

Resource sheet 1: Models of Children's Participation

A. Hart's Ladder of Participation

In the quite substantial literature now available on children's participation, the best known model is the 'ladder of participation' developed by Roger Hart (1992),

Hart stresses that the ladder forms a *starting point* for thinking about children's participation in projects rather than a finished model. However, the lower end of the ladder highlights what is 'not' participation. The emphasis higher up the ladder is on *relationships/ partnerships* between adults and children.

It is important to remember that the ladder's 'rungs' do not imply that one level must lead onto the next, and the ultimate aim of every project is to reach level 8. The reality is that initiatives involving children have such different objectives, and the nature in which they begin can vary so widely.



Taken from: Hart, R. (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* UNICEF

B. Reddy & Ratna's 'Scenarios of Adult-Children Engagement'

1. Active resistance: There are adults who actively resist children's participation. These adults belong to several categories. Some of them feel that children should not be burdened with participation. Some believe that children do not have the capacity to participate and hence cannot make informed choices. Some hold the view that children are very easy to manipulate and hence their participation may be used only to further adult agendas. Some adults in this category take very strong positions against children's participation and actually mobilise support and lobby against it. They do so because they are very aware of the power of children's participation and hence do not want to forfeit their power.

2. Hindrance: There are adults who hinder children's participation. Some of them may be against children's participation and they may come in the way of children's participation either overtly or covertly. They block opportunities for children and discourage children from participating. There are others in this category that may voice their support to children's participation, but the manner in which they interact with children may actually hinder children's participation. They may intentionally or unintentionally undermine the ability of children and may end up making children feel inadequate and reluctant to participate.

3. Manipulation: There are adults who manipulate children. Some adults in this scenario use children to further their own agendas. They may coach children to voice what they want or cleverly interpret what children say/do to suit their own interests. Sometimes this manipulation is very obvious, yet often it may be quite subtle – and may be carried out in ways children find very difficult to notice, let alone counter. There are other adults who may manipulate children in order to 'get the best performance' out of them – and according to the adults, this may be done in the best interest of the child. Sometimes manipulation takes on emotional overtones as children often have emotional ties with the adults they interact with closely. Manipulation is a very subtle and sensitive area. This critique has been often used to discredit children's participation. Even the best child facilitators could end up manipulating children unintentionally and unconsciously. The only way to guard against this is to be constantly vigilant.

4. Decoration: There are adults who treat children more or less like decorative objects, where they are expected to basically add colour to the proceedings. Children are called to present bouquets or sing songs – and not much is made of their presence.

5. Tokenism: There are adults who bring in children to take mileage from their presence and pretend that children have been given opportunities to participate. The adults may not manipulate children to speak on their behalf, yet they do 'use' the presence of children to be counted as 'advocates of children's rights' and to be politically correct.

6. Tolerance: There are adults who bear with the notion of children's participation as some one higher up (such as a donor agency) thinks it is important. In some cases, children themselves may have demanded to be listened to. Adults then go through some consultative exercises with children but do not give any value or credit to the process or the outcome.

7. Indulgence: There are adults who find children's participation 'cute' and 'interesting' and are willing to provide limited spaces for children to voice their opinions. They keep prompting children to speak up and try to keep the environment friendly. They may listen to the opinions expressed by children with interest, but may not follow them up with seriousness. These are mostly one time events and very little comes out of such 'participation'.

8. Children assigned but informed: There are adults who work with children with some seriousness. The adults in this category decide on what needs to be done, but keep children well informed. They encourage children to be actively involved in the activities. They will guide children to implement the task, but do not expect children to input into the larger design of the process.

9. Children consulted and informed: Some adults believe in consulting children and keeping them involved. The adults take the lead role but inform the children about the situation and seek their opinion. They try to give children a sense of ownership over some aspects of the process, but under their supervision. The adults are still in control over the process, but they keep it flexible to incorporate the suggestions and concerns of the children.

10. Adult initiated shared decisions with children: There are adults who initiate a process or a programme, but are clearly willing to share the decision making space with the children. They see it as a collaborative interaction. Even though initiated by them, they make it a joint effort. Here too children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.

11. Children – initiated, shared decisions with adults: There are children and their organisations that call the first shot, and invite adults to collaborate with them. Children ensure that adults are jointly involved in deciding what needs to be done and share the ownership of the process and the outcome. Within the collaboration, children and adults may take on different roles, yet those roles are defined by mutual consent.

12. Children initiated and directed: There are children and their organisations that are in total control and they may or may not involve the adults. If they do decide to involve the adults, they will work out the framework in which the adults are to participate. Children will continue to keep the process under their control and will have the total ownership of the process and the outcome.

13. Jointly initiated and directed by children and adults: There are adults and children who have developed a partnership and they jointly initiate and direct the processes. They have joint ownership of the idea, the process and the outcome. They may play different roles, based on mutual consent. This relationship is possible only when both the adults and children are empowered and are able to pool their respective strengths to achieve a common objective, in partnership with each other.

Taken from: Reddy, N. & K. Ratna (eds.) (2002) *“A Journey in Children’s Participation”*, The Concerned for Working Children, Bangalore, India. www.workingchild.org