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Understanding Youth Civic Engagement: Debates, discourses and lessons from practice

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Understanding Youth Civic Engagement:

Debates, discourses and lessons from practice

Prepared for Social Entrepreneurs Ireland (SEI) by
the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway

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1. Introduction

In 2010, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies to roll out a youth civic action initiative. The programme, entitled *Wave Change*, works directly with young people who have a passion for social change in order to develop the knowledge, skills and networks they need to make a difference in Ireland. The main focus of the initiative is a ten month programme to provide training, development and networking opportunities to a group of young people annually from across Ireland, aged 18-25, to support them to develop and implement ideas for social change. Knowledge generation is an additional strand of the initiative led by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre. The objective is to generate learning that will guide the future improvement of the programme, as well as feeding into the evidence base regarding youth civic engagement interventions that promote positive youth development.

In this context, the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre undertook to provide an overview of the relevant theory and literature on youth civic engagement. In exploring the concept of civic engagement and its relevance to the *Wave Change* initiative, this paper examines:

- What are the relevant definitions, typologies and discourses in which youth civic engagement operates?
- What are the beneficial outcomes of youth engagement?
- What are the essential considerations for developing and implementing youth civic engagement programs?
- What are the core challenges and barriers to youth civic engagement?

In the first two sections, key definitions and typologies are identified that help to distinguish youth civic engagement activities from other forms of youth activity. In section three, the paper identifies five discourses that create a rationale for youth civic engagement activity. Section four summarises the perceived benefits to individuals and communities suggested by research. Section five highlights the barriers and challenges to the civic engagement of youth. In the final section, this paper explicitly focuses on learning from research literature that can

inform the development of civic action programmes and issues associated with effective programmes are identified.

2. Definitions and Typologies

Over the past two decades, the concept of youth citizenship and civic engagement has acquired prominence in research, policy and practice. Across a wide variety of scholarly disciplines, the context for adolescent and youth development is increasingly coming to recognise the importance of the civic domain (Flanagan & Christens, 2011). Among international agencies, the World Development Report, for instance, highlighted exercising active citizenship as one of the most important activities for a healthy transition to adulthood (The World Bank, 2007). Interest in the concept has been spurred by a range of factors, including, initially, concern regarding a perceived decline in levels of civic and political engagement among young people throughout the western world. Given that the participation of citizens is important in the functioning of a healthy democracy, there is a concern that a disengagement of young people from the political system will negatively impact on the governance of society. Attention to youth civic engagement has also arisen from heightened awareness of the rights of children and young people, which highlight the need for the democratic participation and social action by young people to be supported and encouraged. Additionally, the potential for youth civic engagement activity to contribute to the personal development of young people, to promote their welfare and to challenge injustice in society also provides an impetus for greater focus on civic engagement as a component of youth work and youth action.

This paper draws from a wide range of research, theory, and practice literature. The represented bodies of knowledge include social work, sociology, community development, political science, public policy, international development and education. Such areas of inquiry are the primary disciplines in which a focus on civic engagement based interventions have informed youth development approaches. While a myriad of programmes exist to increase opportunities for youth to become more civically engaged in society (as illustrated in the typologies section below), for the purposes of this paper, it was considered particularly important that we set this definition in the context of youth development and empowerment.

This is to distinguish the engagement process from other settings where it would be operationally different.

2.1 Definitions

The concept of civic engagement is closely related to that of active citizenship and/or participation. A major report highlighting youth participation activities in 101 countries acknowledged that civic engagement and participation are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of capturing the many ways in which community organisations, governments and educators work with young people to meet both youth development and community development challenges, the report defined the scope of activities as ‘individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of communities or society in general, and which provide opportunities for reflection’ (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010, p. vi). Lister (2007) views civic engagement as an expression of young people as social actors, and the contributions they already make in society or in their ‘practices as citizens’. For others, civic engagement is a ‘bedrock value of democracy’ defined as being able to influence choices in collective action (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 214). Zaff et al. (2010) highlight that civic engagement includes the exercise of rights and responsibilities and some concern for the state and shared fate with one’s fellow citizens.

Civic engagement is widely endorsed and cited in academic, government, and programme settings. While on the one hand providing a rich rationale for intervention, the array of discourses urging a focus on youth engagement or action means that the concept can be confusing and cluttered. From the perspective of policy makers and programme managers, it can be challenging to disentangle the competing messages and assumptions about young people that underpin the rhetoric in relation to youth engagement. In a robust critique of the use of civic engagement as an umbrella term, Berger (2010, p. 335) advocated ‘the end of civic engagement’. Not, the author is at pains to point out, the end of ‘political participation, social connectedness, associational membership, volunteerism, community spirit or cooperative and tolerant moral norms but rather the umbrella term civic engagement used to encompass all of these topics while clarifying none.’ Rather, he calls for a more nuanced and descriptive set of engagements - political, social and moral that can be better measured and operationalised. Fundamentally, the way in which civic engagement is defined directly shapes how programs are developed, implemented, and outcomes measured. Each definition

will carry with it implications for those looking for clarity on how the components and skills will be delivered and assessed. Some of the recent literature is useful in the explicit focus on value-based orientations including an emphasis on empathy or reciprocity as important aspects of civic engagement.

As defined by Amná (2012), civic engagement, in essence, has to do with a person's 'outward looking', which is rooted in a fundamental orientation towards reciprocity. Amná (2012, p. 613) sums up 'Generally civic engagement deals with values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, knowledge, skills and behaviours concerned with conditions outside of the immediate environment of family and friends'. It finds expression, the author suggests in various spheres including the public, market, civil, and personal. Current perspectives on civic engagement reflect 'new social movements' innovative ways of questioning and transforming conventional forms of politics and political participation' (ibid.), making the point that one does not need to be actively involved in political participation to be engaged civically.

