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To cite this article: Twine Hannington Bananuka & David Mugarra (2022): 'To engage or not to': translating civic education to civic engagement, International Journal of Lifelong Education, DOI: [10.1080/02601370.2022.2140213](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2140213)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2022.2140213>



Published online: 28 Oct 2022.



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'To engage or not to': translating civic education to civic engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from a broader study on citizenship education in Western Uganda to explain how civic education knowledge translates into civic engagement through people's lived experiences. The paper addresses two questions, that is the contextual understandings of civic education and civic engagement by the partner NGO. Secondly, what explains people's decision to engage or not to engage. We employed critical research methodologies with multiple data collection methods as a means of empowering rural community members to dialogue with stakeholders in civic education. We present the findings based on three themes, that is rationality, power dynamics, and mutual interests. We draw on Rational Choice Theory to theorise reasons for civic engagement. We particularly argue that drivers for and against civic engagement are largely individual and driven by assumed benefits and losses. Individual assumptions can also translate to group or larger social conclave based on common drivers, beliefs and interests. We conclude by noting that actors in civic education and awareness programmes ought to note that civic engagement is rooted in individual rationality albeit contextual.

KEYWORDS

Civic education; civic engagement; rational choice theory

Introduction

Studies linking civic awareness and/or education and civic engagement have often posted contradictory results (Abudu & Fuseini, 2014). While civic education and awareness programmes have often been heralded as key to civic engagement (Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Finkel & Lim, 2021; Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011), others note that civic education does not necessarily lead to civic engagement (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005; Whiteley, 2014). Due to these contradictions, Carretero et al., (2015) have suggested closer examination of the kinds of learning and scrutiny of other contextual factors. Relatedly, Klandermans and Stekelenburg (2014) examined the issue of non-participation by people in collective action using social psychological explanations. They noted that non-participation at a social level could be due to non-approval of the cause or lack of opportunity while at individual level, non-participation is largely due to less or low mobilisation campaign and unsupportive environments.

It ought to be noted that most studies about civic engagement have largely been in the Global North and have focused more on specific population categories or interest groups, that is young people (Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Gaby, 2017; Kapucu, 2011; O'toole, 2010; Tonge et al., 2012), women (Daniel et al., 2013; Stefani et al., 2021), older people (Martinson & Minkler, 2006) and minorities (Harris & Battle, 2013). The greater focus on civic awareness and

education for young people has been based on the view that their civic engagement has been low compared to older people (Abudu & Fuseini, 2014).

Therefore, not many studies have explored the relations between civic education and civic engagement from the angle of rurality in the Global South. In one of the few studies about civic issues in the Global South, Abudu and Fuseini (2014) reported a positive correlation between civic education and civic engagement in Ghana. Apart from the fact that rurality brings to the fore issues of vulnerability and powerlessness (Baiyegunhi & Fraser, 2011), communities are complex entities of different interest groups. 'Rural households in South Africa as in many developing countries are frequently confronted by severe idiosyncratic risks (i.e. household-level shocks, such as human illness, death, injury, unemployment, job loss, asset loss, crop pest and diseases) and covariate risks' (Baiyegunhi & Fraser, 2011, p. 85)

The past 20 years have witnessed increased funding of civic education programmes in rural communities of the global South (Kennedy, 2012), perhaps as a mitigation measure against misrule and shrinking democratic spaces (Finkel & Lim, 2021; Nassali, 2014). It's believed that for rural vulnerable people to meaningfully engage with duty bearers who are largely government to demand for their rights, determine their destiny through elections but also demand for accountability, they ought to know those rights as laid down in national constitutions (Ngozwana, 2017).

Pettit (2016) who focused on the issue of power relations, drawing on a study of Swedish organisations and their partners, showed how poverty and exclusion leads to collusion with duty bearers. This was in three countries in developing countries including Uganda. In this paper, we depart from the major debate of power relations to the issue of decision-making, that is the grounds for and against civic engagement by rural community members. We seek to explore what goes on in people's minds when faced with situations to put to use civic knowledge.

This paper draws from a bigger study on local conceptualisation of good citizenship by different partners, that is academia from the Global North (Finland) and Global South (Uganda) and in partnership with an indigenous NGO in Uganda. We particularly address two questions, that is 1) what the local NGO perceive as civic education and civic engagement. Civic education and civic engagement being fluid concepts (Adler & Goggin, 2005), we begin by contextualising them from the lenses of a Ugandan NGO. 2) what drives people's decision to engage or not to engage when exposed to civic education. NGOs have been widely recorded as arenas of civic education (Ribeiro et al., 2012).

