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**“Civics Studies and Policy Programme for Citizen Participation”**

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Democracy has been going from triumph to triumph ever since the Second World War. Yet, the same trends of development to which the OECD has been drawing attention to can be seen also in Finland:

- even in stable democracies, polling percentages,, in elections have been falling
- the membership of political parties have been dwindling, which is weakening one of the central implementers of representative democracy.
- opinion polls reveal that citizens' confidence in the institutions of society is weakening

In several countries, especially in Finland's Nordic neighbours, the state of democracy and ways of improving it are the subject of an ongoing discourse. In Finland, the matter has been given too little attention in recent years. That is why it is now time to subject democracy to a kind of "general checking". It would be good at the same time to agree on the central criteria by which the status of citizen participation and democracy can be evaluated on the national and municipal administrative level.

A second category of reasons stems from the awakening and reassessment that recent decades have seen in relation to civil society and the social capital which it generates. Parallel to this, active citizenship has become a focus of attention in Finland and within international organisation, also as an objective of lifelong learning. Active citizenship does not necessarily come into being on its own; instead, there are knowledge- and skill-related prerequisites for it. We need a renewable understanding of how active citizenship is learned and of our own skill at getting it to grow.

These are the main reasons why the Government of Finland established a special Policy Programme for Citizen Participation.

It is important to remember that citizens direct the State rather than vice versa. The citizen who is active both as an individual and as a member of the communities and associations of which she or he is a member, is the foundation of democracy. Nevertheless, both bottom-up and top-down are necessary. The State can support active citizenship through education. It can create a favourable framework and put in place the prerequisite for both strengthening democracy and adding to social capital.

It is essential to recognise:

- 1) The factors for change which influence democracy as well as the prerequisites for democracy, especially
- 2) Civil society as its social base and
- 3) Fostering active citizenship

Supranational decision making in tandem with dwindling public resources imposes limits on the nation-state's power of decision. The importance of local action is growing at the same time, and also in other respects efforts are being made to transfer decision making to municipalities and intermunicipal joint authorities. Here, there is a need for structural reforms in which municipal democracy is harmonised with, on the one hand, regionalisation and, on the other, a constantly advancing trend towards services being produced on the market's terms. Whether other reforms are needed is a question that will have to be revisited in the future.

In place of the earlier nation-state-centred thinking, we must learn to see democracy and civil society as being multi-level in character. Citizenship of the nation-state is still the inner core, but layers of identity range across the spectrum from citizenship of immediate communities to national, European and ultimately world citizenship.

As a part of the Policy Programme for Citizen Participation the Finnish Adult Education Association (FAEA) has launched several measures to increase the effectiveness with which active and democratic citizenship is fostered in the institutes and organisations of liberal adult education. There is always a need for a better understanding of how the growth of active citizenship can be supported. At least three questions are of central relevance from the perspective of adult education:

- 1) What knowledge should be imparted?
- 2) How can democracy and the competences it needs be developed?
- 3) How can adult education providers encourage people to take part in the work of associations and other voluntary activities?

One of the FAEA's projects is called simply Civics Studies. The overall objectives of the project are:

- to strengthen the learning on active citizenship and civil society
- to strengthen the attitudes that support the participation, activities and influencing
- to support lifelong learning
- to make visible the competences and learning needs of a learner
- to add the knowledge and competences of a learner concerning the influencing and participation
- to give instruments and encourage for learning new civic competencies.

Because the policy programme started in October 2003, many projects are still in the start-up stage. Anyhow, one of the main purposes of the project will be to collect the best practices, exchange and disseminate them.