



PHOTO BY KIM MATTHAI LELAND

# APPENDIX II: The Power of Social Innovation and Youth Participation

By Cristina Martínez García

Social innovation is, by definition, an engaging, connecting, and empowering activity, and the practice of using creativity to develop solutions that improve the well-being of people and society. Through innovative material, the FUSION project unleashes the unique power of festivals to inspire young people to become architects of their own lives and engaged citizens.

In our FUSION guide, we analyse the concept and present examples of social innovation at festivals across Europe, with a special focus on youth participation. It not only aims to inspire new ideas for festivals but also reveals the strengths and weaknesses and the path that still lies ahead.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL INNOVATION?

The first thing to consider about social innovation, despite the relative newness of the term, is the age of the practice. Although “social innovation” was coined in the 1960s, the concept and actions that define social innovation have been around for much longer.

As with everything, it is important to include the context in which the world has developed in recent years, to understand why the debate on the specific concept has begun at this stage. Accelerated technological development, globalisation, and capitalist and neo-liberal growth have made it more necessary than ever to recover the foundations of social innovation as an empowering community process that puts people's well-being at the centre, to draw a horizon of change in society.

Due to the debate on the term itself and the ever-changing situation of the social context and its needs, there are many definitions of social innovation. This brief introduction will focus on the common points that unite them all. On, for example, the relationship and impact that social innovation can have as an agent of change and empowerment in societies, especially among young people.

As a point of reference, we can use the definition of Phills et al. (2008), who refer to social innovation as: ***“A novel solution to a social problem, which is more effective, efficient, sustainable or fair, than existing solutions and whose value created is accumulated primarily for society as a whole and not for individuals in particular”***.

All definitions of social innovation indicate that it is generated from a social need, or that the focus is on generating change (at different scales) that can improve the lives of people in a society. The ways in which social innovation can be generated are as diverse as the forms of conduct that exist through companies, products, concrete actions, ideas, laws, social movements, policies, etc. Moreover, social innovation does not have to be a new idea but can be born from an existing idea approached in a new way to generate change, based on the collaboration of several actors. The European Commission highlights social innovation as ideas that meet social needs, create social relationships, and build new collaborations.

Buckland et al. (2013) selected the following five variables to contribute to the global debate about what social innovation means, where its boundaries lie, how its impact can be measured and finally, what the key factors for success are for any given initiative.



## FIVE SOCIAL INNOVATION VARIABLES

**Social transformation and impact.** Measuring how well an initiative is achieving its objective is an important variable to consider. This area of research consists of reporting techniques, performance measurement and indicator development

**Cross-sector collaboration.** A social innovation rarely operates in isolation, as the boundaries between private, public, collective and individual are increasingly blurred. The collaboration and motivations for different sectors and stakeholders can vary for each type of social innovation and the new landscape of hybrid organisations is of special interest to observe

**Economic sustainability and long-term viability.** This type of organisation differs from traditional NGOs in terms of its financial strategy by having a greater focus on self-sufficiency and performance-driven results. Key dimensions to consider include investment versus payback time, efficiency and effectiveness, management capacity, innovation in fundraising techniques, low-cost implementation strategies, and challenges to growth

**Innovation type.** There are two types of social innovations. Open innovation allows users and stakeholders to copy, reuse, and adapt ideas. And closed innovation models based on the concept of intellectual property where knowledge is kept within the hands of the creator. The relationship between the type of innovation and its scalability and replicability is also an interesting variable to be explored

**Scalability and replicability.** Most of the problems to which social innovation responds are common to all societies, albeit with context-specific characteristics, and so must be the solutions proposed. As many aspects of society have been globalised and individual countries increasingly operate at an international level. It is essential that social innovation can be increased or reduced in scale and replicated in various contexts



## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

At the European level, we share problems that characterise the adult-centred nature of societies and that, in some cases, place young people as incomplete citizens in the transition to adulthood. This can result in high rates of youth unemployment, political disaffection, problems of emancipation, or lack of motivation to engage in a world in which they suffer the consequences of acts they did not commit. We have young people who are more sensitive and aware of social issues, and who are the main promoters of change, but society sometimes does not facilitate their active and real participation.

Social innovation as a tool that responds to social problems, connects different actors, and puts creativity at the centre, can and should be one of the resources that young people use to change the world. From local clean-up initiatives and online fundraising to raising your voice through art or debate. The wide range of possibilities for implementation makes social innovation very accessible to young people and easy for them to imagine as a tool for real social change. Nevertheless, historical studies suggest that transforming any system can take many years and requires not only the capacity for multiple partnerships, but also the involvement of political, legal, and economic institutions. That's why social innovation with young people should be approached from the perspective of building their civic skills, and the opportunity and need for all parts of society to work together to achieve real change.

## ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SKILLS

But what are we talking about when we talk about active citizenship? The British Council's programme on Active Citizenship defines it as:

***“Active citizens are people who feel inspired. They are people who feel motivated and empowered to make a difference. People who have the drive and the know-how to make sure that ideas don't just stay ideas.”***

– *What Is Active Citizens? | British Council, n.d.*

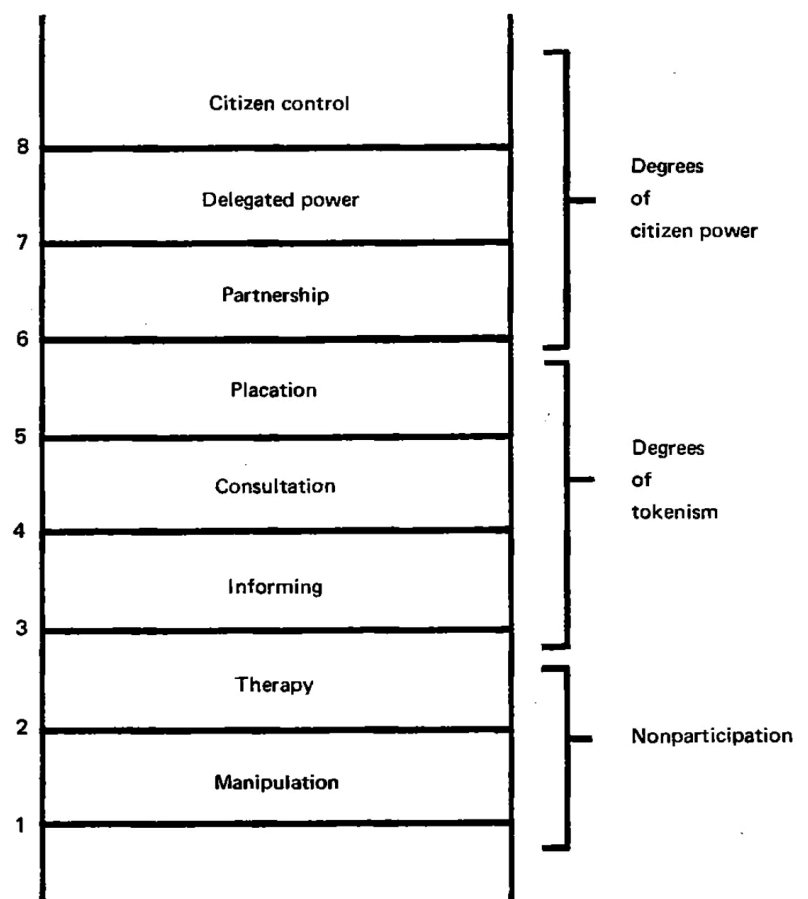
In other words, people who play an active role in their community, who are informed about the actual and potential problems and who participate in ways to improve the situation. Social innovation can be a very powerful tool to educate for active citizenship. As it facilitates easy access to information about social issues, organisations, backgrounds, and different perspectives. Encouraging critical thinking and listening to different voices, creates safe spaces to talk, share, debate and draw conclusions together. Along with strengthening collaboration and cooperation.

The system in which we currently live encourages social problems to be analysed in terms of productivity and accumulation. Therefore, a change of paradigm and vision is needed, especially among the younger generations, which puts the well-being of the people who make up societies at the centre, considering groups in situations of inequality and vulnerability. Social innovation, by directly addressing these problems from a social perspective, promotes this change in the mindset of those closest to it, to ultimately achieve global change.

## THE POWER OF PARTICIPATION

Contrary to what one might think, participation is not as simple as raising your voice. There are different forms of participation, depending on the degree of involvement of the person in the process itself. It is important to be clear about these levels of participation when planning the actions to be carried out by organisations, to avoid frustration with unexpected results or to ensure that the necessary resources are provided to achieve the required level of participation.

A useful theory for understanding and analysing participation is the "participation ladder". A metaphorical figure was created by author Sherry Arnstein to evaluate the different levels of participation of citizens, which has also been applied to the participation of people in companies, organisations, and other fields.



*The original 1969 illustration of Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation as it appeared in the Journal of the American Planning Association. The Ladder features eight "rungs" that describe three general forms of citizen power in democratic decision-making: Non-participation (no power), Degrees of Tokenism (counterfeit power), and Degrees of Citizen Power (actual power).*

Arnstein (1969) argues that not all citizen participation actions contribute to society, and that some of it is a mirage that has no real impact on society. To reach the degrees of "citizen power", where citizens have actual control over the decision-making process, citizens should have information, resources and the ability to influence.

***“My answer to the critical what question is simply that citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. ...it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society... participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless.”***

– Sherry Arnstein, author of A Ladder Of Citizen Participation

This theory is very extensive and interesting, and we encourage every organisation to read more about it in Arnstein’s journal article “A Ladder Of Citizen Participation”. Anyhow, regarding analysing social innovations, the most important takeaway is the need to plan a proper action of participation. In any type of action involving the participation of a group of people, it is necessary to analyse the objectives, the long-term horizon of what you want to achieve with it and how to facilitate it so that it can be carried out.



Social innovation aimed at young people, by putting them at the centre of the action, is one of the most powerful tools to promote the real participation of young people, in the action itself and in society. Social innovation serves as an educational tool to promote active participation and social involvement in real social problems that occur, as well as an empowerment tool to promote individual and community action to solve them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>

Buckland, H., Murillo, D., & Murillo, M. B. (2013). *Antenna for Social Innovation: Pathways to Systemic Change : Inspiring Stories and a New Set of Variables for Understanding Social Innovation*. Routledge.

Phills, J., Deiglmeier, K., & Miller, D. T. (2008). *Rediscovering Social Innovation*. ResearchGate. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242511521\\_Rediscovering\\_Social\\_Innovation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242511521_Rediscovering_Social_Innovation)

What is Active Citizens? | British Council. (n.d.). <https://active-citizens.britishcouncil.org/about>