We employed critical emancipatory research (CER) methods given the nature of communities, that is highly illiterate and considerably of low socioeconomic status (Mahlomaholo, 2009). We draw on rational choice theory (Boudon, 1998; Feddersen, 2004; Goode, 1997) to theorise civic engagement. In spite of the increasing preoccupation with civic education by rights agencies to foster citizen voices on issues of governance and accountability, less focus has been put grounds that inform decision to engage. We particularly argue that drivers for civic engagement are largely based on individual rationality and driven by assumed benefits and losses. Individual assumptions can also translate to group or larger societal conclaves based on common beliefs and interests. We pay particular interest to lived experiences of rural community members in Western Uganda. The emerging lessons to rights organisations call for a focus on people's capacities, priorities and contexts as benchmarks for civic education. In what follows, we briefly elaborate on the concepts of civic awareness and or education and civic engagement.

The concepts of 'civic education and civic engagement'

It ought to be noted that the concepts of civic education and civic engagement are complex and fluid because of the other inter-related concepts (Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011). We therefore begin by briefly unpacking some of these.

Civic education

The concept of citizenship remains fluid, that is as membership of a political entity (Lister & Pia, 2008), membership to a fraternity of common interests (Lister, 1998) and as stakeholder ship to a local community (Bananuka et al., 2022). Irrespective of the definition and understanding, citizenship is often described as a learning process (Bananuka et al., 2022). Civic education is one aspect of citizenship education.

Civic education and civic awareness are usually used in literature interchangeably. However, civic education is in most cases well-structured either formally or non-formally while civic awareness includes all knowledge acquired both formally and informally including everyday life experiences (Abudu & Fuseini, 2014). The other slippery relationship exists between civic education and citizenship education. Abudu and Fuseini (2014) are in agreement with Muleya (2019) and Donbavand and Hoskins (2021) that civic education and citizenship education are the same thing. However, Sánchez-Agustí and Miguel-Revilla (2020) and Roberts et al. (2019) argue that civic education is a component of citizenship education.

In spite of being broad and ambiguous (Yoldaş, 2015), civic education can be defined as a field of study focused on the promotion and entrenchment of human values in society, such as freedom, rights, and equality (Muleya, 2019). The primary purpose of civic education 'has to do with the activities of citizens, particularly with their rights and duties in relation to this legal status' (Brettell, 2012, p. 133). Ngozwana (2017) further adds that civic education 'encourages citizens to participate in governance and demonstrates how to do it effectively, meaning that it promotes the participation of informed and responsible citizens, thus enhancing democracy' (Ngozwana, 2017, p. 528).

Civic education is often associated with democratic societies as its major goal 'is to encourage the ability and willingness of political participation by providing information and the basis to make conscientious judgements (Yoldaş, 2015, p. 546). However, rights and some democratic values are controlled in some countries. Therefore, civic education may take the form of patriotism classes where hegemonic societies might use it to promote state ideology (Alava, 2020).

Civic engagement

Whiteley (2014) makes a distinction between civil engagement and civic engagement by stressing that the former relates to voluntary activities while the latter relates to political activities. In other literature, civic engagement is seen in a broader sense to include classifications such as citizenship action, good citizenship, collective action, political involvement, active citizenship and citizenship participation (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Kennelly & Llewellyn, 2011; Ribeiro et al., 2012; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). This implies that civic engagement encompasses all situations where a person as an individual or part of a group participates in activities that promote the common good (Brady et al., 2020; Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Grütter & Buchmann, 2022; Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Brettell (2012) talks of civic engagement as the ability of individuals and groups to demand for their rights. There is however general agreement that the concept of civic engagement is fluid and a continuum (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

As a continuum, civic engagement can be measured in terms of practice or effectiveness. Adler and Goggin (2005) identified three indicators of civic engagement that is, civic indicators, electoral indicators and political voice. Civic indicators are the activities done for the wellbeing of the community. On the other hand, electoral indicators are those that involve participation in electoral processes for the governance of society. Lastly, political indicators involve actions where citizens make their voices heard by those in authority such as petitions and protests (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Ribeiro et al., 2012).

