

# Facilitating Authentic Participation: Transformative steps to empower groups

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## 1: The Coming Age of Participation

### Political Revolutions

The first of these transformations occurred in the eighteenth century and was a product of the Age of Enlightenment. It emerged from the Renaissance's focus on this world rather than the heavenly realm and on the human in this world, and was accompanied by the Reformation's declaration that every human being is made in the image of God and its concern for the individual's relation to the divine, emphasizing the equality of each person in his relation to God. The philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment articulated an understanding of the human community that placed sovereignty not in the hands of a sovereign but in the hands of the governed.

Starting in Philadelphia in 1776 and in Paris in 1789, the political revolutions that overtook *les anciens regimes* have continued to this day. These revolutions inculcated the principle that *every human being has the right to participate in the decision-making processes that are determining the destiny of his community*. While we are still working out the practical implications of this principle, what is important is that now it is recognized globally as intrinsic to humanness.

### Economic Revolutions

The second transformation was in the economic process and occurred in the nineteenth century. What we now call economics was invented in the middle of the nineteenth century by men such as Marx, Engels, and others who analyzed the economic dynamics in human society in response to the transformation occasioned by the Industrial Revolution. The principle that was established is *that every human being has the right to participate in and secure the wellbeing of himself and his family*. Again, we are still a long way from achieving this, but the principle is there and is universally recognized.

### The Cultural Revolution

Finally, the twentieth century saw the Cultural Revolution. In hindsight we have called the first years of the twentieth century *la belle epoque*. But beginning in 1912 with the sinking of the unsinkable Titanic, it came to a crashing end. Then in August 1914 Europe sank into what came to be called The Great War-the war to end all

wars-eventually dragging the rest of the world into it. By November 1918 regimes had fallen, long-established dynasties and symbols of power had collapsed, and with millions of lives lost in what seemed to be a senseless struggle, people's confidence in the established order was profoundly shaken.

The peace that followed set the stage for the second great struggle of the twentieth century. Only twenty years after the end of The Great War, the world again sank into conflict as the Nazis emerged, setting about using modern industrial processes to attempt to eliminate a whole people and all of those who did not conform to their ideology.

In 1945 the United States initiated the Atomic Age in the skies over Japan. For the first time in human history we possessed the ability to annihilate a whole city with a single blast, and we quickly built enough of these weapons to destroy the planet. By mid-century our faith in progress and the meaning of it all had been profoundly shaken. People looked around them and saw glaring injustices that were built into the structures of our society and the cultural norms that informed those structures.

Around the world people rose up to demand control of their destiny and to participate fully in the community of which they were a part. The civil rights struggle in the United States transformed that nation's culture. Colonial empires fell around the world. A whole generation rose up against what they understood as an unjust war in Vietnam that denied a people the right to determine their destiny.

Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949 and Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, launching modern feminism. The world I was born into in 1940 is a world gone forever.

The last half of the twentieth century saw a Cultural Revolution sweep the world. Much of what has happened and is happening in the world today is the working out of this Cultural Revolution. I do not think we are yet sure what is the fundamental principle of this revolution. I would want to suggest, however, that it is something close to this assertion:

*Every human being has the right to freely participate in and practice the cultural gifts and wisdom of all the world's communities.*