2.2 Typologies

Classifications or models of youth civic engagement demonstrate that it can take place in a range of contexts and take a variety of forms. A sample of models and typologies are now outlined, beginning with the varying contexts in which civic engagement activities can occur. Classifications of youth civic engagement tend to categorise activities around a broad spectrum in both formal and non-formal settings. For instance, the approach adopted by Innovations in Civic Participation in asset-mapping for youth civic engagement activities provides a useful grouping:

- a. **Community Service and Volunteering**
- b. **Mutual Aid:** support to others within the same community or social group
- c. **Advocacy and Campaigning:** raising public consciousness, working to change legislation and representation to government consultation bodies
- d. **Youth Media:** forms of media production by young people
- e. **Social Entrepreneurship:** creating innovative solutions to social problems
- f. **Leadership Training and Practice:** mechanisms for learning and exercising leadership skills.

Source: *Innovations in Civic Participation, culmination of research and publications cited in ICP, Youth Development through Civic Engagement: Asset-Mapping Approaches in South Asia, p.10 (2010).*

These activities can be employed in a range of settings, from local grassroots level to international level. Definitions and characteristics of each setting can be found in the following table.

Figure 1: Settings for Youth Civic Engagement Development

Setting	Key Characteristics
Local grassroots level	Local youth organizations can encourage a wide range of civic skills and motivations, many also seek to create opportunities for young people to become engaged in the management or governance of the organizations
Schools	Schools are important sites for the development of civic skills, values and behaviour. Research suggests that young people are more likely to be civically engaged in adolescence than in early adulthood (Finlay, Wray-Lake & Flanagan, 2010) because there are more opportunities to engage young people in civic opportunities through school and related programmes than there are after they leave school
Third-level institutions	Universities and colleges have increasingly come to see the importance of offering structured service learning and volunteering programmes that enable students to make a civic contribution as part of their curricular or extra-curricular activities
Non-governmental Organizations	NGO's operating at local, regional, national and international levels are important vehicles through which young people can work with others to take action on social issues
Government / political institutions	In many countries, there are formalised structures for young people to engage with political process
Political Parties	Young people can become involved in political parties but local political parties are often not very active in recruiting young voters

Encompassed in the above are broad-based categories that group youth civic engagement efforts across three core areas: education and service service-learning; political advocacy or activism; and youth development. The first, a curriculum-based approach, emphasises civic knowledge and skills that prioritise education for democracy. Service learning, namely an approach to education that combines a community service experience with classroom learning and reflection is also curriculum-based in that it enhances formal learning. In the United States, in particular it has achieved widespread adaption in public schools and universities. Many of these approaches emphasise personal development or benefit to the

individual. Such forms of engagement are primarily service or community focused and are outside the domain of this paper.

With regard to political activity and youth development approaches each of which are core to the kinds of youth engagement programming under discussion here, two particular typologies are especially useful. The first highlights how civic engagement activity can be understood in the context of other forms of participation on non-participation. The second framework provides a useful way in which youth civic engagement activity can be distinguished from other forms of youth work.

Ekman & Amná's (2009, p. 8) typology (Figure 2 below) of civic engagement is useful in that it draws attention to the range of forms that youth civic engagement can take, of which conventional political participation is just one. They developed the concept of 'latent political participation' to describe the activities that involve social involvement or engagement but cannot be considered as 'manifest political participation'. In their typology, civic engagement activities are individual or collective actions 'intended to influence circumstances in society that is of relevance to others, outside the own family and circle of close friends' (ibid.); forms of engagement that may be 'pre-political' (ibid.). These civic engagement activities are an important element in the creation of politically active citizens since as well as yielding value for individuals and society, they enable young people to learn the skills and develop networks of necessity in political activity.

Figure 2: Ekman and Amna’s Typology of Different Forms of Disengagement, Involvement, Civic Engagement and Political Participation (2009, p. 22)

	Non-participation (<i>disengagement</i>)		Civil participation (latent-political)		Political participation (manifest)		
	Active forms (antipolitical)	Passive forms (apolitical)	Social involvement (<i>attention</i>)	Civic engagement (<i>action</i>)	Formal political participation	Activism (extra-parliamentary political participation)	
						Legal/ extra- parliamentary protests or actions	Illegal protests or actions
Individual forms	Non-voting Actively avoiding reading newspapers or watching TV when it comes to political issues Avoid talking about politics Perceiving politics as disgusting Political disaffection	Non-voting Perceiving politics as uninteresting and unimportant Political passivity	Taking interest in politics and society Perceiving politics as important	Writing to an editor Giving money to charity Discussing politics and societal issues, with friends or on the Internet Reading newspapers and watching TV when it comes to political issues Recycling	Voting in elections and referenda Deliberate acts of non-voting or blank voting Contacting political representatives or civil servants Running for or holding public office Donating money to political parties or organizations	Boycotting, boycotting and political consumption Signing petitions Handing out political leaflets	Civil disobedience Politically motivated attacks on property
Collective forms	Deliberate non-political lifestyles, e.g. hedonism, consumerism In extreme cases: random acts of non-political violence (riots), reflecting frustration, alienation or social exclusion	"Non-reflected" non-political lifestyles	Belonging to a group with societal focus Identifying with a certain ideology and/or party Life-style related involvement: music, group identity, clothes, et cetera For example: veganism, right-wing Skinhead scene, or left-wing anarcho-punk scene	Volunteering in social work, e.g. to support women's shelter or to help homeless people Charity work or faith-based community work Activity within community based organizations	Being a member of a political party, an organization, or a trade union Activity within a party, an organization or a trade union (voluntary work or attend meetings)	Involvement in new social movements or forums Demonstrating, participating in strikes, protests and other actions (e.g. street festivals with a distinct political agenda)	Civil disobedience actions Sabotaging or obstructing roads and railways Squatting buildings Participating in violent demonstrations or animal rights actions Violence confrontations with political opponents or the police

Ekman and Amna’s typology also reminds us that people engage in civic action for a variety of political ends, not all of which are particularly tolerant or inclusive. Banaji (2008) makes the point that many forms of civic action, while ‘civic’ in nature, are nonetheless politically motivated in anti-democratic terms. Mindful that not all forms of social or political engagement necessarily ensure morally desirable outcomes, Berger (2009, p. 342) argues that moral civic engagement should be acknowledged as a separate dimension alongside political and social forms of engagement. Moral engagement, he defines as encompassing ‘attention to and activity in support of, a particular moral code, moral reasoning or moral principles’. Toleration, reciprocity and abiding the law, he suggests, are examples of democratic moral engagement.

