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The Future of North Rhine-Westphalia-Participation of the Youth as Part of a Social Transformation towards Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The future belongs to the youth, but do they really have a say in it? Learning processes with regard to a successful socio-ecological change must start in childhood and adolescence in order to succeed in social transformation. The youth cannot be a passive part in a changing society—they have to be actively included in its design. When allowed to participate, young people can make important and effective contributions—which should not be reduced to sub-projects and opportunity structures. In a socio-political context, participation means involvement, collaboration, and commitment. In the context of intra- and inter-generational equity, as the core part of sustainable development, participation strategies should be developed that allow for a permanent and purposeful involvement of children and adolescents. Participation of young people is an important and appropriate step in strengthening those who are so strongly affected by the planning processes but are otherwise powerless. A successful involvement and participation of non-professional actors requires a target group-oriented method, a supportive culture of participation, as well as clarity and decision latitude. Abiding by these rules leads to central results.

Keywords: participation; youth; social transformation; sustainability; political science

1. Introduction

1.1. Facts about North-Rhine-Westphalia—Experiences with Transformation Processes.

North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) is the fourth largest federal state of Germany by size and has many urban industrialized cities and the largest population, with about 17.57 million inhabitants—25% of whom are under the age of 25 years old (data from 2014) [1]. The state capital is Dusseldorf (see Figure 1).

North Rhine-Westphalia and, in particular the Ruhr area, have become one of the largest metropolitan areas in Europe. The mining industry was the focus of the Ruhr region for 150 years. In the Ruhr area, structural change occurred in the 1960s. The price of Ruhr coal rose, which meant a drop in demand. A similar process took place in the rest of North Rhine-Westphalia. Thus, 750,000 jobs were lost throughout NRW, with 70% of them in the Ruhr area [2]. At the end of the 1960s, concrete measures were taken. Examples include the road and rail network and the renaturalization of former mining areas. Another important factor was the establishment of new enterprises, particularly in the service sector. The structural change in NRW is not a completed process. It is ongoing, especially with regard to the envisaged measures of the energy supply for the years 2030 and 2050. Just as in the 1960s, when NRW tried to get rid of old structures like the coal and steel industry, one among many of the present goals is to become almost completely removed from fossil fuels. Such plans are not limited to NRW. They are embedded in a broad international context.

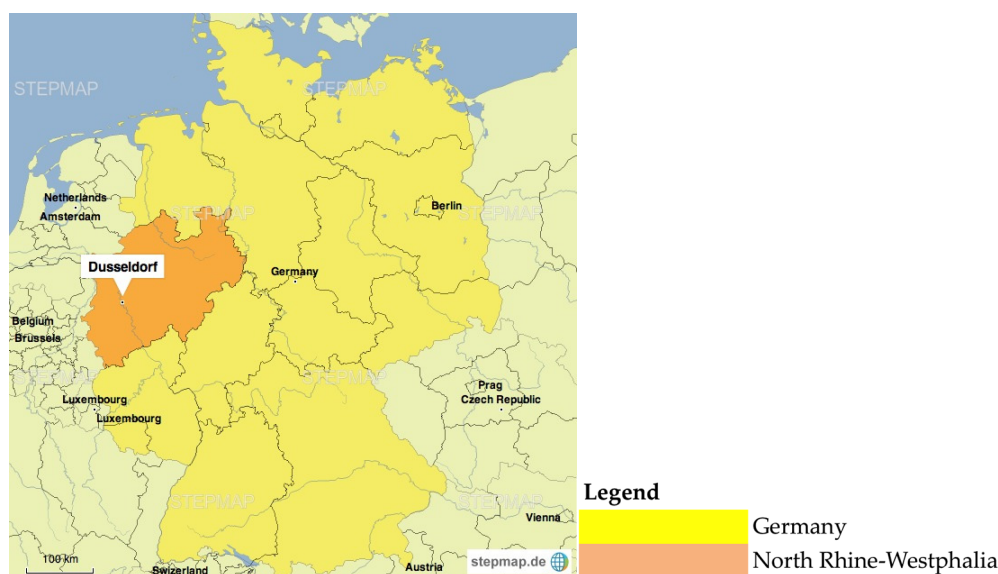


Figure 1. North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) in Germany. Source: https://www.stepmap.de/karte/deutschland_nrw-1717747.

