

**PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH TO CREATE A YOUTH LOCAL PLAN AND A
SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURE OF YOUNG PEOPLE PARTICIPATION IN A
LOCAL COMMUNITY**

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We usually talk about the dynamism and vitality of young people as a source of change, creation and innovation, but often it has also been considered as a problem it must be solved. This ambiguity motivated that politics and other instances have been willing to work for young people without young people. But such approach is unsustainable nowadays. In this sense, Lansdown maintains that *young people are part of the solution to the difficulties they face, not merely a problem to be resolved by others* (2003:2) [because] *they are social actors with skills and capacities to bring constructive resolutions to their own situation* (2003:5).

Since in 2000 the United Nations identified youth participation in country's social and economic life, this item has become a part of the political agenda of developed countries. The 2005 WYR maintains, in recommendation number 51, that *efforts should be undertaken to foster intergenerational relationships and support the capacity of young people to participate meaningfully in programmes and activities that affect them.*

The work we are now presenting follows this approach. Mollet's City Council, a medium-sized town near Barcelona, aims to develop a youth plan with and for young people. Doble Via, a social and educational services cooperative actually in charge of youth equipments in Mollet, is commissioned by The City Hall to design and develop a

Youth Local Plan. This process is undertaken with an agreement with the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB).

The methodological proposals works out through the definition of a participative process, wide and open enough to cover the highest number of city's young people. The intention was to break away from existing models to work local youth plans, which are basically focused on the participation of politicians, technicians and legal established associations, therefore making young people invisible (Reutlinger, 2001) or denying, in many cases, the participation of informal groups and non-associated youngsters. The objective of our participative research is to build up a reflexive process shared by city's young people. This process looks for a common knowledge among youth about specific characteristics of their daily reality and also about the way they want that reality to be in the next years to come.

This report is divided in three parts. In part one we present the participating research and the aimed objectives. In part two we describe the methodological development, the techniques and tools we have worked with. Finally, in part three we offer some results and conclusions of the study.

PART I. PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH

This report has been developed in Mollet del Vallès, a middle-sized town located 30 km away from Barcelona, with a 51,275 population in year 2006, 10,755 being young people among 15 and 29 years-old. As in many cities of the suburban area of Barcelona, more than half of the population moves daily due to work or study; this brings to consider Mollet as a dormitory suburb. This town has a high number of services and activities addressed to young people, many of them defined in the First Youth Local Plan, redacted on 1999.

The new Youth Local Plan had to be:

- Participative. Taking into account the different agents on the territory, especially young people.

- Feasible. It had to fit the youngster's needs and the competences and possibilities of the City Council.
- Interdepartmental. Working with all municipal departments related with the design and management of youth politics.
- Quadrennial. Lasting a four-year period.

The proposal was structured among two general objectives; the first divided on three more specific objectives:

1. To design and develop a participating process to work out the Mollet Local Youth Plan for the 2008-2012 period.
 - To produce a map containing youth groups and activities in Mollet
 - To find out the lacks and main needs regarding young people in town, in order to structure them in action fields for their later development in the Plan
 - To bring Mollet's young people to the participating process to work on the Youth Plan
2. To create a youth participating net in the city, in order to develop the Plan and to allow its future sustainability.

An essential proposal was to give a voice to young people and to provide scenarios in which their voice could be listened, both on the design and developing phase of the plan.

PART II. METHODOLOGICAL PROCESS

Usually, all participative process has two stages: an opening and a closing phase (Pindado, 2002:35). The first one consists of detecting, mobilizing and involving all possible agents. It's an expansive stage that intends to detect, obtain and include as many information as possible, as well as the higher quantity of perspectives and points of view. It could be said that it is a phase where we search to start processes involving social creativity. The second phase, on the contrary, intends to close, concrete and remove everything which is not relevant or feasible, as well as to assume compromises in the developing actions. Following this approach, we designed a first phase where the

drawing of an open and shared diagnosis would be the base and, at the same time, the excuse to involve young people in the creation and later development of the plan.

Diagram number 1 shows the general structure of the research, which was developed in three stages. The two first ones are related to the opening phase, and the last one is related to the closing:

- a) evaluation and diagnosis of the young people current situation
- b) socialization and redefining the information of the initial diagnosis obtained as a result of the wide young participating process
- c) writing the Youth Plan

As it can be seen in the graphics, all the process was monitorized by a support committee composed by the research team, youngster's representatives and municipal representatives.

