



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

*Institutionen för socialt arbete*

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# Untapped Resources

Problems and Possibilities Pertaining  
to Meaningful Youth Participation

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## **Abstract**

Within traditional political and social arenas the voice of young people is rarely heard and taken into meaningful consideration. The world has dramatically changed and is constantly changing yet our system of political participation has remained virtually the same for more than a century. To better meet the demands of a true democratic society, new methods and mechanisms need to be developed to better incorporate the voices of all citizens. Young people, especially, possess unique viewpoints, characteristics and abilities that should be utilised within the realms of power. Young people should be viewed as partners and solutions rather than problems that need to be treated. Through theories of social representation, power and empowerment this study examines explanations and remedies for the current state of youth representation. The empirical basis that this study is founded upon consists of six qualitative interviews as well as a sampling of international laws and agreements concerning youth participation. I also present specifically a youth-run NGO as a best-practice example of how young people can become involved and participate meaningfully in political and civil decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** youth participation, active citizenship, NGO, democracy, power, empowerment, social representation

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# **I. Introduction**

## **I.1. Background**

The average young person today is not especially politically active. In our increasingly individualistic society, fewer and fewer people are participating in the democratic process. This is especially true amongst young people, many of which are excluded from the formal democratic process of voting and thus have to work even harder in order for their ideas and opinions to have any influence upon their communities, their countries and their world. According to numerous national and international agreements and statements, young people are to be seen as an asset to society and their opinions are to be taken seriously and utilised within the realms of formal government. But, how well do our elected officials live up to this intention? What opportunities exist for young people to make their voices heard and participate meaningfully in the governance of their societies? And what are possible reasons for the prevalence of such opportunities or the lack thereof?

Membership in traditional political parties is decreasing amongst young people (Karlsson, 1998). Confidence in the traditional party system is dwindling and the young people who are politically active are becoming increasingly involved in unconventional political organisations and interest groups. This essay will focus on young people who are actively making their voices heard and impacting their societies. How are they achieving this? And why is this important, both from society's perspective and for the young people individually?

## **I.2. Objectives and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the capabilities and opportunities for young people to actively participate in political and social processes. Through examining and discussing the current state of political and social affairs I will show that the voice of young people is rarely taken into consideration within the realms of political and social decision-making. What is more, the possibility of meaningful participation, I will argue, is a right of every citizen in a democratic society, regardless of age or status.

I will examine why young people are often not included or not taken seriously in both domestic and international political arenas and discuss how the obstacles that exist to youth participation can be overcome. For practical clarity, I will focus on the foundation and development of a youth-run Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and draw examples from their experience concerning the activation and organisation of young people.

The general research questions which this study is structured upon are:

- What is meaningful youth participation?
- Why is meaningful youth participation necessary from a democratic perspective?
- What challenges exist in regards to encouraging and organising young people to participate?
- What issues are most in need of youth participation?

### **I.3. Objectivity and Previous Experience**

Being a member of the group *young people* myself (although I am eagerly trying to make the transition out of it), my scientific objectivity and credibility when discussing this subject could surely come into question. Although I do have certain convictions and ideals regarding the subjects discussed, I have, throughout my research and analysis, been constantly mindful of the need for rational objectivity in this process. I have, to the best of my ability, distanced myself from my own opinions and instead sought theoretical and empirical support for the ideas expressed within.

Compounding this consideration even more is the fact that I have worked as an intern for the NGO which I focus on later and present as a best-practise example of youth participation. This, contrary to the logic of objectivity, I see as an advantage to the strength and validity of this discussion. By actively participating in the organisation's activities and procedures I can verify first-hand the reliability, or lack thereof, of the information obtained through their official information and through interviewing others who are active in the field.

### **I.4. What Is *Youth*? Who Are *Young People*?**

For clarity, I feel the need to attempt to define the group *young people* in terms of a democratic discussion. This is a difficult task. In most societies, one is labelled an adult when he or she reaches the age of eighteen and is then eligible for certain adult privileges such as driving, purchasing alcohol and voting. However, the idea of being young in contemporary society is more often defined by what one has achieved and the lifestyle one leads rather than a specific amount of accumulated years (Johansson, 2007). Being young implies a freedom to think independently and an immediate responsibility to no one other than oneself. Young people are, perhaps, the most individualistic group in society in this sense. By this definition a 29 year-old single student is a member of the group *young people*, while a 21 year-old who is married and has a child would not be. An initial reaction to this statement would naturally be that the 21 year-old must surely be considered young. However, being married and having a child has forced the 21 year-old to make drastic, typically-adult, changes in their lifestyle and therefore do not have as much of the individualistic freedom that is the core of the concept of being young.

Webster's Dictionary defines “young” as being in a period of growth. From this perspective a young person can be likened to a plant and the leaves or branches would then symbolise social, economic and biological factors which all contribute to leaving the idea of being young. None of these leaves alone make the plant whole just as the accumulation of one of these factors doesn't make one an adult, but they all contribute in their own way. And together, when all of the branches and leaves are in place you can definitely establish that a plant is full grown or that a young person has definitely progressed into adulthood, but, there is no clear line dividing the two. Youth is thus a permeable, flexible concept and both entering and leaving the group *young people* is a gradual process.

## **II. Theoretical Background and Previous Research**

### **II.1. Reference Procurement**

Throughout the research process I have utilised several channels for locating reference material. Initially, through Goteborg University's library catalogue, I performed several thematic searches for bibliography with the search terms: *youth, young people, youth participation, democracy, empowerment, NGO* and *active citizenship*. This usually resulted in a large amount of printed and electronic material. The search results were, however, ordered by level of relevance which helped to identify the most useful sources. After obtaining these materials I was able to locate several more useful books and reports through the bibliography references within. Also, through a television news presentation, I discovered a researcher and professor who has extensive experience in these subjects. I contacted him and he recommended several useful books that he and his colleagues had written.

