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Module 1: Be Engaged
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<u>Thematic Areas</u>: *Youth Participation; Active Citizenship; Participation, School, and Family.*

Introduction
Why is youth participation central to democratic processes?

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> **Inter-American Democratic Charter Corner:**
> Article 16: Education is key to strengthening democratic institutions, promoting the development of human potential, and alleviating poverty and fostering greater understanding among our peoples.

The active participation of young people in the social and political life of communities is essential, as they constitute a driving force for change that, through their contributions of ideas and perspectives, can bring improvements in how to address the social problems of the contemporary world.

The incorporation of young people into the social, economic, and political processes of their societies is, without a doubt, one of the main challenges faced by the Americas (Trucco & Ullmann, 2015).

UNICEF (2016) points out that "adolescents do not constitute a homogeneous group: what they have in common is their age. They live in different circumstances and have diverse needs." Approximately one quarter of the total population of the region is between 15 and 29 years old. This is a heterogeneous population with various living conditions, needs, interests, and backgrounds that must be considered in order to better focus efforts on all their dimensions. The heterogeneity of young people in the Americas presents a reality in which challenges and opportunities coexist, with a clear warning: a high percentage of young people are unable to reach the minimum levels required to achieve full development.

Reflecting on how they organize themselves, what coordination tools they use, what role traditional organizations (family and school) and non-formal spaces (the virtual world) play in shaping participative and committed young people, becomes a permanent challenge for society.

There is consensus that the participation of young people and their interaction with their environment through their communities, political, and social organizations is fundamental for several reasons. On the one hand, it facilitates the development of personal capacities such as leadership skills, teamwork, communication, conflict resolution, and project management, as well as improving understanding of their environment, building support networks, and developing a sense of belonging. On the other hand, communities

also need young people to develop and improve, since it is they who "bring to the table" the new problems they feel affect them, contribute ideas and new approaches to understanding reality, which helps modernize organizations and, furthermore, by engaging in deliberative processes, strengthen democratic systems.

As UNICEF (2016) points out, "a large part of the world's young population feels disillusioned with politics in general and clearly disadvantaged compared to adults in laws and parliamentary measures. This disaffection is reflected in the fact that, in most established democracies, voter turnout has been on a long-term decline since the 1980s, and that this decline is particularly concentrated among young people."

In this way, youth participation enables the construction of future alternatives that represent past, present, and future generations. The invitation to participate, therefore, is not only a matter of individual interest, but a community necessity to generate sustainable and comprehensive future alternatives.

a. Identify and get involved with the organizations in which young people participate today.

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In some sectors, the term "nini" is used to refer to young people who neither study nor work. This idea is often associated with a certain apathy toward social and political issues; however, researcher Rossana Reguillo Cruz (2014) points out that, despite the difficult situation many young people across the continent face, there is an increasing youth prominence in varied social processes where they have taken up speech and communication tools to put them into practice in ways that challenge what is predominantly understood as "politics." These actions, "must be read as forms of non-institutionalized political action…" (Reguillo, 2014 p. 14).

If it is accepted that the ways of being young are not always the same, then the modes of political and civic participation of youth also vary over time, both across different societies and within them. This is due to various factors such as the evolution of technologies, cultural changes, social and political structures, as well as the individual experiences of young people. Participation has been shaped from new spaces and with logics of action different from traditional ones, where young people, primarily through various forms of expression, have created new logics of civic participation[1].

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1 To explore in greater depth the ways in which young people participate, see: UNICEF, Child-Friendly Cities (2016). Young people drive new forms of participation in democracy.

Forms of participation continue to evolve, taking on various ways of expressing themselves. Today, young people no longer organize themselves in such traditional ways: the rise of the "virtual" and the digitalization of society have facilitated the proliferation of virtual communities, which allow access to information instantly but also pose significant challenges, especially regarding the accuracy and reliability of the information shared.

