

# ENGAGING YOUTH WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES

This guide is intended for community and organizational actors who would like to integrate young people ages 12 to 25 within their communities by allowing these young people to actively participate in decisions affecting them and allowing them to play a more influential role.

This guide is intended for community and organizational actors who would sincerely like to integrate young people ages 12 to 25 within their communities by allowing them to actively participate in decisions affecting them and allowing play a more influential role. Particularly, this guide is for communities who would like to:

- acknowledge young people as co-builders of society
- encourage young people to express themselves
- support young people's leadership development

The approach of this guidebook and the accompanying tools are anchored in the experiences acquired through working with youth and the participatory research, observations and assessments gathered through a demonstration project improved while participating at YouthScape, carried out by Boscoville 2000 in Rivière-des-Prairies, since 2001. YouthScape is a Pan Canadian initiative that engages at-risk youth in community building.

### **Creating a community where youth engagement becomes a simple reflex.**

Mobilizing the strengths of the community of young people and adults, to deploy concerted actions which place favourable conditions to the development of Rivière-des-Prairies youth. It also seeks to actualise youth participation and promote active citizenship.

"THE MORE I UNDERSTAND THE SPACES I CAN OCCUPY, AND THE MORE I LEARN TO NEGOTIATE THE SPACES I SHARE WITH ADULTS, THE MORE I DISCOVER THE PLEASURE OF WORKING TOGETHER."

- Anthony Dorélas,  
IDS Project co-coordinator at RDP, 2007

"ADULTS SHOULD ASK FOR OUR OPINION WHEN THEY MAKE DECISIONS CONCERNING US."

- Tamar Edmond, lecturer in *Mégantic*, 2008

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**Special thanks** to all the youth and adults associated with partners committee's RDP for all their energy and insight!

**Graphic Conception:** Bivouac Studio

ISBN 978-1-55058-429-5 (printed / PDF version)

Dépôt légal- Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2010

Dépôt légal- Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2010



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**YouthScape**  
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communautés au rythme des jeunes.

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## GUIDE OBJECTIVES

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- To heighten community actors' awareness of the key principles of youth citizen participation
- To offer practical tools to:
  - Create a space for discussion within an organisation or a community around youth participation
  - Question one's own environment and explore avenues for youth participation
  - Implement and develop a plan of action involving youth.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION: OPPORTUNITY + CAPACITY

Actions with greater and longer lasting impacts are seen when you combine youth development and citizen participation with each member's strengths. Though you still need to make space for young people to be successful, they must be allowed to contribute as influential actors to this beautiful adventure.

In order for any community to become truly welcoming and vibrant, and in order for youth to reach their full potential, it is important that young people be able to commit to, participate in and influence<sup>2</sup> their communities. It is also important that these commitment and participation opportunities are available in every community. This

combination, as shown in Figure 1, quickly creates waves which amplify the resilience of a community and the contribution capacity of young people who make up part of its citizenry.<sup>3</sup>

IF I FEEL THAT I AM NEEDED, I'LL WANT TO INVEST MYSELF.  
IF I FEEL WANTED, I'LL WANT TO GET INVOLVED.  
IF I FEEL LISTENED TO, I'LL WANT TO EXPRESS MYSELF.  
IF I HAVE ROOM TO SPREAD OUT, I'LL WANT TO OCCUPY THE SPACE.

FIG. 1 AMPLIFIED IMPACT (WAVES)



To successfully mobilise youth, one will have to work in a variety of ways; sometimes things will be familiar, sometimes they will be different, and still, at other times, they will be completely innovative and require creativity.

## THREE AREAS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

- Structures and places of influence**  
Advisory committees, decision structures, meetings...
- Collaboration and action projects**  
Thematic activities, special projects, initiatives...
- Youth services and programs**  
Schools, Youth Centres, Leisure Centres...

Possible areas where young people will get involved are defined within three main areas of participation. Each of the categories also offers various opportunities for young people to work in partnership with adults in their communities and to have a greater impact on the decisions which might affect their lives and their communities (Radiance).

In the summer of 2007, in a Mapping<sup>4</sup> project report, 50 young people admitted to having developed their skills and personal attributions (team work, conflicts resolution, accepting responsibility, diversity management, etc.), as citizens (responsibility, sense of belonging to the district, impacts, voices) and technical experts (GPS, CRABE, polls, research, etc.). Armed with these new capabilities, a team of young people continued to work to organize the collected information and prepare a winter forum for 2008 where they presented their community solution paths to make their community more vibrant for youth. The partners, together with the youth, seized these opportunities to get involved in initiatives in RDP.



# WHY INVOLVE YOUNG PEOPLE WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES?

# 2

## TO START-WE BELIEVE

1. Young people have the right to participate in the decisions and structures which affect their lives.
2. Youth citizens' participation acts as an engine of their individual development and of social development.
3. Youth's ability to participate and play an influential role needs to be experienced.
4. Adults' and youth's ability to work together and collaborate grows through interaction, mentoring and in partnership with adults and young people.

## BECAUSE IT IS THEIR RIGHT!

For a long time, the main youth development models focused on meeting young people's needs, underlining the fact that adults and experts knew young people's needs better and failing to recognize young people's rights. Since the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in November 1989, 190 independent countries of the United Nations (UN), have signed and ratified this international treaty, recognising the rights of young people (Resolution 44/25).