### **II.2. Social Representation**

Theories of social representation as arguments for the inclusion of unrepresented groups within society are plentiful. Initially, the ideas within social representation, basically that some groups have and some groups have not, gained popular recognition within political thought during the civil rights struggles in the United States. Later, and certainly still today, these ideas were and are still being expanded and improved upon to support feminist and women's rights issues. More recently, the same principles have been adopted to address the representational struggles of immigrants. Although all of the following theorists I am about to discuss have failed to include young people in their problematisations of representation for certain groups within society, I feel that their arguments are perfectly applicable to the social representation of youth and therefore have included them in this study.

Moscovici defines social representation theories as systems of values, ideas and practises which serve a dual purpose. The first purpose being to establish an order or a set of rules to interpret and understand their material and social worlds. The second purpose is to enable communication within a certain group or community “by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual group history” (1988, p.214). The significance of this is that there is not one, fixed truth. There are no meanings or ideas that are universally applicable. The group (be it young people, feminists, immigrants, farmers, prostitutes or whoever else) develops their own sense of collective reality and interpretations of and remedies for societal problems are created based on this definition of reality. This is not to say that these thoughts are irrational or misguided, ideas are often based on

actual experiences of members of the group. However, social representational thought is usually coupled with an inability or unwillingness to accept other definitions or interpretations of their group. Members of the group themselves are the only authorities who have the knowledge and understanding to expand upon or redefine the codes within the group. Members outside of the group are often seen as the problem, the oppressor who needs to be educated to the 'truth' that the group has created.

What this means, in relation to young people, is that within the group *youth* there is a constant exchange of ideas and thoughts being exchanged defining what is acceptable and what is not, what music or clothing is popular and what is fun and what is boring. And adults are, for the most part, not capable of affecting this created meaning.

The three traditional arguments within social representational theory, according to Phillips (1998), are: *justice*, *resources* and *interests*. Defining these three aspects from a youth-centred political perspective, the youth group (like other marginalised and minority groups before them) define themselves as unfairly closed off from real decision-making channels (*justice*; *being excluded* is a violation of their rights in a democratic society), the adults in charge of things are not capable of dealing with our problems because they don't understand our reality (*resources*; only young people themselves are fully capable of understanding and solving their own problems) and our ideas and desires will not be enacted unless we are represented (*interests*; the implication that the group young people have a different set of ideals than the adult population and fresh, new solutions to contribute).

### **II.3. Power Theory**

Blomqvist Rodrigo (2005) discusses the evolution of power theories in three dimensions: The first dimension of power describes the exercising of power as an open arena for the exchange of ideas and decision-making where everyone is free to participate. According to this theory, inactivity or lack of participation is a result of the fact that certain individuals or groups are not mentally capable of or simply do not want to be involved in the processes occurring at higher levels of decision-making. This train of thought fails to address the idea that certain groups are disadvantaged and do not have adequate resources to educate themselves of participation opportunities and the ways to effectively utilise them. It is therefore, according to posterior theorists, a naïve, simplified description of the phenomenon.

The second dimension of power describes not only the open arena for exchange of ideas, but the hidden agendas and rules and procedures that build up the structure of the arena. This, what Blomqvist Rodrigo terms “mobilisation of bias”, consists of values, traditions, opinions, culture,



rituals and institutional procedures. Power, in this sense, not only dictates what is decided, but what questions are allowed to even come up for consideration and serious discussion. This phenomena acts to enforce and strengthen the power of those already in power while at the same time keeps those out of power and the issues that concern them from gaining influence.

This two-dimensional description of power can be applied to Phillips' (1998) ideas concerning the politics of presence. She argues that social, gender and ethnic diversity within the government is instrumental for meeting the needs and desires of all of society. However, she argues that these groups are being restrained from participating meaningfully because the traditional system is made and developed by older white men and does not meet the needs and preferences of other groups. This solidifies the power relationship between these groups even more. In relation to this study, I would like to emphasise that Phillips neglects to include young people in her description of the groups who are excluded from meaningful participation, but I feel young people should obviously be included in such a discussion.

Lukes (1994) criticises the first two theoretical dimensions of power for being limited to open exercises of power. He describes a third dimension, that which he considers the strongest exercise of power, which is the idea of preventing people from even identifying conflicts. By forming and defining political and civic life, those in power are able to force people to assume the roles and positions that are assigned to them. In this sense, a “false or manipulated consensus” is created because the participants are not aware of other realities that they could be existing within. Phillips (1998) also discusses this idea of being politically subjacent, but kept incapable of even being aware of it.

#### **II.4. Empowerment**

Applicable to the discussion from an individual's perspective, Solomon (1976) explains that people generally progress through three levels of development;

- the first level consists of positive experiences from early family life which create and build up confidence and competence in social situations.
- the second level, reinforces these social abilities and hones the skills of maintaining relationships. This is usually through schools.
- the third level is then being completely able to accept valued social roles and perform well within them.

Each level is dependent upon the successful completion of the preceding level. Just as these positive experiences teach positive lessons in social interaction, the negative experiences in the process produce negative coping strategies within social behaviour. Traditionally, negative valuations of

young people occur in political practices and civil organisations and events (Payne, 1991). In this sense, young people, for example, can adopt a negative point of reference towards political life, which could carry on to later stages of the development of their political interaction and prevent them from participating meaningfully and positively.

The goal of empowerment is to identify negative experiences and ideas within an individual that are indirectly blocking him or her from reaching their full potential (Payne, 1991). And, further, to aid those in inferior positions in seeing themselves as causal agents being capable of improving their situation themselves through their own actions. The ideas of self-control, personal responsibility and self-actualisation and cognitive psychological processes are applicable within empowerment theory. It is the supporting of a person or group of people to define their own problems and find solutions to them themselves rather than simply telling them what they need and what they need to do. And through this process their own sense of being is improved and strengthened. Starrin (1993) describes empowerment as a replacement for paternalism.