Current youth participation is dynamic and flows through all spaces and platforms, expressing their opinions on the challenges of the societies in which they live, and putting forward knowledge, key ideas, slogans, and guidance to defend their causes.

The community of organized youth is no longer only found in neighborhoods, schools, or common spaces; it is also present in cell phones, digital platforms, tablets, and computers. The network is made up of multiple tools that enable large flows of information and coordination, enhanced by the natural ability of digital natives to use these tools more frequently and more flexibly for different and simultaneous forms of communication.

On the other hand, levels of skills in information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a major obstacle to achieving universal and meaningful connectivity. Data on digital skills is limited. Globally, they are available for only 78 countries and rarely cover the five skill categories (communication/collaboration, problem solving, safety, content creation, and literacy in the use of information/data). Although 86% of people use the Internet in countries that provide data, many lack the digital skills needed to fully benefit from it or to avoid its dangers[2].

The cultural, social, and economic context shapes the ways in which young people organize and participate, although the common element continues to be their desire to influence their social environment through concrete actions coordinated with their peers.

Even so, youth participation is not guaranteed, nor is it always considered an essential contribution to the development of modern societies. Thus, there is a persistent statement that democratic societies must offer opportunities to each new generation of young people to express their opinions and ensure that their interests are represented in

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Available at: https://ciudadesamigas.org/la-democracia-nutrirse-las-nuevas-formas-participacion-politica-utilizadas-los-jovenes/ #:~:text=En%20las%20%C3%BAltimas%20d%C3%A9cadas%20ha, como%20para%20las%20siguientes%20generaciones.

[2] For more information on data regarding young people's digital skills, see: Unión Internacional de Telecomunicaciones. (2022). Informe sobre la conectividad mundial de 2022. Ginebra: UIT. Recuperado de https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-GLOBAL.01-2022-SUM-PDF-S.pdf
Banco Mundial. (2021). Informe sobre el desarrollo mundial 2021: Datos para un futuro inclusivo. https://www.worldbank.org/es/publication/wdr2021

legislative processes. In the same vein, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC-OIJ, 2004) carried out a characterization of the youth of the continent. In that report, the key points are:

- Greater access to education and less access to employment.
- Greater access to information and less access to power.
- More capable of productive change, yet more excluded from it.
- More skills for autonomy and fewer opportunities to put them into practice.
- More cohesion inward, "enclosed" within their own groups of belonging, which results in segmentation into heterogeneous groups.

The conclusion presented in this report remains a call for attention: "there is a contrast between self-determination and protagonism, on the one hand, and precariousness and demobilization, on the other. Thus, while young people gain greater freedom than previous generations, they still do not constitute a specific subject of rights, because legally they are either children or adults. They live in a state of youthful timelessness." (ECLAC, 2004, p. 20)

In this context, the need to strengthen youth participation so that their contributions truly make a difference in how things are done and built continues to be a key element. As already mentioned, young people take part in a variety of organizations and movements that reflect their interests and concerns.

Some of the most common categories of organizations in which young people are involved include: Environmental organizations and nature protection; Human Rights organizations and the defense of civil rights; Student movements proposing changes in educational conditions and school institutions; Political-party organizations to influence locally, nationally, or internationally; Health advocacy organizations, especially in the fields of mental and sexual health; Organizations dedicated to defending the rights of individuals and local minorities; Local, community, and social initiatives; social media and digital platforms; volunteer projects supporting various causes; art, culture, and artistic expression organizations, among others.

This variety of organizations reflects the types of interests and concerns of today's youth, as well as their desire to get involved and generate a positive impact on their communities and the world.

b. Be an Active Citizen: Open Debate and Participation.
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Being an active citizen implies, among other things, participating in a committed and responsible way in the life of the community and in the democratic process of a country. It entails rights and privileges but also requires assuming responsibilities and contributing to the development and well-being of the society in which one lives. This participation can be expressed in various forms, with one of the most common challenges being the integration of young people into these mechanisms of "active participation."