1.2. Steps Towards Sustainable Development – Sustainability Strategies

One step towards sustainable development is the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which offer guidelines and targets for all countries to adopt for the next 15 years to “[...] improve life, in a sustainable way, for future generations” [3].

One of these goals, SDG 16.6, tells us to “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” [4] and it is “[...] seen by many commentators as being the transformational goal and key to ensuring that the Agenda (2030) can be accomplished” [4]. With this in mind, it is obvious that participation is an important key towards the door of sustainability. As such, this paper attempts to present how participation with the special target group of young people can be successful. Therefore, we tested two participating concepts under different conditions.

2. Materials and Methods

A potential manner in which to better integrate children in the direction of sustainable development is through evolving sustainability strategies.

In the elaboration process of a sustainability strategy for NRW in the years 2013 to 2016, there have been participatory processes via large and broad consultation rounds (inspired by Sustainability Conferences), where children and young people, however, have only been indirectly represented by multipliers. For this reason, the target group of children and young people, which has been underrepresented so far, should be actively involved in these processes. In 2015, the Wuppertal Institute tested two participating concepts to demonstrate the best way to address this issue—this will be further discussed later on in this paper.

The future belongs to the youth—but do they really have a say in it? In accordance with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which came into force in Germany in 1992), in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child must be given due weight [5]. In the sense of intergenerational equity, as already described in the Brundtland Report published in 1987, future generations should have the ability/possibility to meet their own needs with the same standard that we meet the needs of the present [6]. This requires long-term, future-oriented development, for which the participation of future generations is indispensable. So, the youth has the right of a sustainable future and the right of being part of this transformational process.

Besides the fact that participation is a basic principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and thus a human rights treaty, it is a proven fact that young people who are involved early in their lives are more likely to participate in social and democratic processes when they are grown-ups. That means that the involvement of young people leads to more civic engagement [7]. Adults as

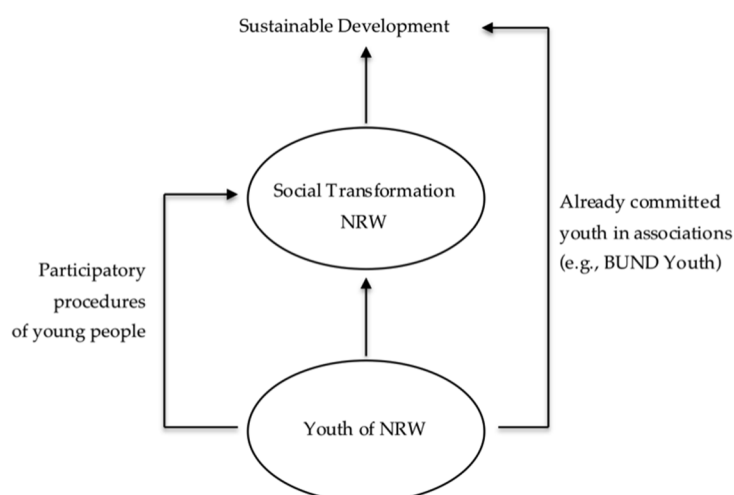
well as young children consider codetermination as important and see improvement in all areas [7]. A living democracy is based on a youth that is capable of participating. Under this condition, participation is a learning process. As such, it can be seen that “Youth participation is important and has benefits for the young people themselves, the youth group and community as a whole” [8].

However, the reality of the situation is that, especially in political contexts, young people are often not included in political decision-making. One of the five central appeals stated at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Global Youth Conference 2012 in Bali, where about 650 young people and representatives came together with 2500 virtual delegates to strengthen the priorities of the youth, is youth participation: “Governments must acknowledge that young people’s participation is a pre-condition for sustainable development” [9]. “A broad youth movement exists today. Media is not talking about it, researchers are generally not aware of it, and even young people do not know they belong to it. However, this decentralization in social movements today is part of a trend called “The Multitudes,” in which localized action without focal-point leaders is subtly, powerfully changing the world” [10].