For the purposes of this paper, we are most interested in forms of youth civic engagement that take place within the youth sector involving organisations working with young people at local, regional and national levels. One of the key issues of relevance to this sector is gaining clarity regarding the constituent components of youth civic engagement activity and how it differs from other areas of youth development. A useful classification has been developed by

the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organising (2003) to illustrate how youth civic engagement can be distinguished from other forms of youth activity.

Figure 3: Youth Engagement Continuum (Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organising, 2003)

INTERVENTION	DEVELOPMENT	COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT	SYSTEMIC CHANGE	
YOUTH SERVICES APPROACH	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT	YOUTH LEADERSHIP	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT	YOUTH ORGANIZING
		<i>Includes components of youth development approach plus:</i>	<i>Includes components of youth development & youth leadership plus:</i>	<i>Includes components of youth development, youth leadership and civic engagement plus:</i>
Defines young people as client	Provides services and support, access to caring adults and safe spaces	Builds in authentic youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization	Engages young people in political education and awareness	Builds a membership base
Provides services to address individual problems and pathologies of young people	Provides opportunities for the growth and development of young people	Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues	Builds skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues young people identify	Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body
Programming defined around treatment and prevention	Meets young people where they are	Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers	Begins to help young people build collective identity of young people as social change agents	Engages in direct action and political mobilizing
	Builds young people's individual competencies	Youth participate in community projects	Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation	Engages in alliances and coalitions
	Provides age appropriate support			
	Emphasizes positive self-identity			
	Supports youth- adult partnerships			

Figure 3: Continuum of Youth Engagement

Source: Funders Collaborative on Youth Organising (2003) *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth*, Occasional Paper Series on Youth Organising, No. 1. Downloaded from www.fcyo.org on 5th August 2012.

As this typology shows, youth civic engagement can be conceptualised as part of a continuum. It is important to recognise how other forms of youth activity can complement it and build skills and confidence. At its core, however, civic engagement activity is

characterised by some kind of agency on the part of young people, as well as collective action towards social change that is youth-led and directed.

At this point, it is useful to review the varying discourses that help to rationalise the existence of civic engagement programmes in the policy environment. These discourses have in turn shaped our understandings of the perceived benefits of such programmes and assisted in conceptualisation of what civic engagement is and is not.

3. Discourses

Civic engagement is not a neutral concept, but rather encodes a variety of perspectives surrounding relationships between the individual, community and broader society. There are varying discourses regarding the concept of civic engagement, which reflect general assumptions about youth in society and the nature of young people themselves. These discourses carry particular messages and understanding about the nature of youth as citizens. To fully understand the significance of civic engagement to youth, it is necessary to examine how particular forms of civic engagement relate to the experiences and social positioning of young people and how they envisage the underlying ‘problem’ to be addressed. This section, therefore, introduces five key discourses that invoke youth civic engagement/action as desirable activity and analyses their underlying assumptions about youth and the purpose of their engagement. While these discourses are not mutually exclusive, they each contain dominant strands demonstrating their distinctiveness. An overview of the five discourses discussed is provided in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Discourses Informing Civic Engagement

Discourse	Key Aim	Concern for ...	Desirable ...
<i>Democratic Citizen</i>	Participation	Recognition; voice; human rights	Engaged in decisions and influence
<i>Positive Youth Development</i>	Idealised adulthood	Adaptation Behavioural/cognitive/moral adaptivity Life Skills	More socially adapted individuals for future adulthood; Social conformity; less risky behaviours
<i>Belonging</i>	Cultivate affective social inclusion	To increase attachments to place and others; build social capital – trust, networks, norms Find spaces for sense of inclusion	Stronger connectedness; Better Interactions; Stronger youth-adult interdependencies
<i>Care</i>	Build social support and resilience	Build strengths in adversity; Prevent escalation of problems; Increase protective factors	Supportive/more effective networks; programmes
<i>Justice</i>	Understanding and tackling injustice	Acknowledging root causes of structural inequality	Social justice

The first discourse, that of the Democratic Citizen, views citizenship primarily in terms of how political and civic identity is activated through engagement and influence in the public sphere.

3.1 Democratic Citizen

The fundamental premise of this discourse is that the active involvement of individuals is important for society as it enhances the vibrancy of democracy. In fact, for a democracy to survive, its citizens must participate. From a societal point of view, it is argued that the participation of young people is important to ensure that the democratic process is inclusive, energised and renewed. Flanagan & Levine (2010, p. 160) point out that during adolescence, young people ‘chart a course for their future and take stock of the values they live by and the world they want to be part of’. According to Finlay et al. (2010), there is considerable evidence that if civic engagement begins in adolescence, it can continue throughout the life

course. Because of this, it is argued that civic attitudes, beliefs and skills should be nurtured among young people.

The rights of children and young people to participate in society are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Because under 18s are unable to vote, attention is focused on how young people can be encouraged and supported to exercise their democratic rights. The youth participation literature, therefore, revolves largely around finding opportunities for youth to demonstrate their capacities to participate as political and social actors in society (Lister, 2007). It is widely recognized that there are different forms which participation can take and various ladders and spectra of participation are used to gauge how meaningful participation really is (Hart, 1992 Shier, 2001).

In addition to a concern with the realisation of the participation rights of young people, the focus on youth civic engagement has also stemmed from a broader societal concern with declining levels of civic engagement. In Ireland, the Taskforce on Active Citizenship highlighted that citizens are less engaged with politics due to changing values and lifestyles and a perceived lack of trust in political institutions to effectively address issues affecting them (Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). While this concern relates to a perceived decline in civic engagement among all citizens, there is a particular fear that decline in participation among young people will have consequences for the future of democracy. For example, empirical studies have highlighted that young people are less likely to vote than older people. An Irish survey (National Economic and Social Forum, 2003) showed that 55% of those aged under 25 had not voted in any election since they became eligible to do so. Similarly, just 39 and 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2001 and 2005 elections in the UK (Tonge & Mycock, 2010). With reference to the USA, Flanagan and Levine (2010) highlight that young adults today are less likely than their counterparts in the 1970s to exhibit nine out of ten characteristics of citizenship: belonging to at least one group, attending religious services at least monthly, belonging to a union, reading newspapers at least once a week, voting, being contacted by a political party, working on a community project, attending club meetings and believing that people are trustworthy. Volunteering is the only indicator that has seen an increase since the 1970s. These trends illustrate the need for policies to encourage political and civil engagement among young people.

