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Chapter 7

YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOTIVATION FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

It is argued that “individuals do not automatically become free and responsible citizens but must be educated for citizenship” (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2003, cited in Leisha, 2012:55). Hence adults’ promotion of young people’s civic engagement is intended to educate young people to become active citizens. This assumes a deficit, or lack of caring by young people about issues in their country or community. However, young people’s sense of belonging and motivations to participate in civic activities are different from that of adults. This paper discusses research with young people involved in two participatory initiatives in Ghana, to examine their motivations for engaging in the projects. The study found that in addition to demonstrating that they are active citizens by engaging in the projects, the young people were also motivated by other self-interest reasons. There was however a marked gender difference in their reasons for participating in the projects. It was observed that the motivations given by the young people reflected gender stereotype of masculinity and femininity. The paper concludes that by understanding what motivates

young people to engage in civic activities and other decision-making forums, participatory opportunities that emphasise young people's interests and motivations could be created in order to sustain their participation.

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is important for the functioning of a democratic society and for individual development. Hence, young people's engagement in civic activities—whether in grassroots demonstrations, joining community groups, or volunteering to help community activities—is very important for their personal growth and transition to adulthood. It is also a measure of how young people are valued in democracy, i.e. young people giving a voice to contribute their perspectives in addressing social problems in their community. According to Flanagan and Levine (2010:160) “the personal and psychological benefits of civic engagement for young adults include fulfillment of the human need to belong and to feel that life has a purpose beyond the pursuit of individual gain”. There are concerns about low levels of participation of young people in civic activities (see, e.g., McLaughlin, 2000; Pattie et al., 2004), which is thought to lead to erosion of the moral and social fabric of society (Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, 2009).

Participation as a key concept in democracy is implicitly linked to citizenship. Collin (2009) has noted how youth participation policies seek to promote active citizenship in young people. The question that arises is do young people share this view; do they conceptualise their participation as citizenship? The subjective experience of young people's participation must also be explored since majority of the literature on youth participation have failed to explore young people's own views on participation. Then again, one can ask, participation in what? The literature has paid too much attention to patterns of youth participation in elections; resulting in the conclusion that young people are disengaged or have become apathetic citizens. Due to declining levels of youth participation in elections some authors have argued that young people have become disinterested in politics (Adsett, 2003; Vrcan, 2002) and are thus “turning their backs on democratic institutions” (Forbrig, 2005:7). It is argued that young people who are non-voters are more likely to be disinterested in politics as compared to those that vote (Russell et al, 2002; Institute for Conflict Research, 2006; Print et al, cited in Sheerin, 2007). The concentration on voting has led to a neglect of the various ways through which

young non-voters, (i.e. those ineligible to vote) participate in society. This chapter outlines some of the various ways that young people (both voters and non-voters) engage in civic activities in Ghana.

METHODS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The National Youth Authority (NYA) as the agency responsible for youth development has instituted different strategies at different levels in the country to promote youth engagement. The strategies are (1) advocacy at the local level, (2) broadcast media at the regional level, and (3) e-governance and youth parliament at the national level.

Local Level Strategy: Advocacy

The National Youth Authority has set up a youth advocacy assembly at the local/district level for young people to engage with local politicians and street-level bureaucrats to influence decision-making at the local level. Membership is open to all young people aged between 15 and 22 years, and in junior and senior high schools. At meetings the advocates discuss youth concerns and pass a resolution for the relevant government department to consider and take appropriate action. However the advocates lament their lack of power or authority to enforce their resolution when the relevant institutions reject the resolutions. Also the long term sustainability of the advocacy strategy is uncertain as the NYA does not have adequate funds for the continuous existence of the project. As suggested by the Director of Programmes at the NYA:

without the funding from our sponsors the youth advocacy assembly is likely to collapse as the authority does not have adequate resources to continue with the project (excerpts of interview conducted in December 2011).

According to the Director of programmes it was expected that the district assemblies would integrate the youth advocacy assembly into their strategy of involving young people in decision-making but the district assemblies have been reluctant to sponsor the project. One metropolitan coordinator at the NYA stated:

further to the success of the advocacy assembly in helping to reduce child prostitution and in busting a drug smuggling syndicate that was using children and young people as couriers at a fishing harbour we approached the metropolitan assembly to fund the project but they said they did not have funds for that.

Regional Level Strategy: Broadcast Media

At the regional level the NYA is promoting young people's participation through the use of broadcast media, in particular radio. The NYA in conjunction with the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation has established a radio talk programme called Curious Minds in all the 10 regional capitals of Ghana. The young people involved in this strategy are aged between 8 and 25 years who are in primary school, junior high school, senior high school and university. To facilitate greater inclusion the programme is run twice a week; one is in English and the other one in a local language. Members of Curious Minds meet regularly to examine current events affecting the youth and choose an issue for discussion during the live on-air show. Policy-makers and politicians are invited to the programme to share ideas with young people. Other young people also contribute to the discussions through phone-in segment. However, the young people in this project were also unhappy about level of seriousness given to them and the non-influence of their discussions in decision-making.

