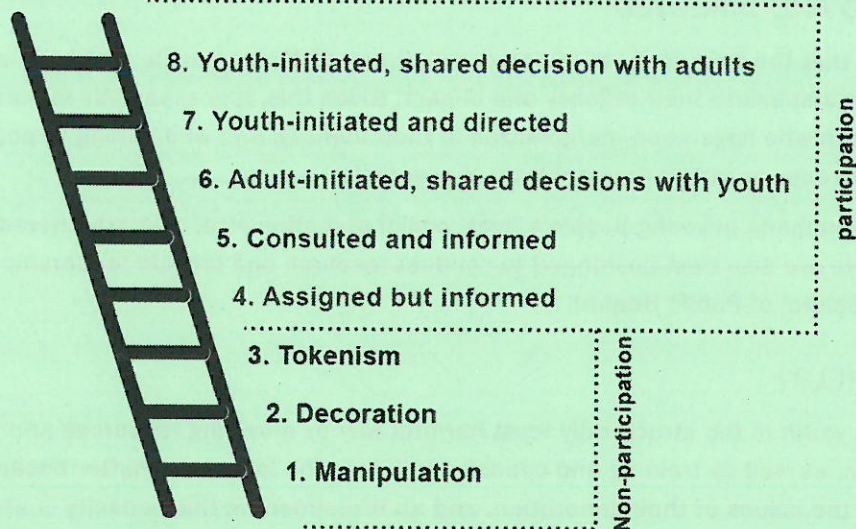


HART'S LADDER OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Sociologist Roger Hart introduced this tool in 1997 in a book he wrote for UNICEF. Hart's Ladder helps establish a framework for determining whether young people have been meaningfully engaged, whether in a project, process, or decisionmaking structure.

LADDER OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION



Source: Youth participation guide: Assessment, planning, and implementation. (Family Health International, 2008)
Source: World Health Organization, 2014

PARTICIPATION

YOUTH-INITIATED, SHARED DECISION WITH ADULTS

Young people have the agency to envision and execute work that is important to them and their communities. Adults provide technical support and resources.

YOUTH-INITIATED AND DIRECTED

Young people drive the work and adults support. YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH exemplifies this because young people initiate and drive the processes of inquiry.

ADULT-INITIATED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH YOUTH

Young people make decisions, but adults convene them. Adults initiating projects control the scope and setting of youth decision-making.

CONSULTED AND INFORMED

Young people offer informed input on a process, project or policy, but are not a part of decisions and do not have control over the final outcome.

ASSIGNED BUT INFORMED

Young people are assigned a role but have little choice over the scope of the role. They are not asked for the opinion, guidance, or leadership on the work that they are doing.

NON-PARTICIPATION

TOKENISM

Young people appear to have a voice, but have not been given any choice in how they participate. Making only a symbolic effort to include young people.

DECORATION

Young people are present in the proceedings but not asked to participate. This reflects ADULTISM because adults treat youth as though they cannot meaningfully contribute.

MANIPULATION

Adults use young people to advance their agendas while claiming to champion youth-inspired causes, or claiming to involve youth. Youth are exploited, gaslighted, lied to.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

WHICH RUNG BELONGS ON TOP?

Roger Hart places shared youth and adult decision-making at the top of the ladder. There are arguments for placing “youth initiated and directed” at the top of the ladder – youth-only spaces and groups where young people work with a team of their peers to envision and execute work that matters to them. Power-sharing with adults is the most practical route, though it is important to think about why young people do not have the agency or resources to operate and advocate on their own in our society.

YOUTH-INITIATED AND DIRECTED

Why does it matter that the work is youth-initiated and directed? Young people that have experienced programs and systems can best speak to their efficacy and impact. Given this, it is especially important to consider the expertise of youth who have been marginalized in their identity, and who belong to populations that have historically been the objects rather than subjects of research.

There are many phenomena in young people’s lives, social and otherwise, that are altered by the presence of adults. Young people are also best positioned to conduct research and provide leadership in these spaces (Emily J. Ozer, UC Berkeley School of Public Health).

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Adults can support youth in the structurally least harmful way by providing resources and technical assistance to youth-initiated work, as well as training and capacity-building. The latter two matter because young advocates are advocating around the issues of their generation, and an investment in this capacity is an investment in the next generation’s leaders.

DEEPER DIVE: Examples of Youth Tokenization (excerpted from Adam F. C. Fletcher, Freechild Institute)

1. When issues affecting youth are talked about by adults without asking youth, youth are being tokenized.
2. At a meeting it is tokenism when adults consistently ask youth to speak about being a youth.
3. When an organization will host programs for youth but won’t host programs led by youth.
4. At a youth-serving organization, it is tokenism when there are only 10 youth and 1,000 adults.
5. In a community organization, it is tokenism when youth are only interacted with on youth issues.
6. In a government agency, it is tokenism when youth are told they have a voice and given the way they’re expected to express it.
7. It is tokenism when adults don’t tell youth directly the purpose of their involvement.
8. It is tokenism when adults control who hears, sees, or communicates with youth.
9. During a meeting, it is tokenism when one youth is expected to represent all youth.
10. When youth are treated as if or told it is a favor and not a right for them to participate in decision-making, it is tokenism.
11. When adults only invite youth who are not likely to assert themselves, make demands, or complain.
12. If youth become burned out from participating in historically adult activities, it is tokenism.
13. If youth think it’s obvious they have a lack of authority or power or that their authority is undermined by adults, it is tokenism.
14. When a group of youth is asked to create something for the community that never leaves the program or organization they’re in, it is tokenism.