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Engaging Youth in Decision-Making: A Path toward Active Youth Citizenship in Eritrea

Rahel Weldeab

Article at a glance

- Citizenship is not innate; it needs to be taught and cultivated in young people through civic education and leadership training.
- Citizenship includes both rights and responsibilities; for youth to become active citizens, they need to be given a voice in decision-making processes that affect them.
- In order for young people to develop a sense of citizenship, they must first realize the positive role they can play through active civic participation.



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1155 Fifteenth Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20005 • USA

ph: (202) 721-9200 • www.cipe.org • e-mail: cipe@cipe.org

Citizenship and Youth Participation in Eritrea

The active participation and feeling of citizenship among young people is crucial to the success of any developing country. When Eritrea gained its independence in 1993 – after 30 years of armed struggle and many years later than other African countries – the young nation had a lot of catching up to do. Eritreans quickly realized that building peace and sustainable development is more difficult than winning a war. They also knew that they did not want Eritrea to repeat the sad experiences of many African countries, whose high hopes following independence were replaced by failure, exploitation, and deterioration of the standard of living.

In 1994, Eritrea developed a national charter to clarify the basic guidelines necessary for its national and democratic journey. This political program is based on an effective broad-based organizational structure that enables full civic participation of all Eritrean citizens. The national charter states that the people should participate in all decisions that touch their lives and their country, from the inception of ideas to their implementation. Eritrea recognized early that people's active and organized participation based on political consciousness is a key condition for success in all development endeavors.

However, Eritrea, like many other developing countries, still has a long way to go until it reaches all its desired development goals. It also has a long way to go to become the democratic nation it aspires to be. Eritrea is not a classic democratic country. The political structure developed after independence was a broad-based movement embracing all patriotic and democratic Eritreans, as opposed to narrow-based parties. For various reasons, including a border conflict, Eritrea has yet to develop a multi-party system or hold national elections. In spite of that, the people of Eritrea are working vigilantly to develop their country. More importantly, their ardent citizenship continues to build the basic foundation needed for a vibrant democratic society.

Young people in Eritrea played an immense role in the armed struggle and social changes that accompanied it. As a result of these contributions and efforts, a foundation for youth participation was developed even before independence. Still, despite their efforts and past involvement in public life, today Eritrean youth struggle to influence policymakers and to have opportunities to participate in decision-making.

Upon gaining independence, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) changed its program to take into consideration the post-independence challenges of organizing youth to bring about change in the country. Although active participation was a principle adopted in Eritrea from the beginning, NUEYS has faced many challenges in communicating the concerns of the youth to policymakers. Effective participation of young people in the policymaking processes and in the implementation of national development programs has only been possible through the active citizenship of youth and the leadership skills they have developed over the years.

The current lack of a youth policy in Eritrea means that government ministries and offices are not obliged by policy to dedicate their work specifically to benefit the youth. Even so, it is evident that the active citizenship of youth is vital for sustainable development, especially when considering how young Eritreans have positively influenced all national development policies, from the central level all the way down to the grassroots.

This active citizenship on the part of the youth ensures that their voices are heard; such participation develops and strengthens the opportunities for young people to learn their rights and responsibilities.

To analyze the importance of young people's citizenship in a democratic society, one has to understand several key points: why youth often do not develop a sense of citizenship; why citizenship is a responsibility; how policy can ensure the participation and active citizenship of youth; how young people should engage constructively in

the governance processes; what skills are required of young people when communicating with policymakers; and how the sense of citizenship should be developed among youth.

Why Youth Often Fail to Develop a Sense of Citizenship

It is not likely, nor should it be expected, that every young person will be interested in politics. Even so, the degree of disengagement among youth from political processes is negatively high, particularly in developing countries, even in instances where political processes directly affect their lives. The political indifference among youth is indeed alarming, considering the reasons they do not want to be involved.

When young people think of politics, they think of corruption, inflexible bureaucracy, and the little power they have to change the environment around them. Rarely do young people see a place for themselves in the political processes of their country; this, in turn, seriously undermines the possibility of young people developing a real sense of citizenship. Youth participation is an integral part of democratic societies, but without a sense of citizenship, the social integration of youth and their cohesion in society would be impossible.

Young people prefer not to get involved in political processes because they feel that the system has failed and will continue to fail them. Faced with the lack of educational opportunities, risks of disease, unemployment, and armed conflicts, the majority of young people in the developing world worry about how to survive instead of working to solve the problems of their society as a whole.

