

Bridging Education and Civic Life: Community Support, Learning Experiences, and Political Engagement among Cambodian Youth

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Abstract

This study explores education's role in civic life through the lens of political socialization among Cambodian youth, specifically focusing on the learning experience and community involvement as mediating factors. By moving beyond the instrumental views of education as contributing to the formation of human capital, the study views education as civic infrastructure that promotes political motivation, efficacy, and participation. Utilizing interdisciplinary scholarship in education, political science, and community psychology, the paper argues that active community-based learning experiences are more likely to produce civic learners than traditional learning methods. Additionally, the study argues that community support strengthens the civic purpose of education, despite structural inequities that persist in over-determining participation by gender, class, geography, and socio-economic factors. With the Cambodian example, the study illustrates the arguments in the context of larger debates within Southeast Asia and the Global South, thereby contributing to the theory and policy discourse on the intersections of inclusive education and youth empowerment, and the strengthening of democratic gaps. The study stresses the need to enhance the linkages between education and communities to cultivate inclusive and sustainable civic futures.

Keywords: education & citizenship; Cambodian youth; community-based learning; civic engagement; civic education; social justice

I. INTRODUCTION

In the years directly after the end of the Khmer Rouge genocide and subsequent civil war, the Cambodian youth demographic was, and still is, a driver of the nation's political, social and developmental discourses. Most scholars agree that the economic rebuilding efforts in post-Cambodia conflict-disintegration focused not only on the re-establishing of the national economy but also the rebuilding of the nation's governance structures, consolidation of power, devolution of power & the promotion of community engagement (Öjendal & Sedara, 2011; Rohdewohld, 2022). In this context, the rebuilding of the education system also became a means for the state and the various civil society actors to empower a generation to play a positive role in the rebuilding of the nation and active citizenship.

The effects of the expansion of secondary and higher education since the 2000s has had a transformative effect on the Cambodian youth demographic (Un & Sok, 2022). Educational policies that also incorporated decentralization and youth policies focused on education that transcended the mere economic and productivity goals of society to include social and civic objectives (Biesta, 2011; Riddle et al., 2021). Within the discipline of political science, education can be viewed as the main locus of civic socialization where learners become socialized into the norms of citizenship, comprehension of state-society relations and the power of political efficacies (Galston, 2001). The Cambodian youth are politically socialized not through direct memories of violent conflict, as many of them were born after the conflict era, but through the educational systems, the community-based programs, and the mediated narratives of the nation's developmental politics. Observers note that this generational shift in political socialization has transformed young citizens' perceptions of political legitimacy, political authority, and political participation (Huot & Chheang, 2026; Norén-Nilsson, 2021). As a result, in Cambodia, education works more than just the provision of cognitive skills; it also encompasses aspects of community life and the construction of civic identities.

Although there has been great progress in the expansion of educational access in Cambodia, there are indications in the literature that youth political engagement in Cambodia is still lagging, and when it occurs, it is selective and symbolic. The political science literature tends to identify a paradox. Despite the increasing levels of education and digital literacy, the youth are paradoxically

disengaged from traditional forms of political participation (Eng & Hughes, 2017; Peou, 2020). Some academics point to structural inequality, particularly socio-economic and geographical divides, to explain the unevenness. Young people living in urban areas and from higher socioeconomic backgrounds generally have better access to civic learning opportunities, student clubs, and digital resources. In contrast, rural and marginalized young people face limited or no opportunities for meaningful participation (World Bank, 2022). Others argue that institutional engagement is as important as educational attainment; students in universities with developed community engagement, service learning, and student governance are more likely to have political interest and feel politically effective (Krings et al., 2015).

At the same time, researchers have pointed out that political engagement is more nuanced than simply voting or political party affiliation. Youth studies scholars point out that Cambodian youth engage in informal community and problem-solution oriented digital advocacy participation (Huot, 2025; Sean, 2023). These kinds of engagement are often perceived as politically apathetic or disconnected from the political system.

