Achieving Meaningful Youth Participation

Oxfam, in collaboration with Butterfly Works, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, UNOY Peacebuilders and the University of Amsterdam, organised on 21 June 2016 a day of reflection and collaborative learning on the concept of ‘achieving meaningful youth participation’. The event brought together around 70 participants with various backgrounds, including education, sexual and reproductive health and peace building, coming from the development community, academia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course, young people themselves participated, too.

The objective was to enable participants to reflect on their experiences. What does the concept of meaningful youth participation actually entail? What are the key achievements, challenges and learning when it comes to achieving meaningful youth participation in organisations and interventions? What are the limitations and ways forward? This Product entails a collection of key experiences and learning.

Meaningful Youth Participation

Participation is a human right. It also makes practical sense: young people have the best understanding of their own lives, but rarely have the opportunity to shape them by effectively participating in society, socioeconomically or politically. Development projects for youth are often designed and implemented without consulting or involving young women and men themselves. The more young people are supported to participate in influencing, monitoring and evaluating processes, decisions and activities that concern them, the greater and longer-lasting the impacts will be.

Meaningful youth participation entails the active, informed, and effective involvement of youth in decision-making at various levels in an organisation and within different stages of a program.

The Flower of Participation depicts the different shapes youth participation can take. At the lowest level are tokenism, decoration and manipulation – forms of “participation” that are not meaningful. The top three leaves show the most meaningful forms of participation:

1. Where youth initiate and direct actions themselves;
2. Where youth initiate actions and share decision-making with adults;
3. Where adults initiate actions and share decision-making with youth.

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1 There is no universally agreed definition of youth – it is a social and cultural construct bound by a range of indicators that vary considerably across cultures and contexts. These include age, marital status, responsibility, financial dependence and emotional dependence on primary caregivers. Like the United Nations and many other development organisations, the event defined ‘youth’ as ages 15 to 24, while acknowledging that young people are not a fixed age group but a more fluid category.


To be meaningful, youth participation must value and build on the understanding that young people are not homogeneous but diverse, with complex, changing and varied needs and desires. Young people have different abilities, ambitions, skills and interests. They experience different levels of privilege and position within society. They may have different needs and possibilities according to their context – for example, if they are rural, indigenous, an ethnic or sexual minority, or living with a disability.

Meaningful youth participation can be defined and interpreted uniquely by various actors and between contexts. It is therefore essential to understand how youth participation is perceived differently and how its definition, use, and objective vary and thus, consequently, may be put to practice and evaluated in contrary fashion: who decides what meaningful youth participation entails, and when it is ‘achieved’?

**CHALLENGES THAT CAN BE FACED**

There is growing evidence that meaningful youth participation can have a positive impact: making interventions that focus on young people more relevant; developing the confidence and capacities of young people; widening the perspectives of adults involved; and building an organisation’s capacity to engage in youth-sensitive interventions.5 Achieving meaningful youth participation requires investment and commitment on the part of organisations and institutions, and young women and men themselves, as many challenges can prevent participation from being meaningful or even from occurring at all.

Negative perceptions of youth and cultural norms can create barriers. Organisations, institutions and decision-makers may lack the capacity to meaningfully involve youth – including financial resources, donor restrictions, and the know-how to create a safe learning environment – meaning that attempts at participation can result in tokenism. Young people themselves can lack the confidence or capacity to meaningfully participate in organisations or to start their own initiatives. Often, only the most privileged youth have the ability and possibility to participate, leaving behind young people who are marginalised.

*Figure 1: A visualisation of a clustering of challenges that can be faced when trying to achieve meaningful youth participation – by organisations, institutions and young women and men themselves.*

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COLLECTION OF EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING

The discussions held during the ‘Achieving Meaningful Youth Participation’ event produced a set of practical suggestions for ways of working that can help organisations and young people together to deal with challenges that can hinder achieving meaningful youth participation. There are no ‘one size fits all’ solutions, however – each context and situation will require its own strategies.

INCLUDING MARGINALISED YOUTH

Marginalised young women and men face systemic barriers that prevent them from effectively participating in society at various levels. These same barriers often make the meaningful participation of marginalized youth in all their variety in organisations and interventions a challenge.

✓ Ensure a common understanding of what is meant by “marginalised”

Which forms of marginalisation are you talking about? Which young women and men are affected, and in what ways? The impact and understanding of the concept of marginalisation is different in each context.6

✓ Keep in mind that young people may be marginalised in multiple ways

Without a clear understanding of all the barriers your target groups face, the meaningful participation of those young people you intend to work with can be severely hindered.