Opportunities for open debates among young people take place in many settings, both in person and online. In person, within the Americas, events such as the Model OAS General Assembly (MOAS)[3] , the Mercosur Youth Parliament, among others, are spaces where young people from different countries can express their needs and take part in dialogue[4]. National governments, for their part, have developed multiple initiatives in this regard, such as the National Youth Parliament of Jamaica. In recent years, the incorporation of virtual platforms has made it possible to use citizen participation tools and social networks for debates and awareness campaigns. Many efforts have been made at international, national, regional, and local levels to generate productive and reflective debates and conversations among young people.

The idea of exchanging opinions through forums, events, virtual activities, and peer-to-peer dialogues has, for many years, been a way to generate debate and listen to the voices of young people. These different forms of participation promote and create a space for active engagement in community development.

Being an active citizen also means making commitments to democracy. In this context, there is some concern that politics today generates greater disaffection among youth worldwide and about the negative impact this may have on governance in society. However, it must also be recognized that many analysts point out that youth political participation has not diminished, but rather has evolved into new forms (UNICEF, 2016). In this sense, efforts are focused on deepening and promoting the different forms of participation used by young people, creating spaces and mechanisms that facilitate them.

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[3] See MOAS: https://www.oas.org/en/asg/moas/default.asp

[4] The Mercosur Youth Parliament (PJM) is a program carried out in secondary schools in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, with the aim of promoting spaces for student participation and debate on different current issues of interest to young people. See:
https://www.parlamentomercosur.org/innovaportal/v/17182/1/parlasur/parlamento-juvenil-del-mercosur.html

Based on Sherry Arnstein's ladder[5] of participation, Robert Hart (1992) developed a ladder on the participation of children and young people in projects, organizations, or communities at different levels, which are as follows:

Step 8: Shared Decision-Making	Projects or ideas are initiated by young people, who invite adults to participate as partners in the decision-making process.
Step 7: Initiated and Led by Young People	Projects or ideas are initiated and led by young people. Adults may be invited to provide necessary support, but a project can be carried out without their involvement.
Step 6: Initiated by Adults, Shared Decisions with Young People	Adults initiate projects, but young people are invited as equal partners to share decision-making power and responsibilities.
Step 5: Young People Consulted and Informed	Projects are initiated and carried out by adults, but young people provide advice and suggestions and are informed about how those suggestions contribute to the final decisions or outcomes.
Step 4: Young People Assigned but Informed	Projects are initiated and carried out by adults; young people are invited to take on specific roles or tasks within the project, but they are aware of the actual influence they have.
Step 3: False Integration of Young People	Young people are given certain roles within projects, but they have no real influence on decisions. A false appearance is created (whether intentionally or unintentionally) that young people are participating, when in reality they have no choice regarding what is being done or how it is being carried out.
Step 2: Decoration	Young people are needed in the project to be represented as a disadvantaged group. They do not have a meaningful role (except for simply being present) and, as with decoration, they are placed in a visible position within a project or organization so that they can be easily recognized by those outside the project.
Step 1: Manipulation	Young people are invited to participate in the project, but they have no real influence on decisions or outcomes. In fact, their presence is used to achieve other goals, such as winning local elections, creating a better image of the

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[5] Sherry Arnstein (1969) identified eight levels of participation, each corresponding to a rung on the ladder, ranging from little or no citizen participation at one end to full citizen control at the other. The higher one is on the ladder, the more power they have in determining the outcome.

	institution, or attempting to obtain additional funding from institutions that support youth participation.

