

Civic Education

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Tool summary

Civic education (also known as citizen education or democracy education) can be broadly defined as the provision of information and learning experiences to equip and empower citizens to participate in democratic processes. The education can take very different forms, including classroom-based learning, informal training, experiential learning, and mass media campaigns. Civic education can be targeted at children or adults, in developed or developing countries, and at the local, national or international level. As such, civic education is an approach that employs a range of different methods, and is often used in combination with other participatory governance tools.

What is it?

The overall goal of civic education is to promote civic engagement and support democratic and participatory governance. The idea behind civic education is to promote the *demand* for good governance (i.e. an informed and engaged public), as a necessary complement to efforts to improve the *practice* of good governance. Civic education has been used to address a wide variety of political and governance issues (e.g. corruption, civic apathy or post-conflict reconciliation) as well as important social issues (e.g. domestic violence, drug abuse, and HIV/AIDS).

Civic education is concerned with three different elements: civic knowledge, civic skills and civic disposition. Civic knowledge refers to citizens' understanding of the workings of the political system and of their own political and civic rights and responsibilities (e.g. the rights to freedom of expression and to vote and run for public office, and the responsibilities to respect the rule of law and the rights and interests of others). Civic skills refer to citizens' ability to analyze, evaluate, take and defend positions on public issues, and to use their knowledge to participate in civic and political processes (e.g. to monitor government performance, or mobilize other citizens around particular issues). Civic dispositions are defined as the citizen traits necessary for a democracy (e.g. tolerance, public spiritedness, civility, critical mindedness and willingness to listen, negotiate, and compromise).

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By far the most widespread application of civic education is in formal school education. Civic education is being taught as part of the regular curriculum in primary and secondary schools around the world, and there are extensive pedagogic resources available from the many civil society organizations involved in promoting this aspect of the approach². Some useful resources in this regard are the curricular materials of organizations such as [Center for Civic Education](http://www.civiced.org/) the [Civic Education Partnership Initiative](http://ceri.civnet.org/) and [CIVNET](http://www.civnet.org/).

This write-up will focus on other types of civic education in informal education and information-sharing activities. Civil society has a large role to play in implementing these kinds of applications. Some of the common uses of civic education outside of schools include voter education, awareness-raising programs for disadvantaged groups, such as immigrant communities or the poor, on their social and political rights, and leadership training for local civil society activists. Civic education has also been used in the public sector to improve the democratic functioning of local government or political parties.

Civic education is frequently used in conjunction with other capacity-building and dialogue approaches to strengthen the ability of citizens and civil society groups to organize themselves, interact with others and make their voices heard by those in power. Thus for example, a civic education initiative may reveal the need for targeted training of community leaders on communications, or may be followed up by the facilitation of citizen forums and advocacy campaigns³. A good example of a civic education initiative that was embedded in a broader democratic governance programme is the work of [UNDP in East Timor](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/02021001.html).

Those delivering civic education services (outside of schools) include civil society groups like community organizations, NGOs, education institutions, faith-based groups, international development organizations, media organizations, the private sector, and government agencies.

Some of the tools most commonly used in civic education activities include seminars, workshops, focus group discussions, drama, simulations, role plays, radio and television programmes, information technologies (e.g. blogs, internet

² See for example the curricular materials of the Center for Civic Education (http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=civic_education_resources), the Civic Education Partnership Initiative (<http://ceri.civnet.org>) and CIVNET (http://www.civnet.org/contenidos.php?id_secciones=OQ==&ACTION=TGlzdGFyTGlicmVyaWFz)

³ A good example of a civic education initiative that was embedded in a broader democratic governance programme is the work of UNDP in East Timor; see UNDP (2004), page 19.

forums) and other informal teaching and information-sharing methods. The emphasis is on participatory and cooperative methods of learning.

Another tool used in civic education programmes (mostly school or university-based ones) is 'service learning' where participants spend some time in their communities, involved in political action such as for e.g. attending or organizing political meetings or protests, or gathering signatures for petitions⁴. More information on service learning is available at www.servicelearning.org and <http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-3/service.htm>.

Training-of-trainer and peer-to-peer programmes are frequently used, to spread the impact of civic education efforts and allow for more continuous learning opportunities⁵. The Training-of-trainer manual developed by [CIVCOM](#) Partners for training facilitators of community-based problem-solving workshops and UNDP's guide on [peer-to-peer learning](#) drawn from its experiences across the world are two useful resources.

How is it done?

