

## Civic-Mindedness



*Bertelsmann Foundation,  
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## **Civic-Mindedness**

Participation in Modern Society

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# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> . . . . .	7
<b>1 Introduction</b> . . . . .	9
1.1 Cohesion, participation and the potential for civic engagement in modern society . . . . .	10
1.2 Transformation in the relationship between the individual und the community . . . . .	13
1.3 Risks and opportunities inherent in change . . . . .	16
<b>2 Civic-Mindedness and Civic Skills: Prerequisites for Cohesion and Participation</b> . . . . .	19
2.1 Questionable forms of community orientation in Germany's past . . . . .	19
2.2 The existential importance of community orientation . . . . .	22
2.3 Civic-mindedness as social responsibility, and civic skills as the ability to act socially . . . . .	25
<b>3 Encouraging Civic-Mindedness and Civic Skills in Today's World</b> . . . . .	33
3.1 Conveying values through education . . . . .	34
3.2 The core focus: Enabling participation . . . . .	35
3.3 Methodological principles . . . . .	36



## Foreword

What holds today's pluralistic society together? What becomes of civic-mindedness and the ability to live together as a community, amid what some label the "me" society—a narcissistic society, an autistic society?

As fuzzy as these terms might be, they make it clear that people feel an increasing sense of uncertainty about social cohesion. Some feel that exaggerated individualism and declining solidarity are threatening the moral foundations of modern society. Others see just the opposite—a turning away from self-centeredness, a new social openness and a new surge in civic-mindedness.

The debate makes it clear that phenomena such as tolerance and civic-mindedness register the "moral temperature of a society" (Roman Herzog) and are valuable commodities that should not be taken for granted. This is why a society must make the effort to inspire and encourage the requisite attitudes and skills among individuals.

The Bertelsmann Foundation has been involved with these issues since 1995, in concert with its partner, the Bertelsmann Group for Policy Research at the Center for Applied Policy Research (C·A·P) of Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. Their joint projects provide innovative, practical stimuli for civic education focusing on the fundamentals of a shared democratic existence. So far, their work has emphasized teach-

ing tolerance, and helping to network international nongovernmental organizations that promote tolerance, human rights and democracy. Building on their positive experiences in this area, the Bertelsmann Foundation and C·A·P have been conducting the Civic Education and Community Orientation Project since 2000.

This publication presents the conceptual basis of the Civic Education Project. At the core of this concept is an idea of civic-mindedness that takes due account of the rising importance of self-determination and people's changing sense of themselves in modern society. Starting from this basis, the project develops criteria for innovative methods and models to encourage civic-mindedness and teach the skills that strengthen communities.

The ideas presented here evolved in dialogue with experts in civic education, intercultural communications and civic engagement. I want to thank everyone who participated—especially the project managers, Ulrich Kober of the Bertelsmann Foundation and Wolfgang Fänderl of C·A·P.

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# 1 Introduction

One of the primary characteristics of today's democratic societies is diversity. Diverse convictions, values and life styles co-exist and even compete shoulder to shoulder. What is it that actually keeps people together in such a society? Is this increasing diversity even manageable? Are today's societies destined to fall apart, leaving only isolated individuals, or at best small groups, no longer bound together by any common ties at all?

There are a number of different answers as to what holds society together. But there is no question that to be able to function at all, democratic societies must rely on people with community-oriented skills, who trust one another and who take an interest both in one another and in the welfare of the community.<sup>1</sup> Mutual interest and trust, together with shared goals and a variety of resources, result in commitment and involvement. People must have a sense that they have something at stake; they must become involved in social life in order to be integrated into society and help society cohere. The key to integration is participation.

1 Jürgen Habermas points out that the model of a discourse-oriented civil democracy must constantly rely on the accommodation of a consonant background of motives and attitudes that cannot be compelled by law, held by a citizen oriented to the common good.

Phenomena such as a sense of community, civic-mindedness, good citizenship, social capital, solidarity and volunteerism are indicators of a society's cohesion. It is often unclear exactly what people mean by these terms. But involvement and commitment in terms of participation can be measured so that we can indeed arrive at empirical findings about the status of cohesion within modern society.

## **1.1 Cohesion, participation and the potential for civic engagement in modern society**

Developments in some parts of today's societies appear to indicate a decline of participation and a concomitant crisis in social cohesion.

### **Crisis indicators**

The following trends are indicators of a crisis due to dwindling participation and civic engagement in OECD countries:

- Voter turnout has declined steadily since 1950.
- The proportion of members of political parties among the electorate has dwindled from more than 10 percent in the fifties to less than six percent in the nineties.
- Involvement in trade unions has declined: with the exception of Scandinavia, membership has shrunk everywhere since 1980.
- Churchgoing has dropped dramatically in some areas since the sixties. It should be noted that this trend applies only to societies in Northwestern Europe. Churches in the United States have proved stable in a highly modern society.