Aiming to reach the highest levels of participation would demonstrate a degree of commitment and integrated involvement of young active citizens in their communities. In this regard, some issues that are currently considered important for strengthening relations with the younger population are:

a. Strengthen interactive communication: There is a need to pay more attention to issues that matter to young people and prioritize their concerns
b. Empower young people through their networks: Leverage peer-to-peer contact to foster young people's political participation.
c. Improve youth representation and the politics of presence: to consider measures to improve the representation of young people in national parliaments and in other decision-making spaces (such as youth parliaments and councils).
d. Education in democracy: Ensure that effective citizenship education is included at all levels of schooling, from primary through secondary.

In summary, being an active citizen means having rights and privileges, taking on responsibilities, and contributing to the development and well-being of the society in which one lives. This active participation is essential to strengthening democracy and ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the community are considered.

c. Participate in Civic Processes: Youth in Public Life and in Formal Political Processes.
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Youth participation in formal political processes in the Americas is a dynamic phenomenon that faces a set of significant challenges but also presents numerous opportunities. Encouraging their participation is crucial to strengthening democracies in the region and ensuring a sustainable future.

At a time when the region is facing major obstacles—such as the skepticism toward politics expressed by many young people, especially toward political parties and traditional institutions, spaces have been created for young people to express themselves and take part in decision-making through programs that encourage political participation, community actions, and local development initiatives.

This outlook encourages reflection on the major changes in forms of participation, highlighting as a disruptive element the use of social media as crucial platforms for youth participation in their communities. The use of these tools as mechanisms of organization, information, and mobilization allows young people to influence the public agenda in non-traditional ways, both locally and globally.

Youth political participation in these contexts is mediated by technology, and it is even argued that they have reinterpreted the very meaning of participation. While for some, ICTs have made it possible to democratize information, give visibility to alternative perspectives, increase dialogue between different positions, and enhance participation by mobilizing previously inactive young citizens, others argue that ICTs continue to generate participation disparity due to issues of accessibility and digital skills. In some cases, they may even foster greater polarization ("cyber-ghettos"), intensifying public debate (INJUVE, n.d.).

Thus, youth participation in civic processes can take many forms: voting in elections, street demonstrations (direct actions), persuasive participation (signing petitions, contacting politicians, and engaging with the media), and participation through political parties (membership). Additionally, virtual participation is also significant, such as sharing information on social media, joining online forums, or engaging in debates.

In the Americas, as well as in much of the world, there has been a paradigm shift in youth political participation, prioritizing individual, horizontal, non-institutionalized, and flexible forms of engagement, over hierarchical, centralized, and highly institutionalized participation.

It is essential to strengthen youth participation so that they can fully realize that their contributions make a difference in shaping and building the communities they live in. Some recommendations to increase youth participation in democracy were delivered by the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD, 2022), which include, among others:

- Simplified ways to create political parties and NGOs.
- Transparency regarding the average age of political lists.
- General inclusion of young voices in public policies and legislation.
- Youth Citizens' Assemblies.
- Inclusion of civic education in the school curriculum.
- Elimination of barriers to participate in elections.
- Simple and confidential voting systems.
- Remote electronic voting.

d. Learn to participate: school, family, and community.
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In the scenario presented by new technologies and their mechanisms of participation, it is important to reflect on the role played by the basic institutions of society, such as the school, the family, and the community: *do new technologies displace the responsibility of these institutions and relegate them to a different and secondary level?*

For many authors, the answer is clear: the school and the family are two fundamental institutions where the learning of social skills and participation in society takes place. Both spaces play an essential role in the integral development of individuals, promoting academic knowledge as well as the values and competencies needed to interact with others.

Educational institutions provide a structured environment where students can learn roles, norms, and expectations within a given group and context. Through teamwork, group projects, and extracurricular activities, collaboration and respect for others' opinions are fostered in a systematic way.

It is also in schools where children and adolescents from different cultural, socioeconomic, and ideological backgrounds coexist. This diversity is a valuable opportunity to develop empathy and tolerance, and to promote critical thinking through problem analysis and peer debate, encouraging young people to form their own opinions about social, political, and cultural phenomena.