Given the wide variety of applications of the civic education approach, it is not possible to provide detailed guidelines here that would be relevant to all the different applications. Instead, this section will present a generic process of how to plan, implement and monitor a civic education programme or activity. This will be followed by an illustrative example of a workshop-based civic education activity to show the steps involved in the actual learning process.

First though, a few words about the role of the media in civic education as this is an area with considerable potential for advancing citizen engagement and many civic education activities can make use of media resources as research and awareness-raising tools⁶. [UNESCO](#) has developed a manual designed for use by facilitators of training/discussion workshops on the role of the media in civic education.

In particular, the media can help facilitate civic education by:

- Raising public consciousness about a social or political issue;
- Reducing issues to choices to show the clear alternatives;
- Highlighting the core values (and any conflicting values) behind each choice;

⁴ For more details on service learning as part of civic education, see for example Garman (1995) and the resources available at www.servicelearning.org.

⁵ For a training-of-trainers manual on civic education, see for example CIVCOM Partners (2005). For an example of peer-to-peer training, see UNDP (2004), page 22.

⁶ See for example UNESCO (2009), which forms the basis of this subsection.

- Spelling out the costs and consequences of each choice;
- Bridging the expert-public gap by translating technical jargon into clear language and highlighting public opinion; and
- Facilitating debate among different groups of citizens.

A good example of how media can be used in civic education is seen in the case of [Africa Good Governance Programme on the Radio Waves](#), a programme run by the World Bank Institute during 2005-2007. This distance learning programme was transmitted via digital satellite radio technology to municipalities in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, with the aim of helping them and their citizens to create more transparent and efficient municipal governments. The programme introduced listeners to the concepts, definitions, and tools of civic participation and governance, and presented a step-by-step methodology for participatory budgeting⁷.

General steps for implementing civic education

1. Start with a needs assessment, to understand the civic education needs of the target group. This needs assessment can take the form of a situation analysis, and could entail, for example:
 - Identifying any existing providers of civic education;
 - Identifying existing government policies on civic education;
 - Clarifying the constitutional and/or legal framework within which civic education programming might take place;
 - Mapping existing civic education provision by identifying thematic areas addressed, target groups, sectoral priorities, geographical scope, methodologies used, materials available, partnerships and linkages, and the level of existing civic education capacity.
2. Identify the target audience and design the civic education activity according to the gaps identified and the capacities assessed during the situational analysis. This stage involves identifying possible engagement options (e.g. basing the education around a specific issue, social group, or event) and the level and formality of the civic education activity.
3. Develop civic education modules and materials to fit the design (or use existing ones if available).
4. Train civic educators and conduct one or two pilot activities to test the training process and materials.
5. Make any revisions necessary and apply the full-scale civic education activity.

⁷ For more details on this programme, see Hirschfeld (2008) and visit www.comminit.com/en/node/134525/348

6. Measure the impact of the civic education activity and ask participants for feedback to improve future experiences.

An example of a specific civic education initiative

'*We the People: Project Citizen*' is one of the most widely applied civic education programmes in the world. It is a curricular programme for students, youth organizations and adult groups that aims to promote citizen engagement in local and state government⁸. Developed in the United States of America in the mid-1990s, Project Citizen has since been translated into more than forty languages. The typical process followed by the participants is as follows:

1. Identification of a public policy problem in their community;
2. Research into the problem, by conducting interviews and surveys, gathering secondary data, and referring to print and internet sources of information;
3. Evaluation of alternative policy solutions to address the problem;
4. Prioritization of one policy solution and further development of this solution;
5. Creation of a political action plan to enlist government support for the proposed policy;
6. Development of a portfolio of the research work and the proposed policy;
7. Presentation of the portfolio in a public hearing before a panel of civic-minded community members.

Benefits

The two main areas where civic education programmes have shown consistently positive impacts are⁹:

- *Increased participation in political processes:* In general, those citizens who have taken part in civic education programmes are more likely to become involved in activities such as voting, taking part in community problem-solving initiatives, attending local government meetings, participating in protests, contributing to election campaigns, and contacting elected officials.
- *Greater political knowledge:* Again, participants of civic education programmes have been shown to have better knowledge about the basic features of the political system of their country, including the structure and function of democratic institutions, their basic political and civil rights, and the timing of elections.

⁸ For more details on Project Citizen, see www.civiced.org/index.php?page=introduction.

⁹ The benefits of civic education programmes have been highlighted in numerous evaluation studies, including for example USAID (2002), on which this section is based, and Finkel (2002)

More generally, civic education can contribute important benefits in promoting good governance and civic engagement.