Civic engagement is also said to refer to processes and efforts that mobilise citizens to community action (Hays, 2007; Miles & Naumann, 2022). In this case, civic engagement as a process is a confrontation with superior powers to redirect decisions in the interests of the 'marginalized'

majority. Confronting super social structures sometimes requires awareness and support of sorts. Any agitation for power balance in decision-making, and resources allocation and utilisation is not a given but demanded.

In this paper, we use a broader conception of civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005) that encompasses civic, electoral and political engagement. We note that it's not only the state that can tamper with rights. We also refer to duty bearers as all those in charge of accountability and capable to withhold or abuse rights of vulnerable people. This includes but not limited to men in a patriarchal society, NGOs, researchers and the few rich land owners (UNICEF Finland, 2015).

Theoretical framework

We draw from Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to theorise how rural people process and translate civic education to civic engagement. We have adopted RCT for its flexibility in addressing complex social dynamics of rural community settings, that is culture, religion, age and gender differences. Human beings are complex beings ordered by multiple interests (Gandhi, 2005). The method of RCT which begins its analysis with a question of relationships or reaction has also been considered ideal (Green, 2002). Additionally, RCT has been found useful in explaining human behaviour concerning decision-making (Archer & Tritter, 2000; LinkManagerBM_REF_L2gylHYhWithall et al.). RCT dates back to the age of reason in the works of Thomas Hobbes around 1651 (Oppenheimer, 2008) and later developed in the 18th century in the 'political philosophy of Hobs and Loka, as well as the classic political economy of Adam Smith' (Krstić & Radivojević, 2019, p. 184). By definition, RCT simply means that 'people act so as to get the greatest possible utility available to them' (Nagy & Groves, 2021; Palmer, 1982, p. 185). RCT has overtime found relevance in various disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology and political science and even biology (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997).

RCT suggests a linkage between rational purpose and personal or societal values (Archer & Tritter, 2000). It is an attempt to socially explain what takes place in the brain of a person when confronted with choices and/or decisions to make (Boudon, 1998; Krstić & Radivojević, 2019). No matter the socioeconomic conditions, human beings are considered rational and will always have reasons for their actions consciously or unconsciously (Ermakoff, 2021; Nagy & Groves, 2021). The theory further holds that individual choices can also translate to group or larger societal conclaves based on common beliefs and interests (Archer & Tritter, 2000; Ermakoff, 2021; Ostrom, 1998).

This collusion manifests in the form of reciprocity or social obligation.

RCT has been criticised as being too general (Quackenbush (2004) and as lacking clarity on meaning of rationality (Ballester & Hernández, 2012). Hodgson (2012) has argued that RCT claims to fit in every situation and ultimately explains nothing. The advanced criticisms of RCT have however been dismissed as immaterial since rationality can be fluid based on context (Nagy & Groves, 2021). Zafirovski, M (2018, p. 195) further notes; 'despite being criticized since inception in much of social science, including sociology and economics . . . rational choice theory has remained a source of analytical inspiration grounded in empirical research'. And Ermakoff (2021) adds that RCT has remained resilient and inspirational in various social science disciplines. In this paper, we indeed do not claim that rationality is uniform but rather individual-based on anticipated gains and losses. We also agree that 'preferences and subjective expectations are also measured in distinct ways' (Thomas et al., 2022, p. 4).

It's from RCT assumptions that we draw to illuminate the way people translate civic education into civic engagement or action. We will endeavour to show the kinds of rational judgements behind people's actions and decisions, how individual actions and decisions impact the larger community, and finally the lessons that CSOs such as KRC and other actors in civic education can learn from the way people make decisions.

Study context and methodology

The NGO and partner communities

This was partnership study between two universities from the Global North (Finland), one Ugandan university and a Ugandan indigenous NGO in western Uganda. We therefore briefly introduce the NGO and its philosophy, then its work and relationship with the two rural communities. Although the work of KRC is so broad and generally developed in nature just like most NGOs in the Global South (Hearn, 2007; Werker & Ahmed, 2008), our focus was their civic education program. KRC, whose history dates back to 1996 has since grown from a research agency to a multi-program organisation stretching the entire country (Shariff, 2022). These programmes range from agriculture productivity, processing and marketing; to nutrition, health, refuges, peace education, environment, energy, human rights and civic education.

