

## Evidence submission from Restless Development to the Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement - Friday 8 September 2017

### Introduction

Restless Development is a global agency that works with young people to demand and deliver a just and sustainable world for all. It is run out of strategic hubs in ten countries across Africa, Asia and in the UK and USA, with a wider network of partners across the world. Reaching over 500,000 young people a week, one of its four key goals is to ensure young people have a voice so that they are able to drive change as active citizens. The organisation supports young people to actively engage influence and inform decision-making processes, deliver programmes and shape their own communities. Ensuring that young people are active citizens and that their voice counts means that they can bring about transformational change for whole societies.

In the UK, Restless Development supports a diverse network of more than 1000 young people to volunteer, campaign and become active global citizens. Examples of its work include the coordination of Youth Stop AIDS; a youth-led movement and campaign network that acts to ensure governments, global institutions and corporations are committed to ending AIDS by 2030. It is also a member of the DFID funded International Citizen Service (ICS) consortium, having supported over 3000 young people to contribute to development impact across Africa and Asia, but also take action after placement to becoming life-long active, global citizens.

### Summary

- The nature of citizenship for young people is changing - they are participating in communities in different ways than previous generations.
- British citizenship education should be placed within a global citizenship framework, to reflect the increasingly diverse societies, both online and offline, that young people inhabit.
- Young people need to be provided with the necessary skills, training, opportunities and networks in order to develop as active citizens. This should be provided through structured engagements - which will ensure people are independent active citizens in the future.
- Restless Development supports lowering the voting age to 16 in the UK, based upon experience that if young people are properly supported to take part in active citizenship activities for the first time, they are far more likely to do it again independently.
- If young people are given a voice in the decisions that affect them, they can be active citizens which will allow them to lead transformational change in communities.

### **What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?**

1.1 According to traditional citizenship indicators<sup>1</sup>, youth civic participation has decreased over the 21st century. In the UK fewer young people vote in elections, or formally join political parties, as compared to their older counterparts - a trend that has persisted and widened over time. These findings have been associated with a rise in young people's skepticism towards established institutions and political processes<sup>2</sup>. However, our experience shows that youth *are* participating in civic spaces, and taking action in their communities - just in different ways to previous youth generations. We therefore recommend that discussions associated with 'civic engagement' and 'citizenship' are broadened to support emerging and exciting forms of youth civic participation in the UK today.

1.2 At Restless Development, we support hundreds of diverse young people each year to take action during the 'Action at Home' phase of their ICS placement. During this 6-month phase, young people are supported and encouraged to take action in their local communities on issues chosen by them. We have found that, when given the freedom and support to take action on issues closest to them, young people today will endeavour to take on a wide range of community activities. These activities are not always captured in traditional models of citizenship. For example, many volunteers use technology to raise awareness of local and global issues, through platforms such as

<sup>1</sup> ["The New Global Citizen: Harnessing Youth Leadership to Reshape Civil Society"](#) (Rhize, September 2016).

<sup>2</sup> ["Most young lack interest in politics - official survey"](#) (BBC, February 2014)

blogging, podcasts, videos, and using social media to create change. Other volunteers attend protests, organise events at their universities, and lobby MPs to act on issues that they have experienced first-hand whilst volunteering overseas. The themes volunteers take action on vary widely, and many stay connected to the experiences and relationships they developed overseas when taking action.

1.3 Although young people may be perceived as less visibly organised in their neighbourhood around traditional community centres, such as religious institutions and youth centres, our experience shows that young people are still driven to build new communities and take civic action through harnessing features of their identity and interests, such as LGBT+ issues, climate change, economic inequality, and more. During our trainings, we encourage volunteers to reflect on their personal stories and their values to help them identify opportunities and networks to take action within, based on their shared identities with other young people.

1.4 As the above example shows, young people are moving away from the 'dutiful' approach to citizenship, which is motivated by community belonging and affiliation to existing institutions. Youth today are leading the growth of social movements, which operates when individuals collaborate in looser networks, centred on community action and shared values. Civic engagement today is less focused on loyalty to the state and nation, and is increasingly motivated by personal identity and experience, asserting individual rights, and connecting with other young people, both within and across national borders. Through these new interactions, young people are forging new global identities whilst based in Britain.

1.5 An example of a youth-led movement is [Youth Stop AIDS](#), one of Restless Development's leading campaign networks. Established for 13 years, the youth-led movement speaks out, takes creative action and engages those in power to ensure that governments, global institutions and corporations are committed to ending AIDS by 2030. The movement was set up by young people in the UK who had witnessed the HIV epidemic whilst volunteering overseas. It now operates through a broad network of youth groups based across the country, which use technology and community meetings to build relationships, develop strategic thinking, and take action on the global HIV epidemic.

