

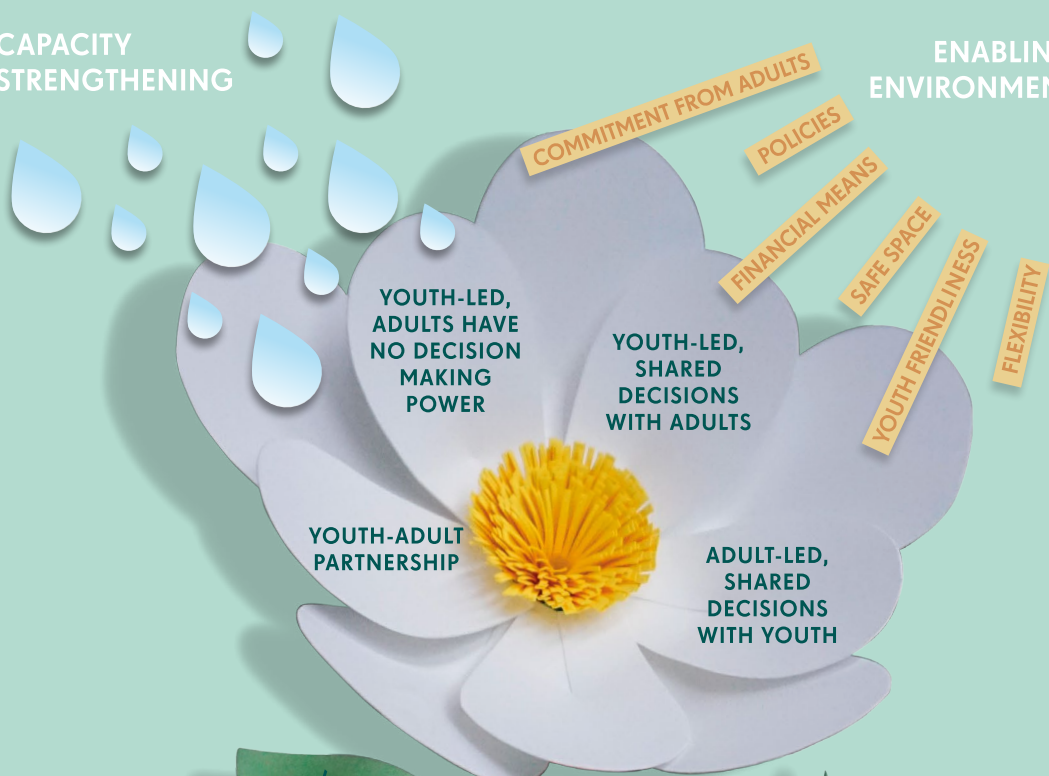
# THE FLOWER OF PARTICI- PATION

The Flower of Participation is a tool that uses the metaphor of a blooming flower to describe the different forms of MYP and how MYP can grow and flourish.

# INCLUSIVITY

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT



- COMMITMENT FROM ADULTS
- POLICIES
- FINANCIAL MEANS
- SAFE SPACE
- YOUTH FRIENDLINESS
- FLEXIBILITY

TOKENISM

MANIPULATION



FREEDOM OF CHOICE

DECISION-MAKING POWER

INFORMATION

RESPONSIBILITY

VOICE



COMMITMENT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

**YOUACT**

**CHOICE** FOR YOUTH & SEXUALITY

# INTRODUCTION

**The Flower of Participation, developed by CHOICE for Youth and Sexuality and YouAct, is a tool that can be used to explain the concept of Meaningful Youth Participation (MYP). It can also be used to reflect on the current status of MYP in an organization and on the organization’s ambitions regarding MYP. It can also be used by young people to understand their position within an organization and advocate for their right to meaningfully participate.**

## WHAT IS MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION (MYP)?

Young people are diverse rights holders on their own, and meaningful youth participation is a right of all young people by the Convention of the Rights of the Child . MYP means that young people can participate on equal terms with adults, or work independently, in organizations as well as in all stages of programming and policy-making: design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. For this reason, mechanisms have to be in place for young people to have an active role, in which their voices are heard and respected. When participation of young people is truly meaningful, it benefits the young people, the program, policy or organization, and society as a whole.

## THE FLOWER OF PARTICIPATION

The Flower of Participation is a tool that uses the metaphor of a blooming flower to describe how MYP can grow and flourish. It can be used to distinguish between different forms of youth participation and to explore whether they are meaningful or not. The tool describes the core elements of Meaningful Youth Participation (the roots), the different forms of Meaningful Youth Participation (the leaves and petals of the flower), non-meaningful forms of youth participation (the insects) and the preconditions for MYP (the water and the sun). All these different aspects of MYP are discussed below.

## THE AIR: INCLUSIVITY

Inclusivity, like the air we breathe, is everywhere and therefore should be integrated in all the elements of Meaningful Youth Participation. We can’t survive without it! Young people are not a homogenous group: they are, in fact, very diverse. And so, we need to be aware of the importance of MYP happening in an inclusive

manner. For all young people. It is important to be inclusive of young people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions, young people living with disabilities, young people living with HIV, young people from rural and urban areas, young women and girls, young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. When a young person is participating in a program, activity or organization, they should represent the voice of different groups of young people.

## THE SOIL: COMMITMENT FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

MYP is all about young people. For this reason, the young people involved have a crucial role. Without the commitment of young people to an organization or program, MYP is simply not possible. And so commitment from young people is represented by the soil in which the Flower grows. Young people should be committed to actively participating, and willing to grasp the opportunities that are offered to them.



## THE ROOTS: THE CORE ELEMENTS OF MYP

The roots of a flower are essential in allowing a flower to survive and flourish. They enable the flower to retrieve water and nutrients from the soil and to keep itself upright. The more roots the flower has, the stronger its foundations.