From a curricular perspective, schools include programs, knowledge, and skills that foster and support civic, democratic, and citizen participation rights, contributing to the understanding of the role of young people in the society and community in which they grow and actively participate.

As for the family, it continues to be the first place where fundamental values such as respect, responsibility, and solidarity are learned. These principles are essential for effective participation in any social group. Parents or guardians act as role models; their own actions and interactions teach how to actively participate in local communities or broader social groups.

A family environment that promotes open communication allows young people to freely express their thoughts and concerns, which is crucial for developing the communication skills needed to effectively participate in the social sphere.

From this perspective, the interaction between school and family is essential to shaping active and participatory citizens[6]. Constant communication between parents, teachers, and the entire educational community makes it possible to identify and address the social and emotional needs of young people, ensuring more holistic development and the proper use of the technological tools described.

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[6] A contribution to strengthening this relationship, see: Ministry of Education of Chile, (2021) Guide for Strengthening the School-Family Bond. Available at: https://convivenciaparaciudadania.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/escuelas-familias-COMPLETO.pdf

Effective interaction between both contexts strengthens learning and contributes to shaping committed citizens who understand their role within a varied community. Fostering these relationships lays the foundation for the development of more empathetic, responsible, and informed individuals, prepared to get involved in the contemporary world.

The community, as an integrating space, is the environment where young people carry out their multiple activities, project their dreams and frustrations; it is the place where they are challenged to put actions into practice according to their way of seeing the world. A receptive and open-minded community reinforces youth participation, while a closed and highly segregated community leads young people to withdraw from their surroundings and focus only on their most immediate group.

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Case for Discussion: BE ENGAGED
Why Is Youth Participation Central in Democratic Processes?
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A group of high school students finds that the political, economic, and social problems of their community have mobilized a large part of the citizens, including their families. They decided to organize an assembly to discuss ways of becoming involved and participating in the current situation.

In the city of San Miguel, a group of high school students has been observing with growing concern the political, economic, and social problems affecting their community. Insecurity has increased, which has even affected them personally, as robberies have occurred inside their school and some classmates have been assaulted on their way home. Furthermore, many of the students' families face precarious economic situations due to unemployment or low wages. As a corollary of the situation, cases of corruption and misuse of public resources have come to light, generating growing distrust toward public institutions.

Recently, various community organizations have begun to mobilize to propose changes and improve the situation. Inspired by these mobilizations and eagerness to contribute to their community, a group of six school friends meets after classes to discuss how they can make a difference. They decide that the best approach is to organize an open assembly, inviting not only their classmates and fellow students but also parents, teachers, and other community members.

After raising their concerns, they manage to get the school's permission to hold a reflection activity. To promote it, the young people create posters with the slogan "Your Voice Matters," inviting classmates, parents, guardians, and teachers, which are quickly shared on social media.

The assembly strengthens ties between students, parents, guardians, teachers, and the community, creating intergenerational relationships within the neighborhood and empowering young people, making them feel like active participants in the necessary change.

Over time, the members of the Youth Committee attracted the attention of local media, which begin covering stories related to their proposed projects, making them visible agents within the community. The results are encouraging; after several months, they begin to see tangible improvements thanks to the joint work generated by this youth-led initiative.

Guiding Questions:

1. What were the main problems that motivated the young people of San Miguel to get organized? Which of these problems are present in your community?

2. How did the students manage to involve different community actors in the assembly? Why do you think many people, including young people, are hesitant today about the reliability of public institutions?

3. What risks and challenges might young people face when actively participating in social and political issues? What does "Your Voice Matters" really mean in a democratic community?

4. In what ways can young people contribute to strengthening democracy in their communities?

5. What mechanisms exist in your school or community for students to participate in important decisions?

6. How is it possible to promote responsible and respectful intergenerational participation? If you were part of the group of young people in San Miguel, what actions would you like to promote?

7. What similar initiatives could be developed in your community or school to improve participation?