These developments reveal that civic engagement in institutions and organizations that were formerly factors in maintaining social cohesion is diminishing.

This decline points, in turn, to a loss of trust within society—a serious problem, for trust is the foundation of social cohesion. Modern, functionally differentiated societies in particular are reliant on trust. Some studies indicate that trust is on the wane in modern societies. Germany, too, is showing signs of a trend toward a society of mistrust. Mistrust for politicians is particularly evident, rising from 10 percent of the population in the early eighties to more than 60 percent since the end of the eighties.<sup>2</sup> This “crisis of representation” is undoubtedly having a negative impact on social cohesion.

### **Signs of a turnaround**

Yet these crisis indicators are also countered by indications of new forms of civic engagement and participation in other segments of society. In Germany, the focus of this essay, there are several new trends:

- An increasing number of volunteer agencies are providing new momentum for volunteer work.
- New community foundations are being established.
- Self-help groups and less formal types of mutual support networks are on the rise.
- Companies are getting more involved in the social sphere.
- Schools and businesses are taking part in new social-learning initiatives.

2 It must be borne in mind, however, that trust for others has generally increased in Western Germany since the fifties, from 12 percent in 1959 to 32 percent in 1980 and 46 percent in 2000.

Overall, civic engagement appears to have increased in the past few years. Between 1993 and 2000, the number of people involved in charitable and volunteer work rose by four to five percent in Western Germany, and by as much as 10 to 15 percent in Eastern Germany.<sup>3</sup>

The German Federal government's 1999 survey on volunteerism concluded that more than one-third of the population is involved in volunteer work. Civic engagement among young people is above the average for other age groups. The potential of this age group for future civic engagement is also especially noteworthy: 63 percent of young people who are not currently involved in volunteer activities would be willing to get involved.

Systematic studies of social involvement among young people clearly indicate that while this age group's active participation in traditional social organizations is declining in some regards, young people appear to have an affinity for flexible, more decentralized, more self-determined activities.

## **Conclusion**

Empirical findings about cohesion within modern society do not support contentions of a general crisis in social cohesion.

The surprising concurrency of crisis indicators and signs of a turnaround appears at first glance to be contradictory. But it becomes understandable when viewed as a reflection of a profound transformation.

3 However, the data from surveys on volunteerism leaves much to be desired, due to a lack of longitudinal studies.

## **1.2 Transformation in the relationship between the individual and the community**

The relationship between the individual and the community has undergone fundamental change in modern societies. This change is the result of a structural transformation that is manifesting itself as a conspicuous shift in attitudes and values.

### **The structural transformation**

Initially, industrialization and modernization released individuals from traditionally prescribed social ties. New, complex webs arose in the division of labor and in market relationships, as did new social milieus. Cohesion was weaker in these new milieus than the traditional ties had been. After World War II, greater spatial and social mobility produced further surges in modernization.

But the resulting tendency toward individualization has not meant dissolving all social identity and all social cohesion, leaving only isolated loners. Even in today's society, broad-based social milieus can still be distinguished in terms of life style. Rather than fragmentation, individualization has meant an expansion of individuals' leeway to act in every milieu.

The tendency toward individualization, for example, explains the dwindling participation in unions and churches. In the past, these organizations drew their participants from two milieus, the social-democratic working class and the Catholic community. In Germany these milieus remained relatively intact into the fifties, but their cohesion has weakened ever since. Individualization leads to pluralization. That explains why today's society is typified by diversity in options for action, in

life styles, and in convictions. It has become harder to integrate society by way of shared values. In the past few decades, cultural diversity has been further reinforced by international mobility, which has led to significant immigration in every modern society.

### **A transformation of values**

The consequences of these structural changes are particularly evident today in people's changing attitudes and view of themselves—as revealed by empirical studies. Social researchers speak of a far-reaching change in values. Traditional morality, for example, under which a sense of duty toward the community played an especially important role, has been losing ground to a morality that emphasizes self-realization and self-determination. This change should not be interpreted as a disappearance of “old” values. Rather, new configurations are emerging that mix traditional orientations with self-realization.

