Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Analytical paper

Tomi Kiilakoski PhD

Leading Senior Researcher, Finnish Youth Research Network

Adjunct Professor, University of Tampere

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1. Introduction

Participation refers widely to taking part in and being part of an activity, a process, a human community or an ecosystem. Sometimes participation refers only to taking part in a decision-making process, and having responsibility, power and a recognised role in influencing local communities or societies.

Participation may refer to **a process** whereby the youth can engage and influence. It may also refer to **an outcome**, where the young people had a chance to contribute to a process (Thomas 2007). For youth work especially, participation is an important principle. The importance of participation manifests itself in different key documents on youth work. The second Youth Work Convention was held in Brussels. The outcome of the Convention, the Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, described the basic principles of youth work as "educative, empowering, participative, expressive and inclusive" (Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention). Already in the first Youth Work Convention it was stated that despite of the complexity of youth work, what unites youth work in Europe is that "it is guided and governed by principles of participation and empowerment, values of human rights and democracy, and anti-discrimination and tolerance" (Declaration of the 1st European Youth Work Convention). On a similar note, the Council of Europe recommendation on youth work states that "The design and delivery of youth work are underpinned by the principles of voluntary and active participation, equality of access, openness and flexibility" (Committee of Ministers 2017).

For youth work, then, participation is one of the basic **principles** on which youth work is built, and it is also an **outcome** of youth work. The delivery of youth work needs to respect the rights of the youth to participate, and if youth work is successful the young people have been able to make a difference and their participation is visible in the process. Moreover, for youth work, participation has two aspects. First, participation **in youth work practice** is needed to deliver quality youth work. Second, at least in some European countries, key aspirations of youth work include making society more democratic and promoting youth participation "in all of the societal fields affecting young people" (Forkby and Kiilakoski 2014). The task of youth is to promote participation in and outside the practice of youth work. This shows how demanding and far-reaching the task of promoting participation in youth work is.

Participation is also an important **youth policy goal**. A key element of European youth policies is promoting participation. This view is shared by the Council of Europe and the European Union alike. The background paper to Agenda 2020 notes that "the approach of the Council of Europe's youth sector to youth policy is one that aims 'to support young people's participation as a citizen and their – often complex – transition to autonomy'" (Council of Europe 2008). The new EU Youth strategy has three dimensions, the first of them being to **engage**, which is defined as fostering youth participation in democratic life (European Commission 2018a).

Participation is one of the key concepts of both youth policy and youth work. It is used to describe both how work is done with young people, and promoting youth participation also serves as a justification for the existence of the youth field. Given this, it might be surprising that while the general principles of participation are agreed, more nuanced ideas about participation are not agreed on. Participation has even been described as an "empty vessel" (Theis 2010) which one fills with one's conception on what the ideal form of democracy is, how citizens act and should ideally act, how the young should have a say in the matters affecting them, what is the ideal nature of the community and so on. Participation is linked to concepts such as engagement, empowerment, inclusion, citizenship, voice or agency. When participation is talked about, debated and promoted, we are talking about the nature of democratic decision making.

This paper analyses why youth participation is considered important, how youth participation has been seen and what models have been created, and how youth participation is connected to different views about democracy. The paper also involves some critical remarks about how promoting youth participation could be made better. The paper concentrates on the decision-making aspects of participation, although it has to be stressed that lived, everyday forms of participation are highly important (Cahill and Dadvand 2018).

2. Why youth participation has become a key issue

Youth participation has become a key concept in the 21st century. To understand this development, different conceptions of the way young people are seen can be offered. These relate to the emphasis of the rights-based approach to youth policy, to the changing nature of political participation in general, and the changes of policy ideals and how politics has been seen.

2.1. Changes in the weather

One of the key drivers of child and youth participation has been the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, later ratified all over the globe by all but one state. This makes it the most ratified human rights treaty in the history of humankind. Article 12 famously states that "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (United Nations 1989). This article strongly stresses the participation rights of every individual under 18 years old. Participation is an absolute right under the article. Also, the article states that mere hearing without influence is not enough. The views of the children need to be taken seriously and they should be given proper consideration when decisions are made (Gretschel et al. 2014). The article also has youth policy relevance since it stresses that more weight should be given to the views of the child when they develop. This means of course in practice that roles in participation procedures should widen and be enriched when the young get older.

The impact of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in participation structures has been noted in numerous studies on participation (Gretschel et al. 2014, Kaukko 2015, Emerson and Loyd 2017). What is perhaps less known is the fact that the rights-based approach is rather demanding and extends way beyond the formal procedures. This fact is stressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC).[1] In the general comment on the right to be heard, this point is explicitly stated:

> *Much of the opportunity for children's participation takes place at the community level. The Committee welcomes the growing number of local youth parliaments, municipal children's councils and ad hoc consultations where children can voice their views in decision-making processes. However, these structures for formal representative participation in local government should be just one of many approaches to the implementation of article 12 at the local level, as they only allow for a relatively small number of children to engage in their local communities (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009).*

1. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a body of 18 independent experts which monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by its states parties.

