

Young people and dance4life: Reflections on meaningful and sustainable participation

By Anke van der Kwaak, Karen 't Hooft, Klaartje Spijkers and Colin Dixon



Dance4life participants during the international youth council training held in the UK. (Photo courtesy of dance4life).

The Royal Tropical Institute did research in 2011 to assess the impact of school-based dance4life programmes on young people in Uganda and Russia. This article discusses the concept of meaningful participation using findings from the study. What does this concept mean and which models exist to analyse the different aspects of participation? It is concluded that participation not only becomes meaningful if young people are actively involved and have a voice, but also when it is sustainable and valued by the young people.

Pregnancy and childbirth-related complications are the leading cause of death among adolescents in developing countries.¹ Moreover, young people are disproportionately affected by HIV. Information, access to condoms and related negotiation skills are essential to avoid HIV – but less than a third of young people in developing countries know basic facts about HIV, and have limited access to comprehensive sexuality education (Factsheet MDGs Goal 6).

Few programmes involve the youth in programme design or programme participation but this may be an effective strategy for developing new programming or scaling up existing interventions or scaling up new

ones. More innovative and meaningful ways of achieving the youth's involvement in programme design and participation are needed, especially for the programmes targeting them.

dance4life is a globally-active organisation addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and HIV issues affecting young people. The organisation's central mission is to generate a social movement that creates change at the global and community levels by taking actions to improve access to sexuality education and youth-friendly services, to challenge stigma and discrimination and to break taboos that surround sexuality, and especially HIV and AIDS (dance4life, 2011).

In 2011, the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) carried out an impact research of dance4life's programmes in Uganda and Russia using a mixed-method approach. Two hundred questionnaires were completed and 12 focus group discussions and 44 in-depth interviews done with students (boys and girls) at secondary school level and between 13 and 23 years old. Participation in this study refers to whether the programme realises full involvement of young people, regardless of their sex, identity, socio-economic status, religion and race, and that the programmes encourage young people's leadership and full participation in decisions affecting them (Van der Kwaak, A. and 't Hooft, K. 2012). This article will discuss meaningful participation theoretically followed by some of the findings of the studies and some conclusive observations.

Meaningful participation

In a paper for STOP AIDS NOW! Stevenson (2007) notes "there is overwhelming evidence

that the participation of young people leads to better outcomes for projects, programmes and organisations. Through their participation, young people learn and develop and are empowered. The participation of young people is integral to the democratic ethos and strengthens society.”

The question remains however: how can we ensure meaningful participation of young people and what ways are the most effective? Stevenson rightly mentions that participation becomes only meaningful if we see it from the perspective of free agency: action on, for, with or by young people (Stevenson 2007) *ibid.*

Models of participation – A theoretical approach

Different models of youth participation can be found in literature. In the Ladder of Youth Voice by Adam Fletcher⁵ Fletcher has added to the model developed by Roger Hart in 1992, which sought to

presented ranging from: young people are listened to, young people’s views taken into account, young people involved in decision making processes, and young people sharing power and responsibility in decision-making (Shier 2008).

In all these models it becomes clear that ‘real’ participation means active involvement in decision-making, and that change will only happen when young people have responsibility and leadership at all levels of programmes.

Impact of dance4life

Findings from the impact evaluation of the dance4life programmes in Uganda and Russia confirmed that the programme had a positive impact on participants’ lives. In this study,

we evaluated the following issues relevant and related to the concept of participation:

• Influence on decision-making

Within the programme structures, the participation of young people in decision-making is mainly at individual and club levels. It is not clear to what extent they contribute to decisions made at higher levels. A relatively new structure – dance4life global and national youth councils – aims to ensure youth are able to guide and influence higher level decision making. A more in-depth analysis of the role of youth councils seems relevant in this perspective.

• Ownership

Participants confirmed they devise and implement plans and this increases their feeling of ownership and responsibility. Discussion groups in schools and communities focusing on the needs of young people before involving them in a standardised programme might contribute to their sense of accountability. Organising training of trainers increases their sense of ownership and ensures improved sustainability.

• Agency and ability

Agency and ability to create change among peers, such as organising skills and informing others were mentioned by young people as something they learned and accomplished. Unexpected outcomes were also observed: young people organising informal meetings to inform others, the ability of people to speak in public and higher self-esteem.

Sustaining youth participation

Sustained involvement of schools and students in the programme proved to be a challenge. It is not only how young people are involved or whether they have decision-making power, but also about long-term sustainability. Creating real change and participation should not be a one-off event. Youth involvement should be multilevel; they should not only perceive they have a voice but also feel it and see the connectedness to others.

Conclusion

It is prudent to examine models of participation. The outcomes reported in



Dance4life participants in the Netherlands. (Photo courtesy of Dance4life).

encourage youth and adults to examine why and how young people participate throughout communities. The first two rungs intended to represent forms of non-participation, followed by three rungs of tokenism and finally three rungs that represent engagement of youth as partners. In this context the youth are increasingly seen as being engaged as researchers, planners, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers, and advocates (Fletcher 2011).

Headroom model of youth participation argues that successful youth participation

is not only beneficial to those young people who are participating, but also to other youth who are recipients of improved services, policies, information and advocacy (Biedrzycki and Lawless, 2008). Young people experienced considerable personal development, for example, in the fields of confidence, public speaking skills and leadership skills. Shier’s Pathways to Participation model is useful in assessing organisational readiness and commitment to youth participation. Different levels of involvement are



Dance4life participants in Kyrgyzstan. (Photo courtesy of dance4life).

the Australian Head model are similar to what was found in our study. We argue that meaningful participation is only realistic when it is sustainable. We can distinguish among different levels of meaningful participation. At the individual level, participation can be meaningful, but how does this work at the collective or institutional level?

At the collective level, participation is only sustainable when in reality power shifts and becomes embedded in the policy and principles of the organisation implementing the programme. It should be stressed that participation can only be meaningful if young people's voices are heard, their ideas are taken into account and the programme in which they participate adds value to their life and wellbeing ■

Lessons learnt

- Participants devise and implement plans and this increases their feeling of ownership and responsibility.
- Young people created change among peers.
- Youth involvement should be multilevel; youth should not only perceive they have a voice but also feel it and see the connectedness to others.

This article is based on a chapter for a book to be published soon by the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) and Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAfAIDS) titled Towards an HIV-free generation: Addressing sexual and reproductive health needs of young people and women.

Anke van der Kwaak
Senior advisor and researcher

Correspondence:
Development, Policy and Practice
Royal Tropical Institute (KIT)
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Tel: +3120568 8497
E-mail: a.v.d.kwaak@kit.nl
www.kit.nl

Karen 't Hooft
Advisor and Researcher

Correspondence:
Development, Policy and Practice
Royal Tropical Institute (KIT)
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Tel: +3120568 8512
E-mail: K.t.Hooft@kit.nl
www.kit.nl

Klaartje Spijkers
Fundraising Manager

Correspondence:
Masterpeace, Utrecht,
the Netherlands
Stuurmankade 254, 1019 WC,
Amsterdam
E-mail: K.Spijkers@chello.nl

Colin Dixon
Director of Programmes

Correspondence:
dance4life International
Spuistraat 239, 1012 VP
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Tel: +31(0)20 521 6655
E-mail: c.dixon@dance4life.com
www.dance4life.com

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