The typical mentality that has evolved out of this change in values can be characterized as follows:

- A stronger need for personal autonomy and the freedom to act as one sees fit
- An increasing appreciation and demand for codetermination and participation: people have a greater need to help decide about matters that concern them directly
- Less willingness to conform to traditional roles or to view commitments as set in stone
- An emphasis on teaching personal autonomy, both in the family and in schools
- Relations between the sexes guided more by concepts of partnership and equal rights
- The waning influence of churches and their doctrines on

how people lead their lives, since formal claims of authority are no longer accepted without question

This way of thinking has become especially prominent in Western Germany since the sixties. In the former East Germany, the process was different because there the state policy was to emphasize values that subordinated personal interests to the demands of the party and its ideology. In the eighties, self- and codetermination became increasingly important and spread into the political realm, leading to the revolution in 1989. We can therefore assume that self- and codetermination are core values in both parts of united Germany today.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, we can say that the accelerating process of modernization since World War II has altered social milieus and ways of thinking, shifting them in the direction of individualization and self-determination. In all, there is a greater need to choose one's own actions for oneself. This trend toward self-defined participation has caused participation in milieu-related organizations to decline, especially in unions, political parties and churches.

Because of this change in attitudes, the reasons people become involved and the kinds of organizational structures they prefer to become involved in are changing. To an increasing degree, people choose to become involved in the community on their own initiative, as a means of personal development. Often, their main motivation is fun—which does not mean that they seek superficial amusement, but that they receive gratification from their commitment to particular goals and causes, and at the same time experience this as fulfilling and meaningful.

### 1.3 Risks and opportunities inherent in change

Our diagnosis, then, is that there is no generalized crisis in social cohesion; instead, we find structural and motivational transformations taking place in civic-mindedness, civic engagement and participation.

#### Risks

Some view this transformation toward greater self-orientation and greater self-determination as a trend toward egotism and a loss of solidarity within society. Common values, they say, are increasingly being displaced by self-seeking individualism.

These are valid concerns. Since the eighties, for example, social researchers in Germany have noticed the development of a value system that they call hedonistic materialism. Typically this involves a strong interest in personal enjoyment of life, based on the highest possible standard of living, while concern for general societal problems wanes, as does the inclination to become socially integrated into families, partnerships and communities. Indeed, this seemed to be becoming the dominant value system among younger people up to the mid-nineties. But by the end of the nineties, the proportion of hedonists among the 18-to-30 age group had receded.

Economic conditions must also be kept in mind. When a market-economy dynamic prevails unchecked in society, and social concerns are thrust into the background, there will be consequences. Under such conditions it seems that values centered primarily on self-assertion become most appropriate. The German "Youth 2000" Shell Study, for example, found that 60 percent of respondents felt it was more important to watch out

for their own interests than to be concerned about the good of others. Another cause for concern is young people's declining interest in politics, as also documented by the Shell Study.

The Volunteerism Survey mentioned above similarly suggests that young people are underrepresented in matters of social and political involvement.

## Opportunities

But in addition to risks, change also offers opportunities to reappraise the concept of community and strengthen civic engagement beyond the limited bounds of individual social milieus. Empirical studies show that individualism and communalism are not mutually exclusive. The need for self-determination and autonomy does not necessarily imply a lack of solidarity and civic-mindedness, or even egotism. It is consumerism, not self-determination, that leads to hedonism.

The Shell Study showed that young people especially prize their own individuality. In fact, the authors see the prioritizing of individuality over an emphasis on commonalities as the clearest change in the Shell studies between 1991 and 1999. But this does not by any means signify that young people are turning away from community life. Relationships and family still remain core values in their lives. So young people do not cherish a form of individualism that advocates living for the moment and for oneself alone, beyond all concern for professional or family life. The study documents that young people prize self-determination and "humanity" both. Similarly, the Volunteerism Survey shows that young people's orientation to fun is not incompatible with civic engagement. On the contrary, their desire for self-realization reinforces their interest in civic engagement.

## Conclusion

We cannot ignore the risks inherent in unilateral, individualistic attitudes. It would be naïve to hope, for example, that a phenomenon like hedonism might simply give rise to a new social morality. But the key finding from empirical studies is that individualization and pluralization do not automatically pull the rug out from under civic-mindedness; instead they create a new set of prerequisites for such an orientation.

Hence one cannot respond to the potential dangers of a loss of solidarity by restricting individuality and self-determination, still less eliminate such risks by invoking the ideals of community, solidarity and loving one's neighbor. If we keep in mind how conditions have changed, community orientation and civic engagement can flourish in today's society as well.

In terms of supply and demand, the demand—among individuals themselves—for new ways to take on responsibility is propelled far less by moral appeals to one's duty toward the community than by personal motivation. This shows how necessary it is to make a community orientation plausible for individuals.

In terms of supply, new opportunities and structures must be created for meaningful, self-defined involvement. Often, traditional community-involvement organizations no longer fit people's personal ideas, needs and inclinations. There is no longer a match between supply and demand, and the result is a misalignment of motivations and opportunities. The abundant potential for civic engagement, in particular among young people, is being underutilized.