Especially in African countries, young people choose to emigrate rather than deal with challenging issues at home. They feel that the problems are too grand for them to make any difference. Moreover, there is a lack of institutions that welcome the participation of young people as a result of societies failing to realize that young people could be viable solutions to the many challenges they face.

Citizenship as a Responsibility and Not Just a Right

Although people automatically acquire the nationality of their country of origin, citizenship is not innate. Rather, citizenship is something that has to be earned. The concept of citizenship comes from the idea that citizens have duties and responsibilities to fulfill in order to have rights as citizens of a particular country (voting rights, land rights, etc.). Citizenship as a responsibility is one of the main pillars of democracy.

In Eritrea, citizens are obliged by the constitution to complete six months of military service and 12 months of national service. Until they complete national service, they are not granted the full rights of a citizen. Since both military and national service usually start upon the completion of high school or college, Eritrean society is dependent on the youth for national defense as well as reconstruction and development efforts. Eritrean youth know that upon completing the service to their country they will not only possess full rights as citizens but they will also be able to defend those rights. Moreover, many posts within the national service provide opportunities for young people to learn more about the development challenges of the country and the strategies adopted to achieve development goals.

For instance, many young people in Eritrea complete their national service as teachers. In those positions, they are exposed to different aspects of education policy, children's rights, and health policy, because the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health partner to provide health services through schools. Through either the teachers' association or the local branch of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS), they can further participate in programs or campaigns in the areas of education and/or health.

Policies Ensuring Participation and Active Citizenship

Although it is very important that development policies and democratic processes always take into

consideration active participation of the people, especially in decision-making, such policies would not have a real impact without young people who take their responsibilities as citizens seriously. In this context, citizenship of young people means that they have a strong commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy and are willing and able to work to ensure both. The active participation of youth would have no effect as just a principle written in policy documents if young people did not take the lead and actively participate in development endeavors. This being the case, citizenship is very important for active participation to take place.

Governments need to take into consideration the contributions of young people in all phases of national policies and plans that affect youth, starting from policy and program design all the way up through implementation and evaluation. Governments also need to improve access to information to enable young people to make better use of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. However, if for any reason a government does not do this, there are still ways for young people to increase their influence, although it might take some time and patience.

Having played a major role in achieving independence for Eritrea, NUEYS took a leading role in mobilizing youth and giving them proper leadership training. At the same time, NUEYS had to build up its reputation in the country almost from scratch due to many post-independence challenges (i.e., reconstruction, nation building) and the government was not always there to provide support. In fact, there were times when a government ministry would simply close the door on the Union, refusing to include youth in the designing of youth-related programs, let alone in any policymaking process.

Through unremitting effort, fundraising, and designing its own programs, NUEYS was gradually able to build up its prestige to a point where some government ministries realized that their programs would fail if they didn't include NUEYS. For instance, having developed its own health

campaign, NUEYS was able to mobilize youth as peer educators raising HIV/AIDS awareness and promoting condom usage. This health program reached the grassroots level and was able to create many youth leaders. Understanding the effectiveness of the strategies used by NUEYS to mobilize young people, the Ministry of Health soon realized that including the Union as a vital stakeholder in its national HIV/AIDS program was the most efficient and effective way to spread HIV/AIDS awareness among youth. Accordingly, NUEYS became a member of the National HIV/AIDS and TB Control Division (NATCoD). NUEYS not only gained the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process on HIV/AIDS programs but was also able to gain government funds to establish youth health centers around the country.

If it weren't for the sense of citizenship felt among the youth leaders of NUEYS, the valuable role that youth play in political and development processes would never have been realized. When young people demonstrated their citizenship by working to bring about positive social transformation, the government was more willing to cooperate with them. Consequently, even without an official youth policy that promotes youth participation, young people can still actively participate as citizens and active citizenship can play a pivotal role in youth engagement in decision-making processes.

Engaging Young People in Governance Processes

The active participation of young people in decision-making and the inclusion of their concerns in all development plans are key for achieving sustainable development. Although they are often the largest disadvantaged demographic group in developing countries, young people have immense potential to become agents of positive change.

There must be equitable and non-discriminatory opportunities for the development of youth. It is also very important that the tools of development are put into the hands of the youth so that they can actively play their role as citizens. Effective

citizenship of young people in developing countries calls for efforts in all areas of policy that affect poverty reduction, social justice, environment conservation, control and eradication of diseases, cultural development, social stability, and political conciliation.

