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## the role of youth

# YOUTH PARTICIPATION: FROM INSPIRATION TO ACTION

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*This paper offers some concrete ideas for promoting youth participation in developmental programs.*

*In recent years increasing attention has been given to the active involvement of youth in decision-making by major youth-related and youth-serving organizations across the world. Although this idea has been discussed and advocated by many local, regional and international organizations, a common understanding of the process of youth participation is still lacking. This paper provides a definition and defines the process of youth participation that can be utilized or tested by other organizations to plan youth participatory programs and activities.*

*The 'lessons learnt' section of the paper outlines some practical aspects that need further research if the idea for youth participation is to be more fully developed. The author does not pretend to present a blueprint for youth participatory development but offers ideas based on personal experience of implementing nationwide youth participatory programs in Pakistan.*

## Why youth participation?

Nearly half of all people in the world are under 25. An estimated 1.7 billion of the global population are young people (10-24); youth (15-24) comprise 1.1 billion, or 18 per cent of the world population, and adolescents (10-19), 1.2 billion. Young people (10-24) comprise almost 30 per cent of the world's population, the largest generation ever, and are growing in number. If we expanded the definition of youth up to 30 or 35 years, we will discover that more than 70% of the world population would be included.

At the moment Pakistan has the largest number of youth in its history. According to Census 1998, youth under the age of 29 constitute 70% of the total population. As much as 64.87% of the young population resides in rural areas and 35.13% in urban areas. The census of 1998 counted 56 million children under the age of 15. There were another 13 million adolescents between the ages of 15 and 19, and 11 million youth aged between 20 to 24 years. The youth of Pakistan presents the most promising resource and in huge quantity – a big reservoir of energy. If this energy is put to proper use it will bring about a complete social, economic, cultural and ideological revolution in the country. That could contribute significantly to economic growth and poverty alleviation. Indeed it is clear from the experience of many other countries that unless these assets and qualities are given the opportunity to be so applied, they can easily turn to negativism and disruption of the social order. The need, therefore, is to create increasing opportunities for them to develop their potentials, personalities and functional capabilities and enable them to be productive and socially useful.

## Pakistani Youth: A Population at risk

It is a great tragedy that the vast amount of youth energy has never been channeled effectively. Young people have not been given any fair participation in many spheres of life. They have never been granted the opportunity to make use of their talents and energy in the development of the country. Young people are experiencing isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness, and idleness (due to lack of free time activities). The youth of Pakistan are caught in a multitude of problems like unemployment, poverty, remorselessness, social taboos, drugs, guns and politics.





The costs of neglecting youth can be measured in terms of the increasing incidence of crime and terrorist activities and the depletion of human and social capital.

The concept of youth participation is very new in Pakistan. The mass media like TV, radio, and newspapers are silent on this issue. The majority of Parliamentarians are still unaware about the concept of youth participation. The high-ranking civil servants and bureaucrats have never expressed any priority for this important issue. Civil society organizations, at all levels, are ignorant about this vitally important concept for National Development. Out of three citizens in Pakistan, two are young people. This is a massive untapped human capital, which has not been harnessed for the development of the country. Their potential is not recognized; instead they are considered as a problem. It is high time to identify youth participation as the vital tool for reaching out to other marginalized youth for helping to realize their full potential as well as for nation building.

The term 'participation' has different meanings for different people. Although we use the word frequently in articles, books, reports and seminars there still is a big gap in its conceptual definition and practical implementation. So far, we have not been able to put forward any concrete plan of how this process of youth participation might be carried out for mainstreaming youth into the process more meaningfully.

Having said that, let me admit that we also face many challenges to motivate youth who are

suffering from severe depression and a deep sense of futility. They consider themselves to be worthless, having no control over their own lives. They have lost drive, motivation and confidence. Disappointments, deprivations, sufferings and despair among youth leave them with no apparent choice. Other challenges include:

- The misperception among youth that political leaders and civil servants will alleviate their problems.
- Lack of skills, especially to build social capital
- A culture of dependency; waiting for someone to come and help them
- Underestimation of non-material resources
- Psychological and economic poverty
- Belief in fatalism
- Centered leadership
- Looking for instant benefits
- Lack of quality education at the higher level

### **Rationale**

Our society has enormous unmet needs for service in such fields as health, education, environment, and care for youth. Young people of Pakistan, from all walks of life, could meet many of these needs. In doing so they would benefit by getting unique and valuable experience for their future careers. It is the best way to address the most pressing problems being faced by the country and to engage youth in the building of a better society. The time is critical to make youth participation a high priority, and spread the message that young

people are resources and assets in our communities. With their active involvement, many of the unmet service needs of our society could be addressed. Youth participation in developmental programs would benefit youth by connecting them to society, channeling their energies for constructive tasks, enhancing self-esteem and confidence, and improving their employability and leadership skills.