Social transformation cannot work without including the youth. That means giving them the chance of being part of it by letting them participate. Social transformation towards sustainable development describes societal changes with regard to social justice, economic reason, and environmental responsibility. NRW follows these guiding principles: “As part of our strategy, it is particularly important for us to emphasize broad participation from the very beginning. We want as many stakeholders as possible to contribute their ideas, needs and knowledge to shape the place they call home. This way, we, together with the people living in North Rhine-Westphalia, will make a strong contribution to the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development.” [11].

There are already many engaged and committed young people in NRW, for example, Young Friends of the Earth (BUND Youth), an independent youth association of the German Association for the Environment and Nature Conservation (BUND) (see Figure 2). They are involved in associations which in turn are united by the umbrella organisation of the Regional Youth Council of NRW, founded in 1948, comprising 25 youth associations at the federal state level representing the interests of young people and youth associations in public and with respect to politics; in addition to other basic issues related to youth policy, it addresses participation in public life. Every year, the programmes offered by the individual youth associations attract 1.3 million children, young people, and young adults in NRW up to the age of 27. In addition to vacation and recreational activities, these programmes also include educational opportunities, including youth-specific topics relating to sustainability [12]. As such, these young people are already and in a direct way engaged with sustainable development in NRW and beyond.

Figure 2. Opportunities of participating youth. Source: Own research



The participation formats initiated by the youth associations also often serve as forms of temporary and situational participation for young people in some processes and projects that consider sustainability related topics, similar to the two formats described below (participatory procedures in Figure 2). In 2015, in the light of the developing of a sustainability vision for North Rhine-Westphalia, the Wuppertal Institute tested two participation formats for this group of people that is of special importance for the development of NRW's future and its vision—NRW's youth. The purpose was to show how to determine youth participation and the best way to go about this. First, a stakeholder-specific workshop was organised by the Regional Youth Council of NRW and held at an event in April 2015. This workshop took place in an stimulating, youth-friendly setting—an outdoor swimming pool. Second, in October 2015, in the Landtag of NRW, a discussion panel was hosted within an issue forum during the 4th Sustainability Conference of NRW on child and youth participation (see a short comparison in Table 1).

Both approaches—workshops and discussion panels—are established participation instruments that can be varied by adjusting a number of characteristics. As a result, the key differences are in the details of the design process. Here it becomes apparent whether a format is effectively suitable for participation or not.

Table 1. Comparison of the two participatory processes.

Criterion	Activating Workshop	Classic Discussion Panel
Organiser	Regional Youth Council of NRW	Ministry for Climate Protection, Environment, Agriculture, Conservation and Consumer Protection of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
Event	“Freischwimmen”	4th Sustainability Conference of NRW
Venue	Cologne outdoor swimming pool, in an event tent	NRW Landtag, in a parliamentary party room
Date	22 August 2015	28 October 2015
Timescale	~90 min	~70 min
Number of participants	20 young people	60 participants, of which ~30 young people
Course of action	During the event for children and young people, interested children and young people were able to participate in a thematic workshop previously announced in the programme. Participation was voluntary.	During the 4th Sustainability Conference, five parallel issue forums were on offer. One of them contained the topic “Vision NRW 2030.” The children and young people present were accompanied to the forum by their supervisors. Participation was voluntary, but was recommended by the organisers.
Moderator	Educational consultants from NRW’s youth associations	A scientist from the Wuppertal Institute
Participants	Young people belonging to youth associations, educational consultants from the Regional Youth Council of NRW	Young people from the federal state’s initiative “Schulen der Zukunft” (Schools of the Future), educational consultants from the Regional Youth Council of NRW, adults interested in the issue forum
Key question(s)	Specific key questions concerning the topics “sustainable consumption” and “fair work”	Key question is less focused and not formulated by issue
Atmosphere	Open, inviting	Atmosphere characterised by a strict hierarchy (teachers—scientists—pupils)
Product	Visual documentation (graphic recording)	Visual documentation (graphic recording)
Assessment	Worked well	Did not work well

