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Research Paper

Education in Motion: Exploring the Use of Non-formal Education as a Pathway to Greater Civic Engagement Among African Youth

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Abstract: Africa's This article examines how non-formal education (NFE) cultivates civic agency among African youth. Drawing on experiential learning theories and comparative case studies from Africa, it argues that NFE provides a transformative pathway for youth civic participation by integrating leadership, reflection, and practical engagement. Through analysis of programs such as Tostan's Community Empowerment Program in Senegal and the Solar Mamas initiative in Zanzibar, the paper demonstrates that NFE fosters both collective and individual empowerment, albeit with varying levels of sustainability and institutional linkages. The discussion highlights the need for policy frameworks that integrate NFE into national systems without diluting its participatory essence. It concludes that the transformative potential of NFE lies in its non-linear, context-specific design and its capacity to bridge civic learning with governance participation.

Keywords:

1. Non-Formal Education
2. Governance
3. Youth Participation

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1. Introduction: Africa's Youth at the Global Table: Reimagining Education for Governance Participation

Across Africa, a new generation of youth stands ready to lead but remains underserved by education systems that privilege examination performance over applied competence. As the African Union secures a permanent seat at the G20 and African leaders assume more significant roles in global governance, the issue of youth preparedness becomes increasingly urgent. Despite Africa's demographic dividend, formal education continues to produce graduates with limited civic and leadership capacities. This article explores how non-formal education (NFE) can bridge this gap.

This article explores how non-formal education (NFE) can foster civic competence and participation in governance among African youth, emphasising the importance of specific

conditions such as community involvement, institutional support, and resource availability. Defined here as structured learning outside formal schooling, NFE integrates practical engagement, reflection, and leadership development. The central question guiding this paper is: How does NFE foster civic competence and participation in governance among African youth, and under what conditions, such as local leadership, funding, and policy support, does it do so effectively? The article demonstrates how experiential learning theories are operationalised within African contexts, highlighting factors that influence success and sustainability.

2. Background

Africa's burgeoning youth population presents both an unparalleled opportunity and a profound challenge for governance and civic engagement. Despite their demographic dominance, African youth remain markedly underrepresented in political institutions and decision-making bodies. Van Gyampo and Anyidoho (2019) argue that youth remain largely excluded from political participation across much of Africa despite their demographic strength. The continent's median age hovers around 19, yet many septuagenarian national leaders highlight the generational disconnect between those who govern and those they govern.

Defined here as structured, experiential learning outside formal schooling, NFE offers a strategic pathway to bridge this gap, because even small investments in NFE can yield disproportionately large gains in a young person's ability to engage and lead in civic life. NFE enables learning through iterative cycles of experience, reflection, and action, offering alternative pathways to civic participation for young people who are excluded from conventional ones.

Structural barriers reinforce this exclusion. High unemployment, financial precarity, institutional resistance that confines youth to party "wings," and entrenched societal attitudes questioning their leadership capacity all limit participation. Today's youth are better educated than previous generations; 64% have attained at least some secondary education, compared with 35% among those aged 56 and older (Afrobarometer, 2023). However, the issues persist. Higher literacy levels have not translated into political agency, and voter turnout among young people consistently lags behind that of older citizens (Afrobarometer, 2023).

Evidence illustrates how NFE can bridge this gap. Kuenzi (2006) found that adults who participated in community empowerment workshops in Senegal, an NFE form, were more likely to vote and to contact officials than peers with comparable levels of formal schooling. Similarly, programs like *Solar Mamas* in Zanzibar demonstrate how experiential learning enables women with minimal formal education to become solar engineers and community leaders. Such outcomes underscore that NFE not only builds skills but also catalyses civic consciousness, creating entry points for political and social participation where formal education has fallen short.

3. Theoretical Framework

"The analysis draws on experiential learning theories, including Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, Jarvis's (1987) concept of disjuncture, and Boyd's (1996) OODA Loop, which stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act, a decision-making model emphasising adaptive learning through action. Kolb's model highlights learning as a cyclical process of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation, while Jarvis underscores how disruption, or "disjuncture," triggers transformation. Boyd's OODA Loop adds an adaptive dimension, emphasising rapid iteration and decision-making under dynamic conditions.

These frameworks collectively reflect the dynamic, context-responsive nature of learning within NFE. Unlike traditional schooling, which follows a fixed, linear progression from one grade to the next, NFE mirrors real life, where learning happens through a mix of trial and error, setbacks and breakthroughs, reflection and re-engagement. Civic learning in this context does not unfold in straight lines but through adaptive cycles of experience, adjustment, and growth. This understanding shapes the analysis of how African youth develop civic agency through active participation in NFE programs.