## **II.5. Democratic Perspectives**

The idea of democracy can be interpreted and implemented in various ways, but in today's society the word democracy is universally used to describe a *representative democracy* where the active participation of the people is required to dictate the formation of political and civic life. Should the people not participate and dictate governance then a society is no longer representative of them and they technically cease to exist in a democratic society. This theoretical definition of a representative democracy is difficult or impossible to achieve in reality and thus various forms and levels of citizens' representation have come to be accepted and practised in modern democratic societies. Establishing and maintaining a democracy (in the practical rather than the theoretical sense) then, is done by accepting a certain level of participation; a 'good enough' democracy.

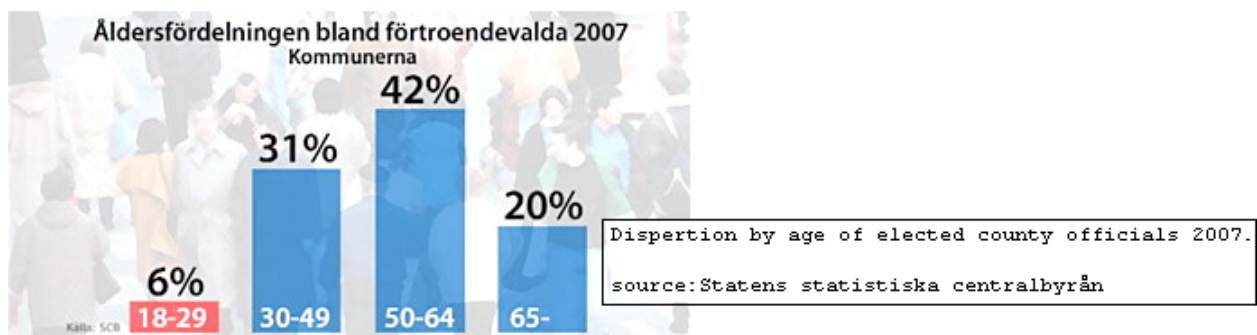
At the age of eighteen a citizen is allowed to directly participate in elections through the voting process. Despite the fact that everyone of legal age *can* vote, there are obvious differences in the frequency of voter participation amongst different socio-economic groups. To make a complex matter as simple as possible, we can establish that white men and women vote more often than minority men and women and middle-aged people vote more often than very young or very old eligible voters. Social-class and education levels also have strong influence on voter participation (Martikainen, Martikainen & Wass, 2005).

According to Johansson (2007) there are opposing explanations for why these groups do not participate in political decision-making processes. Government representatives argue that they have opportunities to participate, but simply choose not to utilise these opportunities. Johansson's

research shows, on the other hand, that young people, for example, believe they have little or no opportunities to make their voices heard in the political sphere. She explains that there is a discrepancy between how the government expects citizens to behave in a democracy and how citizens themselves want to behave or how they are capable of behaving. These conflicting notions are a result of the simultaneous ideas of a theoretical ideal democracy and how a practical democracy functions in reality. These are two different phenomena that these groups are talking about, yet they both use the term *democracy* to describe them.

## II.6. Youth representation in Swedish government

According to a recent study in Sweden, young people are disproportionately represented amongst elected officials in local and national politics. Despite the fact that twenty percent of Sweden's population is between the ages of 18 and 29, this age group only accounts for six percent of the country's elected government officials. This inverse correlation has, throughout recent years, increased; as the amount of young people increases their representation in government positions decreases.



According to David Karlsson, (2006) over the last ten years in the Swedish county-governance system the real power to make decisions has been moved higher and higher up in the chain of government officials (namely to *Kommunstyrelsen* and *Kommunstyrelsens ordförande*). He adds that this concentration of power is doubly harmful to young people; not only are they largely under-represented, but the few positions that they are represented in are at lower levels (*förtroendeuppdrag* and *nämnder*) and these positions have much less influence in today's county government system compared with that which existed ten years ago (Karlsson, 2006).

## II.7. Modern Forms of Political Participation

In contemporary politics there is, according to Hemmati (2004) a need for governments to ensure their democratic accountability by utilising new mechanisms for political participation. For

example, the input of corporations, the media and NGO's need to be better taken into account. By focusing solely on political parties, she argues, governments are missing the elements of policy formation and implementation, key elements of a democracy representative of the people. By ignoring these voices, governments are weakening themselves from a democratic point of view. She maintains that it is the responsibility of democratic institutions that "all societal voices and forces... be drawn in and meaningfully included in the democratic process" (Hemmati, 2004, p.105). Although she fails to specifically mention young people as meaningful voices to be included in this new form of political inclusion, young people and youth organisations are certainly actors which should be included in government's attempts to utilise the input of more voices in society.

There are also obstacles which will arise with this new form of democratic participation. Participating in a dialogue requires flexibility, openness to new ideas and teachability. Individuals who have never participated in political processes can find this especially difficult, yet Hemmati (2004) insists that these are the voices that need listened to the most. She asserts that most politicians today lack an ability to truly listen and learn. The few politicians who do have this ability and see the importance of utilising the voice of new actors in society need to lead the way and develop new forums for doing so.

An example of this new type of political leader can be found in Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for the U.S. Presidency. The main focus of his campaign was on change and redefining how we think about democracy. He vowed, if he became President, he would actively seek the input of minority groups, for example, through direct contact with cultural and charity organisations and American Indian tribal chiefs . He also has discussed with several popular musicians how they could help him reach out to and communicate with young people (Burman, 2008). These kinds of unconventional methods are possible ways that the modern visionary politicians can listen to these voices that Hemmati insists are the voices that most need listening to.

