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TRUE PARTICIPATION BY YOUTH

The publication was prepared by **Kasia Fesnak** and **Natalia Dziejic** after attending the Ashoka Changemaker Summit 2024 in Hamburg. ACMS is Ashoka's largest community event, bringing together social entrepreneurs, young changemakers, leaders from business and philanthropy to foster a vision of "everyone a changemaker".

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PARTICIPATING MAKES A DIFFERENCE

True participation goes beyond passive involvement – it's about taking action and contributing in ways that create real, lasting change. True engagement happens when people come together with intention and commitment, transforming actions into meaningful results. It's not just about being present, but about fully investing in a cause or community by sharing skills, ideas, and resources to make a difference.

When people act with purpose, they show what true participation really means. This isn't about symbolic gestures or superficial efforts – it's about a genuine commitment to making change happen. True participation is empowering because it lets individuals see the direct impact of their actions. This builds confidence that change is possible and proves that every effort counts. At its core, true participation creates a world where everyone not only has a voice but also the ability to make a meaningful impact.

Participation is trending in today's democratic societies. Politicians often emphasize it in their speeches. Civil society works to address the needs of marginalized groups and push for inclusion. Laws promise to protect people's rights and dignity. But behind this inspiring image lies a system that still needs improvement. We speak, but no one really listens. We face social problems but lack the tools to respond effectively. We lower barriers to involvement, but new voices rarely join the decision-making process.

Ashoka Changemaker Summit 2024 reminds us not to settle for fake participation and encourages us to learn about and practice true participation.

Sasha Haselmayer at the opening of ACMS:

*You will see the fruits of true participation, how it changes lives, nurtures community and democracy, how it fuels our imagination and changes broken systems. You will learn that it takes more than removing barriers. **Too many people have lost the belief that they can make a difference and we have to meet them where they are.***



Sasha Haselmayer
Germany

Ashoka envisions a society where everyone—regardless of background, position, or status—has the opportunity and ability to contribute to positive change. It challenges us to ask: How can we build a world where everyone feels both invited and empowered to take part in real, meaningful transformation?
Let's start reflection from the youth.



Adrian
Germany

True participation means for me trying to involve people from all ages, all ethnic groups, basically the entire population as good as we can to help make everyone part of the decision making process, therefore enabling true participation of everyone.

True participation means for us creating systems that combine fairness, openness and stability of this dilemma. So when we can combine these three assets, I believe there are systems that could enable through participation.



Michal
Slovakia

It's making an impact without being a bystander. So if you see a problem, you make change, not stand around and do nothing and complain about it.

Eli
Czech Republic

"True participation" in Ukrainian associations abroad is active involvement in the creation and development of communities through initiatives, joint decisions and interactions that contribute to the preservation of culture, mutual support and integration into the new society.

Hanna
Ukrainian in Italy



Valeriia
Fundacja Pol

I really want to highlight that this is the power of community being connected with people who are doing some similar things that you're doing. So it makes me really feel that I'm not alone and I will never be alone to.

For me, true participation is a conscious and voluntary commitment to actively engage in various forms to make positive changes for people and the environment.

Olena
Ukrainian in Germany



Tino
Spain

It's really cool to see the different steps that you can make and how everything can be more participatory. It might not be the ideal of true participation, but it is real. It feels like now in our generation, we're very close to that one of the final steps, which is just having the chance to truly lead things.

The beautiful thing about the diversity of answers is the fact that all of us activists, leaders, volunteers, all who are making strides towards change are united by:

awareness - I see the need, I ask questions, I see where I can take the next step,

responsibility - I, can influence, as well as you.

values - where every person counts.

vision - I would like to see the world differently and want evidence of it.



Kasia
Poland

Participation takes many forms and can follow many paths. It might start with volunteering, joining a neighborhood initiative, engaging in school or scouting, seeking a sense of belonging, or even pushing back against something that frustrates or deeply affects us.

This publication offers Gen Z's perspective on true participation. We see it as a mosaic of stories—our own and those shared with us—woven together with lessons from life and experiences at the Ashoka Changemaker Summit.

We invite you to treat this publication as both a telescope, offering a new perspective, and a test to evaluate whether your environment fosters true participation. Let's begin this reflection with the voice of youth.

WHO WE ARE AS GENERATION?

In the context of participation, we cannot forget about the individual diversity. Looking for generational affiliation is not enough and would narrow the reflection on participation. So who are we as a generation?

