

# Ladder of Children's Participation

✘ Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation describes eight ascending levels of decision-making agency, control, and power that can be given to children and youth by adults

First published in ***Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship***, a 1992 publication of the International Child Development Centre of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation applied the conceptual framework of Sherry Arnstein's ***Ladder of Citizen Participation*** to the participation of children in adult projects, programs, and activities, including forms of work, advocacy, and citizenship. Like Arnstein's earlier framework, Hart's modified ladder of participation became an influential and widely applied model in the fields of child development, education, civic participation, and democratic decision-making.

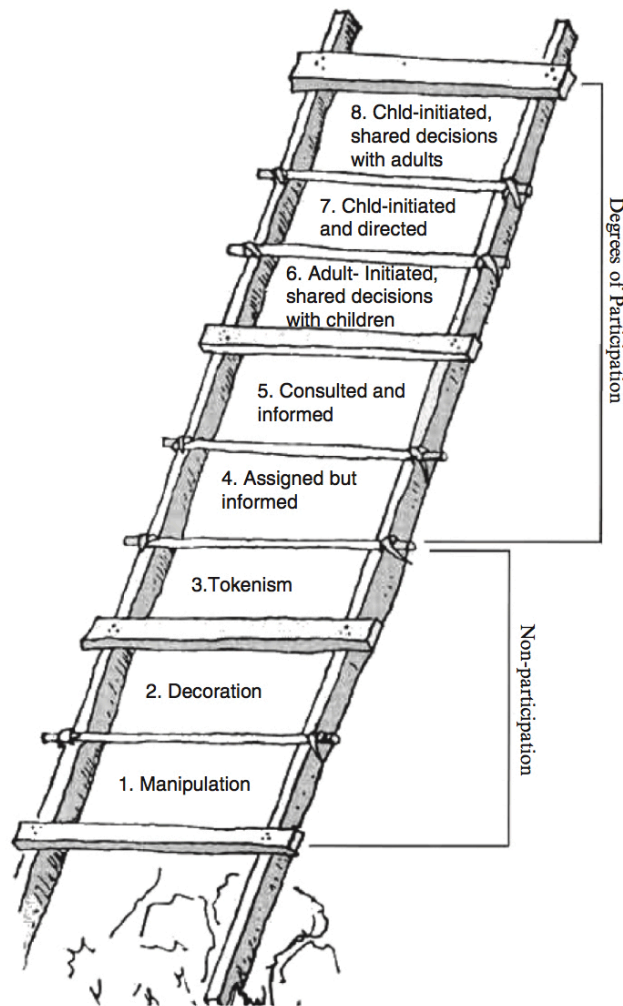
*"Young people's participation cannot be discussed without considering power relations and the struggle for equal rights. It is important that all young people have the opportunity to learn to participate in programmes which directly affect their lives. This is especially so for disadvantaged children for through participation with others such children learn that to struggle against discrimination and repression, and to fight for their equal rights in solidarity with others is itself a fundamental democratic right.... The highest possible degree of citizenship in my view is when we, children or adults, not only feel that we can initiate some change ourselves but when we also recognise that it is sometimes appropriate to also invite others to join us because of their own rights and because it affects them too, as fellow-citizens."*

*Roger A. Hart, Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*

In 2008, Hart explained his rationale for developing the model:

"The ladder was simply offered as a schema to help bring a critical perspective to a subject that at that time altogether lacked one.... The most beneficial quality of the model has probably been its utility for helping different professional groups and institutions to rethink how they work with young people: youth workers, television and radio directors, scout leaders, play workers, street workers, health professionals, and even some school teachers. Its simplicity of form and clarity of goals enable them to find a language to look at their current ways of working systemically, and in so doing, come up with something more complex and useful to their particular context."

The Ladder of Participation



Roger Hart's original 1992 illustration of the Ladder of Children's Participation from *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. The model features eight "rungs" that describe the characteristics associated with different levels of decision-making agency, control, or power that can be given to children and youth by adults.

## The Ladder of Children's Participation

Hart's typology of children's participation is presented as a metaphorical "ladder," with each ascending rung representing increasing levels of child agency, control, or power. In addition to the eight "rungs" of the ladder represent a continuum of power that ascends from *nonparticipation* (no agency) to *degrees of participation* (increasing levels of agency). It should be noted that Hart's use of the term "children" encompasses all legal minors from preschool-age children to adolescents.