KRC's development philosophy has long been driven by the desire to see a citizen who is economically empowered, and able to hold leaders to account and demand for their rights (KRC, 2018a). To KRC, economic empowerment is the bedrock of an emancipated citizen. Even when other programmes such as human rights and citizen education were brought on board, the preferred approach was that they be undergirded by livelihood programmes. KRC has over time changed approaches to achieving their objectives, that is from financial support to farm equipment and the current focus being education, awareness and sensitisation across all programs. The current approach is driven by the view that people have resources but lack the knowledge and skills to put them to better use.

In addition to our interest in the work and civic education programmes of KRC, we collected data from rural partner communities, that is Kanyatete and Busaiga in the western District of Kabarole. The two communities can be described as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2004) of most rural areas in Uganda in that, people are largely subsistence agricultural farmers. In spite of the work of KRC and other development partners including government, poverty levels are still high leading to vulnerability and powerlessness.

Data collection and analysis

'Qualitative research is inherently critical, interpretive, and multi-method in function' (Watson & Watson, 2011, p. 63). The study employed CER methods involving interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), activity calendar and observations. Interviews with communities were also facilitated by a participatory tool called 'the ladder of citizenship' which is related to the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2016; Githinji & n.d.ayikunda, 2019). The choice of the methodology was driven by the nature of participants who are considered of low socioeconomic status and vulnerable. Therefore, beyond the knowledge, we purposed the study to contribute to increased awareness and empowerment (Mahlomaholo, 2009; Nkoane, 2012; Watson & Watson, 2011). Study participants were purposely selected based on prior participation in KRC civic education programmes, while mindful of representation of gender, age, disability and leadership responsibilities. All interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were voice recorded with express written permission of study participants. We carried out in-depth interviews with both organisational staff and stakeholders [n = 14], and community members [n = 37]. Participants by gender disaggregation was 11 males and 3 females for NGO staff and stakeholders, and 15 males and 22 females for community members. Partnership with the NGO only facilitated entry to the communities but data collection was purely done by the academia in the research team, who also interviewed KRC staff and stakeholders. However, we had jointly worked on the methodology, the tools and fieldwork planning.

In order to corroborate spoken words from community members, 4 FGDs [n = 52] were carried out with four self-help groups from the two communities. FGDs were preceded by a seven-day daily activity calendar, where selected participants took record of their daily routine of activities. The

records formed the basis of discussion during FGDs. The purpose of the daily activity calendar was to help participants gauge their lifestyle as citizens. In addition, the first author used prolonged stay of three months with the communities and the NGO to get fully immersed in the lives of the community. This served as a reality check (Pettit, 2016) for participant observation while working with people in their gardens, attending meetings and church services but also association in range of social spaces.

Data collection was concluded by three feedback meetings, that is one in each community and the third one with the NGO and her stakeholders. These meetings included other key stakeholders including politicians, local government officials, religious leaders and law enforcement actors. Dissemination meetings created a talking platform between local people with their leaders [government and NGO], with academia researchers facilitating the interaction. Dissemination also helped to collaborate different data sources. The whole process from planning to research approvals and dissemination took one year of 2019.

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed in the local language, Rutooro and later translated into English. The double procedure was intended to preserve local meanings for richness of meanings. All data was coded in practical details to reduce it to emergent sub-themes and themes. We finally came up with three core themes to explain civic engagement, that is 1) rationality, 2) power dynamics and 3) mutual interest.

Study findings

Civic education and civic engagement from case NGO perspective

As noted above, civic education and civic engagement are fluid terms and applied differently in literature and organisations. We therefore briefly explore the contextual purview of these concepts. KRC has been in the business of civic education in mid-Western Uganda for close to 15 years, 'with an aim of building a civically competent citizenry-with ability to demand for a more responsive and accountable leadership' (KRC, 2018b, p. 16). A senior staff of KRC further clarified the goal of civic education when he noted that; *... there is no way you can expect someone to go and demand for a service he or she doesn't know. The first point is for them to learn or to mind the service they desire to ask for and from who, when and how to ask ... Through learning events, people are equipped with knowledge that can enable them to engage.* Civic education is based on nationally approved curricula for all NGOs drawing funds from a major development partner (KRC, 2018a).