The puzzle emphasizes the transformation of educational experiences into civic and political agency. Education as a process provides knowledge and skills but does not ensure continuous political engagement. As some authors note, the supportive community context, or lack thereof, is critical in determining whether learning leads to engagement (Putnam, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). This study, like others, identifies a significant gap in the division of labour between education and political science as a field of study. Educators' research tends to be focused on curriculum, pedagogy, and learning, and civics as an outcome is an afterthought, if considered at all (Hoskins et al., 2012). Conversely, political science literature tends to examine youth participation through institutional, behavioral, or attitudinal lenses, and often ignores learning contexts and pedagogical practices that could shape political dispositions (Norris, 2002).

Several scholars have suggested the need for a more integrated framework. In a similar vein, Flanagan and Levine (2010) argue that democratic citizenship is not merely a question of knowing something, but a social practice that is understanding as a social practice through interaction and engaged participation. They also argue that political participation is situated within the everyday learning, and supportive peer and civic community frameworks. These views advocate for the understanding of politics and education as one process, and not as separate entities.

The framing of this paper is grounded on such propositions to develop an interdisciplinary approach that focuses on learning experiences in the community. The study does not consider education in the abstract, but analyses how community support, through social networks, trust in civic institutions, and opportunities for political participation, influences the relationship between education and political participation. This approach responds to the need for scholarship that transcends the boundaries of disciplines, and the integrated analysis of relationship within the civic world of young people in the developing and post conflict world (Aspinall & Weiss, 2012).

As informed by the above-stated theories and empirical evidence, this study outlines four interrelated objectives. First, considering the role of educational processes in Cambodia, the study will assess the impact of such processes on the political awareness, motivation, and engagement of the youth. Second, the study will examine the community's role in shaping the learning experience of the youth and how such experience is enacted. Third, the study will assess the dominant forms of political engagement and how these differ across the socio-economic, spatial, and institutional divides. Last, the study will articulate an integrated conceptual framework on education, community, and civic engagement.

The paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. What role do formal and informal educational experiences play in fostering political activism among Cambodian youth?
2. In what aspects does community advocacy reinforce or weaken the educational civic impact?
3. How do the imbalances of assistive educational frameworks shape youth activism?
4. In what ways can education be redefined as civic infrastructure for equitable growth?

The value of this research can be seen as threefold. It adds to the still emerging research on Cambodian youth in the nexus of education and civic life relatively empirically. In terms of theory, it fosters the still scarce cross-disciplinary education and political science nexus by bringing together the concepts of learning, community advocacy, and political activism. It also speaks to practitioners, in particular educators, policymakers, and community actors, to assist in fostering the educational civic activism of youth, which speaks to the all-encompassing global aspirations on social justice education, youth empowerment, and inclusive futures.

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Scholars of education have documented the ways in which schooling, in general, has a powerfully formative impact on the political attitudes, civic mindsets, and levels of engagement of individuals. Some of the earliest theorists of political socialization argued that schools are a part of the ecosystem in which youth acquire, in addition to a formal education, the informal social knowledge about the rules of citizenship, about authority, and about living in a society together (Easton & Dennis, 1967). In this vein, contemporary education theorists, have suggested that the most impactful civic education is the education that goes beyond the curriculum and helps learners engage in civic activities.

For Biesta (2011), democratic education cannot mean gaining knowledge about democratic systems. It must include learning through the exercise of democracy as students must experience having a voice, being responsible, and taking part in collective decision making. In a similar way, the Deweyan approach to democratic education suggests that civic skills and dispositions are a product of social interaction and political engagement (Dewey, 1986). From these perspectives, it is important to understand that schools and universities develop political attitudes through the informal and hidden political curriculum.

Political scientists emphasize that education builds civic skills like critical thinking, deliberation, and organizational ability that fosters participatory citizenship. In the Cambodian case, researchers note that postsecondary education institutions are sites where young people encounter concepts of citizenship, governance, and development, often through the service-learning community outreach and student-organization triad (Un & Sok, 2022). However, researchers warn that when education focuses primarily on examination results or job market prospects, the civic socialization potential of education is diminished (Huot, 2026; Riddle et al., 2021). Education is the basis of civic learning, but scholars are increasingly arguing that the role of education is politically effective only when there is community support. Community psychology and sociology emphasize that learning is social. People understand and act upon what they learn through social networks, and community support plays an important role in the learning process (Huot, 2025; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The social capital theory gives an angle through which it is possible to understand this mediation. Putnam (2000) describes how the construction of dense networks, characterized by trust and reciprocity, aids in cooperation and participation by reducing the costs of collective action. In youth studies, social capital is often constructed through the lens of access to information, civic norms, and participation that transcends formal institutions (Flanagan, 2013). However, there is a warning by Bourdieu (1986) that social capital is an unequal resource that reproduces the social order and inequality, hence the community context is the important variable to understand differential civic outcomes.

