DEUTSCH-TÜRKISCHE JUGENDBRÜCKE
GENÇLİK KÖPRÜSÜ TÜRKİYE-ALMANYA

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From steps to Voice – the Participation Ladder

Subtitle: Examining and improving participation in decision-making processes

Brief description

The Participation Ladder exercise helps young people to reflect on and improve the quality of their participation in decision-making processes. Through personal storytelling, case studies and group discussions, participants explore barriers and enablers to participation using frameworks such as Arnstein and Hart's ladders. By combining theory and action planning, the method promotes political education, critical thinking and the ability to take action. Its creative, reflective and inclusive approach promotes personal responsibility, equality and empowerment. In international exchanges, it enables an intercultural comparison of participation practices and supports joint learning about democracy and youth engagement.
This method is part of the compendium "Navigating Democratic Challenges". It was developed as part of the project "Navigating Democratic Challenges – Civic Education in German-Turkish Youth Exchange", a collaboration between the German-Turkish Youth Bridge (DTJB), the Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten (AdB) and Toy Gençlik Derneği (TOY).

Time required: approx. 120 min.
Target group/minimum age: 14
Group size: min. 8 max. 30
Materials required:
Pens, paper, clipboard, table, craft materials (coloured paper, string, scissors, glue/adhesive tape, etc.)
Appendix: Handout on Hart's participation model, handout on cases

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For which module is the method suitable:
(X) Diversity
(X) Politics
(X) Transformation

Which keywords can be assigned to the method:
(X) Democracy
(X) Empowerment
(X) Justice
(X) Power relations
(X) Human rights
(X) Participation
Suggest up to three additional keywords Social rights, political participation, international encounters

Learning objectives / what skills will participants acquire:
Understanding the ladder of participation

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- Participants recognise the different levels of participation
- Ability to critically evaluate and classify situations

Analysis of social structures
- Recognising and questioning obstacles to youth participation
- Promoting self-determination and capacity for action
- Applies to democratic and challenging political contexts

Creative participation stories
- Actively sharing and exchanging personal experiences
- Strengthening self-reflection and collective understanding
- Using creative media as a tool

Critical dialogue & power analysis
- Linking personal stories with case studies and participation leaders
- Questioning existing power relations in youth participation

Developing strategies for action
- Shared understanding of the strengths and limitations of different levels of participation
- Deriving action plans for improved engagement in one's own context

Learning content / which thematic priorities are set:
The method has three main areas of focus:
1) Familiarisation with theoretical concepts of participation and co-governance and their classification in the context of democracy as a form of government, society and life
2) Developing practical scenarios for applying the theoretical framework as analytical tools for practical use, but also for analysing and reflecting on power relations in specific situations/scenarios
3) Taking action and developing concrete steps

Description of the process

1. Introduction to the session and personal reflection on participation (45 minutes)
Each participant should record the "participation story" of one of the other participants on a sheet of A4 paper. To learn about this "participation story", the young people use the technique of "active listening". The group is divided into pairs. For 3-5 minutes, the participants listen to each other's stories and record them on a sheet of paper as a short text, drawing, collage or a combination of all of these. Various materials are available for this purpose.

The following guiding questions can help the young people to ask about and tell their "participation story":

- When you think back on all your experiences in your youth, where and when were there moments and opportunities for participation in your family, school, neighbourhood, organisation or with authorities/institutions?
  These can be very different areas of participation, from decision-making processes regarding family holidays or meals to participation mechanisms in clubs or schools, in your neighbourhood or community.
- As a young person, how did you participate in which decisions/decision-making processes?
- Have you ever been involved in a non-governmental organisation and what were the processes like there?
- How and when did you encounter obstacles to your participation?

Here, too, there are many different examples – from wanting a new course offered at the neighbourhood youth centre to the right to student accommodation.

The A4 posters are collected or hung up in a place where everyone can see them. They can be used again later. Depending on the time available, this phase may involve a more or less detailed discussion of the participants' stories/examples ( ). This allows the personal participation stories to be explored in greater depth and at the same time lays the foundation for the theoretical framework.

Reflection in plenary (15 min.)
Question: Where do you see similarities, where do you see differences?