## **II.8. An Organisational Advantage**

One positive aspect of the decreasing membership in political parties and with NGO's and youth organisations is the fact that smaller organisations are often more effective. According to Altmeier (2004) smaller organisations are better at training their members, incorporating new ideas and restructuring and adapting to new needs. In smaller organisations there is more direct participation at every level of the organisation and thus the people involved develop their skills and their confidence better. Within organisations with larger memberships, he argues that more time is spent discussing internal issues rather than focusing on the external goals of the organisation (Altmeier, 2004). While many larger organisations are worrying about how to keep their membership numbers

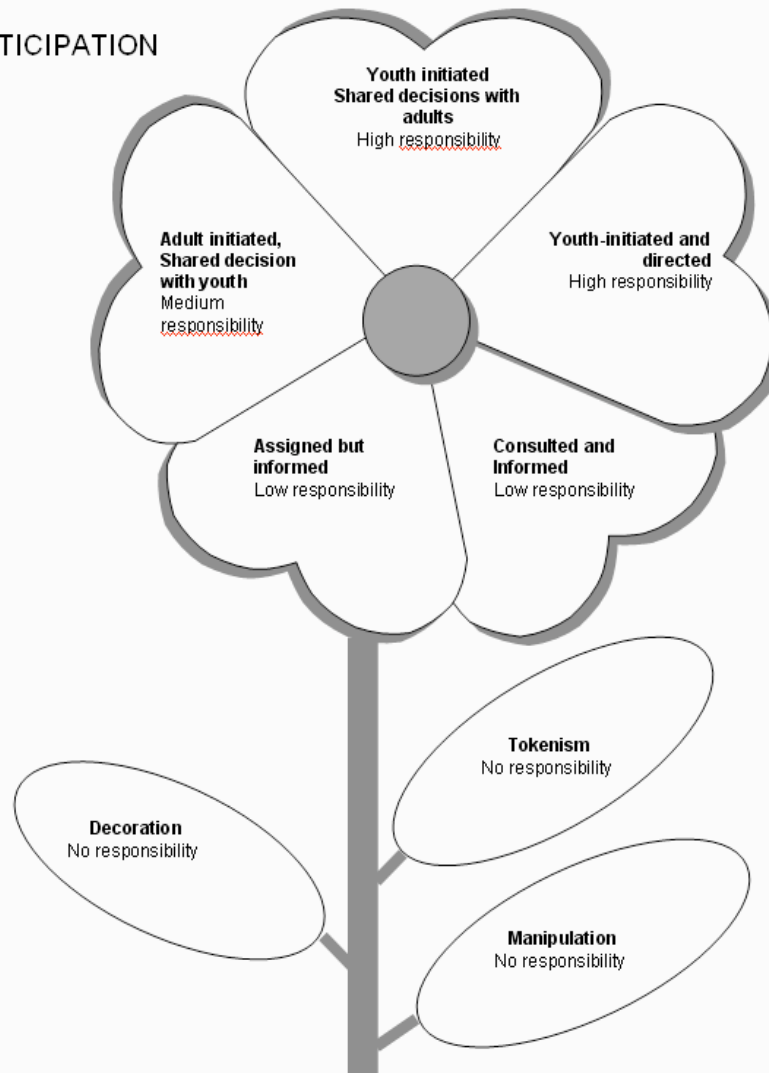
from dropping, Altmeier points out that they should be more concerned about the experience and development that their members are missing out on. At the same time, smaller youth organisations and NGO's are crafting their members into a new political elite.

## **II.9. Meaningful Youth Participation**

Meaningful youth participation is necessitous when designing solutions and policies regarding young people. The youth of today are a huge focus group amongst social policy-makers, but they are all too often seen simply as a problem group instead of utilised as key partners towards positive development. When given the possibility to make informed choices, young people are receptive to positive change, leading to long-term and wide-ranging benefits. Without the support of youth and utilising the positive input of youth, the decision-making, implementing and evaluation of policies and programmes directed towards them will be less effective (Almeida, Bergdorf & Nederveen, 2007). According to Koenders, “No one understands the thoughts, realities and needs of young people better than young people themselves” (personal communication, 12 October, 2006).

In 1992 Roger Hart created a model for identifying and describing different levels of youth participation entitled the *Ladder of Participation*. This spectrum identifies eight types of youth participation and orders them on the rungs of a ladder, based on acceptableness. Inspired by Hart's model, the Dutch youth organisation, CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality, has created *The Flower of Participation* which better illustrates different forms of youth participation. CHOICE felt that the flower model was more helpful because one form of youth participation isn't always necessarily better than another, as the hierarchical rungs of the ladder suggest. Koenders explains that, “different forms of participation can suit different forms of needs. The most effective form of participation varies depending on the nature of the task at hand”(personal communication, 12 October, 2006).

## FLOWER OF PARTICIPATION



**Manipulation.** This is the case when young people don't have any understanding of the issues and therefore don't understand their actions. For example when a four year old AIDS orphan is shaking the hand of President Bush to make him invest more in orphans.

**Decoration.** This looks very much like manipulation but in this case young people might understand their actions. However, young people are just used to bolster the adult's cause (support their problem) in an indirect way. Adults do not pretend that the case they are fighting for is inspired by young people. An example could be young people who are singing to the delegates at the opening of a conference on youth.

**Tokenism.** Young people are given a voice, but in fact have little voice about the subject or the style of communicating it and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. This can be the case when children are taking seat on conference panels or when youth is in a delegation but not allowed to say anything.

**Assigned but informed.** This can be seen as the start of participation. Young people now understand the aim of the project, they know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why and they have a meaningful role. They volunteered for this project after the project was made clear to them. An example might be a community activity which was planned by adults, but youth joins in the activity

***Consulted and informed.*** Project is designed and run by adults, but young people understand the process, are consulted and their opinions are treated seriously.

***Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth.*** Though the projects are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with young people.

***Youth-initiated and directed.*** When the conditions are supportive (adult support), youth can work together co-operatively in large groups and design and run their own projects.

***Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults.*** This would be the case when young people ask adults to join in a certain activity that is initiated by the youth.

(Almeida, Bergdorf, & Nederveen, 2007)

### **III. Methodology**

#### **III.1. Methodological Considerations Concerning Qualitative Research**

The empirical base that this essay is founded upon consists of qualitative data collected through six interviews. Qualitative interviews provide a holistic and detailed understanding of the experiences and personal thoughts of the youth who are directly involved. The style of the interview was free and the questions and themes were very broad. I wanted my informants to reflect on the ideas that were most important to them as opposed to a quantitative study where the informant doesn't have the freedom to go into as much detail or choose themselves what is most important to divulge (Kvale, 2007). Another reason that I chose qualitative research is because I wanted to ensure that my informants have had extensive experience in meaningful youth participation which is of utmost importance for the validity of the information obtained. It is not possible for me to verify the experience of a large enough number of informants so that a reliable quantitative study could be achieved.