Apart from social capital, scholars have noted the sense of belonging as an important psychological dimension that connects individuals to the collective. Baumeister and Leary (2007) argue that the motivation to belong is a primary driver of commitment, identity, and action. In the context of education, a strong sense of belonging has been shown to increase civic motivation and public participation (Osterman, 2000). Closely related is perceived social support, which in the literature is said to enhance confidence and lower the costs of political expression in repressive, stratified, and social situations (Thoits, 2011).

The impact of social identity and normative influence shape the understanding of civic responsibilities among young people. According to the theory of social identity, was structured by Tajfel and Turner (1986), individual behaviors and activities are associated with group norms. This suggests that an individual is inclined to participate when civic engagement is appreciated within the social circle (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Researchers focusing on the participation of young people believe that community participation; volunteering, community programs, or community-based organizations, serves as a valuable training for civic participation that reinforces civic lessons associated with formal education (Krings et al., 2015).

Political engagement refers to a complex construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Engagement is defined as a combination of interest, knowledge, participation, and expression, and the dimensions are interdependent (Norris, 2002). Effective cognitive engagement implies the comprehension of and familiarity with political matters. Behaviorally, engaged individuals practice advocacy, vote, and actively volunteer. Emotionally engaged individuals have trust, attachment, or frustration toward the political systems.

Motivation serves as a bridge between knowledge and practice. According to self-determination theory, political participation is most prevalent when there is the presence of autonomy, competence, and social connection or relatedness (Huot, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Education is one of the social structures that can create the motivating factors, if there are community structures supportive of civic expression.

At the heart of this model is the notion of political efficacy. Campbell and Miller (1954) note the distinction between what can be termed internal political efficacy, the belief in one’s own political ability, and external political efficacy, the belief in the ability of the political system to respond. Research has shown that education enhances internal efficacy by improving one’s skill and self-confidence, while external efficacy is the result of community support and trust in institutions (Craig et al., 1990; Huot, 2025). In circumstances such as Cambodia, where trust in institutions is low, the internal efficacy that is derived from education and community engagement is particularly important in sustaining youth participation.

This study, integrating these theoretical strands, proposes an integrative conceptual model where education, in relation to community-mediated learning experiences, is seen as an indirect influence on political engagement. Education equips individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, and civic responsibilities, while community support systems influence the way these components are understood, reinforced, and mobilized. Furthermore, political engagement is an outcome that is dependent on the combination of motivation and political efficacy.

Table 1 serves to clarify these relationships by outlining the core constructs, the theories from which they are derived, and the roles they play in the study.

Table 1. Core Constructs and Theoretical Foundations

| Construct | Theoretical Foundation | Role in the Model |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Education as Civic Socialization | Civic education, experiential learning | Provides civic knowledge, skills, and participatory exposure |
| Community Support | Social capital, community psychology | Mediates and reinforces learning experiences |

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Political Motivation | Self-determination theory | Translates learning into willingness to engage |
| Political Efficacy | Political behavior theory | Enables sustained political participation |
| Political Engagement | Democratic participation theory | Outcome: cognitive, behavioral, emotional participation |

III. EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT IN THE CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

Prolonged conflict and institutional collapse in Cambodia brought on the need for an extensive process of educational reconstruction. The transformation of socialization and civic orientation of Cambodian youth created some positive impacts. Scholars note that in the post-conflict period the educational reforms of Cambodia were focused on two key areas: rebuilding human capital and social cohesion (Ayres, 2000; Bredenberg, 2022). The early reforms focused on access, literacy, and the restoration of educational institutions, while the later phases tried to balance quality, governance, and relevance to the nation’s development.

Political scientists have noted that the first decentralization reforms in the early 2000s focused on changing the education system to include community and local participation (Huot, 2025; Rohdewohld, 2022). Education for civic interaction tends to be transversely focused on social studies curricula and youth development programs to foster a sense of national identity and social responsibility and an understanding of the government. Some scholars have noted that the lack of incubating citizenship education for the system in place is a sign of confidence to promote pluralism and open dissent (Peang-Meth, 2017).

