New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 64

Engaging People in Active Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe

Context of the Research

Across Europe, there is clear evidence of declining engagement in traditional democratic processes, with governments, companies and other organisations considered to be remote, and insufficiently accountable to their stakeholders. Yet, it is also widely believed that globalisation calls for new, and more devolved kinds of political and social structure, in which individual citizens will play a more active part.

The ETGACE project (See Briefing Paper 44) has explored the nature of citizenship in five contrasting Western European countries (UK, Belgium, Finland, Netherlands and Spain) as well as in Slovenia. As a follow-up to the ETGACE project this RE-ETGACE project has explored the issues of active citizenship in Hungary and Romania, as examples of Central and Eastern Europe, where there are different kinds of tensions determined, above all, by the transition into democratic societies. The project has considered active citizens as agents of change that reflexively act upon their social, political and institutional environment for the "public good".

Key Conclusions

The following key conclusions were reached:

1. Due to the changing political, economic, social and cultural conditions that have resulted in the transition towards democracy, the issues concerning active citizenship and governance in post-communist Central and Eastern countries, appears to be more complex than in the post-welfare Western European countries.

2. There are variations in the way people understand and respond to the new opportunities of democracies and institutional developments like the way citizens are considered as consumers and customers within the welfare state. This has created some complexities.

3. The RE-ETGACE project like in the ETGACE project has acknowledged the existence of a "democratic deficit" across Europe. However, despite quite a few similarities, several divergent patterns and different motives have been observed in Central and Eastern Europe like the erosion of established political structures where democracy has more recently been established.

4. Problems have been identified at the "democratic hardware" level (legal and political structures and regulations, new democratic institutions) and also at the "democratic software" level (lack of initiatives, institutional and social lack of

trust, cynic behaviour, strong penchant for corruption and indifference to voluntary activities).These problems tend to lead to non-participation due to mental heritage, lack of democratic skills and inequalities or lack of access to resources.

5. The original ETGACE project identified the need to "re-moralise citizens" as a possible solution to the "democratic deficit" by regenerating a sense of community and collective responsibility. The RE-ETGACE project also proposed similar solutions of co-operation, collaboration and partnership that have been mainly defined as strategies for promoting institutional development. Responsibility seems to be the major feature for citizens' engagement.

6. However, more importantly there seems to be a need to work at the macro level where real institutional reforms are necessary. Therefore, the most urgent intervention efforts have to be in the area of advocacy oriented towards the legislative changes within democratic and effective institutions.

7. Active citizens in transition or post-transition countries see their involvement in democratic social transformations as relevant. Sometimes frustration or disappointment regarding the democratic society leads to citizens' active involvement. Despite difficulties acknowledged, they are devoted to establishing democratic institutions based on general values like human rights, solidarity, and the search for truth.

8. Similar to the ETGACE project findings, there are very different patterns and personal approaches to active citizenship, which are significantly determined by personal biographies. Nevertheless, the analysis of active citizens' life paths indicates that beside the subjective dimension of active citizenship, it is possible to reach some objective insights that lead to the construction of social trajectories of active citizens. Responsibility, commitment and perseverance are characteristics of persons regarded as highly relevant by active citizens.

9. A diversity of practices and sometimes learning strategies was found in all the three domains investigated: state, work and civil society.

10. However, due to current socio-economic circumstances in Central and Eastern Europe, the work and state/political domains do not create opportunities for individual learning of active citizenship and governance. In fact, apathy, cynicism and un-citizenship behaviour tends to be found in these domains.

11. There is generally no obvious transfer of active citizenship competencies amongst the three domains, although there is some evidence of transfer from civil society involving non-governmental organisations to the private business for personal benefits.

12. Learning active citizenship is an unpredictable process that does not occur systematically. It is more governed by unconscious factors, than guided by rational choices and decisions.

13. The legacy of the communist system may have resulted in widespread lack of trust, apathy and non-participation. This lack of social capital might be considered as a negative response to the principles of "collectivism" induced in the communist period. However, a sense of commitment to specific groups amongst those of ethnic affiliation is sometimes found.

14. The family has a very important role in the transmission of values and attitudes that relate to active citizenship.

15. In order to ensure their success, many active citizenship initiatives that aim at transferring knowledge and skills tend to involve an advantaged minority of urban and educated people. Thus, they fail to combat social exclusion by creating new opportunities for people who have been less successful in education.

16. Educational intervention for active citizenship and governance is being developed in several areas: formal educational programmes, specific non-formal educational programmes, educational practices of donating foreign civil organisations, informal educational programmes, supporting services, providing information, media issues, publications, and participation and co-operation in government and company issues.

17. Three different approaches have been identified: top-down measures related to governmental policies on formal education and the development of civil society; bottom-up that support the development of active citizenship and a mixture of top-down and bottom-up initiatives that seem to be appropriate for strategies involving community development, rural developmental projects and dealing with local unemployment.