The eight rungs of Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation are:

## 1. Manipulation

Participation as *manipulation* occurs when children and youth do not understand the issues motivating a participatory process or their role in that process. In Hart's words: "Sometimes adults feel that the end justifies the means.... If children have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions, then this is manipulation. Such manipulation under the guise of participation is hardly an appropriate way to introduce children into democratic political processes."

Examples include "pre-school children carrying political placards concerning the impact of social policies on children" when those children do not understand the issues or their role in the political process, and asking children "to make drawings of something, such as their ideal playground," after which "adults collect the drawings and in some hidden manner synthesize the ideas to come up with 'the children's design' for a playground. The process of analysis is not shared with the children and is usually not even made transparent to other adults. The children have no idea how their ideas were used."

## 2. Decoration

Participation as *decoration* occurs when children and youth are put on public display during an event, performance, or other activity organized for a specific purpose, but they do not understand the meaning or intent of their involvement.

Examples include "those frequent occasions when children are given T-shirts related to some cause, and may sing or dance at an event in such dress, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organizing of the occasion. The young people are there because of the refreshments, or some interesting performance, rather than the cause. The reason this is described as one rung up from 'manipulation' is that adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children. They simply use the children to bolster their cause in a relatively indirect way."

## 3. Tokenism

Participation as *tokenism* occurs in "those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions."

Examples include "how children are sometimes used on conference panels. Articulate, charming children are selected by adults to sit on a panel with little or no substantive preparation on the subject

and no consultation with their peers who, it is implied, they represent. If no explanation is given to the audience or to the children of how they were selected, and which children's perspectives they represent, this is usually sufficient indication that a project is not truly an example of participation."

#### **4. Assigned but Informed**

Participation that is *assigned but informed* occurs when the children and youth (1) "understand the intentions of the project," (2) "know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why," (3) "have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role," and (4) "volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them."

Hart describes, as an example, a World Summit for Children held at the United Nations Headquarters. It was "an extremely large event with great logistical complexity" and "it would have been difficult to involve young people genuinely in the planning of such an event," according to Hart. However, "a child was assigned to each of the 71 world leaders. As 'pages,' these children became experts on the United Nations building and the event, and were able to play the important role of ushering the Presidents and Prime Ministers to the right places at the right times." In this case, the children's role was both functional and symbolic, and "the children's roles as pages were important and were clear to all."

#### **5. Consulted and Informed**

Participation that constitutes *consulted and informed* occurs when children act as "consultants for adults in a manner which has great integrity. The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously."

One example Hart describes is of an adult-led survey of youth perceptions in which the youth are informed about the purpose of the survey, consulted about appropriate questions before it's developed, and given an opportunity to provide feedback on the final survey before it is administered.

#### **6. Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Children**

Participation that constitutes *adult-initiated, shared decisions with children* occurs when adults initiate participatory projects, but they share decision-making authority or management with children.

One example Hart describes is a youth newspaper. In this case, the newspaper may be an adult-initiated project, but children can manage every aspect of the operation—from reporting, writing, and

editing to advertising, printing, and distribution—with only guidance and technical assistance from adults.

## **7. Child-Initiated and Directed**

Participation that is *child-initiated and directed* occurs when children and youth conceptualize and carry out complex projects by working cooperatively in small or large groups. While adults may observe and assist the children, they do not interfere with the process or play a directive or managerial role.