The reshaping of youth civic exposure has also been influenced by the expansion of higher education. Researchers suggest that young Cambodians are acquiring their first impressions of citizenship, rights, and development through university partnerships with NGOs, international agencies, and community service collaborations (Un & Sok, 2022). However, the civic dimension of education varies considerably and is influenced by the level of institutional resource availability, the exercise of leadership, and geography. Given these factors, education offers the community the possibility of fostering civic engagement, but there is no guarantee of that outcome.

The most prominent civic exposure for Cambodian youths is within the formal learning environments of schools, universities, and organized student structures. Educators suggest that the curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional ethos all impact the political and participatory consciousness of students (Huot, 2026; Riddle et al., 2021). In the case of Cambodia, civic education has been incorporated mainly within social studies and moral education courses, with predominant themes of national history, social cohesion, and development citizenship. Institutions of higher education have become a venue for increased civic education. Student constituencies, educational interest clubs, and service-learning units are noted by scholars for fostering leadership, collaborative decision making, and social issue activism (Krings et al., 2015). These contexts allow young people to develop organizational, analytical, and collaborative. These skills are considered essential to exercising citizenship by political scientists (Huot, 2025; Verba et al., 1995).

There are also scholars who suggest that formal civic engagement is more instrumental than transformative. Participation framed as top-down compliance or to build a résumé rather than as an act of democratic engagement chills political motivation and political efficacy (Biesta, 2011). Furthermore, institutional and political sensitivities that discourage the articulation of dissent can further narrow the civic learning. Thus, the civic exposure that formal educational environments offer is deeply shaped by the institutional culture and the active civic engagement of the surrounding community.

Informal educational and community settings also help to develop the civic identity of young people. Community psychologists and sociologists explain that civic competencies develop more through participation in informal everyday social practices than through formal teaching (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). In the case of Cambodia, civic learning takes place through many NGOs, community-based organizations, volunteer programs, and religious institutions.

Slocomb (2010) asserts that youth programs run by NGOs are likely to offer experiential learning, community service, and advocacy opportunities that are often absent from formal curricula. Involvement in civic activities such as environmental projects, health campaigns, or local development activities helps young people learn about social problem solving, active participation, and collaboration with local decision makers. Such activities, scholars argue, improve civic skills, political motivation, and civil engagement by demonstrating the concrete social benefits of civic participation (Flanagan, 2013).

Religious institutions, especially Buddhist pagodas, also function as venues for moral and civic socialization. Cambodian social scientists note that compassionate, responsible, and community-service moral norms, resulting from active religious participation, influence civic participation indirectly (Huot, 2025; Kent, 2008). Although these sites of religious practice and community service operate on the margins of the political, they help evoke ethical dispositions and communal identities that promote civic participation.

Overall, informal learning spaces enrich formal education by embedding civic education in relational and communal contexts, thereby deepening the social aspects of civic engagement and political participation. Family and peer networks are additional crucial components of civic learning and community support for youth. Political socialization studies indicate that families are a primary influence on children's political attitudes by way of political discussions, modelling, and value transmission (Jennings et al., 1974). Cambodian scholars observe that the youth's perception of political authority and participation is shaped by intergenerational experiences of conflict, survival, and development (Huot, 2025; Ledgerwood, 2012).

Moreover, civic attitudes are further shaped by peer groups, especially in schools. McFarland and Thomas (2006) indicate that peers provide social cues for acceptable participation, thereby reinforcing or dissuading participation. Youth in peer groups that promote volunteering, civic discussions, or leadership are likely to adopt civic attitudes.

These networks are becoming influenced by communities or international spaces. Access to political information and international communication networks is critical for the mass formation and identity building processes of the educated youth. However, in Cambodia, the political information and communication-technology (ICT) based inequality interlaced with the digital skills gap is being reproduced. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) argue that while the embedding of interactive tools within digital environments may strengthen political awareness and internal political efficacy of individuals, it does not guarantee that those individuals will become politically active in the offline world. In the absence of systemic shifts, the ability of educational and community-based support to nurture active citizenship in Cambodia is severely limited.