National Level Strategy: National Youth Parliament and E-Governance

At the national level the NYA is promoting young people participation in governance through the establishment of a national youth parliament to accord young people the opportunity to influence national policy decision and inculcate in young people democratic values and principles. I have argued that young people's non-participation in governance systems is a barrier to their participation in public policy processes (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). Accordingly establishing the national youth parliament is a very laudable idea in creating new spaces to involve young people in political activities and governance systems. However, some young people are concerned about the membership of the youth parliament.

The national youth parliament is made up of only representatives of the various youth parliaments that have been established in the universities and polytechnics. What about those of us in high schools? (Maclean, member of Curious Minds).

As membership of the youth parliament is limited to polytechnics and universities, 15-17 year old young people who are mostly in junior high school and senior high school are thus excluded from the national youth parliament. The exclusion of the 15-17 years age group from the national youth parliament fuels the perception of this age group that they are not taken seriously in national development dialogues (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013). Also, some people are fearful that membership of the national youth parliament would be dominated by members from the youth wing of the political party in power. The quote below illustrates this fear:

People are nominated to the youth parliament. They don't contest to be elected by young people. My fear is that the youth parliament will become an appendage of the youth wing of the political parties (excerpts of interview with Mr Chibeze Ezekiel, Executive Coordinator, Strategic Youth Network for Development).

Furthermore, at the national level, the NYA through the use of the internet is promoting young people's participation in the discussion of parliamentary business, i.e. e-governance. The NYA has established an electronic platform on its website to collate views of young people about issues that are of interest to young people that are being discussed by the National Parliament. The collated views are then presented to the respective parliamentary committee for consideration. As this platform is internet based, there is no age limit on who can input onto the platform. Therefore children, young people and adults can make use of the facility. However the electronic platform is only available to people who have access to the internet and as internet access is currently available only in the urban areas in Ghana, young people in rural areas' participation in the discussions on the platform is more likely to be hindered.

MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN CIVIC ACTIVITIES

From the perspective of the NYA the above-mentioned strategies are meant to inculcate democratic values and principles in young people, but what

is the motivation of the young people for participating in the project. The views reported under this section reflect that of young people who were engaged in the youth advocacy assembly and Curious Minds – children in broadcasting. The young people involved in the 2 projects spoke highly of their involvement. Their motivation to participate in the projects can be categorised into altruistic desires, and self interest. There was however a marked gender difference in their reasons for participating in the projects. It was observed that the motivations given by the young people reflected gender stereotype of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity emphasises wealth acquisition and ambition, while femininity stresses caring and nurturing roles (Hofstede, 2001). Whereas the motivation given by the girls could be categorised into altruistic desires (feminine traits) that of the boys were self interest (masculine traits). See table below.

Motivation for participating	Boys	Girls
Self interest	Exposure	
	Skills development	
	Financial reward	
Altruistic desires		Patriotism
		Youth mouth piece
		Champion women's empowerment

Category1: Altruistic Desires

This is where the young people participated to represent a cause or for the benefit of other young people rather than themselves. Some of the reasons under altruistic desire are championing women's empowerment, patriotism and youth mouthpiece.

Championing Women's Empowerment

The young girls argued that because girls and women have been marginalised for too long they wanted to take the opportunity accorded them in the project to showcase what given the opportunity girls and for that matter women can do. According to Clara (member of youth advocacy assembly);

girls' empowerment is very important to me so I actively sought leadership position in the assembly. I did not want the boys to lead everything and I'm glad I was selected as the chair. I hope I did an excellent job to demonstrate that girls too can be good leaders.

Patriotism

The young girls reported wanting to be part of the project in order to help solve some of the problems facing their local area.

I'm being patriotic. I wanted to address the problems that we were facing, I wanted to voice them out to the public so that something can be done about the problems. Once I help to solve some problems in my district I am helping to solve problems in this country (Baaba, member of youth advocacy assembly).

Another young person stated;

nobody pays for our participation. It is a voluntary job. We are happy that as young people we are making inputs into decision-making to help make this country a better place for all of us. I love my country, that is why every Saturday I come to this radio station to talk to my fellow youth (Justine, member of Curious Minds).

Youth Mouthpiece

The young girls reported taking part in the project as a representative of young people in the metropolis and through that demonstrate the capacity of young people.

Our participation in the project will benefit other young people and the elders can see that the youth too can do something good (Justine, member of Curious Minds).