1.6 This growth in social movements has been supported by online and offline networks and tools. Young people are creating and defining new approaches to social change, using technology to build new ways to create change within their communities. Peer-driven networks, grassroots organising, and offline contact are still important elements in this. Institutions should focus not on creating these networks for social change, but should instead identify and support them.

1.7 Central to all of this is the demand by young people to have a voice on the decisions which affect their daily experiences and their personal identities. Crucially, if a diverse range of young people have a voice and are given the tools and access to influence those in power, it will help to ensure that they can realise their leadership potential and bring about transformational change for wider society.

**Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people's identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?**

2.1 For our youth network, being British today is inextricably linked to being a global citizen. Their citizenship narrative is not about being 'British first', but about being a global citizen who is proud to live in a country which leads on and cares about global issues. Citizenship in the UK can thus be strengthened by increasing the emphasis we place on the concept of Global Citizenship. Young people today live in a digital age where traditional borders and experiences of national identity are being reshaped constantly through globalisation and technology. Both local and global issues can move young people passionately to take action, due to the pervasive and borderless nature of modern technology.

2.2 Global citizenship is a critical aspect of British citizenship. Britain's important global role must be furthered by its citizens', not just its government. We recommend that institutions learn from young people and their ability to stand

in solidarity with global causes. When young people feel connected to wider movements, and if they have the tools they need to create change and influence the powerful, they can be highly engaged and committed to global issues. This is something to celebrate in terms of civic engagement.

2.3 For example, young people within our network are increasingly proud and ready to defend Britain's commitment to 0.7% of GDP going to international development, as well as our government's leadership on global issues such as LGBT+ rights and climate change. At the time of this submission, young people across the country have been contacting and meetings with their MPs to express their pride in Britain's commitments overseas. Such globally focused actions are a reflection of modern British citizenship, encapsulating some of the aspects that make young people proud to be British. This further strengthens the argument that modern notions of British citizenship should be discussed within a global citizenship framework.

2.4 Another example of British young people exercising their citizenship rights to speak out on global issues was the Action/2015 campaign, a global coalition that came together united by the belief that 2015 was a critical year for progress in the fight against climate change, poverty and inequality in the formation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Restless Development supported a diverse group of young activists in the UK to engage and mobilise the public during this campaign. Through an evaluation of the campaign's accomplishments, it was demonstrated that youth in the UK emerged as the key focus of the campaign<sup>3</sup>. When given the support and integrated into a wider movement for change, youth generated great enthusiasm for the action/2015 work in the UK and led much of the strategic thinking behind the campaign.

2.5 The above examples demonstrate that many British young people are ready to act as global citizens and do not see a disconnect between taking civic action to drive change on local and global issues. Attempts to strengthen people's identities as British citizens should also embrace the global dimension of the modern youth experience, particularly with regard to an increasingly diverse national landscape.

**Do current laws encourage active political engagement? What are your views on changes to the franchise for national or local elections, including lowering the voting age? Should changes be made to the voting process or the voting registration process?**

3.1 In the UK Restless Development would agree with the lowering of the voting age to 16. This would allow young people to meaningfully participate in the democratic process and help provide them with the voice essential to their active citizenship.

3.2 At the age of 16 young people in the UK are treated as capable, responsible citizens in a number of ways, including being able to gain employment, pay income tax, get married, join the army or even become a director of a company.

3.3 The majority of 16 and 17 year olds are still in formal education institutions. This provides the ideal setting to support young people to register to vote, understand the democratic process, discuss and debate the issues with their peers, and put their citizenship education into practice. Furthermore, if standardised support is given through formal institutions, it decreases the reliance on family and individual networks to be able to guide young people through the process of voting for the first time, thus increasing the likelihood of a more diverse range of young people registering and turning out to vote.

3.4 Our experience has shown that if young people are properly supported to take part in active citizenship activities for the first time, they are far more likely to do it again independently. Therefore if 16 year olds are supported to vote by their schools and colleges, we believe that more of these young people are likely to vote again in the future - thus increasing the overall youth voter turnout. Voting also encourages engagement with decision makers as part of the democratic process. At Restless Development, we have taken this approach within our 'Youth Decide' events, giving young people the space to engage with, debate and shape their opinions on major

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<sup>3</sup> Action 2015 Campaign Evaluation (Firetail, February 2016):  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bywm4VwGJMMbWFIKbWxkdkRLaGc/view>

political topics - such as Brexit, the refugee crisis, and reframing the vote. These quarterly events build on each other to foster a habit of political debate and engagement amongst young people in the UK.

