

What is participation?

There are many ways to talk about working together.

Much of this jargon can be confusing.

We're going to focus on participation.

It's much more than just taking-part in an activity that someone else planned.

Participation is a way of involving people in decision-making.

It often means sharing or handing-over power.

It's doing stuff with people, not for people.

Since the 1960's, we've seen a trend in involving people in decision-making that affects their lives, in health, education, basic needs and housing.

Sherry Arnstein wrote about urban renewal in the United States.

She used a ladder to illustrate participation.

At the top of her ladder,

Arnstein showed Citizen Power as;

'partnerships', 'delegated power'

and 'full citizen control'.

The ladder shows how organisations

with more power often pretend

to share decision-making,

but they are mostly doing

tokenistic consultation,

or manipulating those with less power

Even though the ladder idea

doesn't tell the whole story,

ladders and spectrums

are still widely used to describe

levels of participation.

David Wilcox later simplified the ladder.

He said, it's not so much about

climbing to the top of this ladder every time,

it works best when you agree on

the level of participation with the people

who have a stake in the project.

And being willing to move upwards, if they want that.

Who is involved is important.

And this can be tricky.

There are many different types of stakeholders

and it is likely that not everyone

will have an equal say.

Under-represented groups need

to be engaged and heard.

And as louder interest groups gain more power,

new inequalities might be created.

Presence at the table

doesn't guarantee those people have a say

or are willing to listen.

People need information and skills

to participate effectively.

This might mean learning new processes

or access to technical knowledge and data.

Without this, they cannot challenge

the status quo or make good choices.

Community facilitators are skilled

in making make sure everyone has a say,

identifying common needs

and helping the group

make informed choices.

Even independent facilitators

can end up stuck in the middle,

trying to negotiate between sides.

It works best when there is a network of relationships,

with a cross-section of staff

and senior managers fully engaged.

Professionals often have to develop new skills

in joint decision-making and access.

This can feel threatening

and organisational commitment is needed

to overcome staff resistance to change.

It takes time to build the conditions

for genuine participation;
to find a common purpose, to build trust.
The many challenges are well documented,
in practice and theory.
So if it's this hard, why do it?
Evidence shows that participation,
done well, can improve services,
a sense of ownership, sustainability,
representation and quality.
It can help address inequalities
and contribute to more
empowered communities.
For example: A growing number of people
don't want to just consume culture passively
at theatres, galleries and museums.
Some want more access to knowledge or collections.
Some want more say on
what is collected and shown,
shining a light on what is overlooked.
Some want to have a say in
whose stories are told and how.
Others want cultural organisations
to play their part in the community
and address social issues.
This means challenging,
researching, reclaiming and negotiating
and it can only be done through genuine participation.