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Participation Creates the Future – Children and Youth Get Involved in Shaping Their Communities

Critics of political action and inaction say that politics and daily life are drifting farther and farther apart. As we confront the limited effectiveness of the state, restoring citizens to their rightful places as responsible decision-makers offers a starting point for sociopolitical reform. This process, now evident in many Western nations, draws momentum from a variety of sources (Enquete-Kommission 2002: 95 ff). Certain factors stand out:

- As the welfare state expands and the government keeps taking on more tasks, its burden grows. The economic slowdown that started in the mid 1970s exacerbates the situation.
- Globalization and its effects limit the steering capability of leaders in democratic systems and increasingly reduce their scope for action in national economic and social policy.
- Education has broadened since the late 1960s, and people feel a stronger need to participate. Civic engagement underpins the future of postindustrial liberal democracy. In this view, the activity of citizens extends beyond having the right to vote; the democratic polity comes into its own only when individuals have the greatest possible voice in decisions. Democracy is no longer regarded primarily as a form of government, but as a way of life (Schmidt 2000: 252 ff).

Against this background, the model of a civil society gains political persuasiveness. On the one hand, individuals take greater responsibility for meeting community needs; on the other hand, they have wider opportunities for involvement. “Civil society means saying farewell to the idea that the state has unlimited responsibility. It means activating citizens to work for the common good. Civil society is a community of confident and responsible citizens, of self-empowerment and self-organization” (Enquete-Kommission 2002: 76). The goal of further invigorating our democratic structures leads directly to the awareness that we must also afford young people greater opportunities to have an impact.

Participation holds potential

Children and youth have a right to participate. In addition to the universal human and civil rights that unquestionably also apply to the young, the Convention on the Rights of the Child—adopted by the U.N. on November 20, 1989, and ratified by the Federal Republic of Germany in 1992—declares in Article 12: “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 [...]” The exercise of this right may be restricted only under certain conditions; each restriction must be specifically justified and carefully reviewed for compatibility with inalienable basic rights.

But the normative assertion “All children have rights!” and the sociopolitical goal of strengthening democracy in our society are not the only arguments for enhancing youth involvement. In the public discourse, voices from many quarters call for better participatory opportunities. A few examples:

- The individualization of people’s lives, the pluralization of lifestyles and the internationalization of the population raise the question of how we can effectively pass on community values and build social capital in the years to come. Against this backdrop, opportunities for children and youth to listen, speak up and make a difference have a sound pedagogical foundation. They offer platforms for education, pathways for imparting values. By the same token, inclusive community projects also provide a lever for combating unwelcome social developments such as violence and right-wing extremism.

- Demographic considerations increasingly come to the forefront. We recognize children as a human resource, as capital essential to our society's viability. The next generation will have the task of initiating social innovations; at the same time, we count on them to stabilize the system, for example by funding social security programs. Speaking from a purely functional standpoint, some assert that we need our young people to participate so they can build the skills required for future tasks. This calculated view of the young person as an object, a means to an end, draws justifiable criticism.
- Demographic change has also lent significance to the aspect of intergenerational equity. Because the rising generation is the first in Germany's postwar history that will have to manage with fewer resources rather than profiting from unbridled growth, the issue of balancing the interests of old and young takes on a new and sharper focus. In view of this urgency, advocates of greater youth involvement declare that we must resist the tendency of democratic systems to rely on future generations to solve today's problems.
- Planning processes such as city development initiatives have adopted a communicative approach in recent years, including local residents right from the start. With this strategy, planners not only hope to avoid mistakes but also endeavor to minimize resistance as changes take place. They use dialogue-oriented methods to help make cities and towns more livable and—as competition for business sites intensifies—to burnish their image as child- and family-friendly communities. One hallmark of quality in this new approach is the inclusion of young people in the planning processes that affect them. Consulted as experts in their own affairs, they have the opportunity to present their concerns to planners who could otherwise anticipate only some of their wants and needs.

