

Youth Participation in Democracy: The Danish Experience

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Danish youth play an important role in maintaining and nursing Danish democracy. This was underscored when the global report by the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study identified Danish youth as the most democratic-minded among 38 nationalities¹. The study, in particular, praised Danish youth's active citizenship skills and understanding of democracy, society and politics, while Danish students fared less well in their political self-confidence and in their ability to quote historical facts by heart.

“Youth” (typically defined as the age group 15-24 years) were the last societal group to get included in Danish democracy. Danish popular democracy was born 100 years ago in 1915 when a Constitutional amendment expanded suffrage from the privileged classes to include women and servants. The visionary idea at that time was to allow every grown-up citizen to participate and have a voice in society. Yet, in 1915, the definition of “grown-up” was confined to everyone above 30 years of age, thereby excluding the age group that today is considered as youth. Over the last century the voting age has been gradually lowered until, in 1978, it was decided at 18 years as it is still today. This paved the way for younger and younger citizens to participate and have a formal say in Denmark's democracy.

Since then youth have increased their active participation in democracy. Some numbers illustrate this. In the latest national election in 2015, 78 percent of youth, in the age range of 19-29 years, voted². Democracy is not only about participation on the day of the ballot but about active engagement in society throughout the year. Here Danish youth are also known as democratic champions: 62 percent of youth in the 16-25 age bracket say they are interested in politics and societal matters with a particular focus on economy, education and employment³. And 24 percent of youth between 16 and 25 years have engaged in volunteer work within the last year⁴.

¹IEA International Civic and Citizenship Study (2009) https://iccs.acer.edu.au/files/ICCS_10_Initial_Findings.pdf

²Bhatti et al. (2016) Valgdeltagelsen og vælgerne til Folketingsvalget 2015. Available at: http://cvap.polsci.ku.dk/publikationer/arbejdsrapporter/2016/Bhatti_et_al._2016_FT-valgdeltagelse_og_v_lgere_671091_.pdf

³Dansk Ungdoms Faellesraad (2013), *DUF Fakta. Demokrati - Unges politiske interesse*. Available at: http://duf.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/DOKUMENTER/DUF_materialer/DUF_Fakta/Demokrati_2013/PUB_2013-10-22_Unges_politiske_interesse_web_.pdf, page 1

⁴Det national forskningscenter for velfærd SFI (2012), *Udviklingen i frivilligt arbejde*, Available at www.cifri.dk

Of course challenges exist in Denmark regarding youth as well, including excessive alcohol consumption, sexual and reproductive health, criminal behaviour and unemployment. But, despite all that, as identified through the International Civil and Citizenship Study, Danish youth appear to have a good grasp of democracy and a democratic mindset.

Is there anything that Bhutan—as a young democratic society going towards its 10th anniversary of constitutional democracy—can learn from the story of mobilising and engaging young people in the Danish democracy? This article seeks to shed light on some of the underlying factors in Danish youth participation and the democratic mindset with the hope that it can inspire youth, policy makers, civil society, and other stakeholders in their initiatives to nurture new generations of Bhutan's democratic citizens.

In this article, five essential elements in the Danish success story are discussed: 1) progressive legislation and policies on youth, particularly related to education with focus on democratic skills; 2) the culture of youth associations and civic life; 3) the strong tradition of civic and non-formal education; 4) the role of youth wings of political parties; and 5) Danish youths' international engagement.

Legislation, Policies and Guidelines with Focus on Building Democratic Citizens

The relevant legislation and policies for youth issues relate to education, employment, and physical and mental health. These policy areas are mainstreamed and managed through different ministries, with the Ministry of Children, Education and Equality taking a lead role.

The education sector and the legislation regulating education are most important for the development of democratic skills among Danish youth. In Denmark, there is compulsory teaching until the ninth grade after which a principle of compulsory education or employment takes over to ensure that all youth are either being educated or in jobs until the age of 24. Each young person has to develop a personal plan on how to achieve the educational and employment aims they strive for, while the government offers various initiatives to guide and support them in this endeavor and, in particular, to help youth with special needs so that they are not left behind.