This metaphor also applies to MYP. There are five core elements of MYP, and the stronger and more present the core elements are, the more MYP can flourish. The five core elements of MYP are:

### **FREEDOM OF CHOICE**

The core element Freedom of choice is about the extent to which a young person can decide if they participate, or not, in a program/activity/organization.

### **INFORMATION**

The core element Information refers to the extent to which young people get and/or have access to comprehensive information about the goals, different elements and timeline of the program, activity or organization, and their role within it. It also links to information about the different possibilities/opportunities that young people have within the program/activity/organization.

### **DECISION-MAKING POWER**

The core element Decision-making power is about the extent to which a young person can make decisions about (parts of) the program or activity or within the organization.

### **VOICE**

The core element Voice represents the extent to which a young person can voice their views and opinions, and the extent to which other people listen to and respect these views and opinions and integrate them into the program, activity or organization.

### **RESPONSIBILITY**

The core element Responsibility represents the extent to which young people have the opportunity to act independently within a program, activity or organization that they participate in.

## **MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION VERSUS NON-MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

There are different forms of youth participation. Some forms are meaningful, some are not. In general, participation is more meaningful when the core elements are in place. The Flower of Participation describes two forms of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation (the insects) and six forms of Meaningful Youth Participation (the leaves and the petals).

Let's look for a moment at Non-Meaningful Youth Participation (Non-MYP). Young people may be involved in programs, activities or organizations, however their participation cannot be considered meaningful, because the core elements are missing. It's important to distinguish between non-MYP and MYP, because it is often the case that young people participate in a program, activity, or organization, but in ways that are dismissing their voice and freedom of choice, and does not give them any decision-making power, responsibility or information. Many people think that simply involving young people means that they are meaningfully participating. This isn't the case.

Without the core elements, opportunities for participation that are meant to be empowering for young people can have the opposite effect and can actually end up being disempowering.

The different forms of non-MYP and MYP are explained below. The accompanying graphs rate the presence of the different core elements. We distinguish between five levels: not at all present (--); present to a low extent (-); somewhat present (+/-); present to a high extent (+); and present to a very high extent (++)

*Note that different scenarios as presented below are not set in stone and that slight differences might occur in reality.*

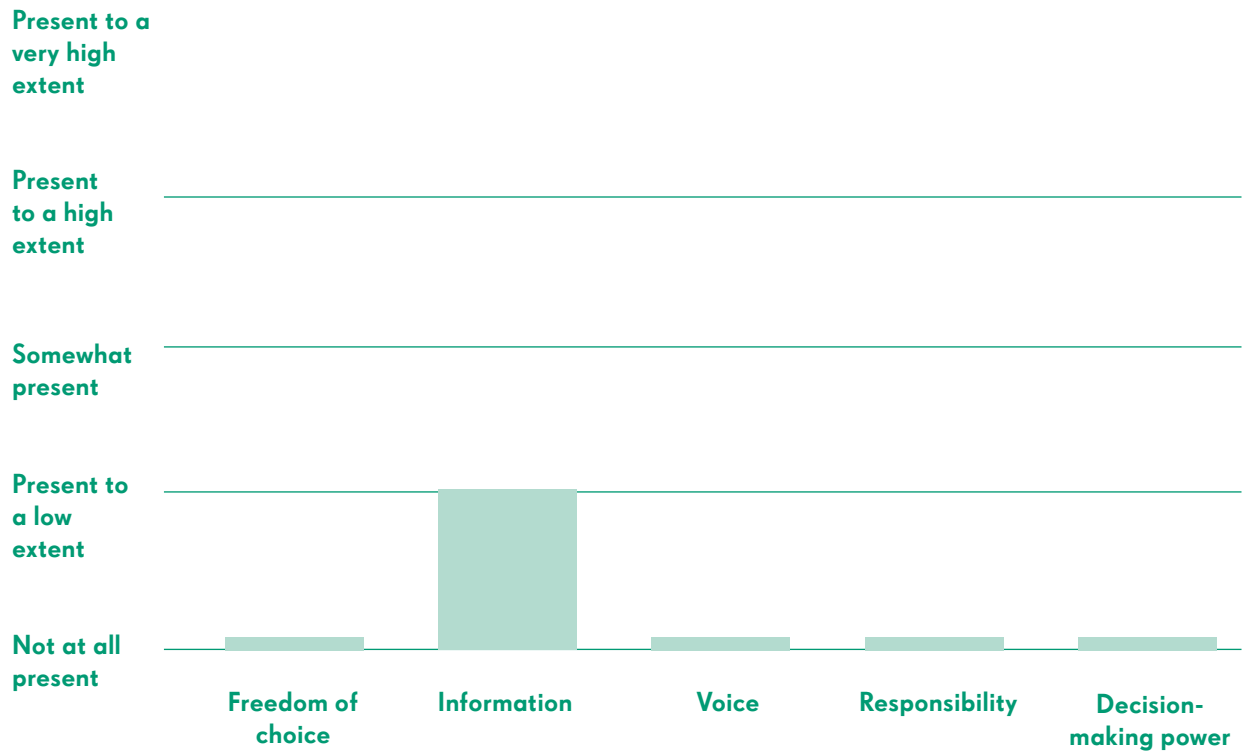


### **INSECTS: NON-MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION**

In order for an insect to survive, it needs to eat. What does it eat? Yes, you've got it: plants and flowers. The insects in the Flower of Participation destroy Meaningful Youth Participation, because they separate Meaningful Youth Participation (leaves and petals) from the core elements (roots).

In the Flower of Participation, the insects represent forms of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation. These forms of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation can make it seem like young people are participating meaningfully, when in fact they are only superficially included. There are two forms of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation: manipulation and tokenism.