In a white paper for the Bertelsmann Stiftung, Olk and Roth (2006) compiled, delineated and evaluated the arguments in favor of greater youth involvement. Although the reasoning varied in scope and persuasiveness, the report makes clear “that enhanced participation of children and youth in modern society represents a true win-win situation. Their basic rights are acknowledged and guaranteed; they have more opportunities to influence local and regional issues that affect them; and the society in which they live profits from the specific perspectives and talents of its young in tackling the challenges of a pluralized and globalized world” (Olk and Roth 2006: 83).

Schools and communities play an essential role in developing this win-win situation. Both are important political training grounds. In particular, what happens to young people in their immediate social settings and their everyday experiences—that is, at the community level—determines “the attitude they adopt about politics and politicians as well as about democracy in general, and whether they are taken seriously as authors of their own lives and included in shaping social and political life or merely exploited for the political purposes of adults” (Fatke and Schneider 2005: 7).

What opportunities do the young now have to participate in their communities? A study sponsored by the Bertelsmann Stiftung found a rich landscape of possibilities, with a host of initiatives taking all sorts of different approaches. Government ministries, associations, foundations and other key actors strongly advocate for children's rights and support the cause through information platforms, campaigns, competitions, continuing education programs and pilot projects. Many communities offer youth parliaments and councils in which young people represent the interests of their peers, as well as informal activities and projects that welcome any interested youth.

But the vast potential of these opportunities often goes untapped. Many projects depend on the commitment of certain dedicated individuals and last only as long as they stay involved. A sustainable and strategic approach anchored in community development processes appears to be still in its infancy (Meinhold-Henschel 2005: 255 ff). Particularly in the open and project-oriented opportunities, participants tend to come and go, and the decisions made

cannot be enforced or sustained. On the other hand, the representative forums do not reach all the community's young people, and structurally they favor older, male and better-educated youth (Hermann 1998: 333 und Möller 1999: 86).

Furthermore, in many communities the strong upward trend seen in the 1990s seems to have waned. Positions for youth advocates go unfilled as personnel turnover occurs; funding is reduced under the pressure of rising costs. Teachers and community youth workers often lack the specific training to moderate complex programs and planning processes appropriately for this age group. Nor does the empirical knowledge available in the field provide reliable information about the participatory potential of our young, the key to tapping that potential or the best way to take advantage of existing opportunities. In particular, the question of how communities can deliberately enhance the participation of children and young people, how they should structure their approach to best meet the needs of this constituency, so far remains unanswered.

Generate expertise – Test models – Transfer knowledge

With these challenges in mind, the Bertelsmann Stiftung has partnered with UNICEF, the Children's Charity of Germany, the German Local Community Association and the community campaign "Schleswig-Holstein – A state for children" to launch *mitWirkung!* (effectAction!), an initiative promoting political participation and civic engagement among children and young people. The project aims to support schools and communities in their efforts to give youth a greater voice and recruit their participation in local decision-making.

The project partners identified these subsidiary goals:

- To create transparency about the current situation of youth participation by conducting a comprehensive empirical study,
- To develop strategies for getting children and young people involved, implement pilot projects in three cities and create models of best practices,
- To sustainably and broadly anchor youth participation by disseminating the project results to the general public and local communities.

All the subsidiary goals of the *mitWirkung!* initiative aim to generate public awareness of the need to involve young people in shaping their communities.

To underpin the development of sound proposals for sustainably strengthening youth participation, the Bertelsmann Stiftung worked with the Institute of Education at the University of Zurich, with support from the University of Münster, to conduct a comprehensive empirical study (for study design and detailed findings, see Fatke and Schneider 2005). Starting in 42 German cities and towns, researchers asked students between the ages of 12 and 18 about their political attitudes, along with their opportunities for becoming involved, their experiences with participation and their wishes in that regard.

So that they could draw reliable conclusions about the relationship between the students' participation levels and the opportunities offered in their schools and communities, the researchers also surveyed their teachers, school administrators and local officials responsible for youth participation. In all, the project surveyed 12,084 students, 631 teachers, 422 school administrators and representatives from 42 communities.

When asked about opportunities to participate in decisions made at home, in school and in their communities, three-fourths of the students surveyed (74.6 percent) reported that they often or very often participate in decisions made at home. Researchers observing the same or similar results in numerous youth studies in recent years have coined the term "the negotiation family" (du Bois-Reymonds 1994; Alt, Teuber and Winklhofer 2005), in which parents and children have a fairly equal voice in shaping family life.

