

Continuum of youth engagement – complete version



**For, With, By Youth:
A Youth Engagement Continuum
for Our Kids Network**

(complete version)

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What Is Youth Engagement: Participation And Empowerment

Engaging youth may seem like something all professionals who work with and serve youth do. However, the relationship between youth and a youth serving organization is based on how much young people believe their opinions matter. According to the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, youth engagement is “the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself.”¹ This document will present a continuum and recommendations for embedding meaningful youth engagement in to the structure and activities of the Our Kids Network to facilitate this process in Halton’s youth.

The practice of youth engagement in community organizations must involve deliberate efforts to create opportunities for youth to meaningfully participate in activities that affect them. How this task is carried out will determine the ways that young people are integrated into our schools, neighbourhoods, community organizations, and governments. Young people’s voices must be heard and heeded not only for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the entire community and the organizations therein. Youth serving community organizations have an important role to play in facilitating these benefits because of how their decisions and programs affect young people.

Youth engagement is a way for youth to be involved in an activity. For youth to be engaged they must be provided with opportunities to participate and to feel empowered while doing so. The notion of empowerment is important to consider when embedding youth engagement into an activity or program because it helps make young people’s participation efforts meaningful by giving them control over their contribution. Young people cannot feel empowered however if they are not given opportunities to be a part of the structures that affect their lives. Participation practices create opportunities for young people’s opinions to be included during decision-making processes while empowerment is about a deliberate shift in power relationships, to make their efforts truly meaningful.

The Institution as a Barrier

Several barriers prevent genuine youth engagement. While some barriers lie outside of an organization seeking youth participants, such as lack of education or social inequality, another side of the coin must be addressed. The decision-making structure of an organization can create internal barriers to youth engagement, which left unattended can prevent young people from having a say. While an organization cannot control external barriers, it is possible for them to change the structure of their organization to address internal barriers. Researchers such as Neema Kudva and David Driskell have found that organizational structures are “crucial...in creating or limiting space for meaningful participation by young people in adult led organizations.”² Their research focuses on how institutional design can either help or hinder genuine youth engagement. They found that opportunities for participation become available through the interaction of certain elements within an organization. The normative, structural, operational, physical and attitudinal elements that make up an organization determine if and how youth engagement will be facilitated.

The normative space is where a declaration of values towards young people’s participation can be found. An organization’s structural dimension is where meaningful youth participation becomes a

¹ Centres of Excellence for Children’s Well-Being.(n.d).What is Youth Engagement? Retrieved from: http://www.tgmag.ca/aorg/pdf/Whatis_WEB_e.pdf, p.1

² Kudva, Neema and David Driskell. (2009). Creating Space for Participation – The Role of Organizational Practice in Structuring Youth Participation. *Community Development*, 40:4, 367-380, p. 369

reality, based on its commitment to the values. This means that youth serving organizations should be structured in ways that present young people with meaningful opportunities to participate. In this way, young people will be better able to control decisions that affect their lives by having their voices heard. For the purposes of embedding youth voice into the governance structure of Our Kids Network, this continuum focuses on the ways in which youth can be engaged in decision-making processes.

Youth Engagement in Our Kids Network: Why a continuum?

The Our Kids Network is a Halton-wide partnership of organizations, agencies, and community planning tables serving children and youth who are 0 to 18-years-old. Guided by research, the Our Kids Network plans and integrates services and supports so Halton kids have every opportunity to thrive. The Our Kids Network gathers research to support children, youth and their families living in Halton and builds relationships between partner agencies to promote a shared vision for child and youth in the region. Its vision is that all children thrive and its mission is “to promote the healthy development, security and safety of all children, youth and families through neighbourhood collaboration, service integration, and measuring results.”³ The collaborative was formed in 1996, and now its protocol partnership base—i.e., the organizations that make up the network by deciding to follow a formal agreement to work together and share information and resources—contains eight organizations. These organizations provide education, health, and safety services to children in the region. The network is based on the values of working together, building evidence, using a holistic approach to human development, adopting a framework (i.e., Developmental Assets), and accountability through a Results Based Accountability framework. Representatives from each organization work together as committee members and project partners to address issues affecting children and communities in Halton.