Many evaluation studies such as for e.g. the one carried out by USAID in 2002 have shown that the benefits of civic education programmes for adults are not always shared equally between men and women. Indeed, civic education can actually widen the gender gap in political participation as men tend to gain more from these programmes, strengthening their democratic values and behaviours at a greater rate than their female counterparts. This skewed impact is likely a reflection of the cultural and economic barriers to women's participation in political processes, especially in the developing world. Evaluations of school-based civic education programmes on the other hand show either a weaker or no correlation between gender and the political participation benefits of these programmes.

Challenges and Lessons

Challenges

Some of the main challenges faced by those applying civic education as articulated in the UNDP literature revolve around the risk of 'elite capture,' which means the domination of the deliberative process by more powerful, articulate groups. Since one of the key objectives of many civic education programmes is to empower weaker groups to participate in democratic processes, these challenges need to be tackled head-on. Civic education activities targeting the poor and marginalized will therefore need to overcome the realities facing these less powerful groups, including¹⁰:

- Low levels of literacy;
- Apathy, cynicism and distrust in the goals and intent of civic education programmes, due to years of oppression, exploitation and marginalization;
- Reluctance to discuss or speak out on issues of concern, as this may be perceived as too risky;
- More pressing priorities – for some, civic education is an unaffordable and irrelevant luxury in the midst of a daily struggle for survival. Setting aside sufficient time to participate in civic education activities may be a challenge, particularly for women.

In addition, civic education has at times been observed as an entity that often adds to the deepening disparities between different groups in society in terms of

¹⁰ These challenges are cited from UNDP (2004).

not only widening the gender gap, but also the gap between those with differing levels of cognitive skills and political awareness prior to their participation in the civic education activity. Commonly, those participants better 'primed' to receive the messages that civic education delivers will benefit more from the education, and use the knowledge and skills they have learned to greater effect than those who are less well prepared (generally the more marginal, less powerful groups in society). In this respect, civic education can risk contributing to the maintenance, or even exacerbation, of the inequalities in political awareness and participation (see for e.g. [Finkel, 2000a](#)).

Finally, while civic education has proved effective in strengthening political knowledge and participation, it has been less successful in instilling democratic values such as political tolerance or trust in political institutions ([USAID, 2002](#)). In fact, in some cases, participants have shown a tendency to become more distrustful and skeptical of their governments ([Finkel, 2000b](#)). This is not necessarily a failing of civic education, as it may reflect a strengthening of critical thinking among participants and may lead to more pressure for reform of weak governance. In addition, values such as tolerance are often deeply held and formed over a lifetime. Civic education programmes are unlikely to change participants' value systems in a significant way although some programmes have had a positive impact on social values such as gender equality and respect.

Lessons

From [USAID's evaluation studies](#), it can be discerned that effective civic education activities are characterized by the following critical elements¹¹:

- Frequent sessions: participants will gain little benefit from attending one or two sessions; once a threshold of three sessions has been reached, the impacts will be significantly greater.
- Participatory methods: the use of interactive methods such as role-plays, problem- solving activities, and mock political or judicial activities is key to effective learning.
- Special efforts to reach the less powerful: given the above-mentioned challenges associated with involving and benefiting less powerful groups, civic education activities need to be carefully designed to match the needs and conditions facing such groups.
- Linking with opportunities for political participation: civic education can either tap into existing channels for participation (e.g. by partnering with local political advocacy NGOs) or create their own channels (e.g. by setting up meetings between programme participants and elected officials). Some of the

¹¹ These lessons are cited from USAID (2002).

most successful civic education programmes for adults have been built around community problem-solving activities.

- Linking to participants' concerns: civic education based solely on abstract notions, unrelated to the daily lives of participants, will have little impact; successful programmes weave lessons about democratic values and principles into the real-life issues and experiences of participants.
- Focus on hot topics: participants will engage more fully if the topics discussed are ones they feel strongly about, so it is useful to define and discuss a number of controversial issues where there is likely to be a range of opinions among participants.
- Model democracy: civic education programmes need to be run in a democratic manner, to demonstrate the values being taught, such as participation, tolerance and respect.
- Address the supply side too: as civic education is generally concerned with increasing the demand for good governance, consideration also needs to be given to strengthening the skills, knowledge and awareness of the supply side actors to respond to this demand. Thus, civic education is most effective if accompanied by capacity building efforts directed at civil servants, the police, parliamentarians, etc.

Key resources

Centre for Civic Education, USA

<http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=introduction>

☞ The site is an excellent resource on 'Project Citizen', a school based civic education programme in the United States of America.

Finkel, S.E. (2000a). Civic Education and the Mobilization of Political Participation in Developing Democracies. Paper prepared for the conference 'Political Participation: Building a Research Agenda', Princeton University, October 12-14, 2000.

