

NGOs play a crucial role in educating and motivating voters

Damaris Aswa is a leader in the area of social justice and community development in Kenya. She is the chairperson and founder of Youth4 Integrity Building - an organization that aims to promote sustainable development by promoting integrity, democracy, and social justice. Damaris is also an Advisory Board member at Democracy Moves, President of the Board of Directors at Anticorruption Research Center, and a member of the AntiCorruption Syndicate team at Voice1 Africa. During her four-month stay in the US last year, she worked with Chicago Votes.

Damaris, can you please tell us more about your work?



Source: Damaris Aswa

In Kenya, corruption, ethnic tensions, low levels of voter registration and high unemployment rates make the need for civic education and the promotion of civic participation obvious. Working to promote integrity, ethical behavior and national unity is critical to citizen engagement.

At Youth4 Integrity Building, we engage young people by giving them the tools, resources and knowledge to make a difference in their communities. We educate them about their rights and responsibilities, promote democratic values, and foster a culture of informed decision-making and active citizenship.

My involvement in other organizations, as well as my international experience, further supports my work to promote transparency, accountability and ethical leadership. By undertaking good governance advocacy and citizen empowerment activities, we hold leaders accountable and contribute to building a society where citizen participation is valued and encouraged.

You focus part of your efforts on educating and motivating young people to vote. Tell us why is it essential that they are politically active?

Civic education and increasing young people's motivation to vote is important because youth participation in the political process is crucial to ensuring a healthy democracy. Young people represent a significant proportion of the population and their voices and perspectives need to be represented in the decision-making process. By voting, they can support candidates who align with their values. These representatives would advocate for policies that address needs and interests of young people such as education, health, and climate change. Voting also ensures youth empowerment and helps people to realize that they can actively shape the direction of their communities and society.

Given my experience in Chicago, as well as my work back home in Kenya, it is essential to partner with educational institutions to integrate civic education into the curriculum. The key is to encourage students to vote. Organizing debates and mock elections at school and university help do this. These activities make the electoral process more understandable and engaging.

An additional measure is the organization of events where young people can interact with local candidates, leaders, and NGO representatives. This allows them to voice their concerns and ask questions. Those who are already politically active, on the other hand, can be encouraged to become "ambassadors of civic participation." An example of this is the Democracy Corps Leadership Program of Chicago Votes. It recruits fellows who then share their experiences, participate in public debates, and inspire their peers to become active.

Last but not least, awareness campaigns play a role - they inform young people about the importance of the electoral process and opportunities to influence policy decisions. On the one hand, this happens through the development of thematic educational materials such as posters, leaflets, etc. On the other hand, it is important to include creative and interactive methods during the events at which they are disseminated in order to present the information in an interesting and accessible way.

What are the biggest problems that voters face in Kenya? Tell us more about the current situation there.

Kenya held its general elections last year in August 2022. We are glad that for the first time in history, citizens upheld peace before, during, and after elections. Although the announcement of the results of the presidential vote caused some tension and the opposition demanded the results to be annulled, citizens remained calm.

Some of the challenges that are still persistent in Kenya include cases of pressure over voters and voter intimidation that deter people from exercising their right to vote. In Kenya, we have a history of electoral violence and political instability, an environment of fear and uncertainty for voters, limited access to voter registration for rural and marginalized groups, and concerns about the fairness of the voting process and the announcement of election results. Despite the introduction of some reforms aimed at improving the accuracy and transparency of the electoral process, there is still skepticism and disillusionment among voters.

It is important to note that the situation in Kenya is dynamic. Continuous efforts are needed to ensure that all those with the right to vote can exercise it freely and without pressure. Back in time, there were initiatives in this direction that failed to achieve their objectives. However, they were a good basis for the current efforts to improve the situation. These are:

- The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), which conducts continuous voter registration campaigns and has organized mobile registration centers to increase voter access to the electoral process.
- Civic education programs conducted by the Independent Electoral Commission and NGOs to inform citizens about their rights and the electoral process.

- The Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), which monitors and investigates cases of voter intimidation and violence during elections.

People usually perceive voting as something boring. Can voting be “cool”? How do you achieve that?

Voting can be "cool" and engaging! One approach to changing attitudes involves developing educational materials such as voter guides to give people knowledge about the electoral process, the candidates, and the issues involved. This way, citizens will feel confident and motivated to cast their votes as the interactive approaches will engage them.



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The second strand in this direction is to simplify the voting process. In Kenya, for example, this could happen by developing user-friendly voter registration apps. One such measure is the creation of an online voting system - this would make the process convenient and accessible to all voters. In areas with poor internet connectivity, consideration could be given to creating the ability to vote in a more inviting environment at the polling station such as having music at the polling station. Organizing voting parties, music festivals, or art exhibitions that celebrate civic engagement and encourage people to vote by making them feel part of a larger social experience is also an interesting idea.

Moreover, if we are talking about successful and impactful campaigns, we must use slogans, vivid graphics, and compelling narratives. They attract attention and generate excitement around voting. Finally, collaborating with celebrities and influencers who have followers among the target audience is key to attracting that group of people. This can make voting appear "cooler."

In your opinion, when are young voters ready to vote for the first time? What motivates them the most to do this?

The logical answer is "when they have reached the legal voting age". However, I would add that it happens when they are actively engaged with their communities, have received appropriate civic education, and have a basic understanding of the political issues and their potential impact on society.

For some young voters, voting is seen as a civic duty, so they are motivated by the historical significance of their first vote. Some of them realize that they are becoming part of a long



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tradition of democratic participation and want to be part of shaping the future of their country.

Moreover, as strange as it may sound, we have observed that when young people see their friends and peers actively participating in the electoral process, it generates a sense of socialization and further motivates them to participate.

The aspiration to shape the future, address pressing issues, and ensure that their voices are heard and their interests represented in the political arena undoubtedly inspires them.

How would you motivate voters who have to elect their representatives in public institutions frequently? Why is it important for them to cast their vote no matter what?

Motivating voters, who have to choose their representatives in public institutions frequently, can be a challenging task. Some of them would surely feel tired, especially if they do not see a desirable change. However, I would like to emphasize the importance of voting, regardless of the frequency of elections. In fact, to some extent, frequent elections indicate the existence of an active and vibrant democracy. Every election provides an opportunity to shape the future direction of the country or community. By voting consistently, people demonstrate their commitment to the democratic values and principles on which society is built.

In such a situation, it is important to tell success stories and examples of how voting has led to positive outcomes. This can be done online through websites or blogs where detailed stories can be shared. These formats could be ideally complemented by social media campaigns (e.g. on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram) with engaging content.

What is the role of nongovernmental organizations in the task of educating and motivating voters? How do you see the public institutions' role in that more as the one of a potential partner?

NGOs play a crucial role in educating and motivating voters through various means. They provide civic education programs to raise awareness about the importance of voting, conduct voter registration drives, create awareness campaigns to inspire citizen participation, mobilize voters through targeted outreach efforts, and monitor elections to ensure transparency. Public institutions, on the other hand, can collaborate with NGOs to enhance their voter education initiatives, support policies that promote civic education and participation, disseminate accurate information through government platforms, and provide capacity-building support to

NGOs. By recognizing the complementary roles of NGOs and public institutions and fostering collaboration between them, a more comprehensive and impactful approach to educating and motivating voters can be achieved, leading to a more informed and engaged electorate. Some of these public institutions in Kenya include The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), The National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), and the Ministry of Youth and Gender Affairs. Together, NGOs and public institutions can work towards creating a society where citizens are well-informed, actively participate in the electoral process, and have their voices heard in shaping the future of their communities and nations.