

# **Youth Participation in the Civic Process: A Literature Review**

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## **Introduction**

A vital, dynamic practice of citizenship is our best hope for creating the kind of world in which we want to live. In the current movement for 'new citizenship' and civic renewal, young people need to be front and center.

- Melissa Bass, 1997

Although cities and school districts around the country utilize civic education and leadership as a form of youth development, authentic involvement of youth in the civic decision-making process can be challenging. To do so requires cohesion between governing bodies, a commitment to defining and pursuing inclusionary practices, and resources to support the work. Cities must navigate the legality of appointing minors to a voting body, identify systems of support for student members, and expand their agendas to incorporate youth. Schools must relate student learning to academic standards, prepare students to participate in an adult-oriented environment, and support them in comprehending material that goes beyond their regular assignments and schedules.

Yet, civic processes can benefit greatly from youth participation, and vice-versa. Youth provide fresh input into decisions that shape cities, bringing issues to the table that might not be considered in an adult-only environment. From participation, youth gain professional experience, insight into their city's power structure, and an integral understanding of civic leadership. In turn, their input contributes to a more inclusive, youth and family friendly environment. Our cities are intended for both youth and adults, so why aren't civic processes constructed this way?

This review seeks to contextualize and define youth participation as it relates to democracy, civil society, and deliberate participatory planning. More practically, it summarizes common practices, successes and challenges in youth participation in order to serve as a resource for cities engaged in this work.

## **Defining Youth Participation**

Prior to analyzing common practices and conceptions of youth participation, it is useful to define these terms, and understand their use in the field of planning and civic engagement. Definitions of youth can vary widely, depending on the application. The term was originally utilized to protect young people from being forced into inappropriate working conditions. While the United Nations defines youth as between the ages of 15 –25, some groups allow youth to self-identify up to age 29. Classification can be useful to assess and advocate for young people's involvement in the civic process, but critics view "stages of development" to be socially constructed and varying according to culture, ethnicity, gender, and class (Simpson 1997).

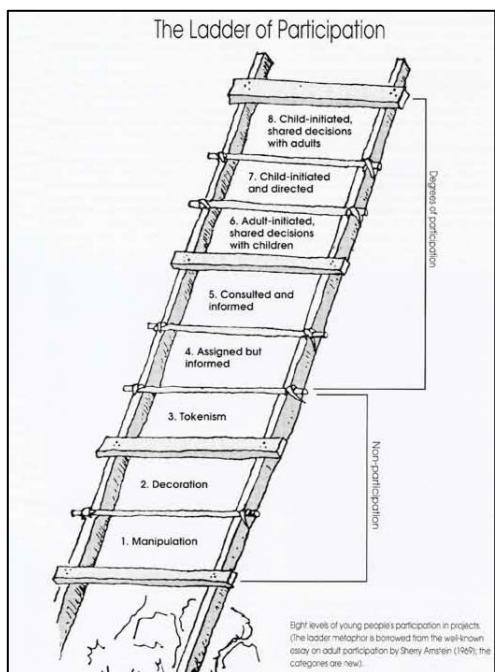
According to Roger Hart, "Participation in society begins from the moment a child enters the world and discovers the extent to which she is able to influence events by cries or movements." (Hart 1992) Anecdotally, Hart takes us back even further, with stories of pre-natal mothers painting their visions of open space in cities onto their expanded stomachs, reinforcing rights of inclusion and voice even before birth. This radical definition of youth

participation cuts through barriers associated with age-related, developmental readiness for active engagement.

It's possible that labels further isolate youth as being different from adults, and therefore provide them with less responsibility and voice. Instead of identifying youth solely by age, political economists attribute young people's lack of power to structural forces precluding their capacity to fully participate in the public realm. Youth are considered a class without power, disenfranchised from participation in the democratic process that affects their lives, and they are therefore alienated from society (Côte and Allahar 1994). Participation then becomes a question of democracy rather than development – a right that is verified through several international mandates.

Participation can be defined as a process of shared decision-making, influence, and involvement amongst stakeholders (of all ages) over development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect their lives (Checkoway 1995; Hart 1992; World Bank 2007). Legal precedence regarding youth participation stems from the 1990 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified treaty in history (in over 100 nations except for the United States), declaring participation to be a fundamental right of all young people.