Some have argued that the perceived decline in youth civic engagement may be just a symptom of the fact forms of civic engagement change from generation to generation (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). For example, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the USA, young people were more likely to be concerned with issues such as terrorism, defence and the economy. They are also more likely to engage with online communities than to read newspapers, join political parties or join unions (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Harris et al. (2011, p. 27) note that youth engage in many issues in more ordinary and sometimes individualised ways. The increased usage of social networking sites on the internet are recognised as forms of engagement for many youth who feel they do not have a public space to engage with others. They have been described as “intimate, social, unregulated youth space” where ‘ordinary youth’ can express themselves and have a say in the public sphere (ibid). Likewise, Banaji (2008) illustrates that there are a wide variety of online spaces that youth engage with to varying degrees.

3.2 Positive Youth Development

Within this discursive position, civic engagement activities are widely seen as a means of strengthening the development and capacities of young people. Skill and asset building approaches to working with young people stress the importance of encouraging the overall development of the young person rather than merely trying to ‘fix’ their problems. The most high profile theoretical model is ‘positive youth development (PYD)’ which promotes the development of the young person through emphasis on five key personality characteristics, described as the five Cs of: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner et al. 2005; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The sixth, ‘contribution’, emerges from the first five and is more likely to be seen in young people who contribute to their communities (Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan, 2010). It is argued that positive youth development can promote civic engagement, which in turn further promotes positive youth development. The main unit of analysis is the individual young person whose behaviour and mindset can be strengthened and made more resourceful through involvement in community activities. Much has also been written about how youth programmes can act as ecological assets to more effectively generate or promote these positive characteristics, behaviours and ways of thinking within individual youth.

The PYD approach was influential in the funding of youth programmes among philanthropic organizations in the USA. For example, from the mid 1990s, the Ford Foundation began a deliberate move from programmes focused on prevention of problems to those embracing instead the promotion of positive development and preparation for adulthood among youth. In this the foundation 'relied heavily on the guiding principles of positive youth development which is based on an asset rather than a deficit model to inform the selection of projects and the development of initiatives' (Mohamad & Wheeler, 2001, p. 4). Positive youth development proved attractive to funders as it offered a theory that found practical expression in programming that addressed skills development and the active engagement of young people in their communities.

3.3 Belonging / Community Connectedness

Against the backdrop of what is viewed as an increasingly individualised society (Beck, 1992), we can find a discourse which perhaps sees civic engagement as a means to forge a sense of belonging among young people to something wider than their individual selves. This discourse stems from a desire to create stronger connections for youth towards others in the places they live and the spaces they interact in.

There are two key theoretical positions supporting this discourse; social capital and interactionist theory. The concept of social capital refers to fact that social connections and trust between people are beneficial to individuals and to society (Field, 2008; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Research has shown that community is important to adolescent well-being by virtue of broadening networks and providing opportunities for interaction with others, often through local groups and activities. Furthermore, being known (by adults) matters to children for their sense of safety and being cared for. Studies of child neglect, for instance, suggest that it is quite often the poor social capital base of neighbourhoods that constitute a vital ingredient in accounting for its incidence (Jack & Jordan, 1999). Leonard's (2005) research in west Belfast shows that young people can be civically active within local communities, providing favours to older neighbours. One fifth of youth studied were engaged in some form of voluntary activity locally, very often at an everyday, ordinary level. Civic engagement is thus viewed as the mechanism which develops trust, safety, support networks and information - as constitutive ingredients of social capital – from which young people derive a greater sense of belonging or stake within society.

Bridger, Brennan & Luloff (2009) view community from an interactional perspective, where the emergence of community is a dynamic process of bringing people together. This perspective is particularly useful in explaining the process leading to civic engagement. All localities are composed of numerous distinct social fields or groups whose members act to achieve diverse individual interests and goals. Connecting these individual fields is the “community field” which serves to coordinate and unite individual groups into purposive community wide efforts. It cuts across class lines, organized groups, and other entities within a local population by focusing on the general and common needs of all residents. Through this interactive process, an entity can emerge that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

The key component to this process is found in the creation and maintenance of channels of interaction and communication among the diverse local groups which would otherwise be directed toward their more individual interests. Through these relationships, individuals interact with one another, and begin to mutually understand general common needs. As residents and groups interact over issues important to all of them, what has come to be known as community agency, or the capacity for local action and resiliency, emerges (Brennan & Luloff, 2007). Agency reflects the building of local relationships that increase the adaptive capacity of local people within a common territory. Agency can therefore be seen as the capacity of people to manage, utilize, and enhance those resources available to them in addressing locality wide issues (Brennan, Luloff & Ricketts, 2007). The application of agency can be seen in civic engagement at all levels.

While the attention given to building local capacities is often focused toward aggregates of adult residents, youth are increasingly visible and active contributors towards community development efforts. Such involvement assists with both the development of community and with the social and psychological development of the youth within it. These active youth represent the future leaders and activists that will help shape local life and well-being in the years to come. The merging of such community and youth development theory can help us to better conceptualize how both might mutually contribute to their sustainability (Barnet & Brennan, 2006).

3.4 Care

A fourth discourse might see civic engagement as a means of addressing the needs of young people, particularly those who are vulnerable. Whereas the positive youth development discourse applies to all young people, the care discourse is of relevance to young people who experience challenges, such as poverty, health issues, disability and exploitation. Proponents of this approach believe that all youth need to be challenged as well as cared for and that civic engagement offers the means to do both simultaneously (Pittman et al., 2003, p.14; Dolan, 2010).

