



Participation: dimensions and degrees

Being clear about the dimensions and degrees of participation will help to avoid misunderstandings about what consumers are being invited to become involved in.

Dimensions of participation

Dimensions of participation refer to the “who, what and where” of participation.¹

Figure 1: Dimensions of participation

Who is being invited to participate?
Consumer (user and carer/family) Consumer representative Consumer advocate Community member Service provider Service manager Policy maker Researcher
In which organisational systems is participation being considered?
Governance Evaluation and planning Service delivery Care processes / case management Groupwork Research Policy Human resources / professional development Administration
At what level of the organisation is participation being invited?
Organisational governance Program management Individual case management
What degree of participation is being offered?
Information giving Consultation Deciding together Acting together / partnership Independent initiatives Consumer control

Degrees of consumer participation

Tokenism is the main pitfall that both consumers and service providers want to avoid when developing consumer participation strategies. Being clear about what degree of participation consumers are being invited to engage in can help to avoid frustration and accusations of tokenism.

Knowing about the different degrees of participation

also enables organisations to think about what they are ready for and to take things gradually, rather than “jumping in the deep end” and risking disappointments with the process. Finally, the view of staff and consumers of what is possible can be expanded by considering different degrees of participation, from information giving to partnerships and consumer controlled initiatives.

The following framework of degrees of participation was discussed by service providers and consumers and accepted as simple and applicable to housing and homelessness services. It describes degrees of participation from the least amount of consumer involvement to the most. Some degrees of participation will be more appropriate in some situations than others. A variety of different strategies and approaches will ensure that a variety of different people can participate, and each strategy can be designed to reinforce other strategies.

More or less involvement is not necessarily better; the framework just demonstrates that a range of options exist.



Figure 2: Degrees of participation

1. Information

The organisation provides information—about services, about planned changes—to its consumers; this can support participation. The minimum is that people are told what is planned.

2. Consultation

The organisation provides information to its consumers and seeks their views on that information. A number of options may be presented and feedback is considered.

3. Deciding together

Consumers are encouraged to provide additional ideas and options, and to join in deciding the best way forward. This may be the beginning of a partnership.

4. Acting together / partnership

Consumers decide together with the rest of the organization what is best, and a partnership to carry it out is formed.

5. Independent initiatives

Consumers are helped to do what they want, perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the organisation.

6. Consumer control

Consumers control the strategic direction and operational framework of the organisation.

Other frameworks

There are other frameworks for understanding degrees of participation; you might choose another that suits your organisation better. All frameworks to some extent simplify the complexities of consumer participation, however they are still of value in clarifying expectations and processes.

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation

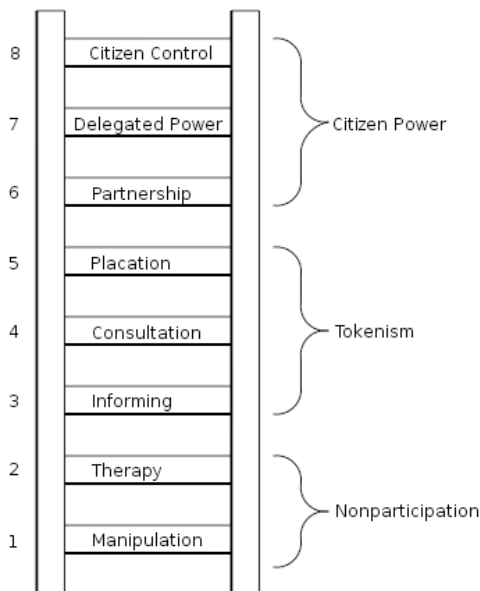
Most frameworks exploring degrees of participation are informed by Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. In the late 1960s, citizen participation was presented as a way to think about power with the aim to enable 'the have-not citizens', excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.

"With this understanding, participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo."

(Arnstein 1969)

Arnstein proposed eight levels of participation to help in analysis of power sharing. These are grouped into three sets ranging from non-participation through tokenism to citizen power. For further information, refer to Arnstein's 1969 article.²

Figure 3: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation



Hart's ladder of participation for young people

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation is designed for young people but is relevant to all consumers of homelessness and housing services. It includes eight levels, which reflect who is driving the development initiative:

1. **Manipulation** - adults use youth to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by youth.
2. **Decoration** - youth are used to help or "bolster" a cause.
3. **Tokenism** - young people appear to be given a voice, but have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.
4. **Assigned but informed** - youth are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.
5. **Consulted and informed** - youth give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults.
6. **Adult-initiated programs or projects, shared decision-making with youth.**
7. **Youth-initiated and directed** - young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.
8. **Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults** - decision-making is shared among youth and adults. These projects empower young people and also enable them to access and learn from the life experiences and expertise of adults.

The first three levels are classified as being non-participatory, while the top five rungs of the ladder represent increasing degrees of participation. The value of Harts' ladder of participation is that it clearly spells out the ways that so-called 'participation' can in fact silence and use young people for the purposes of adult agendas. The ladder can also be seen as an aspirational model. For further information, refer to Brophy Family and Youth Services' 2005 report.³

What level of participation is your organisation ready to tackle?



Endnotes

1. Adapted from Johnson, A (2001). *Background paper for the Consumer Participation Reference Group*. Flinders Medical Centre. Viewed October 2007 at <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/Docs/fmcbacground.doc>
2. Arnstein, R (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *JAIP*, Vol. 35 No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224. Viewed November 2007 at <http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.doc>
3. Viewed November 2007 at [http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/s_aap2/\\$file/brophy_family_report.pdf](http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/s_aap2/$file/brophy_family_report.pdf)