This treaty is an extension of the Human Rights treaty, signed in 1948 and recognizes young people's rights to be heard and taken seriously, with freedom of speech<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> and to actively<sup>7</sup> participate in decisions concerning them. It acknowledges that young people are able to have opinions and to make choices on the questions affecting them. It thus invites everybody to consider a young person as a full-fledged individual, to recognise his/her strengths and abilities, thus pushing

the adults to listen to him/her, consult with him/her, and to offer him/her space so that he/she can fully participate. It is no longer a question of basing things on the principle of working "for" youth but rather, "with" youth. Exercising this right is materialised by young people expressing themselves, by focusing on empowerment, by bringing communities together to create appropriated spaces so that youth can express themselves and contribute significantly to the decision-making process. This new perspective sheds a different light on the methods used within the communities forcing the use of different rhythms and methods of work.

THE UN CONVENTION  
ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD  
GIVES A VISION!

## BECAUSE THEY WANT IT AND HAVE THE ABILITY TO DO IT!

Young people very much appreciate the opportunity to integrate and participate in the communities they move in, as well as the one they live in. They show solidarity and are optimistic, trustful and open minded<sup>8</sup>. They are looking for opportunities to contribute in their own way, with their strengths, their opinions, and their view of the community. They can enrich a project or organization considerably.

YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE  
THE WILL AND THE ABILITY TO  
STIMULATE COMMUNITIES!

In January 2009, the YouthScape communities met at the Banff Centre, in Banff, Alberta, to share their experiences and exchange good practices. The group included around sixty young people and adults. At the end of the first day the dynamics were average. The youth were critical of the agenda and perceived it as too dense and structured. The next day, a real change occurred when young people created an open space (café style) in an adjacent room. They took the room over and fitted it out in their own way. There, they shared stories, created "wikis", left visual traces of their impressions, their learning, their relations and their thoughts. They willingly invited the adults to share the space with them.

This contribution by the young people was significant. This free and neutral space quickly became a chosen place for dialogue, to meet or simply to pause and think. This event's rhythm and dynamics quickly changed: relations between participants became easier and differences became less apparent. Young people also felt more at ease to actively participate and adults became more inclusive.

## ADVANTAGES TO ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

There are numerous advantages to integrating youth within their communities. In May 2008, at an event with approximately fifteen organisations involved in Rivière-des-Prairies, participants spontaneously indicated the following advantages:

### IT ALLOWS YOUNG PEOPLE:

- **To grow** by living positive, fulfilling and instructive experiences, giving a meaning to life
- **To model** their identity by mixing with significant adults and peers: a winning combination for their development
- **To contribute** to their environment and community
- **To encourage** their engagement in projects where they have a say as opposed to those where they just fulfill everybody else's agenda
- **To develop** their leadership and sense of responsibility
- **To better understand** how communities are built and organised and the decisions that govern them
- **To change** perceptions
- **To build** on successes

"I was reading in the "Informateur" (a local weekly) an article concerning Bosco and its upcoming projects, like the possible development of a youth complex. The journalist even mentioned that it would include a Resources Cafe intended for young people. It was my idea and I was really proud to read it. I felt important. I felt I had some impact in the project."

- Francis Robitaille, Mapping Project, 2007

### IT ALLOWS ADULTS:

- **To validate** their perceptions of young people's needs and to answer them
- **To discover** new ways to approach reality and create solutions
- **To reassess themselves**, going beyond their conditioned responses
- **To open** decision-making to those whom they concern
- **To acknowledge** young people as full-fledged individuals
- **To offer** the youth better programs and services
- **To go beyond** their common practices, to go out of their comfort zone
- **To know** the youth networks and invest in them with a common perspective

"Do we leave enough space to the youth? Do they participate to the decision making? How are we cornered in a situation where young people cannot be consulted? ( ) It's incredible how much one can get out of the youth and sometimes we do not pay enough attention to that."

- Gaetan Grenier, Jean-Grou High School Principal, 2008

### IT ALLOWS THE COMMUNITY:

- **To create** a greater sense of belonging
- **To use** all of its resources
- **To become richer** with a common vision for both youth and adults
- **To develop** new partnerships, **to join** and mix complementary points of view, **to innovate**
- **To make** better choices, **to insure** long-term growth and **to avoid** creating spaces young people hardly use
- **To insure** a common future **and inspire** the changing of the guard
- **To strengthen** a positive feeling towards young people **and to break** prejudices

"This approach is a win-win situation. At the beginning, one is worried, one looks at our community and one is not certain how to do it. One must first see its advantages. The only way is to get closer to young people, to discover those with whom we work and to give them an opportunity to contribute. They need to do the same thing so we can work together with respect!"

- Abdelaziz Tahir, development agent, RDP PAT Arrondissement, 2009

"YOUTH WILL STICK WITH THE PROJECTS THEY BUILD"

- Claude Bilodeau, Boscoville General Manager from 2000 to 2009

# WHERE CAN YOUNG PEOPLE PLAY INFLUENTIAL ROLES?

# 3

Meaningful participation entails giving young people influential roles within the communities while integrating them into project and program planning, lay out, evaluation and dissemination processes and within the structures themselves.

Young people are often the main users of community places and services (schools, youth centres, municipal spaces, parks, etc.) Therefore, their opinions concerning these

places and services are important and cannot be neglected. They must be involved as full-fledged actors and must participate in the decisions defining or modifying the programs, services or spaces they use.

Within the decentralization of decision-making, inter-sectoral meeting and mobilisation tables are being created. These new structures provide interesting opportunities to integrate young people; places where their opinions

**YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCE WILL ONLY BECOME SIGNIFICANT IF THE DISTANCE BETWEEN DECISION MAKERS AND YOUTH IS REDUCED.**

can be integrated and they can develop their capabilities and become influent actors in their own right.

