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Active citizenship of youth

Youth is the most active component of civil society. An active civil position is interest to public work, initiative, and diligence. The Kurt Lewin Foundation conducted a year of research and education in four secondary schools in Eastern Hungary to study the effect of the school as an organizational/operational environment on the active citizenship of students.

At the commencement of the project, the concept of citizenship grounded in activity, responsibility, and democratic values was emphasized in Hungarian educational policy, while the views and opinions of society in general and the younger generation in particular were changing in a direction not favorable for bolstering active citizenship.

For this reason the research and educational project comprised on the one hand an endeavor to enhance active citizenship by means of various developmental activities. On the other hand it included two panels of data collection, both by quantitative and qualitative methods, to assess the present situation pertaining to the topic of the study.

The Foundation conducted a survey concerning active citizenship in two grammar schools, and participant observation was used to explore the school citizens' socio-demographic parameters, everyday habits, social relationships, and plans for the future, as well as their awareness, opinion, and information-gathering habits with respect to democracy, politics, and society, and their knowledge and opinion concerning their schools and, in particular, democracy in their schools.

Although democratic citizenship can be promoted through local, regional and national levels of youth activities, international youth activities can also provide a space for mutual learning and promote long-term youth participation and democratic citizenship. The real challenge in Euro-Mediterranean youth work is to ensure that participants use their experiences, knowledge and contacts after these activities, to develop local, regional, national and international youth projects and work practices to engage youth in the local community.

Young people are active citizens who make a positive contribution to society as informed, responsible and engaged members of their communities.

Patterns of political participation and community engagement established in early adulthood frequently form the basis for civic behaviours in later life. Active civic engagement enhances the democratic process, increases young people's representation in their communities, and assists the government to develop appropriate policies and services for this age group.

Young people who consider themselves to be citizens of their schools, communities and wider political environments and who contribute to decision-making in these different settings are likely to feel a sense of allegiance or belonging to these institutions. Youth who feel that decision-makers deem their views to be irrelevant or that there is no point in becoming involved in decision-making processes are at much greater risk of feeling alienated or socially excluded.

Citizenship involves both rights and responsibilities. An important aspect of being a good citizen involves behaving well towards others, living within societal laws and taking responsibly for one's actions. Young people gain from being encouraged to "give back" to their communities, through activities such as volunteering. These activities help young people to build self-esteem, confidence and skills, as well as fostering a sense of social connectedness. Participation in activities such as volunteering also help to promote positive perceptions of young people by others in the community.

Indicators

There are five indicators in this section of the report, each of which highlights different aspects of citizenship.

The first indicator, beliefs about government responsiveness, measures young people's views about and attitudes towards traditional political institutions. Beliefs about their ability to influence political decision-making may affect young people's willingness to engage in political processes.

The second indicator, youth volunteering, highlights the positive contribution that young people make as active participants in their communities. Note that this indicator measures engagement in formal volunteering through an organisation or marae and excludes any informal voluntary activity that young people may undertake on their own. Voluntary activities that are one off, ad hoc or engaged in on a seasonal basis may not be captured by this indicator, which focuses activities carried out over a four week period only.

The third and fourth indicators measure the extent to which young people abide by societal laws. Two metrics are used: Police apprehensions, and cases proved in court/convictions.

The final indicator is voter enrolment rates, which provides a more direct measure of political engagement.

2013 was the European Year of Citizens, with the focus on the fact that citizens of Europe and neighbouring countries understand their rights and the concept of Europe as a living mechanism and these concepts continue to be relevant no matter what year emphasises it. If more informed people can take decisions in their context, and democratic life in Europe can be more vibrant at all levels.

The vision for the European Citizenship is to offer to people throughout Europe chances to:

- learn about the rights and opportunities,
- stimulate debate about the obstacles that prevent people from fully using these rights
- be encouraged to participate in civic form on European policies and issues.

Effective youth development practices engage youth in active roles, viewing them as community resources rather than as passive recipients of services. This tenet underlies a wide range of programmatic approaches, including 4-H leadership development, youth in governance (Fiscus, 2003; Goggin, Powers, & Spano, 2002; MacNeil, 2005; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000), youth-led research and evaluation (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; (Youth in Focus, 2002), and organizing public work projects by students (Boyte, 2004). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how youth engagement might be practiced within traditional government social programs.

The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation analyzes five key transitions that young people undergo as they enter adulthood—completing education, entering the labor market, taking responsibility for their own health, starting their own families, and exercising citizenship. This research brief—based on a chapter on citizenship in the report—reviews the institutions through which young people encounter their social and political world, and the implications of citizenship for development.

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Active citizenship can facilitate collective action, which can yield more effective and better-targeted public services. Collective action, public accountability, caring for kin and community, and stewardship of the environment are much more difficult without the contributions of an active citizenry. Active citizenship can also broaden

the access of previously excluded groups to opportunities for growth and higher living standards, most obviously in the empowerment of women.

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But what makes a good citizen? What enhances a person's feeling of belonging to and responsibility for the social and political community? What processes determine the quality of citizenship, and are there policy interventions that could make these processes more effective?

By the time people reach their early to mid-twenties they have developed stable preferences and lifelong behaviors regarding voting, participation in politics, political affiliation, and a disposition toward violence. Patterns of interaction, informed by the principles (e.g., equal opportunity, fairness, or tolerance) that permeate social and political institutions, affect citizenship formation in complex and diffuse ways. But for young people certain institutions are particularly important for citizenship formation, including schools, military service, community service, prisons, and the experience of war.

For most people, school presents the first exposure to the world outside the immediate family. Young people learn to deal with rules and authority, to negotiate, and to act collectively. Yet although schools promote national identity over the long run (schooling policies partly explain, for instance, why Basque separatism is strong in Spain but not France), it is not clear whether explicit civics education promotes

citizenship. Evaluations have repeatedly found that civic education classes have a weak effect on school-age children.

These findings suggest a general problem that might explain why civics courses, although able to promote civic awareness, have almost no impact on “the development of democratic attitudes and behaviors.” Students learn as much, and probably more, about citizenship from the broader school culture than from civics classes, and the broader school culture usually replicates the patterns of exclusion and hierarchy in society.