

YOUTH PARTICIPATION NOW

AN EXPLORATION OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT,
PARTICIPATION AND PROTAGONIST APPROACHES

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10to19
DASRA ADOLESCENTS COLLABORATIVE

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1. Introduction

“Decisions about us should not be without us”

Today around the world there are about 1.8 billion young people¹ between the ages of 10 and 24; with India having the largest adolescent population in the world, around 253 million in the age group 10-19 years². Investments in their health and education can transform their lives and produce positive economic and social results. But decisions related to their well-being have to be taken by the young people themselves, hence programs must be designed to include a greater number of young members in planning and decision-making roles.

10to19 Dasra Adolescent Collaborative (hereby referred to as 10to19) attempts to prioritize scaling up state-level, evidence-based adolescent programming by fostering a network of stakeholders, and accelerating growth of the field by positioning adolescents at the centre of the national health and development agenda.

10to19 in its endeavour to accelerate adolescent-first approaches by funders, civil society and government and to be able to engage a critical mass of 1.5 crore adolescents in India, has realized the importance of championing the cause of young people, through young people themselves. To elevate their voices, build knowledge and networks, mobilize resources and enable policy improvement, it is essential to listen to and respond to the voices of young people. This youth led approach is imperative to the collaborative approach envisioned by 10to19 to bridge the gap between Government, NGOs, Funders and young people and work towards adolescent wellbeing and health. Building a cohort of young people with skills and resources that enable them to share their priorities with the wider community is focal to transition young people to become partners in their own development and not just beneficiaries. To shift the lens from beneficiaries to active participants and proponents of their own development, 10to19 intends to learn from the existing youth engagement programs on practices, processes and structures that may facilitate this shift.

Over the last few years, numerous research studies have shown that building youth leadership and involving them in decision making have a significant impact on young people and their communities. Moreover, evidence has also shown that including young people in governance and decision-making processes leads to relevant, effective and sustainable solutions that work not just for young people, but their peers and communities as well. A recent example is how young people have led the charge during the COVID-19 crisis. The way in which young people have stepped up to minimise the impact of COVID-19 by spreading awareness about the virus, combatting misinformation, speaking up for improved access to mental health services, and assisting with service delivery, has shown the tremendous impact they can have on society.²

It is evident that young people understand the challenges they face most intimately, and have creative and powerful ideas to tackle these challenges. However, stakeholders across the ecosystem - from CSOs to funders to community members to the government - all have a critical role to play in building enabling environments and facilitating platforms that support and involve young people in developing solutions. Many different approaches have been tried and have shown success; from instituting youth inclusion in

¹ In this report, the terms youth and young people are used interchangeably to refer to the age group of 10-24 years

² www.nhm.gov.in – Adolescent Health (RKSK)

governance structures, supporting youth-led and youth-focused innovations, incorporating youth-led research and monitoring within civil society initiatives, to collaborating with young people as co-creators in program design and implementation.

This report is an effort to explore these myriad approaches of youth engagement, participation and protagonism. It attempts to explain meaningful youth participation (what), rationale for youth participation (why), while landscaping some existing models (how), with a primary focus on India. The purpose of this exercise is to begin to grasp an understanding of the process, initiatives and activities undertaken by program interventions across Civil Society Organisations and government interventions to engage with young people.

About Dasra & the 10to19: Dasra Adolescents Collaborative

Dasra is India's leading strategic philanthropy foundation, focused on creating large-scale social change in India. It accelerates social change by driving collaborative action and powerful partnerships with funders, social enterprises and other key stakeholders. Dasra works on a range of issue areas in India including empowering adolescent girls, sanitation and governance.

The **10to19: Dasra Adolescents Collaborative** is a high-impact a multi-stakeholder platform that aligns all key stakeholders (funders, NGOs, policymakers, research experts, adolescents, and last-mile communities) to a common vision of increased prioritization of adolescents across key issues and systems in India. The key outcomes that the collaborative aims to achieve include:

- Delay age at marriage
- Delay age at first pregnancy
- Complete Secondary Education
- Increase agency and employability

2. Decoding Youth Participation

Before we jump into youth participation, let us first begin by unpacking the concept of beneficiary participation more broadly.