The Our Kids Network’s commitment to a holistic and assets-based approach to child and youth development is conducive to adopting the principles and practices of youth engagement. This continuum is a tool to help practitioners determine an appropriate way to make youth engagement meaningful in their activities. Making a commitment to engage youth supports the Our Kids Network in realizing its goal to help all kids thrive. By adopting youth engagement practices the Network is able to develop better services for youth and give young people opportunities to gain the positive experiences and personal qualities they need to increase their levels of Developmental Assets. This helps youth contribute to their communities in positive ways.

Based on the unique structure of OKN, one over arching strategy for youth engagement is not appropriate. The Network is governed by committees, which provide strategic direction and manage its operations. Its central governance committees are made up of protocol partner members. Representatives from the Network’s protocol members also sit on its standing and planning committees. Standing committees support the Network’s planning committees, which are responsible for providing strategic direction for specific areas of childhood development. In addition to service integration and planning through its committee structure, the Network also supports neighbourhood hubs. Hubs are made up of local planning teams that interact with community members.

While the Network’s partners have agreed to work together to provide children and their families with better access to services in the Halton region, each organization maintains independent control over its operations. For this reason, OKN’s youth engagement policy only applies to the governance structure of the Network its self. Nevertheless, this commitment affects how OKN’s partners deliver their services as a collective. Therefore, this policy contains a commitment to youth engagement while ensuring flexibility. A youth engagement continuum was developed for this purpose.

³ Our Kids Network. (2011). About. Retrieved from <http://www.ourkidsnetwork.ca/Public/About>

What does the continuum look like?

This continuum is intended to ensure the genuine engagement of young people in the Our Kids Network. It can be used as a lens to review and evaluate a committee's activities for barriers to youth engagement and to help incorporate youths' voices into their operations. Any committee undertaking requires that a variety of decisions be made and meaningful participation can happen at any point in the process.

The continuum places participation practices on a scale based on the degree to which the opportunities they create allow young people to become involved in a committee's activities. At each level of participation, a practitioner can make the involvement of young people more or less meaningful through the degree of empowerment they choose to incorporate in their activities—i.e. how much control they give youth over the activity or decision making process they are involved in. Therefore, practitioners can decide how much responsibility they are willing to give to youth participants at a given level of participation.

A variety of mechanisms can create opportunities for engagement at a desired level of participation. Practitioners can choose the degree to which they are willing to allow young people to be involved in their activities based on what they believe is appropriate. The aim for practitioners is to embed a range of youth engagement practices into their committee's activities, at the highest appropriate level of engagement for their committee and activity in question. The aim is not to always operate at the highest level of youth engagement. Each committee should operate at the level that makes sense to them, however every level of the continuum should be represented in at least one committee of the Network.

Regardless of the mechanism chosen, youth should be given the choice to participate only after they are fully informed about the activity they would be involved with. Young people should be given clear guidelines and understand the extent to which their opinions will influence the final decisions made. They should also be given an opportunity to provide feedback about their participation experience. The mechanisms included in this continuum are not mutually exclusive and can be used in combination with others from the same level of participation or across levels. Moreover, they do not represent an exhaustive list of options for embedding youth engagement practices into a committee's activities and were gathered based on an environmental scan of youth engagement policies in Canada and internationally. The youth engagement policy or framework from which the mechanism was extracted is indicated and practitioners are encouraged to refer to the attached environmental scan [see appendix 1] for examples of how other jurisdictions and organizations used a particular mechanism as part of their broader policy framework.

Categories of engagement

The continuum categorizes meaningful youth engagement practices, which are part of a larger spectrum of approaches to youth engagement. The diagram shows participation and empowerment levels on two intersecting axes, which create a plane of youth engagement methods that are divided into four regions [see figure 1]. As the categories of participation practices become more inclusive, they also become more empowering. The highest levels of participatory and empowering practices are located in the upper right region. The opposite are located in the upper left region.

