

What does participation mean?

The ladder of participation is a model developed by Hart [1992] which identifies eight levels of children's participation in projects. It is designed to encourage those working with children to think more closely about the nature and purpose of children's participation in community activities. Hart argues that genuine participation should not be confused with activities such as children's dance, music or theatre performances in which children act out predetermined roles in projects designed by adults. Such performances, while they may be worthwhile in themselves and a positive experience for children and adults alike, need to be recognised for what they are: performances.

Rung 1: Manipulation

Example 1: pre-school children carrying political placards.

If children do not understand the issues and their role, then this is manipulation. This is unlikely to be an appropriate way of introducing children to democratic political processes. Adults may underestimate the competence of children while at the same time using them to influence a particular cause.

Example 2: children are consulted but given no feedback. They may be asked to draw their ideal playground, adults then synthesise the results and come up with a 'children's design'. The processes are not transparent to the children and perhaps not even to other adults. On the other hand, a drawing competition, where the process and judging criteria are explicit, would not be manipulative, since no pretence would be made about participation.

Rung 2: Decoration

Example: children are given T-shirts related to a cause, but have little idea of what it is all about and no say in the organisation of the occasion. Although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by children, they are still using the children to bolster the cause, but in a more indirect way.

Rung 3: Tokenism

Example: children are invited onto a conference panel and 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 or discuss the issue with their peers. Although the children are selected by adults it is often implied that they are representing other children.

Children included in such procedures may simply learn that participation can be a sham. This is not to suggest that young people cannot be effectively involved in conference panels, but the events need to be organised in a participatory manner.

Rung 4: Assigned but informed

To establish whether a project is genuinely participatory a checklist is useful:

do children understand the intentions of the project?

do they know who made the decisions about their involvement and why?

do they have a real rather than 'decorative' role?

was the project explained to them before they were invited to volunteer?

Example: children participated as ushers at the UN World Summit for Children. A child was assigned to each of the Presidents and Prime Ministers, taking on both a functional and symbolic role. In this role the child became an expert on the UN building and the event, ensuring that the leader was shown to the right place at the right time, but no pretence was made about these children representing the viewpoints of their peers at the Summit. [The question of whether it might have been possible or desirable to consult children in the planning of the event is not addressed in this example.]

Rung 5: Consulted and informed

Children act as consultants for adults in a project which is run by adults, but the children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously. Example: the production of the *Pied Crow Magazine* in Kenya. A draft version of each edition is trialled with a group of children before the final production stage. Children comment on the value and relevance of the topic matter, as well as its more general appeal. Children know that their views will be taken seriously and are encouraged to become involved in the process, with their ideas being taken up in future editions. Children as readers are encouraged to write for other children and understand that children's contributions are appreciated and welcomed.

Rung 6: Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children

At this level there is genuine participation, for although projects are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with the young people concerned.

Example: children learn the skills of desktop publishing, and design school or community newspapers. They develop skills in decision-making, collaborative working, research, interviewing etc. and can draw on the technical assistance and advice of adults, for example, journalists.

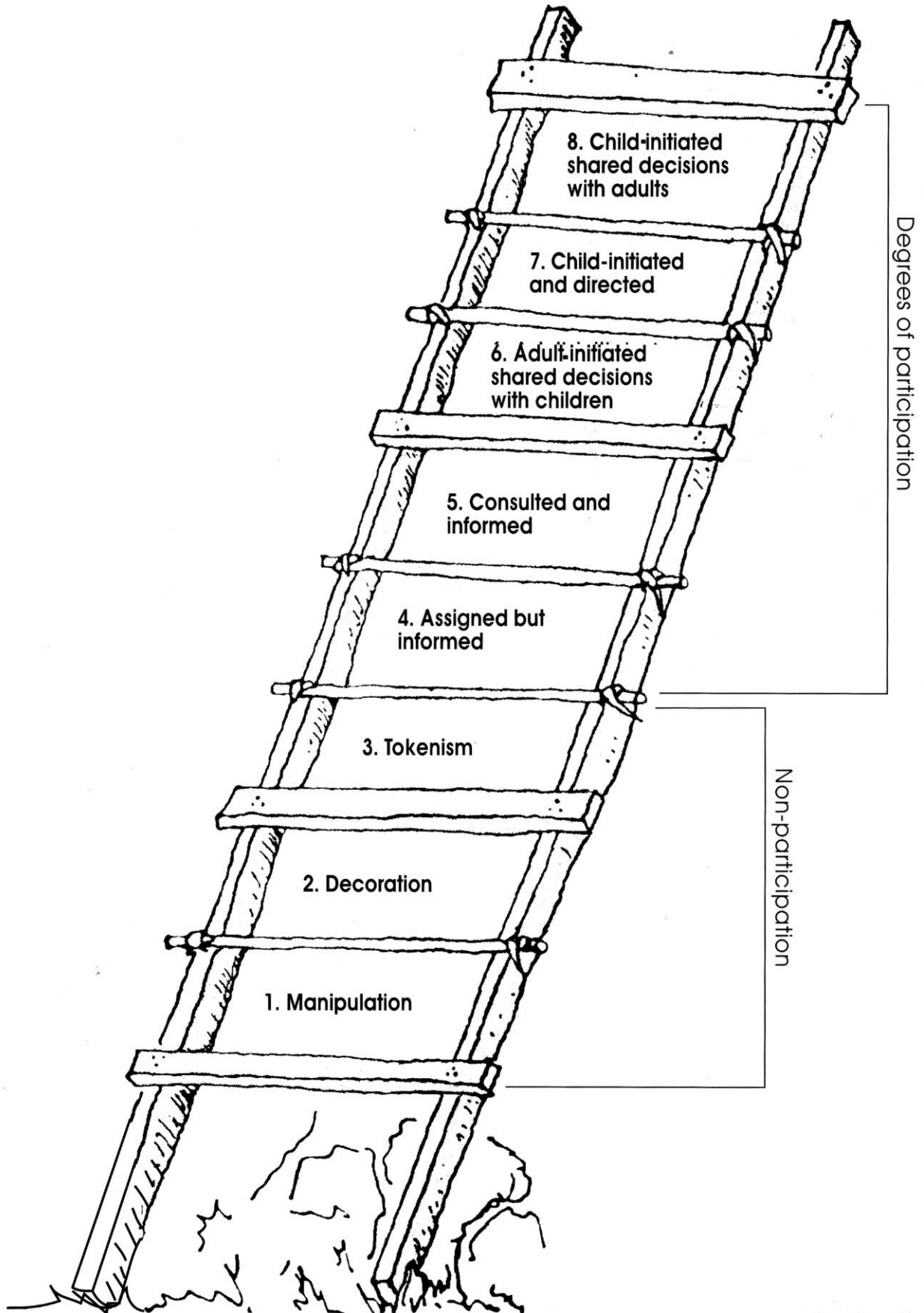
Rung 7: Child-initiated and directed

It is easy to think of examples where children develop and carry out complex projects in their play, working in a co-operative way. It is more difficult to think of examples of child-initiated community projects. Even when children develop an idea, for example, to design and paint a mural, adults often find it difficult not to step in and direct the project.

Rung 8: Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults

Hart suggests that such projects are rare because adults are often not attuned to the particular interests of young people and that it is usually only older teenagers who tend to incorporate adults into projects they have designed and managed. An important point of discussion here is: how are such projects an 'advance' on those at rung 7 which are simply child initiated and directed?

The ladder of participation



From Roger Hart, [1992]