

## **Civic Education Overview**

Citizens are at the heart of a functioning democracy; they give life and meaning to the principles, processes and institutions. For democracy to develop and endure, citizens need to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Without the involvement of citizens in political life, government power can be abused and the basic rights and freedoms of democracy can go unrealized.

Because a successful democracy requires informed participation, citizens must first understand ideas about citizenship, politics and government. They need knowledge to make decisions about policy preferences and the proper use of authority, along with the skills to voice their concerns and to hold government officials accountable. And then, they need to want to exercise their rights, and have the political space to do so without unreasonable resistance or harassment from authorities or others.

Civic Education is a critical and effective empowerment tool for promoting citizen participation in democratic processes. It empowers citizens, both as individuals and as part of collective groupings. Citizen participation is built by protecting individual and collective rights and ensuring appreciation of each citizen's obligations to the society of which they are a part.

All citizens – male and female; young and old; civil servants; politicians; rural or urban - can benefit from Civic Education. A reinforcement of civic disposition, civic skills and an enhancement of the knowledge base of all citizens can make a significant contribution to achieving development objectives. For example, in transition context, civic education can help reduce uncertainty about how the transition is unfolding and how it will affect citizens. It can also help citizens better understand their individual rights and responsibilities, and position them to be active participants in transition decisions and processes.

## **Civic Education Objectives**

Civic Education is generally understood to as a means to develop c three elements of democratic citizenship: civic disposition, civic knowledge and civic skills.

**Civic disposition** involves citizens:

- Developing confidence to be able to participate in civic life
- Engaging in political processes
- Assuming the roles, rights and responsibilities usually associated with citizenship in democratic systems

- Being open, tolerant and responsible in exercising their rights and responsibilities

**Civic knowledge** means citizens:

- Understand their political and civic context
- Know their social and economic rights as well as their political and civil rights
- Understand the roles, rights and responsibilities of citizenship

**Civic skills** involve citizens:

- Acquiring the ability to explain, analyze, interact, evaluate, defend a position, and monitor processes and outcomes
- Using knowledge for informed participation in civic and political processes.

## **Civic Education Principles and Practices**

At the core of civic education are the underlying democratic principles of freedom, transparency, participation, responsiveness, accountability, empowerment and equality. Civic education can help shape a democratic society where these principles are put into practice.

A civic education campaign will include both content and process elements. Content is defined as the knowledge and skills being introduced through the campaign. Civic education content can be reinforced by using processes that allow citizens to practice democratic behaviors. For this reason, civic education is often more effective when interactive processes are used. Discussion-based civic education is one example.

Discussion-based civic education recognizes that action reinforces learning and that most adults prefer experiential forms of education. By using interactive approaches, the emphasis is placed on participants taking an active part in the learning.

Methodologically, these type of programs usually rely on group-process and deliberation techniques, as a means of developing the foundation for future collective action.

At the same time, effective civic education campaigns during a transition period must incorporate information about the current political and social developments. Even though they choose to participate in civic education sessions, most people do not often think about democracy and they may not see the immediate connection between civic education and what they view as pressing issues and current developments. For this reason, it is helpful to practical reference from the daily lives of participants. It is also important to include tangible information about what is happening with the transition. Through the discussion process, participants can then move from something close to

home with which they can relate to the larger democratic issue or idea underlying the discussion.

### **Adult Education Considerations**

- Adults have established values and opinions that need to be recognized and drawn upon during activities. Comparing values and sharing opinions are also necessary elements of citizen participation.
- Adults benefit from participatory activities that allow them to relate new knowledge and information to realistic problems and previous experiences.
- Adults need to understand why they are learning something and need to believe that learning is in their interest. In other words, new information and skills must be directly relevant and meaningful to the concerns and desires of adults.