

Section Two: Participation in Practice

Significant levels of investment in the creation of different models of participation have been committed over the past 30 years. This has given rise to a considerable body of experience in the elements that contribute to effective and meaningful participation and the forms that it can take. While it is neither possible nor desirable to seek to restrict a definition to any single model, the following elements can be understood as a useful guide to understanding the conditions necessary to ensure the realisation of adolescents' participation rights:

- The necessary enabling environment
- Features necessary for meaningful participation
- Different modes of participation
- Social ecology of participation

2.1 Establishing the Enabling Environments for Participation

Few societies have traditionally created the opportunities for adolescents to make a meaningful contribution in matters affecting their lives. A range of barriers can impede those opportunities. Action is needed both to recognise and acknowledge the existence of these barriers, and to act to remove them, in order to build enabling environments that respect, protect and fulfil adolescents' right to participation. In so doing, sensitivity needs to be afforded to the significant differences in how those barriers impact girls and boys, adolescents of different ages, as well as those who are more marginalised.

a. **Addressing social norms and barriers**

In all countries, adolescents encounter social norms and prevailing cultural values that impede participation rights. Deep-seated hierarchies of power, at multiple levels within communities, serve to exclude adolescents from decision-making in most societies. These hierarchies are justified in terms of, for example, adolescent incapacity, need for protection, traditional gender role expectations, fear of disruption and need for discipline. Intersectional and structural discriminations can further compound exclusion from participation, for example, for girls or adolescents with disabilities. Younger adolescents may experience greater limitations on their right to be heard. Investment in measures to engage with, challenge and potentially change these norms, and demonstrate the individual, familial and societal benefits of greater

democratic engagement with adolescents, will contribute to enhanced participation outcomes.

b. **Establishing the legal and policy environment**

If the right of all adolescents to be heard in all spheres of their lives is to be realised, it needs to be underpinned by a legislative and policy environment to strengthen and guarantee that right. Establishing legal rights, incorporating them into policies and providing the necessary budgetary support will contribute to the creation of an environment in which participation becomes institutionalised and culturally embedded for all adolescents, rather than simply a series of short-term, one-off activities.

c. **Promoting awareness of the right to participate**

It is not possible for adolescents to exercise their participation rights if they are unaware either that they have those rights or how they can be used. Equally, unless and until professionals working with and for adolescents understand the implications of those rights for their day-to-day practice and the institutions within which they work, and begin to transform the cultures within those institutions, adolescents will continue to be denied the right to be heard. This calls for the strengthening of human rights education in schools, and education on human rights for adult professionals.

d. **Building skills and capacities**

In societies where adolescents are not encouraged to question, speak out, express views, and make decisions, investment is needed to build their skills, confidence

and capacities to exercise their participation rights, and to overcome the fear of so doing. This can only happen if adults are simultaneously provided with the knowledge, skills and capacities to enable them to work with adolescents in a participatory and inclusive manner, consistent with their human rights.

e. **Creating opportunities for participation**

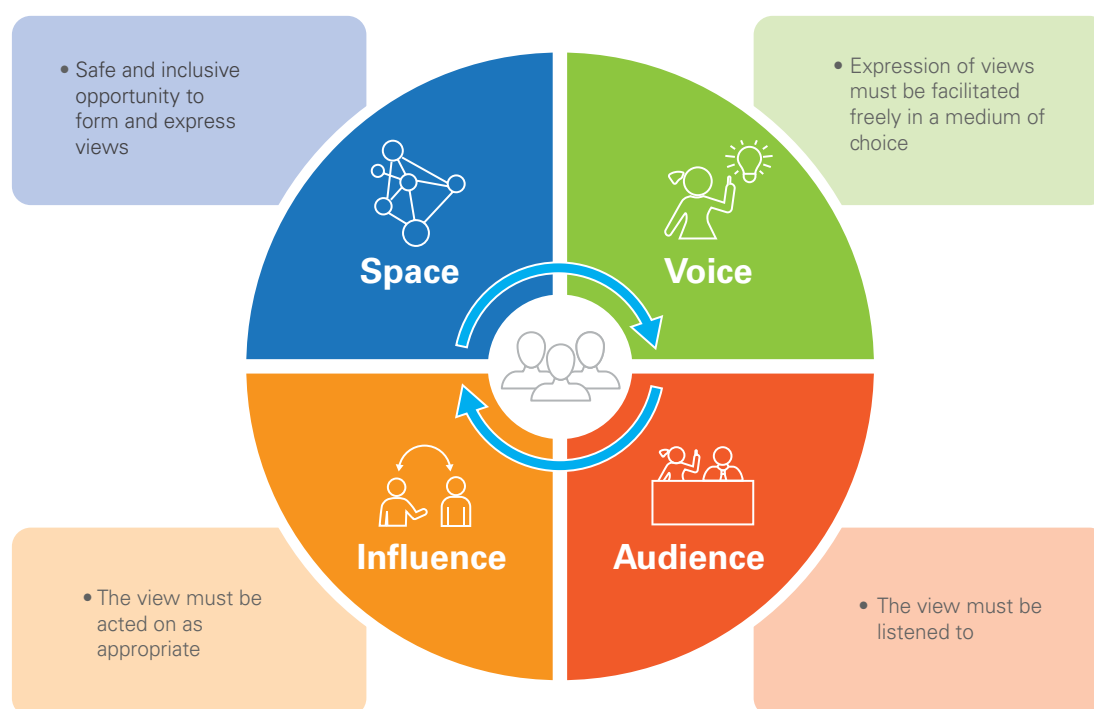
Adolescents must be provided with time and opportunities for their opinions to be heard and to be able to influence decisions affecting them. It requires more than one-off consultations. It necessitates the 'institutionalising' of opportunities for individual adolescents to be heard in, for example, their home, schools, local communities, health care, child protection, work places, and judicial systems and national processes. It also requires support for the adolescents to organise, identify issues of concern to them and gain