4. Methodology

In this study, we employ two qualitative research methodologies to explore the role of NFE, experiential learning, and apprenticeships in enhancing civic engagement among youth: qualitative case study analysis and comparative analysis.

This study employs a qualitative, desk-based comparative analysis of documented NFE initiatives. Case selection followed a purposive strategy to capture thematic diversity and geographic representation. Data sources included peer-reviewed studies, organisational reports, and independent evaluations.

Each case was analysed using a structured lens that considers: (1) context and issue, (2) the educational intervention, (3) observed outcomes, and (4) governance implications. This structure enables both within-case analysis and cross-case comparisons, revealing patterns, best practices, and contextual factors that influence program effectiveness. The methodology is informed by a case-oriented comparative approach, which prioritises understanding each case in its own right before drawing thematic conclusions.

By synthesising empirical evidence from a range of documented NFE initiatives, this desk review contributes to the growing body of literature on alternative education pathways and their role in preparing youth for civic life and global governance. It also lays the groundwork for future research and policy discussions on scaling NFE across the continent as a strategic mechanism for democratic renewal and youth-led development.

5. Comparative Case Studies

This section analyses two NFE initiatives that illustrate distinct yet complementary pathways to civic empowerment. The Tostan Community Empowerment Program in Senegal demonstrates how NFE can shift entrenched social norms and embed democratic practices at the community level. At the same time, the Solar Mamas initiative in Zanzibar shows how technical competence can evolve into civic legitimacy and gendered leadership. Together, they exemplify how experiential and participatory learning can lead to more inclusive, accountable, and community-driven decision-making, which are key components of meaningful governance reform.

5.1. Tostan (Senegal)

The Tostan Community Empowerment Program[1] (CEP) in Senegal exemplifies how NFE can catalyse profound social transformation from the grassroots up. Operating outside the formal school system, Tostan's three-year program uses storytelling, theatre, and rights-based dialogue to engage whole communities, youth, elders, women, and religious leaders in collective civic learning. This approach makes education a community event, rather than an individual pursuit.

[1]https://tostan.org/ and Tostan n.d.

At its core is the Community Management Course, which invites participants to examine human rights, health, and democracy in direct relation to lived experience. For example, abstract concepts like equality and bodily autonomy are grounded in open conversations about culturally entrenched practices such as female genital cutting (FGC) and child marriage. By doing so, the program replaces rote learning with what Kolb (1984) calls "abstract conceptualisation," where participants reflect, dialogue, and then act.

Through Tostan, communities do more than learning about democracy; they practice it. Through structured deliberation and consensus-building, participants learn to negotiate, resolve disputes, and take collective decisions that bridge gender, generational, and status divides. One of the most striking outcomes of this process has been the coordinated public declarations to abandon FGC, which have now been adopted by over 9,000 communities across eight countries (Trueblood & Kediran, 2019). In many of these communities, women who previously had no formal education now chair local committees, mediate conflicts, and represent their villages in meetings with government officials. These changes reveal not only increased civic literacy but also a tangible sense of agency and belief in participatory governance.

Tostan's model has also contributed to institutional development. Local committees formed through the program have petitioned for improved health services, sanitation infrastructure, and girls' education, engaging elected officials and holding them accountable. In this way, NFE becomes a channel through which marginalised voices enter formal governance arenas.

Yet, the program's success is fragile. It relies heavily on trained facilitators and deep community involvement. Attempts to scale the model too quickly have led to a loss of quality and consistency in delivery, and the impact risks becoming symbolic rather than genuinely transformative (Boyden, 2017). Tostan thus highlights both the promise and complexity of scaling NFE: the need to expand reach while preserving the participatory methods that make such programs effective.

5.2. Solar Mamas (Zanzibar)

In Zanzibar, the Solar Mamas[2] initiative illustrates how NFE grounded in technical learning can not only equip individuals with practical skills but also elevate them to positions of civic legitimacy and local leadership. Run in partnership with India's Barefoot College, the program trains illiterate and semi-literate rural women to become solar engineers over six months. The pedagogy is entirely experiential: participants learn by doing, wiring circuits, assembling panels, and installing solar systems in real time. There are no textbooks, no exams, just collaborative, hands-on learning designed to build confidence alongside competence.