## YOUTH INTEGRATION AND ENGAGEMENT CAN TAKE DIFFERENT FORMS

There are several youth integration and engagement forms. Each community has its own unique context and opportunities. Within the scope of each community and sector there are several forms of participation that can be used to carry out projects with young people. In fact, there are as many participation options for youth as there are creative possibilities.

Integration forms determine the space young people have to influence decisions and are closely tied to young people's notions of responsibility and engagement, which increase

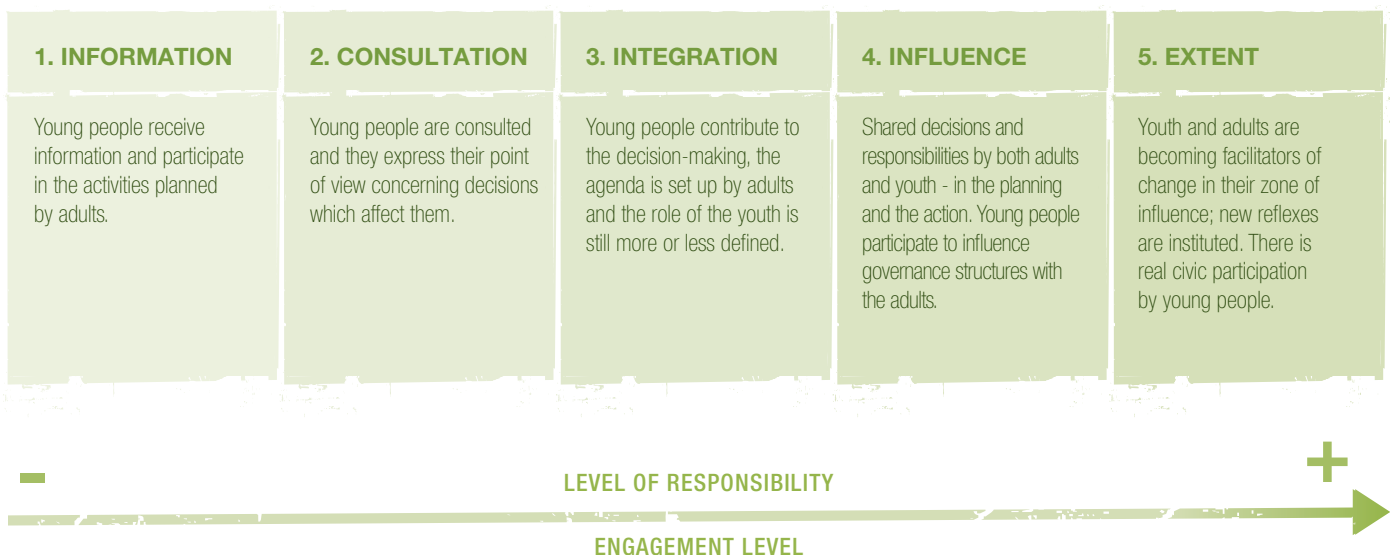
as they increase their level of participation. They also extend back to the power balance exerted by youth and adults and ultimately translate into real shared leadership according to the respective zones of influence. Figure 2 shows all these aspects.

**MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION DEPENDS ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S ABILITY TO FEEL ABLE TO PLAY THE ROLE.**

**"I UNDERSTAND THAT THE MORE I EXPRESS MY COMMENTS, THE MORE I CAN INFLUENCE."**

*- Michelle Scardere, 19 years old*

**FIG. 2 YOUNG PEOPLE'S CIVIC PARTICIPATION / POWER BALANCES** <sup>9 10</sup>



The Figure below shows the various possibilities to foster youth participation within a community within: services and programs for the youth, collaboration projects, and structures and places of influence.

**FIG. 3 ILLUSTRATION OF YOUTH'S CIVIL PARTICIPATION LEVELS**

Places Levels	Services and programs for youth	Collaboration and action projects	Structures and places of influence
<b>EXAMPLES :</b>	<b>YOUTH CENTER</b>	<b>CULTURAL CENTRE PROJECT</b>	<b>POLITICAL STRUCTURES</b>
<b>1. INFORMATION</b>	Young people participate in the activities of offered programs.	A group of young people participate in awareness activities concerning the nature of a Cultural Centre.	A few young people follow a MP for 24 hours to learn about the realities of the profession.
<b>2. CONSULTATION</b>	They complete questionnaires concerning the activities offered as a means of providing feedback and influencing the development of new programs.	The Cultural Centre's preliminary plans are shown to the youth group and their impressions and recommendations concerning the proposed layout are noted.	The Town Council organises a day of reflection and invites the communities young people to share their opinions on various issues concerning youth.
<b>3. INTEGRATION</b>	A group of young girls offer dance courses on the fall programming.	Some young people accompany the cultural agent to develop programs in another Cultural Centre.	A group of young people draw a map of their town and present the community needs as perceived by young people to council.
<b>4. INFLUENCE</b>	Youth administrator positions are created on the board.	Some young people are involved and wield influence in the development (orientation, name, lay out, products sold) of a Café for the Cultural Centre.	<i>A group of young people, supported by the mayor set up a youth council.</i>
<b>5. EXTENT</b>	<i>A group of young people works with the existing team to rethink the orientation of the Youth Centre to give it a more contemporary dynamic.</i>	<i>A group of young people take charge of the youth programming (resources management: human resources, artists, material and financial resources).</i>	<i>The town council and youth council work together on questions/issues affecting the youth in the community</i>

*The sections in italic represent possible options*

The first two levels are a reflexion of communities' common practices. Organisations develop action plans and programs bringing young people in to inform and consult with or carry out internal or external studies as part of their normal programming. But what is the actual weight given to young people's opinions? Were they allowed to dream with the adults, to model solutions, to make choices, to establish priorities and to actively participate in the implementation?

