



Arnstein's Ladder Explained

Unit 2: Arnstein's Ladder & Quasi- Participation



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Not All Participation Is Equal

- In 1969, urban planner Sherry Arnstein introduced a simple but powerful idea: not all “citizen participation” is equal. Some processes genuinely shift power into citizens’ hands; others merely create the appearance of participation while keeping decision-making firmly with those already in power.
- To capture this range, Arnstein proposed a ladder with eight rungs, grouped into three broad categories: non-participation, degrees of tokenism, and degrees of citizen power.



Why Arnstein's Ladder Matters

- The ladder is not just a theoretical model — it is a **diagnostic tool** that reveals the difference between declarative and genuine participation. In post-conflict contexts like Bosnia and Herzegovina, this matters for several reasons:
- **It distinguishes form from substance** — public hearings, surveys, and "consultations" are legally required in BiH urban planning, but the ladder allows us to assess whether they genuinely transfer power to citizens or simply legitimize decisions already made.
- **It reveals the risk of "quasi-participation" in divided societies** — in environments where trust between communities has been damaged by conflict, participatory processes can easily become a tool through which existing political and ethnic power structures reproduce themselves under the guise of inclusion.
- **It gives future practitioners a shared vocabulary** — urban planners, sociologists, and civil society activists can more precisely name and critique the processes they take part in or lead.
- **It is foundational to later models** — it directly influenced theories of collaborative planning (Healey), deliberative practice (Forester), and 21st-century participation strategies (Innes & Booher), which this course also draws on.



Comparative overview of participation typologies

Sherry Arnstein (1969)							
manipulation	therapy	informing	consultation	placation	partnership	delegated power	citizen control
Carole Pateman (1970)							
pseudo-participation		partial participation			full participation		
Hamid Shirvani (1985)							
supportive (facilitative) approach				advocacy			
Fredrik Wulz (1986)							
representation	questionary	regionalism	dialogue	alternative	co-decision	self-decision	

Comparative overview of selected participation typologies. Comparative overview of selected typologies of participation, arranged from lower to higher degrees of citizen influence (Arnstein 1969; Pateman 1970; Shirvani 1985; Wulz 1986).



The table places Arnstein's ladder alongside three other typologies of participation: Pateman's (1970) distinction between pseudo-participation, partial participation and full participation; Shirvani's (1985) contrast between a supportive (facilitative) approach and advocacy; and Wulz's (1986) seven levels, from representation to self-decision. Although they differ in the number and naming of levels, all four arrange participation from lower to higher degrees of citizen influence. This matters in post-conflict contexts, where it helps distinguish participation that merely informs or consults citizens from participation in which they share in decisions.



Non-Participation

- At the bottom of the ladder are Manipulation and Therapy. These are not participation at all — they are designed to give power-holders the appearance of legitimacy, or to “educate” and “cure” citizens rather than let them shape decisions.
- Citizens are placed on advisory boards or invited to meetings, but their role is to be informed or persuaded, not to influence outcomes.
- Warning sign: a meeting where decisions are announced as already made, or where only positive views are permitted to be expressed publicly.



Degrees of Tokenism

- The middle rungs — Informing, Consultation, and Placation — allow citizens to hear and be heard. Information flows one way, from authorities to citizens.
- Surveys and public meetings gather citizen opinions, but there is no guarantee these opinions will change anything. At Placation, a small number of citizens may sit on committees, but they remain outnumbered and can be outvoted by those holding power.
- This is participation as ritual: citizens have a voice, but not the leverage to ensure it is heeded.



Degrees of Citizen Power

- Only at the top — Partnership, Delegated Power, and Citizen Control — do citizens gain real negotiating power and decision-making authority.
- At Partnership, power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power-holders.
- At Delegated Power and Citizen Control, citizens hold the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power, over a plan or program.



Why This Matters in Post-Conflict Cities

- Arnstein's Ladder is especially useful for analyzing participation in cities recovering from conflict, like those in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- In divided societies, participatory processes can easily slide into “quasi-participation” — activities that look inclusive and democratic on the surface, but actually reinforce existing power structures, ethnic divisions, or political control.
- Learning to place a real-world process on the ladder is the first step toward recognizing whether citizens are genuinely empowered, or merely being managed.



References

- Arnstein, Sherry R. 1969. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35 (4): 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>.
- McAlevey, Jane F. 2016. *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pateman, Carole. 1970. *Participation and Democratic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- Wulz, Fredrik. 1986. "The Concept of Participation." *Design Studies* 7 (3): 153–162.



Next: Concept Spotlight — Manipulation, Tokenism, Citizen Control