Article 12 of the UN treaty declares that: *States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views that the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.* Article 13 states: *The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's voice.* This ordinance seeks to protect children's rights, empowering them to depart from oppressive situations such as forced labor and sexual injustice, providing them with the right to an active voice in the processes that affect their lives.



Meaningful youth participation, however, requires special consideration. There is an element of preparation, guidance, and education that must be paired with the chance to participate. The Canadian Mental Health Association recognizes that this involves "nurturing the strengths, interests, and abilities of young people through the provision of real opportunities for youth to become involved in decisions that affect them at individual and systemic levels." (CMHA 1996)

According to Professor Roger Hart, in true participation, children understand the intentions of the project, they know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why, they have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role, and they volunteer for a project after the project was made clear to them (Hart 1992). In order to express this clearly, he created the ladder of

youth participation (see below), specifying degrees of participation ranging from non-participation (manipulation; decoration; and tokenism) to participation (assigned but informed; consulted and informed; adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth; youth initiated, shared decisions with adults) (Hart 1992).

Supporting people of any age to take an active role in decisions that affect their lives can be transformative and empowering for both the individual and for society. It is perceived that youth participation requires more active support and protection than with adults. Once youth gain power over the decisions that affect their lives, however, the result can be a more actively engaged citizenry and group of individuals to serve as resources for their communities for years to come (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, McLaughlin 2002).

## **Reasons for Participation**

### *Benefits to Organizations / Agencies*

Youth participation has been linked to greater organizational sustainability and effectiveness, as well as improved policy formation and program implementation. (World Bank 2007). Organizations engaging youth report that participation leads to changes in the organizational climate and a deeper commitment by adults towards youth development principles (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, and McLaughlin 2006). By incorporating new groups into their structure, organizations can be motivated to set priorities, formulate plans, and implement programs. Working to engage youth also leads to the creation of informal structures and personal relationships that provide social supports and, in some cases surrogate family functions (Checkoway 1995).

Thus far, a majority of work around youth engagement has tended to focus on the experiences of young people in community-based or non-governmental organizations. Youth participation in this setting can more frequently offer young people alternative spaces to reflect critically and build capacity for action, since these agencies do not face the same sets of constraints as public institutions (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, and McLaughlin 2002). Although participation in the public realm can be more challenging to implement considering legal requirements and bureaucratic road blocks, it also allows for youth voice to be embedded into the processes that govern their everyday lives, thereby incorporating them as active citizens.

### *Building Better Cities and Policies with Youth*

*The priorities that children express are conditions for making cities more livable for people of all ages.*

- Louise Chawla, 2002

Incorporating youth into the process of city planning, policy, and governance can also lead to the construction of better, more egalitarian cities. Research from the Growing Up in Cities Initiative, in which youth from cities around the world were asked to evaluate their priorities for community development, showed that youth prefer social integration, freedom of movement, safety, and a varied environment (Frank 2006), qualities important to all residents. In addition, since youth are highly dependent on public services (i.e.

transit, education, health care), their ability to shape outcomes related to public processes and planning benefits not only themselves, but other vulnerable populations who are heavily reliant on these services (such low-income and elderly individuals) as well. This can potentially relieve pressure within civic government as sole keepers of responsibility (World Bank 2007).

Youth participants may have the ability to influence more informed, better policy by getting at real issues in a community when involved in the research process. By gaining trust from other age groups, they can provide greater insight and understanding of important issues. Youth participants can also help measure program effectiveness for people of all ages. As a World Bank Country Manager stated, "If our programs do not capture young people's imagination, then chances of us not capturing the imagination of the general public are great" (World Bank 2007).

### *Youth Participation, Democracy, and Urban Planning*

*Participation...is the means by which a democracy is built, and the standard against which democracies should be measured.*

- Roger Hart, 1992

Professor Roger Hart discussed in depth the importance of youth participation in the development of a more inclusionary civil society.<sup>1</sup> According to Hart, "if we anticipate adult participation in the public process, we must begin by including youth. The confidence and competence to participate must be acquired through practice from a young age." By engaging young people, you are teaching them a culture of participation that will hopefully carry through to adulthood. "The benefit is two-fold: to the self-realization of the child and to the democratization of society" (Hart 1992).