Integration levels 3 to 5 are possible if and only if there is a real will on the part of the adults

to make space for youth within the community, integrating them where it really counts!

Thus, integrating young people at these levels can require structural changes within the community. For instance, the creation of an advisory committee can really weigh in the decision-making process. It has been proven that the more rigid the community, the more difficult it will be to bring about changes to

these structures. Within these contexts, **explore practices** as well as structures as a means to create space for the youth. **Practices represent the methods and paths used to do something, to get results.**

**WE NEED TO AVOID THE SILOS FORMED BY ADULT LEADERS AND EXPERTS. TO ENSURE A FUTURE, WE NEED TO INTEGRATE THE MAIN SUBJECTS IN THE DECISION-MAKING CIRCLES FROM THE BEGINNING: THE YOUTH.**

Within the RDP Cafe Le Spot, young people (flexible structure) wished to determine their café's opening hours. To reach a decision, they consulted with the young people, studied the building contract and arrived at a decision by consensus. If they had been lodged in a school (a more rigid structure) the situation would have forced these young people to comply with the hours dictated by the structure, directly influencing the path used to reach this decision (practice).



How can we engage young people within our communities in such a way that they feel at ease and can fully contribute? Experiences in the field have allowed us to identify the driving force behind youth engagement.<sup>11</sup> These seven driving forces are:

1. **To have a vision;** to have a cause at heart
2. **To feel competent;** to have an opportunity to contribute with one's strengths and particular skills
3. **To have responsibilities;** to have clear roles and courses of action
4. **To be recognised;** to receive feedback on one's contributions
5. **To have influence;** to have the opportunity to express one's opinion
6. **To be supported;** to understand the structures and to be supported by community resources
7. **To be creative;** to grow in communities supporting the expression of creativity

"THE CAFE LE SPOT PARTICIPANT'S FACES WERE BEAUTIFUL! I COULD SEE THE PRIDE OF A MISSION ACCOMPLISHED AFTER HAVING PUT SO MUCH EFFORT IN IT, AS WELL AS A FEELING OF HAVING REACHED A GOAL, A DREAM."

- Tamar Edmond, a youth patronising Cafe Le Spot, 2009

**FIG. 4: THE SEVEN DRIVING FORCES BEHIND THE ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE**



We have noticed that when these seven forces are present, young people are more committed and their participation is maximised. When some of these elements are missing, youth engagement is more difficult and the results are less conclusive.

A group of young people were accompanied in a skill building activity. In this experience, an adult guided the group using the seven driving forces behind youth engagement to maximise their contributions. Right from the start these young people got involved with an idea they really believed in: to develop a café where youth (18 to 25) could freely patronise and be accepted as they were. Throughout the implementation, the adult guide (ally) let the youth express themselves, put ideas forward and use their strengths and skills. She allowed them to fully manage the organisation, the management and the decisions and supported them in clarifying roles and responsibilities in order to help the youth more fully implement their decisions which were arrived at by consensus. Thus these young people had great latitude of action from the emergence of their idea to its complete realisation.

Youth had a positive impact within RDP and they contributed to the development of their community.



## 1. TO HAVE A VISION

The more young **people adhere to a vision or believe in what they are doing**, the more this passion compels them to engage in it. For this engagement to become concrete, their vision needs to be supported through the development of a project or the belief of a community - where they feel important. In both cases, the community is willing to integrate youth through a vision, a set of values, priorities and/or a plan of action corresponding to this orientation. Thus, any decision concerning youth becomes an opportunity for a youth/

adult partnership or the creation of a youth-led initiative.

Such a vision will infuse your community with new energy as young people will feel more committed and motivated to contribute. Moreover, this commitment will grow if they are invited to define the strategic parameters with the adults.

### IN ACTION

When a community begins a reflection around youth engagement, it is important to integrate young people from the community in the process at the beginning as their contribution greatly improves the process. If parameters already exist, ensure that these young people can make them theirs and recognise what has been developed. Such an exercise reinforces the young people's engagement and allows them to better understand the range of possible implications from the beginning.



#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

Do we collectively desire to have a vision concerning young people's engagement within our community?

Does our board and/or our management team support such a vision?

Are young people participating in the planning and implementation of our strategies and programs?

Are young people participating regularly in the development and set up of our activities?

Do we attract and maintain young people in leadership positions in our community?

"WE NOW SEE THE YOUTH DIFFERENTLY AND WE KNOW THAT WE MUST ENGAGE THEM IN OUR COMMUNITIES. WE FIRMLY BELIEVE IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION AROUND THE TABLE. BUT ARE OUR COMMUNITIES SO AWARE? DO THEY SHARE OUR VISION? ONE NEEDS OTHER PARTNERS TO KICK-START THIS CHANGE. WE HAVE LOTS OF WORK TO DO TO INFILTRATE OUR ORGANISATIONS IN ORDER FOR THEM TO ADOPT THIS VISION."

- Pierre Prevost, RDP partners committee Member, 2007

## 2. TO FEEL COMPETENT

The more young people are given the opportunity to make the most of their skills and feel competent, the more they will commit. This second force behind young people's engagement can be embedded into management tendencies that invite communities to highlight their distinctive elements and build their main strengths in order to be more advantageously placed in a highly competitive environment. It fits less well with the focus on strengthening weaknesses

to enrich a community, an approach that is becoming more and more abandoned.