## **2 Civic-Mindedness and Civic Skills: Prerequisites for Cohesion and Participation**

In order for civic-mindedness to make sense to today's society we must first clearly distinguish it from questionable forms of community orientation. Then we must demonstrate how crucial community orientation is for the individual by seriously considering the relationship between the individual and the community. We can then move on to develop a modern concept of civic-mindedness that combines self-determination with community orientation.

### **2.1 Questionable forms of community orientation in Germany's past**

For Germans, the term civic-mindedness may also evoke authoritarian concepts of community orientation that carry unpleasant historical associations with the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

#### **Community orientation under the Third Reich**

National Socialism pushed the ideology of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, or “people's community,” to which the individual was expected to submit. The Nazi party program expressed this in

the slogan “*Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz*”—the common good comes before the private good. After the political discord of the Weimar Republic, this ideology undoubtedly held a certain appeal for broad segments of the population.

Education played a key role for the National Socialists. They dismantled the Weimar Republic’s educational system, which they found liberal and humanitarian, with its alleged emphasis on individualism. Instead they imposed a policy known as *Gleichschaltung* on schools and universities, bringing them “into line” by abolishing academic freedom and dissent; and they founded the Hitler Youth to foster the concept of a collective personality defined according to strict racist criteria.

The categorical rejection of individuality was typical of the National Socialist concept of community. This was what they meant when they spoke of “educating people to be civic-minded.”<sup>4</sup>

Such an anti-individualistic concept of civic-mindedness led to the extinction of the individual within a people’s community defined by race. Moreover, the Nazi version of civic-mindedness was extremely exclusive, and ultimately eliminating; under the National Socialists anyone defined as not be-

4 The following quote from a 1933 journal may serve as a fairly typical example of National Socialist ideology. Under the heading “Educating to Be Civic-Minded, the Idea of the Organic Whole,” Johann Friedrich Herget wrote: “The era of disgrace that lies behind us was one of unparalleled oppositions. Shutting out the individual from the collective whole, and granting personal advantage absolute precedence over the interests of others—selfishness—had broken up the German people into innumerable self-centered units jostling against one another. ... If education in civic-mindedness now succeeds in harnessing the forces for renewal that erupt so abundantly from the people in the service of the state, then a vital and lasting structure will arise through an organic evolution, as the crowning achievement of our nation’s elevation. But first education in civic-mindedness must create a new spirit, which will creatively generate the new state out of itself—albeit with the realization that only shared blood ties, identity as a people and nationalism are or can ever be the foundation of a mighty life of the state.”

longing to the people's community was stripped of their rights, enslaved or murdered.

### **Collective orientation in the GDR**

Although it would be simplistic to compare the socialist regime with the National Socialist system, the GDR also pursued an authoritarian strategy of collective orientation. The regime propounded an ideology of equality under which individual and collective interests were supposed to be identical. Personal values were simply a subjective reflection of specified social values. All forms of education were placed in the service of the dictatorship. Self-realization was suppressed.

But beyond the state's policy on values, a wide variety of forms of unprescribed, practical solidarity grew up among the GDR population. These informal types of civic-mindedness served mainly to cope with the problems induced by the nation's economy of scarcity, and they vanished relatively quickly after Reunification. Many people experienced the disappearance of this solidarity as a loss. That these particular forms of civic-mindedness did not survive indicates that whatever solidarity a state-imposed collective orientation was able to engender was mostly a matter of joining forces against the state, rather than drawing together with fellow-citizens. It originated more from small communities opposing the state than from forming bonds with other groups.

### **Conclusion**

Historically, Germany's two dictatorships clearly show that some forms of civic-mindedness or community orientation

suppress individual freedom. They violate the dignity of the individual—the ethical foundation of democratic societies.

One sign of individual freedom and personal dignity is the opportunity for the individual to define himself or herself, and not to have definitions simply imposed from outside by a collective.

Hence, if civic-mindedness is to comply with the fundamental ethical criterion of human dignity, it must embrace self-determination.

## **2.2 The existential importance of community orientation**

Philosophy and empirical anthropology have established the critical importance of community for the individual. A person cannot survive in isolation; rather, each individual is fundamentally dependent on the community.

### **The social nature of the individual**

A community is an indispensable prerequisite for the ability of a person to survive and evolve. Since humans are not endowed at birth with everything they need in order to survive, the individual must rely on support, recognition and orientation from others, especially in the first months of life. Identity can establish itself only in a social context: “A human becomes human only among humans” (Fichte), and “through the Thou a person becomes I” (Buber). Individuals need deep social relationships in order for their personalities to evolve. Hence they have an existential interest in such contacts.