The results of the discussion are visualised on the flipchart. The moderator places particular emphasis on actors and settings for participation, as well as on the values mentioned in connection with participation.
When working out the value dimensions, the moderators can briefly refer to Arnstein's underlying theoretical concepts, Freire's educational concepts and their implementation within the framework of the European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life. (See additional material in the appendix)

Key values may include:

i. **Empowerment**
   1. Arnstein's ladder of participation makes it clear that participation is essentially about power – about the transition from manipulation and tokenism to citizen control.
   Empowerment is a key value. The ladder metaphor explicitly refers to empowerment through structural change.
   2. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed emphasises **dialogue** and **consciousness-raising** – the process of developing a critical awareness of one's own social reality through reflection and action.

ii. **Justice and inclusion**
   1. The European Charter on Youth Participation emphasises inclusive participation as a democratic right and aims to involve young people in decision-making processes that affect their lives.
   2. Hart's ladder of child participation emphasises the importance of genuine participation over symbolic inclusion and values the capacity for action of even the youngest participants.

iii. **Capacity for action and active citizenship**

Participation is understood as an exercise in active citizenship, in which individuals – especially young people – develop from passive recipients to co-creators of their social world.
Actors of participation can be:

1. Young people/children/citizens
2. State/local authorities
3. Civil society/NGOs/institutions
4. Educators/trainers/youth workers

In addition, a further 15-minute discussion can be held to explore how these actors can participate themselves and promote participation in practice:

1. Empowerment through capacity building, creating safe spaces for expression and joint decision-making
2. Creating participatory structures and redistributing power, rather than merely "consulting" actors.
3. Participation actors have a bridging function – they connect citizens with authorities/official institutions and advocate for marginalised groups. This requires inclusive, participatory spaces for learning and expressing opinions.
4. Participation actors can position themselves as critical mediators – not as authorities, but as fellow learners and allies.

2. Introduction to the theoretical concept: Roger Hart's "ladder of participation" and its stages (30 min.) (ANNEX)

3. Role play/sketch: Participants are divided into small groups that are as diverse as possible (diversity = at least a good mix of TR and DE as well as different genders) (small group time approx. 60 minutes).

a. Each group receives a sheet of paper with a case description (Annex 2 cases) (alternatively, personal stories can be used) (1 minute)
b. The young people read and discuss the cases in their small groups. They prepare any form of presentation for the plenary session (play, demonstration, song, poem, graffiti, cartoon, etc.) (25 minutes).
c. The groups take turns presenting their results, plays, etc. to the plenary (5 minutes per group, approx. 20-40 minutes).
d. The cases are discussed and the audience tries to guess and describe where on the participation ladder they would place the situation or approach just presented and whether it is relevant to their personal stories. Controversial discussions are welcome (30 minutes).

4. Debriefing (20 minutes)

5. Development of an action plan for participation (30 minutes)**:**

The following questions may be helpful in developing an action plan for strengthening and shaping participation within an organisation/community/parish.
They are answered in small groups or individually (2 min.)
What

- What specific problem or barrier to participation do you want to address?
- What changes would you like to see in your community, school or organisation?
- What methods/tools can you use to improve young people's participation?

Why

- Why is this issue important to you or your peers?
- Why do you believe that change is possible and necessary?

Who

- Who is affected by this problem?
- Who are the key players who can support these changes (e.g. peers, teachers, youth workers, local politicians)?
- Who could you work with or mobilise?

Where

- Where does the problem occur? (e.g. school, neighbourhood, youth centre, online)
- Where could your action have the greatest impact?

When

- When should the measure begin?
- When are there good opportunities to exert influence? (e.g. upcoming youth council meeting, event, gathering)

How

- How can you begin to implement changes step by step?
- How can you obtain support or resources?
- How can you measure whether you are making progress?

Example of an action plan: "We want to strengthen the voice of young people on our school council by organising a peer-led workshop with 30 young people. This month, we will contact the student coordinator and design a meeting using the participation ladder as a tool. We will evaluate the event by gathering feedback from our classmates after the event."

Variations on the method

The method itself is very flexible, including in terms of group size and schedule, and the details can be easily changed as needed (see above).