The results are remarkable. Women who had never set foot in a classroom became the sole providers of electricity in their communities. With their newfound technical expertise, they command respect in village meetings, contribute to infrastructure planning, and influence decision-making processes traditionally dominated by men. This shift aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital; technical knowledge becomes a gateway to civic authority. Their expertise does not remain confined to the domestic realm; instead, it becomes a bridge to public recognition, status, and influence.

In many villages, these women are now consulted on broader development matters, from electrification needs to energy use at schools and clinics. Their visibility as community problem-solvers elevates them from peripheral domestic roles to central governance actors. This transformation underscores the civic power of skill acquisition: when learning is directly tied to community well-being, technical education becomes a form of political participation.

[2]https://www.barefootcollege.org/zanzibars-solar-mamas-flip-the-switch-on-rural-homes-gender-roles-2/

Yet, like Tostan, the Solar Mamas model faces fragility. Without integration into national rural electrification strategies or institutionalised follow-up, these graduates risk becoming isolated success stories rather than agents of systemic change. Gender backlash is also a genuine concern: women who challenge traditional hierarchies by taking on technical and leadership roles often face resistance from within their communities. As Mbo'o-Tchouawou et al. (2019) note, this necessitates formal recognition, policy support, and safeguarding mechanisms to ensure their continued participation and protection.

What makes the Solar Mamas initiative powerful is not just its delivery of skills, but also its subversion of expectations: who can be an engineer, who gets to speak in public, and who holds authority. The program reframes civic participation not as voting or attending town halls alone, but as contributing essential knowledge to collective life.

Together, Tostan and Solar Mamas demonstrate the plural possibilities of NFE. While Tostan shows how community-wide, dialogic learning can reshape social norms and governance practices, Solar Mamas reveals how individual empowerment through technical competence can evolve into civic influence. Both underscore that NFE's value lies in its rootedness, lived experience, real-world application, and capacity to translate learning into leadership. The challenge for policymakers is not whether to support NFE, but how to scale and embed it without stripping away its contextual strength and participatory soul.

6. Policy Recommendations

To fully harness the transformative potential of NFE as a vehicle for civic engagement and youth participation in governance, African policymakers must move beyond celebratory narratives toward a clear-sighted appraisal of both its strengths and limitations. Evidence demonstrates that NFE cultivates agency, efficacy, and cross-cultural competence in ways that formal schooling often cannot. However, it also exposes enduring challenges of fragmentation, inequity, and weak institutional linkages. A forward-looking policy agenda must therefore focus on embedding NFE within systems, expanding access, assuring quality, and securing sustainable financing.

6.1. Systemic Integration and Policy Anchoring

The first policy priority is to integrate NFE into national education and governance frameworks without compromising its autonomy or flexibility. Too often, policymakers treat NFE as peripheral: an informal, remedial space detached from mainstream policy. Integration should proceed through recognition and policy frameworks that validate non-formal learning, such as UNESCO's *Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (RVA)* (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2012) and conceptual models of non-formal–formal education reform (Hoppers, 2006). At the continental level, African states can align these reforms with the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 (African Union Commission, 2016).

Policymakers must pursue a dual strategy: embedding NFE structurally in education and civic policy while safeguarding its pedagogical distinctiveness. This means linking NFE outcomes to national qualification frameworks and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) systems while preserving participatory and experiential methods. Experiential methods emphasise learning through direct experience (such as dialogue, community projects, role-play, and reflection rather than passive instruction or rote memorisation). Integration should strengthen coordination and legitimacy, rather than bureaucratizing innovation.

6.2. Equity and Access

Access to NFE remains stratified by geography, gender, class, and disability. Urban, educated youth dominate participation, while rural and marginalised groups face barriers of cost, transport, and technology. Programmes like *Solar Mamas* demonstrate how NFE can disrupt gender hierarchies, yet such examples are still exceptions.

Governments should therefore adopt equity safeguards: targeted subsidies, inclusive curriculum design, outreach through trusted community intermediaries, and culturally grounded delivery mechanisms. Addressing cultural barriers is equally vital. Gerontocratic norms that marginalise youth and gender norms that restrict women's leadership must be confronted through mentorship initiatives, intergenerational dialogues, and media campaigns that normalise youth and women's participation in governance.

Technology offers promise but demands caution. Digital platforms, radio, and mobile learning can expand reach, yet also risk deepening inequality if they privilege literate, urban users. Policymakers should treat technology as a complement rather than a replacement, investing in multilingual content, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive design that accommodates learners with disabilities.