Because the type of informant I sought after was so specific, it was most effective to locate and choose my interview subjects through a snowball sampling method. I had previous contact with two of my informants and knew that they were valuable resources on this topic. Subsequently, through their recommendations, I came into contact with the other four informants. This, in my opinion, is an effective way to ensure that the data collected is valid; that I am researching that which I intend to research from informants who have experience in the correct areas. The interviewees could personally vouch for the dependability and experience of the other interviewees which is, at least, more reliable than asking the individual informant themselves how trustworthy they are.

However, the idea that validity within qualitative research can be achieved through following a specific procedure is highly fallible according to Seale (2004). He argues that the level of validity when dealing with qualitative research depends solely on the interviewer's ability to identify and eliminate "threats" to validity such as social norms and contexts, linguistic hindrances and possible misunderstandings. The interviewer must modify, through pragmatic consideration, the guidelines for valid data collection according to the observable features of each individual interview circumstance. According to this description, I assessed the informants' backgrounds, previous experiences and the levels of trust and openness observed between them and myself and can thus ensure a reasonable level of validity.

Also, qualitative research is not generalisable amongst a larger population. The information I have obtained is only applicable to the specific experiences of my informants. Gobo (2004) makes the distinction of two kinds of generalisations; a generalisation concerning a specific group or



population and achieved through quantitative surveys and, the other, a less appealing generalisation concerning "the nature of the process", where the information collected applies only to the specific experience of the informant at a particular place and time. This has sometimes been described as "naturalist generalisation" or "analytical generalisation", but Gobo argues that these are politically-wise, yet failed attempts at giving qualitative research some level of artificial scientific legitimation when in actuality they are not scientifically reliable or generalisable.

Weick (1989) discuss the idea of *plausibility* as a substitute for the validity and reliability when working with qualitative data. Taking into consideration the levels at which the interview subjects are "interesting, obvious, connected, believable, beautiful, or real in the context of the problem they are trying to solve" are ways to ensure a high level of plausibility. The utilisation of plausibility as opposed to, or at least in addition to, validity and reliability are not to imply that my findings are "un-scientific" (Kreiner & Mouritsen, 2005). It is, on the contrary, a desire to add credibility to the knowledge produced through qualitative research with the best suitable method.

### **III.2. Interview Process**

I chose to interview my informants in three separate ways: traditional face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and through internet utilities (e-mail and instant messenger service). All of my informants are living in other European countries and due to financial and time constraints it was not possible to conduct all of the interviews in person.

The two face-to-face interviews took place in a private room and were recorded on cassette which was then used to transcribe the interview into a text document. During the telephone interview I took notes of the main ideas that were expressed and then, immediately after completion of the interview I filled in the notes with greater detail as it was still fresh in my memory. The internet interviews were realised through e-mail correspondence and through real-time discussions using an instant messenger programme. After initial review of the interviews, further contact was made to specify and expand upon certain ideas of particular interest.

Although the three methods of data collection have the same goal, the practical way of achieving this goal varies drastically between them. The telephone interview was, undoubtedly, the most difficult of the three interviewing methods. It was sometimes difficult to record quality notes fast enough and still concentrate on what was currently being said. And some pauses and gaps in the conversation were necessary as I was finishing writing a note and then had to quickly introduce a new theme or question. The face-to-face interviews were much easier as I was able to have a more casual conversation and let the interviewee speak freely. Kvale (2005) terms this practise a conversational or dialogical interview. The entire recorded content was easily reviewed at a later

date making it possible for a more in-depth analysis and understanding of the entire interview. In all three of these live interviews my informants were relaxed and were very good at expressing their opinions and talking freely at length about the topics suggested.

In my experience, I found internet interviewing to be the best form of qualitative data collection. Whether it is through a standard e-mail or using an instant messenger service, the informants have the comfort of being in front of their own computers, and the time to thoroughly think through their responses and formulate the most specific and detailed responses. The pressure of time constraints and speech or social impediments that exist in traditional interview forms is eliminated by utilisation of the internet. Ryen (2004) makes the point that this can also negatively affect the results as there is more time for manipulation and tactical readjustment of the communication.

The subjects I was investigating were quite easy for the informants to discuss, but in cases where sensitive or embarrassing information is being discussed this method is even more valuable as it eliminates much of the shame and nervousness that often can accompany such interviews and often affects the sincerity and validity of the interview results. On the other hand, internet communication removes the opportunity to observe and interpret non-verbal communication such as body language, pauses, voice inflection, hesitancy, restlessness and irritation (Ryen, 2004). This makes internet data collection more or less of a wise choice depending on the sensitivity of the subject being investigated. Despite this fact, I believe that the internet should and will be increasingly more accepted and utilised within academic research as the benefits of this method of data collection become increasingly evident.

### **III.3. Ethical Considerations**

With regards to ethical considerations towards my interviewees, they were all informed of the purpose and aims of this essay and were also assured that I will inform them of any and all information that I intend to use in this essay. There was virtually no hesitance or concern amongst the interviewees. This can be attributed to the fact that we were, prior to the interview, already somewhat acquainted on a personal level. Also, the fact that all of the interviewees were passionate about the subjects being discussed and all had prior experience discussing and advocating for these themes made the atmosphere of the interviews very open and positive.