access to relevant policy makers. This might involve opportunities to undertake research, develop strategies for action, provide mutual support and campaign and advocate for change both online and through more traditional routes.

2.2 Essential Features of Meaningful Participation

Promoting the enabling environment involves the measures needed to build and sustain a culture of respect for adolescents' participation rights. However, at the level of any specific participatory activity, attention must be afforded to the four specific obligations placed on adult duty-bearers under Article 12 in order for it to be meaningful and effective. All four features are essential to the fulfilment of the right to meaningful participation.

Figure 3 Features of meaningful participation⁷



7 Lundy L. Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*. 2007 Dec;33(6):927-942

- **Space:** In order to become increasingly active in influencing matters affecting them, adolescents need to be able to form and express views and they must be afforded the space and time to do so. Adolescents must be given the opportunity to gain the confidence, the time and space to contribute their views. This applies both at the individual level, for example, decisions relating to health care, as well as issues at the broader level such as access to services, legislation or policies.
- **Voice:** Adolescents can express themselves through multiple different media. For example, the digital environment affords significant opportunities through which adolescents can speak out. It offers the potential for them to network, reach out, and communicate widely to their peers as well as wider society. Appropriate and accessible information is an important pre-requisite for the ability to speak out and express views and negotiate decisions. This needs to be provided in different forms according to the adolescents concerned, for example in relevant languages, in sign language, braille or other forms of augmented communication. Not all adolescents will be able to express themselves easily. The onus is on supporting adults to find ways in which to enable adolescents to communicate their views, concerns or ideas. They may need to be able to raise issues confidentially, or through different forms of expression, for example, in writing, through artistic media including music, poetry or writing. It is worth remembering that, according to Article 12, participation rights are based on the capacity to form a view, and not on the ability to express a view in any particular way.
- **Audience:** Central to the right to participate is that adults listen respectfully to what adolescents have to say. They must have access to the relevant audience for the views being expressed, whether that is their parents, peers, a teacher, a doctor or judge, a local politician, key civil servants, or relevant media. For example, a school council must have access to the head teacher or school board if its role is to have any meaning. The right to express views and have them given due weight can only be realised if adolescents' views are heard by those people with the power and authority to act on those views.

- **Influence:** The right to participate does not imply that adolescents' views must always be acted on. However, it does require that their views are given proper consideration and that any decision that is subsequently made is reported back to them with an explanation of how and why it was made in the way that it was. Ideally this should apply in all settings.

In addition, for adolescent participation to be effective, ethical, systematic and sustainable, there are a number of basic quality requirements that have been elaborated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child and need to be reflected clearly in all activity, initiatives, programmes and projects working directly with adolescents need to be met.⁸