KRC uses a number of spaces for civic education and these are basically civic educators (CEs) in schools and churches, change agents (CAs) in the communities, posters, face the citizen rallies, Community conversations and radios (Kakibogo, (2022); KRC, (2018b); Tusiime, (2022)). The CEs and CAs are supervised by a community process facilitator (CPF) at the level of a sub-county. These community agents are all volunteers and only facilitated to manage scheduled activities. Each of the spaces reaches out to particular people notwithstanding some limitations. KRC (2018b) reports of evidence-based achievements as a result of different civic education spaces where people have been able to engage with government to deliver on rather neglected social services and projects.

There are four indicators of civic engagement from KRC perspective, that is 1) Ability to petition leaders in writing. People are guided on how to compile their problems into a document called an 'issues paper' which is handed over to concerned leaders for action 2) People are encouraged to speak out to leadership on public rallies known as '*face the citizens' rallies*'. 3) Local people are encouraged to monitor the quality and delivery processes of social services 4) People are also encouraged to hold demonstrations as the last resort where the three approaches above fail to yield fruit (KRC, 2018a). Findings of this study show different responses concerning how people translate civic education to civic engagement. Some have never participated and ignorant on how and on what to engage, others have attended but resigned to engagement, others have knowledge but can't show proof of engagement and others are confident and can prove having engaged with duty

bearers. In the proposal for Civic education funding (KRC, 2018a), KRC identifies objective one that directly relates to local people as;

'Civic incompetence (inability of citizens to claim their civil and political rights) due to limited knowledge on their civil and political rights, roles and responsibilities, fear and apathy among the citizens: The republic of Uganda has ratified many human rights conventions and declarations. Many of these remain on paper and only known to a few people-mostly the elite' (KRC, 2018b, p. 3).

According to KRC, inability to engage is in most part a result of lack of knowledge of their rights as laid down in the constitution. Therefore, civic education is largely geared at sensitising people so that they can use the knowledge to hold leaders to account and demand for their rights.

How people process and apply civic education

Findings showed overwhelming knowledge about KRC civic education programmes. Even those who acknowledged not having attended any physical forums still reported some knowledge of the same. When it comes to civic engagement with duty bearers, the majority talked of knowledge of what to do and the confidence to do so. However, practical evidence was very low. It was noted that most people fizzle out in the face of 'powerful' duty bearers. We now present the findings under three emergent themes, that is rationality, power dynamics and mutual interest.

Rationality

According to Boudon (1998), rationality means taking the best decision given a number of alternatives. In this theme we show that rural people's decision to apply civic education or engage is based on careful measured choices. One local male community member noted;

Truth be told we always go to that hospital and they tell us that there is no medicine and yet you are sick and in pain. You will not argue with them you will just go and buy the medicine elsewhere. If there is an option, you bribe because you are saving your life. The problem we have as people from the village is that there are certain things that you see and notice you are just wasting your time If you try to follow them up.

This is collaborated by a female community member when she notes that; *'Even if I pay a bribe, I only pay it to free my husband from jail. However, we normally do that mistake well knowing that police bond is free of charge, but we do it because of pressure mounted on us and unpredicted time your person might spend in detention'.* It therefore emerges that decision to engage or not depends on calculated benefits against costs. Civic knowledge might be telling one to report medical staff who have denied you medicine yet its free from government. However, you might end up losing your loved one in the process of pursuing your rights. Equally so, people bribe to secure policy bonds for their loved to avoid a rather costly and time consuming process. In reference of a civil matter, another community member noted; *'it doesn't make sense to report a peasant farmer because at the end of the day you will not benefit anything since they live in poverty'.*

Although the participant above was responding to a civil matter, it still speaks of why people choose to avoid judicial processes in the pursuance of their rights altogether. They rather make rational calculations of how they stand to benefit from the process. In addition, they presume systems are corrupt and procedures time consuming. One may call it inability to engage, but they see gain by avoiding the process. The noted shortcoming of rationality is that people were so individual-centred not much concerned about the common good. This was noted during dissemination of findings as one senior staff of KRC noted; *'But it is coming out of the findings that okay that people are not looking at that outside engagement they are only looking at themselves and this is something that we have to discuss internally because at the end of the day whatever we are doing has an end point'.* Accordingly, preliminary findings ignited a desire for KRC to review their approach that ensures a nexus between their goals and individual citizen's interests.

