

Youth Participation With, By and For Youths

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Currently, there are many voices and views concerning youths which, in a rather paternalistic way, are superimposed on the voices and views of young people themselves. This means that they experience many difficulties when participating in diverse spaces and processes of social and community life, mainly in terms of decision-making and putting words into actions, because not all young people have the privilege of knowing, wanting and being able to participate in life in society. The Asociación Juvenil Talasa was created through a group of young people with the aim of reflecting their voices and ideas in international projects and learning opportunities from the grassroots. Thus, since 2021, the association has managed to generate synergies to export them to all those interested in continuing to create and learn.

When the editorial team of this journal asked me to write an article about youth participation, I did not know if I fitted the profile to write these types of articles. Also, my academic career is not related to studying or working with participatory or community methodologies, so it is somewhat difficult for me to structure all the ideas in my head on the subject. Although in recent years I have become more involved in social and/or associative aspects of collective life, even creating my own associative project – which we will talk about later –, my relationship with the academic field came to an end years ago and, although, on the one hand, I have always wanted to be an authoritative voice and create knowledge, on the other, life has opened different paths for me that have led me away from that world.

However, it seems that life is a continuous map full of roads to travel, so here I am. Once again I find myself in front of the screen writ-

ing an article on youth participation in a style that is a little out of the ordinary, outside the grandiosity of cultured words that sometimes puts off readers – especially young people – and is, in a certain sense, a barrier – of access – to knowledge, not only with respect to the opportunities to write articles and share voices, knowledge, views and best practices with the rest of interested society, but also in terms of the mere understanding of all those words.

Therefore, this article is written with an intimate approach, an accessible language and a subjective perspective. Its objective, far from motivating young people who are reading it to participate in associative life – although that too –, is to sow a seed among people with experience in the associative field and those who work with young people to reflect on their relationship between power and giving in: the “power” exercised by organisations over the

interests of youths and the delegation or transfer of spheres of decision-making, action and opinion to youths, empowering them through the *by* and the *for*.

I have often heard people (political representatives, representatives of social bodies, and so on) talk about youths from a somewhat paternalistic point of view and tone, “young people want...”, “young people need...”, without having previously asked if young people want one thing or the other, if we need one thing or the other. They superimpose outside voices and opinions on our own voices and opinions.

Today, people, and especially young people, are facing a changing world, changing, demanding and complicated, which requires us to be constantly up to date and possess higher level degrees (university and master’s degree, or master’s degrees in the plural), as well as a broad professional career in which we have acquired outstanding work experience: being experts in something specific while having knowledge of “a little bit of everything”: using digital tools and social networks, soft skills, innovation, and many more. And even so, despite being qualified for it, we continue to face many barriers in representative bodies. The fault will be laid at the door of “these youths”.

In this panorama, we young people are facing a reality in which it is hard for us to participate in the different spaces and processes of social and community life; it is difficult for us to be involved in decision-making and to have our voices heard and integrated into actions. We do not want this participation to be just for show. I raise this issue here because it is important to identify how youths are being recognised today. It seems that we are not suited to making decisions on our own, that we have no initiative and that we depend on experienced people to put ideas into practice.

The effects of the pandemic are still latent and have undermined youth participation

Although far removed from our current perspective of the here and now, the effects of the pandemic are still latent and have undermined youth participation. To delve a little deeper into this topic, we must understand what the fundamental pillars of participation are: knowing, wanting, and being able.

- Knowing: knowing about the existing participation mechanisms and the means and channels to access them.
- Wanting: having the motivation to be part of the existing processes, mechanisms, pathways and channels, without external obligations.
- Being able: not depending on external factors (time, responsibilities, economic situation) that prevent access to participation.

Not all young people enjoy the privilege of knowing, wanting and being able to participate in life in society. On many occasions, they possess one or two sides of this base triangle, but all three are mandatory to qualify for the step of participation. In addition to these pillars, we must be aware of the other invisible social barriers that hinder – or underestimate – the participation of people identified, stereotyped and categorised by the collective generic imagination in Spanish society (racialised people, from rural/geographical areas, or even, but to a lesser extent, for gender reasons).

To understand participation from a complete point of view, we must look at Sherry Arnstein’s famous Ladder of Citizen Participation. The ladder consists of eight rungs in which it can be seen how far the population participates in a process and if they become participants in a process or not; in other words, the degree of real participation. These eight rungs are, in ascending order: manipulation; decoration; symbolic performance; designated but informed; consulted and informed; decisions initiated by others, but planned with the

population; decisions initiated and led only by the population; and decisions initiated by the population, but coordinated with others.

At the lowest rung would be the manipulation of the population and, at the highest, self-management or self-development. This is where we must question to what extent we involve young people in the processes aimed at this population group. I will illustrate this with my associative project: Talasa.

The Asociación Juvenil Talasa is a project created through a group of young people who wanted the voices and ideas of youths to be reflected in international projects and non-formal education learning opportunities created by and for youths from the grassroots. In other words, it was not an initiative started by an organisation or by experienced adults, but rather arose from the very motivation of young people wanting to establish a base in which the prepositions *by* and *for* were real. An initiative that arises from young people willing to show, rather than prove, what they are capable of in order to weave strengthened networks and give young people tools so that they can grow both personally and professionally.