Dolan (2010) argues that civic engagement and democratic participation can represent a means by which young people can enhance their resilience and social support. The study of resilience focuses on how some individuals, in spite of exposure to a series of adverse experiences in the early years, manage to escape any serious harm (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Longitudinal studies of risk and resilience have shown that many young people, who despite being exposed to serious risks during childhood, cope well and demonstrate positive outcomes in adulthood. These studies have attributed resilience to the presence of protective factors that help to mitigate against the effects of early disadvantage. Significant protective factors include intelligence and problem-solving skills, external interests or attachments, support from non-familial adults and a defined purpose in life and sense of self-efficacy (Ungar, 2008). Similarly, studies in the social support tradition found that those who participated in their community and the larger society had better mental health status than more isolated people (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Dolan (2010) argues that youth civic engagement provides opportunities for young people to develop mutually supportive relationships with others and to experience how it feels to make a difference to society. In this way, he contends, social or political civic activity by youth has the potential to buffer them from the adverse effects of difficult life circumstances – in other words, to help them to become resilient (Dolan, 2010).

3.5 Social Justice

While the focus on youth as assets is core to the positive youth development field, emerging work takes into account the need for civic orientation of groups who have been marginalised from society. Flanagan & Christens (2011, p.3) argue that class and racial divides in the civic

opportunities available to young people is evident in realities such as the lack of opportunities to practice civic skills, disassociation from school and time constraints of living in economically disadvantaged communities. In addition, they authors point out, traits such as confidence and optimism can predispose some young people to become engaged in civic action, factors that can be impacted by social class and background.

Social justice youth development is a form of engaging young people that incorporates a distinct political or social change objective. It is distinct from other kinds of youth development in that it calls for an explicit acknowledgement of the seriousness of the socioeconomic challenges facing young people. Social justice models include elements of youth development frameworks such as emotional and social support, positive adult-relationships and so on, yet encompass socio-political elements based on critical understanding about the root causes of social and community problems. According to Ginwright & Cammarota (2002, p. 86), as an intervention for youth, justice-informed frameworks ‘go beyond assets-based and prosocial development to foster youth as active agents of change in their own environment based on understanding of socio-political conditions and injustice’. The fostering of ‘critical consciousness’ that develops young people through the provision of specific socio-political competencies is reflected in developing capacity to articulate social and community problems as well as propose solutions. Ginwright & Cammarota propose a social justice model for youth development based on two underlying principles of self-awareness/identity and social awareness. *Self-awareness* includes practices and programmes that foster a positive sense of self and explorations of racial, ethnic and sexual identity. *Social awareness* encourages people to think critically about issues in their own communities. It incorporates heightened knowledge of social issues coupled with skills that promote inquiry, analysis and problem solving.

Growing inequalities in society are often posited as necessitating even greater need for models that engage young people in addressing social and political challenges through democratic action. A model for practice advocated by Christens & Kirshner (2011) characterising youth organising as a ‘combination of community organising, with its emphasis on ordinary people working collectively to advance shared interests and positive youth development, with its emphasis on asset-based approaches to working with young people’ identifies the following elements as useful in training for young leaders:

- *Relationship development*: Developing a constituency that can mobilise for community change around a common issue. Processes used for working with young people, the authors point out, differ from those with adults for instance instead of one-on-one meetings emphasis on ice-breakers, group check-ins, games, activities, and unstructured social time
- *Popular education*: Building critical perspectives on social systems and the perpetuation of inequalities.
- *Social action*: Organising of activities that build public consciousness to take action on specific issues
- *Participatory research and evaluation*: Activities geared toward their own leadership development include interviewing, designing surveys, collecting data, policy and programme research and public presentation of findings.

4. Benefits of Youth Civic Engagement

The five discourses just discussed, while each bringing a distinct rationale for the existence of civic engagement programmes, can be seen to contribute to a set of commonly perceived beneficial outcomes that accrue from such programmes. These are separated into benefits across two levels, the micro level – benefits to individuals, and the systems level - benefits to communities.

4.1 Benefits to Individuals

At the micro-individual level, the literature points to a broad range of psycho-social and physical benefits to young people from civic engagement including: positive identity and development; enhanced self- confidence and self-esteem; improved social, communication and critical thinking skills; greater educational / academic achievements and career aspirations; lower risk of addiction and problematic behaviours; good physical health; and heightened civic and service interest. There is an extensive body of literature published on the outcomes of youth involvement in community based activities terms of positive identity development and sense of identity (Pancer and Pratt, 1999; Pratt, Hunsberger, Pancer & Alisat, 2003; Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999; Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Youniss et al., 2001). This involvement has been linked to thriving during adolescence (Lerner, et al., 2005; Theokas, et al., 2005).

More generally, such benefits are in line with the “six Cs” framework for positive youth development comprising growth in and positive levels of: competence, connection, character, confidence, caring, and contribution which have been associated with pro-social involvement by youth (Busseri et al., 2006).

Aiding others can bring great satisfaction and helps people to feel part of something bigger than themselves (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002). Young people may enjoy increased independence and capacity to be altruistic, enabling them to direct their focus from their own problems to the needs of others, thereby being perceived as “civic actors” concerned with and taking responsibility for the health and wellbeing of all citizens (Flanagan et al., 1999). Involvement in service can engender feelings of self-efficacy (Kendrick, 1996) and being able to make a difference in the lives of others, from having some form of responsibility or leadership through working in a coordinated fashion in a community based organisation (Henderson et al, 2007). Young people can also benefit from better enlisted social support to and from others which has a known connection to better wellbeing and mental health (Dolan, 2010). Moreover, the participation of youth in community life is particularly timely as it is at this stage in one’s life that a sense of community and social responsibility is first formed (Pancer & Pratt, 1999). This involves developing an interest in the common good and support for the rights and needs of others. Also important is the role of identity formation in volunteering (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Lee, Piliavin & Call, 1999) whereby a volunteer identity is formed and developed as individuals engage in service work which in turn influences their attitudes and intentions with respect to the amount of time they will spend volunteering and their commitment to future voluntary service work (Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007).