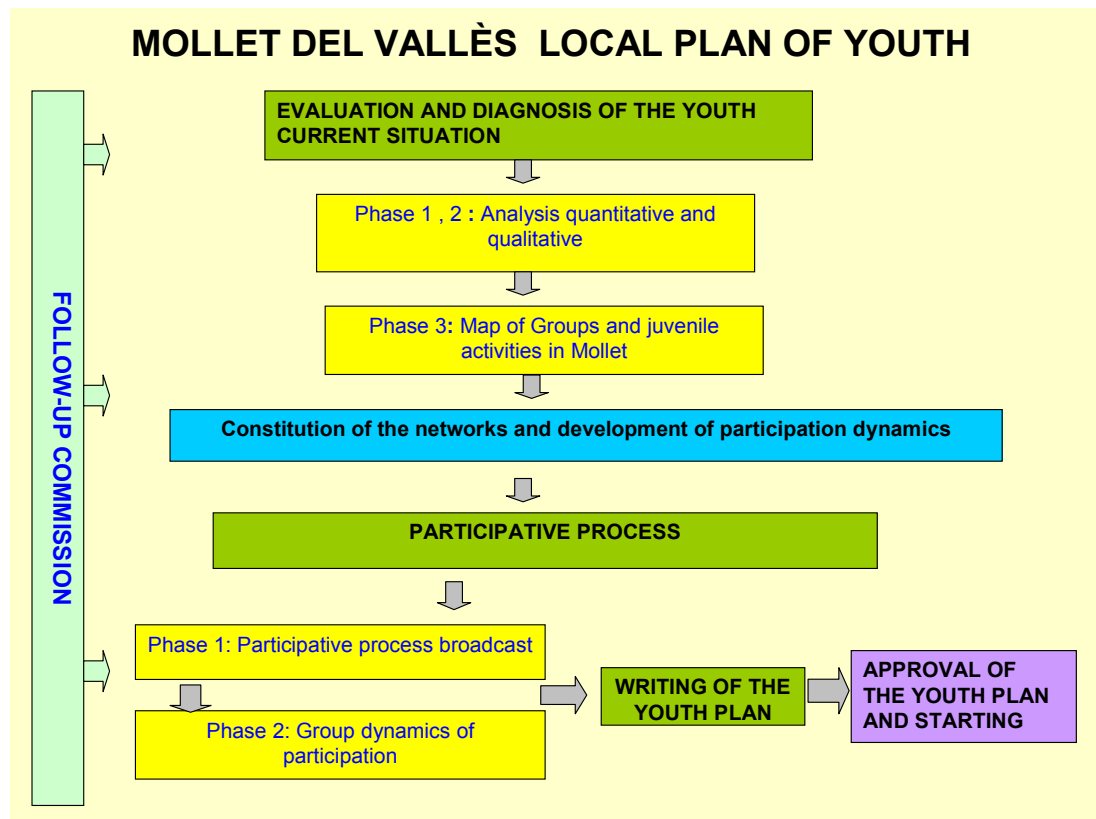


Diagram # 1

The basis for the diagnosis are 10 variables (leisure and associationism, working, housing, services,..) which are specified on 50 quantitative and qualitative indicators intended to obtain information on tangible and intangible realities. This indicators are the guidelines to research and build up the information that, in this first stage, is obtained -as it may be seen in diagram number 2- analyzing different documentary sources and through interviews with municipal responsible (26 interviews), youth associations responsible (25 interviews, 8 to youth associations), and, finally, to key city agents (17 interviews). The goal is to obtain initial contents about city's youth reality and a map of all youngsters -associated or not- which may draw up participating nets.

With the information obtained from this diagnosis, the research team designs three different strategic methodologies in order to obtain the final information that will resume the Local Youth Plan. All three strategies come up from four different items, which are the ones that allow us to organize the information gathered by the young people:

- a) Facts. They are the objective reality, that is, all about young people in town. These are the concurrent data or the data resumed up in the diagnosis. They are the basic contents provided by the research team to begin with discussions, debates or rewriting of the information in the four methodological strategies.
- b) Opinions. This is the subjective reality, what is thought to be in town for youth.
- c) Proposals. What young people think should be done respecting to whatever there is or should be in town.
- d) Contributions. Referring to what each young person or groups of young people can do, specially to make things change and to succeed in obtaining in town whatever they need or want.