The association is made up of young volunteers who have been learning based on the trial-and-error methodology, sharing experiences, exchanging knowledge between the people who are part of the core and all those who have been part of the activities we promote. We have managed to create and develop synergies to export them to all those interested who have contacted us to continue creating and learning. Our methodology is participatory and inclusive, where young people take the lead because, at all times, they are part of the processes of creating ideas and projects, including the technical, logistical and training aspect. It is participatory because we offer spaces for the groups we work with to provide new ideas and promote the value of those ideas; and inclusive because we prioritise those people who have not previously

had the opportunity to take part in projects like these, maintaining gender equality between the groups and giving access to those with difficulties and barriers (economic, social, etc.).

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When we created the association, our main objectives were twofold: on the one hand, to diversify the profile of the people who access the opportunities of the Erasmus+ Programme (KA1, Youth Exchanges and Training Courses) through spaces of dialogue and, on the other, to give young people tools to empower themselves through non-formal education activities, and thus, ultimately, become capable of dealing with all the bureaucratic procedures involved in submitting a project at the European level and that allows them to forge ahead with an idea. Young people would be the ones leading this project at all times.

For those unfamiliar with the working of key action 1 (KA1) of the Erasmus+ Programme, I will say briefly that the actions in which our association participates focus, on the one hand, on Youth Exchanges, in which people aged between fourteen and thirty from different European and associated countries can participate in a mobility programme where they share specific topics of interest to youths and discuss them; and, on the other, towards the Training Courses, aimed at people over the age of eighteen whose field of work is linked to youth. Both types of actions are subsidised by the European Commission and the respective national agencies (INJUVE, in the case of Spain) of the member countries, so that the participants do not usually incur accommodation and living expenses, and rarely travel expenses – unless they have exceeded the established limits.

Why did we want to focus on these two goals? First of all, by participating in these types of exchanges we realised that the profile of the people who accessed these projects was not diverse: people from minority groups (racialised, LGBTBI) did not participate, and the socio-economic level of the people who participated was always middle class, so much of the population did not have access to the projects. We realised that the way in which organisations promoted these types of exchanges was somewhat cold. Many did not follow up on the people they sent, nor did they receive prior training to explain the programme, activities, and so on. When addressing these issues, in our association we wanted a rich and diverse range of participants, which would allow them to share experiences and show everything that exists in our country, the diversity of cultures and ways of thinking that are typical of the geographical territory and acquired by migratory flows.¹

We established the second objective because we saw that young people did not participate in the entire process of the phases of the European projects. Although it is a requirement for young people to participate in all its phases, the reality is that they only participate in the implementation phase of the Youth Exchange activity or Training Course. The organisations and other people submitted and submit projects for youths but without youths: without involving us in the phases of creation, writing, activity planning, monitoring, submission, and management of the documentation and evaluation of the project in general. That is why we decided to start an association with which we could also train and support other young people in realising their ideas in non-formal education projects and activities.

We wanted to break with the fixed and paternalistic associative structure and encourage, promote and make it easier for young people to be more involved in the full running of these projects. Of course, it is neither an easy task nor does it present a two-way path (communication). In our case, Talasa is just a way to transform an idea into a project, which provides technical and logistical support to young people so that they can submit projects.

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Since 2021 we have submitted five Erasmus+ projects in total, two by the association's board of directors – formed by young people – and three by young people from outside the association. We have managed to get two young people to submit their own projects – one of them on two occasions. Of the total number of projects submitted by outsiders, one of them was approved and is pending implementation and another two are pending the grant award resolution. Taking into account that our association is small and that we are volunteers, we see it as quite an achievement to have managed to involve people from outside the organisation in the submission of projects, in all its phases and sharing knowledge that they can use. It was not an easy task, as it required a lot of support, time and effort, but that is the objective of our organisation.

Now, three years after founding the association, we are faced with the following dilemma: since we are not so young anymore, should we change the standing rule and continue to

1. See the TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, about the importance of the heterogeneity of knowledge: <https://bitly.co/Jphu>

be part of this, continue to create projects for young people, as we have the experience and enjoy it? Should we let the Talasa project run its course by involving more young people on the board of directors to inherit and build on what we have created? Should we close the project?

These are our doubts.

If we change the standing rules, we would be going against what we believe and the objective for which our association was created. We would be letting ourselves be carried away by experience and power and we would not be transferring that space to new young people.

As I have already said, we are a small organisation, whose work is not well known because we do not dedicate ourselves professionally to it and because our experience is short and it is difficult for us to find people

who want to join the project with all that this implies, acquiring certain responsibilities voluntarily.

If we close the project, we will close a personal and professional stage in the lives of the people who have been part of the association during its period of activity.

All these questions emerge when we begin to realise that youth is a stage of life. And it has an end, but it is a bittersweet end.

We still do not know what we are going to do. Personally, I advocate finding and giving spaces to new youths who can continue with our project, either in the same organisation, Asociación Juvenil Talasa, or by creating their own associations, once the tools to do so have been acquired and our formative seeds have borne fruit in order to generate initiatives, learning and empowerment.



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