The first workshop was integrated into a target group-oriented framework programme enabling the effective participation of young people. For this format (the workshop), the Wuppertal Institute chose politically engaged, well-informed young people as the target group, and let them select the topics themselves, provided that they fit into the framework and policy areas of the Sustainability Strategy for NRW. After a discussion with the Regional Youth Council of NRW on participation possibilities with young people, two associations were selected for participation in April 2015 that showed an interest in participating in the project and that were interested in exploring the topics of “sustainable consumption” and “fair and decent work”, which were relevant to education policy. These two topics cover core activities of the sustainability strategy for the State of NRW and the content of the “Sustainable NRW 2030” vision developed so far by the Wuppertal Institute [13]. The 20 young people exhibited very different opinions about the topics and were interested in hearing the opinions of others. The culture of the discussion was very polite and open-minded, and the young people showed great interest in expressing their opinions on the various topics. Minority opinions were listened to and not commented on negatively. There was a friendly and open atmosphere in the workshop during the whole 70 min, and the young people appeared to enjoy the discussion. Since two different subject areas were covered in one workshop, the subject areas “consumption” and “work” could not be discussed comprehensively with regard to their content; however, some of the opinions given by the young people suggested that this would have been possible. During the preparatory phase and the implementation of the workshop, the Wuppertal Institute assumed an advisory function. Two implementing associations could freely choose the method and how to run the workshop as well as its contextual design. The questions derived from the vision “Sustainable NRW 2030” are solely questions that provide guidance:

Subject area “sustainable consumption”:

- (1) What will my consumption behaviour be in 2030?
- (2) Why do you think it is important to have sustainable consumption behaviour?
- (3) What is a sustainable lifestyle? What does a sustainable lifestyle mean to me?
- (4) What is quality of life for me, and what is wealth? How do I see my own future?
- (5) What will I eat in 2030?
- (6) Why do you think it is important to have sustainable eating habits? What effects do you think this might have on consumption?

Subject area “fair and decent work”

- (1) How will I work in 2030? How will I work in a way that’s good for me?
- (2) What are my opportunities? What opportunities do other people have?
- (3) What does fair work actually mean (to me)?
- (4) What are fair working conditions and what is a fair salary?
- (5) Will I be well qualified for a good job in 2030?

Both moderators (from Socialist Youth of Germany—called “Die Falken” and BUND Youth) introduced the young people to the respective topic to be discussed and chose a very youth-appropriate interactive method for both subject areas.

The time limit was the reason that the young people could only give brief statements, signalling tendencies of their opinions, which were very oppositional in part, but in many cases identical. The workshop was documented in real time using graphic recording via a simultaneous, visual summary and documentation of content done by an illustrator. The result was a visual record, which has the advantage that it can stimulate and motivate the audience to participate during the documentation process—in real time. In addition to the motivational function, participants are able to identify with the work, due to the functions of images, as the literature has shown [14].

In the second format, the discussion panel, the aim was to integrate the target group into an existing framework programme—this failed: “effective involvement” was not achieved. For that format (discussion panel), the Wuppertal Institute again chose young people as the target group. These young people, however, were not members of an association, as in the workshop format, but instead were pupils from NRW initiative “Schulen der Zukunft” (Schools of the Future). In this

initiative, pupils are provided age-relevant information about the topic of sustainable development at school, where they explore issues from different areas over a longer period of time (from climate education to international responsibility). Since the pupils chosen for the second format are, therefore, interested and experienced in the different disciplines of sustainable development, the selection of topics was extended for this group. Four keynote speeches had been scheduled that introduced the issue forum together with a presentation on the development of the Wuppertal Institute's vision, which helped all participants to get "on the same page". The vision "Sustainable NRW 2030" was made accessible to all participants of the 4th Sustainability Conference a few weeks in advance via the website of the Sustainability Conference. The speakers included educational consultants from youth associations and staff from NRW's "Schulen der Zukunft" (Schools of the Future) initiative, who initially talked about their educational work with children and young people. In a final discussion, the young people were asked to give a brief statement on their understanding of sustainability: what does sustainable development in NRW mean to me? The contributions made in the final discussion, some of which were mentioned several times, reveal a very comprehensive understanding based on prior knowledge of sustainability among all participants of the issue forum and suggests that a discussion would have been possible under different basic conditions (see Table 2). The same illustrator who was present at the workshop at the swimming pool also documented the keynote statements of the speakers and the subsequent discussion, and illustrated the contributions of the "Vision NRW 2030" issue forum visually as a graphic recording.