Furthermore, there is much discussion in the literature in relation to the broad range of skills which young people may develop and/or enhance through civic engagement activity ranging from personal and social skills (Rubin et al, 2002; Lewis, 1991; Roker, Player & Coleman, 1998), to leadership (Kuh, 1995), communication (Tucker & McCarthy, 2001) and critical thinking skills (Gellin, 2003). Civic participation in service and voluntary work has also been associated with lower rates of drop-out from the educational system (Mahoney, 2000), higher academic achievement levels (Barber et al., 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Reeb, Sammon, & Isackson, 1999), and a greater sense of career direction and

progression Johnson et al., 1998; Primavera, 1999; Taylor & Pancer, 2002). Another positive outcome of youth engagement is a reduction in problem behaviours (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Youniss & Yates & Su, 1997) including alcohol consumption and criminal involvement.

4.2 Benefits to Communities

As well as having benefits for the individuals involved, youth civic engagement can bring benefits to communities at the systems level. Collaborative civic action can help to create connectedness between community members, and promote collaboration through the identification of common local issues and the bringing of solutions to these issues. It can emphasise the importance of young people as civic actors. As a consequence, young people have a sense of contributing to shared norms or values so that ‘one feels at home rather than out of place’ in their communities (Sherrod, Flanagan & Youniss, 2002, p. 267). According to Brennan (2008, p. 1), the contribution of young people to community development activities has often been overlooked or under-estimated but there is a growing recognition that community and youth resiliency are ‘part of the same cohesive whole that reflects local wellbeing and adaptive capacities’. In other words, strong communities are needed to promote youth resiliency and vice versa. Flanagan & Levine (2010) point out that engaging with fellow members of community-based groups also helps young people form social networks, build social capital and connect to opportunities. In practice terms, the benefits of community participation have been associated with improved programs and services (Pancer & Nelson, 1990) and a better match between the community needs and services provided (Iscoe, 1974). Zeldin, et al. (2000) studied the impact of youth involvement on organisations. They found that the whole organisational culture changes as the principles and practices of youth involvement are adopted through the involvement of youth in organisational decision-making. The organisations began to be more inclusive and representative in their structure, and were able to reach out to the community in more diverse ways (ibid). Youth civic engagement can also enhance the democratic process by bringing new energy, ideas and perspectives.

Finally, it should be noted that such beneficial outcomes do not automatically arise from youth participation in community based service and voluntary work. Rather such engagement requires the existence of an environment comprising of supportive groups, organisations and communities that provide opportunities for young people to connect with others, engage in

meaningful activities, develop skills, feel safe, secure and valued. This shall be discussed in Section 5 of this paper.

Figure 5: Youth Civic Action: Summary of Benefits for Individuals and Communities

<p>Individual Benefits</p> <p><i>Encouraging individuals to be active agents in their own lives and the public sphere</i></p>	<p><i>Involvement in YCE can bring the following benefits to individuals:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoyment, fun and friendship • Enhanced skills in areas such as group work, research, needs assessments, planning, programme evaluations and media campaigns • Capacity to participate well in the community and contribute to its betterment • Greater connectedness to community • Greater social awareness • A positive sense of self and identity • Enhanced social support, resilience and well-being • Opportunities to provide leadership of organisations • Academic and career development • Development of personal networks and social capital
<p>Community Benefits</p> <p><i>Fostering a transformative agenda and strengthening democracy</i></p>	<p><i>Involvement in YCE can bring the following benefits to communities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of joint solutions to social and civic problems or inequalities • Stronger community networks, identity, attachment and capacity • Better recognition of young people as contributors to the development of their communities and society • Enhanced participatory decision-making and democratic governance in community institutions • Renewal and sustainability of community development efforts through • Injection of new ‘lifeblood’

5. Challenges and Barriers to Youth Civic Engagement

A number of challenges to civic engagement of young people have been highlighted in the literature. These can be summarised as follows: inequality; societal attitudes to young people; normative assumptions underpinning discourses of civic engagement; and adult control of civic engagement activity.

5.1 Inequality

Social exclusion is a critical factor in determining opportunities for and access to routes of participation. People with lower income and education levels are less likely to take part in voting, volunteering and other behaviours (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; National Economic and

Social Forum, 2003; Taskforce on Active Citizenship, 2007). It follows that young people from families with lower incomes are less likely to vote or take part in civic organisations. The uneven burden of poverty and inequality between families depends not only on the availability of financial resources but the interplay with other forms of capital, namely human capital (i.e. qualifications, work history), family and community social capital (supportive ties and networks at home and locally) (Leonard, 2005; Forrest & Kearns, 2005) and local infrastructure (transport, work, etc.) (Cass, et al. 2005). Such combined assets or resources will influence levels of vulnerability and capacity to participate in other aspects of social life. Furthermore, young people who do not attend school, college or employment are also less likely to engage in citizenship activities (Hart & Atkins, 2002).

While, as we saw earlier, much emphasis is placed on forging social capital as the solution to the woes of poorer communities, we cannot detach social capital from the importance of other forms of capital, namely economic and cultural (education credentials, the 'right' school, etc.) as critical currencies of success. Leonard (2005) argues the point that economic capital is critically necessary to be active participants and poorer young people lack resources to engage in 'social capital' type associative activities, particularly if we regard engagement in associations or clubs which are costly. There is a need to acknowledge the extent to which costs are associated with civic engagement activity and whether they are prohibitive for groups of young people.