As a major hindrance, uneven regional distribution of educational and civic programming resources and digital tools, and the inequity of these resources across socio-economic strata has been emphasized in the World Bank (2022) report. As a result, civic engagement opportunities are

diminished for rural and marginalized populations, and youth compared to urban populations. The barriers to political education are also pertinent. Politically cautious educational strategies may undermine critical involvement and stifle discourse, thereby channeling youth activism into cautious, non-assertive pathways (Peang-Meth, 2017). Also, uneven funding and provision of civic education and community resources are additional barriers that negatively influence the consistency and depth of civic education. To integrate these dynamics, Table 2 spatially organizes pertinent educational and community contexts and articulates their civic contributions and constraints.

Table 2. Education, Community Support, and Civic Learning in Cambodia

| Context | Civic Contribution | Key Limitations |
|---|--|---|
| Formal Education (Schools & Universities) | Civic knowledge, leadership skills, institutional exposure | Limited critical dialogue; uneven quality |
| Student Organizations | Participatory practice, peer learning | Restricted autonomy; variable support |
| NGOs & Community Programs | Experiential civic learning, local engagement | Uneven access; donor dependency |
| Religious Institutions | Ethical socialization, community cohesion | Indirect political engagement |
| Families & Peer Networks | Value transmission, normative influence | Reproduction of inequality |
| Digital Communities | Information access, political awareness | Digital divide; weak offline linkage |

IV. LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Several studies, drawing from many disciplines, emphasize the importance of the learning experience, beyond the mere attainment of qualifications, in shaping the civic and political participation of young people. Educators point to the political knowledge and reasoning ability

that can be acquired from learning in the classroom but emphasize that the political effects are muted if learning is not framed within an advocacy context (Biesta, 2011). Political scientists have made similar observations and have underscored the importance of providing youth, particularly in developing or post-conflict nations, with learning opportunities that extend beyond the classroom (Norris, 2002).

Theorists have also articulated the reasons why learning through experience, rather than through the acquisition of knowledge, is likely to stimulate engagement in civic activities. Dewey (1986) argued that the act of learning becomes socially significant when people relate to and address social issues collectively. Scholars have shown that service learning helps develop a sense civic and political responsibility (Eyler & Giles Jr, 1999), and in Cambodia, researchers have noted that young people involved in community development and NGO activities have, in effect, been learning about citizenship, governance, and collective action (Slocomb, 2010).

Engagement in digital learning is an important aspect of learning and engagement. Access to digital platforms is said to assist in developing civic skills, as they facilitate learning, encourage peer collaboration, and support users in expressing their learning (Theocharis & Van Deth, 2017). Still, other authors point out that digital engagement is often very limited and needs to be supported by face-to-face learning and offline community engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). These competing viewpoints suggest that learning experiences that are civic and participatory in nature, especially those that are community-focused, are the most effective in fostering social engagement and community focus.

Engagement and support from the community are vital in transforming learning experiences into civic engagement. Motivation is the willingness to take action to support a cause. Motivation is relational, and in this case, a community or social support system is needed, and not just individual characteristics or attributes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Educational psychologists have observed that community-focused, supportive systems increase participants' feelings of autonomy and competence, which are psychologically vital for continued engagement.

Community support can be viewed through multiple lenses. Networks based on trust repair the social costs of engagement and legitimize participation in civic activities (Putnam, 2000). Youth who are within nurturing peer networks and community groups are more likely to view and experience learning as meaningful and actionable. Moreover, Stanton-Salazar (2011) argues that

the institutional agents of socialization, such as teachers, mentors, and community leaders, help assimilate learning into civic ambitions when they affirm the importance of youth in the learning process. Community support is particularly significant in Cambodia, where participation in civic activities is often individualized. Researchers note that youth participation is most probable when families, peers, and community institutions endorse participative acts as socially acceptable and valuable (Ledgerwood, 2012). In contrast, in the absence of extensive networks of support, learning experiences can fail to produce political motivation, and educational opportunities can sustain civic apathy.