## MANIPULATION



### MANIPULATION

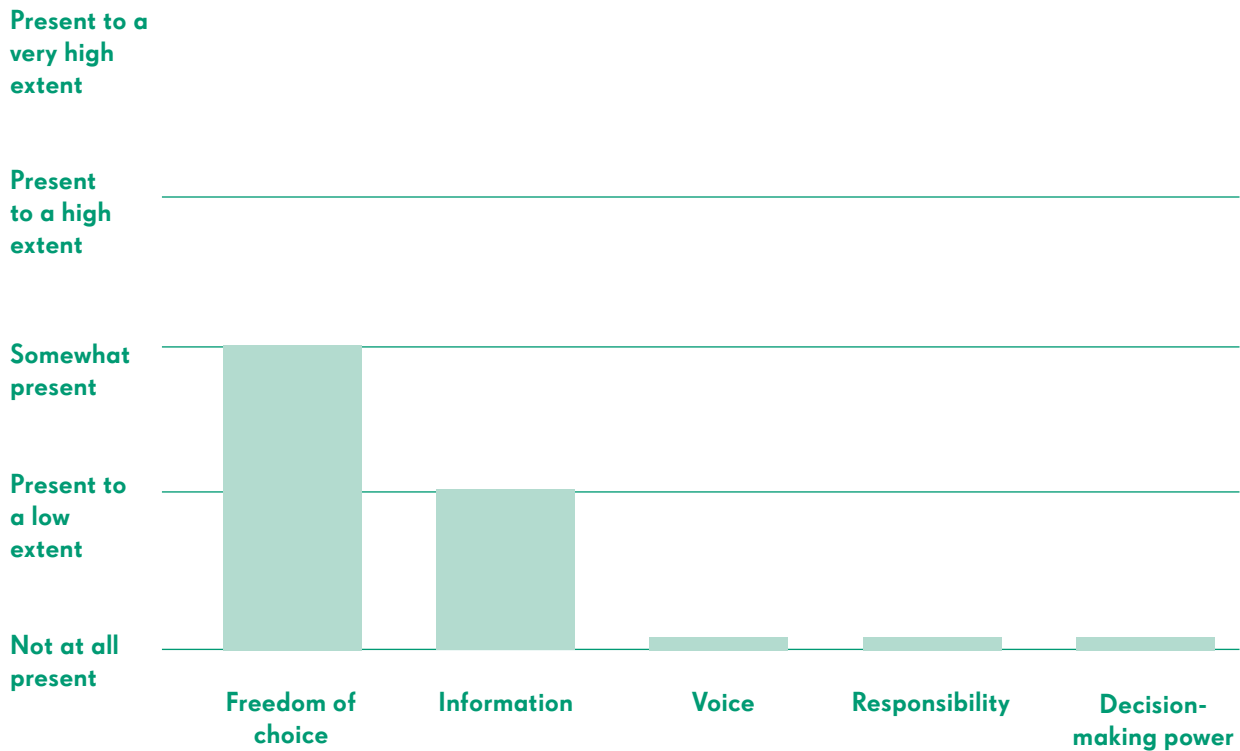
We speak of manipulation when young people are used to support a cause. At the same time, the initiators pretend that this cause was inspired by these young people and/or that these young people are supporting it. Young people are used as decoration, to make the cause seem more attractive. The young people that participate in such a program or activity are not in control of the activity, they cannot give their opinion on the activity or the cause, and don't enjoy any responsibility. They may be aware of the goal of their participation, but even this is not always the case.

### Some examples of manipulation:

- An orphan living with HIV shakes the hand of a major donor in order to make him invest in a program targeting orphans who are HIV+.
- A teacher calls in a class of students to sing the national anthem when a group of international donors visit the school.

*Note that different scenarios as presented in the graphs are not set in stone and that slight differences might occur in reality.*

## TOKENISM



### TOKENISM

Tokenism is when young people are invited to participate, but only in a superficial manner because in reality, young people do not have a voice and their opinions are not listened to or respected. There is no space for them to participate on an equal footing, and they don't carry any decision-making power or responsibility. However, in contrast to manipulation, young people do enjoy some freedom of choice. This form of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation occurs often, since by inviting young people, it may give the impression to others that young people are being meaningfully engaged. However, when looking at the graph, the core elements of Meaningful Youth Participation are hardly present.

### Some examples of tokenism:

- A young person is invited to join a meeting to represent 'the youth voice', but is not allowed to say anything.
- When young people are invited by adults to participate in a shared decision-making process, but are constantly overruled by adults when they express their opinion.
- When a young person is invited to make a statement during a conference, but their draft speech is changed to make sure it represents the adult cause.