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the active involvement of young people in development projects and many international organizations are beginning to implement youth participation projects in a variety of ways. But a common understanding of the concept of youth participation is still lacking, and this is crucial in motivating them to participate in and contribute to an aided self-help program. It would promote a sense of achievement, personal satisfaction, feeling of helpfulness and value as well as a civic identity.

In spite of the fact that the word is so often used by a wide variety of stakeholders, there is still lack of concrete data on many of its operational issues. There is hardly any consensus on what is meant by youth participation, what is the process of participation, what are the practical implications for participation, what are the lessons learnt of participation and what are the operational costs in youth participation?

In this paper the process suggested for promoting youth participation is derived largely from experience of implementing nationwide youth programs in



Pakistan. The paper will present comprehensive definition of a concept of youth participation which has been tested successfully at many under-resourced locations of Pakistan.

## Definition

Based upon my experience of working with youth, I would like to define youth participation in this way:

"Youth Participation is a process that is implemented through a series of phases, from the *lowest level of participation* to the *highest*. It is the *cultivating* and *engaging* process in which young people, in partnership with those who are able to assist them, can build their capacity to gradually take control of their lives and assume increased personal responsibility to conceptualize, plan, implement, control and evaluate their collective actions for personal and greater good".

The definition takes into account the following propositions about the nature of Youth Participation:

### *Lowest level of Participation:*

Youth participation process begins with the lowest involvement that means initial work is done on their behalf in order to smoothen the process of participation in the identified community as well as to increase their self confidence and capacity to assume greater role in future interventions. During this phase, information is gathered from them through consultations that begin the process of participation. It is generally a one-way flow

of information from implementing organization to youth and community stakeholders, or other way round. The decision-making power remains the sole control of the implementing organization.

### *Highest level of Participation:*

In western countries, some youth are expected to have the skills from the beginning of the program to participate fully in the development programs due to the availability of opportunities and resources. However, in developing countries due to lack of understanding, resources and several other factors, this process is often lengthy. It is based on a long and painful process of building the capacity of youth through gradual steps which enable them to assume greater role in all the areas of programming. As their participation level increases, there is a transfer of power from the implementing agency to the youth. The pace of this process is largely dependent on the youth involved. However, the implementing staff, with the application of effective strategies like teamwork, care and stimulation, can help youth to move from one phase to other quickly.

*Cultivating:* The cultivating process aims at building the capacity of young people by providing them with opportunities in those areas that are identified by youth themselves. This helps to increase their confidence, morale and self-esteem. It is very important to make a clear distinction between 'capacity-based' programs and 'desire-based' programs. Many organizations develop and imple-

ment projects based upon their priorities thus, neglecting the desires of the young people. Often these capacity based-programs are unable to produce the desired results and end up blaming youth. They simply ignore the fact that whatever they are offering had no connection to the reality of the youth involved.

The process of cultivation achieves best results when the interests and wishes of youth participants are acknowledged and incorporated into the design. Such desire-based programs increase hope among youth and make it clear to them that through their participation they will prioritize and develop action plans for themselves.

*Engaging:* It is an engaging process. It engages youth in a more organized and structured manner for a definite period of time. The engaging process is different from the traditional volunteer concept because it is carried out through an organization that has created the opportunity for youth participation. It gives a clear direction to young people regarding their service role including length, and intensity of service agreed upon mutually.

## Process of participation

### *Phase One: Analyzing*

The process of participation begins by conducting an analysis of the existing situation. The analysis begins by taking two primary factors into account. The first is the environment within the community in terms of existing institutions, communication channels, and the social, political,





economical setting. The second calls for an organizational analysis to develop an inventory of the resources both material and non-material within your organization, which will be capitalized during the process of youth participation.