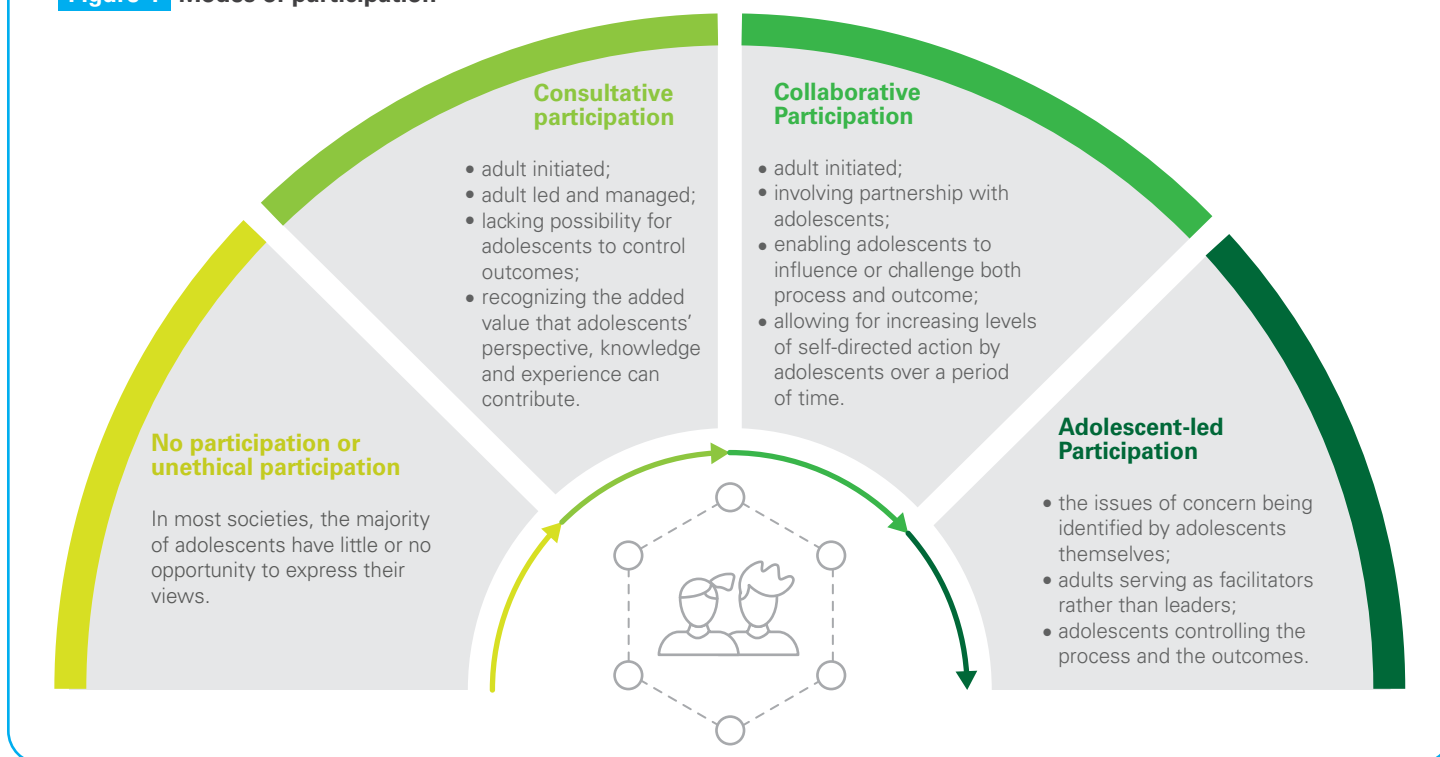
2.3 Different Modes of Participation

Adolescents can participate in activities, processes and decision-making in broadly three different ways: consultative, collaborative or adolescent-led.⁹ It is important not to perceive them in terms of a hierarchy of preference. Each mode of participation offers differing degrees of empowerment and influence, but they are all legitimate and appropriate in different contexts, and can be **rights-respecting provided they comply with the features of space, voice, audience and influence, and the nine basic requirements for quality**. Without compliance, participation runs the risk of being tokenistic, manipulative or even coercive.



8. The nine requirements are that participation must always be: transparent and informative; voluntary; respectful; relevant; child-friendly; inclusive; supported by training for adults; safe and sensitive to risk; and accountable CRC General Comment No. 12, The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 2009

9. Lansdown G & O'Kane C (2014) A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation, Save the Children et al, London

Figure 4 Modes of participation

- **Consultative participation** takes place when adults seek adolescents' views in order to build knowledge and understanding of their lives and experience. It can be used to reach out to a wide range of adolescents, and tends to be the most commonly used approach to participation. Consultative participation does not allow for sharing or transferring decision-making responsibility to adolescents themselves. However, it does recognise that they have knowledge, experience and perspectives that need to inform adult decision-making.