## IV. International Agreements and Conventions

There are numerous international agreements and conventions dealing directly and indirectly with young peoples' rights to participate meaningfully in civil and political processes. Below are four examples of such documents:

- ***The Convention on the Rights of the Child***

*Part I, Article 12.1 - States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

- ***International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights***

*Article 2 - Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*

*Article 25 - Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, without any of the distinctions mentioned in article two and without unreasonable restrictions to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives.*

- ***Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development***

*Chapter 4 - 6.13. Countries should aim to meet the needs and aspirations of youth, particularly in the areas of formal and non-formal education, training, employment opportunities, housing and health, thereby ensuring their integration and participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the political process and preparation for leadership roles.*

*Chapter 4 - 6.15. Youth should be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities that have a direct impact on their daily lives.*

- ***Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life***

*II/8 - Youth participation in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties*

*54. A vibrant, independent and active non-governmental sector is an essential element of any truly democratic society. It is also important that other sectors of civil society such as political parties are strong and active at a local and regional level. Participation in the democratic life of any country, region or locality is about more than voting every few years. That is why participation in NGOs and political parties is so important, because they help citizens to be involved in, and influence, decisions and actions on an ongoing basis. Therefore it is crucial that young people are encouraged and supported to participate in associative life in their communities.*

*55. Local and regional authorities should provide financial and other resources to NGOs which actively promote the participation of young people in their activities and democratic decision-making structures and procedures.*

*56. Local and regional authorities, in partnership with political parties and in a non-partisan manner, should promote the involvement of young people in the party political system in general, and support specific actions, such as training.*

Conventions (or covenants) are the only form of international documents with actual legal power (compared to, for example programmes of action charters and declarations which encourage cooperation, but include no form of legality to enforce cooperation). The countries which sign these agreements are legally bound to uphold the rights contained within. According to the *The nature of States parties obligations (Art. 2, par.1)*, each signatory party is required to allocate the "maximum of its available resources" to the "full realisation of the rights" detailed in the agreements. However, there is no international institution in place to ensure that these rights are respected. Theoretically, the United Nations Security Council could impose sanctions on a country to force them to live up to the agreements they have signed, but thus far the security council has only dealt with security between states rather than individuals securities within their societies. However, within Europe, The Council of Europe's 47 member states (only Belarus and The Vatican City are not members) can be held accountable for rights violations. States parties or individual citizens can file applications against signatory states through the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Despite their lacking legal force, programmes of action, agreements and declarations are widely accepted internationally which creates a moral obligation for implementation. Negligence of these rights can have a negative effect on international relations and the possibility of resulting political and economic implications is an incentive for states to comply with these documents (Almeida, Bergdorf & Nederveen, 2007).

## V. Interview Results and Analysis

To analyse the interview results I used what Kvale (2007) terms the method of *idea concentration* [(*meningskoncentration*) my translation from Swedish]. This method consists of reformulating the empirical data so that the statements are more concise, it is easier to identify main ideas and themes and single out the most essential and useful information. After doing this I divided the data into four categories and grouped all of the relevant information into these categories:

- Defining meaningful youth participation
- Why is youth participation important?
- Challenges regarding youth participation?
- Personal growth through participation

Ryen (2004) makes the point that a sociological scientific study should not simply accept the interview data as factual explanations and citations. A journalist can do this kind of work. The sociological researcher must not neglect the process of analysis, of understanding and interpreting his data. He must not simply report raw data, but instead look for the contextual and situation-dependent aspects hidden within.

My six informants consisted of:

- A coordinator of a European youth NGO dealing with sexual and reproductive rights.
- A coordinator of a Dutch youth NGO dealing with sexual and reproductive rights.
- A representative of an international NGO dealing with sexual and reproductive rights.
- A member of a youth NGO dealing with sexual and reproductive rights
- A member of a youth organisation dealing with integration and youth participation
- A master's student of political philosophy researching youth participation

### - Defining meaningful youth participation

The unanimous opinion of the interviewees is that meaningful youth participations means the inclusion of young people within every level of decision-making processes; from design to implementation and evaluation. Some mentioned that they have been present in discussions and been able to voice their opinions, but that these opinions were not implemented into the final resulting projects. This type of involvement could, according to the Flower of Participation model, be described as starting out as an assigned but informed form of involvement, but resulted merely in tokenism as their opinions didn't seem to really matter to the adults involved.

Also, it was mentioned that meaningful youth participation should include involving youth

in ways they can be involved, in non-traditional forms. For example, one interviewee discussed a situation where an adult organisation branched off from their normal procedures of holding conferences and debate panels and instead organised a festival-type activity where young people were encouraged to interact and discuss issues creatively, for example through games and other innovative activities. At the end of the day, the organisers documented the results and opinions expressed through this festival and presented the information in a formal report to the adult decision-makers of the organisation. They were reportedly very thankful for the “valuable and unique” (Danova, personal communication, 18 January, 2008) input that was received in this way.

### **- Why is youth participation important?**

This question, at least for those I interviewed, seemed to be quite absurd. It is much more difficult, they reasoned to try to explain why it is not important, why youth shouldn't be included. The idea that no one understands the needs and desires of young people better than young people themselves was reiterated several times throughout the interviews. They felt that because there are so many policies and procedures constantly being produced and enacted concerning young people that it is paramount that young people are included in designing them so that they will be effective.

One interviewee strengthened this point by mentioning the fact that, in her experience, young people care more about a project if they have been involved in creating it. Parentalist objectives that are simply forced upon young people are often ignored and not taken seriously. However, when a project that is designed by or in partnership with young people is presented young people get more excited about it and talk more positively about it amongst themselves, thus strengthening the reach of the project. It could be the same ideas presented, but simply because they felt they were meaningfully involved in the creation of these ideas, rather than simply having them handed to them by adults, young people take them more seriously and are more eager to see to their effective implementation. These thoughts of creating a feeling of pride and possession are discussed by Starrin (1997) within the realms of empowerment theory. Juxtaposed against the paternalistic processes of forced accordance, this kind of active participation empowers the individuals affected by it to believe in the process and in themselves.

Payne (1991) discusses the idea of learned helplessness which in this case is applicable to the young people who observe that they have no bearing on the procedures directed towards them will accept this role and their capacity to learn and participate usefully in other situations can become impaired. They will simply lose faith in the system and in themselves and withdraw. But, by allowing them to experience situations where they have control and can achieve positive results, this learned helplessness amongst young people can be avoided or 'de-learned'.

