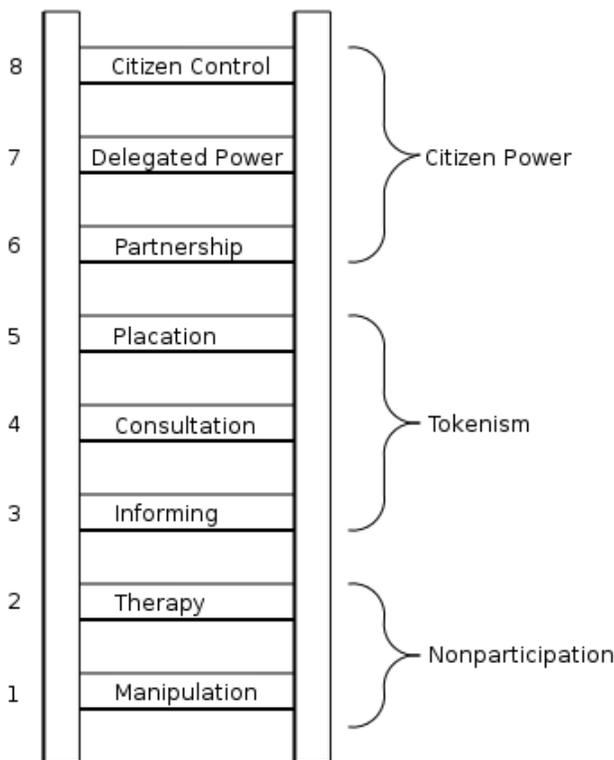


Sherry Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.”

The relationship between cities and political participation is a theme that can be traced back to ancient philosophy. How are people in a city governed, and how *should* they be governed?

There are very few times and places where established nation-states are forced to give power to cities, and it’s even more unusual for any of that power to be given to local, neighborhood groups within cities. One example is the response of the federal, national government of the United States to the “urban crisis” of the 1960s -- broad-based social movements, including large urban movements pressing for civil rights, fair access to housing, and economic justice. Sherry Arnstein (1929-1997) was a social worker who had a unique position to examine this extraordinary time. She was a staff member on several commissions and agencies in Washington, DC, in the early 1960s, and became a Chief Advisor to the newly-created U.S. Department of Housing and Urban

Development. HUD, itself an unprecedented national commitment to “urban” issues, had been mandated to undertake a “Model Cities” program to find out what worked and what didn’t in dealing with urban problems. At that time, the big urban problems had to do



with persistent poverty, unemployment, and racism -- compounded in older industrial cities by population and job losses. Congress required HUD to ensure “citizen participation” in federally-funded programs. Arnstein’s role was to provide advice on how to achieve “citizen participation” across a vast national urban system of hundreds of cities. “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” reflects Arnstein’s reflections on what she learned over several years of watching city elites, community groups, and federal bureaucrats as they went about trying to get (or keep) power over crucial decisions.

Arnstein’s ladder is a metaphor for understanding whether citizen participation is genuine, honest, and effective -- whether the concerns of everyday people have a chance of

influencing the outcome of a decision.

At the bottom of the ladder are two rungs of “non-participation.” At the very bottom, **manipulation** involves absolute deception: doing surveys or holding meetings specifically designed to fulfill participation requirements -- but with no genuine desire on the part of the “haves” to share any power with the “have-nots.”

A step up is **therapy**, which uses “citizen participation” in a misleading way -- to disguise the real intention of modifying the behavior of the poor.

The next three steps involve more honest, if still inadequate forms of participation. Arnstein calls these “tokenism.” First is **informing**: those who have power have made a decision, and they are providing a one-way flow of information about that decision.

A step up is **consultation**. Attitude surveys, neighborhood meetings, and public meetings are held to gather residents’ views and priorities -- but there is no guarantee that the input will actually make a difference. Arnstein describes a particularly vivid example of an arrogant official asking ‘Can I see the hands of all those in favor of a health clinic? All those opposed?’

Another step up is **placation**. At this step, powerful people and institutions are forced to make some sacrifices: in almost all cases, those with power will first try to placate opponents by offering *money now* rather than giving any *power* that might establish a precedent for the future.

At the top three steps of Arnstein’s ladder, the “have-nots” begin to get real citizen power. In **partnership**, citizens and power-holders negotiate joint structures such as policy boards, planning committees, and similar mechanisms to resolve different priorities.

In **delegated power**, citizens are given more substantial authority over a particular plan or program. A neighborhood group might be given control over a park, for instance, or a child-care program.

At the very top of the ladder is true, genuine, meaningful **citizen control**. This is rare, but not impossible. In fact, it can be achieved fairly easily if those who have power can use a geographical or institutional “fix”: giving power to institutions in particular policy domains, or to particular places. This is the example Arnstein uses: “a neighborhood corporation with no intermediaries between it and the source of funds is the model most frequently advocated.” These organizations became formalized in a set of laws passed shortly after Arnstein wrote, creating many Community Development Corporations (CDCs).

Question

1. Have you ever been part of a group or an institution that asked for your input? Did you participate? Did you feel that your participation influenced the outcome?