This is why community is of core importance in providing

for the survival of the “Mängelwesen Mensch”<sup>5</sup>: man, deficient by nature. The material and cultural goods that people need in order to complete their existence can only be produced through a community. The individual’s reliance on social exchange is expressed in classic terms by Thomas Aquinas, building on an idea from Aristotle: “Man is by nature a political and social being. This is evident from the fact that a man is not sufficient unto himself if he lives alone, for nature has endowed him adequately only in a few regards. Thus it gave him reason, through which he is to produce all he needs for life, such as food, clothing and other such things. But a lone man is not enough to do all this. For that reason, by his very nature man lives in society.”

Thus we can say that communities are of value for individuals, since they are necessary for the physical and mental welfare of a person.

But the advantages of communities extend beyond the individual to an entire society.<sup>6</sup> Regular social interaction within communities helps establish stable norms for generalized reciprocal relationships. These norms encourage people to trust one another even when circumstances get difficult. Thus communities offer both private and public benefits.

## **The tension between the individual and the community**

Once one realizes the value of community, one might assume that the individual will always consider how his or her actions

5 An idea conceived by Arnold Gehlen, building on Herder.

6 On the distinction between a community and society, it should be noted that a community refers to concrete social relationships as they are experienced directly, while society is the entire association of all social communication, actions and institutions within a geographically defined area.

will affect the community. But in some situations, calculations of short-term individual gain may encourage people to ignore a community orientation. This suggests that the relationship between the individual and the community is not without tension.

Individuals' reliance on the community also has asocial variants, which is why Kant accurately speaks of the "unsociable sociability of Man." The individual can exploit and take strategic advantage of social relationships. Models from game theory, for example, show that once a group grows beyond a certain size, or when groups are short-lived, cooperation becomes less probable. In such a context, the gain from egotistical behavior may outweigh the disadvantages an individual suffers from his selfishness (the "free rider" dilemma).

Hence cohesion in communities is always labile. It makes sense that one should concern oneself for the community—but it cannot be taken for granted. After all, a community always means some restriction on the personal leeway of the individual members of the community. This poses no problem as long as the individual understands the norms and structures that apply in a community, and agrees that they are necessary.

But communities may also include structures of dominance and authority that are harmful to the rights and dignity of the individuals. For example, communities may impose such severe peer pressure that the individual is manipulated. One particularly troublesome example in this connection is communities' tendency to strengthen cohesion by blaming problems on individuals or entire groups whom they victimize in collective acts of violence (the scapegoating mechanism). In other words, not only does the individual pose certain risks to the community, but the community poses certain risks to the individual.

## Conclusion

A person is not an isolated entity, but is fundamentally dependent on a community. Yet this reliance generates irresolvable tension between individual autonomy and social integration.<sup>7</sup>

Exaggerated individualism attempts to resolve the tension in favor of absolute freedom of action for the individual; exaggerated collectivism moves in the opposite direction and denies individual rights and aspirations.

For that reason, the equilibrium between individual freedom and the claims of the community must constantly be re-established and redefined.

### **2.3 Civic-mindedness as social responsibility and civic skills as the ability to act socially**

Civic-mindedness is an expression of individuals' reliance on the community. Through civic-mindedness, individuals can establish a relationship with the community and a balance between their individual aspirations and those of the other members of society. In other words, civic-mindedness serves as a mediator between the individual and the community.

7 The German Constitution acknowledges this tension as follows: "The image of the human being in the Constitution is not that of an isolated, sovereign individual; instead, in terms of the tension between the individual and the community, the Constitution has decided in favor of the individual's reliance on the community, without encroaching on the individual's intrinsic value" (from a 1956 decision of the German Constitutional Court).

## Civic-mindedness as a sense of social responsibility

Civic-mindedness represents an individual's community orientation. It might be defined as the individual's sense of responsibility within a community.

Social awareness, solidarity, community-mindedness and good citizenship are also used to refer to community orientation, and the terms are often used interchangeably. Community-mindedness means civic-mindedness that is focused on a specific community, while good citizenship means civic-mindedness within the public forum.

A variety of criteria characterize a civic-minded individual:

- A sense of belonging to a community
- An orientation to the common good
- A willingness to work for the community

### *A sense of belonging to a community*

An individual's sense of belonging to a community is the emotional dimension of civic-mindedness. Civic-mindedness will only develop if individuals feel like they belong to and can identify with the community. This entails that they feel valued and recognized by the other members of the community. An individual's sense of belonging to the community helps build a community's sense that it belongs together.

Belonging to a certain community or a variety of communities is important to a person's sense of identity. People always define themselves in relation to communities—such as the immediate or extended family, friends, religion, culture, nation or ethnic group.