5.2 Societal Attitudes to Young People

It is argued that, because portrayals of young people, particularly adolescents, in the popular media can be negative, young people themselves can have low expectations regarding their ability to contribute to society in a positive way (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). A body of research also highlights that young people are attuned to these negative perspectives and believe that their participation is not valued and, as a result, they do not feel that their engagement in relation to social issues will be welcomed (Stoneman, 2002; Hart, 2009; Millbourne, 2009)

5.3 Normative Assumptions Underpinning Discourses of Civic Engagement

This paper has highlighted a set of diverse discourses underpin arguments in favour of civic engagement programmes. Aspects of these discourses have been criticised for the normative understandings of what constitutes appropriate behaviour by young people. With regard to the democratic citizen discourse, Wallace (2001), Hart (2009), and Bynner (2001) argue for a move away from a normative citizenship agenda, whereby young people are taught what constitutes appropriate citizenship values and behaviour, towards a citizenship informed by a cultural or difference-centred approach. In this way, normative assumptions of citizenship would be replaced by an approach which takes the views of citizens seriously and allows them to input regarding what citizenship should or could mean in contemporary society. Similarly, it has been argued that the PYD approach of Lerner et al. (2005, p. 25) is primarily interested in “what leads youth toward an *idealized adulthood*, one marked by effective contributions to self, family, community, and civil society”. Youth are therefore explicitly adult becoming and it is a discourse largely concerned with future competency – of learner citizens, citizens in waiting or apprentice citizens (Lister, 2007, p. 696).

Stoneman (2002), Watts & Flanagan (2007) and others make the point that the literature on civic engagement focuses on the maintenance of the status quo rather than action for social justice. Benaji (2008) argues that we should not be surprised about the apparent unwillingness of youth to civically engage in conventional political formats or to turn to right-wing civic activism against the backdrop of unresponsive political machinery and in some countries, highly corrupt, regimes of governance. Sherrod, Torney-Purta & Flanagan (2010, p. 265) and Wallace (2001) believe that there is a need for models that facilitate young people to exercise informed judgement and criticise the status quo where necessary.

5.4 Adult Control

Related to the previous point, a further challenge to the civic engagement of young people is ‘adulthood’, the tendency of adults to control the nature and content of young civic engagement activity. In other words, forms of engagement for young people are often designed to replicate adult democratic institutions and are based on adult notions of how young people should participate. For example, in Ireland, models such as Comhairle na nÓg

and Dail na nÓg in Ireland, are structures and processes that mirror traditional representative politics but for a younger audience.

Likewise, while one of the main ways in which young people are encouraged to contribute to civic society is through volunteering, Bynner (2001) argues that, unlike the more challenging practices of youth activism, volunteering is encouraged by adults because it is 'safe' and places young people under the control of adults (Bynner, 2001). Millbourne (2009, p. 356) argues that volunteering has greater appeal to the more educated young people (who see the opportunities for their future careers) than those who may have left education and that young people see 'volunteering' as something that is more 'top down' than being something you do because you really want to do it.

6. Civic Engagement Programmes: Issues for Consideration

While a number of models and frameworks for civic engagement programmes are set out in the literature, certain components are consistently identified as core elements in the development of effective programmes. Highlighted below are elements of leadership and skills training that the literature suggests are critical factors in the effective planning and management as well as the design and implementation of youth civic engagement programmes. The section concludes by looking at some of the challenges in evaluation of such programmes.

6.1 Action-orientated

Research has shown that while young people may be committed to social justice, they do not necessarily consider themselves responsible for doing anything about the injustices they see (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Organised efforts that are grounded in action rather than ideals alone therefore are more likely to resonate with young people. Finlay et al. (2010) recommend that organisations should outline the specific civic goals they wish to achieve and provide tangible opportunities for young people to engage in action towards meeting them. According to Stoneman (2002), the learning involved in deciding what community service one would like to do, and then developing a project to fulfil it in partnership with an adult organiser, is profound. Developing youth-designed community improvement and service projects can unleash enormous positive energy and transmit complex skills to the next

generation of community-based leaders. It is critical that the process be facilitated by government or adult organisations because it takes ongoing adult staff support and leadership. Likewise, numerous research studies have emphasised the importance of experiential learning as part of the leadership development process. Wehmeyer, Argan & Hughes (1998) found that while skills development is important, it is also critical that young people have opportunities to learn by doing.

6.2 Reflection

Following action, the second and key stage of experiential learning is reflecting on the experiential activity (Boyd, 2001). Van Linden & Fertman (1998, p. 132) believe that “experiential learning only happens when a person participates in an activity and then looks back at the experience critically, gains some useful insight by analyzing it, and puts the resulting knowledge to work in everyday life”. Zeldin & Camino (1999) found that if students did not have the chance to reflect on their experiences they would lack either an understanding as to why their actions are important or the ability to communicate the concepts to external audiences. The reflection process often requires participants to maintain a journal and to communicate about their experiences.

6.3 Relevance to Young People’s Own Interests and Lived Experience

The research literature suggests that young people are more likely to be engaged by and passionate about social issues if they are relevant to their own culture and lived experience. A US study of 12 community based organisations at which young people actively worked for change found that young people were attracted by the focus on their own cultures and backgrounds. It was considered important that youth’s own knowledge was valued with young people acknowledged as experts in their own lives. Importantly, these programmes provided a context for youth to reflect and problem-solve around the day to day challenges faced by their families and communities. The experience of having a structure and a framework for identifying challenges, developing a community change agenda and engaging in direct action proved beneficial. It fostered critical thinking skills and the development of values and attitudes to help deal with and take action against injustice (Innovation Centre for Community and Youth Development, 2003).

6.4 Incorporate Skills Development

While there is agreement in the literature that leadership programmes should provide opportunities for young people to develop the skills required to take on leadership roles, there is no agreement as to exactly what these skills are. Wehmeyer, Argan & Hughes (1998, p. 243) suggest that instruction on leadership development should focus on teaching students how to set goals, resolve conflicts, be assertive, foster teamwork and participation, communicate effectively and run a meeting. Unsurprisingly, developing competency in communication and interpersonal skills has also received widespread support in the literature (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Edelman et al., 2004). The reason that no core set of skills has been agreed upon as fundamental to leadership development may relate to Conner and Strobel's (2007) observation that the effects of leadership development on individual youth is not uniform. Their study illustrates that young individuals participating in the same programme may acquire different leadership skills and styles of leadership depending on their personal strengths (Conner & Strobel, 2007). A related objective and a feature of many skills training programmes is the goal of *encouraging* exposure to diverse social networks through interaction with people from different world views that can challenge views and may lead young people to envisage different futures for themselves.

