

Active Citizens Days – Civic Education



Summary of workshops held in Oslo

September 10.2019

For the purpose of the meeting civic education was defined as encompassing the definitions of both education for democratic citizenship and human rights education and was based on Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education¹.

As the charter rightly identifies, education plays an essential role in the promotion of core values such as democracy, human rights and rule of law as well as in prevention of human rights violations. Education is also increasingly seen as a defense tool against the rise of violence, extremism, populism, xenophobia, discrimination and intolerance.

The first Active Citizens Days meeting in Oslo gave the opportunity to organizations from across the beneficiary countries and Norway, working on civic education to come together and discuss the most challenging and pressing issues that they have in their work.

Strategies adopted in introducing civic education in the various EEA and EU countries vary, as well as the level for formal and informal education measures that exist. With many successes and good examples of educational tools and programs, some questions still remain:

- How can civic education contribute to strengthen the respect for rule of law in a country?
- How can civic education instill the principles of tolerance and inclusiveness in communities?
- How can we use civic education to create more engagement?
- How can civic education be an antidote to populism?

The purpose of the meeting was to exchange experiences and discuss concrete cases and initiatives among participants. Participating organizations were all versed organizations with solid experience from the field of civic education and the meeting was meant to give space for these experiences to converge for mutual learning and inspiration. The organizers wished to give as much time as possible for discussions and interaction among participants.

The event was supported financially by the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria, Active Citizens Fund Slovakia and Active Citizens Fund Czech Republic and organized in cooperation with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, contact point for bilateral cooperation under the Active Citizens Fund.

The event was opened by Mr. Bjørn Engesland, Secretary general of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, followed by a key note speech by Mr. Niels Engelschiøn, Director General Department for European Affairs and Chairman of Financial Mechanisms Committee, Government of Norway. Csilla Czimbalmos addressed the practical issues of the workshops and concluded the opening session.

¹ <https://rm.coe.int/16803034e5>

1. Workshop on civic education and the rule of law

Guiding questions for the workshop

Can civic education contribute to awareness raising about accountability and transparency? What are the societal prerequisites in terms of education in order to instill the principles of rule of law?

Participants

Participants were from organizations representing Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Norway and Portugal.

The workshop included discussions that laid down the premises for the situation of rule of law in each of the countries represented in the group. The opening point was the premise and at the same time the situation description for Norway, that the principles for rule of law and accountability start through education as early as kindergarten: "I respect you, I expect you to respect me." These rules are predefined and are part of a participatory process in education and upbringing. Rules are defined to be a benefit not a burden and they are created for safety. Because they are often designed through a participatory method, most have a sense of ownership to these rules. Seen from this perspective, it is much easier to implement rules.

It is not only about respecting rules, but also about having ownership of the rules.

Conclusion of the discussions was that there is generally a gap between making laws and implementing them. Cross-cutting work must be done with pupils, teachers, families, public administration and police in order to establish trust (in more simplified way).

As supplement for discussions and as recommendation we refer also to the newly published UNODOC's Education for Justice initiative guide for policymakers on [Strengthening the rule of law through education](#).



2. Workshop on civic education and inclusive societies

Guiding questions for the workshop

What are the principles of integration in a cohesive society? How can civic education instill the principles of tolerance and inclusiveness in communities?

Participants

Participants were from organizations representing Norway, Portugal, Greece, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Poland and Lithuania.

Part one of the workshop involved a more general description of the situation in the countries represented in the group. The discussions centered around identifying common challenges and best practices on how inclusive societies can be created. One of the main topics discussed was how civic education can instill the principles of tolerance and inclusiveness in societies.

Methods that work

Participatory methodology
Non-formal education
Use of arts in school
Collaboration with other NGOs
Training trainers approach
Cooperation with teachers' training institutions
Live testimonies on issues of grave concern such as migration
Intercultural meetings for youth working on joint projects
Face to face meeting between teachers

Reasons for low inclusiveness

Lack of motivation from teachers
Difficulties in securing funds for NGOs to work on the topic
Challenges in collaborating with parents
Lack of space for students to actively participate in schools
Gap between legislation and school practice
Increasing weight of religious education to the detriment of civic education
Difficulties in getting training accreditation
Disparities between bigger cities and rural areas

Recommendations for stakeholders

The second part of the workshop identified recommendations for measures that can be taken to enhance inclusiveness through civic education.

For NGOs:

- Opening up communication strategies, communicate better the impact of your work. Challenge ourselves!
- Ensure transparency and enhance quality of your work (innovative tools, reach out for new participants, etc.)
- Cooperate with other NGOs, unite resources
- Build more capacities among CSOs that would enable them to fulfil watchdog functions

For decision-makers/ education authorities:

- Reaching a shared understanding of the concept of civic education
- The state should provide systemic space for civic education, and NGO activities can supplement it with their activities (collaboration)
- Teacher training should be mainly offered by state/ regions, supported by NGOs as an essential resource
- Stay open for cooperation with NGOs that are involved in the civic education – they are partners rather than competitors

For decision-makers:

- „Zero tolerance“ to the laws that restrict the activities of NGOs
- Political advocacy for the recognition of civic education as a part of the core curriculum



3. Workshop on civic education and engagement

Guiding questions for the workshop

What are the civic education best practices for engagement and how can we work with them in different circumstances and different countries?

