

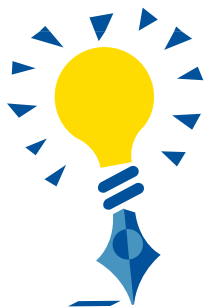
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Capturing Youth's Potential

Gulmira Churokova

Article at a glance

- In the face of significant social and political challenges, youth in Kyrgyzstan often feel a sense of *rolelessness* as they lack opportunities to engage with policymakers.
- The government must realize that young people are valuable members of society and have something positive to contribute to the country's development.
- Given an outlet to express their ideas to policymakers, youth would gain the motivation to become more active citizens.



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1155 Fifteenth Street NW · Suite 700 · Washington, DC 20005 · USA

ph: (202) 721-9200 · www.cipe.org · e-mail: cipe@cipe.org

Nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan is still undergoing a profound social and political transition. The number of urgent challenges facing the country is overwhelming, and the roadblocks faced by youth seem insurmountable to many Kyrgyz citizens. Corruption at educational institutes, unemployment, nepotism in the workplace, and brain drain all have a negative impact on young people's futures, as well as the future of Kyrgyzstan as a whole. Yet, rarely do young people take any initiative to address these issues – as if the problems do not affect them. In particular, youth are very passive when it comes to participating in political reforms, which is partly explained by the lack of opportunities to engage in dialogue with decision-makers. Political participation is often limited to public protests, or, more frequently, youth simply ignore politics.

These interconnected issues demonstrate that Kyrgyz youth feel that they lack a proper role in society. Young people are rarely engaged in the type of responsible work necessary for the social development of the country. Additionally, youth are not involved in state development strategies or the governance process. Rather, the picture looks like this: There are unsolved, urgent issues; the government is making an effort to solve them; the opposition offers alternate solutions; and young people – the stakeholders – are not taking part in governmental or oppositional activities. Because of this *rolelessness*, young people do not know what type of impact their involvement can have on state development. Rather, they see their own life as separate from the future of the state. In this way, youth are losing their sense of citizenship, which will ultimately have a negative impact on development in Kyrgyzstan.

Cause of the Problem

The reasons for the rolelessness of youth vary from situation to situation, and from person to person. However, one over-arching explanation is that the government does not consider the potential of youth to effect positive change. Thus, the government neither develops nor provides the institutions necessary to engage youth and allow them to participate as full members of Kyrgyz society.

The Government of Kyrgyzstan has an official youth policy, yet the youth policies of both the current government and the previous government are very weak and poorly developed. Prior to 2005, the government program was called *Jasbtyk*, and its focus was the 'cultural, moral development, and political and economic activities of youth' – a very vague set of issues to target. This program had several weaknesses. The goals and purposes were very broad, there was neither a mechanism nor strategy to achieve the stated aims, and there was no oversight over the (very small) budget.

The current youth program, *Kyrgyzstan Jashtary*, is inadequate in many of the same ways. It was based on trite phrases, such as 'Youth is our Future,' but did not include a strategy or detailed plan for involving youth in the decision-making and problem-solving processes. Moreover, *Kyrgyzstan Jashtary* was created without any social research for defining the needs and situational realities of the youth population. Finally, the budget to carry out this policy was too small.

Through these vague, weak policies, the Kyrgyz Government demonstrates that it does not consider young people to be valuable members of society; rather, it dismisses them as unimportant. Instead of giving a role to youth and using its potential, ideas, and energy, the state ignores youth and compounds the pervasive feeling of rolelessness.

The consequences of this issue are very serious – it damages both youth and the state. Having been denied a role in building their country, youth seek other opportunities for self expression; working for reform in the public sector is no longer considered. In rural areas, youth may turn to alcohol and drugs. Without receiving enough attention from state, young people lose their sense of citizenship, which has many detrimental effects on the future of Kyrgyzstan's development.

Why Is a Sense of Citizenship Crucial for the State?

A sense of citizenship is loving one's country – feeling its successes and struggles. A person with a

strong sense of citizenship cannot look at problems without taking action. Good citizens will not just accuse the government of failing to achieve its goals or poorly implementing a project, but will work – with positive energy – to solve the problem by developing and promoting new ideas and proposals. For this reason, a sense of citizenship requires cooperation and constructive problem-solving, not protesting.

This feeling and knowledge of citizenship leads to responsibility. The word responsibility can be broken into its root words to better explain this idea: *response* and *ability*. It means responding to a problematic situation, not ignoring it. It means having a vested interest in the development of the country, and the right education and skills to be able to work for positive change. Only when a person is interested in the country's progress and feels a sense of responsibility can he or she have the potential to become an integral part of the country. Since he or she is interested in the future of the state, this young person may advance new, brilliant ideas and thoughts regarding its development. Since this citizen feels responsibility, he or she would not merely talk about those ideas (or try to sell them for personal benefit) but would take the initiative, act, and achieve results.

It is impossible to buy a sense of citizenship. It is also impossible to merely ask youth to develop their sense of citizenship. The only way to cultivate citizenship is for leadership to recognize that young people are valuable members of society and have something positive to contribute to the country's development.