By contrast, only 14.5 percent of respondents said they could participate often or very often in decisions at school. Particularly revealing in this context is the widespread impression that their teachers are not particularly interested in their ideas and suggestions. Almost half (43.5 percent) of the students surveyed expressed this view, and another 31 percent agreed at least in part. Only 25.4 percent of the students were of the opinion that their teachers show a particular interest in their ideas.

Participation in community organizations is similarly low. Only 13.6 percent said they often or always have a voice in decisions, and 60.1 percent reported that they rarely or never get involved. Asked about the opportunities for youth participation offered in their communities (13 activities in all), 30.3 percent of the teenagers said they have never taken part in any. Of those surveyed, 52.8 percent have participated in one to three activities. Only 2.7 percent reported participating in more than half of the activities.

Build on strengths – Factors influencing participation

In addition to describing the participatory behavior observed in schools and communities, the study broke ground by identifying factors that demonstrably improve youth participation in community life. Young people are more likely to get involved if they have positive experiences in their schools, clubs and community organizations. Other crucial factors include their level of information about local opportunities to participate and their own sense of competence. Additional motivation comes when their friends actively participate and when they feel compelled to make a difference in shaping their communities.

This information paves the way for recommendations about how to strengthen community participation among the young. A pivotal factor is their satisfaction with previous involvement—both the process and the outcome. What determines an individual's level of satisfaction is the balance between expectations and actual experience. Therefore, the key to success lies in identifying what the young participants expect of the process and its outcome and tailoring local offerings to match those expectations.

Within that context, attention then turns to the level of information about opportunities to participate, the youths' perception of their own abilities, the significance of associations and clubs in their lives and the intensity of their participation at school. Any effort to improve participation must start with an effective and age-appropriate information campaign. The objective should be to communicate the portfolio of community offerings in such a way that children and young people know how they can get involved and have ample information about current projects, programs and plans.

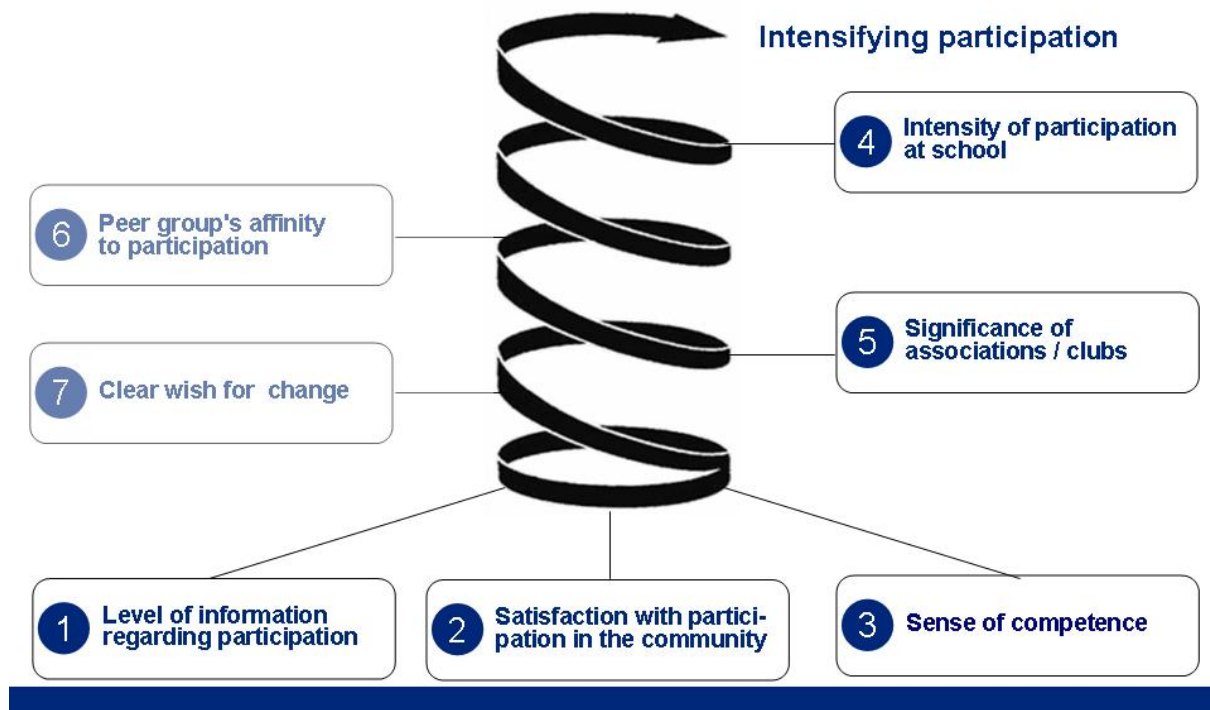
Another important consideration is the need to offer participatory opportunities that build skills in this area and give young participants the confidence to continue and expand their involvement. Finally, the intensity of participation at school affects how much young people are drawn to engage in community projects. Forging stronger ties between school programs and community youth work appears particularly promising in this regard.

