Reversing the Trend: Addressing the Decline in Youth Civic Participation
By Adefunke Adeyeye

Image Source: TheGuardian.

Introduction

In an era where the youthful population is at its highest and there is a global call for change, the role of the youth in shaping the trajectories of societies has never been more critical. No doubt, the enthusiasm and energy of young people hold immense potential for driving positive transformation; however, there has been a gradual decline in the active involvement of youth in civic and political activities over the years. In light of this decline, It is imperative to unravel the possible reasons for this dwindling enthusiasm and proffer workable solutions to collectively reclaim the youth's passion, energy, and fervour, empowering them to once again embrace their roles as architects of change.

The possible factors responsible for the gradual decline in civic engagement among the youth are broadly categorized into three: social-economic, cultural, and political factors.

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Social-economic Factors

- [1]**Financial concerns** and the pursuit of stable employment consume young people's focus, leaving them with little energy or time for civic activities.
- **Poor civic education and Illiteracy:** Many young persons lack a strong understanding of civic processes, government structures, and their rights and responsibilities hinder the ability of young persons to engage meaningfully in their communities.
- **Limited access to reliable and unbiased information** about political issues and candidates is limited, particularly for those who live in remote areas and those who rely on only social media or sources with biased viewpoints. This makes it difficult for youth to make informed decisions.
- There is also a **challenge of apathy,** which results from negative perceptions about the effectiveness of civic participation or feelings of being unwanted or underrepresented, which may cause discouragement and eventually lead to civic disengagement.

Cultural Factors

- Cultural norms deeply rooted in **beliefs, customs, and religions** can limit how young people engage in civic activities.
- **Cultural sensitivity to safety** can also hinder the level of civic participation of young people. Family obligations, employment, or study-related priorities often influence young people's involvement in civic activities.

Political Factors

- **Political marginalization:** When asked about how inclusive they are in governance, a good number of youths feel alienated, and others indicated the feeling of being unvalued by the government of their country[2]. This further deepens apathy among young persons and reduces their engagement in civic duties.
- **Financial Barriers**: Political campaigns and certain civic activities can be expensive, making it difficult for young people with limited financial resources and other personal financial obligations to engage effectively. A good example of this could be seen during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; despite the "Not Too Young to Run" law, which reduces the age barrier for youth to run and hold elective political office, many young persons could still not afford the fee of the party's nomination form. This indirectly disengages them from participation.
- **Frequent elections** and political cycles lead to fatigue among young people, making them feel overwhelmed by the constant need to stay engaged.

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[1] https://www.undp.org/montenegro/press-releases/low-level-youth-participation-public-life-challenge-whole-society

[2] https://guardian.ng/opinion/why-youths-should-participate-in-elections-governance/

- **Youth voices** are sometimes not taken seriously by older generations or political leaders[3], leading to a feeling of being marginalized or ignored. The overall effect of this discourages the youth from getting involved in civic activities.
- **The Relevance of Issues**: Young people often feel that many political issues do not directly affect them, leading to interest in participating. They are more concerned with immediate personal challenges like education, money, and employment.
- **Digital Divide**: Technology has expanded opportunities for civic engagement, but not all young people have equal access to the internet and digital tools, and this creates disparities in participation.[4]

Call To Action

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving various stakeholders. Different stakeholders, including the government, political leaders and policymakers, educational institutions, and business leaders, all have collective roles in addressing these challenges.

- **Government, political leaders, and policymakers** should make policies that effectively serve and engage youth, considering all other facets of their lives. Efforts should be made to create platforms and enabling environments that encourage civic participation among young people. The government should establish youth advisory boards or councils that provide input on policies affecting young people. Policies and laws that promote and protect the rights of young people and encourage greater participation should also be promoted. This will help tackle the challenge of underrepresentation and the feeling of being unwanted by young people.
- **Educational Institutions** should employ diverse ways that ensure that Civic Education is beyond a course that needs to be taught and passed for good grades alone. They should use the course as a tool for developing productive and involved citizens who are civically engaged. Diverse ways that help in achieving this may include service-learning projects, extracurricular activities, class discussions and debates, role plays and simulations, home-school connections, etc.
- **Business leaders** will help tackle these challenges by fostering active citizenship among young people by providing them with opportunities that help connect youth to business networks and markets; this will first help tackle the pressing issues of unemployment and underemployment among youth. Business leaders can also help develop business policies in collaboration with government/policy makers, that put youth in business leadership roles. This will help them influence the creation of employment opportunities and entrepreneurial training for other young people. Another angle business leaders can look into is investing in and promoting

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[3]https://www.generationunlimited.org/media/3021/file/Action%20Guide%205:%20Young%20people%E2%80%99s%20participation%20and%20civic%20engagement.pdf

[4] https://www.unicef.org/media/72436/file/Digital-civic-engagement-by-young-people-2020_4.pdf

mentoring opportunities. Mentors and role models who are actively engaged in civic activities will make it easier for young people to envision their own participation.