One obvious factor to consider in an international setting such as this is language. Either sufficient English proficiency of all participants and/or translation would need to be ensured. This could be done either simultaneously, possibly by dedicated professionals and with appropriate equipment, if financial resources allow, by placing participants according to their language skills or dividing them into groups and offering some of them "whispered translation" if necessary, or by consecutive interpreting. This may be the only option if the budget does not allow for other options and a large proportion of participants do not have sufficient knowledge of a common language. However, any translation, especially if it is consecutive, must be taken into account in terms of time. This most likely means that certain parts/expectations will have to be shortened and/or the overall duration (including breaks!) will have to be extended.

In any international or intercultural environment, and perhaps especially in the German-Turkish case, particular care may need to be taken to ensure intercultural respect and appreciation of diversity, especially if participants do not yet have much experience in such environments. Overall, planning should always be flexible and responsive; in addition, care should be taken not to inadvertently create or emphasise unnecessary differences by making this a visible issue in advance.

To see different solutions for the same rungs, a story can be selected and participants asked to solve the problem described. Solving/solution here means that participants try to improve the case by doing something that is then an example of higher rungs on the ladder, such as 7 or 8.

Expansion pack: Intersectionality
The Participation Ladder – originally developed to understand power dynamics in urban planning and youth participation – can and should be adapted to different, intersectional contexts. These include, among others:

- Gender and LGBTQIA+ participation
- Migrants/refugees and transnational youth
- Young people with disabilities
- Socio-economic exclusion
- Minorities and indigenous communities
- Young people in conflict/post-conflict areas

In each of these contexts, the ladder offers a valuable perspective for critically assessing whether participation is inclusive, accessible and empowering – and how different identities may experience the same rung of the ladder in unequal ways. For example, a queer youth group may be involved in decision-making at a youth centre, but still face barriers in terms of safety, representation or legitimacy in community spaces.

The method should therefore encourage participants to:

- think critically about intersectional barriers in their own participation history
- discuss how the "rung position" can differ depending on identity, even within the same scenario
- to examine how participation structures need to be designed to truly include all voices.

Evaluation, reflection and consolidation of results

Aim of reflection

- Understanding one's own participation experiences and feelings
- Identify obstacles and success factors for participation
- Establishing a connection between personal experiences and social participation
- Reflect on intercultural differences and similarities
- Developing options for action for more inclusive participation

Phase 1: Individual reflection – micro level
Duration: 10–15 min
Format: Individual work / notes
Method: Writing or reflection sheet
Questions

- How did you feel when creating your own participation story?
- What do you notice that all the stories have in common? Are there any recurring themes or experiences?
- At what moments did you feel that participation had really taken place?

- What dreams or goals would you like to achieve through participation, and in which situations could you fully commit to this?
- How useful do you find the concept of the participation ladder for your own situation?

Objective:
- Structure your own feelings, experiences and thoughts
- Preparation for discussion in small groups

Phase 2: Small group work – meso level
Duration: 20–25 minutes
Format: Groups of 3–5 participants
Method: Card query / brainstorming / pinboard
Tasks
- Share experiences of moments of successful participation
- Identify obstacles to participation and recognise commonalities
- Discuss differences and similarities between personal challenges and larger societal challenges
- Exchange views on differences and similarities between experiences in Germany and Turkey

Key questions:
- What obstacles stood in the way of your participation? Are there common factors that link these obstacles?
- Was it easy to categorise situations using the participation ladder?
- Did you disagree with the majority opinion in any situation?
- Did you notice any cases in which the identity of the participants influenced the degree of participation?

Objective:
- Intercultural exchange
- Develop a common understanding of success factors and obstacles
- Reflect on the practical applicability of the participation ladder

Phase 3: Plenary session – macro level / socio-political reflection
Duration: 25–30 min
Format: Fishbowl / open discussion / short statements
Method
- Fishbowl: One group discusses, others listen and then switch
- Open discussion about social relevance and options for action
- Moderator notes key points for all to see

Key questions:

- Do you see more differences or more similarities between small challenges of personal participation and larger social challenges?
- Who might be completely excluded from the participation process?
- How can participation models be adapted to better include marginalised or underrepresented young people?
- What kind of support systems or changes are needed to ensure that participation is not only theoretical but also practical in terms of equality?
- What are the limitations of the participation ladder model?
- Are there any suggestions as to how content or methods could be presented differently in the future?

