



Here's what young people think of the state of democracy in SA and what they plan to do about it: voting is just the first step

First-time voters participated in a Decode workshop titled 'Our Vote is our Voice', but they argued voting on its own won't be enough; real change will be achieved only through communities coming together to speak with one collective voice.

“Democracy means the power of the people. But that power is only on loan!” This was according to one of the young people who attended a session on “Our Vote is our Voice”, the third in a series of citizen workshops held in Cape Town on 27 October 2023 as part of IFAA’s “In Defence of our Constitutional Democracy” or Decode project.

The implications of his statement were clear, and reflected the mindset of most of the young participants: Power belongs to the people, not the party or politician. It is transferred to our political representatives if we vote for them, but must be returned if that trust is abused.

The workshop targeted first time voters. The programme allowed them to comment on the state of democracy in South Africa today. And it asked them to spell out what they thought they could or should be doing about it.

Decode is a one-year project that highlights the role of Parliament and constitutionally elected public representatives in making our democracy effective. Just as our elected representatives have to conduct oversight of the Executive and call these political leaders to account, citizens have to check that representative are making effective use of the peoples’ power that is on loan to them.

Decode is funded by the Australian High Commission in South Africa and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

The young participants were questioning and challenging, and demonstrated their political insight and maturity. In a session on active and responsive citizenship, ►



participants were given real-life scenarios reflecting daily realities in the lives of the poor, for example:

Andile is aware that his good friend and neighbour Peter steals copper wires. This means the trains cannot run. Andile's sister lost her job because she could not get to work. Andile also knows Peter is stealing because he has no job and must feed his large family. Andile knows he should report crime as a responsive citizen. However, he understands Peter's situation.

Mary lives in a neglected area. The municipal trucks have not been around to collect waste for six weeks. The place is filled with litter. Plastic bags blow in the wind. There is a smell of sewerage everywhere. People are getting sick. They have had no water for many days. People are complaining that the municipality has forgotten about them.

Participants had useful advice for “Andile” and “Mary”. Clearly familiar with the challenges presented in the exercise, what stood out in their responses was their compassion and empathy. It appeared more important to them to provide “Peter” with some form of support from the community than to punish him. Suggestions ranged from trying to help him find a job to sharing with him and his family whatever food or resources they could spare.

“Mary” was advised to organise a petition for better services in her area or to call on her neighbours “to come together as a community and organise a community clean up”. The emphasis was on speaking out with a collective voice, exercising pressure as citizens and the need to “raise awareness to make South Africa aware of what is happening in our communities”.

Some of the creative initiatives they put forward were described by workshop facilitator Mike Pothier, a lawyer and activist with the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, as effective programmes for community action and civil society mobilisation.

Later the workshop held a “speed dating” exercise with a twist. In two facing rows



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they were given a few minutes to convince the person in front of them that they should go out and vote when the time comes next year.

Decode's partners on the ground are many and varied. For the youth workshop Decode has a shout out of appreciation to Civics Academy, an independent, not-for-profit online education initiative that offers training and free video and audio content aiming to inform and strengthen democratic values and responsible citizenship.

The Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office, a project of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, has supported Decode from the start. It is the official vehicle for contact and dialogue between the Catholic Church in South Africa and the country's Parliament and government and provides an avenue for the Church – as part of civil society – to contribute to debates on issues of public policy, and to help shape legislative and policy developments.

Participants came from non-government organisation Ikamva Youth, which is committed to empowering young people from under-resourced communities, and lobby and activist group My Vote Counts, as well as local Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges.

The workshop surfaced comments about the pressure new voters sometimes face to vote for the same party their parents had always voted for. Pothier urged them not to make choices based on what had happened in the past. "And tell that to your parents," he said. "You don't vote because of something you remember. You vote for the future, not for the past."

Pothier asked them to list ways in which they could hold their elected representatives to account. How do you exercise responsible citizen oversight over those in positions of power – not by throwing stones or setting tyres alight! The participants' responses went well beyond exercising their right to vote. "Use the media to expose corrupt politicians"; "use the law and take them to court"; "withhold municipal rates" to demand effective delivery of services.

At the end of the day participants' assessments of the workshop reflected that they had learned a lot about how South Africa works – its system of proportional representation; the three-tier government process; the rules and practices of Parliament; and so on – but the day's discussions were not about whether or not they were going to vote. The participants' responses went well beyond exercising their right to vote. Their emphasis was on community activism; their solutions were "get together, organise with other people, mobilise".

As Pothier said, "no one can say 'there is nothing we can do'. The power is in our hands. It is up to us to decide how we use it."

Before they left, participants were given handouts from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) on how to register as a voter and how to vote and they were encouraged to share them with family, friends and members of their communities. **NA**