Participants

Participants were from organizations representing Greece, Norway, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia.

Due to a high number of participants attending this workshop, the work was structured in smaller working units. The discussion topics were distributed in three smaller groups as such:

1. What is in fact civic engagement?
2. How and why the youth engage?
3. Is democracy a way of life? Is civic engagement a prerequisite for democracy?

The **first group** discussions went from formal definition to brainstorming. The group first captured the different views of what civic engagement is as: a political system and a sense of belonging. The discussion then turned to more concrete ways of answering the questions: Who? How? Why? Discussion also touched upon the phenomena of “civil vs. uncivil” societies and the trends of radicalizations and extremism in Europe.

The discussions in **second group** touched the different levels of engagement of young people as:

- The themes they feel are important e.g. environmental issues (School strikes, Greta phenomenon), or socially oriented programmed – the youth engage when they feel attached to the topic (it has to be about them);
- How are the schools connected with engagement - The engagement around schools, both formal and non-formal education;
- The differences of engagement within smaller or big/organized societies;
- Role of the family was named as a crucial in developing an awareness of engagement;
- The positive sides of engagement as gaining trust, and supporting values of democracy;
- The negative sides – skepticism among young people.

The **third group** was trying to answer the question If is democracy a way of life? The word democracy is an empty shell, there are many different ways of thinking in defining its content. We are living the shift from participatory to spectator democracy and the phenomena of social medial is strongly supporting or even driving this shift/change. The group further discussed the ideas of what the basics of democracy is – asking questions, facing authorities, holding authorities accountable. Democracy is essentially a tool and not a medicine. Discussions were also around the idea that there should be more awareness around the fact that democracy is more than just the right to vote.

Inspirational points for stakeholders to increase civic engagement through civic education

The second part of the workshop was centered around the following issues about civic engagement:

1. The Values/contributions of civic engagement to free and open societies
2. The Challenges in the work of civil society organizations
3. The Successes or how to succeed?

For civic education to encourage **engagement and promote open societies**, it needs to have curricula and educational structures that manage to increase the human capital: intellectual, social and emotional. The attributes that such education should be characterized by are:

- A bottom-up approach
- Growth mindset
- Inductive of mutual learning among individuals
- Focused on well-being and quality of life
- Freedom
- Focused on common values, cohesion and belonging
- Motivational
- Trust
- Connection
- Accountability and corruption sensitivity

Challenges of engagement for organizations working in the field of civic education hinge upon the internal and external cultural limits. There are big differences between countries' cultural frames for engagement, e.g. in post-communist countries there is a common attitude of non-engagement: "Don't stick your head out" or "Don't rock the boat."

The following contributing factors that influence the level of engagement were identified:

- Political atmosphere – What is allowed? (teacher at schools, pupils, NGOs)
- System – What is civic education? Is it defined or not defined? Civic education is for some communities a controversial issue. There may be a need for a "Code of conduct."
- Financing – Who should finance it? NGOs receiving Open Society Foundation grants are labeled as "Soros agents" having thus a negative effect. If state financing is involved, what are the criteria for awarding grants? Who decides then what topics civic education includes (i.e. patriotism education, nationalist education)?
- Communication: Fear/Opportunity, manipulation, Lack of information, lack of critical literacy
- Collaboration among NGOs; not easy, sometimes not agreeing, time consuming
- Complex reality – no clear answer on complex questions and difficult topics
- Teachers – are essential, but are often overwhelmed by too many duties, not socially involved, not educated for civic education, are in clash with parents, lack time and motivation or are skeptical to civic education
- Millions of adults – no one educates them

The third questions on **how to succeed with civic engagement**, generated the following recommendations:

- NGOs and civil society organizations are functioning as a catalysator/mediator of the society and the societal challenges – this should be recognized
- It is crucial to open the space for civic actors – only then the things can happen
- Personal, good experiences are crucial to share such as:
 - Forum for citizenship, Portugal
 - Youth space with content, Slovakia
 - Community internship, Estonia
 - Reaching the far-away youth, Czech Republic
 - Transforming the public library sector, Romania
 - Write your project, Slovenia
 - Million moment 4 democracy, Czech Republic
 - Citizen Voice in public space, Greece
 - Children parliament, Slovakia
- Thinking in long-term perspectives is essential
- In post-communist countries there is shared feeling that democracy as not a defined concept, and therefore it is not lived. Educating about what democracy is, is essential.



4. Workshop on civic education and populism

Guiding questions for the workshop

What are the most effective ways for civic education to counteract populism and contribute to a stronger community of values around fundamental human rights principles?