We are experiencing climate anxiety, or we are faithful Shein customers. We worry about a housing crisis that derails plans to study in another city or country, or we just live with family. We change the job market to suit our needs, or we don't have a job at all. We experience forced migration, migrate seeking comfort, or live in our country of birth. We may be holding the hand of a loved one, or we are being kicked out of our homes for doing so.

Each person whose reflections are included in this publication is first and foremost an individual, not a representative of a generation. We sum up in us different characteristics, beliefs and experiences that put us in different positions of privilege or oppression. This intersectional perspective is important in participation, which aims to empower people who are excluded due to different aspects of identity.

We can imagine **participation as a key to a door**. The shape of the lock is determined by the accumulation of barriers such as stereotypes, discrimination and systemic inequality. That is why it is so important to be attentive to the diversity of identities, especially minority identities - we need the right key to get through the door.



PARTICIPATION MEANS COMMON POWER


1

PATH TO TRANSFORMATION

In times of war and crisis, fear often takes root, spreading uncertainty and a sense of helplessness. Changemaking offers a counterforce — a pathway to agency and resilience that transforms fear into purposeful action. Rather than allowing fear to paralyze, changemaking empowers individuals and communities to confront challenges head-on, fostering hope, solidarity, and innovation even in the darkest times. It reminds us that everyone has the capacity to contribute to positive change, providing a sense of control and collective strength that can be deeply healing in turbulent times.

In war and crises, changemaking emerges as a powerful response to fear, reshaping how individuals engage with adversity. For a woman committed to activism, changemaking becomes her fight — her way to counter violence with resilience and advocate for those most affected. For a man who joins the army to defend his country, it manifests as the courage to stand guard, aiming to protect his homeland and provide a future worth rebuilding. For a mother left alone with her children, it is a means of survival, as she draws upon inner strength and resourcefulness to create stability for her family amid chaos.





For a young woman facing a crossroads — whether to flee the country or remain to support those in need — changemaking becomes a deeply personal choice. She can stay to bring relief and solidarity to those around her, fighting fear by standing strong within her community, or she can choose to leave, channeling her efforts to advocate and provide resources from a safer place. Both paths hold value, each a testament to courage and compassion in a time of common fear.

In all these choices, changemaking allows individuals to transform fear into purpose, weaving resilience into the fabric of their lives. It creates pathways to act meaningfully, whether close to the heart of crisis or from a distance, offering a way to change fear into action and hope in service of a shared future.

Attending a panel on participation during times of crisis and war was an incredibly moving experience. I listened to a conversation among remarkable women — each sharing their personal stories, thoughts, and deep commitment to issues impacting millions of lives. The discussion focused on the war in Ukraine, its immediate consequences, and the roles that Ukrainian women and those working in humanitarian organizations in Poland and the United States are playing in response to the crisis.


This was far more than an exchange of information; it was a profoundly emotional and inspiring dialogue filled with empathy and reflections on a reality that shifted abruptly in February 2022, when the first Russian missiles struck Ukrainian cities.



2

PATH TO FREEDOM

The stories of women who face the consequences of the war in Ukraine are surprisingly reflected in the reality of women in Mexico - it is also a reality of war, but of a different kind, related to organized crime, feminicidio and exclusion from public space. Women face normalized (culturally and systemically) violence, fear for themselves and loved ones. Jade, a girl who also participated in ACMS in Hamburg, talks about all this closed doors and about participation despite everything. Jade never traveled by public transportation - she went to school with her parents or by cab because of security issues, not for convenience. At school, Jade was never allowed to develop the way she wanted.



She heard that programming classes were organized for boys and there was no place for girls. And at the same time, Jade had the courage to defy the bans.

Today, Jade teaches young girls robotics, giving them permission, inspiration and a space from which they are not excluded. She tells the story with pride and a smile, showing their projects. Their logo is pink cogs, and the pin is shiny and glittery. Very girly and very proud.

Participating became changemaking which gives Jade (and the girls she supports) pride. It is a path to solidarity change, and it gives them a sense that they can control something. Because a lot is out of their control. Jade's friend disappeared a few hours before our conversation. Like many other feminicidio victims, she may not be found.

3

PATH TO SOLIDARITY

Over the past two years, I've met a number of splendid women on my professional path and in my activist activities.

Let me tell you about Olena, a Ukrainian lawyer who has lived in Germany for many years. Like everyone, she identifies with many roles, daughter, sister and friend.