18. However, current developments encourage the emergence of "professional activists" in non-governmental organisations and make these organisations more estranged from grass root society. The division between this "entrepreneurial" category as planners and decision-makers on one hand and volunteers as their assistants on the other hand may inhibit the development of an on-going dialogic to encourage participation. Unfortunately, it is tending to contribute to the shaping of active citizenship as an 'elitist', middle-class phenomenon.

19. The major impediments for fostering active citizenship are identified as poor social-economic circumstances, lack of "know how" of active citizenship, the ambivalent of existing civil organisations and a democratic deficit at different levels.

20. Solutions for solving these problems involve: increasing the standard of living, raising interest in becoming active citizens and governors, changing attitudes, developing "know-how" of active citizenship, increasing the reputation of civil organisations, providing public information, changing the attitudes of government bodies and public institutions, involving people in public affairs, changing company culture and involving people in the decision-making process.

Key Recommendations

1. It is critical for political parties in post-communist countries to modify their approach in order to make sustainable efforts for increasing their interest in societal issues, democratising the political domain and encouraging "networked polity" by promoting local governance. Consideration also needs to be given to institutional reform of the public administration sector as well as different civil services.

2. There should be awareness-raising campaigns in the context of European accession for acknowledging that EU-integration is not only Government's or State's responsibility. There is a special role for public mass media in promoting civic values and this needs to be recognised in the context of reshaping public media in Central and Eastern European countries. In addition there should be open access to public information for all the citizens strengthening their information rights, providing technologies to foster access to free of charge services and guidance.

3. Schools should be open to the wider society, embedded into their local community. If this requirement is fulfilled, more actors would interplay in educating youth and school partnership programmes would broaden the democratic experience of students. School democracy (student participation, parent participation, teacher participation) should also be promoted.

4. Teacher training programmes should address the issues of active citizenship and stimulate its integration in specific disciplines of the curriculum as well as valuing the dimension of social activism in what is called the "hidden" curriculum.

5. International youth exchange programmes are of immense value, not only at the higher education level, but also in general education. Financial support and opportunities are needed to make them possible particularly for rural and deprived areas.

6. Considering the role of education in relation with the economic sphere, general educational levels should be increased significantly. There should be a special emphasis on the development of basic skills including IT skills and the transfer of practical skills learning in the school curriculum.

7. Establishing real learning partnerships between schools, enterprises, administrative bodies, trade unions and civil society should create a positive balance between civic involvement and economic development.

8. The state as well as private employers should encourage investment in the formal and informal education of their employees.

9. Civil society should provide opportunities for those disadvantaged, in terms of educational attainment, to be actively involved in this sector. As several examples have shown, sometimes, people active in this sector are looking to complete their studies by returning into the formal educational system.

10. As there is a need for specialised professionals in the civil society domain, special education programmes have to be developed at the vocational training as well as at the university level.

11. Both formal and non-formal educational programmes have to be built on experiences people have already in the practice using a skill oriented rather than knowledge oriented approach. The same could be realised by informal learning in grassroots organisations by stimulating debates and empowering people.

12. There has to be a critical assessment of the current developments that encouraged the emergence of "professional activists" in non-governmental organisations and have made them estranged from grassroots organisations diminishing voluntary and civil participation.

13. As responsibility for different social services transfers from the State to civil organisations, financial support should also follow as well the means for accessing other financial support. These measures should also support volunteers in providing these services.

14. Subsidies, grants or other opportunities should be found to enable the sharing of good practice between volunteers and other civil society experts by publishing leaflets about their activities, and sharing experiences and good practice.

15. Special attention should be paid to enforcing community development projects. It is important to stimulate and empower people in various domains, starting with community involvement, to take up the initiatives and withdraw the feeling of helplessness inculcated from the past.

Further Information

The full title of this project is "Reviewing Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe - A Central and Eastern European Perspective" with the Final Report "The Implications of the Research for Central and Eastern European Policy Design on Active Citizenship and Governance" March 2004.

It is a follow-up to the project "Education and Training for Active Governance and Citizenship in Europe: Analysis of Adult Learning & Design of Formal, Non-Formal & Informal Educational Intervention Strategies" with the Final Report "Lifelong Learning Governance & Active Citizenship in Europe" (July 2003).

The projects web sites at http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Education/ETGACE/ and http://www.socsci.kun.nl/re-etgace/

Final Report

Key Publications

"Active Citizenship and Governance in Central and Eastern European Context. Report on Literature and Policy Analysis" 87 pages, May 2003.

"Learning Governance and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe. Report on Life Histories" 122 pages, October 2003.

"Similar or Different Learning Strategies for Active Citizenship and Governance in Europe. Report on Focus Groups" 86 pages, December 2003.

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