But today, the social connections and bonds needed for social identity are becoming more dependent on personal deci-

sions. Today individuals have more leeway when developing their own network of relationships. At the same time, they also feel a need to establish these relationships actively and build their social identity. This need requires individuals to have the appropriate relationship-building resources, and these are tied in part to material resources.<sup>8</sup>

In establishing social identity, individuals may look to multiple communities or to just a few. In extreme cases, they may limit their social identity to a single community. If they view a single social identity as absolute, this may lead them to devalue other communities.<sup>9</sup> Conflicts between groups with competing social identities can be reduced when members of these different groups get to know each other personally, or form a social identity that embraces both groups. However, individuals in complex societies never belong exclusively to just one community. They belong to a variety of communities (for example, a company that runs a nuclear power plant, but also a neighborhood located in the vicinity of the nuclear power plant). This decreases the probability that people will develop an exclusive social identity.

### *Orientation to the common good*

Orientation to the common good is the normative aspect of civic-mindedness. To be oriented to the good of the communi-

8 Research on urban networks has pointed out the link between social capital and economic capital. The higher the socioeconomic status, the more resources a person will have to work actively toward relationships.

9 Tajfel and Turner's social-psychological theory of social identity explains how identification with social groups can lead to a devaluation of the Other: Individuals want to develop a positive social identity, and thus compare their group against other groups. The comparison can tend to downgrade these other groups.

ty, individuals must recognize their own needs, interests and goals, and weigh them against those of other members of the community.

This means that they must be able to see things from the other's point of view, to modify their own viewpoint, and to acknowledge that everyone has an equal right to develop freely.

The exact nature of the common good of a community is decided by a process of negotiation in which all members can participate. This is what distinguishes free, democratic, pluralistic communities and societies from authoritarian and totalitarian ones. In the latter, the common good is simply set forth by ideology and defined a priori. Of course, the democratically negotiated common good is not just the result of formal procedures or the sum of all individually coordinated interests. As a normative idea, the common good is tied to values like justice and human dignity. Hence the common good is founded on preserving the fundamental rights of individuals, or human rights. On this basis, the interests of all must be taken into account equally. This even includes the probable interests of those who cannot take part in the negotiation process, but who will be affected by the results—for example, future generations.

Some are troubled by such a universalist notion of the common good, which is readily suggested by the challenges posed by ecology and worldwide poverty. The larger a group becomes, the less civic-mindedness it is likely to inspire, since each size makes the community more abstract and less immediately tangible to the individual.<sup>10</sup> There is no question that civic-mindedness arises and is practiced initially in communi-

10 One can therefore also consider civic-mindedness an extremely scarce resource, bearing in mind that fun, as a core motive for a modern community orientation, is an easily renewable resource.

ties that can be experienced first-hand. But it is also possible for this sense of belonging together to grow and for the definition of social identity to be extended further. In a globally networked world, events that cannot be experienced directly by an individual may trigger surprisingly strong civic engagement. This is evident in the generous individual donations after catastrophes worldwide and in the success of organizations such as Greenpeace and Attac. In a world of global economic and political relationships, the scope of civic-mindedness is less dependent on milieu and on the size of a community as it is on specific circumstances.

The dilemma becomes more complicated when the different communities one belongs to are in opposition to each another. In resolving such dilemmas, it is helpful to remember that social commitments can be interpreted as a type of promise. Anyone who enters into a social commitment is making a promise to carry out certain tasks or services. The people who rely on these services—as well as everyone else in the community—count on the individual to fulfill the obligations he or she has undertaken. The result is that the good of the community in which the individual has direct responsibility will take priority.

### *A willingness to work for the community*

An individual cannot be considered a civic-minded person until he or she is ready to accept responsibility within a community and to work for the good of that community. This is the practical dimension of civic-mindedness.

This requires that individuals know how they can get involved and also that they are given an opportunity to participate. Their willingness to get involved cannot be acted upon

unless there are opportunities to help shape the community and to make a productive contribution.

### **Civic skills as the ability to act socially**

A willingness to get involved is inherent in civic-mindedness. But if the community is to benefit from this willingness, the individual must have specific abilities for dealing with others. Civic-mindedness cannot evolve meaningfully without civic skills.

Civic skills are the ability to communicate and cooperate with others. They are not merely social techniques, but are complex, multilayered capabilities that include cognitive, emotional, motivational and normative aspects.