The continuum stretches across these two regions to capture the full range of youth engagement practices in three categories, which become progressively more inclusive as we move to higher levels of participation and empowerment. Youth engagement practices *for youth* create the lowest levels of

participation and empowerment, engagement practices *with youth* create opportunities for more participation, and engagement practices *by youth* create opportunities for the highest levels of participation and empowerment [see figure 2].

Practices that offer opportunities for the lowest levels of participation do not create conditions where youth can take on leadership roles in a committee's activities. These *adult led initiatives* are located in the upper left region of the diagram. In adult led initiatives, young people have opportunities to be included in a committee's activities; however, adult committee members have more say than the youth participants. While adult led initiatives do not exemplify the most inclusive types of participation practices, they are valuable.

Youth engagement practices that fall under the category *for youth* are all adult led and create opportunities for including young people in a committee in a passive and ad hoc manner. An example would be ensuring that all the information youth need to be involved is available. While adult led youth engagement practices include youth, they are less empowering for the youth participants than youth initiated engagement practices.

With youth practices can be adult led but can also create opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles in a committee's activities. This category therefore occupies both the upper right region of the diagram entitled *youth led initiatives* and the upper left region of the diagram entitled *adult led initiatives*. An engagement practice may be adult led or youth led, depending on what mechanisms the practitioner chooses to incorporate into activities. *With youth* practices create opportunities for youth and adult committee members to work together. One youth led example would be to create a youth action team, composed entirely of young people, to conduct research and report to a committee on the opinions of their peers. On the other hand, an adult led example would be to provide training to both adults and youth to help them work together.

The highest levels of participation most empower youth. These youth engagement practices are in the upper right region of the diagram entitled *youth led initiatives*. These practices create opportunities that allow youth to take on responsibility in a committee. On the continuum, these practices can range from activities undertaken *with youth* to activities led *by youth*. *By youth* practices are the most inclusive. Examples would be to reserve a percentage of seats in a committee for youth representatives or to create a youth advocate position where one youth acts as an advisor to adult committee members. Youth engagement practices *by youth* create opportunities for youth to fill authentic leadership roles in a committee.

The bottom two regions of the plane encompass categories of practices that create very little opportunity for youth to become empowered when participating in a committee's activities. The lower left region is entitled *non-engagement* because it characterizes practices where youth are given little or no opportunity to participate in a committee's activities. In *tokenism*, young people are given opportunities to participate, but are not empowered when they are included. In these types of practices, young people's voices are not taken seriously because very little power is transferred from adults to youth participants. When practitioners aim to embed youth engagement practices into their committee's activities, they should use mechanisms that create opportunities for youth to be involved that fall within the categories on the continuum. This will ensure that the youth engagement practices of that committee are meaningful. For a full description of the categories contained in this continuum, along with examples of mechanisms for creating opportunities to embed these engagement practices in a committee's activities, refer to the chart below [see chart 1].

Recommendations

A youth dimension should be incorporated into the design of Our Kids Network operations. As mentioned earlier, a normative commitment to youth engagement helps create the necessary structures to turn meaningful youth participation into reality. Committing to a set of principles, which guide OKN's youth engagement practices, can facilitate the development of a structural framework to make meaningful youth engagement happen in all of OKN's committees. The following recommendations, if adopted, could enable and encourage this process:

- Mandate the inclusion of youth voice in OKN's governance structure (*for example, see United Way: What Works and What Doesn't?*)
- Adopt/create an overarching set of principles to which all committees adhere. (*see Bringing Youth into Quebec's Mainstream*) **[ACTION TO BE TAKEN: Review principles to determine which ones Our Kids Network will adopt. See appendix 2 for an overview of youth engagement principles.]**
- Make a commitment to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the OKN youth engagement policy and the use of the youth engagement continuum across all its committees. This would require that all committees incorporate a youth dimension in their design. The youth engagement policy should be reflected in all committees' terms of reference and work plan and possibly in framework agreements between partners. (*see Bringing Youth into Quebec's Mainstream; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities*)
- Require that each committee develop its own specific plan to engage youth based on a core set of youth engagement principles and the continuum (*see West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK*)
- The Integrated Planning Committee should take responsibility for ensuring youth voice is embedded in OKN, providing direction for the recommendation of youth engagement strategies, and ensuring that the committees' youth engagement strategies are coherent (*see Bringing Youth into Quebec's Mainstream; Creating a Province of Choice; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Engage, Involve, Create*)
- Develop a formal needs assessment tool to support each committee in establishing a baseline indicating where they are with respect to the youth engagement continuum (similar to the OKN partnership self assessment tool and knowledge mobilization tool). (*see BC: Youth Policy Framework; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross*) **[ACTION TO BE TAKEN: Review needs assessment examples to develop one that is specific to the committees of Our Kids Network. See appendix 3 for an overview of needs assessment questions.]**
- Adopt a youth lens to be used when committees are creating or revising policy (i.e., the youth engagement continuum) (*see Creating a Province of Choice*)

Chart 1 For, With, By Youth: Youth Engagement Continuum Chart				
Level of Engagement	Definition	Mechanisms⁴	Opportunities⁵	Examples⁶
For Youth	Opportunities are created for youth engagement by gathering young people's opinions, how they are affected by circumstances in their community, and/or by recruiting them to fill specific but informal roles in an activity. Information about a decision is made available, along with assistance for understanding how youth will be affected. A mechanism for including young people's opinions in an organization's activities is adopted but their inclusion is passive and ad hoc. Youth are recruited when needed by practitioners, who plan and run all of the activities.	Ensure all information that youth need to be involved is available	Clearly define the scope of the youth participation initiative and provide youth friendly orientation materials (including a clear terms of reference) to all participants.	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; BC Youth Policy Framework; 4-H;
			Disseminate all information in a youth friendly format and ensure materials are frequently updated	Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa
			Use a communication medium that makes information accessible to youth (i.e., technology, website)	Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa; West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Creating a Province of Choice; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK
			Ensure information about opportunities for involvement is widely disseminated	Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities
			Ensure contact information of	An Agenda for Youth

⁴ Mechanisms are participation methods for youth to be involved at the chosen level of engagement

⁵ Opportunities are ways to put a mechanism (that creates opportunities for youth to participate at a level of engagement) into practice

⁶ Examples of a particular youth engagement mechanism and/or opportunity in practice can be found in these organization or government documents. For a review of the documents included, refer to the attached youth engagement environmental scan [see appendix 1].

			decision makers is easily available	Engagement: UK
			Develop an educational campaign to foster intergenerational ties in the community	Bringing Youth into Quebec's Mainstream
				See also: By Youth For Youth Framework; Engage, Involve, Create
		Conduct research about issues affecting youth	Conduct surveys and hold focus groups to collect information about youth	An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Vision for the Future
			Facilitate a method for comparing youth engagement efforts in the community and for sharing information about youth engagement practices	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK
		Collect formal and informal feedback from youth and incorporate this information into program evaluations	Hold an event dedicated to hearing young people's opinions, such as a youth summit, symposium, luncheon, or forum to bring youth together on an ad hoc basis. These forums provide a way for youth to discuss issues that are important to them for a specific purpose and can be held in person or online.	Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; Our Kids Are Worth It; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Realizing Potential: MCYS; West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Vision for the Future
			Use quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods to evaluate programs and use data elements	For Youth, By Youth Framework; Youth Policy Framework: BC; Vision for

			based on youth centered outcomes	the Future
			Demonstrate clearly why a final decision was made and how youth voice was considered in the process, including how youth perspectives were collected and integrated into a program or policy	Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities
				See also: By Youth, For Youth Framework; BC: Youth Policy Framework; Creating a Province of Choice; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax; AYAC Strategic Plan
		Encourage community service providers to host youth events		West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Vision for the Future; Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People
		Create opportunities for positive media coverage of youth in the community		West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; AYAC Strategic Plan
		Hire staff based on non-traditional qualifications (i.e., community standing)		By Youth, For Youth Framework