Another thought discussed was simply that adults don't understand the reality of young people. Culture is constantly changing and even the informants who could be considered part of the group young people admitted that they know very little about the realities facing teenagers these days as so much has changed just in the past ten years. And if this is the case, then certainly adult members of parliament, for example, have even less understanding and desperately need to seek the input of youth.

### **- Challenges regarding youth participation?**

The practicalities concerning youth participation can present problems. The most frequently discussed problem was time restraints. Because, most often, young people are involved as volunteers rather than full-time staff within an organisation it is not always possible to get things done as quickly as most adults within the organisation are accustomed to. Young people complained of feeling the pressure of making responsibilities towards the organisation compatible with other responsibilities such as school, sports, family obligations, etc. The organisers of organisations dealing with young people expressed that they find it difficult to organise work and get things done effectively because they cannot place the same requirements and standards on volunteers. They sometimes had to make excuses to other partners within the organisation when things that young people were to be working on didn't get done on time. However, the organisations that had more experience working with young people as well as the youth-run organisations have become more accustomed to this type of problem and were better prepared to deal with it.

Other challenges discussed concerned the idea that young people are more progressive or have differing opinions than the adults they worked with. Karlsson (2003) discusses that his empirical data shows that regardless of political party, sex, class and all other variables, older politically active persons have more conservative ideals than young people. Phillips (2000) and Blomqvist Rodrigo (2005) argue that political ideals shouldn't be attached to socio-economic factors such as age, sex, class, etc., that this simplifies or generalises these complex groups. The notion that we shouldn't generalise entire groups in this way is certainly noble, but according to Karlsson's research anyways, the generalisations are fully necessary within a scientific discussion. All of these variable groups showed strong correlations when their political opinions were compared.

The problems that arose, then, were that it was often difficult to reach compromises with young people. Adults have had more experience in political and civil decision-making processes and thus have more experience exchanging ideas and compromising their own agendas. Young people were sometimes viewed as unwilling or unable to compromise. On the other hand, another

interviewee suggested that her experience with young people is that they are more open to new ideas than the adults are. Young people were described as willing and eager to take in new ideas while the adults were unreceptive towards the young people. Based on these differing responses as well as my own experience with such dealings, I believe the setting and atmosphere of the discussions is paramount to their productivity. If an atmosphere of mistrust, doubtfulness and opposition exists, both sides will be reluctant to cooperate. But, when adults make young people feel welcome, capable and respected, I am confident that young people appreciate such opportunities and are themselves willing to make concessions and cooperate better. Perhaps this is evidence of young people being partly ruled by their emotions, rather than logic alone.

Another problem was that of differing cultures. Firstly, western organisations complained of the difficulty of attracting minority, immigrant or non-heterosexual members. It seems that these groups are not only underrepresented in political activism, which Karlsson's data confirms, but the few that do participate politically do so within specific organisations aimed at their particular minority. The second aspect of cultural problems involved the social hierarchies which exist in varying degrees within every culture. Young people, for example, from Eastern European countries seem to have a strong respect towards their superiors. The communist history which didn't allow them to speak up to or against an authority figure is set in their cultures and still today, compared with the Western European participants, they are much less comfortable and willing to assume meaningful roles within decision-making situations with adults. Also, in many African and Asian countries, young people (and especially young women) do not have the cultural and sometimes even legal rights to organise and debate political issues.

#### **- Personal growth through participation**

All of the interviewees involved viewed their youth activism as an invaluable resource. They have gained confidence and experience applicable to future jobs and life situations. They found it stimulating, energising and enriching to be able to interact and work together with other young people from all over the world. Several discussed the kind of passion and excitement that has existed during certain trainings and meetings. They felt an overwhelming positivity and hope from being involved in such processes and being surrounded by such people. One suggested that, no matter what kind of work you do, there are very few chances to ever feel the kinds of connections and meaningfulness that arise after living and working with young people for several days on end.

Several discussed the satisfaction of building an organisation up themselves. As youth organisations are generally young and small, it is normal that all members participate in the structuring and restructuring of their operations. They learned a lot about organisational difficulties,



flexibility, trial-and-error decision-making and monitoring and evaluation. They have grown themselves together with the organisation, they all felt a personal connection to their organisations. And everything that they have learned through their involvement with their organisations they can use (or are already using) in other occupations. This is a textbook case of empowerment. By being able to find and design solutions themselves and succeeding, these young people are gaining the confidence they need to successfully take on even larger projects in the future. These young people are, undoubtedly, being crafted into the new political elite (Altmeier, 2004).

## **VI. YouAct: European Youth Network on Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

To illustrate one way that meaningful youth participation is currently being realised, a description of YouAct, a multi-national youth organisation follows:

YouAct is a network of young people throughout Europe who are active in the field of sexual and reproductive rights (SRR). The network was officially established in 2004 by the Dutch youth organisation CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality and The World Population Foundation (WPF). YouAct still cooperates closely with these two organisations, but is completely independent and self-governing. They have complete control over the structure, planning, activities and sustaining of their organisation. This aspect is especially important within the context of real youth participation. There are countless examples of young people who, in the beginning, had a strong desire to be active in civic and political organisations, but after a short while gave up because they felt the adults in charge of the organisation didn't care about their ideas or take them seriously (Skoglund, 1992). Young people need to be taken seriously and included in the organisational process, not only from a rights-based perspective, but also simply as a factor of sustainability.

YouAct currently has 22 members from 16 different countries. All members are under the age of 28 and are volunteers. There is one paid, full-time coordinator who is based in their office in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The members communicate regularly through e-mail, instant messaging services and internet forums. Individual members represent the organisation at various events and activities. There is also an annual general meeting where all members congregate for four days. In these meetings all members have the chance to plan the activities and the structure of the network for the coming year and elect their steering committee, comprised of seven members.