The Committee also demands educating and training the adults who work in the field of participation. The Committee also states that tokenism – promoting participation only for the sake of window dressing – should be avoided. When interpreted broadly, the participation right gives a strong justification for promoting participation.

Of course, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is valid only for those under 18 years old, and many youth participation structures include young people who are much older than that. Despite this, the significance of the Convention is in pointing out that young people are rights-bearing citizens and they have a right to participate in the decision-making process that affects them. It also stresses that nation states have a duty to promote participation in order to uphold their international legal obligations (Farthing 2012: 75). This can be seen as one of the key factors in explaining the importance of the concept of participation in child and youth policy.

There are, however, other perspectives as well which have contributed to the success of participatory approaches. Researchers have talked about the "participatory turn" in governance (Bherer, Dufour and Montalbeault 2016; Kuokkanen 2016). They point out that participatory procedures have a history that extends up to the 1960s, and they are in no way restricted to the youth field alone. They have been created to fix democracy deficits in the public governance. Participatory mechanisms were originally designed as a way for citizens' views and input to have some influence on otherwise controlled political and bureaucratic decision-making processes. It was also hoped that citizens could become empowered through a participatory process and have more agency in political decision making. Participatory turn has brought about different mechanisms which aim to include citizen input to the public sector such as participatory budgeting, citizen councils, public consultations, neighbourhood councils or participatory planning, and so on. Also NGOs and social movements have created participatory procedures. Participatory turn involves different projects of participatory democracy, some of which can be criticised for becoming too standardised and formal to actually attract citizens (Bherer, Dufour and Montalbeault 2016).

Participation can be promoted from the human rights and citizen perspectives. Different organisations have been active in promoting these perspectives. As an example of the participatory turn, the OECD published a handbook on citizenship participation in 2001 titled

Citizens as partners. This handbook gave justifications for promoting participation, articulated the benefits of participation and gave advice on how to better engage citizens in decision making. The handbook emphasised the need to create partnerships and build better relations between citizens and bureaucratic mechanisms. When defining active participation, the handbook offered the following formulation:

> *Active participation means that citizens themselves take a role in the exchange on policy-making, for instance by proposing policy-options. At the same time, the responsibility for policy formulation and final decision rests with the government. Engaging citizens in policy-making is an advanced two-way relation between government and citizens based on the principle of partnership (OECD 2001: 16).*

Youth participation structures can be seen as belonging to a wider framework on participatory turn, and as being part of the "spirit of the times" (Zeitgeist) of the age where it is understood that some if not all of the policy processes are too far from the sphere of the experienced, lived, everyday life of the citizens. Youth participation, however, differs from other spheres of participation for different reasons. The ways of youth participation in politics are viewed differently across generations (Farthing 2010, Sloam 2016, Crowley and Moxon 2017). The new ways of influencing societies need to be taken into account by creating new mechanisms to engage the younger generations. In particular this has meant calls for stepping outside the sphere of representative democracy and democratising other sites, such as schools, youth clubs, work places or social media settings (Gretschel et al. 2014).

2.2. Benefits of participation

Participatory approaches have a strong cultural backbone, given the weight of the rights-based approach, the participatory turn and the consequent changes in governance. Different reasons for promoting participation have been articulated in the literature on participation (Hart 1992, OECD 2001, Thomas 2007, Farthing 2012). These benefits can be summarised in the following ways:

- **Rights-based perspective**: Children and young people have a right to participate and be heard in the matters concerning them. Promoting participation means respecting this fundamental right.

- **Developmental perspective**: Participation does not happen by itself. Like any other form of social behaviour, education and training are needed to help younger generations to influence society. Youth participation is needed because it helps young people learn vital citizenship competences. These include learning how to influence, discuss and debate together, how to make a difference and understanding how processes of decision making work.

- **Service perspective**: When the young people participate and express their views and hopes there is a better basis for policy making, the implementation is easier and services are in general more effective when the actual users are listened to and their experiential knowledge is taken into account.

- **Democracy perspective**: Engaging young people in the decision making is the way to make democracy stronger. There are at least two dimensions of this. First, the more citizens are interested in common matters, the more likely they are to engage democratically. The citizenship perspective emphasises the need to find ways that interest, engage and empower young people. Second, from the perspective of the political system, if there are numerous ways to make an influence on the system, more people are better able to contribute. The more people are engaged in democratic life, the stronger the mandate of the democratic system.

- **Community perspective**: the more groups feel they are accepted as legitimate members of a community, the safer and more comfortable and creative the community is likely to be since people have an interest in maintaining the community. Participation is a way to ensure that local communities are inclusive and responsive to different needs.