Objective:
- Connection between individual experience, school practice and social participation
- Make concrete ideas for more inclusive participation visible
- Strengthen intercultural perspectives

Phase 4: Conclusion – transfer / ideas for action
Duration: 5–10 min
Format: Tandem discussion + plenary session
Method
- Tandem: Everyone shares one key insight or concrete idea for action
- Plenary session: The moderator summarises the key points and asks:
    - "What steps can I personally take to promote participation in my school or youth group?"
    - "Which ideas do we want to pursue together?"

Objective:
- Ensure sustainability
- Develop options for individual and collective participation

Note

This method is part of the compendium "Navigating Democratic Challenges". It was developed on the basis of a Turkish-German exchange between practitioners.
Over the years, the authors have had only good and positive experiences with this method and its various variants. We particularly like how it encourages young people to get actively involved, creatively exchange stories, and discover and discuss differences (and usually many more similarities ;)). In terms of content and with regard to strengthening personal responsibility, we also consider the exercise to be very relevant and useful in enabling young people to recognise situations with low

participatory quality themselves, possibly avoid them and, ideally, remedy them – both locally and when participating in international work, e.g. through their communities or other institutions.

Tips for moderation
Moderators should always be approachable, attentive, appreciative and flexible in responding to the needs of young people. This means (as a rule) adopting an attitude of curious listening, but occasionally also encouraging and activating, especially if the group is rather shy, has language difficulties or has only recently got to know each other.
Facilitators should familiarise themselves in advance with the theoretical and pedagogical framework provided in the supplementary material and annex, as well as the political implementation concepts.
It may be interesting to start with a timeline showing that, compared to the thousands of years that humanity has existed, we have only been experiencing participatory democracy for a few years. Examples of paradigm shifts include the Magna Carta of 1215, the French Revolution of 1789, the October Revolution of 1917, the end of the Second World War in 1946 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. It should be emphasised that participation is still a new concept.

Additional material (images, links, worksheets, toolbox, etc.):

English version, Turkish version

Theoretical framework
Arnstein, S. “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224.
Hart, R., Children’s participation from tokenism to citizenship, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence 1992.
Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, Vol. 1989, Issue 1, Article 8, pp. 139–167.

Educational framework
Freire, P. (2005 edition). Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Continuum, pp. 66–73.
Boal, A. (1979). Theatre of the Oppressed, Pluto Press, pp. xix, 122–124.
Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Political implementation
Introduction to the revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, May 2003, p. 5
The accompanying Recommendation CM Rec(2004)13 of the Committee of Ministers to support the implementation of the revised Charter was adopted by all member states of the Council of Europe. p. 29
In practice, this means that member states have a moral responsibility to implement the revised Charter, even though its recommendations are not legally binding.
These theoretical and pedagogical foundations shape a method that is as much about experiencing democracy as it is about learning it. Freire and Boal provide the liberating pedagogical perspective,

Arnstein and Hart anchor it in participation theory, and Kolb adds the cycle of experience necessary to reflect on and respond to real-life scenarios.

References

- Have Your Say! - Manual on the Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (New Edition) (2015)
- Türkiye'de Gençlik Çalışmaları Rehberi - 5N 3K Yol Haritası, Toy Gençlik Derneği x Tepebaşı Belediyesi Gençlik Merkezleri (2017) https://www.toygenclik.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Tu%CC%88rkiyede-Genc%CC%A7lik-C%CC%A7alis%CC%A7malari-Rehberi-5N3K.pdf
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Glossary:

Empowerment: Empowerment is the process of gaining self-confidence, skills, opportunities and support to take action, influence decisions and shape one's own future.
This often includes

- recognising that you have power, even if society tells you otherwise
- developing one's voice and learning to use it effectively
- working with others to change unjust systems
- Having control over decisions that affect our lives

Empowerment is not something that is handed to you – it is something you build yourself, often through reflection, dialogue and collective action.

Tokenism
When people (especially young people) are invited to participate only for appearances' sake – without any real influence. Example: being invited to a meeting but not allowed to speak or make decisions.

Consciousness raising (according to Paulo Freire)
The process of becoming aware of injustice and power relations in society – and recognising that you have the ability to change them. Awareness → Reflection → Action.