*As she points out, **All of these parts equally form my identity, but they only define me as a whole. Each of these elements directly influences my decisions and my path.***

Olena was born and raised in Lviv, and moved to Berlin at the age of 15. She quickly learned the language and integrated into German society, but kept close contact with home, so over time she began to feel somewhere between the two cultures and mentalities.



Today, in retrospect, she says: ***Now I really appreciate this state, because it gives me a broad perspective on things and situations, a critical understanding of both at the same time.***

She is currently doing a referendum in Berlin, which is a two-year internship and advanced training for already qualified lawyers. During it, one has to play the role of a judge, prosecutor and lawyer, as well as prepare for the exams that will take place at the end of the internship. This is a very grueling and demanding learning process. Often you have to do very responsible, but not always personally interesting work. When Olena graduated, she didn't plan to take this step because her planned career path didn't require it. However, with the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she became actively involved in volunteer work.

She decided to take the next step and co-founded an NGO. Olena opened a door that let her into a completely different world of agency, great responsibility, but also a zone of decisions over which she has no direct influence. In her own words, "I co-founded an NGO and then saw how much I could already contribute to the people and Ukraine. But in a bureaucratic country like Germany, I often faced limitations on my abilities without a completed referendum. So the war had a direct impact on my professional plans for career choice and application of my legal skills." Olena trusted in her professed values, which are undeniably humanity, honesty, integrity and justice.

"It is important to understand people's motivations, their willingness to get involved, their personal end goals. These may be different for each person, but they are equally important, so you need to find their intersections and build and develop their interest in participating in change. People tend to start a fire quickly, but if you don't add fuel, the flame starts to go out. In today's fast-paced life, this can happen very suddenly. So you have to keep that flame, that interest alive"

Inspired by her family and friends, and the freedom-loving nature of Ukrainians, she experiences inspiration every day. All these stories and the kindness of the people who surround her all the time or those she meets by chance. She works without stopping to realize change in the world.

“It is very important to listen and hear young people, to understand and develop their motivations, interests, ideas and goals. In this way you can give them as much freedom as possible to act, while understanding how you can best and most effectively help them and guide them along the right path to achieve their goals.”

What I'm reading here is individualization, creating space for action and agency. Olena is proof that these are not just fine words but the reality of people who have tried and found fertile ground to act and make changes in their lives.

Now it's time for a perspective, a woman who grew up in Ukraine, and the war forced her to change her reality and make big decisions related to migration. Meet Hanna Humenchuk, owner of a design studio, co-founder of a Ukrainian association, volunteer and conscious Ukrainian woman. As she says of herself, ***“My Ukrainian identity maintains a connection to national history, the desire for independence and the preservation of national dignity.”***

Hanna was born and raised in Vinnitsa, as she points out, ***“in a city that once had no outstanding attractions, but in the period of independence decided to become the best version of itself. For several years in a row Vinnitsa was awarded the title of the most comfortable city in Ukraine. This taught me to appreciate resources, find and use advantages, and always strive for something new.”***

Hanna shows us that seeing through the eyes of imagination, change and real steps can motivate action. Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian War (February 2024), Hanna has settled in Taranto, Italy, where she continues the same activities as in Ukraine.



She opened a branch, united a team of Ukrainians and helped them master the design and advertising professions. ***Since the outbreak of the full-scale war, I have focused more on supporting the Ukrainian community, creating space for development and unification, and building cultural and professional ties with the Italian society.***

The main goal of the activity, besides, of course, helping the local community to gain a profession in the IT and design sector, is also the vision of changing the attitude of Italians towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. ***“I'm especially proud of the fact that we are even involving people aged 50+ and 60+, teaching them new skills in the IT industry”***

All of these activities focus on community support, the development of democratic values, intercultural dialogue and the integration of Ukrainians into a local society that is new to them.

“It is important to foster initiative and leadership among Ukrainians, create support networks (psychological, professional, educational) and share experiences. I see the need to create an environment where everyone has a chance to open up, learn, take initiative and find their place in the community. This space includes access to information, organization of events and programs that take into account the Italian language skills and socioeconomic status of the participants.”

Hanna emphasizes the role of a leader in a community that needs a guiding voice to hear, name and put into action the demands and gathered needs of the group. This is another amazing story of how values, motivation and action succeed and yield real results.

