

Power and Powerless-Youth Civic Engagement the Promise of Democracy?

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This paper draws upon the preliminary findings of a PhD. study, initiated in 2009, under the umbrella of the UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement based at the National University of Ireland, Galway. This study utilised a youth-centred participatory methodology in researching three rural and three urban communities in the sub-Saharan country of Zambia. This exploratory study, underpinned by cultural competency and a gender lens, generated both youth and adult understandings of civic engagement. The research has illuminated many challenges to be negotiated in the process of revitalising grass-root civil society in Zambia.

Historically, Zambian civil society has been effective in contributing to social transformations. For example, in its pursuit of independence from British colonial power and other changes that has led to the establishment of the current multi-party political system. Legacies of previous doctrines and past government abuse and corruption are associated with the dis-empowered civil society. Currently an unequal society prevails; a rural and urban division is evident, where young people and women occupy a marginalised position. The Zambian government has introduced legislation to de-centralise government structures and various policies promote gender equality and youth participation. These outlined legislation and policies provide the rhetoric as a backdrop to the conducted research.

This paper initially considers the mis-match between the youth[1]and adult[2] understandings of civic engagement in Zambia. Second, the current provision of youth civic engagement activities, power dynamics and factors preventing the participation of some young people in these activities is explored. This leads to the conclusion that the rhetoric and reality of youth participation and gender equality in civic engagement activities is somewhat different from each other. As a societal construct youth civic engagement activities may be part of a hegemonic process contributing to the maintenance of the status quo. . This is an essential element of a democracy, which can politically engage citizens and hold government and decision-making structures accountable for their decisions and actions.

The study proposes by implementing a range of measures to rebalance existing power relationships may strengthen civil society at grass root level. For example, by enhancing existing engagement activities, introducing new culturally appropriate opportunities with young people, facilitating adult-youth dialogue and by listening to and responding to young people, as community members and adults of the future. By doing so, these measures may contribute to the development of a vibrant civil society in Zambia

[1] Definition for the purpose of the study: Young person, 12, 13 or 14 years of age

[2] Definition for the purpose of the study: Adult 18 years of age and older