### **LEAVES AND PETALS: DIFFERENT FORMS OF MYP**

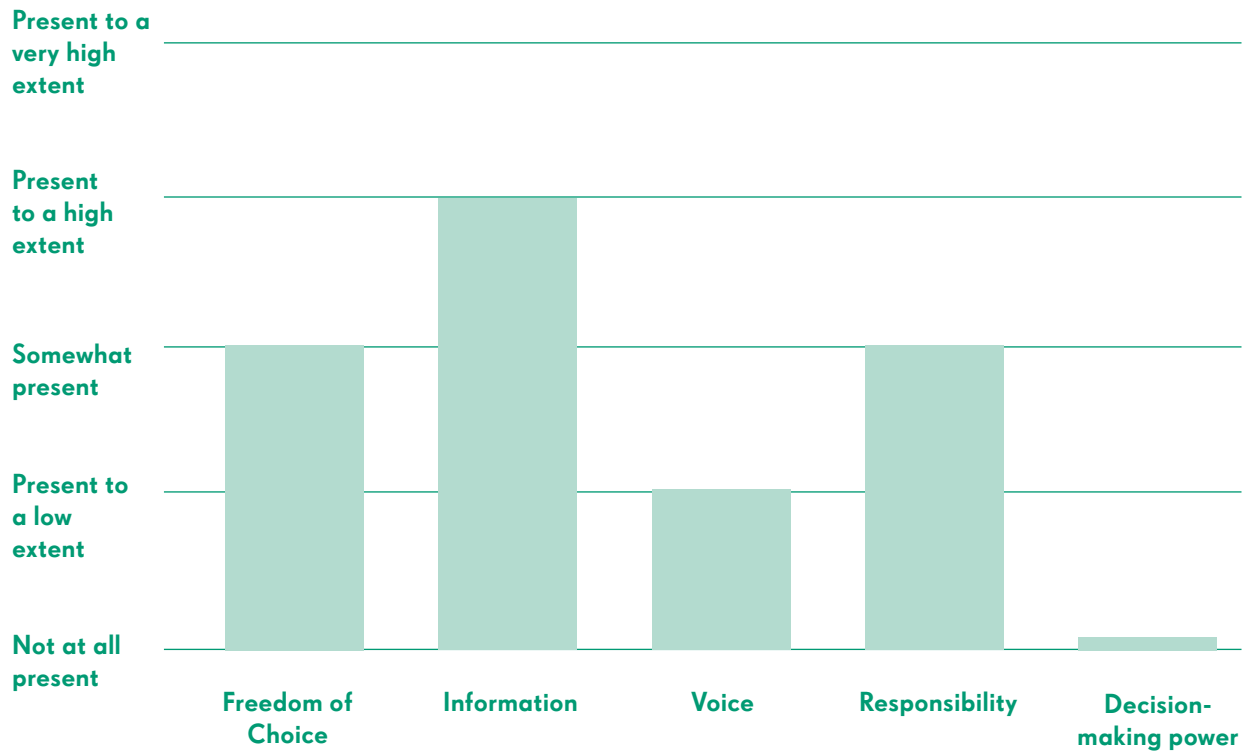
Having discussed the two forms of Non-Meaningful Youth Participation, let's now turn to the more exciting part: forms of Meaningful Youth Participation. There are six forms of Meaningful Youth Participation, and all of the different forms include more or less all five core elements (the roots) that have been discussed above. Note that the form of MYP to best fit a program, activity or organization depends on several factors. Due to financial restraints or lack of organizational capacity it could be that young people will only be meaningfully involved within a certain youth program or activity. Other factors that can influence the choice for a certain form of MYP are the goal of the program or activity, availability of young people or knowledge of young people.

However, CHOICE aims for the inclusion of as many core elements of MYP as possible. Therefore, although all forms of MYP that are presented below are actually meaningful, we distinguish between two levels of Meaningful Youth Participation: the leaves and the petals of the Flower of Participation.

Although the leaves do not represent the beauty of a blooming flower, they represent the preliminary steps towards it and therefore serve an important function. This is also the case for the two forms of Meaningful Youth Participation that are represented by the leaves of the flower, which will be explained below. Young people are meaningfully included, and enjoy some of the core elements, however, there is still room to grow and to establish 'higher' levels of MYP.

These 'higher levels' of MYP are represented in the petals of the flower. In these four forms of MYP, young people enjoy most of the core elements of MYP. The petals are all highly meaningful; the best form of MYP is dependent on the goal(s), design, and resources of the program or activity.

## YOUNG PEOPLE ARE APPOINTED A ROLE AND INFORMED



### YOUNG PEOPLE ARE APPOINTED A ROLE AND INFORMED

In this form of youth participation, someone asks young people to do a task, and the young people can decide if they want to participate or not. Moreover, young people are informed about the goals of the program, activity or organization, about their role in it and why they have been invited to participate. However, young people do not hold any decision-making power, and only limited voice and responsibility. In this form of MYP, the extent to which freedom of choice, information, voice and responsibility are present can vary considerably. There may be a situation in which young people are asked to organize a whole event, but where the ultimate decision-making power about the theme, the speakers and

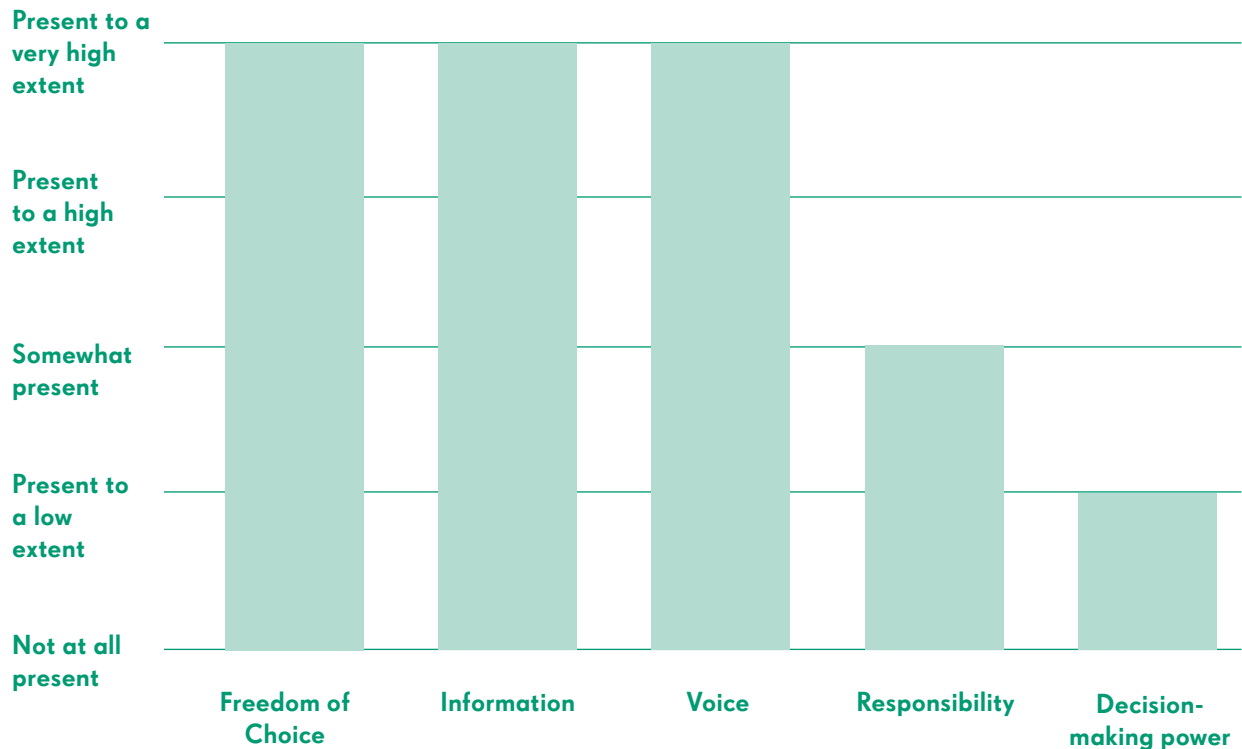
the funding lies with adults. In this case, responsibility can be present to a high extent, but decision-making power may not be present at all.