These are the three methodological strategies developed:

- a) Youth participating nets. They are shaped thanks to relationships established in the previous stages with young people and with key agents in town. The first one is called “*Civic Young Net*” and the second one “*Young School Net*”. The methodology is based on the idea that it is more effective to work with natural groups than with groups created *ad-hoc* for the research (Úcar; Ponce, 2001). Besides, this fact assures more chances that the nets will be sustainable in time. The

research team develops a training session with young leaders -called group leaders- in which they are taught the goal of the participative process; besides, they learn to analyze and rebuild the diagnosis information gathered up in the previous stage. They are asked to repeat the working methodology developed in the training session with the youngsters groups with which they usually have relationships. Because of the way we represented it, we have called this multiplication strategy of participative actions "the flower technique". At the end of the process, 233 young people have participated in the *Civic Young Net* and 207 in the *Young School Net*.

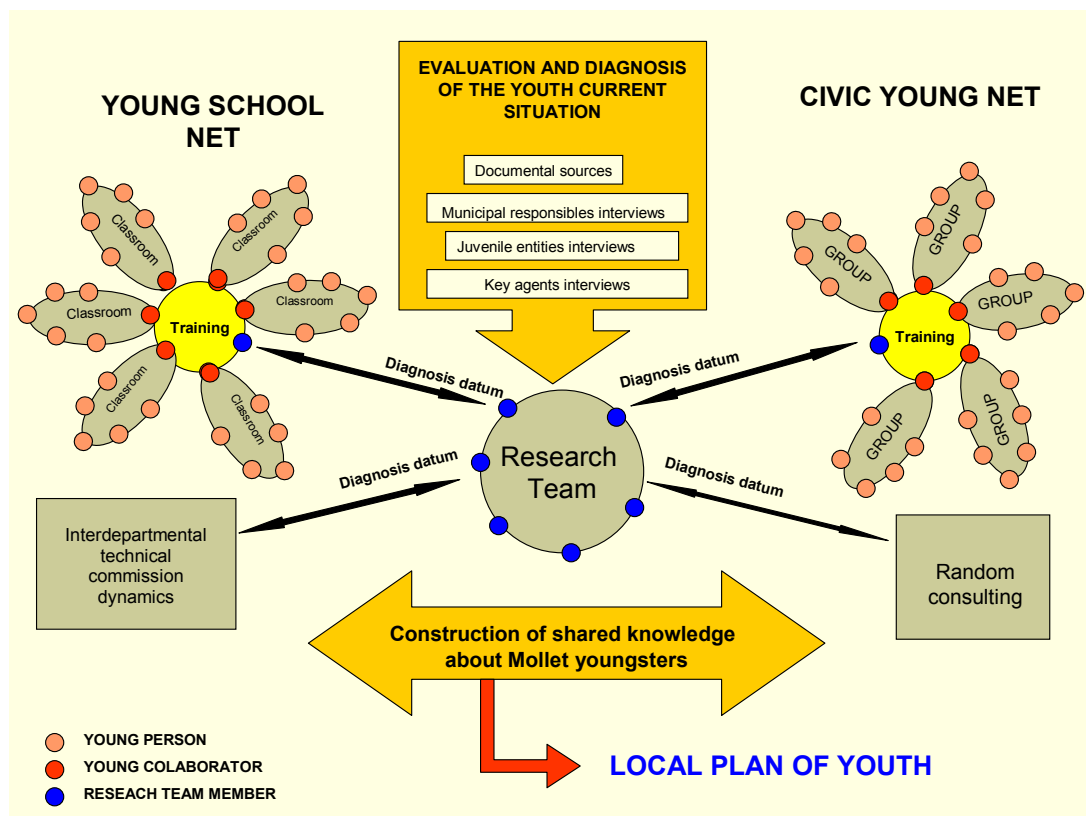


Diagram # 2

- b) Random Sample. From the diagnosis data and the items about which we wanted to gather information (opinions, proposals and contributions), we designed a questionnaire to give to a representative selection of city's young people. The stratified, proportional and random sample was shaped by 320 youngsters. The questionnaire was sent (post mail and email) to 640 people, but only 63 youngsters sent it back and full.
- c) Institutional groups dynamics. This one is a group dynamics developed with the so called "Interdepartmental Technical Commission", which is a municipal

commission integrated by technicians of municipal departments that develop programs, actions and services related with city's young people. We tried to gather up the point of view of the municipal technicians more involved in the political dynamics of the town. Finally, 20 technicians participated in both dynamics.