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families at the National League of Cities has agreed, stating "nothing is more important to the health of our democracy than the active engagement of young people in representative government at the local level" (MRSC 2007). Through inclusion of young people, the model of *deliberative participatory planning* is operationalized within the state and for the broader community (Gurstein, Lovato, and Ross 2003, Forester 1999). This includes intergenerational interaction, respectful dialogue, advocacy, critical education and cooperative organizing for all participants.

Urban planners are strategically situated to involve young people in civil society for several reasons. They operate in diverse institutional domains in several substantive fields and in urban and rural areas nationwide (Checkoway 1995). Planners are uniquely positioned at the nexus of stakeholders, institutions, organizations, and individuals to assist in the incorporation of young people into the planning process. When trained in youth development and education, the result can be powerful.

Public participation is also part of planners' professional mandate. The American Institute of City Planning Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (AICP) states that a planner

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<sup>1</sup> *Civil Society* meaning, "social organizations, associations, and institutions that exist beyond the sphere of direct supervision and control by the state." (Friedmann 1998)

should “strive to give citizens the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs; [that] participation should be broad enough to include people who lack formal organization or influence;” and that this includes efforts to “expand choice and opportunity for all persons recognizing a social responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups and persons” (Wachs 1985 cited in Checkoway, Pothukuchi, and Finn 1995). Yet, studies show that planning agencies do not broadly represent their area population, that they often over-represent businessmen and others with a concentrated economic interest in land use decisions, and that they under-represent minority groups (Checkoway 1995).

Planners should be “passionately engaged in a transformative politics for inclusion, opportunity for self-development and social justice,” thereby creating opportunities for self-development, and removal of obstacles that limit each person’s chances to develop her or his innate abilities to the fullest possible extent (Gurstein, Lovato, and Ross 2003). This mandate can be easily related to the creation of an engaged citizenry, starting with youth participation.

### *Benefits to Youth Development*

Apart from involving young people in shaping the places where they live, one of the most effective strategies for influencing positive youth development is through the actual process of participation – helping young people listen to one another, respect differences of opinion, and find common ground; developing their capacities for critical thinking, evaluation and reflection; supporting their processes of discovery, awareness building, and collective problem-solving; and helping them develop the knowledge and skills to make a difference in their world (Driskell 2002, Checkoway, Pothukutchi, and Finn 2003).

Consistent with theories of environmental learning as a successful method of engaging youth, studies show that participation can strengthen academic achievement in the classroom and increase problem-solving capacity in the community (Checkoway 1995). Youth that are constructively engaged in development processes serve as a positive influence on their peers and are less likely to engage in risky and anti-social behaviors as their opinions are heard (World Bank 2007). They gain their own understanding of citizenship and develop roles for themselves as part of a democratic society, which subsequently promotes a conscious sense of responsibility and stewardship to the community (McCreary 1996).

This may have particular importance for at-risk or socially oppressed youth, who can be taught skills to challenge the conditions that perpetuate poverty, analyze the causes of racism, and critically reflect on important issues (Checkoway, Pothukuchi, and Finn 2003). In cities and communities in which young people face violence daily, and can maintain negative relationships with figures of civil authority (i.e. police), professional collaboration with adults in the public sphere can be a transformative, refreshing, and influential in their development. In addition, by including young leaders in the creation of their future, we are empowering them to make change to suit their needs for a lifetime.

Perhaps in light of these positive effects, researchers in the field of youth development

have noted a shift in youth work from prevention programs (designed to treat and prevent problems of 'at-risk' youth), to preparation (building skills and supporting broader development for all youth) for participation in power sharing and public decision-making structures (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, and McLaughlin 2006). Youth participation and investment in the formation of the urban environment can also serve a preventative role by contributing to positive social development, and encouraging youth investment and ownership over space and place.

