



Briefing note 4

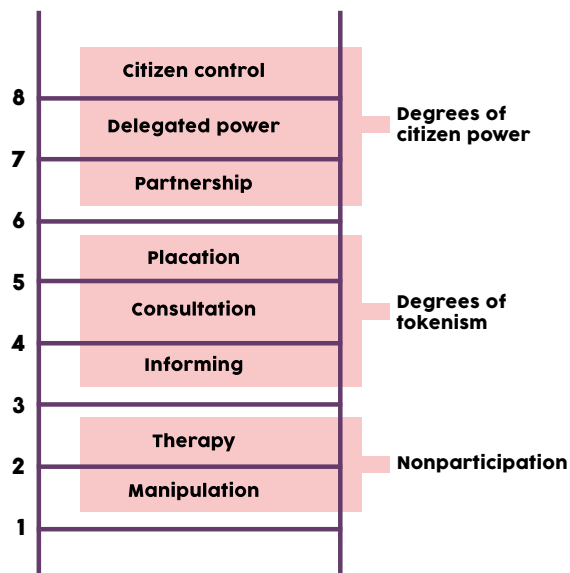
Assessing Communities Influence in decision-making

For communities to influence decisions about the common good or the public interest, they need to have sufficient power. That is challenging when frequently, community members are dealing with the effects of entrenched racism, sexism, poverty, insecure housing, ill-health, precarious employment, along with the isolation and stress that can come from contemporary life where social, community and family bonds of love and care are under additional strain from migration, commuting etc. Furthermore, communities themselves are frequently not well resourced to come together, discuss, deliberate, strategise and organise to progress their own, self-defined aims.

But people and communities have the human right to participate in decisions that affect them.¹ Also, opportunities to influence governance certainly exist, and especially in areas of environmental policy. Nowadays, public bodies frequently invite input into their decision-making processes on climate adaptation plans through initiatives like online surveys, public town hall meetings, focus groups, asking for written submissions etc. How can such participation enhance decision-making power? Here, we describe a way to help capture, analyse and assess how different opportunities and modalities of participation and engagement might influence a plan and/or program.

Sherry Arnstein's '*Ladder of Citizen Participation*' has eight rungs, with each rung corresponding to the extent to which a modality of engagement relates to people's influence over the plan or action. The bottom rungs are (1) *Manipulation* (e.g., being a member of an Advisory Committee), and (2) *Therapy* (e.g., where a community group is used as a channel to bring about behaviour change). Effectively "non-participation," both of these are oriented to the 'education' or 'cure' of participants by power-holders, not the facilitation of people's involvement in planning.

¹ See clearly articulated rights in several jurisdictions including in constitutions, in the administrative law of many policy sectors, and in international law. Thus, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Universal Declaration) specifies in Article 21: "(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country;" elaborating a right to participate in the conduct of public affairs. These principles were further codified in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which establishes the right and the opportunity of citizens to take part in the conduct of public affairs without discrimination on any ground. Several regional human rights instruments also address participation in decision-making. For an EU-specific example, see the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) (1998), available [here](#).



Rungs (3) *Informing*, and (4) *Consultation* are activities where people hear information on plans and can offer their views on those plans, but there is no surety that their views will be taken account of by decision-makers. Thus, the status quo will likely remain.

(5) *Placation* (e.g., a pre-determined facility like a Task Force, or Advisory Committee where community representatives are members, along with representatives from other bodies), is where there can be some response to people's input and requests, but powerholders retain ultimate authority.

(6) *Partnership* involves some decision-making by participants in negotiation with powerholders, though situations of (7) *Delegated Power* and (8) *Citizen Control* imply that people have clearly-identified authority (e.g., a number of seats on a council) over decision-making.

In practice, even with opportunities for meaningful participation in a policy forum, communities are far more likely to have influence if they are already organised, are demanding change from and have visibility with powerholders. In those circumstances, community representatives participate knowing that they are representing the interests of their community, are backed by that community's own organisational processes, and are accountable back to the community for any developments. This makes it far less likely for community representatives to be co-opted and makes it far more likely for the forum to be more accountable to the community!

Excerpt from Siobhán Airey, Yağız Eren Abanus, Hüseyincan Eryilmaz & Daniela García-Caro Briceno, *Towards a Just Transition - Walking practices & Legal possibilities* (ESL-CSJ: 2025), 30. Report available [here](#).

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