**What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?**

4.1 Young people should be supported on their journey to active citizenship, being provided with the skills, training, confidence and tools to engage and organise within their communities. If they are supported through initial engagements, then they will do it independently in the future. This can be supported by encouraging active citizenship through formal education, which could cover crucial elements such as how parliament works and our voting system.

4.2 Political participation, and the potential to engage with and influence decision makers, is a crucial element of active citizenship. Institutions must take care not to de-politicise lessons on civic engagement, and must recognise that young people need to have a voice in the decisions that affect them - this is the key factor to ensure ongoing civic participation. Young people must recognise that they have actual power to create change, and must understand how to use that power effectively.

4.3 We would also recommend that civic education is delivered in an engaging way, so young people are not deterred by the concept of active citizenship and the formal civic processes. At Restless Development, we have recently conducted a training audit to ensure that all of our trainings with volunteers are as youth-led, participatory, and engaging as possible. Fostering youth leadership and peer-support within trainings and citizenship schemes is particularly important, as these are tools needed to ensure long-term civic engagement for young people.

4.4 As discussed above, young people today are embracing a more active and participatory form of citizenship, rather than more 'dutiful' models of citizenship. Therefore, any formal educational initiatives or non-formal programs focused on good citizenship should reflect and strengthen the leadership potential, political awareness, and critical thinking abilities required for youth to meaningfully participate in civic spaces.

**Do voluntary citizenship programmes such as the National Citizen Service do a good job of creating active citizens? Are they the right length? Should they be compulsory, and if so, when? Should they include a greater political element? Should they lead to a more public citizenship ceremony? Are they good value for money? What other routes exist for creating active citizens?**

5.1 Voluntary citizenship programmes are a good first step at mobilising and supporting young people, but longer-term structures and support are needed to embed active citizenship. For example, it is important for funding to be long-lasting and sustainable, in order to support young people for longer periods when they are embedded in own communities. This will sustain the habit of civic engagement and ensure that citizenship programmes are not tokenistic or perceived by young people as one-off activities, separate from daily life.

5.2 Throughout our delivery of the International Citizenship Service, we ensure that volunteers understand that being an active citizen is a lifelong journey - *not* defined by taking a one action in their communities, followed by an official stamp to mark completion of the programme. We work with a diverse range of young people, many of whom were often not previously engaged in politics or community action. We expose these young people to a range of tangible ways they can take action and have a sustainable impact in the UK and abroad (e.g. through working in host communities overseas, learning how to engage with MPs, joining campaign stunts, and more). We also encourage volunteers to stay connected to the wider Restless youth network in the future, through using social media platforms; encouraging them to go back to their schools and communities to motivate other young people to get involved in community action, and through our 'Youth Decide' events (described below) to connect individuals to the wider network.

5.3 Building and nurturing this network of active citizens is an important way of ensuring that youth understand that being an active citizen does not end after the 6-month programme. Instead, the journey of active citizenship can continue on far beyond the official time period prescribed by the programme. This approach was also demonstrated through our experience leading the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Development Advocates programme, which equipped young people with the skills to continue to speak out and shape development priorities well beyond the programme timeline.

5.4 However, our experience is that appropriate investment for 'active citizenship' is increasingly hard to come by. With funding focused on fixed outcomes of youth engagement, the flexible funding that encourages youth-led active citizenship activities is limited. There is an opportunity for the ICS programme to better fund and support collective active citizenship activities that would have a greater sustainable impact on local and global communities.

5.5 Having a voice, and being able to influence those in power is an essential element of active citizenship. Trying to separate politics is to ignore this crucial element of citizenship. At Restless Development, we run a global project called the [Accountability Advocates](#). As part of this initiative in the UK, young people have been trained to work on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A team of young people collect data to monitor and hold the government to account on the SDGs in the UK, whilst also linking up with the wider global movement of accountability advocates. This initiative is a prime example of long-term active and political civic engagement, led and designed by young people who are supported to take action on issues that affect their lives.

5.6 Voluntary citizenship programmes should be available for everyone - and we should push for their inclusivity - but they are not right for everyone, so should not be compulsory. Young people should choose what sort of active citizenship works for them. Structured citizenship programmes should thus incorporate tailored and adaptable support, to ensure that young people can find a pathway to a form of citizenship which works for them. This model of personalised support is a crucial part of how Restless Development supports young people to become active.

5.7 We think that public citizenship ceremonies are not necessary, especially when substituted for personalised support, recognition and connection to a wider movement. In our experience, offering tailored 1:1 support to young people as they take action in their communities means that volunteers feel that their work and achievements are recognised, without the need for a formal ceremony. Moreover, it is important for young people to understand that active citizenship does not 'stop' after a programme has been completed; they should see themselves as developing the long-term habits of civic engagement.