Political efficacy fundamentally links political learning and political action. Political behaviorists divide political efficacy into internal and external political efficacy; the former refers to the conviction that one possesses the requisite skills to partake in political activities, while the latter refers to the belief that political systems are responsive (Campbell & Miller, 1954). Education is believed to produce internal efficacy because of the knowledge, analytic abilities, and communication skills that it imparts (Craig et al., 1990). Research shows that participatory learning activities like student governance, debates, and community work help develop internal efficacy because young people get to practice agency and see results (Finkel, 2003). Educators say efficacy is further strengthened when learning settings promote exchange and reflection, as opposed to mindless following (Huot, 2026; Riddle et al., 2021).

External efficacy, on the other hand, is more impacted by the surrounding institutional and societal structures. Political scientists warn that when young people view political structures as remote or non-responsive, external efficacy tends to stay low, regardless of the level of education attained (Peou, 2020). In Cambodia, researchers say community-based activities may help fill the gap created by a lack of trust in formal structures by creating a sense of collective efficacy at the community level (Öjendal & Sedara, 2011; Rohdewohld, 2022). It is empirical that political efficacy, as an educational outcome, is the result of a complex interaction of learning activities and community structures.

Even with common educational reforms, disparities exist in youth political engagement by gender, socio-economic class, and region. Educators have pointed out that while educational distributions are unequal, so too are the means of civic learning, with variations in access to institutional and community resources (Bourdieu, 1986). While it is understood that young people from cities and

economically higher strata are more engaged in civic activities such as joining student bodies, digital activism, and volunteering to gain civic capital (World Bank, 2022), this holds true for the majority.

Patterns of participation in this context are further impacted by issues of gender. Feminist scholars have argued that aspects of women’s political activism are the result of a particular set of educational and cultural barriers, including the prevailing socio-cultural norms of women exercising leadership and voice in public (Kabeer, 2005). Although educational opportunities have increased for young women in Cambodia, researchers warn that participation in public life is still constrained by socio-cultural expectation (Brickell, 2011). There are still pronounced rural–urban gaps. Rural youth, it is noted, are likely to have less access to participatory learning opportunities, as well as civic and digital engagement tools, and this makes it impossible for education to be a means of political engagement (Un & Sok, 2022). These inequalities illustrate that the learning experiences are not homogeneous but are rather shaped by the existing structures that define benefits of education as a civic resource.

A combination of motivational support, a sense of community, and learning leads to a realization of a wide spectrum of civic and political outcomes. According to participation scholars, the barriers to political engagement are lessened by the diverse forms of education that promote political participation by providing the youth with the competence and the psychological resources to act (Verba et al., 1995). In Cambodia, researchers note a spectrum of political participation from voting and civic volunteering to advocacy, local leadership, and issue-based mobilization (Eng & Hughes, 2017).

It is noteworthy that questioned the pathways that do not result in a linear and straightforward outcome. Community-based problem solving occurs prior to youth civic engagement, and community-based problem solving occurs prior to institutional political engagement (Flanagan, 2013). Education thus serves, not as a predictor of certain behaviors, but rather, as a means of building capacity for various forms of engagement, contingent on the specific context.

Table 3 is an attempt to integrate the various dynamics in terms of the learning experience, the mediating mechanism, and the outcome of engagement.

Table 3. Learning Experiences and Pathways to Youth Political Engagement

| Learning Experience | Mediating Factors | Civic & Political Outcomes |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Classroom-based learning | Knowledge acquisition, critical thinking | Political awareness, cognitive engagement |
| Service-learning & community projects | Social capital, motivation, efficacy | Volunteering, local participation |
| Student organizations & activism | Peer support, leadership skills | Advocacy, organizational engagement |
| Digital learning & online interaction | Information access, identity formation | Expressive participation, awareness |
| Informal community engagement | Normative influence, belonging | Collective action, community leadership |

V. DISCUSSION

One of the key contributions of this study is being able to shift the focus of education, from an instrumental approach that is primarily concerned with the accumulation of human capital. For decades, dominant policy and development discourses have focused on the role of education in fostering employability, productivity and, by extension, economic growth. These instrumental functions of education, while not insignificant, many scholars contend that such instrumental framings often conceal education’s other civic and democratic functions (Biesta, 2011; Sen, 2015). Education, from this perspective, is civic infrastructure; a system in and through which individuals acquire the capacities, dispositions, and relational qualities necessary for democratic citizenship.