- **Inclusive society perspective**: Organisations learn, albeit in the different ways than the individuals do. Learning what the young people want, what they hold as important and what type of changes they want to see in the society enriches our democracy because it ensures that more voices are heard. Promoting youth participation is a way of securing that different perspectives are heard in the public sphere. Therefore, at the end of the day, youth participation is not only about the young: it concerns all of us.

The above justifications are of course ideal types in the Weberian sense – although they are all analytically separated here, they tend to exist together and are bundled in the real world. They

also describe the ideal situations, and in practice there is a lot of room for criticisms and improvement in promoting participation.

3. Defining youth participation

Participation is a debated concept, and there are numerous definitions on what real, authentic or effective participation is. One of the most obvious points of reference is Roger Hart's (1992) ladder model of participation. He noted in his text that "participation" can in fact mean a lot of things, and some forms that are called participation are more about manipulating children than providing genuine opportunities to participate. Hart was concentrating on child participation, and he expressed his motivation as providing a **beginning typology** for thinking about children's participation in projects. His typology was a modified version of Shelley Arnstein's ladder model, which in 1969 was used to describe adult participation. It is the belief and experience of the author of this text that Hart's model still fulfils its original purpose as a beginning typology which helps us to look at the different roles children and young people can have in the decision-making process. It also serves as a way to evaluate if the possibilities available reach high enough. And importantly, it can be used as a critical tool to show that some of the opportunities which are claimed to be about participation are in fact non-participation.

The powerful and still-valid criticism that Hart states is that there are plenty of ways of doing things that are not about participation. Sometimes children and young people are invited to join the decision making for purposes that serve the adults, not because the opinions of the young are actually considered important.

- **Manipulation** happens when the young people do not understand what they are part of and what is their real impact. They are not given proper information about their role in the process.
- **Decoration** happens when the young people are part of the process, but do not really have a role to play – such as performing, dancing or singing at political conferences. This differs from manipulation because they are not lied to that they really could be part of the actual process.

- **Tokenism** arises when the young are part of the events, but they do not really take part in the process. Hart's example is a panel where the young participants are not adequately prepared or informed to tackle the topics or are not given the time and resources to talk with their peers.

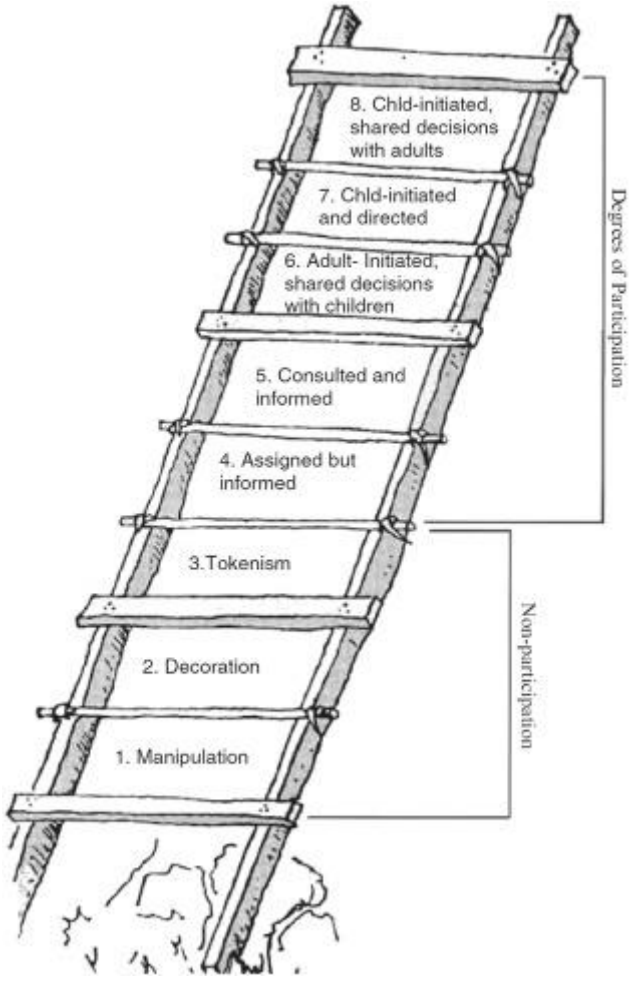

Figure 1. Roger Hart's (1992) ladder model of participation

Roger Hart argues that these examples are cases where adults use the young people for their own purposes and are not really interested in what the young people have to offer, nor are they willing to change their way of doing things (Hart 1992). When talking to young activists they still mention examples of them being manipulated in youth conferences. For this reason it is still important to keep in mind Hart's criticism, since participation requires a lot more than having young people invited to the process.

Genuine participation includes five different stages. The first step is **assigned but informed**. By this Hart means that in some cases the young people do not have real power to change the situation but they are offered other roles and relevant information about the project. Hart emphasises consistently in his thinking that the real nature of the project needs to be spelt out, otherwise the event falls into a category of manipulation. Hart (1992: 11) provides four conditions for this to happen:

1. the young people need to understand the intentions of the project;
2. they know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why;
3. they have a meaningful (rather than "decorative") role;
4. they volunteered for the project after the nature of the project was made clear to them.