### *Ensuring Meaningful Youth Participation*

When engaging youth in city building, the process cannot be "business as usual." Meeting logistics, dynamics, and materials must shift in order to accommodate the needs of participating youth. For this reason, it's easier to take the first step towards participation than it is to actually engage youth in sustainable ways. This section of the paper points out challenges and outlines solutions to ensure meaningful youth participation in the planning process.

*Shared Understanding* – In order to ensure clarity in the participation process, it is essential that expected outcomes and objectives are transparent from the outset of the process. In particular, definitions and levels of participation that can be afforded by the organization should be common (World Bank 2007). If both youth and adults are not on the same page from the outset, problems in collaboration can arise. In order to achieve clarity, groups may sign a contract (similar to a memorandum of understanding) laying out key definitions and expectations prior to the start of the participatory process.

*Non-Exclusivity* – True participation engages young people that are hardest to reach and therefore easily marginalized from the civic process. Many times, stakeholders will count on the same small group of youth to represent their peers, and provide input for all youth. This can lead to exclusivity, where only the most privileged or skilled youth are chosen to participate (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, McLaughlin 2002). Youth (as all people) are individuals, and their opinions will vary accordingly. By preparing a broader group of young people to consult and feed back information with, participation can be more successful and representative. For this reason, it is recommended that no fewer than two youth representatives sit on a committee. In pairs, youth can feel more comfortable verbalizing their beliefs in an adult-oriented environment, and a greater number of perspectives can be represented.

*Skills Training* – Engaging all youth is not an easy task. Youth, as adults, must be properly trained to participate in a skilled, knowledgeable manner. New initiatives may be needed for training youth (and adults they work with) to assess community conditions, to set priorities and make decisions, to develop action plans, and to formulate strategies to implement programs (Checkoway 1995, World Bank 2007). Training to increase leadership skills, explain meeting dynamics, and increase the confidence of participants can also be useful for youth. This effort may require a partnership with a third-party educator, or more ideally with the local school district (as is the case with Emeryville, California).

*Professional Development* – Adults also need professional development in order to

effectively incorporate youth into their work. Many adults have never worked with youth before, and they may fear the unknown aspect of what participation will bring. The most well-intentioned adults may not yet understand what youth participation means, and changing their frame of reference will take intentional effort by planners and facilitators of participation. It's important to note that this requires adults' willingness to be changed (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, McLaughlin 2002).

*Sharing Power* – Real commitment to youth participation means shared power with young people who enter the civic process. From preparation to evaluation stages, young people should have real responsibility on any committee to which they dedicate time (World Bank 2007). This may mean shifting the agenda of meetings to make room for youth voice, and including items that adults may not understand as important. This does not mean that adults will surrender their roles as guides and educators to participating youth. An age-inclusive setting can serve as one of the few arenas in which adults socialize youth into practices and habits of the professional world. Adults play roles as critical guides, especially in projects that are oriented toward civic participation or political activism (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, McLaughlin 2002).

*Maintaining Flexibility* – All in all, youth participation requires real dedication, and a measure of flexibility, especially at the outset of the process of incorporation. In order to fully embrace the participation of youth, “organizations need to allow the formation of certain aspects of youth culture, which means they must be flexible enough to allow members to form symbols and rituals, and to infuse existing rituals with new meaning” (Hart 1997). Youth need space, time, and appreciation when entering the field of civic leadership. This way, they can develop their own “politics of identity,” and be recognized as agents in development of civil society. Adults need preparation as well in order to accept and embrace a restructuring of their normal process of engagement. The combination of “practical action” with “political vision” can be challenging, but is the only way to successfully create an inclusive process (Forester 1989).

### *Models of Participation*

Models of youth engagement and participation occur internationally at different scales, in a variety of context and contents. It is valuable to understand different models of engagement in order to contextualize youth participation.

Functioning at a macro, international policy level, the UN sponsored *World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)* advocates that young people in all parts of the world aspire to full participation in the life of society, including participation in decision-making processes. In 11 World Bank country offices, Youth Advisory Groups attempt to innovatively engage young people, and improve development outcomes. In Piura, Peru a group of young people participated in the World Bank's Water and Sanitation Pilot Project between 2003 and 2005. Under the guidance of World Bank specialists, the youth conducted field interviews with project beneficiaries to assess whether the project was indeed meeting people's needs. According to one Task Team Leader, “Young people bring invaluable contributions to a development project because they have the uncanny ability to uncover

the beneficiaries' real voices" (World Bank 2007).