Table 2. Statements by participants in the "Vision NRW 2030" issue forum.

• Enjoyment	• International solidarity
• Equilibrium	• More space for animals and plants
• Work-life balance	• Planetary boundaries
• Being vegetarian	• Global community
• Participation	• More animal rights
• Mobility	• Inclusion
• Greater transparency	• Environmental protection
• Conscious living	• Less greed for money
• Responsibility	• Self-aware purchase behaviour
• Quality of life for all people	• Freedom
• Justice	• Environmental protection
• Satisfaction	• Equal rights in the workplace
• Social responsibility	• Jute instead of plastic
• Community	• Sustainable development
• Peace	• Culture
• International justice	• Sustainability as self-conception
• Renunciation	• Rationality
• Awareness	• Integrity of creation
• Solar industry	• Fair trade

3. Lessons Learnt—First Results and Theoretical Approaches

Although the 30 young people joining the discussion panel showed an interest in the issue forum and in the topic itself, it was obvious that they were hesitant to actively take part in the discussion. This inhibition may have several reasons: on the one hand, the heterogeneous structure of the participants may have inhibited their willingness to make a contribution; on the other hand, the spatial conditions of a parliamentary party room at the Landtag and its corresponding seating arrangements did not provide an ideal culture of discussion for this group of participants. Two circular rows of fixed seats on which some young people were seated in the inner part of both rows could be a main reason for the poor participation in the discussion.

In addition, the given format did not allow for any mutual decision process on the part of the young people participating, which is indispensable as a quality criteria for successful participation. Furthermore, the less focused key question may have overwhelmed them. In addition, there was a considerable difference in age and qualifications, which may have made the young people unsure about asking more detailed questions. This may have induced the impression of a test situation because sometimes the pupils' teachers were also in attendance at the same issue forum.

Another possible limiting factor was the short time period scheduled for discussion. Four subject-specific introductory speeches, one from science, two from the work context of educational consultants from associations of the Regional Youth Council of NRW, and a teacher from one of NRW's "Schulen der Zukunft" took up one-third of the time. This reduced the possible discussion time and did not specifically appeal to the young people, but rather to the adults in the issue forum. This may have intensified the perception of hierarchy levels (teachers—scientists—pupils) as an inhibiting factor and may have distracted the young people from the topic of their own prospects for the future. This may have given the young people present the impression that passive listening rather than active participation was expected of them.

The classic participation instrument of the discussion panel revealed several deficits. No discussion arose, because the young people in attendance were reluctant to participate in the dialogue. Possible reasons for this could be the heterogeneity of the participants there. In addition to the young people present, many adults took part in the discussion. The educational disparities resulting from the different age groups (pupils, students, professors) could have caused barriers to discussion among the younger participants. In addition, a strict hierarchy among the teachers and their pupils could have been perceived as a knowledge test and may have deterred young people from participating in the discussion.

The comparison of the two different participation formats shows that the engaging workshop in a youth-appropriate context functioned well for its intended purpose. To a rather considerable degree, the successful outcome of this event was also due to the fact that the young people could learn and experience participation within association structures on a long-term basis, which is crucial for well-functioning participatory processes. The interests and perspectives of children and young people were articulated day-in-day-out in associations (with "Freischwimmen" being a representative example) that are supported by elected representatives in politics, administration, and the public, who seek to hear the voices of young people, to take them seriously, and to consider them when making policy decisions.

Compared to the workshop, where the young people, among themselves, free from strong age-related educational and hierarchical differences, showed an open culture of discussion, the young people seemed inhibited and self-conscious in the debate. Compared to the workshop at the outdoor swimming pool, the discussion panel at NRW Landtag generated different results. It can be assumed that a visit to NRW Landtag already presents a special and unknown situation for some pupils with regard to the location, and has a rather intimidating effect. In contrast, a visit to an outdoor swimming pool is familiar to many children and young people, and is associated with free time. This uninhibitedness was clearly observable among the young people in the workshop.