The core criteria for civic skills are:

- The ability to articulate one’s own feelings, fears, boundaries, wishes and hopes to oneself and to others
- The ability to become actively involved in groups and social networks
- Self-assessment abilities and “self-discipline”<sup>11</sup>
- The ability to deal with conflict rationally, productively and fairly (“tolerance skills”)
- The ability to assume responsibility reliably

11 Self-discipline is used here in the sense of emotional self-control—the ability to avoid violent responses to conflict situations is a core requirement for constructive conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

Civic-mindedness has its roots in the social nature of the individual. The experience of evolving and growing within a context of communities—rather than living as an autonomous, isolated entity—is fundamental and existentially critical to every human being.

This experience helps individuals relate to their community. Hence civic-mindedness, as an expression of the individual's reliance on the community, is an anthropological category describing a person's ability to live and survive.

To some extent, individuals have a natural potential to develop civic-mindedness. However, the tension between individuality and the societal aspects of life makes it clear that civic-mindedness and the skills needed to live a community are not something one can take for granted.

As important as this attitude and these abilities are to a functional democratic society, a free democratic state has no way to guarantee them.<sup>12</sup>

Thus it becomes even more necessary for society to encourage civic-mindedness and civic skills, and this task is particularly challenging in today's world.

12 Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde put the dilemma this way: "A state can exist as a free state only if it regulates the freedom it affords its citizens via internal means, by way of the moral assets of the individual and the homogeneity of society. Yet it also cannot attempt to guarantee these internal regulatory forces by its own action—i.e., using legal compulsion or authoritarian command—without sacrificing its nature as a free state, and relapsing, at the secular level, into the claims to totality from which it rescued society in the religious civil wars."



### 3 Encouraging Civic-Mindedness and Civic Skills in Today's World

Individuals, especially young people, face complex, hard-to-manage challenges and demands in today's society and culture. This is especially the case in view of the mobility and flexibility required by today's labor market. At a deeper level, people are under constant pressure to reflect, make choices and restructure conditions in their lives. Social roles have become less clearly defined under today's conditions, norms are increasingly considered personal options, and personal commitments have come to seem merely a matter of choice.

Within these fundamentally wide-open worlds of experience and within the context of relationships with their peers or adults, young people must decide and choose what is best for them. And sometimes they may not be emotionally or psychologically mature enough to make these decisions reliably. Hence today's wider options and opportunities for action, mobility and consumption can induce insecurity, doubt, and confusion.

The diversity and increased options of today leave individuals searching for plausible, sustainable values and life styles. The greater need for personal orientation in structuring one's own life represents an opportunity to educate young people about the value of community and to instill within them a sense of civic-mindedness and civic skills.

### 3.1 Conveying values through education

Under today's conditions of cultural plurality, where self-determination is increasingly important, we must know exactly where we are going with education in order to convey values.

Education must strive to develop the individual personality in the broadest possible sense, while reflecting upon individual interests and social conditions.<sup>13</sup> The process of education furnishes the individual with the right skills for value-oriented thought and action within a context of social responsibility. In these processes children and adolescents become actors and partners, who assume responsibility for themselves.

This view accentuates the independent activity and will of the individual. On this basis, civic education aims to enable individuals to participate actively in social processes, with full rights and responsibilities.

Education cannot convey civic-mindedness and civic skills out of context. Children do not develop civic-mindedness automatically, but rather through constructively confronting and dealing with certain topics.

Such processes of stimulation and confrontation must be initiated early. Socially responsible action, after all, is based on values that become more abstract as children grow older and develop greater capacity to think for themselves. The materials and stimuli offered by educational processes play an important role in developing social and ethical judgment. Research on civic engagement in Germany has confirmed the connection between early encouragement and engagement:

13 Even in his time, Humboldt understood education as being oriented to social interaction and living in the human community. According to Humboldt, this can happen only when each individual is able to develop his or her own individuality and honors the individuality of others.

civic engagement in adults is very often rooted in childhood and adolescence. For that reason, any plans for promoting participation and civic engagement must place special emphasis on educating young people.

### **3.2 The core focus: Enabling participation**

Since the individual's participation in the community reinforces cohesion within society, the focus in promoting civic-mindedness and civic skills must be on enabling participation.

This process starts with the available potential for civic engagement. Civic-mindedness and civic skills can evolve when the individual experiences the community as an enriching space for experience, negotiation and life-structuring. Young people can especially be won over for civic engagement in the community when they have the leeway to act independently, on their own responsibility; when they can contribute their own abilities, interests and solutions to problems; and when the activity they participate in is fun and meaningful. In these situations, the individual is able to experience civic-mindedness as a medium for self-determination.

The first community we usually experience is the family. Later, formal educational institutions like preschool and elementary school become important. These play a special role in the development of civic skills because individuals come together here on a basis other than family relationship or mutual attraction and must somehow get along with one another. For children and adolescents these institutions provide the first public forums and community life on a small scale. Peer groups become more and more important for social development, and often they come to replace the family as a socializing influence.