On the other hand, although the factors "peer groups' affinity to participation" and "clear wish for change" make a difference in the scope and intensity of youth participation, they can be influenced only indirectly.

All of these factors interact in what can be depicted as a participation spiral. The level of information at hand, the young participants' sense of competence and the range of age-appropriate opportunities to take part in school and club activities provide the foundation for community involvement. Positive experiences (satisfaction with outcome and process) intensify the inclination to participate, and the process continues as a self-reinforcing spiral.

Figure 1: The Participation Spiral

The Participation Spiral: 7 Influencing Factors



Learning by doing

Building on the analysis of these findings, the Bertelsmann Stiftung is now working with the cities of Essen, Leipzig and Saalfeld to develop and test strategies for effectively mobilizing young people and for implementing integrated plans for their participation in community life.

The guiding goal of the *mitWirkung!* initiative is *active, informed civic and political participation among the young*. The project partners therefore set out to establish sustainable and effective participatory structures in the three pilot communities and to make the experience gained there available to all German communities as well as the public.

Based on the city-specific findings of the empirical study, we first conducted in-depth analyses in the three cities to determine the efficacy and target-group relevance of existing—and often parallel or overlapping—opportunities for youth participation. Bringing together school leaders, local government officials, youth workers and any other relevant actors, the project partners have begun to further develop these local projects, finalize them and combine them in an integrated portfolio. The focus is on making the offerings attractive to young people from different social or cultural backgrounds. Each community defined its own priorities for the project. In all three cities, however, emphasis was placed on improving the flow of information about opportunities for participation, establishing networks among local programs and institutions, and expanding preventive programs. The overarching goal is to appeal especially to young people previous programs had not yet managed to reach. All of the project's activities take their orientation from the findings of the empirical study.

In this approach, the factors of the participation spiral constitute the key target points for strengthening participation among children and young people. Based on a detailed

evaluation of the relevance of these factors and how readily they can be influenced, we identified four focus areas for the work in the pilot cities:

- Improving information about opportunities for participation
- Enhancing young people's satisfaction with participation in their community
- Strengthening young people's participatory skills
- Implementing cooperative projects that link in-school and out-of-school educators and youth workers

For all four focus areas, we formulated objectives that guide the choice of measures taken as the project continues. The focus areas, objectives and measures are briefly outlined and explained below.

Focus area 1 – Improving information:

The objective *“Young people are appropriately informed and their participation is publicly affirmed”* is to be achieved chiefly by developing and implementing appropriate communication programs. The empirical study conducted in the first project phase demonstrated that an effective media and public relations campaign is fundamental to the success of youth participation projects. If we want young people to get involved in shaping their communities, we must give them information about available opportunities that is appropriate to their age and experience. Therefore, the structural underpinnings of participatory offerings must include effective information and publicity efforts. To meet this need, the Bertelsmann Stiftung worked with the pilot communities to develop an integrated communication plan. The plan calls for establishing the entire portfolio of participatory opportunities as a “brand” that community youth will recognize and remember. In addition, young people who get involved in these projects should experience public appreciation. The project partners are working to develop and implement appropriate methods (bonus systems, certificates, prizes, and the like). At the same time, we are developing a public relations handbook for participatory projects that will also be available to the public.