Communities are working more and more with their own resources, strengths and preferences because each individual's best chances of development are in the domains in which he or she has the best skill set. This strength based approach is critical when developing partnerships with young people.

### IN ACTION

In a community development context, working with young people invites one to believe in and trust young people's potential and to adopt a positive outlook towards them. To develop, youth need opportunities to use their strengths and experience success along the way. As adults, it is important to acknowledge positive points and to work with the young people to develop strategies to address challenges or differences. Apprenticeships realised in such a manner are as beneficial for young people as for the adults.

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

- Do we believe in and trust a young person's potential?
- Do we have a positive attitude towards youth?
- Do we recognise each young person's skills?
- Do we offer young people the space to develop all of the skills they have to offer?
- Are we curious to discover what interests the youth we are working with?

"TO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE REQUIRES AVAILABILITY AND ENERGY. THEY BRING US BACK TO THE HERE AND NOW WITH BRILLIANCE, AUTHENTICITY AND SPONTANEITY. ONE EVENING A GROUP OF YOUTH CALLED ME TO DEVELOP AN IDEA THEY JUST HAD. THEY WERE IN THE PARK, CHATTING ABOUT EVERYTHING AND NOTHING AND HAD DISCOVERED A SOLUTION TO THEIR PROBLEM. I FELT PRIVILEGED TO BE THE FIRST ONE THEY WOULD ANNOUNCE IT TO..."

- Maryse Dumouchel, RDP Cultural Centre, 2009

COMPETENT

### 3. TO HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES

The more youth are **aware of their responsibilities and have clear roles** the more they will commit. Recent studies<sup>12</sup> exploring various means that young people use to make themselves heard and to learn to become active and responsible citizens have come to the same conclusions: the young people themselves are forcing us to do things differently. It is no longer a question of simply transferring knowledge. We need to work with them as co-creators and partners. They need opportunities to engage as citizens and to increase their awareness of responsibility

through discussions and debates within their communities, the projects they lead and the structures and influential spaces they occupy. They need adults to leave them that space and possibility to invest in it.

In order to encourage young people to assume more responsibility, a transfer of power is required. Leadership needs to be shared.

#### IN ACTION

Delegating power to young people is a development opportunity for youth and an occasion to enrich youth/adult partnerships. To occur, this requires involvement of both youth and adults, and clear roles and responsibilities so that expectations and boundaries are clarified and are directly tied to the decision making process. Tools must be available to

encourage the assuming of more responsibility and expected results must be defined and negotiated and then translated into action together. To make youth responsible means providing them with the needed support and following their progress without controlling it.

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

Do we have opportunities in our community to give responsibility to youth and to delegate more power to them?

Are we delegating activities which represent a realistic and stimulating challenge for young people?

Are we negotiating together the delegated activities, objectives and expectations?

Do we give youth enough tools when we delegate responsibilities to them?

Do we give youth sufficient autonomy so that they can find their own means to reach their purposes?

"WITH THE ADS INTERVENTION, WE HAVE SEEN A 50% DECREASE IN RUDE BEHAVIOUR (...). LAST SUMMER WHEN WE INTEGRATED A MOBILISATION FLAVOUR TO THE PROJECT (YOUNG PEOPLE INTEGRATED CIVIC PARTICIPATION PRINCIPLES AND VALUES INTO THE SUMMER PREVENTION PROJECT), WE SAW A BIGGER SUCCESS RATE IN THE PARKS. JUVENILE CRIMINALITY DECREASED BY 35%."

- Normand Seguin, Police Officer City of Montreal, 2008

## 4. TO BE RECOGNISED

The more young people **feel they are recognised for their contributions**, the more they commit. There are several ways to manifest this recognition: through supportive words like feedback and through concrete gestures such as setting up meeting times adapted to their schedule. In both cases it is a question of the community rethinking its practices and opening up a dialogue with youth to harmonise the rhythms and realities of all.

Some young people have very dense schedules (studies, work, volunteer work, sports and leisure, etc.) whereas others have lots of free time. It is difficult to give a homogenous picture of young people today. This diversity requires different strategies to reach and engage different youth in our communities.

### IN ACTION

Giving feedback is probably the most efficient tool to recognise others. Feedback allows one to acknowledge positive behaviours and contributions and to underline flaws. In both cases it offers information to support young people's engagement and contributes to their development. This generation has been given more feedback from their parents than previous

generations. For youth it is important. They will not hesitate to call for it if they are not receiving enough. Feedback represents an important key to keep youth motivated and engaged. The more efficiently and timely it is supplied, the more responsive youth will be to it.

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

- Do we offer regular constructive feedback to the young people we are with?
- Do we regularly surprise youth who are doing the right thing by openly appreciating them?
- Are we good at formulating efficient feedback?
- Do we pay attention to their reactions to given feedback?
- Are we open to receive their feedback and to readjust as needed?

"MY MOST BEAUTIFUL MEMORIES ARE THE MEETINGS IN THE LARGE ROOM WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE WERE RECOGNISING THE SUCCESS STORY OF OTHER YOUTH AND WERE APPLAUDING THEM WARMLY."

- Shelby Dalmacy, *Project Mapping 2007*  
youth co-coordinator

"WE HAD TO MODIFY OUR WORKING HOURS TO ACCOMMODATE YOUTH, OTHERWISE WE COULD NOT PLAN COMMON MEETINGS!"

- Emmanuel Casseus, *IDS Project 2007*  
adult co-coordinator

To recognise and integrate young people one also needs to review one's way of doing things. In rigidly structured communities with a very strong culture, it is not rare to observe after a few months of work in partnership that youth look more and more like the adults

they are with. Be vigilant! The influence should be felt on both sides with youth as well as with adults... to harmonise practices is to mutually and positively be influenced.