Consultation is an appropriate means of enabling adolescents to express views, for example, in family decision making, when undertaking research, or in planning, monitoring or evaluation processes, or when developing legislation, policy or services. For example, a new programme initiative might consult with adolescents before deciding a course of action. An NGO might conduct a survey to gather adolescents' views on how to design a campaign, or to provide the basis of evidence of that campaign. Online surveys and outreach programmes such as U-Report represent a consultative form of participation. Adolescents can also be consulted on decisions affecting them in health care or in

education, or as witnesses in judicial or administrative proceedings. Consultation may be the most appropriate way of enabling adolescents to contribute their perspectives within democratic systems where elected politicians are accountable to the whole population, but wish to gather views from different constituencies.

They tend to be one off activities with no on-going commitment, but they do offer a viable means to gather the views of very large numbers of adolescents, and the results can be more representative of the views of the entire adolescent population than other types of participatory activity. However, it only constitutes meaningful participation if serious consideration is given to the views contributed by adolescents, and appropriate feedback is provided on how those views have been taken into account.

- **Collaborative participation** affords a greater degree of partnership between adults and adolescents, with the opportunity for active engagement at any stage of a decision, initiative, project or service. Collaborative participation might include involvement of adolescents in designing and undertaking research, policy development,

peer education and counselling, participation in conferences, or in representation on boards or committees. Collaborative participation provides opportunity for shared decision making with adults, and for adolescents to influence both the process and the outcomes in any given programme.

Consultative processes can be made collaborative by, for example, a research project:

- enabling adolescents to identify what the relevant questions are;
- giving adolescents the opportunity to help develop the methodology for the research;
- supporting adolescents to take on the role of researchers;
- involving adolescents in discussions about the findings, their interpretation and their implications for future developments.
- involving adolescents in the dissemination of research, and supporting them in advocacy or campaigns for the implementation of recommendations.

Individual decisions can also be collaborative, for example, adolescents sharing responsibility with their parents for a decision relating to medical treatment, where the adolescent does not want to take a decision alone but is more comfortable with the support of parents.

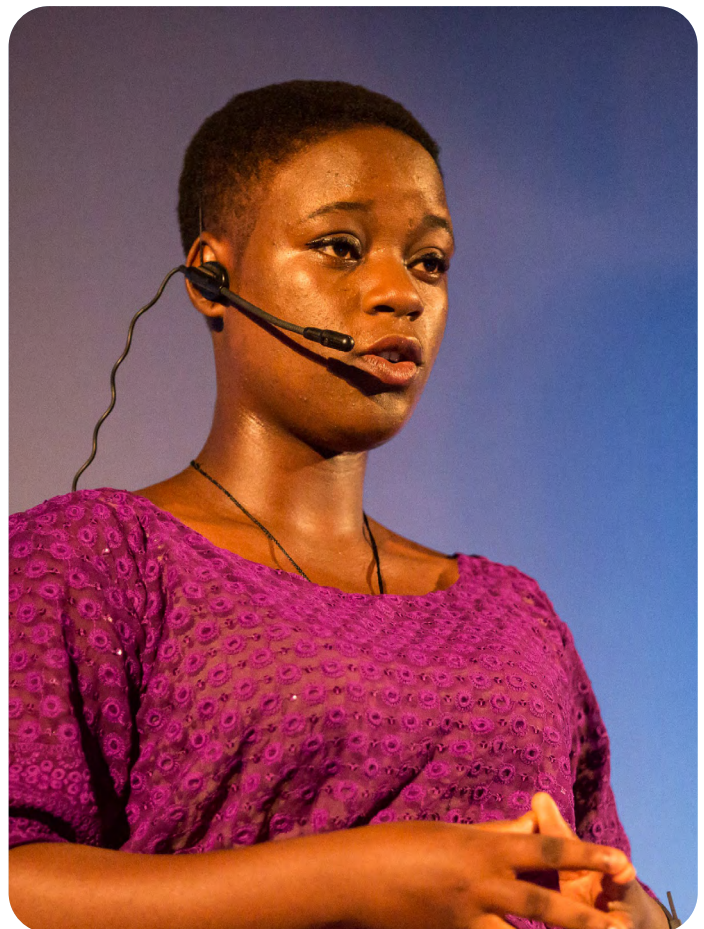
- **Adolescent-led participation** takes place where adolescents are able to create the space and opportunity to initiate their own agendas. This kind of participation tends to involve smaller numbers since, as with adults, in any population, only a minority are likely to be motivated to become actively engaged. However, with growing numbers of adolescents engaged in the digital environment, adolescent-led participation online is rapidly increasing the scope and access for self-directed engagement.