Other categorisations by Hart describe a deeper role where the youth are actually invited to contribute to and influence the process:

- **Consulted and informed** happens when adults run the project, but the youth have an opportunity to express their views to the adults. In the higher steps of the ladders more power is given to the young people.
- **Adult-initiated and shared decisions** happen when the agenda is set by the adults, but the young people have a chance to influence the actual decision and have their say.
- **Child-initiated and directed decisions** are made by children and the youth themselves with adequate support and mentoring.
- The highest form of participation in this model is **child-led shared decisions**, which incorporate adults into projects originally developed by the young people. In 1992, Hart felt that these sort of projects are all too rare, not because the lack of commitment and capabilities of the young people, but because of the lack of caring adults who are attuned to the interests of young people and who are able to respond to the subtle indicators of energy and compassion in teenagers (Hart 1992).

Hart's ideas provide a basis for offering a definition of what co-management means. First, co-management exists when information is offered, the roles of the participants are clearly expressed and it is ensured that participants are able to fulfil their roles. This requires both time and financial

resources. Second, co-management happens when shared decisions are made. They might be youth-initiated or adult-initiated. There needs to be dialogue between all the involved parties. Third, co-management needs to be an integrated part of governance, and cannot consist of parallel processes for the youth where the young people are unable to actually take part in the decision-making processes of the adults.

Hart's model of participation has been influential. He himself thought that the most beneficial quality of the model has been its utility for helping different professional groups such as youth workers and scout leaders and institutions to rethink how they work with young people. He also stated that the idea was not to provide a necessary sequence to children's developing competence in participation, nor was it intended to say that higher levels of the ladder are superior and one should always aim to reach the higher ladders (Hart 2008). The real power of the model, he claims, is that it makes explicit that there need to be opportunities available for participating. Children and the young people have always a right to refuse to participate, but if they are willing to contribute, enough quality support and opportunities need to be provided:

> *While a child may not want at all times to be the one who initiates a project they ought to know that they have the option, and to feel that they have the confidence and competence to do so on occasion. Adult facilitators of projects should not be made to feel that they must always support their child participants to operate on the "highest" rungs of the ladder, but they must manage to communicate to children that they have the option to operate with these "higher" degrees of engagement (Hart 2008: 24).*

The model was always meant as a simplified tool to point out how adults can promote participation, and Hart himself wishes to oppose mechanistic interpretations of the model. Many important additions have been made, which are needed to point out the nature of participation more clearly.

Different ways of participating: Hart's original model did not pay attention to the different ways of influencing decision making. The whole concept of the dialogue between adults and the youth has been questioned, and the need to talk about power issues and the established ways of communicating has to been emphasised. According to this criticism, finding ways to take into account different artistic and expressive forms of communicating the ideas of the youth to adult society needs to be developed. This way the whole existing structure of making decisions needs to

be questioned, and possibilities of learning more need to be opened (Birch et al. 2016). The Hartian model needs to be further amended by building spaces for dialogue.

The question of empowerment: Harry Shier has developed the model further to talk about the issues of empowerment. While Hart emphasised information, Shier notes that in practice far more support is needed. Opportunities, obligations and openings (personal commitment of the worker) are needed to promote participation. Shier talked about pathways to participation, indicating that a conscious effort is needed to secure participation. He reiterates questions that are still useful in looking at the willingness of adults to actually share their power and give room for children and the youth to make an impact. These questions tackle the level of individuals, the methods and organisational procedures and policy mechanisms.