With Youth	<p>Opportunities are created for youth engagement by adopting a formal mechanism for gathering young people's opinions and for working with youth on an ongoing basis. The organization sets the agenda and has the final say over decisions that are made but youth are given some responsibility and are provided with assistance and guidance from adult staff. Both youth and staff are given opportunities for learning skills to develop intergenerational partnerships, and young people are provided with training to build their individual competencies. Young people may be given more or less responsibility in their relationship with adult decision makers, depending on what the organization deems appropriate.</p>	Recruit youth who will be assigned by adult staff to fill certain roles within an organization or an initiative	Use inclusive recruitment strategies	Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People; AYAC Strategic Plan
			Create a youth participation terms of reference with youth input	Vision for the Future
			Invite youth to present at staff, board, committee and/or council meetings	Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross
			Create youth action teams to report on the opinions of their peers	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax
			Create a youth committee, sub-committee, council or board, made up entirely of young people, to conduct research and collect feedback from their peers to present at staff and committee meetings	4-H; HOPE; West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Bringing Youth into Quebec's Mainstream; Creating a Province of Choice; Engage, Involve, Create; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Realizing Potential: MCYS; West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax; Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa
	Provide frequent and ongoing	Training can help adults work with	Youth Engagement	

		training for youth and adults	youth by educating them about youth engagement and techniques for engaging youth	Strategy: Halifax; Our Kids Are Worth It
			Training can help youth and adults work together	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Our Kids Are Worth It; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross
			Training for youth can give them the tools they need to participate in the activities of the organization	BC: Youth Policy Framework; AYAC Strategic Plan
			Training should give youth a chance to educate adults about how better to engage youth	An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK
				See also: Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; By Youth For Youth Framework
		Build mentorship opportunities into programs for youth and adults to develop relationships where both parties share responsibilities	Schedule meetings when youth can attend	Creating a Province of Choice
			Create opportunities for youth to partner with professionals in the community by holding an event to connect youth with adult mentors	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK
				See also: By Youth, For Youth Framework; 4-H; West Vancouver Civic

				Youth Strategy; BC: Youth Policy Framework; Creating a Province of Choice; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax; Our Kids Are Worth It; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa
		Help youth build leadership and other skills by creating a youth leadership training program	Provide constructive feedback to youth by evaluating their performance on an ongoing basis	By Youth For Youth Framework
				Realizing Potential: MCYS; Our Kids Are Worth It; West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; BC: Youth Policy Framework; Creating a Province of Choice
By Youth	Opportunities are created for youth engagement by making space in an organization to adopt decisions made by youth and by recruiting them to fill authentic leadership roles. Young people are	Establish a formal mechanism for youth representatives to be a part of the organization's long-term structure	Include youth on planning committees and task forces	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People
			Bring together existing youth led initiatives and form a youth advisory group/council	Our Kids Are Worth It; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; Vision

<p>given the chance to build their decision-making and problem solving skills in collaboration with adult staff. Young people are invited to fill formal positions and are able to make some decisions autonomously, for which they take responsibility. To the degree to which an organization deems appropriate, youth participants and adults compromise when making decisions because adults make an explicit commitment to give up some power to young people.</p>			for the Future
		Create an independent body of youth representatives to channel youth voice into the organization and to develop strategies for implementing changes to the organization and its programs	Creating a Province of Choice; Civic Youth Strategy; Red Cross; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax; Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities; Aboriginal Youth Council; Respect: The Government's Vision for Young People
		Reserve a percentage of seats for youth on organizational governance bodies—committees, the executive, etc.	By Youth, For Youth Framework; 4-H; Child and Youth Friendly Ottawa; AYAC Strategic Plan
		Create a youth advocate position, where one youth sits on an advisory committee along with adult decision makers and communicates feedback from interactions with his or her peers on issues important to youth	West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; An Agenda for Youth Engagement: UK; AYAC Strategic Plan
		Require a youth vote on the organization's executive body	Vision for the Future
		Require that youth co-chair the organization's executive body	Vision for the Future
	Adults and youth work		Youth Engagement