“We must not forget that some young people can face double, triple or even quadruple forms of discrimination, all adding on to each other, making participation in society almost impossible”

– Thanh, 27, Vietnam

✓ Remember that numbers reflect only part of the story

In your target setting and evaluation of a project, keep in mind that setting percentages around participation does not necessarily reflect equal opportunities. For example, when girls represent half of a project’s participants, this does not necessarily mean they do half of the participating. Within groups of participants there can be dynamics that determine who gets more opportunities, and who is and is not made to feel that they belong.

✓ Investigate the day-to-day realities of marginalised groups of youth

Marginalisation can mean lacking the confidence, capacity and skills to meaningfully engage – but it can also mean simply not being able to afford the time and energy required to participate. Program design and implementation can sometimes overcome this challenge: for example, by providing day-care for young mothers or young people who need to take care of younger siblings, or talking to parents to see if the young people in a household can be relieved of their responsibilities for agreed-on short periods of time.

CREATING SAFE AND ENABLING SPACES
Both youth and adults need to feel comfortable with letting youth speak their minds and contribute in their own ways to creating change. This requires creating a safe and enabling environment in which everybody can freely learn from and engage with each other, mistakes are tolerated, and participation is not hindered by cultural norms regarding gender, class, etc.

✓ Promote capacity building, training and room for practice
Youth need the confidence, capacity and skills to be able to bring their energy and creativity to bear on decision-making, programme design, implementation and monitoring, and setting up and leading their own initiatives. This requires jointly engaging in capacity development and training activities: not just a one-day training, but a continuous process with room to implement what has been learned. As there may be a high turnover, capacity building mechanisms need to be institutionalised. Peer-to-peer learning platforms can help young people to learn from each other.

✓ Create common definitions and a mutually respectful dialogue
When an intervention involves working with multiple partners, all must have the same willingness to create an enabling environment for meaningful youth participation – and the same understanding of what that means. This can necessitate developing partner organisations’ capacities to mainstream meaningful youth participation, or preventing disillusionment by creating realistic expectations among young people about what can be achieved.

✓ Ensure continuous follow up
Do not assume that once the principles and definition of meaningful youth participation are clear, everybody will act accordingly. It is necessary to continuously monitor and reflect on how young women and men are participating, what room they have to contribute, how they do so, what levels of control can they exercise, and so on. This includes monitoring your own organisation’s understanding of what meaningful youth participation means, and the adaptability of your project to varying contexts.

✓ Be innovative in your ways of working to build trust
Creating an enabling environment requires building trust, and the best ways to do this are different in every context: identify the specific challenges and look for creative tools and techniques to get people out of their comfort zones and connecting with others, sharing their thoughts and emotions without feeling judged. Ask questions, don’t jump to conclusions.

✓ Take into account the practicalities of young people’s social context
Become aware of the practical limitations imposed by young people’s lived realities, especially if they are living in poverty or exclusion – for example, their schedules, travel possibilities, financial restrictions and the opportunity cost of their time.
LEVERAGING POWER RELATIONS

Often, achieving meaningful youth participation entails a change in power relations – for some people to gain more decision-making power, others must be willing to step back. When managing power dynamics, it is important to avoid emphasising a dichotomy between ‘youth’ and ‘adults’, and instead focus on the importance of the principle of participation within any development effort.

✓ Find champions for meaningful youth participation
   Conduct a power analysis to identify actors who can help to make – or potentially block – the change you want, and look for current or potential champions among them.

✓ Analyse the context – economic, social, cultural and political
   Performing a context analysis at the start of a project helps to engage with youth in ways that are relevant to their living environment, and to move through the political space in an informed way.

✓ Empower youth to choose how they participate
   Avoid relying on adult perceptions of what are possible and appropriate ways for youth to participate – these may not be relevant to their daily lives. Often the ways in which young people want to participate may be more fun and informal, or using technologies with which they are familiar.7

✓ Build positive youth-adult partnerships
   Power-sharing partnerships between youth and adults can create new forms of power – but adults and young people alike need support to ensure that partnerships between them are effective, underpinned by democratic values and free from discrimination and inequality.

✓ Be flexible in support to youth-led organisations and initiatives
   Meaningfully supporting youth-led organisations, initiatives or movements implies a long-term engagement process – providing financial core support, developing organisational capacity and ensuring transparency and accountability to their own constituencies. Funding is a particular challenge – fundraising skills help youth-led movements to become sustainable and independent, but there is a risk that they become bogged down in bureaucratic processes or become vulnerable to co-optation or completely donor-driven. Flexibility is essential – not all youth movements benefit from becoming an official organisation.

✓ Take the consequences of power relations into account in everything you do
   Within your programme or organisation, be aware of the influence of power relations at all levels. For example, working with students in a school can change the existing power dynamics within the school and among the students, raising the possibility of negative consequences.

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