Many countries have established national youth policies using WPAY as a guide. In Fortaleza, Brazil fifty young people were trained by CEDECA (*Centro da Defensa da Crianca e do Adolescente*), a local NGO, to participate in the municipal budgeting process. The young people's proactive engagement with policy makers led to an additional budget allocation to children and youth of \$400,000 in 2004, increasing to \$760,000 in 2005.

Also international, the *Growing Up in Cities (GUIC)* project was conceived within the Children and Environment Program of the Norwegian Centre for Child Research in 1994. The purpose of the GUIC project is to work with children and youth in different countries in order to gain insight into how young people feel about the quality of their physical environment and their priorities for change. It seeks to discover how – if at all – they are consulted by people in authority on the variety of urban planning decisions that inevitably affect their lives, and how they can succeed in influencing local urban policy.

Located in countries throughout the world, this program engages youth in studies of their local built and natural environment, and seeks to create a community of involved youth that present their experiences to each other in order to make public record of their participatory experience. A manual created by Founder David Driskell and GUIC collaborators serves as a tool to help design and implement projects that involve young people as partners in the community development process. Its ultimate goal is to improve the quality of young people's lives as well as the quality of the places where they live.

The Toronto Youth Cabinet was created in 1998 as the voice of youth at City Hall. For one and a half years, the City of Toronto sponsored a series of focus groups, town hall sessions, and a youth safety survey to ask hundreds of young people across the city about their concerns and ideas for creating healthy communities. The message consistently expressed throughout these forums was that young people want to be heard and they want to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives and the communities in which they live.

As a result, the City of Toronto has launched *InvolveYouth*, a citywide campaign to increase the number of young people participating in leadership roles in community organizations. *InvolveYouth* has made two comprehensive guides explaining how to incorporate youth into decision-making structures, the benefits and challenges associated with power sharing, and provides exercises to identify and solve issues related to authentic youth participation in organizational decision-making processes.

The San Francisco Youth Commission offers another model of youth participation in planning and the civic process. In 1995, San Francisco voters passed Proposition F, calling the Youth Commission to serve as a permanent government entity to advise decision-makers on youth policies and matters. Composed of over 15 young people, the group aims to "accurately represent and effectively advocate for the needs and wants of San Francisco's youth and to encourage youth to be involved and to speak up in the political arena" (San Francisco Youth Commission 2007). They do this by identifying the unmet

needs of youth in the City; making sure City policies more accurately reflect those needs; advocating for youth policies by making recommendations to the Mayor and Board of Supervisors; and collaborating with community groups in their education and advocacy efforts. The Youth Commission is highly organized and successful in their charge, with several full time staff members supporting the work.

A program called Get Engaged: Seattle encourages civic engagement of young people by placing young adults ages 18 – 29 on boards and commissions throughout city government. Serving in an advisory capacity to the Mayor and Council, commissioners give input on policy decisions, issue recommendations, and create a mechanism for citizen feedback. Participants serve one year (September – August) as a full voting member on their commission. They also serve an additional 6 – 10 hours per month in committee meetings, apart from their regularly scheduled Board meetings. Participants attend a daylong trainings and retreats; have monthly opportunities to attend forums for skill development and education about current issues; and learn from a peer group of other civically minded young adults. Their motto is, “Experience doesn’t matter. Passion does.”

## **Conclusion**

This review is an abbreviated version of a longer paper written in 2008 in partnership with the Center for Cities & Schools at UC Berkeley. It is intended to serve as a guide for engaging youth in planning and policymaking practice. Research shows that youth involvement benefits people of all ages, increasing access to transit, commerce, and city services, and making cities more inclusive for all. Although planners and policymakers must utilize practices appropriate for their culture and community, it is their duty to maintain a democratic process that engages people of all ages. This approach will benefit participants and cities alike, creating more inclusive, engaged, and functional environments for all.

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