### Examples of young people are appointed a task and informed:

- Young people are asked to give a speech on climate change during a community awareness meeting organized by adults. They can draft the speech themselves, but the adults have to check and approve the presentation before the community awareness meeting.
- A secondary school student is asked to do a structured interview about love and relationships with other young people because she is able to relate better to her peers, but the questions are developed by an adult researcher. The student is informed about the goals of the research and why her role in the project is important.



## YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONSULTED AND INFORMED



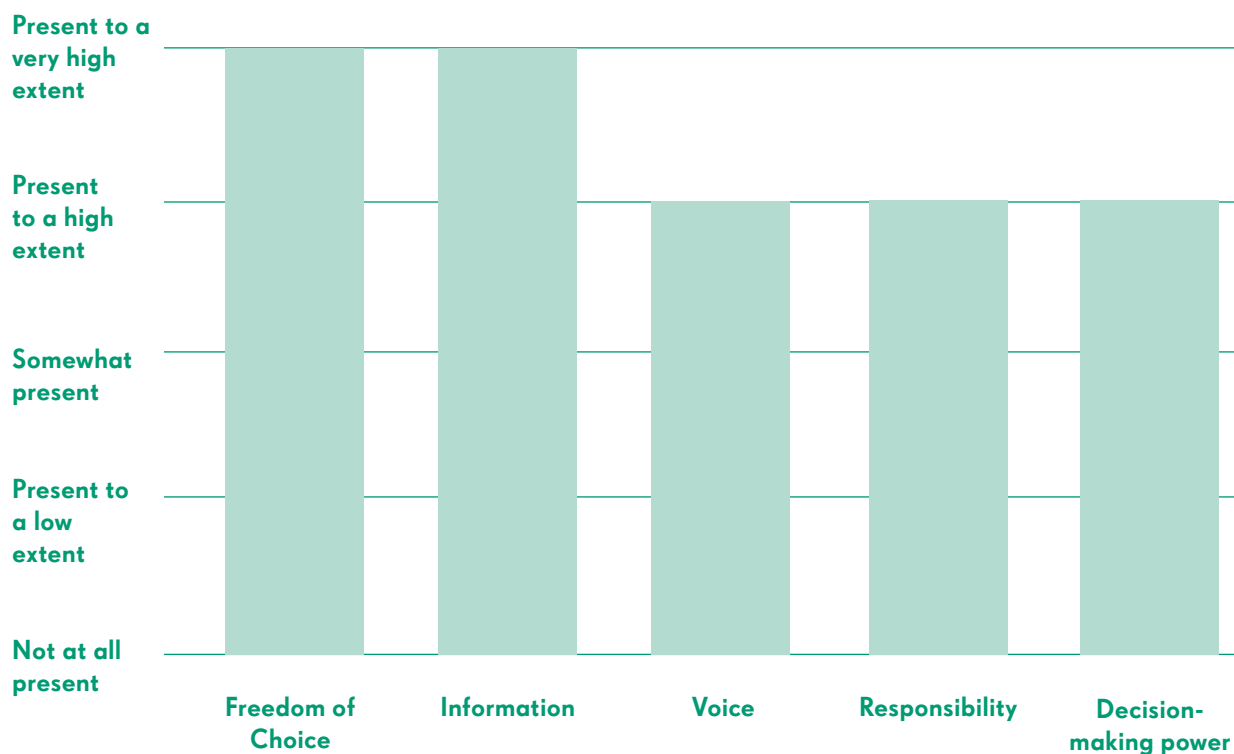
### YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONSULTED AND INFORMED

When young people are consulted and informed, they are asked for their input and their opinion is considered. They are also informed about the goals of the program or activity, why they are involved in it, and what will be done with their input. Suggestions made by young people are given thorough consideration. Yet, the consulted young people do not make the final decision as to whether the input of the young people is actually incorporated. Young people do not enjoy any decision-making power on the design, implementation and evaluation of the program or activity. They carry limited responsibility. The main goal of their involvement is consultation, and their influence is therefore limited.

### Some examples of young people are consulted and informed:

- A 16-year old is invited to join one of the design sessions of a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum, to bring a 'young and fresh' perspective to the discussions. However, he does not have any control on what is ultimately integrated into the curriculum.
- A girl, who is active as a youth advocate for the rights of LGBTI people, is approached by an NGO worker who invites her to be part of a focus group of young LGBTI people. The NGO worker wants to use her experience to enhance the effectiveness of an LGBTI support program they are currently implementing. The focus group comes together every three months for the duration of the LGBTI support program. She is not, however, involved with implementation of the program.