Intersectionality (by Kimberlé Crenshaw)
An approach to understanding how people's identities (such as gender, ethnicity, disability, social class, etc.) intersect and how this affects their experiences in society – including access to participation.

Spect-actor (by Augusto Boal)
A person who not only observes the world, but enters into it – and takes action to change what is happening. In participatory theatre and in real life, we are all spect-actors.

Experiential learning (according to David Kolb)
Learning through action, reflection and adaptation.

Kolb's cycle (see also Methods Compendium Navigating democratic challenges Chapter 4):

- Concrete experience (doing something)
- Reflective observation (thinking about it)
- Abstract conceptualisation (learning from it)
- Active experimentation (trying something new)

The method itself follows the cycle: 1. personal story → 2. theory & 3. role play → 4. reflection → 5. action plan.

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ANNEX 1
Ladder of Participation

Roger Hart wrote a book called “Children's Participation: The Theory And Practice Of Involving Young Citizens In Community Development And Environmental Care” for UNICEF in 1997. He followed after the conceptualization of Sherry Arnstein “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” Journal of the American Planning Association, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224.

Degrees of Participation

8) Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults. This happens when projects or programs are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and adults. These projects empower young people while at the same time enabling them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults.
7) Young people-initiated and directed. This step is when young people initiate and direct a project or program. Adults are involved only in a supportive role.
6) Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. Occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people.
5) Consulted and informed. Happens when young people give advice on projects or programs designed and run by adults. The young people are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.
4) Assigned but informed. This is where young people are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved.
3) Tokenism. When young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.
2) Decoration. Happens when young people are used to help or "bolster" a cause in a relatively indirect way, although adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by young people.
1) Manipulation. Happens where adults use young people to support causes and pretend that the causes are inspired by young people.

Annex 2
Participaton Ladder - Case stories (engl)

Case Story 1: Youth Center and Political Influence
"A youth center with close ties to the local municipality receives most of its funding and logistical support from the municipality. The municipality informs the youth center that the ruling political party is organizing a national rally and wants to involve young people. The youth center announces a 'cultural trip' to its members. However, upon arrival, the young people are taken to the political rally and expected to stay for several hours. The young people were not informed about the rally beforehand, and this information was kept secret."

Case Story 2: Opening of a Youth Space
"A youth center announces the opening of a new youth space, inviting all its volunteers and users to attend. Upon arrival, attendees are given t-shirts and hats with the youth center's logo and asked to wear them. The opening ceremony involves speeches by local officials and group photos. No youth-oriented activities are organized, and after the photo session, the event concludes with thanks to the attendees for their participation."

Case Story 3: University Youth Panel
"A university announces a 'Youth Rights Panel,' stating that student club leaders and members have been selected as participants and can engage in discussions. The panel features guests and a moderator who discuss youth participation in political and social life. However, the participating students are not informed about the specific topics beforehand and are not provided with any background materials. After the speakers' presentations, no discussion is held, and the panel concludes. The university newspaper headline reads, 'Youth Discussed Their Rights'."

Case Story 4: Community Development Project
"Youth center employees plan a community development project for the summer. They decide to renovate a local community center in an underserved neighborhood. Volunteers are invited to a project meeting where the project is presented. Volunteers are divided into teams responsible for different tasks, such as painting, repairs, and landscaping. Volunteers are assigned specific tasks by the youth center employees, and implementation begins."

Case Story 5: Youth-Led Initiative
"Youth center volunteers discuss how to revitalize an underused space. They share their ideas and suggestions with the youth center staff. The youth center incorporates the volunteers' recommendations into the renovation plans. Volunteers are invited to participate in the renovation process and to celebrate the completion of the project."

Case Story 6: Civic Engagement Project
"Young people participating in a project development training at a youth center identify a lack of awareness about local NGOs among their peers as a key issue. Following the training, they form a team to develop a project aimed at addressing this problem. They request information from the youth center about how to contact and visit local schools to promote civic engagement."

Case Story 7: Environmental Awareness Project
"A youth worker designs a project focused on recycling and promoting critical consumption habits. The project includes organizing swap markets, preparing meals from surplus food, and creating a 'sharing table' for community exchange. The youth center recruits volunteers for the project and divides them into teams based on their interests. The project's goals, activities, and name are developed and implemented in collaboration with the youth volunteers."