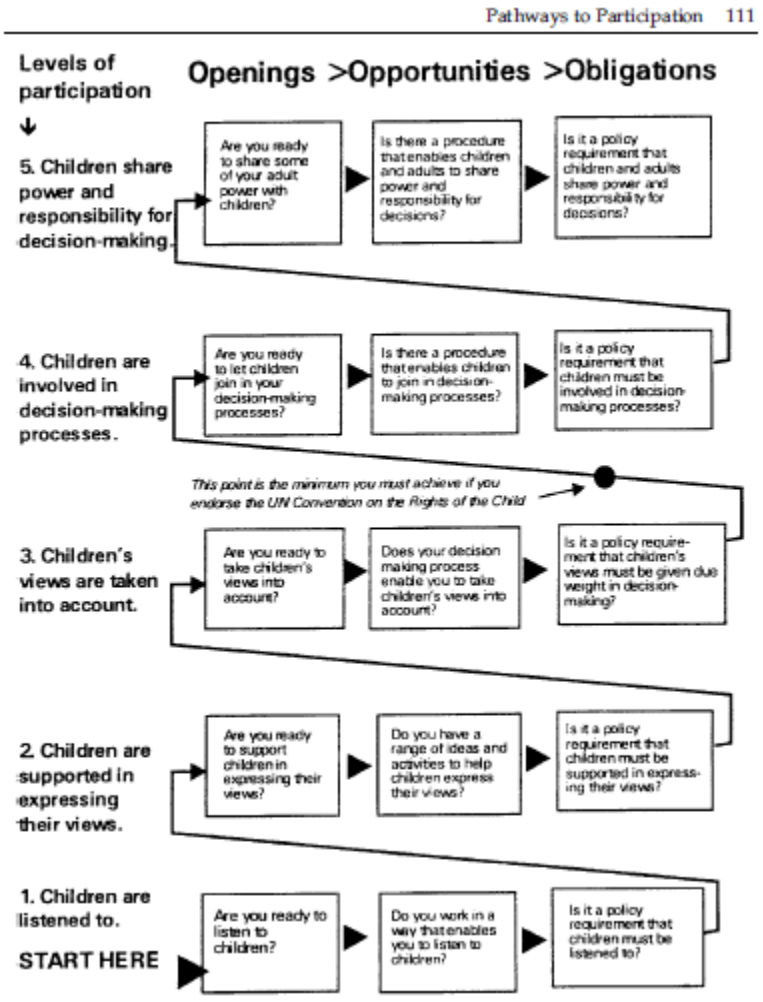

Figure 2. Shier's model of participation (Shier 2001: 115)

The feeling of participation: Participation is about taking and being part of an activity. Being informed and empowered is important so that there can be action. Being part has an emotional element as well. There has to be a **feeling** of participation. If the young people do not feel themselves accepted as being part of an activity, the formal structures, opportunities and obligations are not enough (Kiilakoski, Gretschel and Nivala 2012).

The fluid nature of participation: Some scholars have criticised the above reformulations for supposing that participation is inherently a positive thing, and forgetting about the safety issues and fluid developments in the environment of the young people. This criticism states that in some cases participating might be scary for the youth, even though proper procedures might be in place. For example, Cahill and Dadvand have developed a model which responds to place-based questions, and pays more attention to the context in which participation happens. They emphasise that although methods and intentions are important, it is also important to pay attention to the contextual factors. The model also emphasises the rather obvious but sometimes sadly neglected fact that the youth are different and the threshold for participating is not the same. If we want all young people to participate, we need to consciously remove obstacles to participation.

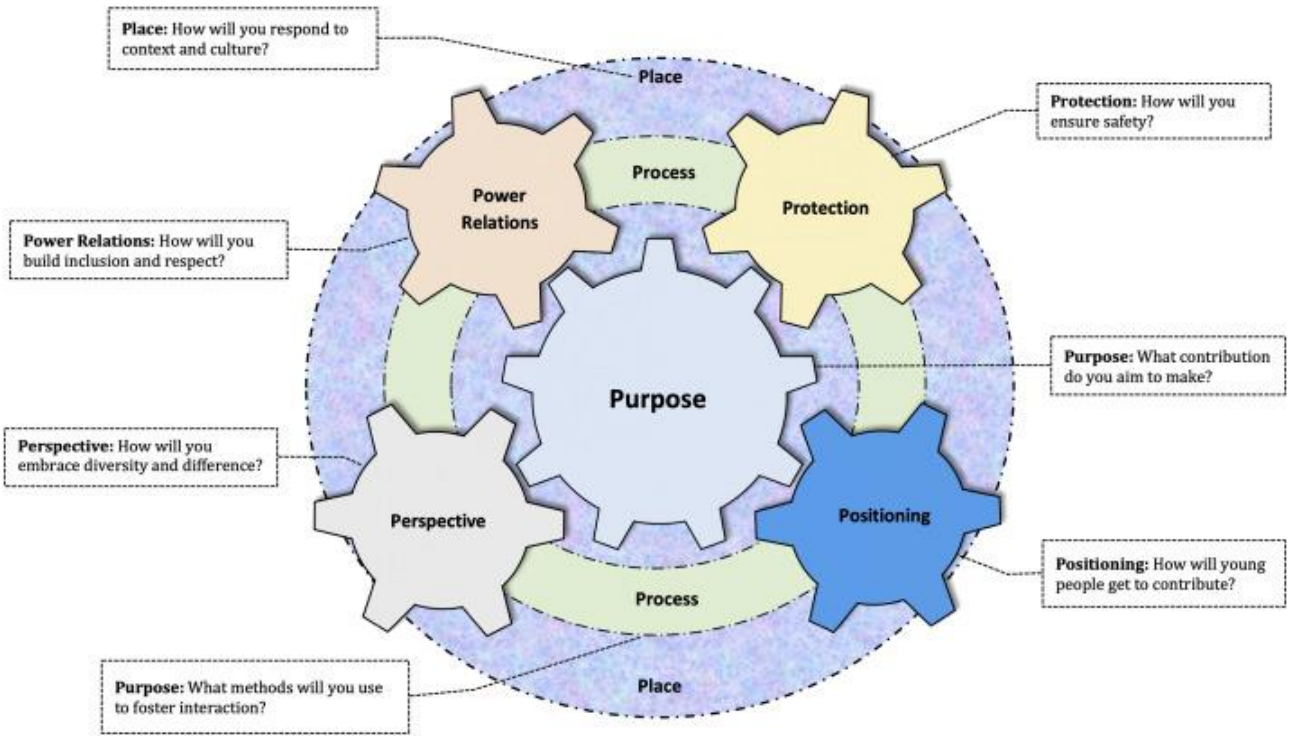

Figure 3. Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) model of participation