Power dynamics

The conception of power dynamics revolved around a number of factors, that is socioeconomic status, exposure or knowledgeability, coercive power and gender. Individual citizens engage with duty bearers calculatedly in terms of power relations. It was noted that exposure to civic education empowered some citizens over others. Those who attended village meetings and churches were in better position to engage than those who don't. People with television sets and radios are also in better position to engage than those who don't have. One male local leader noted *'Yes, most people know that the police bond is free. Those who don't know are the ones that don't attend meetings . . . However, some who know, end up paying money at the police station because they lack confidence'*. He further added *'For people to gain confidence, we need to keep teaching them that there is always a level that is higher . . . this helps them to overcome fear . . . Even me as a leader I may not know how many other levels that there are'*.

The response above shows two limitations to civic engagement, that is lack of knowledge but also 'fear of coercive power' that deprives them of confidence to stand up to their rights. Therefore, civic education or knowledge to rights must be backed by confidence to stand up to coercive power. This is collaborated by a male local opinion leader when he notes that *'Even though KRC teaches people . . . they still need more support like leadership . . . when I tell the people that the police bond is free, the police threaten me. At times I ran back to KRC for help'*.

Power dynamics also takes an economic angle as a local male citizen noted; *'I know some of my rights but not the details. If someone refused to pay me for the work I had done, I would punch them and if they are stronger than me, then I walk away and call that a bad debt . . . How do I report a person who has more money than me and can easily bribe the authorities?'* Lack of economic power denies individuals power to engage with duty bearers since the 'economically powerful' controls not only the poor but also channels of arbitration. Inability to engage was also seen to promote jungle law where people take the law in their hands. HT Power dynamics still brought out the aspect of gender relations as noted from the FGD with female community members. In the conversation below, they speak of their rights and how they try to claim them:

P1: No, we don't know our rights as women

P10: If my husband beats me up, I divorce

P: For me, I will leave his house and go back to my parent's home

P7: My rights as a woman are to ensure that am doing what my husband likes and more so my husband should also be knowing my likes and dislikes . . . I attended the KRC workshop that's where I learnt my rights . . . but the workshop was mostly about teaching us agriculture for example, how to maintain a banana plantation

P3: In most cases, women of these days don't sacrifice for marriage, whereby when a man beats her up she doesn't ask for forgiveness but in our age [senior citizen] if a man beats you up, you ask for an apology and reconcile

P5: If a man beats me up, I pack my belongings and go back to my parents' home . . . I can't report the case because those are family matters and not supposed to be solved by the chairman

P6: Yes, I can report the case to police, if I get the opportunity

It ought to be noted that these communities are highly patriarchal. The divergence of opinions speaks of differences in education, cultural inclination and age. Younger women and those with a bit of education endeavour to claim their rights in marriages and male-dominated leadership structures. Such a position is however scorned by older and illiterate women. To the latter, marriage must be protected from outsiders for stability of the family institution and preservation of cultural values. It also shows power of culture over constitutionalism which KRC seeks to promote. Although the constitution clearly stipulates the rights of women, culture dictates that women are subservient to their husbands and men at that. Therefore, taking a husband to police or courts of law is being uncultured.

Mutual interest

We call the third and last theme as ‘mutual interest’. In relation to rationality, it was discovered that people pay attention to certain issues deemed critical for their survival not only of individuals but also as groups and the community at large. As these communities are predominantly agricultural farmers (Ashaba, 2019), they are easily mobilised to engage with issues concerning agriculture. One notable story of civic engagement was of community members who are residents of Harugongo Sub-County staged a massive demonstration against local government over bad roads. Impassable roads were limiting access to the market for their produce. Indeed, the demonstration paid off as the local government quickly mobilised funds and repaired the roads. One male local community member noted; *‘If the government does not provide services to us, yet we pay taxes, we go to the NGO’s like KRC and we report and even on radio stations . . . Before we did not have roads, so we went to the radios and we even made riots and the road was made.* Another male community member asserted; *‘Even when we had bad roads, we used to call KRC and they would get in touch with responsible organizations . . . and we indeed got our problems solved’.* Several KRC staff and stakeholders too cite this demonstration as an outstanding case of civic engagement.