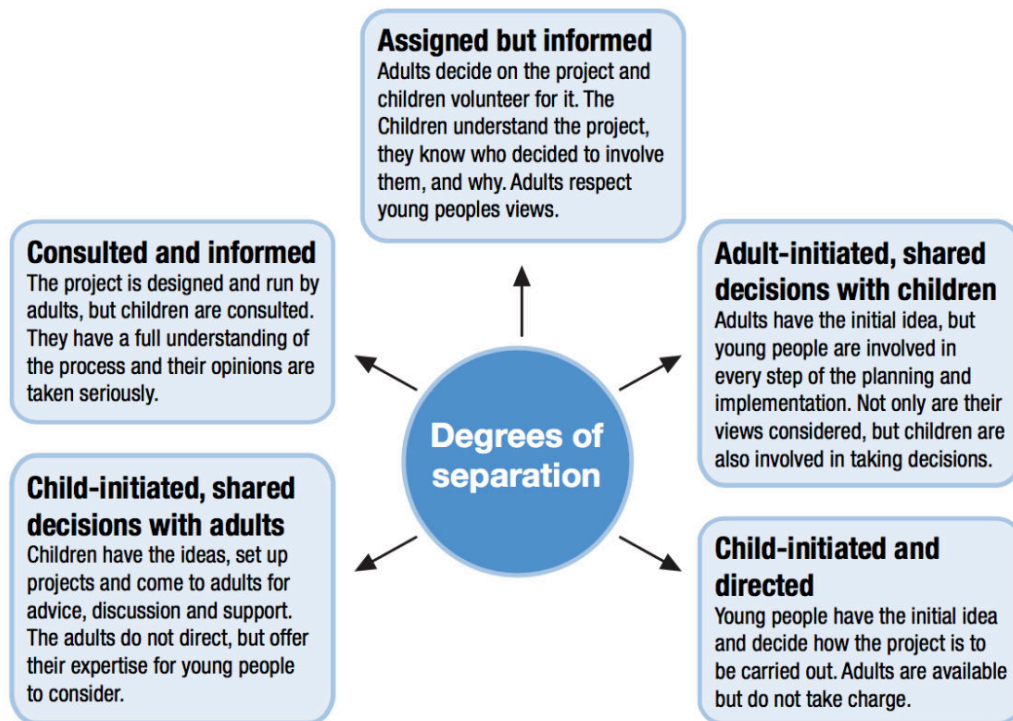
Hart notes that it's difficult "to find examples of child-initiated community projects. A primary reason for this is that adults are usually not good at responding to young people's own initiatives. Even in those instances where adults leave children alone to design and paint a wall mural or their own recreation room, it seems hard for them not to play a directing role."

## **8. Child-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults**

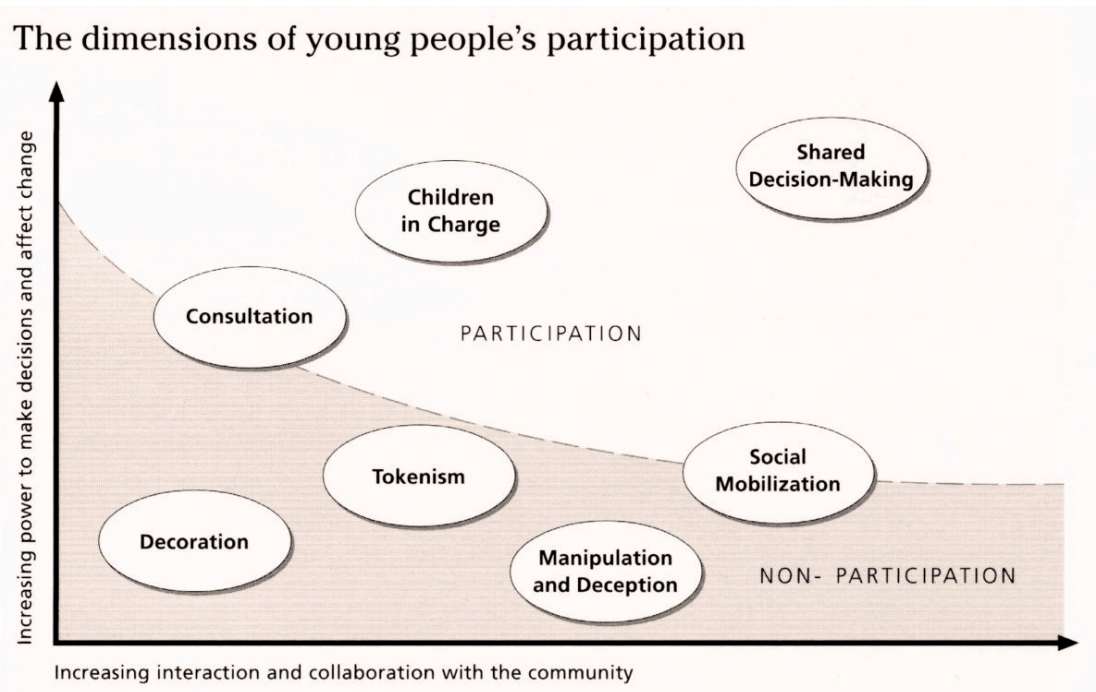
Participation that constitutes *child-initiated, shared decisions with adults* occurs when children—though primarily teenage youth in this case—share decision-making authority, management, or power with adult partners and allies.