In the mid-1970s, there was growing consensus amongst international, government and non-governmental agencies that interventions need to have a more active, effective and lasting participation of intended beneficiaries for it to have the desired outcome. Consequently, several agencies started to promote participation of people, in particular disadvantaged women and men in development projects through various programmes. There is a wide range of features or characteristics that are looked at to define beneficiary participation; these include:

- (1) sensitizing people to make them more responsive to development programmes and to encourage local **initiatives** and self-help groups
- (2) actively involving people as much as possible in the **decision**-making process with regards to their development
- (3) organizing group action to give to hitherto excluded disadvantaged people control over **resources**, access to services and/or bargaining power

- (4) promoting the involvement of people in the **planning** and **implementation** of development efforts as well as in the **advocacy of their benefits**

In more general terms; "*the involvement of a significant number of persons in situations or actions which enhances their well-being, e.g., their income, security or self-esteem*" is participation (Uphoff: 1979). Much later, **The World Bank** (2004) defined participation as "**a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them**". The concept of beneficiary participation is often viewed as a basis for project success. Factors that influence beneficiary participation are Leadership, Needs assessment, Organization, Management, and Resource mobilization.

Participation is a rich concept that varies with its application and definition. The way participation is defined, depends on the context in which it occurs. For some, it is a matter of principle; for others, a matter of practice; for even more it is an end in itself. Beneficiary participation can likely be traced to three root sources, which are:

- participation as good development project practice (Abbot, 1996)
- participation as good governance (Kooima, 1993) and
- participation as political empowerment (Freire, 2000; Bond, 2001)

Participation of young people is crucial to program effectiveness. Continuous engagement with the primary stakeholders not only improves knowledge and capability of participants but also enriches a fulfilment of needs where people learn to realize their objective more easily.

Ideally beneficiary participation should be as an 'end by itself' while planning programs and schemes. The 'ends' approach views participation as a process whereby controls over resources and regulative institutions by groups previously excluded from such control is increased. Active participation is open, and community members take part in all stages of the intervention's decision making. Other vital activities, such as management as well as monitoring and evaluation of the interventions, are done by the people themselves.

When it comes to interventions designed for young people, substantive engagement and dialogue accordingly become critical components. Learnings from smaller interventions point to the importance of customizing and incorporating attributes of successful participations at scale. It is also essential to provide adequate resources and power to young people themselves, through leadership, skill and capacity building and by providing an enabling platform for them to function.

Within the scope of this present report, we shall refer the **World Bank definition of participation** for uniform understanding. The definition is relatively new, and it encompasses the key facets of participation. Moreover, we will also keep in mind that there will be some differences in the ways young people are engaged in programs vis-à-vis adults/community. It is the collective responsibility of governments, civil society and communities to ensure that young people are equipped to

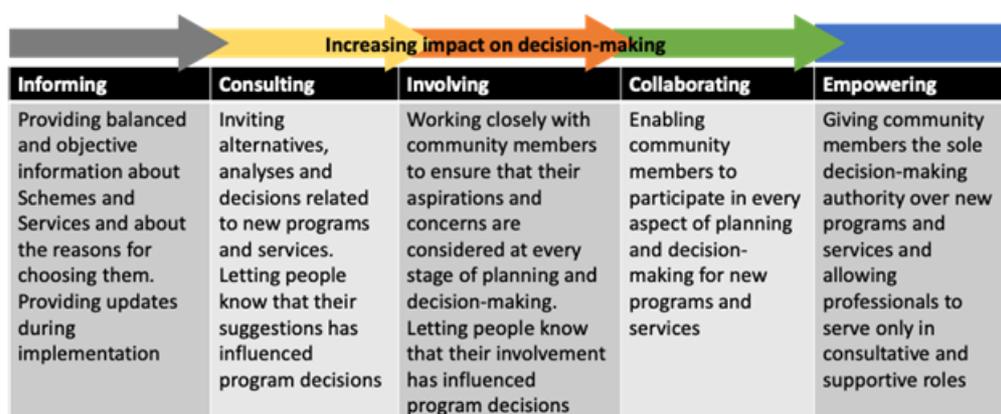
Participation - a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them.
 - **World Bank (2004)**

participate in decision-making for matters that affect their lives and their communities.

To help understand the various stages or levels of youth participation, we will refer the *Spectrum of Public Participation Model*, developed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2).

It identifies *five levels of public participation* (adapting in this case to youth participation). The further to the right on the spectrum, more influence the beneficiary has over decisions, and each level can be appropriate depending on the context. It is important to recognise they are **levels**, not **steps**.

Figure 1: Spectrum of Youth Participation



Adapted from the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, developed by the International Association for Public Participation

3. Approach to Landscaping

To grasp an understanding on processes, practices, activities undertaken by CSOs/NGOs and government to effectively engage with young people, a landscaping exercise is being carried out to explore ways in which a variety of interventions have enabled youth participation.

A few aspects that are being explored through this landscaping:

- Nature and depth of beneficiary participation
- Scalability and replicability of the intervention
- Practical Learnings on engaging various kinds of beneficiaries
- Innovative approach towards engagement

4. UPCOMING | Key Learnings

5. UPCOMING | Landscape of Beneficiary Participation Models