6.3. Validation and Quality Assurance

Limited recognition of NFE outcomes remains a significant constraint. Graduates of programmes such as PACEMaker International, Jumpstart Academy, or the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award often develop leadership and problem-solving skills; however, they frequently lack credentials that translate into labour-market or governance opportunities. Policymakers should therefore institutionalise competence-based assessment and validation frameworks that move beyond symbolic certification.

To guarantee quality while preserving adaptability, governments should invest in facilitator development and standardised, evidence-based monitoring. South Africa's National Qualifications Framework and Kenya's RPL Policy provide working models for embedding NFE into national systems. The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award also illustrates how structured, tiered certification (when coupled with reflection and external verification) can formalise learning without diluting its participatory ethos.

6.4. Sustainable Financing and Political Ownership

Chronic underfunding remains the most intractable barrier to progress. NFE often relies on short donor cycles, which undermines continuity and scalability. Governments must establish dedicated budget lines for NFE within the education, youth, and governance ministries. In addition, organisations and governments should explore innovative financing models (such as social-impact bonds, diaspora contributions, and public-private partnerships) to diversify funding sources.

Crucially, NFE must enjoy political ownership rather than remaining an NGO-driven space. The most durable initiatives, such as Tostan and the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award, thrive because they are co-designed with communities and supported by robust policy frameworks. Governments should fund community-based organisations sustainably, while also embedding safeguards for transparency and accountability.

Finally, young people themselves must shape NFE policy and evaluation processes. Institutionalising youth advisory boards and feedback mechanisms within ministries and

education councils ensures that programmes remain responsive to learners' realities. Without this participatory governance loop, NFE risks reproducing the very top-down tendencies it seeks to counter.

7. Conclusion

Across Africa, a new generation of youth stands ready to lead, yet remains underserved by education systems that continue to privilege examination performance over civic competence. As the African Union takes a permanent seat at the G20 and African leaders assume more visible roles in global governance, preparing young Africans for these responsibilities has become a crucial policy imperative.

This essay has argued that NFE offers a timely and transformative pathway. By embedding leadership, civic consciousness, and practical engagement into its pedagogy, NFE equips young Africans not only to participate in community life but also to represent their societies in global arenas, including climate negotiations, SDG monitoring, AU Youth Assemblies, and G20 engagement tracks.

What is required now is not rhetorical 'forward-thinking' but a decisive policy reorientation—one that anticipates future governance challenges related to climate, technology, and migration and ensures that today's educational investments prepare youth to meet them. This reorientation does not suggest replacing formal schooling with NFE; instead, it calls for an alternative model in which formal and non-formal education operate in tandem. NFE should be recognised as a flexible, experiential counterpart that strengthens, rather than competes with, formal systems. Service-learning, community projects, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) illustrate how both domains can function as mutually reinforcing pillars within a broader civic learning ecosystem.

The comparative evidence in Section 6 underscores NFE's greatest strength: its *context-specific adaptability*. In community-based settings like *Tostan*, NFE fosters collective empowerment by reshaping social norms and embedding democratic deliberation. In technology-focused programs like *Solar Mamas*, it cultivates individual agency and civic legitimacy by developing practical skills. Together, these examples reveal that NFE's value lies not in uniformity but in its diversity, its capacity to generate civic competence through non-linear, experience-driven learning that responds to local realities.

Investing in NFE is not a diversion from urgent development priorities; it is an essential tool in advancing good governance. By building political literacy, negotiation skills, and civic agency, NFE reduces the long-term costs of disengagement, instability, and democratic backsliding. Policymakers should therefore prioritise models that reach marginalised populations, embed structured reflection, and demonstrate evidence of behavioural, not merely attitudinal, change.

At its core, NFE is about cultivating civic imagination and democratic resilience. Through storytelling, service, and community-rooted learning, it nurtures agency and embeds political literacy, the competencies most essential to democratic life. As the African Union's *Agenda 2063* envisions "an Africa driven by its citizens, especially its youth," NFE provides the most direct means of realising that vision.

Africa's influence in global governance will not rest on demographics but on preparedness. By embedding NFE within national education architectures, financing it sustainably, credentialing its outcomes, and, most importantly, involving youth in its design, governments can ensure that African youth enter multilateral spaces not as guests but as partners, contributors, and visionaries. NFE's flexible, inclusive, and transformative character equips them not only to inherit the future but also to govern it.

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