Examples would include students partnering with adults to raise funding, develop and run a school program, or lead a community campaign. A major advantage of this form of youth participation is that it can empower young people to have a significant impact on policies, decisions, or outcomes that were traditionally under the exclusive control and direction of adults, such as legislative or political processes.

Hart notes, however, that examples of this form of child and youth participation are rare: "The reason, I believe, is not the absence of a desire to be useful on the part of teenagers. It is rather the absence of caring adults attuned to the particular interests of young people. We need people who are able to respond to the subtle indicators of energy and compassion in teenagers."



*In Empowering Children and Young People: Promoting Involvement in Decision-Making* (1997), Phil Treseder refashioned Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation into a hub-and-spoke configuration to avoid common criticisms of the ladder metaphor: in real-world settings, participation does not unfold in an ordered sequence from higher to lower, and forms of participation that appear on lower rungs of the ladder are not intrinsically worse than higher levels—in fact, they may be appropriate in certain circumstances, such as when children and youth need adult support and guidance to fully participate in a leadership or decision-making process. Image source: [Empowering Young People](#), Carnegie UK Trust, January 2008.



In *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth: A Manual for Participation* (2001), David Driskell proposed another reconceptualization of Roger Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation called the Dimensions of Young People's Participation. The reconceived presentation places the eight rungs of Hart's Ladder on an X-Y axis. The vertical dimension illustrates increasing power to make decisions and change, while the horizontal dimension illustrates increasing levels of interaction and collaboration. Image source: *Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth: A Manual for Participation*.

Since Hart first proposed the ladder, several debates have arisen about appropriate and inappropriate applications of the framework, in part because practitioners began using the model in ways that Hart never intended. Addressing a few of these debates, Hart dedicated a chapter to the limitations of the framework in the 2008 collection *Participation and Learning*, which Hart edited with colleagues:

- The ladder is intended to be applied primarily to "programmes or projects rather than on children's everyday informal participation in their communities." As Hart writes, "The ladder of participation addresses only a rather narrow range of ways that most children in the world participate in their communities...and it is largely limited to describing the varying roles adults play in relation to children's participation."
- Hart also cautions against viewing the ladder as a developmental model with sequential stages or levels of participation: "In some ways the ladder metaphor is unfortunate for it seems to imply a necessary sequence to children's developing competence in participation. This was not the intention but given the metaphor of a ladder it is not at all surprising that the model has been interpreted as stepwise climbing. In fact the ladder is primarily about the degree to which adults and institutions afford or enable children to participate.... I think of the upper rungs of the ladder as expressions of different 'degrees' of agency or participatory engagement by young people." (For a related discussion of the tendency to

misinterpret ladder models, see [Ladder of Citizen Participation.](#))

- The ladder is not intended to be an instrument for program evaluation: “It is an easy step from thinking of the ladder as a developmental model to using it as a comprehensive tool to evaluate how participatory a programme is.” But this application was not Hart’s original intent: “There was no intention for it to serve as any kind of comprehensive evaluative tool.”
- The ladder does not advocate that adults cede all power to children or that ceding power to children is always a good thing. In Hart’s words, “One of the most surprising critiques of the model for me has been the desire of some to transform the top rung of the ladder to be ‘children in charge’ or children’s decision-making without adults.... My purpose in creating this scheme had not been to argue naïvely that we should think of children as repressed individuals who needed to be liberated through a series of steps whereby all adult engagement was removed. My concern was rather to argue that children’s potentials as citizens needs to be recognised to the fullest and, to that end, children ought to be able to participate at times at their highest possible level.”
- Like any model, the ladder reflects some degree of cultural bias, and it may be less accurate or useful when applied to certain cultures. For example, the ladder primarily reflects a “Western orientation,” which tends to emphasize individualism and the value of progressive independence and autonomy in child development, and therefore it may be less useful or even problematic when generically applied to cultures that emphasize the value of collectivism and the maintenance of familial or communal interdependence in child development. According to Hart, “It is most surprising to me that I could not find more cultural critiques of the ladder, particularly from Asia and Africa, for I can think of some important ones. The reason may well be that many of those who write about the issue of children’s participation are themselves educated in the West and rely on Western theories of children’s development which, sadly, almost completely dominates the child development literature globally.”

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## References

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Hart, R. A. (2008). Stepping back from ‘the ladder’: Reflections on a model of participatory work with children. In ***Participation and Learning: Perspectives on education and the environment, health and sustainability*** (pp. 19–31). Netherlands: Springer.



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