5.8 Citizenship programmes offer exceptional value for money; they provide outcomes for the individual young people; but crucially for also the communities in which they take action; and longer-term as their active citizenship continue. Appreciating value for money requires an acknowledgement of the holistic nature of a schemes outcomes and its ability to impact on the individual, community and short and longer-term.

**How can society support civic engagement? What responsibility should central government, devolved and local governments, third sector organisations and the individual have for encouraging civic engagement? What can the Government and Parliament do to support civil society initiatives to increase civic engagement?**

6.1 We recommend that institutions should invest in community-based and national organisations that have the expertise in supporting young people in civic engagement and are committed to creating spaces for young people to connect and take action. This provision of skills, opportunities is crucial to encouraging active citizenship.

6.2 At Restless Development, we have been demonstrating the power of supporting young people to lead and create spaces for civil society discussions and initiatives. Our series of 'Youth Decide' events are organised and facilitated by young people within our youth network. These events focus on topical global issues and bring together diverse young people to meet, discuss and collaborate on how they can take action on these issues. For example, during the Brexit election, young people came together in London to listen to other points of view, engage in immersive theatre techniques to understand different perspectives, and develop their opinions in a safe

atmosphere. The creation of community spaces and investment in young leaders is a powerful way to build civic engagement, amplify youth voices, and grow community awareness.

6.3 Given the changing nature of citizenship, as noted above, there should be more flexibility in understanding what 'civic engagement' is and as a consequence, what types of initiatives should be funded. We recommend that funding for civic engagement is focused on youth-led community action, and on providing movements with the capacity to meaningfully access and engage with influencing spaces in which youth can impact change on local and global issues.

6.4 The government should also consider the implications of the Lobbying Act and the restrictions this places on engaging young people in active citizenship activities. The restrictions place strain on programmes, staff and volunteers, that rely on public communications and engagement in topical issues. One example is in the run up to the recent General Election volunteer's blogs about the election were edited before being posted online, a direct contradiction of encouraging young people to freely speak out on politics. Given that amplifying youth voice is one of the foundations of active citizenship, the government should consider how the Lobbying Act impacts citizenship programmes and youth engagement in political processes.

**Why do so many communities and groups feel "left behind"? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?**

7.1 As noted above, youth will define and exercise their citizenship in diverse ways. This could be a potential barrier if not embraced. For example, many citizenship initiatives could feel distant and rigid for young people who are driven to create change based on their lived experiences, but who lack knowledge of formal processes, wider citizenship concepts, or access to real decision-making spaces. This is particularly the case for minority youth groups, who do not see themselves represented in government or the establishment. Such lack of representation can alienate the concept of 'politics' and power from ordinary young people, and needs to be addressed to make ideas of formal citizenship and civic engagement relatable for minorities.

7.2 At Restless Development, we have also led on influencing governments globally to make political processes and spaces more youth friendly. This could take the form of structured, meaningful and effective participation in official policy processes, the promotion of formal and informal spaces where young people can engage with each other and the community at large, and volunteering schemes. We also advocate engaging with young people in the spaces where they already meet - be this in communities, online or at universities.

7.3 21st century notions of identity are being reshaped by young people, as civic engagement is increasingly based on individual values and personal experience. Many young people view themselves through the lens of intersectionality, aware of how structural barriers to participation (such as race, class, gender and disability) can help or hinder their opportunities in life. Youth will thus feel motivated to take action on the issues and causes that they personally relate to, and not necessarily to notions of citizenship rooted in formal institutions and concepts. Institutions need to adapt to this changing reality by working directly with young people to co-create personalised routes for young people to get involved with civic activities.

7.4 In the specific case of citizenship programmes, there is a need to push for inclusion and diversity to ensure the opportunity is accessible to people from all parts of society. This may require additional investment, but ultimately strengthens the initiative. For example, within the International Citizenship Service programme, Restless Development has undertaken many measures to ensure that we can ensure young people are fully supported to lead and take action overseas and in the UK.

7.5 These adjustments can include fully understanding and altering programmes to support volunteers with mental health conditions; helping volunteers to access housing benefits once they return to the UK; providing personalised guidance on identity concerns such as sexuality and race; and more. Government funding for the program ensures that any young person can access the opportunity, regardless of economic background. This is absolutely crucial to

ensuring that certain groups do not feel “left behind” in citizenship opportunities - the first step is to acknowledge all the potential barriers and actively address them when recruiting and supporting young people to take action.