**Phase Two: Connecting**

The second phase begins by establishing contacts within the community to identify appropriate channels for introducing your organization and laying the groundwork for the future. It is a learning process for the implementing agency to hold one-to-one or small meetings with people identified in the preparation stage to gather as much as data as possible. During this phase, arrangements are also made to identify channels for introducing the organization and its goals to the general population within the community. The involvement of local elected representatives, religious leaders and potential leaders can play a very important role in reaching out to the young people effectively. This connecting stage can also be called a 'clearing stage' because it helps the organization to get clearance from the major stakeholders to carry out its youth participatory program.

In those communities where gender discrimination is prevalent, this stage helps to clarify doubts and seeks approval from the community members to allow young girls to participate in the organizational program.

**Phase Three: Informing**

This phase involves establishing direct communication with the



youth through organizing open sessions or meetings in the community with various segments of youth population at various locations in order to inform all the diverse groups within the community about the organizational goals and objectives. During this phase, the youth participation is limited to listening and clarifying issues about the organizational goals and plans within the community. The implementing agency should be well prepared to handle all types of questions asked by the youth in a respectful manner and without raising any expectations among the youth. The activities of this phase involve the general community, including parents and youth. The purpose of involving parents is to inform them about the advantages of involving their kids and to address any of their doubts or questions.

**Phase Four: Forming**

In phase four, the organization

begins to work with the potential community leaders identified in phase three. Their task will be to scale up the process of participation and coordinate the developing plan of action as team leaders. This is also a method of initiating the decentralization process and promoting the concept of participation. The responsibilities of these teams will be to share key information and make necessary arrangements for future activities in specific areas.

**Phase Five: Exploring**

The exploring phase involves holding participatory community planning meetings with different youth groups to identify and prioritize the needs and wishes of the young people. This can be thought of as a youth 'diagnosis' process in which the youth, in partnership with the implementing agency, carry out the need-assessment and start taking a more active role in the process of participation.



Involving those with greatest needs should be the top priority of the implementing organization.

#### **Phase Six: Organizing**

During this phase, the implementing agency creates a formal grassroots-level structure for youth by providing a place and structure in which the participants can: plan, implement and monitor their activities collectively; make others in the community more aware of the situation facing young people by increasing their visibility; help young people feel that they are not alone with their problems; promote change by creating a youth voice; and generate self reliance in the community. There are various models of organizational structure for promoting community participation in order to achieve in-depth participation within the target communities. The particular model chosen should be one best suited to the community in question.

The youth model should serve not only to enhance involvement and responsibility, but also to educate youth about the importance of a vigorous and healthy democracy. It should also help young people develop the skills to listen for deeper understanding, think critically about public issues, make informed judgments, and take meaningful action. It should support democratic cultures that encourage youth to listen to others, make moral analysis, cooperate with others, solve problems, and learn inclusive forms of decision-making. This process is an essential aspect of participation as the youth learn to interact with each other and external organiza-

tions as well as how to organize and set out roles and responsibilities for everyone. These local structures are meant to organize and assist youth in working together. One of the objectives of establishing a local youth structure on the above-mentioned lines is to ensure that the extent of participation is not fixed at the level of those youth who come forward initially as leaders.

#### **Phase Seven: Transferring**

This phase provides training to the organized youth committees by teaching the skills necessary in their chosen areas of action. In general, this training involves: participatory action methods; social organization; community mobilization; participatory planning; project management; communication and facilitation; conflict resolution; and teamwork. The overall objective is to enable participants to develop their skills in planning and implementation, management, record-keeping, reporting, and controlling and monitoring interventions at the local level. These skills are essential steps in the movement toward actual participation.

#### **Phase Eight: Engaging**

After establishing grassroots level structures and receiving training in programmatic and administrative areas, the community members are ready to become engaged in the community building process for a specified period of time. Each Youth Committee develops an individual plan of action and begins the process of implementation with minimum technical support from

the supporting agency. The youth committees share their progress with the implementing agency in order to share their challenges, successes and areas for improvement. After these reflection and feedback sessions the members again go back into their communities to continue their work.