The Local Youth Plan is being build up with the information gathered through these strategic methodologies. A first paper which picks up the philosophy, strategic and specific lines of the Plan has been handed over, and right now is being discussed within the City Council and the youngsters groups that participated in the process. Once a consensus is reached, it will be presented to the city.

PART III. SOME RESULTS OF THE DEL PARTICIPATIVE PROCESS

The participation in the group dynamics developed due to the writing of the Youth Plan has been 498 people, a 4.71% of the city's young population. The distribution of this participation can be seen in diagram number 3, depending on the category to which the participants belong.

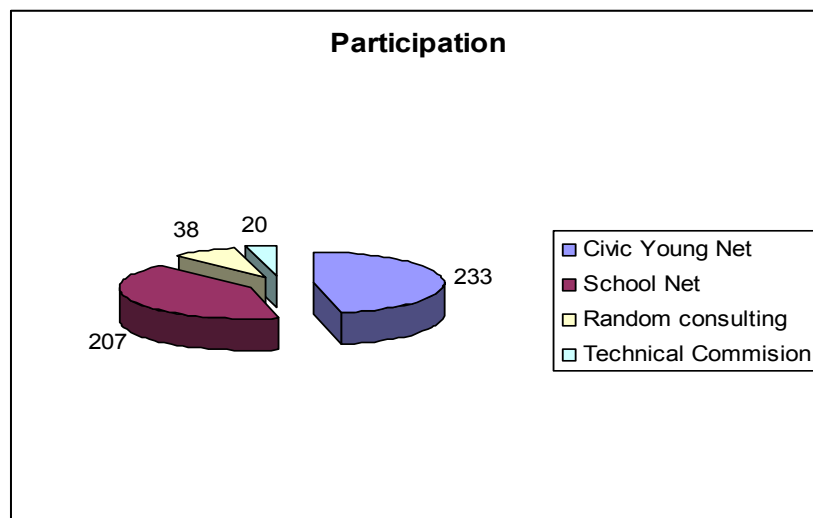


Diagram # 3

Respect to the global numbers of participants in the citizens net, we have to make a difference -as it may be seen on diagram number 4- between the young people that belong to a legally constituted association from the ones that are not associated and the ones that are gathered in informal groups. We can observe a great participation in the

participative dynamics - as it may be seen on diagram number 5- of the informal and not associated groups, which implies a significant difference with the majority of Youth Plans done until this moment, where the importance of participation depends basically on legally constituted associations.

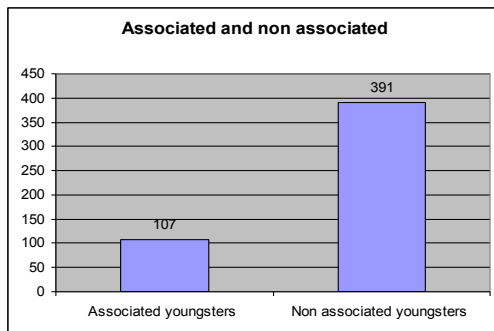


Diagram # 4

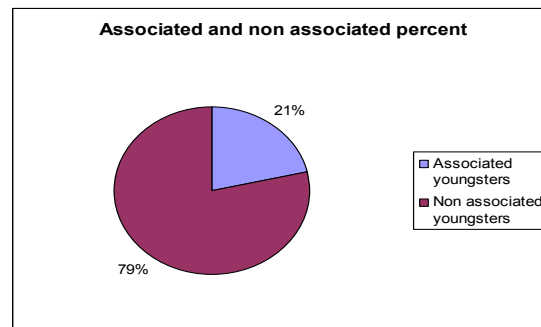


Diagram # 5

From the results of the study we must emphasize:

- The creation of a youth participative net in the city of Mollet, which includes the Young School Net and the Civic Young Net. The participation has not been restricted only to the designing stage of the Plan, but in the future it will have an active paper both in the developing of the Plan and in its evaluation.
- The active communication of the young participation net has been guaranteed through the creation of an email list that has allowed a process of constant communication between participants, and that will promote the debate and participation in the implementation stage of the Youth Plan.
- The idea that youth politics of a city depend exclusively of politicians and technical's decisions has been broken up. Young people can and must have an active and committed paper in municipal politics issues that concerns them, opening a path for their participation, not only at youth stages but in the next future. It's a first step to enrich politics life in the city, based on active citizenship participation.

Finally we must emphasize that this Plan, thanks to its participative structure, fits in a very realistic way the necessities and expectations of young people in the city, since all actions and objectives defined are the result of the job and proposals of the young people involved in the participative process.

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