All in all, the format of a classic discussion panel is much less appropriate to involve young people than an engaging workshop. To create an open and constructive culture of discussion, in particular for non-professional stakeholders, a stimulating, age-appropriate appeal and a socio-biographically similar group structure, all within a framework adopted to the target group, is required.

Regarding child and youth participation, it became apparent that children and young people can and want to take part in participatory processes if the right conditions are created for it. In order to prevent these "non-professional" stakeholders from participating in classic formats, they should be explicitly geared towards the appropriate target group.

The participatory trials by the Wuppertal Institute in 2015 showed that the issues of sustainability and sustainable development are among those that interest young people and can and should, therefore, be discussed with them. So, on the one hand, participatory work with children and young people is an important and promotional element of sustainable development; on the other

hand, there is a great deal of tension between adequately providing sufficient opportunities for participation and possibly overwhelming children and young people. Participation formats are often poorly geared towards the involvement of children and young people and require age-appropriate adaptation to this target group [15].

Any method used has to be geared towards children and young people. To this end, both the type of implementation and the preparation should be modified accordingly with regard to staffing needs, materials, and venue limitations. The website www.kinderpolitik.de lists 270 methods in alphabetical order, ranging from the method “Auswertungszielscheibe” (assessment target) to the type of method “Zeitbudget” (time budget) [16].

How is it possible to make participation successful and worthwhile for children and young people on the one hand, and for policy-making processes on the other hand? Table 3 below specifies quality standards for the successful participation of children and young people.

Table 3. General quality standards for child and youth participation.

1. Participation is Wanted and Supported—A Culture of Participation Emerges
The participation of children and young people is expressly desired and actively supported by decision-makers and promoted by responsible contact persons and the organisation of networks. It is made binding by regulations. In general, the aim is a sustainable culture of participation.
2. Participation is Possible for all Children and Young People
Opportunities to participate are easily accessible and diverse regarding topics, methods, and forms. Different needs depending on age, gender, disability (if applicable), social, cultural or ethnic origin, and educational backgrounds are taken into account. The venue and schedule for the events are chosen in such a way that they are convenient for children and young people.
3. The Objectives and Decisions are Transparent—from the Outset
All stakeholders, in particular children and young people, are involved in the clarification of (sub-) goals of the participation project. The objectives are transparent and comprehensible, and allow room for sufficient openness in the participatory process. The decisions taken at all levels are disclosed. The targets set are regularly reviewed and updated.
4. There is Clarity Regarding the Scope for Decision-Making
Participation means involvement, collaboration, or co-determination. The children and young people involved are informed how much influence they will have during the participatory process and the role they play as seen by decision-makers (source of ideas, representation of interests, co-determination). As a result, they gain clarity about the possibilities and limitations of their influence.
5. Information is Comprehensible and Communication is on Equal Terms
Children and young people are provided with information that is comprehensive and understandable for the respective target group about their participation rights and the milestones and results involved. Equal communication is ensured. The adults are genuinely interested in the concerns of young people and give attention to them.
6. Children and Young People Select Topics that are Relevant to Them
Children and young people are actively involved in the selection of topics. The participatory process deals with topics important to children and young people.
7. The Methods are Appealing and Target Group-Oriented
The methods used in participatory processes correspond to the stage of development and educational background of the target group; they are diverse, they appeal to different senses, and they motivate and enable children and young people to work actively. The methods are chosen in a way that they open up accessibility possibilities and do not exclude children and young people due to single, uniform methods (e.g., exclusively via language and writing).
8. Sufficient Resources for Enhancing Self-Organisation Skills are Provided
Sufficient personnel, financial, and material resources are provided for participatory processes.
9. The Results are Implemented Promptly
Concrete results and decisions from the participatory process are implemented promptly, otherwise those involved are given comprehensive and comprehensible reasons for the failure to implement them.
10. Networks for Participation are Established
Supporting partners are recruited and an active network established in order to promote the participation of young people and use the synergetic effects of different stakeholders. Comprehensible policies for such cooperation apply.
11. Participants are Qualified for Participation
Thanks to a qualification concept, it is ensured that the stakeholders involved have the necessary personal, methodological, communication, organisational, and subject-related skills for designing participation projects.
12. Participatory Processes are Designed in a Way that they Enable Personal Gain
The participatory process is structured in a way that children and young people can experience personal gain, going far beyond an exploration of participation under general beneficial aspects, and takes into account biographical developments (the experience of personal spirit and community spirit; inspiring new relationships to peers and adults; the improvement of their skills).
13. Engagement is Reinforced by Recognition