<http://www.stevenfinkel.info/download/civic%20education%20and%20the%20mobilization%20of%20pp.pdf>

☞ This paper reviews the impacts of civic education programmes in the Dominican Republic and South Africa and offers some practical lessons for the design of similar programmes elsewhere.

Finkel, S.E. (2000b). Can Tolerance be Taught? Adult Civic Education and the Development of Democratic Values. Paper prepared for the conference 'Rethinking Democracy in the New Millennium', University of Houston, February 16-19, 2000.

<http://www.uh.edu/democracy/finkelp.pdf>

☞ This paper examines the extent to which civic education programmes can instil democratic values such as tolerance, drawing on civic education experiences in the Dominican Republic and South Africa.

Garman, B. (1995). Civic Education through Service Learning.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1996-3/service.htm>

☞ This web article outlines the rationale and benefits of service learning and provides some brief guidance on designing service learning experiences.

Learn and Serve. National Service-learning Clearinghouse

www.servicelearning.org



- ☞ This is a good resource for anyone interested in organizing service learning opportunities, and provides starter kits for both school and community-based programmes. UNDP (2004). Civic Education: Practical Guidance Note. Bureau for Development Policy, Democratic Governance Group, United Nations Development Programme.

http://www.undp.org/governance/docs/A2I_Guides_Civic%20education.pdf

- ☞ This is an excellent introductory how-to guide on civic education with case studies of UNDP initiatives around the world.

UNESCO (2009). Civic Education for Media Professionals: A Training Manual. UNESCO Series on Journalism Education. UNESCO, Paris.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001804/180402e.pdf>

- ☞ This manual is designed for use by facilitators of training /discussion workshops on the role of the media in civic education. It includes a set of suggested exercises to use during the workshop.

USAID (2002). Approaches to Civic Education: Lessons Learned. Office of Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington, DC.

http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/publications/pdfs/pnacp331.pdf

- ☞ This report describes USAID's approach to civic education, both in schools and communities, assesses the impacts of the initiatives undertaken, and identifies a set of lessons learned.

Supplementary resources

Brilliant, F. (1999). Civic Education Assessment Stage II. Civic Education Programming Since 1990: A Case Study Based Analysis. Management Systems International. Report submitted to USAID, Washington, DC, US.

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/4d/ac.pdf

- ☞ This paper reviews USAID-supported civic education programmes undertaken in the 1990s and includes ten case studies that reflect the diverse approaches adopted by these programmes throughout the world.

Civic Education Resource Inventory

<http://ceri.civnet.org/>

- ☞ A part of CIVNET, the Civic Education Resource Inventory provides information on civic education resources from around the world. The inventory contains citations of over 588 resources related to school-based civic education.

CIVNET/CIVITAS

www.civnet.org

- ☞ CIVNET is a worldwide online community of those involved or interested in civic education. CIVNET is administered by CIVITAS International, an international civic education NGO. The site includes a library of resources on civic education, though mostly related to the US education system.

CIVCOM Partners (2005). Train the Trainer Manual: Participation: Civic education and Community Mobilization. Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, Public Affairs Committee, National Constitutional Assembly, CIVNET, ASSERCO, CBRC, NIZA.

http://www.hrea.org/erc/Library/display_doc.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.hrea.org%2Ferc%2FLibrary%2Fcivilcom05.pdf&external=N

- ☞ This manual provides simple how-to guidance for facilitators of community-based problem-solving workshops, as a tool for civic education. The manual takes the reader through each step of the process, with a sample programme and notes on group discussion exercises.

Communication Initiative

<http://www.comminit.com/en/node/134525/348>

- ☞ The Communication Initiative network is an online space for sharing the experiences of, and building bridges between, the people and organisations engaged in or supporting communication as a fundamental strategy for economic and social development and change. The link describes the Africa Good Governance Programme on Radio Waves,



which is cited as a valuable example of the use of media and communication in civic education programmes

Dippell, M. (2004). Civic Education Strategies for Political Parties and Civic Groups. Paper presented at the Organization of American States Special Session of the Permanent Council on 'Promotion of Democratic Culture through Education' Washington, D.C., April 12, 2004.

www.ndi.org/files/1717_lac_dippellremarks_041204.html

☞ This paper outlines the National Democratic Institute's approach to civic education in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in particular its political leadership programme and its civic forum programme.

Hirschfeld, A. (2008). Creating Citizens for Democracy: Civic Education and the Use of Radio in Kenya. MSc Thesis, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, UK.