		together to implement youth driven action plans		Strategy: Halifax
		Adult staff help youth develop programs and deliver services to their peers		West Vancouver Civic Youth Strategy; Youth Engagement Strategy: Red Cross; Youth Engagement Strategy: Halifax

For, With, By Youth: Youth Engagement Continuum Diagram

Fig. 1

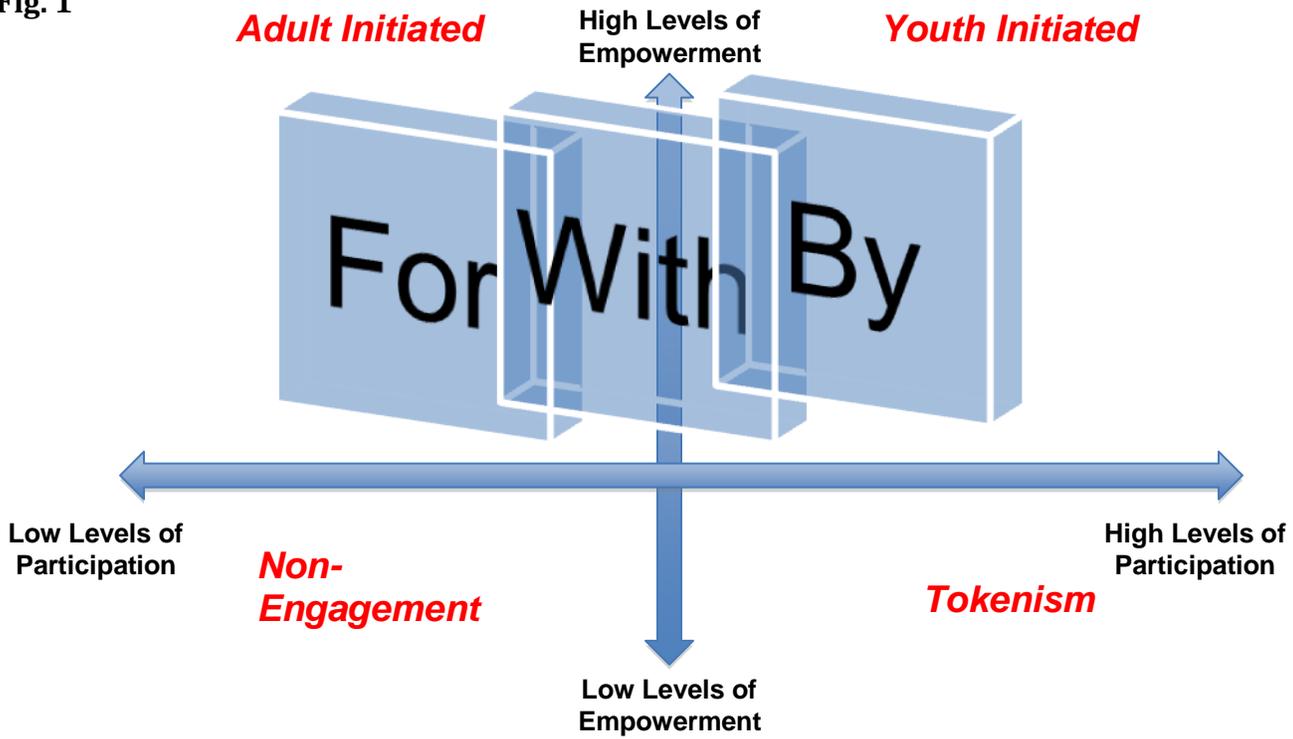
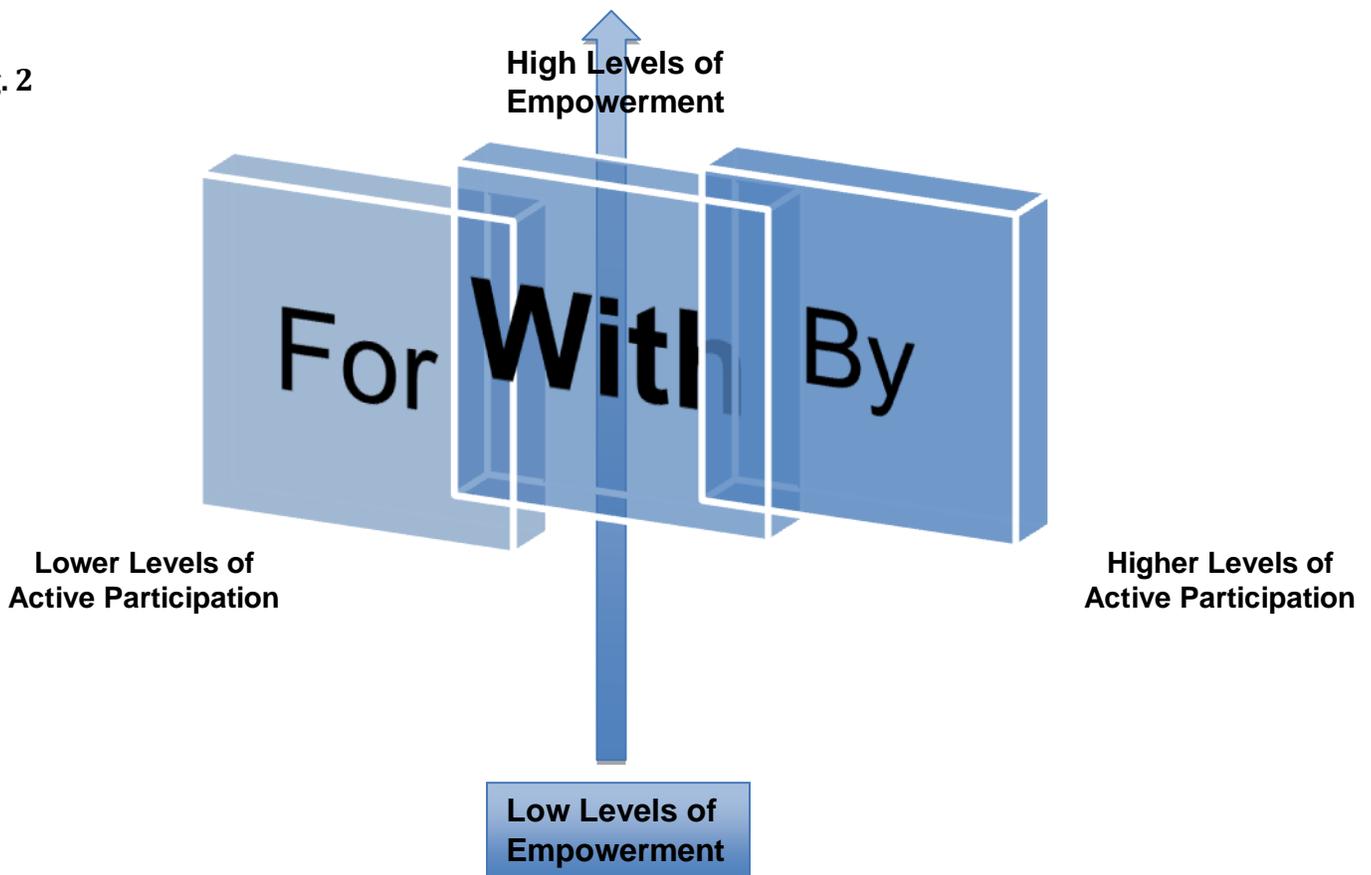


Fig. 2



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The continuum was developed based on the following works:

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