Democracy is not only the function of formal institutions. Political theorists emphasize the importance of a citizenry with civic skills, confidence, and a sense of collective responsibility (Dahl, 2020). Developed education systems provide the basis for such attributes by fostering critical thinking, effective communication, and moral reasoning. Educators emphasize the importance of such attributes, especially in post-conflict and developing countries like Cambodia, where education fosters the building of trust, social cohesion, and civic norms, which are often absent due to the impact of former historical violence and fragile institutions (Bredenberg, 2022).

The results presented in earlier sections have contributed to the understanding that the civic value of education stems not only from what youth are learning, but how and where that learning is taking place. Community-based education, which is participatory and dialogical, can transform itself into active democratic agency. Education is often seen to attain societal approval and to attain the next level of societal structure, thus sidelining civic education. This is the case in a structure that depends on educational institutions for civic development and democracy for economic growth. This is the case where the structure depends on educational institutions for civic development and democracy for economic growth.

The analysis further shows that support of the community really makes a difference in determining how and if the effects of education are felt civically. Across the sociology and political science fields, there is a consensus that from a structural perspective, participation is socially embedded and is influenced by the systems of trust, belonging, and normative reinforcement (Flanagan, 2013; Putnam, 2000). Community support, in this sense, acts as a facilitator that promotes the influence of education by transforming learning into motivation and action. It is suggested that the findings of the study are aligned with Stanton-Salazar's (2011) assertion that social networks and institutional agents are critical for marginalized youth in the conversion of educational resources into civic outcomes. When learning activities are complemented by support from familial, peer, community, and organizational mentoring, youth are likely to internalize civic norms. They can see participation for what it is, to be legitimate and meaningful. On the contrary, educational exposure amid a socially fragmented or a non-supportive ambience fails to result in enduring political engagement.

Supporting Cambodia's strong relational norms and community ties, community support is especially salient. Scholars note that youth involvement often manifests as group-oriented activities, volunteering, local projects, religious involvement, rather than as manifestations of 'political' individualism (Ledgerwood, 2012). The implications of these findings are that community contexts are not merely accessories to education, but rather, to some extent, co-generate civic agency. This suggests that community and educational approaches must be intertwined in youth civic engagement strategies. When education is viewed as civic infrastructure, this has positive ramifications for social justice and inclusion. Critical theorists point out that the lack of equitable access to quality education and the absence of nurturing learning environments

exacerbates political inequality by excluding certain people from civic participation (Bourdieu, 1986; Fraser, 2009). The analysis of the current study illustrates the impact of overlapping socio-economic, gender, and geographic factors on access to participatory learning and community support, and on the resultant patterns of political engagement.

Inequalities can be addressed through education-driven civic engagement, which empowers marginalized young people through voice, confidence, and collective capacity. For Sen (2015), development as expansion of constituent freedoms, including political and social participation, is central to development. From this lens, education is a contributor to social justice to the extent that it strengthens people’s capacity to be civic actors beyond mere development beneficiaries. The inclusion of Cambodian youth in a larger context enhances the value of the findings. Research in Southeast Asia and the Global South reveals similar patterns where the community and political context mediate the civic impact of education (Aspinall & Weiss, 2012; UNESCO, 2021). In Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, researchers note the political impact of service-learning, student activism, and community engagement on youth, especially when strong civil society networks are present.

Cambodia’s challenges and singular characteristics are comparably telling. In common with other post-authoritarian states, there are political rigidity, unequal distribution of power, and variable state capacity. Cambodian scholars, however, also point to the country’s unique opportunity for civic learning embedded in its historically close-knit community relations and traditions of collective living (Kent, 2008). For this reason, the Cambodian example adds to the existing literature by demonstrating that in the absence of formal political participation, community support and education may play a vital role in fostering a democratic political culture. In line with the discussion, Table 4 provides a conceptual framework of the role of education as civic infrastructure across the varying levels of analyses.