The engagement of all participants, particularly children and young people, leads to public and institutional appreciation and recognition. Qualifications and skills obtained are also certified accordingly.

14. Participation is Evaluated and Documented

Continuous and participatory evaluation of the project ensures the quality of the chances for participation for the present as well as in the future and also enables learning processes.

Notes: Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (2015)[17].

Participation is thus not just participating. Depending on the design, the level of decision-making power, and the form of supervision (either by a third-party or self-supervision), the intensity of participation will differ. Figure 3 gives an overview of Roger A. Hart's "Ladder of Participation" [18]. According to this ladder, real participation only starts when children and young people are no longer directed by others (or even exploited as token participation), but when they can truly participate (Steps 4–8). It is at this point that young people can make decisions themselves, with adults only occupying a supporting function.

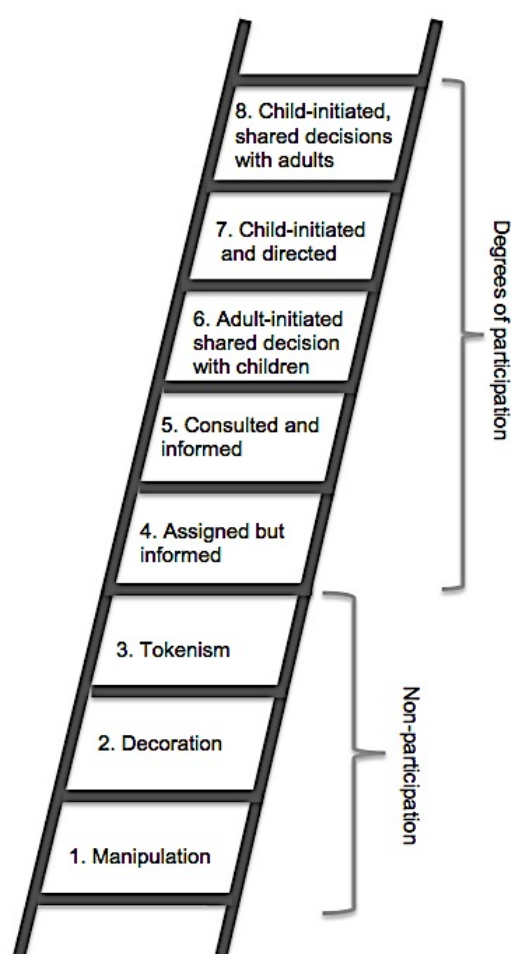


Figure 3. The Ladder of Participation according to Roger A. Hart (1992). Source: Adapted from work by Roger A. Hart (1992) [18] (p. 8).

Young people have already shown considerable engagement in many areas, which, among other things, is due to the very good extracurricular educational work of many associations and initiatives in NRW (for example, the Natur- und Umweltschutzhakademie (NUA) with NRW's "Schulen der Zukunft" initiative). The ambitions of (children and) young people to participate in socio-political processes is undeniable. The Shell Youth Study 2015 also indicated an increased political interest compared to previous years and a willingness on the part of young people to participate in political processes [19]. In addition, numerous analyses show how participation among children and young people can generally be successful (see, among others, Ziegler, R. [20]).

