regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors. Despite the difference in age and experiences within the youth cohort, it is important that the participation of all youth be respected as of equal value. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that all youth for whom an initiative is relevant are enabled to participate and are not excluded as a result of their 'invisibility' within local communities¹. There is also a need to avoid an exclusive focus on activities or projects that address the concerns of more visible groups of youth.

¹ For example, an initiative focusing on improving the local environment should include youth with disabilities, young women, indigenous youth or youth from ethnic minority communities etc

- **Ground rules** should be **established with youth** at the beginning. All projects involving youth need to establish ground rules that are negotiated and agreed between adults and youth. There may be some boundaries that the adults need to impose because of their responsibilities for a project. However, any such boundaries need to be clear and explicit from the beginning. While ground rules can be renegotiated during the course of the project, this needs to be done in a democratic way, involving youth.

5. Basic categories of youth participation

Participation is a multi-layered concept encompassing those activities that actively engage youth in all areas of community development. Using a framework developed by Gerison Lansdown² and applying it to youth, it is possible to group these different participative activities in three broad categories:

- **Consultative processes**, whereby adults seek to find out about youth's experiences, views and concerns to inform legislation, policies or services. These processes are adult-initiated and managed and give youth the opportunity to contribute towards influencing outcomes without having control over these.
- **Participative initiatives**, which generally offer greater opportunities for the active involvement of youth themselves in projects, research or services. These processes are initiated by adults, but involve collaboration with youth, usually enabling them to influence outcomes and to take self-directed action once the project is underway.
- **Processes promoting self-advocacy** empowering youth to take action themselves to address those issues that they see as important. The processes are controlled by youth, with adults in a facilitation rather than leading role, and the issues are identified by the youth themselves.

It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive categories and participation processes often straddle at least two of these.

6. Practical lessons to promote effective participation

There are no blue prints to effective consultation and participation with youth. Every project needs to develop its own methodology appropriate to its own aims. However, there are a number of practical lessons that have been learnt as a result of many initiatives to promote youth participation around the world. These lessons apply to all efforts to involve youth – from conferences to empowerment projects, consultation exercises to democratic participation processes at university or the workplace.

- Be prepared to listen to youth views and priorities. Use youth-friendly meeting places, language and structures.
- Involve youth from the earliest possible stages.
- Be clear about what you are trying to achieve (objectives and outcomes) and about the boundaries of the proposed activity, the decision-making structures, the capacity for change, the methodology, the time scale and any competing interests
- Be willing to consult with youth on methods of involving them
- Be prepared to be challenged and remember that youth are not a homogenous group
- Ensure representative participation of youth
- Identify and research the issues
- Make available the necessary resources
- Foresee spaces for youth to interact by themselves and with adults
- Develop indicators or goals for effective participation in collaboration with youth
- Ensure an effective and sustainable follow-up

7. Issues to debate

- In the current years, the importance of youth participation has been increasingly recognised. What do you think should be done, by all actors involved (including youth), to render it more efficient and ensure meaningful spaces for participation?
- What kind of innovative mechanisms for youth participation you would have to suggest?

² Lansdown, Gerison, *Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision Making*, Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, 2001.

- What kind of values and capacities are necessary for youth who are participating in decision-making processes and mechanisms?
- What is your commitment in present and for the future to promote youth participation through your different capacities and within different social groups and spaces (family, friends, school, workplace, community)?