YouAct is fighting for the sexual and reproductive rights of young people. This is done through advocacy, awareness-raising and sharing information with other organisations active in the field. They work for the acknowledgement of young people's rights on a political level, write articles and conduct workshops to raise awareness about the needs and rights of young people and they actively work together with other youth and adult organisations. Not only do they advocate for young people's rights, but, through trainings and collaboration, they also empower young people to more effectively stand up for their own rights. YouAct is founded on the principle that young people have the right to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes and their voices need to be listened to.

Amongst other activities, YouAct has attended several governmental meetings in the EU and UN conferences on SRR and were able to represent the voice of young people. YouAct has conducted trainings on SRR and HIV/AIDS advocacy for young people in the Central and Eastern European region and in Sri Lanka. They cooperate with key players in the field on different levels.

They have formed partnerships, for example, with the International Planned Parenthood Federation, EuroNGO's and the Irish Family Planning Association for a Youth-Adult partnership training. YouAct has representatives in advisory bodies to UN agencies such as UNAIDS - Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and UNFPA - the United Nations Population Fund. And they also work together with other youth organisations to increase the effectiveness of their advocacy efforts. These partner organisations include; Global Youth Coalition HIV/AIDS, African Network Lenswe La Rona, Youth Coalition and CHOICE For Youth and Sexuality. (Almeida, Bergdorf, & Nederveen, 2007)

### **VI.1. YouAct's Definition of Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

Sexual and reproductive rights entail everything that has to do with sexuality and having children. For example, everybody has the right to be informed about sexuality and reproduction and to know how to protect oneself from sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. Additionally, every person has the right to decide over their own body and nobody can force another person to have sex. People have the right to make their own choices and should not face discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation. Moreover, people have the right to health care services including comprehensive information and medical treatment and contraceptives should be equally accessible to all. In summation, one can say that when people can practise their sexual and reproductive rights, they have sufficient information and access to services to make informed choices about all aspects of their sexuality.

Sexual and reproductive rights are specifically important for young people because they are the most vulnerable group and the choices they make can affect them for the rest of their lives. Young people are most affected by a lack of sexual rights; young girls are married away against their will, sexually abused and raped. Young people around the world and especially in developing countries often do not have the information they need to make free and responsible choices regarding sex. Young people around the world have the highest risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Pregnancy complications are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 (Say, 2007).

Therefore, to ensure their fairness and effectiveness, decisions and laws made concerning sexuality and reproduction should be made in cooperation with young people. According to Nederveen (personal communication, 28 November, 2007), the reality today is that the voice of young people is seldom heard in government meetings and UN conventions, despite the fact that the decisions made there have a tremendous impact on their lives. She maintains that "young people should be seen not as problems and recipients, but rather as resources and partners. No one

understands the needs of young people better than young people themselves.”

## VII. Summary Discussion

According to Bessant (2004), as young people feel more and more that they are not given the chance to participate in traditional political processes they are improvising and adapting new ways to voice their opinions. This can include public forum discussions, manifestations, marches, interest and volunteer organisations and, of course, NGO's, to name a few. Representatives of governing institutions often describe this development as a problem, they insist that young people need to learn the proper way to channel their political opinions (Johansson, 2007). If not, she claims the democratic system's institutional structure will eventually come under criticism and require fundamental restructuring. I would argue that the growing popularity of non-traditional forms of political expression is evidence that the current democratic system's structure is already being criticised. And, in my opinion, it is obvious that the problem is not that young people need to adapt to an outdated form of democracy, but instead that the democratic system should adapt to young people's needs.

In our constantly shrinking world, political activism is more and more based on international partnerships and cooperation. Nationalism, both at state and individual levels, is being replaced by solidarity over borders. This process is most evident in Europe, but I believe this developing international cooperation will continue to increase in all parts of the world. However, this emerging new form of governance is currently being restrained by a 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial society's form of national democratic participation. Young people are already doing their part by developing and choosing new and innovative mechanisms for political participation. The challenge now lies in the hands of the governing powers as they are faced with the choice of trying to repeal this development or embrace it. There are many international laws and agreements demanding them to embrace it. By reforming their thinking and their routines, adults and young people in partnership can develop a new model of democracy which is better-suited for today's realities and challenges.

This development is not a possible scenario that, as Johansson (2007) and many others say, might change the core of our democratic system and something we should fear. Instead, it is something that already is changing the core of our democratic system and at the highest levels of national and international governance there are ambitions to adapt to these new forms of participation and activism. Now it is time to follow through on these ambitions. And this is not a development that we should be afraid of, but rather welcome and embrace. Afterall, it is *“government of the people, by the people, for the people”* that we supposedly are to strive after.

The distinction between ancient and modern freedom is interesting in this context. Athenian residents considered themselves free because they actively participated in the governance of their society, they sacrificed their time and their pleasures to uphold a free, egalitarian society. Modern

liberal freedom can be defined as just the opposite of that; we support the idea of an overseeing governing body that protects our private freedoms so that we are able to pursue our individual happiness in whatever way we see fit (Kymlicka, 2002). Perhaps the disenchanting, depressed society we exist within today is, in fact, a direct result of our liberal detachment from an Aristotelian definition of 'the good life'. The true 'good life' might finally be found by fusing ancient and modern freedoms together through the creation of a society where political participation becomes a part of our daily lives and thoughts and thus more directly applicable to and dependent upon our individual pursuits of happiness (not to mention the requirements of a truly representative democracy).

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## Interview Guide

### *Youth Participation:*

What is meaningful youth participation?

Why is meaningful youth participation necessary and what issues are most in need of youth participation?  
from a democratic perspective

### *Organisation:*

How was (*the organisation*) established? Who established it and why?

In what way have you helped the voice of young people to be heard?

Who is listening and who is not?

What kind of difficulties and arguments against youth participation have you encountered and how have they been dealt with?

What challenges exist in regards to encouraging and organising young people to participate and how are these dealt with?

working with volunteers

sustainability

### *Personal Motivation:*

Why are you involved with (*the organisation*)?

What role do you play in the organisation?

What have you learned, or how has being active in this organisation helped with your personal development?

How do you expect it will help you in the future?

*Most memorable/important experiences?*