I am grateful that people with passion and commitment are helping by putting causality in the hands of others. This way amplifies the effect and makes that a long-term one. It's amazing how many solutions can carry the same questions and the same values, both of our activists say.

Let's move to next part and focus on what is blocking our participation



WHAT PARTICIPATORY OBSTACLES DO WE SEE?

1

INACCESSIBLE PROCESSES

Universality must begin to mean accessibility, otherwise it is an illusion. This includes for example the most basic form of direct democracy, such as elections. Discussion of low voter turnout rarely takes into account the question of who does not participate in elections due to the exclusionary format. The level of accessibility of polling places is not analyzed.

Elections are very important to me, I follow the political scene and know with whom my views resonate. But that doesn't mean I take part in every election, there are times when going to the polling place, the whole process of going out, meeting the committee, other voters, is too much for me. I look forward to the option of online voting.

An analogy can be looked at local forms of democracy: voting for civic budgets or in school elections. In theory, everyone is invited to decide. But they struggle with barriers or don't feel empowered because of historical conditions, habits, values or other factors. We need a conversation about who is absent at the democratic table to improve its quality.

2

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Participation in Central and Eastern European countries is conditioned by authoritarian experiences. The processes of democratization have occurred recently or are still ongoing. In such a context, the mentality of the society is important, where consent is needed for participation - from the environment and from oneself. Young people have a chance to realize themselves in various structures - in scouting, volunteerism, city councils or informal initiatives, but the one that is most common and at the same time most clipping wings is school

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If all we teach in schools for 12 years is “cuss, pass, forget,” we are raising citizens who are either uninterested or immature to participate in democracy. People are uninvolved because they have been restricted throughout the education process. It's such a Gombrowicz-esque “how it doesn't enthuse you, how it enthralls you,” if you want to have your opinion, it's not here. We have an internal blockade to anything beyond survival. It's only recently that there's been talk about students' rights to choose their hair color or drink water in class, a basic right to decide for themselves, not to mention to co-determine their surroundings.

School democracy does not work for the school community - student rights are not respected, school documents are against legislation, school bodies function inefficiently. We need schools where we can develop our agency and learn to function in a participatory culture. This means not only gaining permission to be active for ourselves, but also learning permission to act for those with whom we disagree.



3

NO DESIGN WITH ABSENTEES IN MIND

Design has different purposes - it can be created for a dominant group (e.g., most schools are created for neurotypical, non-disabled students), created universally to be open to as many people as possible (like public institutions tailored to diverse groups), or created specifically for groups with specific needs.

There is no need to say that participation is least accessible to vulnerable groups.

Strong communities know their challenges and how to address the problem - often before the authorities think of it. But weakened groups don't have such agility, and they lack the tools and support.

Accessibility is dominated by thinking about minimizing barriers. Institutions and NGOs declare readiness and flexibility for reported needs. However, empowering people for whom participation is impossible requires a strategic approach and designing a solution geared to the needs of this group. In September 2024, compulsory education in Poland was extended to Ukrainian children and youth. Those who have been out of formal education for a long time are unprepared for institutionalized learning, just as schools are not ready for diverse groups of students. The universal curriculum is unlikely to work, yet it is being implemented.

4

AGEISM AND YOUTHWASHING

Age discrimination is felt especially by those young people who have activist experience. Because of their commitment and desire to do more, they are more likely to encounter people in positions of power - in business or administration at various levels. This is a serious barrier to talking especially to institutions at various levels, and a phenomenon that not only limits efforts for change, but also contributes to activist burnout among young people. On the other hand, there is youthwashing (a phenomenon that is the opposite of meaningful youth engagement).

“Youthwashing - a term coined by Eilidh Robb and UK Youth Climate Coalition - is the act of tokenizing youth for personal/organisational gain e.g. PR reasons. It is an act of using youth to convey messaging, rather than creating meaningful space to amplify the youth voice”.

(Tweet and quote from Katie Hodgetts)

And while the term youthwashing originated in the climate movement, it encompasses many situations beyond it. Young people are invited to prestigious conferences, to panel discussions, to institutional boards, community committees and advisory groups. However, this does not happen inclusively, with recognition of their identity, opinions and needs, they are required to “play on adult terms,” or the presence of young people is irrelevant, serving only image bingo.