Family communities and groups of friends have great potential for day-to-day solidarity, but usually remain limited to private environments. As far as public educational institutions such as schools are concerned, they often offer no space for individual initiative or individual responsibility. The space for social learning must be amplified if the potential for engagement is to evolve. New environments for learning must be organized, offering appropriate leeway. Such leeway can enable in-depth exposure to social phenomena, arousing interest and responsibility among children and adolescents, and even adults. This is where the need and opportunities lie for innovative models and methods in education.<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3 Methodological principles

Certain principles derived from today's understanding of civic-mindedness must be taken into account when organizing new environments for social learning.

Based on these principles, the Bertelsmann Foundation and the Bertelsmann Group for Policy Research at the Center for Applied Policy Research (C·A·P) in Munich have developed specific requirements that their innovative methods and models must meet.<sup>15</sup>

14 In schools, for example, greater flexibility and openness are indicated. New methods and teaching arrangements are needed that foster creative leeway in lesson plans and school life. Expanded opportunities to participate can reinforce students' personal initiative and involvement. The cooperative networking of the school with its surroundings, the neighborhood or the community helps, for example through social internships by students.

15 For these methods and models, see the project home page, [www.projekt-gemeinsinn.net](http://www.projekt-gemeinsinn.net).

## **Orientation toward the individual**

The individual person is the starting point for promoting civic-mindedness. When individuals are given the opportunity to experience themselves as belonging to a community and when they receive positive recognition as community members, they can develop a sense of belonging and build a positive social identity.

Social identity and personal identity are closely allied. A well-developed ego identity and a strong ego are indispensable for independence and the ability to interact—in other words, the ability to be part of a community. In that sense, we can hold that the cohesion of the individual expressed by his or her ego strength is a precondition for the cohesion of a community. Strong communities require self-aware individuals with a sense of responsibility.

Esteem for the individual must be reflected in forms of teaching and learning in which the learner is less passive and is playing a more productive, active role in his or her own learning process.

## **Orientation toward experience and reflection**

Community orientation is not brought about by abstract references to the value of community for the individual, and still less by bewailing the supposed decline of civic skills. Values are taught and learned, conveyed and instilled, mainly through experience. Any attempt at conveying values must be based on this basic premise.

The value of community becomes plausible to the individual when it appeals to his or her previous positive experiences in social interaction, or facilitates new experiences.

Learning processes must be designed in such a way that they allow people to have experiences and feel the associated emotions. Reflecting on positive experiences with community-oriented activities helps people learn from their success. This learning strategy seems especially well suited for initiating processes of change in groups and communities that want to strengthen their cohesiveness.

### **Ethical orientation**

An orientation to the common good presupposes that the individual has ethical judgment. Perhaps the most important aspect of ethical judgment is the ability to see one's own viewpoint in relative terms, to compare it with other viewpoints, and to incorporate it into the social context.

Additionally, ethical reflection helps individuals be critical and discerning, counteracting the tendency to limit themselves to any one social identity. Ethical judgment thus enables individuals to follow the dictates of rational insight and conscience. It promotes civil courage, which enables individuals to distance themselves from group prejudices and pressures.

Ethical reflection also includes making the categorical distinction between the dignity of the individual and the value of community. Despite all emphasis on the importance of community, the individual must never be merely subordinated to the community. The dignity of the individual takes priority over the community.<sup>16</sup>

16 This conviction is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## Orientation toward action

Autonomy and self-determination, when properly understood, entail an assumption of responsibility. This presupposes that appropriate options for participation and experience are available.

To that extent, promoting civic-mindedness and civic skills among young people must be conceived as a “pedagogy of participation.” Social attitudes can be encouraged only by tapping into a person’s own capabilities for evolution.

A necessary consequence of promoting civic-mindedness is the principle of being oriented toward action. In this context, it is important that young people are provided with a variety of “roles of responsibility” that must meet the following criteria:

- Leeway for independent and responsible action
- Appreciation of one’s resources
- The opportunity to contribute one’s own inclinations, needs and abilities
- The chance to do something meaningful
- Acknowledgement of responsibility, i. e. the opportunity to be accountable for one’s own actions
- An opportunity for independently organized teamwork
- Adequate skills and knowledge
- Flexibility regarding time
- The opportunity to participate in defining an activity’s goals
- The chance to switch roles or withdraw

## **Orientation towards interests**

Action, reflection, and the willingness to get involved presuppose an interest in the common good.

This interest is aroused by opportunities and topics that appeal to the target groups, tie into their experiences, challenge their judgments, and motivate them to act.