4. Derived Results and First Conclusions

There is already a great deal of research in political education participation with different topics, perspectives, or country specifications (e.g. Vakaoti P. [21]; Farthing R. [22]; UN Youth [23]). What the two small samples here showed coincides with what is stated in the literature of quality standards for child and youth participation shown in Table 3. As such, a first conclusion can be drawn for participation with young people:

Participation formats should be preferably used that

- (1) Only include stakeholders with an intrinsic motivation to participate;
- (2) Design key questions to be as focused as possible and as open as necessary;
- (3) Provide a suitable venue for a successful discussion;
- (4) Create an open and inviting atmosphere conducive to participation;
- (5) Use the results of the participation beneficially.

Therefore, the participation of youth should be part of every policy field. Participation has to become the rule rather than the exception. Despite the National Action Plan for Children's Rights, various campaigns for children's rights, point-to-point perception in the media, and whole series of model projects, the participation of children and adolescents is not really a relevant issue in public or media. Some states, including Baden-Württemberg, Hesse, and Thuringia, have successfully integrated children and young people into the process of developing a sustainability strategy as Youth Advisory Boards and youth forums [24]. In these federal states the youth have an active part during the first and on-going development and the implementation of the sustainability strategy issued by the respective German federal states. These Youth Councils or Youth Advisory boards consist of up to 22 young people between the ages of 16 to 24. The role of this Youth Council is participation. Moreover, Thuringia has a youth forum with up to 200 young people that presents their own projects related with sustainability. The widespread impact of this forum is assessed to be very broad [24].

The leverage effect produced by the Youth Councils as well as the expected widespread impact and the mediating function are decisive advantages of this long-term involvement. In NRW's youth associations, participation is sustainable due to the living environments of children and young people. The selected representatives from the youth associations act as a mouthpiece for the interests of young people vis-à-vis politicians, political administration, and the public. As a result, children's and young people's concerns are integrated into civil society consultation and participatory processes. For this reason, the State of NRW, as well as the rest of the federal states, are advised to follow the approach of the European Sustainable Development Network [25], i.e., to develop a participation strategy specific to the target group of (children and) young people to further elaborate the Sustainability Strategy NRW. To this end, overviews of the participatory topics and guidelines should be drawn up and the differences regarding the implementation of child and youth participation should be identified. The process should benefit from good examples and best practices in other federal states.

What is the added value? Besides the overall societal relevance, as previously stated, there is a lot of additional untapped potential: children and adolescents show different and creative problem-solving potential and living spaces for the young can raise the quality of life of adults as well. In addition to future-oriented policy as called for by sustainable development policies, the role of child and youth (political) participation is an important and correct "gain in power for the previously powerless affected by planning" [26]. Soft skills, which young people acquire by active participation including the willingness to commit oneself to something and to cooperate, the ability to mediate and resolve conflicts and problems and to improve communication skills and creativity, are a great asset [26].

So why do the grown-ups often have such reservations about the participation of the youth? Some reasons for that could be the possible overburden of the children, the inefficiency or the participatory deficit of innovation [16].

All these reservations can be overcome if the expectations concerning the target group are adjusted to realistic levels and the participation process is planned and implemented in a target

group-oriented manner (see Table 3 above). The results of the discussion panel organised by the Wuppertal Institute shows that a huge obstacle is the asymmetric communication that can take place at nearly all levels. A lecturing tone, lengthy speeches, or the disability not to communicate on equal footing with the children are as inappropriate as it is questionable, associated with this target group. The dominance of the grown-ups are often a problem. In the former case, it was a question of discussion with each other on an eye-to-eye level and on the other it was a hierarchy level that did not lead to the desired results: an atmosphere that was open-minded and friendly.

5. Conclusions

Child and youth participation is an important and effective contribution to the social transformation towards sustainable development and should not only be reduced to sub-projects and studies of opportunity structures. Thuringia, Baden-Württemberg, and Hesse are showing what can be done. On the contrary, in the context of intra- and inter-generational justice (which after all is the core of sustainable development) [6], participation strategies should be developed that allow for the long-term, targeted involvement of (children and) young people. “Participation is the key to successfully developing a truly impactful sustainability strategy” [27]. To ensure a reconciliation of interests between old and young people, the participation of young people has proven to be successful. A prerequisite for this could be actor-specific participation, as shown in the two participative formats tested by the Wuppertal Institute.

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