As is clear from the above developments and reformulations of Hart's original and influential model, it is not easy to integrate all the relevant aspects of participation into one description or model. Perhaps it is not even necessary, since different models can show us different perspectives which may be needed in promoting participation at different levels. What all these remarks show together is that it is necessary to pay attention to different aspects of participation, including asking the following questions:

- What roles are young people given? Are they able to influence decisions in different roles, from consulting to making decisions to implementation and evaluation?
- How is the method of participation defined? Are the rules of the discourse pre-given or are the youth able to influence the decisions by themselves? Is participation rational and discursive, or are more expressive forms of expression permitted? If the young people want to participate in a different way, is the system of participation flexible enough?
- Is enough attention paid to supporting and aiming to empower young people? Are there enough resources allocated to ensure that the young people are able to get the support they need? Are there methodologies and procedures which make it clear how young people are supported? Are these methodologies known by young people and all of the relevant partners in cross-sectoral co-operation? Is there an explicit policy supporting these procedures?
- Are the safety issues respected and analysed? Are the spaces made safe enough that different young people have a real possibility to attend? Is enough time given to the process so that everybody can join?
- Does the participation mechanism ensure that participation is inclusive enough? Are there systematic efforts to analyse what might be the barriers for participating? Are some groups of young people systemically excluded, and if this is the case are there efforts to ensure that this will not happen in the future?

4. Participation and democracy

The ways of promoting participation of the young people reveal how societies understand democracy. If youth participation is understood as taking part in the already existing structures without having the chance to make the community different from what it was, the picture of democracy is not complete. Democratic action is undertaken with others to change societies and existing modes of thinking. Youth participation can expand and enrich public life (Poyntz 2009) provided that the democratic structures supporting participation are created and redesigned to meet the demands of the young people and enable them to get in communication with adult society.

The ideals of democracy have changed over the years. Our current version of democracy is a product of history. Democracy is a topic of continuous debate and reconceptualisation. In order to document the full scope of possible participation structures, it is important to analyse the full scope of democratic life itself: representative democracy and its ideal conception of citizens electing delegations is contrasted with the ideals of participatory and deliberative democracy, and their emphasis on participation in everyday settings and democratic, open and free discussion. Different conceptions of democracy have different ideals of what constitutes a democratic culture and how citizens create a different future democratically. Theories of democracy have been used to analyse participatory mechanisms and to further point out the need to develop different strategies (Gretschel et al. 2014; Crowley and Moxon 2017).

Representative democracy is a form of governance where elected politicians (and sometimes office holders) must renew their position in elections. It has proved to be an effective way of changing the government when people are unhappy with the way they are ruled. Not all citizens, though, are capable of taking part in elections. Children and young people are excluded from elections. The absence of children in the field of traditional representative democracy is based on the developmental perspective which assumes that adults are more capable of speaking for children and young people, and are able to make more informed decisions on behalf of all members of society (Nussbaum 2007: 36). Consequently, in most European countries it is thought that those under 18 years of age are not mature enough to make informed decisions on matters affecting them.

The absence of young people in the representative field might lead to a generational gap where the opinions, discourses and advocacy of the young people are omitted in the decision making and the youth are not interested in communicating with a system that does not properly take them into account. This fact is recognised in the new Youth Strategy of the European Union, which states that although the young people do want to contribute to society, this does not necessarily happen through traditional political arenas. In order to reach the youth, the strategy demands that "decision-makers need to make participation a reality for all young people: to be transparent about actions in their favour, to reach out and communicate in an accessible way through their preferred channels (for example, social media) and to promote their involvement in decisions" (European Commission 2018a: 2). It is hard to fathom how this goal could be reached without somehow rethinking and changing the traditional representative democracy and without looking at the democratic ideals which describe that democracy takes place not only through elections but in the local communities as well.

The traditional model of representative democracy which emphasises representative formal structures has been criticised for being too distanced from everyday dimensions of participation. It has been noted numerous times that there is a strong generational gap in participation types and that the new, innovative, issue-based forms of participation are gaining ground (Farthing 2014, Crowley and Moxon 2017; Myllyniemi and Kiilakoski 2019). Some of the standard participation mechanisms such as student councils and youth councils in fact mimic the traditional political structures. In Eurobarometer 455, which studied young Europeans, only 13% of the respondents had been actively involved in a local organisation which aimed to improve the local community, and only 7% were active in a political party. There was, though, a trend towards an increased commitment to voting (European Commission 2018b). These results can be taken to mean that representative democracy is not outdated although it needs to be supplemented with other forms of democracy, such as participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, both of which are analysed in this text.