## ADULT-LED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH YOUTH



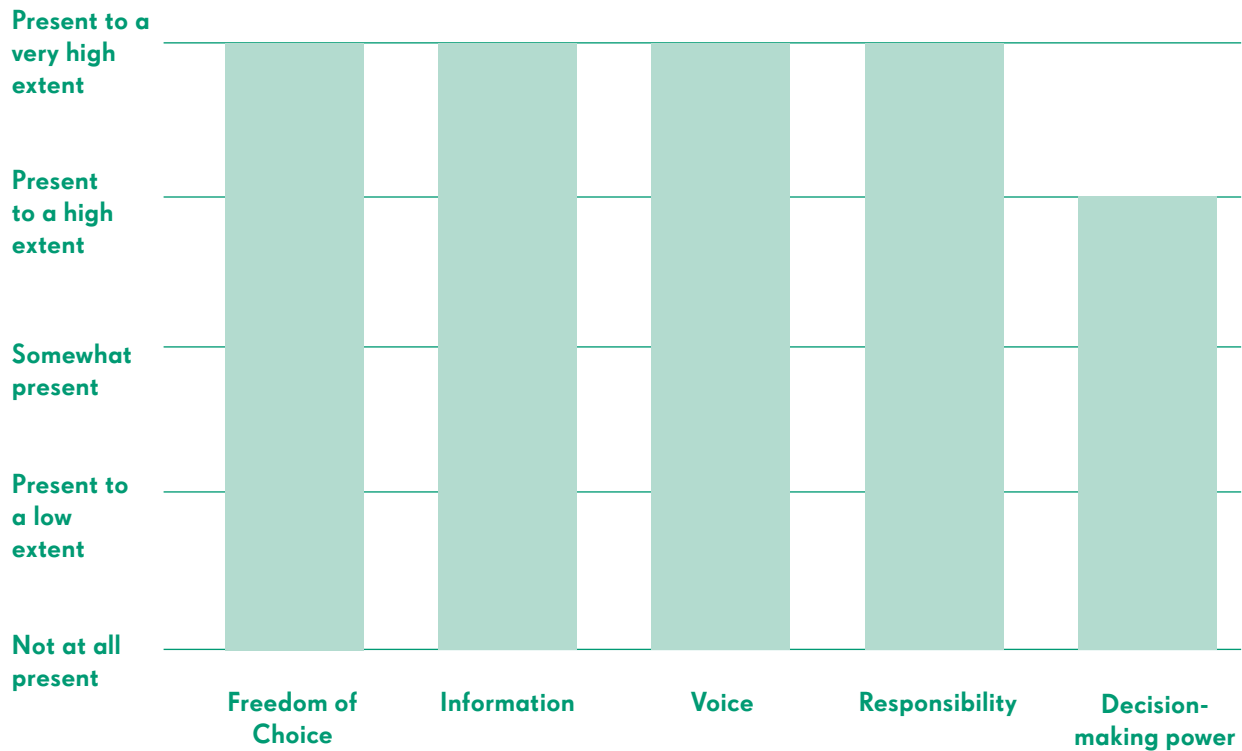
### ADULT-LED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH YOUTH

In this form of Meaningful Youth Participation, adults are primarily in charge of the program, activity or organization. However, they include young people who do have some control in decision-making processes. It is the adults though, who have the final say. Young people are fully informed about the aims of the program or activity, and have a voice in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. They enjoy certain (but not all) decision-making power and responsibility.

### Examples of adult-led, shared decisions with youth:

- A school teacher wants to organize a celebration day to celebrate the end of the school year, and asks students to help him organize it and decide on the activities for the day.
- An adult group of human rights activists has a strong group of youth volunteers. During general group meetings, important decisions are made by voting. All activists and volunteers of the group have one vote.

## YOUTH-LED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS



### YOUTH-LED, SHARED DECISIONS WITH ADULTS

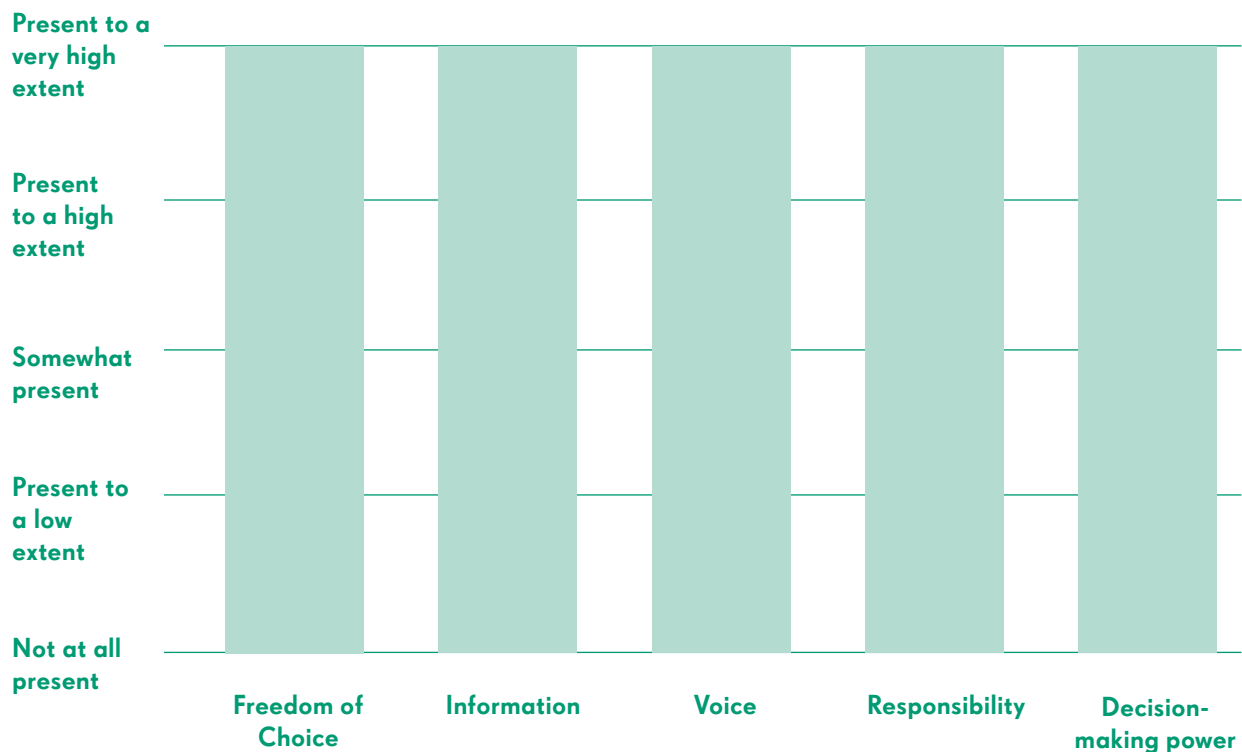
When a program or activity is youth-led but there is shared decision-making with adults, it means that young people oversee the program or activity, but they include adults who also have a say. This is often the case when young people lack expertise or experience, and ask adults to participate for learning purposes and to enhance the quality of the program, activity or organization. Ultimately, young people are in charge, but they share decision-making power with adults.