Another young girl commented that;

you know the district assembly does a lot of things in this area, and being a member of the youth advocacy one can tell what the youth in this area want to the district assembly officials. As the Chair of the advocacy assembly I met with the metropolitan chief executive several times to discuss what the youth wanted in the metropolis (Clara, member of youth advocacy assembly).

Thus the young girls saw the project as an avenue to demonstrate their competence to adults and also represent the interest of young people.

Category 2: Self-Interest

Self interest is where the young people participated for their own benefit i.e. what they stood to gain from their participation. Exposure, skills development and financial reward were some of the reasons reported by the young people.

Exposure

The young boys reported taking part in the project because it will make them well known. As noted by a young person in the broadcast media:

being on radio exposes you and your skills to other people and with such exposure you'll never know where it will lead you to (Jacob, member of Curious Minds).

James (member of youth advocacy assembly) also reported that his motivation for being a member of the youth advocacy assembly was;

to be exposed to the workings of the district assembly and local politics. I am interested in politics so I wanted other people to know me through the advocacy assembly.

Skills Development

Related to the exposure motive, the young people also reported taking part in the project in order to develop relevant skills for the job market.

I would like to work in broadcasting. So when I heard that the programme was about talking on radio I was very enthusiastic about it. I believe the curious minds programme is preparing me to work in the media. Here I am the technical man taking care of the machines during live sessions (Charles, member of Curious Minds).

Financial Reward

Finally some of the young people reported taking part in the project because of the financial allowances that were paid to them. According to Barnabas (member of youth advocacy assembly);

I would not have been a member of the advocacy assembly if I did not receive any money. The money was a source of motivation for me because I had to travel to attend meetings.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the above it is amply demonstrated that young people are strongly motivated to participate in civic activities, albeit for different reasons. Vromen and Colin (2010) had similar findings in their study of young people's views on youth participation in Australia. They found 3 motivations for young people's participation namely 1) learn new skills and obtain information, 2) social benefit i.e. develop new friendships and 3) give something back i.e. contribute to bring about improved outcomes for young people and the community. Vromen and Colin's first 2 motivators (i.e. learn new skills and social benefit) can be likened to my study's self-interest category, while the third motivator (i.e. give something back) can be classed as an altruistic desire. This finding unsurprisingly means that young people are less likely to participate in initiatives in which they are not motivated. Hence by understanding what motivates young people to engage in civic activities, policy-making and other decision-making forums, participatory opportunities that emphasise young people's interests and motivations could be created in order to sustain their participation. According to Vromen and Colin (2010:107) young people are more likely to be "attracted to opportunities that look interesting and that highlight what's in it for participants".

Findings of this study challenge the notion that young people and in particular young non-voters exhibit low political efficacy. Political efficacy refers to "people's beliefs in their ability to understand and participate effectively in governance" (Coleman et al, 2008:771). It is directly related to citizens' perception of how responsive political institutions are to them as actors in the political process. According to Easton and Dennis, for individuals to be politically efficacious they must "construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the places of officialdom" (cited in Coleman et al, 2008:772). There is a distinction between

‘internal’ and ‘external’ efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to people’s confidence in their own capacities to understand politics and show interest in it (Sheerin, 2007).

External efficacy refers to people’s views and experiences of how political institutions and political actors respond to them i.e people’s perception of trustworthiness of politicians, their responsiveness, and believe whether voting can make any difference (Sheerin, 2007).

Low political efficacy results in low participation in political establishments. As noted earlier, the declining levels of youth participation in elections have led some authors to conclude that young people have become disinterested in politics (Adsett, 2003; Vrcan, 2002; Russell et al, 2002; Institute for Conflict Research, 2006; Print et al, cited in Sheerin, 2007). The young people in this study contradict this claim in the literature. The study found that although the young people are currently non-voters they actually have high levels of political efficacy. In spite of their non-voting status, through their advocacy work, their use of broadcast media to reach out to political institutions and actors, and their use of the internet platform to contribute to parliamentary debates they have demonstrated their interest in politics. They are more interested in issue-based politics than simply voting at elections.

Nonetheless, young people often face barriers in their quest to be involved in issue-based politics that have an impact on their welfare. Their diminutive figures and life experiences are equated to their mental capacity and are thus thought of as not having any significant knowledge to contribute to decision-making.

Young people tend to reject this assertion and call for a respect for their right to participate in decisions/policies that affect them irrespective of their life experiences. Young people’s right to participate as contained in the UN Convention on the rights of the child; African Children’s Charter; Ghana Children’s Act 1998 and the African Youth Charter is not premised on young people having significant knowledge about the issues at hand. Their participation right is premised on their ‘evolving capacity’ i.e. their maturity and understanding. It is therefore the responsibility of adults to let young people understand or have knowledge of policy options so they (young people) can express their views about those options, because young people are highly motivated and want to contribute to policies and programmes that of interest to them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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