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## Be a good citizen, have civic values to help bring about change

By Prof (Dr) Ramneek Ahluwalia

South Africa – a young democracy that has experienced a uniquely difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Our country is still in the process of defining itself. This defining will probably not result in a democracy that mirrors the west, owing to differences in history, politics, economics, and cultures, but a country that carves key transformational lessons for not only other emerging democracies but for established nations as well.

Local participation may be limited for a variety of reasons, while ethnicity, regionalism and religion have a large role to play in political spheres throughout South Africa. Issues related to gender based violence (GBV), gender diversity, alcohol and substance abuse, HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancies, dangers in sexual health rights and general health and wellbeing warrant a drive towards teaching civic values.

This is why interactive education rather than the traditional teaching and learning norms like Peer-to-Peer education developed to aid students interact with one another to attain educational goals. Providing them with opportunities to teach others and learn from one another, expanding their perspectives and fostering meaningful connections.

This is vital in changing the trajectory of civic participation and civic values which leads to the development the need for civic education as an interactive curriculum for every student both in the schooling and post schooling system. One of the ways Higher Health has fought HIV, GBV, COVID-19 and other pandemics is through this interactive curriculum called Peer to Peer education which entails civic values via civic education programmes.

As a recent analysis of the Born Free generation (defined here as people who have come of age politically since the passage of the 1996 Constitution) concluded, "rather than re-drawing the country's main cleavages along lines of age and generation (as in post-war Germany), many of the key fault lines of apartheid (such as race, urban-rural residence, class, and poverty) have been replicated within the new generation" ( Mattes, 2012)).

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And while there has been a drive towards transformational education, there is a need for a thorough relook of the interactive Peer to Peer education model as part of the curriculum offerings from institutions of Higher Learning, schools and skill providers through a programme designed to produce more engaged citizens.

The National Higher Health civic Peer to Peer education programme, the values to be taught are so implicit in the teaching and learning modalities that over each year, voluntarily hundreds of thousands of students are enrolling; responding to the needs of our communities and the future of our youth.

Volunteerism towards community development contributes significantly to sustainable development in South Africa, as it does throughout the world. Creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accordance with their needs and potential. True development expands peoples' choices, which in turn allows them to lead lives they value, in a way that does not compromise the future potential of the planet.

At its core, democracy is about the whole, not the individual: when we all pull together, change for the betterment of our society can truly be achieved. Now, more than in the recent decades, South Africa needs a citizenry which is actively involved in civic life beyond just voting.

So much has slid away from us that we all need a recommitment to how Nelson Mandela saw himself - "a humble servant of you, the people". We should all be humble servants of society, doing more than we as individuals need for just ourselves.

For that to happen we will require civic education that goes beyond what is offered at a school level. We need government to prioritise and run civic education programmes, we need tertiary institutions to prioritise this understanding into the experience that students have at institutions of higher learning. We need civil society to undertake even more than it is already doing.

As much as voting is important, building a citizen that knows their constitution, the rights it guarantees and the responsibilities it engenders, with the implication that those in leading positions can and should be held to those guarantees is critical.

The times we are living in make this doubly necessary.

Civic education has a centre focus towards transformational change where civic values and the building of families will not only help us in fighting diseases and health pandemics and social pandemics like gender based violence, but will also help towards building good governance in the country and in fighting violence which is not a uniquely South African problem but a pervasive global problem.

Higher Health, an institution in the post school education sector has put together an accredited extra mural curriculum on civic education. Over half a million students join this civic peer to peer education curriculum every year. This is the hope of building well rounded adults by using education as a tool for empowerment, building civic values, teaching peer education, building volunteerism whilst empowering them on issues plaguing our communities like, gender based violence, sexual reproductive health, HIV, mental health and gender diversity.

The only way young people will be able to challenge the current issues and cultural social norms, is through the consideration of taking key lessons from examples like post WW2 Japan and Germany, in their concerted efforts to building a new generation that challenged their old norms, and including young people taking it upon themselves to bring about the change they want to see.

To have the right to vote, and to be able use it freely and regularly to express your choice, is a prerequisite for democracy. Yet it is not enough. For a democracy to function properly, it needs active, continuous citizen participation well beyond the ballot box.

The recent municipal elections have shown a massive decline in voter participation. This could be because of disappointment with what political parties have to offer, it could be a feeling that voting makes no difference, it could also be that there is such a feeling of helplessness that nothing will change in anyway.

That feeling is understandable. The lived experience of many people today is much worse than it was just a few years back. Unemployment is sky high, and the hope of ever finding work sometimes is so faint, that desperation is a daily experience for far too many.

It is vital for our youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to promote civic education as a critical instrument for both societal and individual empowerment. Imagine a cohort of young people who can do more than read, write and do math, but who are able to consider the responsibilities impelled by our Constitution and the ways it calls public servants to account for their decisions!

They will be the true change agents.

Mandela was a change agent enthusiastic about ensuring that everyone in South Africa has access to equal educational opportunities: "Education is the great engine of personal development. A daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, a son of a mine worker can become the mine's head, and a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation."

Considering that we are still in the midst of a global pandemic, it is our responsibility to continue to care about the impact of decisions made on our behalf by those in charge. And even more to fully grasp the tools available to act to bring about change if we do not agree.

Now is not the time to give up.

The world, and not just South Africa, is indeed at a point where the feeling is that things will get worse before they improve. South Africa could not escape untouched from such dire happenings as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the global rise in inflation, supply chain constraints, and a jobs bloodbath persist.

This makes it vital that we become active citizens. This Mandela Month asks that we all give 67 minutes of our time to a cause which is greater than just our daily lives. The times, though, expect that we continue that commitment beyond the ask.

Knowing the Constitution is part of what can and must be expected from a good citizen. But there is more that can and should be done. Worried about crime? Join the local policing forum, the neighbourhood watch. Worried about education? Join the school's governing body. Worried about the hungry? Join a soup kitchen.

Do not accept what you live every day. You can change your world, and that of other South Africans. You have a voice – in politics, in political processes, in the wider society where we live our daily lives.

Become a good citizen. Go out there and help to bring change. Every small step can be part of a giant leap.

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