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

- Are the cultures, the languages, and the ways of doing things in our community adapted to young people and do they support and acknowledge their contributions?
- Are the schedules (activities, meetings) adapted for young people?
- Do the meetings take into account youth's preferences and ways of doing things?
- Do the personnel work in harmony with young people?
- Are youth and adults mutually influencing each other?



## 5. TO HAVE INFLUENCE

The more adults allow youth to play a truly **influential role**, and **to make decisions**, the more they commit. This involves identifying opportunities for youth to share the power and be associated with the decision-making process and to see how this sharing can be actualised. In developing this shared leadership, adults will often only "let go" of some power after they have seen the youth's abilities to share it with them<sup>13</sup>. While young people often have difficulty showing their skills as there are very few opportunities to show

them in front of adults. In this vicious circle, the notion of shared leadership grows very slowly and the power remains in adults' hands for a long time.

However, we know the theory: a decision taken together generates more commitment on both sides.

### IN ACTION

It is a question of knowingly making space for young people to exert their influence. This involves becoming more aware of one's modes of action and behaviour, noticing one's own patterns both individually and organisationally and observing the impact created by our actions. Without this sensitivity, shared leadership is difficult and takes longer

to flourish. In most communities, power sharing between youth and adults is neither in the culture nor in the current practices. One must make concerted efforts to create a common space where young people can have real power.

"CONSIDERING THE PARTICIPANTS AS ADULTS, GIVING THEM THE FULL POWER OF DECISION-MAKING, WAS A KEY ELEMENT OF THE PROJECT'S SUCCESS. FINAL DECISIONS WERE TAKEN AS A TEAM, AFTER THINGS HAD BEEN DISCUSSED. I OFTEN PLAYED THE ROLE OF DEVIL'S ADVOCATE IN THE DISCUSSIONS IN ORDER FOR THEM TO SEE THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN AND HELP THEM TO GO DEEPER IN THEIR ARGUMENT."

- Nathalie Bergeron, Cafe Le Spot, 2009

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

Do we recognise how power is negotiated in our communities?

Do we easily share power with young people?

Are we ready to back up young people's decisions, even though they may be different from ours?

Must young people first convince us of their skills before we give them an opportunity?

Are we giving young people the benefit of the doubt?

"IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO SHARE POWER WITH A YOUNG PERSON. WE OFTEN FALL BACK ON OUR OLD HABITS TO GIVE DIRECTIONS. OTHER TIMES WE GIVE THEM ALL THE LATITUDE THEY NEED BUT THEN IT IS THE YOUNG PERSON WHO DOES NOT WANT THAT MUCH. IT SCARES HIM/HER. WE MUST ADJUST AND GROW TOGETHER!"

- Gerry Neree, IDS Project 2009 co-coordinator

## 6. TO BE SUPPORTED

The more young people are **supported by the community** and **have access to the necessary resources** (human, financial and material) the more they commit. When young people have opportunities to play an influential role in the communities, the support of influential people is often key to their success. Moreover these friendly leaders or allies frequently become role models for youth and have a significant impact on their lives. Young people often get involved in projects or

communities that meet their immediate needs and preferences and correspond with their futures aspirations. They are curious and want to learn how to open doors. They want to be able to do it by themselves later on.

As in the organisational change context, if leaders do not back up the change (supporting youth to have and use their power), the chances of the change happening are very slim.

### IN ACTION

Young people need resources and support to succeed. Opening up opportunities for action to young people often creates change that can be met with some resistance. A few friends on the inside will not be enough to navigate through this resistance. They will need a significantly bigger sphere of influence. A little push in

sensitive areas to promote young people's participation makes a significant difference to young people's commitment. This type of backup can set young people up for success and allow youth to concentrate their energy where it counts most.

WORKING WITH NORMAND SEGUIN, A POLICE OFFICER FOR CITY OF MONTREAL, WHO BELIEVED IN THE PROJECT AND COULD OPEN DOORS, WAS OF GREAT HELP. IT ALLOWED US TO UNDERSTAND HOW EVERYTHING WORKED (...).

I THINK I WOULD LIKE TO BECOME A POLICE OFFICER TOO. I AM VERY INTERESTED IN SUCH A CAREER."

- Apollos Paul, *Dialogue Project with the Police*, 2009

### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

Do our community leaders know local young people?

Do our community leaders back up young people's projects?

Do we have the necessary financial and material resources to efficiently back up young people with their projects?

Are adults mentoring youth?

Do our community leaders work in partnership with youth?

## 7. TO BE CREATIVE

The more communities **encourage the emergence of creativity**, the more young people will commit. New thoughts and trends are shaping the ideas for the future that are very different from the ones we initially created.<sup>14</sup> To prepare for this new way of doing things, communities will need the creative contributions of young people. Indeed youth are often more open, less rigid and much more creative than adults. Their presence, energy, advice and ideas can quickly improve a community. Learning to work with young

people opens new horizons that are very different from the usual ways of doing things; it prepares us for the future with more self confidence and humility.

The various projects carried out allowed us to notice that the openness and sensitivity levels of the adults accompanying youth had a significant impact on bringing out their creativity.