#### **Phase Nine: Leading**

After gaining experience and learning by doing, the young people should be confident and competent enough to replicate the same process in other areas of their communities, reaching out to other young people in distress. Over time, the Youth Committee should be able to assume complete responsibility to plan, manage and monitor the local activities without any external assistance.

#### **Phase Ten: Strengthening and Expanding**

By phase ten, the local Youth Committee is ready to expand their horizon and start networking with other organizations for strengthening and expanding their program activities. During this phase the Youth Committee expands the coverage or initiates new services for their target community. As it recruits more volunteers within its own boundaries it might reach out into new communities to initiate and help develop additional programs of youth participation.

The implementation of all ten phases is a systematic and gradual process, determined by those involved. It is very important that organizations interested in promoting the concept of participation should carefully assess





themselves during the preparation phase of the project in order to plan and invest time and resources accordingly. Rushing out from one phase to next can have a detrimental and damaging affect on the whole process. Each phase will increase the level of participation incrementally and reduce the role of implementing agency. It is very important that the organization's involvement should be gradually phased out. The gradual reduction in their contribution will help the local groups to become increasingly self-sustaining.

### **Strategies for promoting youth participation**

I have often been asked which strategies have been most effective in achieving youth participation. My answer is that there is no single approach for working with youth. However, what has been most effective in my work is a combination of care, stimulation and teamwork. I consider these tools to be essential to achieve success in any field. The best thing about these tools is that they do not incur financial costs so they cannot be cut by any donor agency. The skilful use of these tools can tremendously increase the vitality and pace of the participation process.

**Care:** Care is the most effective strategy to involve young people meaningfully in the participation process. It removes distances and brings people together. Care is demonstrated through respecting, listening, enabling and giving hope to young people that they are worthy of achieving great things in life for themselves, for their fami-

lies and for their communities. Young people may forget what you tell them but they never forget how you treat them. Care promotes honest communication and welcomes diverse perspectives.

**Stimulation:** Stimulation increases productivity. When people are encouraged and motivated, they are in a better position to harness their unrealized potential. It is very important that the implementing agency staff is equipped with effective stimulation techniques. Young people in communities are often afraid to open up in front of outsiders. Often, these young people have had traumatic experiences of diversity because their routine interaction is limited to young people like themselves and they feel reluctant to communicate with anyone from outside of their familiar circle. This attitude can hinder the process of participation. People should be encouraged and admired at each step. It affects their attitudes, performance and spirit to work together. It will give them a very positive message that they are capable, they are not judged and they can act on their own behalf without any external assistance.

**Teamwork:** Teamwork divides responsibilities and multiplies results. It promotes trust, ownership and interdependence. Young people should be provided with opportunities to learn that 'no man is an island' and success lies in working together and achieving together. This is probably the most effective tool in promoting partici-

pation and helping young people to realize their goals and potentials.

### **Measuring level of youth participation**

It is very important that the implementing agency develop qualitative and quantitative indicators to assess the level of youth participation throughout the above-mentioned phases. The analysis should be an on going process and with the same participants throughout.

Possible indicators for qualitative tracking and analysis might include:

- Confidence
- Unity
- Leadership
- Networking
- Communication
- Communal services
- Teamwork
- Compassion
- Self-sacrifice
- Skills
- Political Participation
- Self-responsibility

Possible indicators for quantitative tracking and analysis might include:

- Number of youth trained
- Number of young people involved
- Number of youth projects started
- Number of youth meetings held
- Amount of resources generated
- Number of young people taking leadership role
- Number of new activities which are being undertaken

The on going assessment of the youth participation process is very



useful for the agency and the youth themselves to further improve the methodology and replicate the experiences. It will also be helpful for extracting practical guidelines for other agencies interested in youth participation.

## Lessons learnt from Pakistan

There is a very little research conducted to investigate the lessons learnt on youth participation. Speaking from my personal experience of implementing youth participatory projects in the various districts of Pakistan, the following observations and findings seem relevant.

**Extra Burden:** Throughout this paper I have stressed that youth participation is a process and requires sustained commitment from both the implementing agency and local communities. Young people living in poverty-stricken areas find it very difficult to be part of this process on a consistent basis. Each day they have to work very hard to nourish and support their large families. Under such circumstances, involving young people for longer periods of time add extra burden on them.