Focus area 2 – Enhancing young people's satisfaction with participation in their communities: Here we have formulated three objectives. Even in the early stages of the project, it was evident that the success of youth participation projects depended on designing them appropriately for the target group and properly training adults as process moderators. Given the objective *“City planners, local government employees, and in-school and out-of-school educators and youth workers have the skills to design and manage effective participatory processes that satisfy the needs of young participants,”* the Bertelsmann Stiftung worked with the Children's Charity of Germany to develop a training program for this target group. Specialists are currently testing the program in Essen, Leipzig and Saalfeld, training as many as 40 process moderators for youth participation projects in each of the pilot cities.

In tandem with the theoretical segment of the training program, the future process moderators are implementing community projects according to previously agreed-upon quality standards. The projects were developed after in-depth analysis of existing offerings to identify areas where action was needed in each pilot city. This led to a city-specific plan providing an overall framework and concrete projects designed to meet the identified needs. In order to meld the various community participation opportunities into an integrated portfolio, all the projects are managed centrally in each pilot city. This approach pursues the objective *“Effective participatory structures are sustainably anchored in the pilot communities.”* At the same time, linking the theoretical training and hands-on project work deepens and solidifies the lessons learned.

The empirical study indicated that young participants find satisfaction not only in the process, but also in the outcome of their efforts. In response, the Bertelsmann Stiftung formulated the objective *“Participatory processes are implemented with outcomes in mind.”* By developing and agreeing on quality standards and by constructing and applying standardized evaluation

methods, we enable the communities and process moderators to plan future participatory projects that meet their needs and to manage them effectively. These quality standards and evaluation instruments are available to the public.

New formats for dialogue with community leaders round out the activities to improve the efficacy of community participation offerings.

Focus area 3 – Strengthening participatory skills:

To work toward the objective *“Young people feel competent and qualified to engage in participatory processes,”* we are conducting training sessions designed specifically for young people, recruiting experienced young participants as program ambassadors and launching pilot mentoring programs. Starting in 2007, interested members of the moderator training program will have the opportunity for further instruction to become youth trainers. Teaching adults how to train young people for effective participation will ensure that even after the *mitWirkung!* project ends, young participants will still be able to build their skills and the youth who follow them will also have access to appropriate training opportunities.

Focus area 4 – Implementing cooperative projects that link in-school and out-of-school educators and youth workers:

In their in-depth analyses of existing opportunities for participation, all three communities discerned a definite need to establish networks between in-school and out-of-school educators and youth workers, and especially to develop programs that bridge both worlds. In addition, the empirical study had found that participatory experiences in the school setting boost individual participation. Therefore, the Bertelsmann Stiftung adopted the objective *“In-school and out-of-school educators and youth workers operate in networks and develop joint participation projects.”* The project partners plan to establish and develop cooperative relationships between schools and other youth facilities. Project exchanges and hands-on training in the design of joint participation projects are also planned as important startup assistance in the social arena.

In addition to developing and testing sustainable models for civic engagement and political participation, the effective public dissemination of best practices represents an important tool for stimulating successful participatory processes and establishing inclusive structures that meet community needs. To this end, the Bertelsmann Stiftung maintains an ongoing search for exemplary participation projects. We look for instructive examples in certain fields (e.g., issues related to participatory planning, social prevention or integration) and effective structures for bolstering youth participation (e.g., ways to dovetail representative and open forms of participation). The research projects also aim to promote the exchange of know-how between communities. Successful examples can be accessed at the Web site www.mitwirkung.net.

The lessons learned in this project have been consolidated and made available to the public in the form of proposals and concrete instruments for communities, schools and youth facilities. In addition, the public relations handbook, quality criteria for participation projects and standardized evaluation instruments will be available to interested communities in late 2006. Starting in 2007, the training programs tested in the pilot cities can be introduced in all German communities.

Summary

The active involvement of young people offers cities and towns the opportunity to steer future developments in key areas. When we take their contributions seriously and anchor their efforts in solid community structures, the participation of youth yields positive effects. A pivotal challenge for future project initiatives is to expand the community networks that underpin youth participation and identify facilitators and mentors among teachers, youth

workers, politicians and local government officials. After all, the civic engagement and political participation of youth starts in the minds of adults.

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