<http://www.idd.bham.ac.uk/research/dissertations/06-07/Hirschfeld.pdf>

☞ This paper looks at two civic education programmes: the Africa Good Governance on the Radio Waves Programme which focuses on local authorities across Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, and Uganda and the National Civic Education Programme which is a Kenya-wide programme focused on increasing the population's political awareness.

Human Rights Education Associates.

www.hrea.org

☞ This website has an extensive library on civic education centred on human rights, including curriculum development materials, textbooks and other documents.

International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

www.ifes.org

☞ This website contains a wide selection of resources on civic education for electoral assistance and democracy. It also has several photo galleries with a good collection of photographs of civic education in action.

National Democratic Institute (NDI)



www.ndi.org

- ☞ NDI has undertaken civic education programmes in many countries worldwide and this website includes details of many of these initiatives.

World Movement for Democracy

www.wmd.org

- ☞ This website includes a section on civic education, which provides links to organizations involved in civic education in different regions of the world.



Case studies

Peace-building and citizenship education in Angola

In 2003, Development Workshop, an international NGO, launched a civic education programme in Angola with its local civil society partners, to encourage dialogue and tolerance among war-affected communities. The programme followed on from extensive peace-building efforts by the same civil society groups and focused on preparing the population for the 2008 elections. The programme consisted of the following elements: electoral training, education, adult literacy, conflict resolution and organized participative planning at the local community level. Community theatre, cartoons and a community newspaper were also used to bring across the messages, such as the right to vote and the need to live and work together peacefully. The programme was built around teams of provincial activists, trained in civic education, conflict management, community mobilization and principles of democracy. The teams, which comprised representatives of the Ministry of Education, local NGOs and other civil society partners, took special efforts to ease the reintegration of ex-combatants into communities. Conflicts were common and often centred on grievances over resources. For example, one poor community which was experiencing high levels of violence and criminality included many displaced people, mostly unemployed and living in tents without access to water or sanitation. A seminar was organized for the community members, to discuss how to move from violence and revenge to tolerance and reconciliation. As part of the solution, DW's water and sanitation programme became involved, providing basic services which helped to ease the tension over resources.

For more information on this case, see:

www.dwangola.org/dwWEB/english/programmes/peaceBuilding_&_citizenship.html

Promoting political participation among Afro-Ecuadorians

In 2005, IFES, an international democracy-building organization, launched a project to strengthen Afro-descendant community groups and enable Afro-Ecuadorians to participate in the political life of the country. IFES partnered with local Afro-Ecuadorian CSOs and conducted the following set of activities:

- *Leadership training for Afro-Ecuadorians:* the project established a political leadership school, which provided training in project management, ethno-education and political participation;
- *Dialogue with political leaders:* the project encouraged Ecuador's political parties to run Afro-descendant candidates and to participate in debates that examine Afro-descendant issues;

- *Increased visibility for Afro-Ecuadorians:* the project showcased Afro-Ecuadorian history, culture and national contributions on a weekly radio program, in publications and in special events.

The project also trained some 60 Afro-descendants to monitor election procedures in five provinces during the 2006 presidential and legislative polls. These trainees took part in the first such election monitoring in their communities, to measure voter turnout among Afro-Ecuadorians and determine the specific problems they face at the polls. The observers studied how Afro-Ecuadorian voters acted in polling centers and how they were treated overall.

For more information on this case, see www.ifes.org/ecuador.html#project_52

A political leadership training programme in Latin America

The National Democratic Institute, a US-based NGO, has been operating a civic education programme in Latin America since 1995 to help make political parties more responsive and representative. NDI started by looking at the common characteristics of successful parties around the world and identified three elements to their success: (i) internal democracy in selecting candidates, leaders and a policy platform; (ii) ongoing outreach and recruitment of all sectors of society including traditionally underrepresented populations like women, youth and minority groups; and (iii) transparency and openness in party activities and financing.

In 1999, NDI launched its Political Leadership Programme, which has brought together young leaders from across the region, from 56 major political parties and movements across the ideological spectrum. These leaders are immersed in an intensive academy that focuses on skills-building activities aimed at addressing the three elements of success mentioned above. In addition, each participant has to design and implement a party-strengthening project with the support of a high-level party mentor. These projects have included: increasing indigenous participation in Guatemala; reforming party statutes and internal democracy in Colombia and Venezuela; promoting youth and women participation in Mexico and building communication and outreach capacity of local party branches in Bolivia, Colombia and Paraguay. After the participants return to their countries, NDI provides advice and support by periodically bringing in political practitioners who can offer advice from their experiences elsewhere in the region.

For more information on this case, see Dippell (2004) and www.ndi.org/content/leadership_program