It follows that ideas, devotion, and energy grow out of a sense of citizenship. In order to get these *products*, the state should invest in and support citizenship development. Stephen Covey provides a useful example in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* – the balance between production and production capacity. Using Aesop's fable of 'The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs,' Covey explains how properly caring for the goose that laid golden eggs would have maintained or increased its ability to produce a beneficial product, whereas killing it for an immediate abundance of that product destroyed its future production capacity. He argues that in order to get more golden eggs (the

product), one must invest in the producer. Applying that fable to the issue of youth's sense of citizenship in Kyrgyzstan, society and the state must value and engage young people in order to get the golden egg – the sense of citizenship. That, in turn, will lead to increasing ideas, energy, and willingness to be a part of Kyrgyzstan's development. If the state wants the commitment, ideas, and energy of young people, it should invest in youth by offering them opportunities to participate in problem-solving processes.

By providing these opportunities, Kyrgyzstan would be on its way to solving the issue of rolelessness and thus building a sense of citizenship among young people.

Recommendations

The proposed solution consists of four steps. These steps lead to the ultimate goal of creating a *Council of Young Leaders for State Development*.

Step One: Conduct social analysis to determine the main obstacles faced by young people, in order to develop a comprehensive plan to address the most pressing needs.

Step Two: Organize regular regional political debate tournaments for youth in order to involve them directly in the problem-solving process.

Political debates are very effective in developing widely accepted solutions to problems. By debating, teams come to an agreement on the best strategy for solving a particular issue. In these political debates, young people research and learn more about a selected challenge facing youth in their regions. They then develop and present their own solutions. The judges are representatives of local government, since the tournaments will be regional and focused on local issues.

Unlike most competitions, there is no limit on the number of teams that win – winning is based solely on the quality of the proposed projects. The award is sufficient funding and guidance to implement their project proposal. Additionally, winning teams

can combine parts of different cases into one and organize a common action plan. In this way, young people gain experience in doing responsible, socially necessary work. By organizing political debates, supporting youth's ideas, and providing them with the opportunity to implement their own solutions to the issues that touch their lives, the government builds a bridge between the state and youth. This meaningful involvement nurtures a sense of citizenship.

The Debate Tournament

The debate tournaments would be open to all interested participants. Participants would be divided into teams and assigned the position of affirmative (government) or negative (opposition). The team representing the government must present a case, which consists of three parts.

Problem: Participants present the problem at hand and its urgency.

Solution: Participants outline a detailed solution to the problem, identifying an implementation plan, responsible parties, target locations, and a budget.

Advantages: Participants state the outcomes and benefits of the plan.

The team representing the opposition then identifies the weaknesses of the government team's case and make a counterargument with alternate suggestions on how to solve the identified problem.

Step Three: Hold an annual conference where all realized projects will be presented to the President of Kyrgyzstan and other government officials.

The goal of this conference is to reward 'real citizens' for successfully implementing their projects, and will recognize active, potential, creative, and energetic leaders. Moreover, this type of event motivates young people to get involved in civic life and debate tournaments, and develop and implement their own projects.

Step Four: Create a Council of Young Leaders for State Development from noted active, creative, and energetic youth.

The members of this council have the status of national advisers. They also play the role of a youth parliament by presenting their ideas, proposals, and advice to the executive and legislative branches.

Outcomes:

- The state becomes aware of the problems and obstacles facing youth.
- As a result of the political debates, young people develop their critical and analytical thinking skills.
- The state gains a clear mechanism for solving particular problems, and is also able to identify enthusiastic human resources to implement the solutions.
- Youth become substantively involved in the problem-solving process and gain support and respect from the government. Also, young people are motivated by the idea of becoming a member of the council and a national adviser.
- The problem of rolelessness is successfully addressed.

Conclusion

When youth are involved in the problem-solving process, they grow both personally and professionally. Through the activities presented above, young people would develop their sense of citizenship, which is the proverbial golden egg for the government. The presented plan could be highly effective because it is inexpensive, yet would yield results both for youth and the country's development as a whole. The most important thing is that in all four steps, the government is receiving and integrating ideas from youth. By implementing this plan, the government can be sure that it is using the potential of youth as much as possible and youth can be sure that they are playing an indispensable role in their country. As Lao Tzu said: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." By implementing these stated steps, Kyrgyzstan would be on the threshold of bringing youth's valuable input to the government and opening the door to new opportunities for young people.

CIPE's 2007 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Gulmira Churokova's essay, which won third place in the 'Citizenship in a Democratic Society' category, was written in response to the question: What needs to be done to develop a sense of citizenship in young people and help them find their role in a democratic society? To learn more about the essay competition, visit www.cipe.org/essay.

Gulmira Churokova is a student at American University in Central Asia, where she studies sociology. She is highly interested in international organizations and political and parliamentary debates. Ms. Churokova volunteers at the Eurasia Foundation, where she conducts analysis of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. At the Debate Center (described in her essay), she works as a trainer and judge, and sometimes participates in debates.

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