### IN ACTION

Creativity while important is very fragile. The influence of adults working in collaboration with young people can either support or undermine the creative dynamic even if participants are working in open and creative environments. Adults with rigid attitudes tend to influence initiatives and project development according to their own modes of working. This can unintentionally stifle creativity. An adult's open mind on the other hand supports the emergence of young people's creativity and allows them to contribute and improve their communities. We noticed that:

#### RIGID ATTITUDE

- Enhances linear approaches
- Is favoured by introverted young people
- Does not function well in a chaotic environment
- Likes things to be predictable
- Takes calculated risks
- Left brain dominance: rational
- Enhances young people abilities

#### OPEN ATTITUDE

- Enhances non linear approaches
- Stimulated by a variety of styles
- Very adaptable to a chaotic environment
- High tolerance for the unexpected
- Risk seeking
- Right brain dominance: intuitive
- Enhances young people's global development

#### DISCUSSION ELEMENTS

- Are we open to new ideas?
- Are we curious and adventurous?
- Do we set limits for ourselves when "It is not within the rules"?
- Are we humble? Do we acknowledge that we do NOT know everything?
- Are we ready to take risks and to improve young people's success?

We saw that to be fully committed, young people need to have a vision they really care about, contribute what they have to offer, have the opportunity to take over, be recognised, have sufficient space to exert their influence and be supported. Their commitment is also made easier when the community supports the emergence of creativity.

Now, let's examine the main barriers that can undermine youth commitment.

"WHEN I DEVELOPED THE MISSIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE MADE AWARE OF WHAT A CULTURAL CENTRE IS, WHAT THE ROLE OF A CULTURAL AGENT IS AND WHAT IT TAKES TO WORK WITH ARTISTS, I WENT FURTHER THAN I USUALLY DO. I HAD TO GET OUT OF MY USUAL WAYS OF DOING THINGS IN ORDER TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE ON MY SIDE AND BRING OUT THEIR INTEREST. I WAS TELLING MYSELF THAT I HAD TO BE SUPER CREATIVE. I TOOK A RISK AND THEY CAME ON BOARD."

- Maryse Dumouchel, RDP Cultural Centre, 2009

The main barriers facing youth integration are the prejudices against them, the hesitation to take risks, agendas, and organisational structures. Working with youth invites us to reassess our beliefs, our tolerance for risk and our structures.

## PREJUDICES

### "BELIEVING THAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE NOT CAPABLE!"

A popular myth is that young people are irresponsible and stay young longer<sup>15</sup>, thus confirming the perception that they cannot enjoy adult status and do not deserve the privileges that go with age. Therefore our society limits their spheres of influence and has a tendency to impose restrictions rather than giving them the same rights and responsibilities as adults. With these

prejudices, adults do not reflexively consult youth; nor do they have youth fully participate in decision-making, tagging them as people "less" capable than themselves.

"WE HAVE TO ASK [YOUTH] WHAT SORT OF ACCOMPANIMENT THEY NEED AND ARRIVE TO A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF HOW IT WILL BE DEVELOPED. WE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ACCOMPANY THEM IN ORDER FOR THEM TO GROW UP."

- Lise Jean, Mobilisation Sector Manager

### "SEEING YOUNG PEOPLE AS A HOMOGENEOUS GROUP"

Many adults interpret youth behaviour according to their own experiences of that age period. They assume that though the world has changed, young people remain the same and resemble each other. But, young people are not homogeneous. They are diverse and often exert their leadership in unexpected ways that hardly resemble the models profiled by the adults. "It is difficult to paint a homogeneous picture of young people. The only common

denominator is its fragmentation (...). There are many varieties of combinations: a young person might be avant-gardist on certain issues and conservative on others. Overall, they live in the short-term and have integrated systemic insecurities into their behaviours."<sup>16</sup>

## TAKING RISKS

Some adults are convinced that they are more adept than youth to define the future and ensure a future for today's youth. They cannot imagine leaving the world to young people, often perceiving that they do not have enough perspective or experience to play such a determining role. These adults think it is much

too risky to leave the responsibility of such choices to "youth". Let's push this idea a little further. What would happen if today's solutions became tomorrow's problems? In this case, who would have to make the choices?

"OCCIDENTAL SOCIETIES HAVE BEEN DOMINATED BY ANALYTICAL APPROACHES AND THOUGHT. WE ARE AT THE START OF A NEW AGE (...) WHERE QUALITIES OF INNOVATION, EMPATHY, JOY AND CAPACITY TO GIVE MEANING WILL BE THE DECIDING FACTORS."

- Daniel H. Pink, 2005

## BEING AN ALLY

The qualities of allies to accompany and support young people are often underestimated. However, this relationship is essential in all collaborative projects. Without it, young people's civic participation cannot be actualised and remains theoretical. Creation of this partnership generates a climate of trust essential to the collaboration. Moreover, it opens

up opportunities for authentic conversations; conversations that allow for open dialogue on what is and is not working to allow for necessary adjustments to enhance situations.

"IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO NAME THINGS. IT IS EASIER TO SAY BRAVO THAN TO GIVE CRITICAL FEEDBACK. BUT IT IS ESSENTIAL TO BUILD A QUALITY RELATIONSHIP."

- Nathalie Persico, Mobilisation Sector Coordinator



THE MAPPING PROJECT ALLOWED US TO HEAR YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS. DEVELOPING OPTIONS AND SOLUTIONS TOGETHER WAS BENEFICIAL.

Young people tend to commit if their interests are met. A youth agenda may not correspond with a community agenda and young people's capacities and interests may not correspond with the opportunities offered by the community. Dance might be his/her greatest passion and his/her time is therefore invested

in and around this interest. This is why it is important to work in a multi-sectoral manner and to analyse the various opportunities offered in the community together (youth and adults). By working together, a range of initiatives that meet young people's agendas can be created.

## STRUCTURES

"ADULTS GET UP JUST AFTER WE GO TO BED!"

