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A reflection on non-formal citizenship education for vulnerable groups

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the importance of non-formal citizenship education of vulnerable groups and to stress the necessity of the redefinition of the concept of citizenship by theoretically reflecting the importance of citizenship education of vulnerable groups and identifying good practices in Europe and Slovenia. It argues that the contemporary global socio-political context requires a more complex understanding of citizenship education, founded upon the globality of socio-political issues, multidimensionality and heterogeneity of vulnerability as well as broader understanding of the concept of citizenship itself. Particular emphasis is given to non-formal citizenship education (of vulnerable groups) and good practices in the field. In conclusion the paper argues that inclusion and political participation of vulnerable groups should be understood as a fundamental determinant of democracy within a given socio-political community.

Contemporary liberal-democratic systems are grounded upon the concepts and practices of citizenship and on principles of human rights, and as Hanna Arendt asserts (1994, p.73) on the political and moral standards, which are assumed to be inconsistent with all forms of discrimination, marginalization and disadvantage of individuals and socio-political groups. Although, various forms, practices and structures of discrimination, disadvantage and marginalization are considered an anomaly within the liberal-democratic order and are often seen as something inherently deviant to its values and norms, they are in fact produced and reproduced by this very order. Diverse discriminatory practices, structures and discourses had not only accompanied the establishment of the liberal-democratic order, but represent its constitutive elements (Foucault 2009, 2003, 1977; Goldberg 2002; Stoler 2002; McWhorter 2009; Hindess 2001).

In other words, an apparent paradox is at hand, one where the building blocks of modern democracies, among them the postulates of individual liberty, inalienable human and civil rights, sovereignty of the people, separation of powers and self-regulation, free trade etc., formed, legitimized and politically materialized simultaneously with practices of discrimination, marginalization and disadvantage. Consequently, these practices constitute the divide between individuals/subjects, competent (and capable) of political participation (full citizens) and those individuals, whose competencies are not acknowledged and have,

therefore, been excluded and/or hierarchically included[1] in the processes of decision-making and public deliberation. These conceptualizations of citizenship are reproduced as a normative (legal-formal) conceptualization of citizenship, formed upon a set of specific criteria. Intrinsic to this legal-formal conceptualization of the 'true or full' citizen is the norm of an autonomous, rational, white, heterosexual and physically able male. (Burchell 1995, p.10-13; Foucault 1977, 2009; Spivak 1999, p.147; Stoler 2002, p.27).

The hegemonic liberal-democratic frame presupposes a highly exclusive understanding of the concept of citizenship. This perception also has significant impact on the conceptualization of vulnerability as well as on the understanding of the purpose of (non-formal) citizenship education of vulnerable groups. In this context it is necessary to address the significant difference between the understanding of inclusion and integration. Integration is understood as normalization of the individual to the prevailing, unchanged and untransformed socio-political practices, structures and discourses. In contrast to integration, inclusion is understood as a process of transformation, not exclusively limited to the vulnerable individual or social groups, but as a process encompassing the modification or transformation of the society as a whole. Inclusion in particular refers to the transformation of the existing practices, structures and discourses into which the vulnerable individual and groups are being included.

Another significant issue in the field of the citizenship education of vulnerable groups is the understanding of the concept of vulnerability. According to Yung (2000, p.88), vulnerability should be understood as relation and not as an essential substance. Vulnerability as a relation and a dynamic state derives from structural socio-political inequality (education, employment, etc.), therefore the limitations for participation should be understood beyond specific individual circumstances and need to include structural inequalities and multidimensional discrimination, where education is only one dimension of the multiple and multidimensional forms of marginalization, discrimination and disadvantage faced by vulnerable groups in modern liberal-democratic societies. In this context, vulnerability is understood as multiple, multidimensional, interpersonal, structural and a historically conditioned concept, and vulnerable groups as *structural groups established in specific historical processes through different and diverse structures, practices and discourses, which reinforce their state of vulnerability in the contemporary socio-political contexts.*

Through a variety of practices, structures and discourses individuals as members of vulnerable groups are conceptualized and addressed in the sense of their deviation from the norm of the 'true' citizen. According to Gert Biesta (2011) citizenship is not a predefined identity, which can easily be thought or learned. Citizenship (and vulnerability) is continuously re-established and redefined through diverse forms of political engagement in the democratic processes. Therefore the socio-political context is paramount in addressing issues of marginalization, discrimination and disadvantage. Therefore citizenship education can only be effective to a certain degree.

Within this theoretical reflection we can acknowledge that the main challenge for (non-formal) citizenship education of vulnerable groups is to take in to account the multidimensionality of exclusion, discrimination and marginalization that negates the effects of both top-down and bottom-up strategies of inclusion. Moreover, most of the policies of active citizenship are structured on the ideal of activities adapted for the privileged/normal groups of citizens. In this sense, we can argue, that non-formal citizenship education is nevertheless an integral mechanism for acquiring knowledge and increasing participation of vulnerable groups. Non-formal citizenship education (understood as a bottom-up strategy) can be seen as an effective approach whereby vulnerable individuals and groups are able to achieve a certain

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[1] Luhmann (1982) argues that while inclusion is not defined by a 'circle of virtue', exclusion/ marginalization is defined by a 'vicious' circle. In other words, inclusion and participation in individual spheres, fields, contexts and structures is rarely complemented with inclusion in others, while exclusion from one sphere, field or context is in most cases directly connected with exclusion from a number of other spheres, fields and contexts.