Education up to and including university level is free in Denmark and the State provides generous student subsidies and additional cheap loans to support living costs of youth undergoing further studies, including vocational studies. Basically the

principle implies that, from pre-school to the age of 24, the government is nurturing, guiding and requiring children and youth to develop their skills as citizens and workers who can engage and contribute positively to society.

The legislation regulating education includes laws for public schools, various private schools, the so-called “Efterskole” or “after-school” for ninth and 10th graders, education for children and youth with special needs, and other cross-cutting laws and policies. In Denmark, the majority of children go to public school, while some use the private offers. For example, in the school year 2015/2016, 537,097 students out of 671,443 from pre-school to the ninth grade were registered in public schools⁵. All private education programmes are obliged to follow the main principles, curriculum and requirements of the law on public schools, which then take a central role in defining the Danish vision for forming young Danish citizens.

So what does the public school law say about democracy?

The democratic principles have a central place in the three-fold aim of the public school: 1) To foster pupils’ acquisition of knowledge and skills; 2) prepare pupils to continue higher education; and 3) prepare pupils for participation, responsibility, rights and duties in a free and democratic society. Hence, the education sector aims to ensure that all youth exit school with a solid understanding of democracy. In practice, this happens through a democratic and informal learning environment in schools and a pedagogy which includes lots of group work, discussions, opinion-sharing, debate, innovation, creativity and common activities, focused on promoting respect for human rights, freedom of speech, the value of diversity, and everyone’s equal worth. School students also engage actively in student unions, which have a seat and voice in discussions on school-related matters and further engage in public debate.

An interesting institution is the “Efterskole” or “after-school” which is a boarding school that offers an alternative to the formal education system for one year, typically during the critical teenage years around ninth or 10th grades. As of September 2016, there were 245 after-schools in Denmark, accommodating 28,000 students every year in the age group of 14-18 years. The after-schools provide creative courses in music, theatre, sports, arts, politics, philosophy, media and many other specialisations. But, more importantly, they provide a space away from home, a laboratory for transitioning into adulthood and, at the same time, a platform to learn to live in a community with responsibilities and duties for each other and for common wellbeing.

⁵For statistics on students registered in schools, see www.uvm.dk/Service/Statistik

The Culture of Democratic Civic Associations—And the Role of the Danish Youth Council (DUF)

It is said that, if three Danes get together, they will establish an association. The Danish culture of associational life is remarkably strong and is often acknowledged as a main factor in explaining the strong democratic spirit of civil society. Through the associations, people learn to listen to each other and develop better skills of communication and understanding—and they get hands-on experiences with democratic organisations, general assemblies, election of committees, and implementation of programmes. Further, associational experiences are said to spur political interest and action.

When it comes to Danish youth organisations, the Danish Youth Council (DUF) has played a central role in engaging young people in associational life. The organisation was established in 1940 by youth leaders who wanted to show that, despite the war and despite a society split by divisions and disagreement, the general belief in democracy and in the importance of strong, volunteer associations remained. DUF's first chairperson, Hal Koch, who was also one of the greatest political philosophers at the time, believed in democracy as a way of living, saying:

Democracy is not only a form of government. Democracy is a dialogue. It is a way to act and a way to treat others, where respect for the individual, the community, the environment, and the entire society are essential... And where prejudices are challenged and arguments move opinions.

DUF is an umbrella organisation for 72 social youth organisations including scouts, student councils, organisations for disabled, cultural organisations, development organisations and others—covering multiple aspects of life.⁶ They represent around 6,000 local youth branches, 600,000 members and around 100,000 volunteers.

DUF provides them with capacity building, funding, organisational development grants and other kinds of support. Essential in ensuring the strength of the youth associations is also a special requirement in the “Gambling Act” which states that 7.95 percent of the surplus made on gambling in Denmark will be allocated to Danish youth. This amounts to around 120 million Danish Kroners a year (approximately 18 million USD), which DUF distributes to youth associations as support for their running costs as well as specific projects and initiatives, ensuring their viability and existence.

