Youth Civic Engagement in Non-Formal Education

Research Context:

Globally, young people have a critical part to play in social change, not just as adults in the future but as active citizens today. For all young people, whether in or out of school, civic engagement is a way to hone the knowledge, skills, relationships and commitments that support their effectiveness as individuals and as contributing citizens. The potential of non-formal youth education to develop leadership and citizenship through civic engagement is enormous, and there are significant and substantial benefits for civic engagement recognised in the four main theoretical perspectives:

- The central role of social support – especially emotional, esteem and advice assistance.
- Achieving resilience – especially getting help and dealing with problems over time.
- Shaping civil society – through community-level interaction and social networks.
- Positive youth development – through emphasising skills and assets for strength.

For young people themselves, the benefits of civic engagement programmes include:

- Building their sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.
- Developing their affiliation and commitment to the community, especially an individual belief that they can have an impact on the community and how that, in turn, helps in developing a young person’s sense of identity and countering problem behaviour.

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Key Findings:

This research explores five theoretical and practice-based approaches to youth civic engagement for consideration by policymakers and service-providers:

1. Providing non-formal civic education opportunities to give young people the knowledge to participate in public life, and extra-curricular and community-related activities to enhance their skills in doing so.

2. Developing community service and volunteering initiatives to provide young people with pathways, as individuals, to promote positive change in their own communities.

3. Organising political action, advocacy, social and community change programmes. These recognise that young people are traditionally less engaged in voting, reading newspapers and electoral politics but more engaged in shaping priorities for change and influencing the actions of institutions and organisations. This is especially so where their experience and perception of need, inequity or injustice, and issues of knowledge, rights and power arise.

4. Developing leadership and the practice of leadership to enable young people not just to prepare for employment but to assume responsibilities e.g. as head of a household. One useful approach defines youth leadership as a set of competencies that can be learned and practiced e.g. participating in group processes, building consensus, and getting personal ideas and interests built into a collective view and approach.

5. Involving young people in research and evaluation. One way of doing this is participatory action research, where researchers and youth work together as partners to design and implement research on issues affecting their lives. Examples would be involving young people doing surveys and interviews and presenting their findings in public.