Table 4. Education as Civic Infrastructure for Inclusive Futures

| Analytical Level | Educational Function | Civic Outcome |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Individual | Civic knowledge, skills, political confidence | Internal political efficacy |

| | | |
|---------------|--|--|
| Community | Belonging, normative support, social capital | Motivation and sustained engagement |
| Institutional | Participatory learning environments | Collective action and leadership |
| Societal | Inclusive educational access | Democratic legitimacy and social justice |

VI. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the role of education in civic life and political activism of Cambodian youth, focusing on the role of community support and learning. The analyses produced one dominant finding: the civic impact of education is neither given, linear, nor uniformly distributed. It is rather a function of the impact of the quality of learning, the presence of enabling social structures, and the capacity of youth to act upon the knowledge they acquire and convert it into confidence and motivation.

The paper has shown that classrooms alone cannot provide complete foundations for civic engagement. Shifting the focus of learning environments to participatory, experiential, and community-embedded practices enhances the development of political awareness, internal political efficacy, and a sense of responsibility for the common good. Community support from families, peers, institutions, and local organizations acts as a crucial link that either enhances or limits the political impact of education. Where education and community support intersect, youth political participation is sustained, and the levels of engagement are deeper and broader. Where there is no intersection, political participation is shallow or fragmented.

The study, by integrating the educational theory and the political science disciplines, makes a case for looking at education as civic infrastructure. It demonstrates that education is not simply a means of preparing individuals for the employment market, but a means of constructing a societal framework that promotes democratic agency, social integration, and active participation. This perspective is particularly important for post-conflict and developing countries, where the civic potential of the younger population is critical for achieving democratic legitimacy.

The implications of this research emphasize the need for changes in teaching and learning policies. First, the design of curricula should build from merely content-driven citizenship education to

approaches that prioritize participation, dialogue, and reflection. Civic education is most transformative when learners grapple with authentic social problems, engaged in collaborative problem solving and reflective practice about their social responsibility as active community members, and not just passive spectators or bystanders.

Second, the need for civic and community-oriented education must be included in the design of curricula for the training and professional development of teachers. Teachers do not merely transfer content, but they also nurture civic learning with the right structures and processes. It is important to prepare teachers to promote inclusive dialogue, active participation of learners, and advocacy for the connection of the learning that takes place in the classroom to the learning that occurs in the community.

Third, there should be a greater commitment from educational institutions to work collaboratively with community members, civil society organizations, and local community initiatives. Such partnerships promote learning that goes beyond the walls of the institution and provides students with opportunities to use their learning in authentic ways. Community engaged learning, service learning, and youth initiatives should be recognized as essential for the educational experience, not as extras.

Most importantly, equity must be prioritized in educational policy. The accessibility of participatory educational environments to avoid the perpetuation of political inequality must be ensured in the case of the rural youth, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and marginalized groups. The education policy that prioritizes inclusion and community engagement has individual developmental impacts as well as impacts on the democratic resilience of the community. Policies that help build and strengthen communities help to build and strengthen democracies. The study also has relevance beyond education systems, to youth policy and the policy of democracy more generally. Educated youth strengthen democracy, because education increases the number of democratic citizens who can participate, problem solve, and lead. When young people can politically participate and see that society values that participation, they are confident to participate in politics.

One of the implications of the study is that youth engagement is not limited to politics. Youth governance and social development also benefit from community volunteering, leading the community, advocacy, and local initiatives. These activities lower democratic participation

thresholds and close the gap between people and governing institutions. Education and community support act as alternative democratic infrastructures when formal political participation is limited or unequal. Fostering civic agency at the local level helps build social trust, collective efficacy, and longitudinal political predictability. Empowering youth through education is more than a social policy goal; it is an essential pillar of democratic governance.

This study is insightful, but it has limitations. The analysis, at a conceptual level, recognizes education and community support as the primary factors motivating political involvement. However, other factors, including media, economic precarity, and institutional trust, need to be analyzed more closely. The study could be strengthened if it employed longitudinal research methods to determine the impact of civic knowledge and skills over time, as well as cross-national or cross-regional comparisons. With the increasing influence of digital technologies, youth political socialization requires a more thorough analysis of how online learning environments integrate with offline community engagement.

This study would significantly benefit from a more refined analysis of the intersection of gender, race, and class to better understand who is most advantaged by civic education as an infrastructure, and who is most disadvantaged. This research evidences the need for framing education, community support, and youth engagement as interdependent components of inclusive futures. When communities understand education as civic infrastructure and place learning within nurturing social ecosystems, they dispossess youth the capabilities to meaningfully engage in democratic life and to sustainable and just development.

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