Let's move to next part



YOUTH PARTICIPATION. HOW DO WE WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

1

We are young, but youth is only one part of who we are. We need safe spaces that recognize and accommodate our other needs and identities to fully participate. This includes considerations for limited mobility, sensory sensitivities, concentration challenges related to neurodiversity, and discomfort with physical proximity

Consider in team:

- Have we taken the time to get to know the group, its needs, challenges and preferences?
- Is the team diverse enough to understand the diverse needs of the participants?
- Is there an expert in the team who can educate about diversity and social intersectionality?
- Do we consult on accessibility policies?
- Do we have a budget prepared for accessibility activities? How can we ensure it?

2

Don't invite just anyone—or only people from a single social circle. Instead, identify and reach out to groups that are currently missing from the dialogue.

Consider in team:

- What are we doing to establish a relationship with the groups that are hardest to reach?
- How do we want to support young people's involvement? What steps are we taking to facilitate their participation?
- Are there opportunities for migrant- and refugee-friendly participation or other foreign participants that do not rely on language skills?
- Have we taken care to communicate in plain language (without obscure abbreviations, contextualization or specialized words)? Have we prepared for a diverse form of communication?

3

Ensure equality between groups. Cross-generational dialogue can be challenging and may unintentionally harm participants. Beyond co-decision-making, we need mutual respect for each other's dignity.

Consider in team:

- Do we transparently prepare rules of mutual respect and set limits on freedom of opinion?
- How do we respond when boundaries are crossed, such as in cases of discrimination, hate speech or inappropriate comments?
- Are we willing to facilitate dialogue across differences?
- How can we create a welcoming space for different age groups?

4

Token participation undermines and disempowers participants. It can also be retraumatizing. Take responsibility for creating a safe, inclusive process that addresses identified needs.

Consider in team:

- Are power and position differences analyzed regularly?
- Do we include the perspective of participants in the analysis?
- Do participants know how they can respond or report irregularities?
- Do we present transparent, friendly procedures to which we commit?

5

We need to be genuine partners whose voices, concerns, and opinions are taken seriously. If you're giving us a seat at the decision-making table, don't use our involvement to boost your image.

Consider in team:

- Is the participation proposal supportive and empowering for all parties?
- Are the youth involved included with respect for their identities and abilities?
- What goals do we set when engaging youth?
- How does engaging youth fit into long-term policies?
- Are we developing documents that support us in our work with young people?



6

If you're establishing youth bodies within your organization or institution, prepare for differences of opinion—and accept the consequences of those differences. Be transparent about whether these structures have an advisory role or actual decision-making authority, and ensure they are meaningful, not symbolic.

Consider in team:

- Is the team prepared for conflicts that may arise?
- Are youth learning strategies for dealing with conflicts?
- Do we have a clearly defined role for the youth and develop standards of cooperation that we adhere to together?



7

Participation brings joy, fosters a sense of belonging, and gives our actions purpose—because we are doing what we believe is right. But participation also comes at a cost: it takes time, impacts our relationships, education, and even health. Value and acknowledge our contributions.

Consider in team:

- Do we value the involvement of young people and express that gratitude?
- Do we respect the youth's time and make rational use of their resources?
- Do we reward youth for the energy they devote?



8

Share power, share resources. Let us co-decide how funds are allocated, and create youth budgets specifically for activities we design and lead.

Consider in team:

- Do we create budgets in a participatory way?
- Do we consult on funding strategies?
- Do we create youth budgets from which young people can fund their activities and ideas?

The eight points above reflect a wide range of experiences and modes of engagement. This is certainly not a closed list, and we highly encourage you to include discussion of this proposal while contracting cooperation. The team may decide to take the guidelines into account or, based on them, propose it's own, modified for their needs.

SUMMARY

Every participation is a journey. True participation is a journey that is empowering. It may be marked by uncertainty and fear, but even then it resounds with pride, strength and determination. Part of it is mutual support and solidarity, motivation and empathy.

We are grateful to meet people on our path who are open-minded, see more and feel more. . They are proof that a better future is all the time ahead of us and in our hands. Each of them is just a drop in the sea of change. This fills us with great strength, but also with respect for the actions of every single person. Their courage, determination and awareness make these citizens, with many roles, many faces and consisting of so many fragments and stories, allowed themselves to stand up for their values and stepped out into leadership positions to move with their vision into a world that is not easy, bringing hope, love and creating space for true participation of themselves and the people they meet on the road with similar values.

Thank you all. You are an inspiration, a source of strength and empowerment.