Compared with traditional ways of influencing, participatory democracy offers a fuller perspective on citizenship. It features user democracy (participation as recipient of services), but also shows that participation can take place in the ordinary surroundings of the young people. Proponents of participatory democracy believe that sites which are normally considered apolitical, such as

schools, working places, community houses or youth centres, can be sites of democratic decision making. By participating in these environments, citizens are better equipped to affect their surroundings and to take control of their own community and environment. Practical examples of participatory democracy are workplace democracy or participatory budgeting (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009: 212-13). It can also be argued that since youth councils usually lack the power to make binding decisions and are dependent on adult structures, they should not be categorised as representative democracies although their structure is similar to that of city councils. They can, however, be seen as examples of participatory democracy since they emphasise the importance of debating and bridging the opinions of young people to the decision-making process. Following the criticism of Roger Hart (1992) described in the previous section, participatory democracy should be about having a say, not about taking part in the processes as a listener or as a form of decoration. The real question behind the success of participatory mechanisms is power distribution – if power is not redistributed, and all the important decisions remain in the hands of adults, promoting participatory democracy might be counter-productive (Farthing 2012: 83).

Another democracy ideal, deliberative democracy, has a slightly different perspective regarding what constitutes an ideal form of democratic citizenship. This perspective emphasises that democracy is about communication, involving offering arguments instead of merely expressing one's opinions and reflecting on the points made by others (Dryzek and Dunleavy 2009: 215). Democracy is about discussing different values, viewpoints, experiences and expectations. As humans, we disagree on what good life is about, and reflecting on the differences is vital in making sure that all the affected voices are heard in society. Thus, proponents of deliberative democracy claim that democracy is not only about voting, participating or directly expressing one's will, it is fundamentally about engaging in a dialogue and trying to arrive at a shared understanding of common issues.

Deliberative democracy is based on a principle that collective problems should be based on public reasoning, and public institutions are legitimate insofar as they establish a framework for free public deliberation (Cohen 1989: 21). According to philosopher Joshua Cohen, deliberative democratic politics has five conditions, of which at least three are relevant for youth participation. First, there has to be public deliberation on the common good. There are probably alternative conceptions of what really matters, so citizens are required to have a wider perspective instead of narrow, interest-based conceptions. Second, equality must be a key priority. Since everybody's

opinions need to be listened to, taking part in a dialogue must be independent of economic or social position. Third, politics should create a sense of political competence (Cohen 1989: 21-22). These three conditions all have implications for youth participation.

Creating participatory structures that enable the young people to hear the different arguments and ideas, and training them to take part in these structures, are needed to create a democratic mindset. This also serves as an argument for promoting co-management: decisions are better if all voices are listened to, including those of the young people. The youth need to be provided with opportunities to express their views to adults, and to discuss them seriously, since adults need to hear the opinions of the young people to understand the full scope of how citizens think and what they value. This ideal of democracy cannot limit people based on their age. The equality emphasis is an argument for helping the young people to contribute. Also, the youth are better able to understand how and why other generations think. Deliberative democracy's perspective emphasises the need to secure that participation structures are empowering and help the young people to develop a positive self-respect as citizens. The different aspects of democracy[2] and their implications for youth participation are presented in Table 1.

Theory of democracy	Ideal image of democracy	Possible actions for the youth
Representative democracy	Citizen as elector: gathers information, understands this information and acts by voting or standing as a candidate.	Young people over the legal voting age can vote and stand as candidates in local elections and be elected to the council or parliament. Political organisations can choose young members to act on committees and the board of the local authorities.
Participatory	Citizen as participant: gives	Representative forms of

2. Although seldom analysed in connection with participation supported by the public authorities, counter-democracy or politics of dissent (O'Brien, Selboye and Hayward 2018) is a way of contributing to democracy by expressing dissatisfaction and through refusal to accept decisions. This form of democracy is not analysed in this paper. It has to be noted that demonstration, a form of politics of dissent, is far more common for young Europeans than it is for other generations (Sloam 2016: 527).

democracy	feedback, takes part in discussion/action, acts in a local community with others.	participatory democracy: youth councils, students' councils; committees. Action in NGOs. Participatory budgeting.
Deliberative democracy	Citizen as a deliberative actor: takes part in public debate, offers arguments, and takes part in forming reflected and elaborated view on society together with others.	Citizens' jury for young people, dialogical methods for creating common opinion, workshops aimed at establishing a common understanding, discussion sites using digital platforms