6.5 Explicitly Set Out the Degree of Youth Participation

Some studies have emphasised the importance of youth involvement in all levels of youth civic engagement programmes. Involving youth in every aspect of such programmes is a means to provide them with the opportunity to practice their leadership skills. It is argued that a “youth driven model” or “youth led model” will yield the most tangible results in terms of youth development and youth empowerment (Edelman et al., 2004; Kahn et al., 2009). As explained by Edelman et al. (2004) a “youth driven model” may not necessarily be run by youth, but the adults will ensure that many aspects of the programme are shaped by youth and that there is a significant level of youth ownership.

As we saw earlier in this paper, young people's participation can be conceptualised in a range of ways, ranging from a narrow individualistic model concerned with young people's access to services and facilities, that is, inclusion in existing adult institutions to a model concerned with youth participation and leadership in community endeavours. Projects and initiatives for

young people can often prioritise ‘top down’ centrally regulated indicators and are shaped to match external professional agendas. Millbourne (2009) questions whether these initiatives have the potential to be ‘transformative’ or whether they are about creating new forms of accommodation within existing social and political institutions (p. 351). It is important, therefore, that civic engagement initiatives are explicit regarding the degree of youth ownership of their activities and their decision-making authority in relation to them.

6.6 Provide Opportunities for Youth-Adult Partnership

While youth ownership of civic action endeavours is important, this does not mean that adults do not need to play a role (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Woyach’s study (1996) identified adults as having an invaluable motivational role in leadership development with young people. Conner and Strobel (2007) found that encouraging praise and reinforcement have a positive impact on leadership development. Indeed, relationships between the young person and the adult as mentor can be an important factor in youth leadership programmes. Finlay et al (2010) draw attention to the value of mentoring young leaders, whereby young people are matched with supportive adults after completion of a civic engagement or service learning programme to support them in the further development of their skills and aptitudes.

6.7 Evaluating and Measuring Youth Civic Engagement

Difficulties in defining and conceptualising civic engagement are reflected in the challenge of measurement and evaluation. The complexities associated with evaluating leadership skills and empowerment for example are vast. Organisations that focus on supporting personal and social development have long struggled to provide hard evidence of the value of their work. There is a lack of consensus around the outcomes that they aim for and are able to deliver, and a lack of consistency in measuring these outcomes. The Young Foundation in the UK in 2012 developed a framework focused on social and emotional capabilities that helps make the case to commissioners and service providers as to why these “soft” skills matter (McNeill, Reeder & Rich, 2012). Ambivalence over the demonstrable value of civic engagement is not helped by the “promising but unproven” assertion made of interventions in civic engagement by the World Bank in its 2007 World Development report. Indeed, the World Bank went on to specify Randomised Controlled Trials as the only appropriate standard for evaluating youth engagement initiatives.

Aside from practicalities such as the cost and technical expertise required to conduct RCTs, others have argued that the very nature of civic engagement makes it unsuitable for forms of evaluation that are based on linear progressions with standardised outcomes. Campbell-Patton and Quinn Patton (2010) argue instead for a developmental theory of evaluation. The authors point to indicators such as principles and values developed by Innovations in Civic Participation, for example, that identify quality programmes as those that include factors such as quality local community leadership, a dedicated coordinating entity, democratic input and involvement, training and supervision, effective use of local resources and flexibility. Instead of focusing on individual behaviours or particular community outcomes, these principles look at the process of building long term capacity for and commitment to civic engagement. This allows for an evaluation model that takes into account both processes and outcomes. Developmental evaluation, “supports programme and organisational development to guide adaption to emergent and dynamic realities on the ground in real time” (p. 612).

7. Summary and Conclusion

Youth civic engagement is an area which has received much attention in the relevant literature in recent years. There is a significant body of literature on the topic ranging from definitions, typologies, classifications, discourses, benefits, and challenges. This paper has sought to address this topic with a view to providing an informed knowledge base for Social Entrepreneurs Ireland to develop and implement a youth civic action initiative - Wave Change. The primary aim of the initiative is to improve the capacity of young people to lead on and participate in social issues which affect them and/or their communities. The secondary aim is to improve their existing support systems (networks) to better facilitate them to lead on and participate in social issues which affect them and/or their communities. Central to the achievement of these aims is capacity building involving the up-skilling of Wave Change participants with a set of personal and practical skills, the enhancement of their networks of support (both adult and peer), and the provision of opportunities for engaging in and/or leading on social change and social justice issues which affect them. In doing so, it is anticipated that this initiative will facilitate a more participation-oriented group of young people actively involved in social change.

It is widely agreed that involving youth and in particular marginalised youth in civic oriented forms of activities is of value both from the perspective of individuals taking part in such forms of engagement, and from the perspective of the communities in which this engagement takes place. At the personal level the issues of rights of children and young people to participate in civil society, as well as the nurturing of civic skills are relevant in the context of positive youth development, empowerment and citizenship. Regarding the latter, youth civic engagement is linked to the concept of social justice and the betterment of communities through enhanced levels of social capital, community agency and interaction amongst local residents, groups and community based organisations.

An important point of learning highlighted in this paper is that civic engagement programmes for youth require considerable attention to distilling precise and concrete objectives and to intensive planning and management. Important lessons from the literature have been summarised in terms of action-oriented and experiential learning approaches to civic engagement; reflective practice enabling participants to consider core aspects of their participation; relevance to one's personal situation and own interests; providing a wide range of skills ranging from leadership to communication to interpersonal and team working; supporting a youth-led model which encourages youth empowerment and ownership; and building adult mentoring into these programmes.

Finally, this paper has pointed out that the concept of youth civic engagement is not without its critiques and challenges. It has been explained that participation is not equal, rather is it directly linked to various forms of capital including economic, social, and cultural. As a result, youth from marginalised backgrounds/families are less likely to engage in forms of civic action than their counterparts from high socio-economic backgrounds and those with higher levels of educational attainment, and those in employment and able-bodied more likely to participate than the unemployed and the disabled. Societal attitudes towards young people and normative assumptions on citizenship also have important determining impacts on youth civic engagement, with negative stereotypical perceptions and 'adulthood' hampering young people's tendency to become civically active.

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