The proper infrastructure for active youth participation has to be put in place in order for them to become a decisive force for social change. If the energy of youth is harnessed the right way, they can indeed be a strong and reliable backbone of positive social transformation and good governance. Governments should allow and promote the work of youth associations through financial, educational, moral, and technical support. Moreover, governments need to take the needs of the youth into consideration by making their voices heard in decision-making processes.

Skills Required for Communicating with Policymakers

It does not happen too often that adults, particularly policymakers, are willing to listen to what young people have to say. They assume that young people are naïve and lack the experience to understand things like policy implementation, program management, governance, reform, and development. Quite often policymakers see youth as troublemakers instead of agents of positive change. Youth are seen as both the cause and the effect of the problems of poverty, social injustice, disease, underdevelopment, unemployment, and political conflicts. Rarely are they seen as the solutions to such problems, which results in many young people failing to realize that they have the primary responsibility for their own development.

If young people are to become agents of positive change, they must possess certain skills to communicate with policymakers and to be involved in their country's development. Such skills do not just entail ways of communicating. Rather, they include project management, advocacy, policy analysis, analytical skills that come through formal education, and the ability to use limited resources

efficiently towards social change and development. Such skills are enhanced by work experience in development projects and campaigns. Extra training in project management and advocacy is needed, most of which could be achieved through correspondence or e-courses. The use of information technology for training as well as for regional and international networking provides an inexpensive way of youth empowerment. Not all youth in developing countries have access to information and communication technologies. Those who do have access should be responsible for disseminating such information to those who do not; this can be done through local training sessions.

One of the most effective ways to develop the skills required for active citizenship is through volunteerism. The experience and exposure that could be gained this way not only helps the youth but also ensures the building of an inclusive, participatory democracy. Communities should provide volunteering opportunities to youth who are ready to play their role as active citizens. Most community work initiatives, especially in developing countries, cannot afford to pay employees for all the work that needs to be done. Therefore, it is to the advantage of the community to have energetic youth willing to use their free time for development initiatives. Some examples of voluntary work that young people could do includes assisting in awareness campaigns, volunteering at the local library, at an orphanage, or as mentors for children and other youth.

How to Develop a Sense of Citizenship among Youth

For young people to develop a sense of citizenship, they must first realize the positive role they can play through active participation. More importantly, the society at large has to appreciate the participation of young people.

Through civic education and leadership training, young people can develop a sense of citizenship. Communities should provide such opportunities and vocational skills training for their young people.

Communities should also realize the indispensable role that young people can play in development and good governance. To realize and appreciate active citizenship among its youth, a community should provide continuous opportunities for youth empowerment and also praise the efforts undertaken by youth leaders and volunteers.

The media can also help develop a sense of citizenship among young people by reporting on their work and achievements. Discussions on youth issues broadcasted or reported in various media outlets can not only promote youth participation but also encourage more youth to participate through volunteering and active citizenship. The media should promote all types of youth participation by reporting on the achievements of young people regardless of their economic status, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or gender.

Conclusion

Active citizenship and good governance are intimately connected as one cannot exist without the other. Both approaches promote social and political tolerance as well as respect for the principles of democracy and human rights. True reform and true development must be sustainable and the only way sustainable development can take place is through the active participation of citizens, especially of the youth.

It is important for governments in developing countries to understand the reasons why so many young people do not feel a sense of citizenship, and to create programs to instill active citizenship among young people. The role of governments, communities, and the youth themselves are equally important. Young people should not be discouraged and governments need to promote youth participation. As a result, the sustainable development of young people and their active citizenship within their communities would ensure the achievement of development goals of any country.

The Center for International Private Enterprise's 2009 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Rahel Weldeab's essay, which won second place in the 'Citizenship in a Democratic Society' category, was written in response to the following question: "What needs to be done to develop a sense of citizenship in young people and help them realize their role in a democratic society?" To learn more about the essay competition, visit www.cipe.org/essay.

Rahel Weldeab received her Bachelor's Degree in Public Administration with a minor in political science at the University of Asmara in Eritrea. As an ardent believer in public service and volunteerism, she hopes to play a pivotal role in promoting peace and sustainable development in her region, particularly through youth participation. She entered this competition because she feels that there are valuable lessons from her country that other youth, especially those from the Horn of Africa, can learn and appreciate. Her interests include social activism, development, freelance writing, feminism, peace building, regional and international cooperation, and youth policy. Her hobbies include reading, writing, capoeira (Brazilian martial arts), listening to music, playing the guitar and singing.

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