Participants

Participants were from organizations representing Estonia, Romania, Slovakia, Norway, Slovenia, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Bulgaria.

Part one of the workshop dealt with central issues tied to the phenomena of populism in the countries represented in the group and sought to give answers to how civic education can be employed to fight the phenomena.

Some of the worrying faces of populism identified are:

- Changes in legislation decreasing the rights of civil society organizations (Poland)
- NGOs are not allowed to have any activities at schools (Poland)
- Institutional rejection of human rights: migrants, minorities, women, lgbtiq
- Political attacks against Roma minorities (Bulgaria)
- Word “gender” has received negative connotations (Bulgaria)
- Civic education not accepted (Bulgaria)
- Increasingly harsher rhetoric against refugees but also local Muslims (Slovenia)
- Increase in islamophobia and hate speech (Slovenia)
- Negativity against migrants and Roma pushed at the parliament level (Slovakia)
- Populist parties set the tone on gender issues (Slovakia)
- Unwillingness to ratify Istanbul convention – signature withdrawn (Slovakia)
- Delegitimization of NGOs as liberal extremists (Slovakia)
- Very conservative understanding of family (Lithuania)
- Violence against children tolerated (Lithuania)
- Relativization of the value of human rights as unimportant (Lithuania)
- Hate speech slowly gaining grounds, sometimes in Parliament as well (Norway)
- Attempts to limit reproductive rights (Norway)
- Veiled discrimination against immigrants based on language, ethnicity (Norway)
- Right wing extremism on the rise claiming that the “islamization” of Norway is under way (Norway)

Right wing populism uses tactics of separation to split communities and spread its influence. Understanding the roots and the mechanisms that contribute to the propagation of populism is essential in combating the phenomena.

Societies today are characterized by quickly changing processes. For many, change is associated with loss of control and causes fear. Populism makes use of this fear and plays on it to create dissent and polarize societies. The main target groups for populist attacks are women, minorities, migrants, refugees, sexual minorities.

Recommendations and inspiring positive measures

The second part of the workshop identified a series of recommendations and best practices of measures that can serve as inspiration for organizations and individuals seeking to limit the influence of populism through civic education. These are structured around methodologies that work, best practices of work in challenging environments and steps that can be taken to improve the situation.

Methodologies that work

With youth

- Training programmes building critical mass, improving democratic skills (such as the ability to shift perspectives) and enhancing critical thinking
- Democratic debating training through competitions (good experiences from Slovakia)
- Storytelling

With schools and teachers

- Implementing digital literacy education
- Engaging in remembrance days, linking history to present day challenges
- Storytelling (survivors, shared life stories)

With media

- Training programmes

With general public

- International networking
- Effectively addressing the needs of deprived groups
- Storytelling, documenting and sharing of stories
- Exhibitions
- Working with emotions
- Participating in public debates
- Presence in media and the public sphere is key to change narratives

With authorities and interest groups

- Continuous advocacy for democracy and human rights

How to work in environments where democracy and human rights are not mainstream or even accepted?

- Using academic free spaces as source of expertise and place to meet students
- Creating alternative spaces
- Focus on values
- Use of “hidden agenda strategy”
- Support local activities
- Universalizing the ideas of democracy and human rights
- Support self-organizing and community-based activities
- Solidarity among NGOs and international networking as strategy

Recommended steps to improve the situation

- Support civic journalism
- Engage new people/activists (in particular the less radical voices, those in between the already persuaded on both sides)
- Support individuals (eg. teachers, bloggers)
- Cooperate with popular artists
- Use existing spaces and institutions to reach out to people
 - Festivals (good experiences from Lithuania)
 - Schools
 - Churches
 - Parents associations
- Listen! Listening to what people are concerned about is as equally important as sending out a message
- Introducing human rights as an important everyday concept
- Seek to adapt all national curricula to include and emphasize the importance of fundamental human rights (not to forget: this also goes for well-functioning democracies)
- Training in digital literacy
- In order to have more influence tomorrow, NGOs need to build credibility and prepare for an improved situation today
- Showing respect and listening to the needs and emotions of those who are likely to vote for populist parties
- Support the creation of “neutral” groups which also include those targeted by populists (across ethnicity, religion etc.)
- Working on community level, engaging members of community and community key figures
- Continuously evaluate if funding is being efficiently used



Resources and inspiration on civic education

- Council of Europe's Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education <https://rm.coe.int/16803034e5>
- UNODC's Education for Justice Initiative guide for policymakers, Strengthening the rule of law through education https://www.unodc.org/documents/e4j/UNESCO/2795_18_Global_Citizenship_Education_for_the_Rule_of_Law_griis_complet.pdf
- Citizenship and participation, Compass, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/citizenship-and-participation#Forms%20of%20participation>
- Human rights education key to secure, inclusive societies, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/399068>
- The missing link between civic education and populism, <https://89initiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Civic-Education-report.pdf>