Adolescent-led participation affords greater empowerment and allows for a greater degree of influence, for example, through the establishment and management of their own organisations, or identification of problems within their communities that they wish to address. It can be activated through social media, where the opportunity for more immediate or short-term

activism can take place. It might involve: policy analysis, advocacy, awareness raising; community action; peer representation and education; and use of and access to the media as well as online campaigns and networking. In general, the role of adults in adolescent-led participation is to act as facilitators to enable adolescents to pursue their own objectives, through provision of facilities, information, guidance, contacts, resources, and support.

However, in the digital environment, it is increasingly possible for adolescents to organise and engage, both individually and collectively, without the same degree of adult support.

The appropriate mode of participation will be informed by the context. All three types can apply to both individual and collective participation. However, while all three can be appropriate, it is important that consultation is not always used as the default mode simply because it is easier, without full consideration of the potential for a higher level of engagement of adolescents.



2.4 Social Ecology of Participation

Adolescents' lives are impacted, both directly and indirectly, by factors throughout the social ecology – from the family, and peers, to school and the local community to local and national government through to the international sphere and the global environment. Accordingly, they are entitled to participate at all of these spheres in order to try and influence and transform laws, policies, budgeting, service provision and design, cultures and norms, political priorities and socio-economic conditions that affect them, not only now but in the future. The

opportunities for wider engagement are enhanced by the digital environment and use of social media that allow for the building of far greater networks, more responsively, more cheaply and with diminished need for adult support.

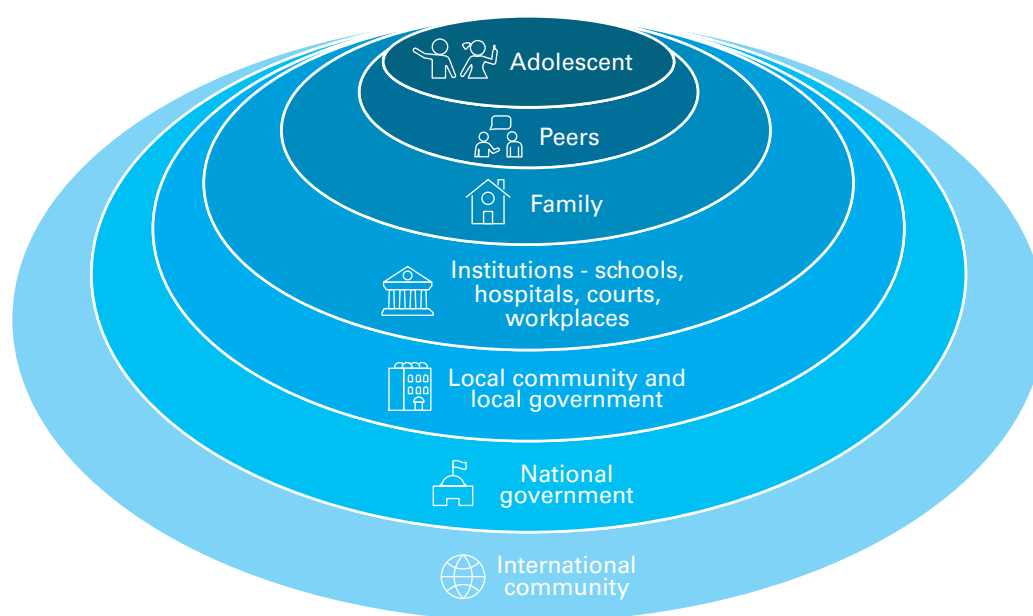
Depending on the level and the sphere, adolescents can be involved in multiple forms of participation, for example:

- individual participation within the family, school, health services, workplace, or judicial proceedings
- collective participation involving peer education,

advocacy and campaigns, research, community development, peace-building, strengthening governance and accountability, running their own organisations, environmental protection, participatory budgeting, promotion of positive behaviours and norms.

Adolescents have been active participants in all of these spheres. In all areas of policy – child protection, education, health, media, water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, social protection, climate change, as well as budgeting– initiatives have been developed to engage adolescent perspectives and experiences. Innovative and wide-ranging approaches to participation have been adopted, including peer education, research, advocacy, community development, campaigning, and UNCRC reporting. Adolescents have been invited to speak at conferences at local, national and international levels. A few, such as Malala Yousafzai, have been recognised as world leaders. Children's parliaments, unions, clubs, and adolescent-led organisations have developed across many regions of the world, representing an expression of democracy and an opportunity to learn about and claim rights. Rights-respecting schools in which children have a meaningful role to play have been introduced in a number of countries.¹⁰

Figure 5 A social ecology of adolescent participation



¹⁰ see, for example, <http://www.unicef.org/education/Rights-Respecting-Schools-Award/>