**Monopolizing Decisions:** Experience has shown that, very often, the more active and affluent young members within the community where the project is introduced, monopolize the process of participation. This leads to less or no participation from non-affluent members of the community. The implementing organization can address this issue by providing an

opportunity for all members of the community by establishing a democratic structure based on equal opportunities for all.

### **Pace of the Participation Process:**

The pace of the participation process is dependent on the motivation and capacity building of those involved. Often organizations with time and resource constraints try to rush things along in order to complete their own agenda, and this has an enormous effect upon the process.

### **Instability or Chaos:**

The process of participation is designed to empower people to take control of their lives and participate in ongoing community developmental projects. Recent experience of working with the youth for the promotion of a Universal Primary Education program has revealed that teachers disliked the idea of involving young people in the educational system. The teachers saw the youth as encroaching upon their domain and became resistant. The implementing organization should be ready to deal with such unanticipated responses and prepare youth to handle such situations gracefully.

### **Sustainability of Participation:**

The sustainability of the participation process depends on sharing the decision making power with all those involved. People can only be motivated if they feel that their voices are not only heard but also counted.

**Capacity Building:** Capacity building is an essential part to promote participation. Young

people living in under-resourced communities are usually suffering from many deprivations and are often reluctant, or unable, to relate with anyone outside of their communities. Their inability to communicate and build social capital often ends up with traumatic experience of diversity. It is very important to begin with those capacity building activities that are based on the desires of the youth rather than the desire of the organization. Capacity building activities helps young people to increase their confidence, self-esteem, knowledge, skills and contacts as well as make them feel valuable and worthwhile for undertaking action at local level.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine what is meant by youth participation with the particular focus on under-resourced communities and to show, on the basis of practical experience, how a youth participation process can be implemented. Participation is a core element in the growth and development of youth. Youth participation has different meanings for different people. On the one extreme it is perceived as sharing information with youth who remain as passive recipients of information. The resulting decisions represent a unilateral display of will and action. On the other hand, youth participation is viewed as a cultivating and engaging process, which enables young people to take complete ownership of the program through systematic and gradual learning. In this paper a comprehensive definition of the





concept of youth participation has been presented which is grounded in a set of logical and integrated principles derived from my own experience of working with young people.

In this paper, I have shared my belief in encouraging youth to become actively involved in bringing their own unique perspectives, energy, idealism and creativity in the planning, design and management of developmental projects. I have emphasized that, when dealing with young people in developing countries, or living in under-resourced environments, one has to keep in mind that they are unfamiliar with the youth participation strategies common to the western world. Western ideas of active participation, ownership, teamwork and sustainability are generally beyond their range of understanding, experience and resources. Hence many programs that are planned according to western criteria and attitudes do not succeed when they are implemented in these environments. Within the framework of each unique community the essential challenge is always to develop a process that enhances youth participation from lowest level to the highest level with a logical steps based on the existing realities.

I have attempted to express what I have learned in a way that invites further action and research so that the full potential of youth participation can be assessed. As I said at the outset, youth are an abundant and promising resource and their collective energy have yet to be effectively mobilized. It is our task to create the opportunities for their participation in all spheres of life. The time has come to consider our youth as active citizens and not citizens in waiting. Youth present the most promising resource – and in huge quantity. It is a great tragedy that vast reserves of youth energy have never been put to proper use. The youth have been given very little or no opportunities for participation in any sphere of life. Providing opportunities for young people to become involved in decision-making has immense benefits. It means that the decisions being made are more relevant to their lives. It allows the acquisition of valuable skills, which are relevant to other areas of young people's lives. When they are engaged in these aspects of life, they develop a healthy self-esteem and enjoy respect within their communities by attending to needs that cannot be addressed by existing services. The involvement of young people is also essential for the health of communities. Providing opportu-

nities of participation at an early age and at local level make it more likely that young people will continue to be active citizens as they grow older, and this pattern of behavior becomes a lifestyle.

We have a remarkable opportunity to address problems which have previously been ignored and have plagued us for so long. The time has come when we should think in new ways, apply new approaches and do more to bring young people and resources together to advance a common purpose to help young people grow up with hope, personal responsibility and the opportunity to lead meaningful and productive lives. At a time when our world desperately needs to heal, we are unable to benefit from the minds of many youth, who if given the chance, can make positive contributions.

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