- Young person, Marketing Committee, 2008

Young people tend to manage environments that are more fluid and less established much better than adults. Thus, the structures, whether of organisational or functional in nature often constitute barriers to youth's commitment as they cannot be easily adapted to young people's modes of operating.

By structure, we mean **all the components and their interrelations that form a community and forge its culture, its ways of thinking and doing things**. Here are a few examples:

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE/FORMAL	FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE/INFORMAL
Organisational chart Rules and procedures Working hours (...)	Call to meetings Meeting management Language (...)

At the partners committee, first mixed meeting, young people were sitting together and for the most part, were listening. They felt like visitors, being careful not to disturb too much. They did not dare to ask questions when they did not understand the many acronyms that were part of the adult conversation and answering very briefly to the questions asked. Two years later, this space is used in a fluid and more equal manner with questions and content being offered by both adults and youth.

Communities have various degrees of flexibility as far as their willingness and capacity to modify their structures. For most, it is not possible to change **organisational elements** in order to more easily integrate youth. Though, they are often able to discuss the more **functional elements**. Here are a few questions to ponder:

- What is the place of our young people in our community? Do they have what is needed to establish an equalitarian relation with adults and have some influence?
- Does our community **culture** support youth engagement? Do we succeed in **translating in our gestures**, intentions that encourage meaningful engagement of youth?
- Up to what point do we allow our youth to **appropriate themselves into our community**?

A participant could not come to Banff because she had exams to write at the Ministry. Two days before departure, she sent an SMS Message to the coordinator to let her know. For this young lady, all her messages whatever the scope and repercussions, were communicated via her telephone, as is the case for the majority of her peers. This mean of communication can be perceived very differently by an adult and was viewed as inadequate in this context.



## CONCLUSION

Engaging youth within one's community represents an opportunity for each of us to build a better world together, be more welcoming for all and become better adapted to youth needs. As adults, it is our civic responsibility to include young people in the decisions that interest and affect them.

When this reflex develops within a community, the discussions regarding youth issues are enriched by the opinions of people. When young people are involved in the process and share the responsibility for developing and implementing solutions a totally new perspective is created. Letting young people penetrate our decision-making spaces infuses dynamics and while avant-gardist in the eyes of many, carries with it an immense hope for

our society. Today's youth can be both today and tomorrow's actors.

We should not wait for governmental programs to determine the path and supply us with the tools for youth engagement. We must, as communities, mobilise ourselves and initiate actions which will modify our ways of doing things. When a community manages to mobilise its leaders and share a vision of democracy while simultaneously giving a large space to youths' civic participation, a driving effect is created. An effect that is sufficient to stimulate various layers of society, including marginalised youth at risk.

"A MOBILISATION PROJECT THAT SENDS A STRONG MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY. WE NOW NEED OUR INSTITUTIONS TO FOLLOW SUIT AND EMBRACE THIS NEW VIBRATION. THE DISTRICT SHOULD PLAY AN EVEN STRONGER ROLE AND IT IS MY DUTY TO INFLUENCE MY COMMUNITY AND TO MAKE THINGS EASIER. TO CREATE AN ADOLESCENT SECTOR, WHAT DOES IT MEAN? FIRST WE MUST CHANGE ATTITUDES AND THEN PUT SOME MONEY INTO IT!"

- Abdelaziz Tahir, City of Montreal, 2010



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- <sup>1</sup> Boscoville 2000 is part of the YouthScape project, a Pan Canadian initiative financed by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, supporting five communities around youth citizen participation. This initiative is coordinated by IICRD (the International Institute for Child Rights and Development) associated with the University of Victoria, BC
- <sup>2</sup> Marner, Langlois and Dumond (2007), Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006), Zeldin, Larons, Camino and O'Connor (2005), Perkins, Bordens Keith, Hoppe-Rooney and Villiarruel (2003).
- <sup>3</sup> Burgess, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> The Mapping Project involved roughly thirty young people from Riviere-des-Prairies (RDP) who were to scrutinise their community around four major themes: resources, environment, employment situation and district files. Regrouped around subjects they had chosen, these youth carried out research, conducted polls with 12 to 25 years old and showed visual proofs (photos and GPS points) to document their theme and bring out their comments.
- <sup>5</sup> Governments guarantee that children able to judge, the right to express their opinion freely on any question they are interested in, the children opinions being duly taken into consideration, taking into account their age and degree of maturity. To this end a child will be given the possibility to be heard in any judicial or administrative procedure concerning him/her directly or through a representative or appropriate organisation in accordance with the National legislation procedural rules.
- <sup>6</sup> Children have the right to freedom of expression. This right includes the freedom to research, to receive and distribute information and ideas of all kinds without consideration of borders, under oral, written, printed or artistic form or by any other mean should they choose.
- <sup>7</sup> One of the key principles guiding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Survival / Development / Protection / Participation.
- <sup>8</sup> IRB Inquiry (2006).
- <sup>9</sup> Child Participation Scale adaptation, Hart (1998) and Arnstein (1969).
- <sup>10</sup> Model developed by Liesette Brunson and Josee Latendresse, in collaboration with the Boscoville 2000 team.
- <sup>11</sup> Blanchet-Cohen and Latendresse (2010).
- <sup>12</sup> MacKinnon, Pitre and Watling (2007).
- <sup>13</sup> Weisenbach and Camino (1999); Zeldin (2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Daniel H. Pink (2005).
- <sup>15</sup> Robert Epstein Studies (2009).
- <sup>16</sup> Diane Pacom (2009).

TO FEEL  
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TO HAVE INFLUENCE  
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