⁶For more on DUF: www.duf.dk

Grundtvig and the Civic Education Movement

Another factor contributing to Danish youth's democratic and civic skills is Denmark's long history of civic education through the so-called "folkehøjskole" movement⁷. A "folkehøjskole" or "folk high school" is an informal education platform where young people can develop creative, social, innovational and other life skills. The movement started in the 1830s, when the Danish priest, N.S. Grundtvig, advocated a new school system that would contribute to the demand for "popular education" following the democratic movements. Grundtvig is primarily known for his visionary thinking about enlightenment and his vision to educate and inform all normal citizens on principles of freedom, public debate, the power of dialogue, democracy and participation in public life. The "folkehøjskole" was meant to be a concrete tool and nest to nurture these skills.

Today, there are around 70 registered "folkehøjskoler". They provide space for contemplation, personal development, engagement and enthusiasm within the framework of a binding community. Young people go there at the age of 18-20 years, typically in the crucial years after finishing college, trying to find out where to go in life. The pupils in a "folkehøjskole" live together in the school and share responsibilities for cleaning and taking care of the communal place, while studying.

According to the movement, an education at a "folkehøjskole" provides a young person with an opportunity to pursue "*development of human talent*, which includes both development of skills and citizenship and also development of one's own talents in a human way (and finding one's future place in the community)". Statistics show that young people who have been to a "folkehøjskole" drop out of their following formal studies less frequently and they engage more in civil society organisations and associations⁸.

Youth Political Parties—Young Danes' Participation in Elections and Their Political Interest

An important factor influencing young people's democratic participation in society is the strong youth wings of the political parties. Almost all the formally established parties have youth wings that function independently and are the perfect arena for youth to learn the political game and engage in societal matters on a larger, political level. It is also an easy transition into mainstream politics and the formal political parties after training in debate, election campaigning, political dialogue and organisational skills.

⁷For more on folk high schools, see: <http://danishfolkhighschools.com/>

⁸For more on Danish non-formal education: <http://eng.uvm.dk/Education/Adult-Education-and-Continuing-Training/Non-formal-adult-education>

After a decade of falling membership numbers, the number of youth engaging actively in the youth wings of political parties increased by 23 percent from 2015 to 2016. One of the factors for this increase was a strengthened focus from political parties and their youth wings in visiting schools to make it easier for youth to sign-up as active members. Further, in September 2015, eighth and ninth graders across the country were engaged in the so-called school election which, like the Bhutanese mock elections, gave youth just under the formal voting age an opportunity to experience the process of elections, including election campaigns, political party debates, and going to the voting ballots.

Young Dane's International Engagement and Global Citizenship

As a small country with only 5.5 million citizens, Denmark is dependent on the world around it. Therefore, it has always strived to engage in friendly relationships with other nations and build a world based on norms of global institutions, trade, peace and cooperation. It also permeates down to young people who are often very engaged in global matters through volunteer work, youth exchanges, school friendship initiatives, United Nations and other programmes.

One of the most significant initiatives is the high school students' development organisation, Operation Dagsværk, which literally means "Operation One Days Work". Danish high school students contribute one day of their annual school year to work and earn money that is donated to an educational project in a developing country. The aim is to raise awareness amongst Danish youth about the situation of other young people across the world and also to go beyond awareness to support projects that create better opportunities for youth education. Many young Danes continue engaging actively in developing organisations or a global career, following this experience in the high school days.

Concluding Remarks

As the five elements show, Danish society has a strong focus on building active citizenship skills among the new generation of youth. Legislation, public resources, space for political participation, and a philosophy that supports and nurtures everyone's participation are factors contributing to the successful schooling of young democratic citizens with interest and concern for common wellbeing. It also explains why Danish youth fare better when it comes to democratic spirit and values than just facts on political systems. The Danish model is a way to educate democratic citizens—a way of being first and foremost.

Some of these initiatives may be transferable to the Bhutanese context. A good place to start, to explore this further, would be to ask Bhutanese youth themselves and give them a voice on how to foster their participation in the young democracy of Bhutan.