### Some examples of youth-led, shared decision with adults:

- When young people want to advocate for more youth-participation in the national government and ask an adult-led NGO working on these issues to join them and jointly set out a strategy to realize an effective lobby campaign.
- Because of a lack of experience, a youth organization asks support from an experienced adult from a partner organization to co-decide on the distribution of budget along different budget lines within a planned program.

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## YOUTH-LED, ADULTS HAVE NO DECISION-MAKING POWER



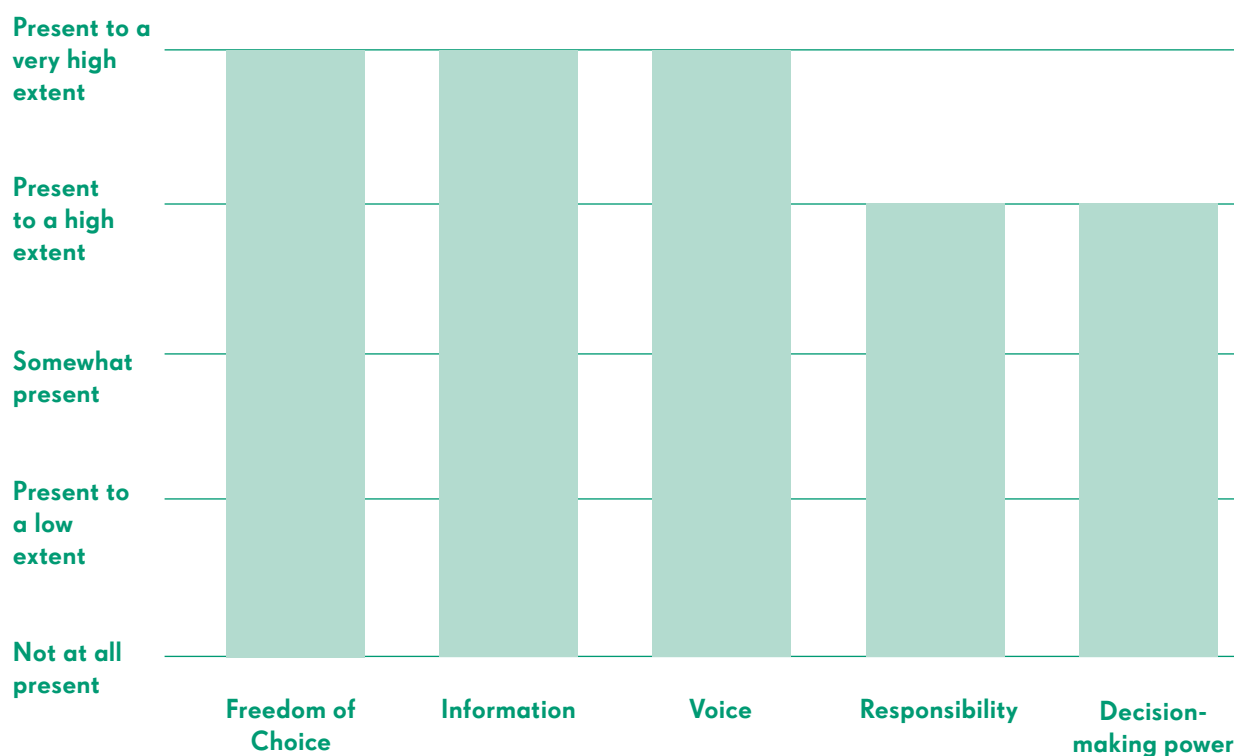
### YOUTH-LED, ADULTS HAVE NO DECISION-MAKING POWER

When a program or activity is youth-led without any adult involvement, young people are fully in charge. Young people enjoy the maximum level of decision-making power, information, voice and responsibility. They are completely autonomous. Support may be limited in this form of MYP, since young people are usually on their own, without any adult involvement. However, it can also be the case that adults are consulted and invited for capacity strengthening. The young people then reach out for the adult support themselves. Youth-led organizations usually can be placed in this category of MYP.

### Examples of youth-led, adults have no decision-making power.

- Young people decide to organize a peaceful demonstration to advocate for better quality education.
- A student association organizes a fundraising music festival, to raise funds for medical treatment for one of their sick members. Some adults are asked for advice on the logistics of organizing a music festival. However, the students make all the decisions on what will be done.

## YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP



### YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIP

In a youth-adult partnership (YAP), both young people and adults are equally involved and share power. They enjoy equal voice, and define the aims of the program or activity together. Decision-making power for young people is slightly less present than in a youth-led initiative, because they share it with adults. A YAP involves mutual learning, as adults can strengthen the capacity of young people and vice versa.

#### Examples of youth-adult partnerships:

- CHOICE is involved in different programs that are youth-adult partnerships. The Yes I Do program, which aims to decrease the number of early and forced marriages, unintended teenage pregnancies and female genital mutilation or cutting, is a joint initiative by CHOICE and four adult-led partner

organizations in the Netherlands. We have joined forces, embracing our different skills and expertise, to build a comprehensive program. In this program, young people are involved in every stage and at all levels and enjoy equal decision-making power. Considerable knowledge-sharing takes place, which benefits both the young people and the adults.

- A small group of young people and adults joined forces to organize a fundraising event to support victims of an earthquake that happened recently in Asia. Within the group, everybody is involved in all decision-making and has an equal voice.

## SUN AND WATER: PRECONDITIONS FOR MYP

A flower can only grow and flourish if certain preconditions are met. For example, plants need water and sun to grow and bloom. This also applies to MYP. MYP cannot be established without certain preconditions. The Flower of Participation distinguishes between two types of preconditions, capacity strengthening (the water) and an enabling environment (the sun).



### WATER: CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

In order for a flower to flourish, it needs continuous watering. To be able to play an informed and effective role in programs and activities, young people should also have the opportunity to grow. Furthermore, capacity strengthening can be a way of personally empowering young people, and thereby have beneficial effects that go far beyond the activity or organization. In order to sustain MYP, young people's capacity should be strengthened. The kind of capacity needed for MYP can vary, but can include knowledge, skills (for example budgeting, management, planning) and critical self-reflection. Strengthening capacity can be done in various ways, for example through training, workshops, internships or coaching. Another essential element of young people's capacity strengthening is providing mentorship for young people, so that they can further strengthen their capacity in a safe environment. An effective learning environment should also be a safe space (and thereby links to one of the elements of an enabling environment), where making mistakes is acceptable and considered to be part of the process. Besides strengthening the capacity of young people, the capacity of adults should also be strengthened. Adults should be aware of what working with young people entails and how they can create a supportive environment for Meaningful Youth Participation. Capacity strengthening can link communication skills and new communication techniques, training in the provision of mentorships, awareness on MYP and why it is important, etc.

The sun: an enabling environment

**DON'T FORGET!**

**REMEMBER, THAT IN ORDER TO REACH THE 'HIGHER LEVELS' OF MYP, YOU DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE TO START AT THE BOTTOM OF THE FLOWER, AND PROGRESS THROUGH THE LEAVES FIRST. THE HIGH LEVELS OF MYP CAN BE REACHED IMMEDIATELY, IF ALL PRECONDITIONS ARE MET AND THE CORE ELEMENTS ARE PRESENT! FAST-TRACK TO MYP!**

**SUN: ENABLING ENVIRONMENT**

Flowers need the sun to create an enabling environment for them to grow. This also applies to MYP. The enabling environment needed to allow MYP to flourish comprises a number of factors:

- **Commitment from adults to MYP:** young people should be supported by adults to be able to meaningfully participate. Adults should respect young people as equals and allow them to take meaningful positions in their programs, organizations and activities. In order to create this commitment, it is important to strengthen the capacity of adults in MYP as well, and to work with participatory methods that support young people and adults in working together.
- **Financial means:** because many young people still attend school, or may not earn as much money as adults, it is important to support young people with the financial means to allow them to meaningfully participate. This could take the form of compensation for travel expenses, meals, etc. In addition, young people are often used as volunteers. And although volunteering is a good way to contribute, learn and build skills, the balance between volunteering and equal and fair compensation should always be kept in mind. When young people, for example, do equal work to adults, with equal responsibilities, they should also get equal compensation.
- **Youth-friendliness:** to be able to meaningfully participate, young people should fully understand what is discussed and feel comfortable being involved. And so, it's important to use youth-friendly language and avoid excessive jargon (although this doesn't mean that young people cannot participate in spaces where a lot of jargon is used, for example at the UN!), and use youth-friendly tools and learning methods.
- **Safe space:** safe spaces are necessary for young people and adult staff to feel free to share their opinions and thoughts, even when these are critical. A learning environment gives people the space to make mistakes – and judges them on their efforts rather than on (lack of/negative) results. Young people and adults should feel valued, respected, safe, encouraged and supported.

- **Flexibility:** young people may have a different daily schedule to that of adults. They may still go to school, have a (part-time) job, or need to take care of family members. This all needs to be considered if young people are to participate meaningfully. So, perhaps it may be necessary to plan meetings outside of office hours, so that young people can also be present. But flexibility goes further than planning. It's not only young people's schedules that can differ, but their views too. And so, adults need to have an open attitude towards the opinions and needs of young people. Which may require adults to be more flexible in the approach they take. But it's not a one-way street – young people will also need to be flexible when working with adults: the ultimate aim is to find common ground and a way of working that serves both parties.
- **Policies:** To integrate MYP in a program or organization, policies on involving young people should be in place. An example of this could be the commitment of an organization to having young people make up 30% of its board.

## ***A FLOWER CAN ONLY GROW AND FLOURISH IF CERTAIN PRECONDITIONS ARE MET. FOR EXAMPLE, PLANTS NEED WATER AND SUN TO GROW AND BLOOM***

### **WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

Please refer to the CHOICE MYP Position Paper if you want to know more about MYP and especially on what you can do to support MYP. For tools and checklists on how to implement MYP in your program, activity and/or organization, please refer to our website [www.choiceforyouth.org](http://www.choiceforyouth.org).