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degree in socio-political inclusion. But Paulo Freire (1970) problematizes the idea that emancipation is granted (top-down), rather than obtained or achieved (bottom-up). Following Freire's understanding of the process of emancipation, we must acknowledge the impact of his ideas on the methods and strategies used by all forms of citizenship education. Freire (1970) suggests that citizenship education for vulnerable groups should be understood in the sense of *cyclical learning,* which consists of four main phases or elements. In accordance, cyclical learning should facilitate vulnerable groups' reflection of the socio-political context, identification of the key challenges and opportunities for their participation, engagement in the socio-political processes and finally a reflection of their engagement.

In order to enable and empower vulnerable groups in their efforts to redefine the concept of citizenship and change the general (public) perception of vulnerability as a natural state (as opposed to a socio-politically constructed relation), an approach aimed at facilitating public debate and opening up the democratic spaces and process, where vulnerable groups can articulate their political view, interests and promote their role in the socio-political realm should be promoted and fostered through non-formal citizenship education. Enabling, promoting and supporting self-organization and 'direct' actions, which address diverse socio-political issues is another important task of top-down strategies of non-formal citizenship education.

Therefore, the development of competencies and skills is one of the key components in overcoming the exclusionary practices in the contemporary liberal-democratic order. Nevertheless, the role and impact of formal citizenship education in non-formal practices should also be taken into account and questioned. Formal citizenship education can be highly contested in the context of vulnerable groups as it normally functions in a manner that reproduces the dominant order and the prevailing conceptualizations of citizenship on the one hand, and delegitimizes, silences and absorbs any potential alternatives, on the other. For that reason actors in the field of non-formal citizenship education should continuously address, reflect and contest formal and institutional policies and strategies. Nonetheless they should also continue cultivating cooperation with the formal field of citizenship education and this cooperation must become the corner stone of more effective policies and strategies, which address the structural obstacles of inclusion and political participation and take account of the multidimensional aspect of vulnerability.

The case of Slovenia

The following part of the paper will focus and present those innovative practices[2] in the field of non-formal citizenship education within Slovenian environment, which exhibit some of the key characteristics, discussed above. These practices are presented mostly because of their innovative approaches to knowledge dissemination and awareness rising. The good practice cases have been identified on the basis of their specific nature of organisation.[3] In the first case (IWW) self-organisation with non-hierarchical elements is the key characteristic, while the second (Café Open) focuses on the creation of non-formal spaces or the so called

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[2] The good practices presented here are analysed in-depth within the study, entitled *Analysing citizenship education of vulnerable groups – a theoretical reflection, European good practices analysis and the state of affairs in the field in Slovenia.* Based on their relevance for this paper we focused on "*Invisible workers of the world*" (IWW) and "*Café Open*". IWW tackles issues that refer mostly migrant workers; Café Open is focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual issues. Information on both cases is accessible through: http://www.njetwork.org/IWW-Nevidni-delavci-sveta and http://open.si/

3 IWW as a self-organizational format includes migrant workers, activists and academics whose main goal is to address discriminatory, exclusion and marginalization practices that are everyday reality of migrant-workers not only in Slovenia but also all over the world.

spaces of freedom[4], the purpose of which is to include diverse vulnerable groups and to enable open discussions on heterogeneous and multidimensional issues and discriminatory practices. In both cases the participants involved address and problematize the contemporary socio-political order, the growing economic inequality, socio-political exclusion and issues, connected with the multidimensionality of modern and postmodern forms of citizenship.

In the case of Slovenia the lack of projects, research and theoretical activities that address the issue of citizenship education for vulnerable groups is particularly endemic. Moreover the insufficiency of non-formal citizenship education practices or their significant fragmentation and lack of cooperation between formal and non-formal education systems indicates that non-formal citizenship education for vulnerable groups has not been given sufficient consideration or it seems to be less important. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that some of the good and innovative practices in the field of non-formal citizenship education for vulnerable groups (LGBT community and migrants) in Slovenia present the potential for further development of non-formal practices in the field of citizenship education for vulnerable groups.

Non-formal citizenship education for (global) inclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present the different dimensions of non-formal citizenship education for vulnerable groups by utilizing contemporary theoretical knowledge and analysing existing practices in the field. Within the theoretical reflection of liberal-democratic ideology and the normative conceptualizations that it produces, we identified an evident paradox. Through numerous strategies, policies and structural solutions the contemporary liberal-democracies address and confront the global heterogeneous and multidimensional issues such as respect for human rights, eradication of poverty, homophobia, migration etc., but at the same time these issues remain as persistent as ever. The insufficiency of these approaches and methods along with the contemporary reality of increasing global challenges, demand we not only reflect the contemporary socio-political order, but also search for alternatives, which would more effectively take into account the complexity of existing socio-political order. (Non-formal) citizenship education (for vulnerable groups) and socio-political awareness understood as political literacy and political participation can be seen as a significant alternative through which global issues should be tackled in order to create a more inclusive and democratic society. For these reasons an effective non-formal citizenship education (for vulnerable groups) should include theoretical and practical knowledge (skills and competences) as well as real political engagement, which is considered to be a fundamental element of (non-formal) citizenship education.

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4 Cafe Open is an innovative idea that was specifically created as a " gay, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals friendly bar". The purpose of this project is to form 'spaces of freedom' where different cultural and socio-critical events are performed. The basic idea is to create "open spaces" where everybody can openly and actively participate and address issues, ask questions and express opinions.

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