Face the citizens’ rallies were also observed as an arena where citizens exhibited group action against corrupt government officials, repressive police force and bad water sources among other issues. True, some of the local officials were either reprimanded by senior officers before the congregation or given express transfers. However, side conversations with other locals also showed that vocal local people were mostly being used by political opponents or by those with individual vested interests. Although observations of face the citizens’ rallies depicted good fora where local people apply their civic education knowledge to engage with government officials, some people disagree as one male community member noted;

I did not attend that [face the citizens rally] at Nyataboma but I attended the one at Harungongo Primary School. The RDC [Resident District Commissioner] and the OC [Officer in Charge of Police] of this place attended . . . but that was just comedy among those people. They just wanted to convince people that they are working yet they are not . . . I don’t know anyone in those top offices who will help me? For example, if I went to report to the DPC [District Police Commander] that the OC has asked me for money and I gave it to him . . . Yes, maybe if one asks for help from KRC, they can help. I have told you that if you have someone who can help you, it is possible but otherwise you as an individual it may not be easy to get justice

It was noted that mutual interest or common good as a trigger for civic engagement required a trigger in form of shared problem that touched the core livelihoods of the people. In other cases, mutual interest thrives on leadership with good mobilisation skills. More often people spoke of seeking help from KRC to engage at community level. This was in turn breeding bad blood between KRC and local government officials. Some local government officials accused KRC of turning people against the government. They were of the view that KRC should equally invest equal energy in speaking of citizen obligations. One local government official noted; *In the beginning, KRC used to make bad reports on us. It’s the reason I told you that they used to fight me, but last time they came and told me that: ‘chairman we have made some research and found out that this or that is not going on well in your sub county and we would sit and compared notes’ . . . No, I don’t have a problem with KRC now, but at first I got it’.* He went on to speak of several instances where community members had civically engaged with him and other government agencies courtesy of civic education by KRC. One general complaint from local government officials was that KRC puts more emphasis on rights than citizen obligations which was promoting irresponsible citizenship.

All in all, findings show that local people as individuals and groups apply civic education based on different grounds. One notable observation was the high level of citizen consciousness to participating in this study. Unlike previous studies (Nuwagaba & Rule, 2015) that local people mind less about ethical research procedures, this was not the case. During data collection, a fair number of participants were keen to interrogate the researcher [1st author] and his assistant about the purpose of study and how they stand to benefit. Some few participants also took prolonged time to read the long informed consent form as approved by the Uganda National Council for Science

and Technology (UNCST) before appending their signatures. This could not pass as a sign of inability to engage.

Discussion

This paper sought to explain what informs people's decisions in using civic education knowledge to engage with various duty bearers. Although literature posts contradictory conclusions about how civic education influences civic engagement (Abudu & Fuseini, 2014), what is in contention only relates to the form, pedagogy and contexts. Generally, civic education remains key to informed and empowered citizenry in socio-political life of any society (Ngozwana, 2017). Otherwise, how would people know unless they are told (Doolittle & Faul, 2013). However, beyond civic education knowledge, some people choose to shelve knowledge acquired from civic education in preference to cooperating with rights abusers (Pettit, 2016) and yet others are able to engage. In this paper we posit that the decision to engage or not is highly measured and thought out by individuals, who in some instances lead to group decisions. Rationality takes on various meanings and interpretations, that is projected losses and gains, measured satisfaction from decision taken and or ability to submit to desires and interests for the common good.

It emerges that for both categories, that is those who engage and not, do so as their best decision given available options. What might be referred to as inactive or disengaged might actually mean something else (Verba et al., 1995). People seem to place their interests or carry some reservations to what elites, civic educators and perhaps outsiders considers important (O'toole, 2010). An emergent lesson for civic educators and development workers is that civic education or perhaps any other programmes targeted at rural masses ought to be undergirded by the interests and capacities of the partner communities.

At a social level, each group or community tends to have an 'ordered list' of priorities, albeit in the subconscious. This is where individual rationality meets group interest leading to group action or civic engagement. Although it's noted for example, that civic education is important in communities of low socio-economic status, it does not constitute priority of what people consider critical in their lives. As such, most people tend to associate more with programmes that address basic needs such as food or agriculture, housing, medical care and education of their children. Indeed, Civic engagement is therefore vital but only if it comes after the satisfaction of the much needed basic needs. Such attitude resonates with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Zalenski & Raspa, 2006). This is perhaps what pertains in most NGOs running civic education programmes. Literature shows that people with more income, education and land ownership have higher propensity to civically engage (McBride et al., 2006). However, Pettit (2016) further notes that empowerment for civic engagement among rural poor necessitates going beyond access to resources, opportunity and knowledge to structural and legal barriers that impede people's desire to confront the powers that be. Once again, we note that civic engagement touches a lot of things ranging from political participation to community voluntarism. As a result, people's civic engagement tends to issues closer to their immediate needs, and where they felt it is in their means to do so. Some people in pseudo democracies have come to near resignation to political participation such as voting since they believe they can't change anything (Alava, 2020).