Table 1. Different democracy ideals and forms of participating

The gap between established forms of democracy and methods used by the young people has been well documented and understood (Sloam 2016, Crowley and Moxon 2016). To respond to this condition, new and innovative forms of participation need to be promoted to repoliticise democracy. This requires using a wide array of methods. To achieve this, it is useful to look at different ideals of democracy and see how well the current political system is able to support possible different ways of being an active citizen. What is important to note is that the structures offered need to provide both top-down approaches (for example, a local government consulting and integrating youth council to decision making) and bottom-up approaches, such as taking seriously the initiatives of the young people even if they are expressed outside the current political system. For example, demonstrating or displaying a sticker or a badge are more common for European young people than to older generations (Sloam 2016: 527). If the goal is to build more democratic societies and to ensure that all generations are able to be part in democratic system, young citizens' experimentations with concrete ways to reinvent democracy in Europe need to be taken into account, encouraged and integrated into traditional decision making.

5. Conclusion: Promoting participation

I had the honour of interviewing groups of young people when I was studying the co-operation of youth work and schools. When interviewing four young talented girls we were talking about participation. Their environment had an established participatory system, which for me seemed to work fine. The girls recognised this, and one of them was saying, “They always ask us our opinions and enquire what we want.” This certainly made me happy. Another continued, “But whatever you say, nothing ever happens.” I was not that happy anymore. The third continued, “It’s about that: nothing ever happens, things never work out.” I felt a wave of desperation approaching.

The above discussion points to the fundamental issue on youth participation. The institution had provided a participation mechanism for the young people. They were inquiring how the young felt, and supported them in expressing their opinions. According to some of the established models of participation, this situation has all the necessary elements for successful youth participation. The experience of the girls, however, is about not being able to participate. Without enquiring how the youth actually feel about participation procedures one cannot really talk about the quality of participation. In the worst case the young people get frustrated and learn that participation leads nowhere and they may become cynical towards efforts to make them participate. This of course runs counter to everything youth participation is supposed to achieve, such as respecting the participation rights of the young people, making better decisions, enriching democracy and helping the youth to develop citizenship competences.

To emphasise the necessary element of participation, my colleagues and I have adopted a three-fold definition on participation. Based on our earlier research**,** we understand participation as having three necessary but insufficient conditions:

- First, participation requires having **a recognised and legitimate role in the community**. The recognition needs to be both formal and informal. If the young people are not sure of their role, they can oppose or rebel, but it may be hard to find a constructive role (although refusing to act is in some cases an act of participation in itself).
- Second**, there needs to be action**. If the youth have a role in schools, for example as members of the school council, but the structure does not bring about any action, there is no participation. This action needs to be recognised by young people and adults alike.

- Third, **action has to be meaningful for the participants**, and there has to be a feeling of participation (Kiilakoski, Gretschel and Nivala 2012).
- As is evident, we view participation as a relation between an individual and a larger entity, such as peer group, class, school, community, town, society and ecosystem. To achieve quality participation, one needs to pay attention to both sides: to train and empower young people, and also to analyse critically if the community is really able to help young people to participate. Participation is a two-way street.

Using the threefold definition of participation the material presented in this paper can be formulated in the following way. Special attention has been paid to how these observations might be implemented in practice.

1. **Recognised role**: According to the participation models presented in this paper, special attention needs to be paid on informing young people on the nature of the project or event they are participating in. Furthermore, their role and possibilities have to be explained realistically to the young people themselves and to the adults. Besides a formally accepted role there needs to be an informal recognition. Attention should be paid to creating a safe and empowering environment which encourages the young people to participate. There should be clear policies and procedures to support the youth. Different democracy theories also point out that the roles of the young people should extend from working in councils to participating in and discussing local and national matters.
2. **Action**: Participation without influence is criticised in all the models and justifications of participation. Something needs to happen, and the young people have to be able to initiate changes either through voting, deliberating or doing something together. Most of the theories of participation concentrate on discussing and deciding, but critics remind us that expressive ways of participating need to be enabled as well. Sometimes the youth will decide to do things differently. Responding positively to experimentations with democracy of the young people is a way to bridge the generational gap on participation.
3. **Feeling of participation**: The final test of meaningful participation is that the youth themselves need to feel that they participated. Emotional factors in participation are also emphasised in the requirements to pay attention to empowering the young people and being sure that they find the process useful. This contributes to developing their self-respect as a citizen.

If all three conditions have been realised, participation is a process instead of a formal structure or a singular event. It will be a continuous, systematic process where the roles of the young people are clear to the youth themselves and also to adults. The youth are able to contribute, and it is evaluated if they felt they were part of the process. This may sound like a hard thing to do – as it should be. Promoting meaningful or genuine participation is not a magic trick which can be done without changing the way we adults think, do things and relate to others. It requires an attitude that respects the right of the young people to participate and willingness and skills to change the current ideas about democracy. While this may seem hard, this paper has pointed out that there are numerous excellent reasons to promote participation, including securing rights, building democratic competences, and developing communities, societies and democracy.

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