Although rationality is largely individual, it's also driven by context in which people find themselves. Context should be looked at in terms of location and socioeconomic status needs, age, gender and culture (Carretero et al., 2015). Different communities subscribe to different beliefs that might drive decisions of individuals differently. It can as well be said that people are driven by issues that concern them at a particular point that is, interests and priorities change over time. Perhaps issues that drive the young adults are different from what concerns women, men or disabled (Ali, 2010; Brettell, 2012). It would be good for donors to disburse funds to NGOs giving them leverage to design their own curricula and implementation plans based on local cultural and contextual conditions. The issue of vulnerability is also complex and distorts most interventions

that NGOs and governments often wish to advance. Although vulnerability is a male and female challenge, women particularly in the Global South tend to be affected more given the imbalances built within the social structures of society. Ali (2010) in a study about hurdles of working women in Pakistan notes that; ‘women objected to suggestions of actively confronting issues of patriarchy and gender bias and even public harassment, arguing instead that they had other more important concerns to deal with first’ (Ali, 2010, pp. 318–319). In such a case, it doesn’t matter how much civic education she has received, she will not engage because of social and cultural limitations (Carretero et al., 2015). Klandermans and Stekelenburg (2014, p. 351) indeed asserts that ‘non-participation can have a variety of origins, ranging from rejecting the cause to missing the opportunity to participate’.

It’s also important to stress that the foregoing discussion on civic awareness or education and civic engagement cannot be concluded as a two-actor affair, that is one organisation and the local people. civic engagement is driven by other factors beyond civic education from any one organisation. Organisational programmes are only key to the level of formal structures and programmes that help to marshal informal *knowledges* already in the community. As noted by Ribeiro et al. (2012), civic engagement is a complex process that requires multi-stakeholder involvement. Civic engagement doesn’t require a miracle solution but rather multiple pathways to participation, driven by factors such as family, schools, friends, and interest groups like clubs, churches, savings and investment groups (Andolina et al., 2003). Furthermore, civic education is a slow process and requires sustained education and awareness, but eventually bears fruit (Tonge et al. (2012).

Conclusion

We therefore conclude by noting that civic engagement among the rural folk is a slow process that is confronted by vulnerability, powerlessness and cultural constraints. Effort ought to be put on triggers such as gravity of the issues at hand and tapping into leadership by a few enlightened and those economically empowered. The organisational approach of running civic education alongside economic empowerment programmes is commendable. Civic education and awareness programmes ought to note that engagement is a matter of interest and compromise based on reason or rationality. It’s important for education and awareness programmes to appreciate people’s context as it relates to capacities, culture, interests and ambitions.

As noted earlier, CER methods go beyond information gathering to an endeavour to make a contribution to changed lives (Mahlomaholo, 2009; Nkoane, 2012; Watson & Watson, 2011). Through the research engagement with the NGO and partner communities, the study was able to generate dialogue between community members and their leaders. During dissemination of findings, joint action plans were put in place where political leadership and civil servants in liaison with KRC agreed to ensure that citizens’ needs and grievances are timely addressed. The NGO leadership and local government officials also agreed to a harmonious working relationship and the acceptable messages put out to the communities. This was in addition to interactions between the researcher [first author] and communities at individual, family and group level. Through, these interactions for example, the researcher liaised with the NGO to send in more supplies of civic education leaflets and posters to the communities. We also believe that through joint publications and information sharing, the study findings will continue to have lasting impact in the lives of the communities. Notwithstanding the limitations of RCT as being ambiguous and general (Boudon, 1998), it helped us to look at rural people as individuals and groups as all-round beings, that is social, economic, political and psychological in decision making. This was in a way able to challenge the would-be descriptions of ‘reason’ and judgment of researchers, philanthropists and decision makers.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to 1) The Academy of Finland for funding this study 2) Prof. Katariina Holma, University of Oulu, Finland and Prof. Tiina Kontinen, University of Jyväskylä, Finland; the Principal Investigators of the Cs-Learn project 3) Alice Nankya Ndidde, Makerere University, Uganda (Head of Ugandan research team).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant [number 24302771].

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Ethics approvals

Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and research process by Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).

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