

Concept Paper

# Youth Agency in Civic Education: Contemporary Perspectives from Cabo Verde

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**Abstract:** Globally, young people have demonstrated a certain level of disenchantment with the way their societies are being governed. Whereas some argue that they have become apathetic and somehow passive bystanders, new trends highlight that the opposite is true in many parts of the world. This paper explores the dynamics of youth groups in Cabo Verde who are acting on their frustrations with the lack of state-led citizenship education and enacting new sites to empower other citizens, foster critical and active citizenship as well as develop capabilities to engage, both individually and collectively, in civic and political activities. Two youth-led initiatives, *Djumbai Libertariu* and *Parlamentu di Guetto*, which emerged recently in the capital city Praia, will be analysed as social movements contributing to the emergence of new civic spaces, led by youth, for citizenship education, with the aim of tackling the lack of civil society action and attempting to address issues of general concern through both individual and collective action.

**Keywords:** civic education; civil society; youth; social movements; active citizenship

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## 1. Introduction

“In order to advance the skills and capacities required to engage actively, democracy needs people who collaborate and who have civic virtues and habits” [1].

Civic education is of vital importance to the viability and sustainability of democracy [2]. It emphasises the role of individual citizens as key actors with rights and responsibilities and aims at preparing them to be part of society through the development and learning of empowering skills, knowledge and attitudes. In modern democracies, there is a preoccupation with the conditions necessary for individuals to sustain civic responsibilities [3], and thus it is crucial that civic education initiatives reflect the political plurality in society [4] and equip citizens with critical approaches to engage in democratic processes.

From the perspective of the state, civic education is a crucial means of its self-perpetuation. As argued by Levinson [5], human beings are not born under any particular form of government and therefore are not likely to naturally develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to maintain it. This is of particular relevance to democratic states, as in order for democracies to function effectively citizens need a certain level of endorsement of the values and norms inherent to democratic regimes [6]. Consequently, the focus is on educating citizens, particularly younger ones, regarding the “ways of the state”, in an attempt to guarantee compliance with its *modus operandi* and the adherence to basic principles.

In some contexts, state-led civic education can become an instrument for wielding political and ideological power [4], as political elites push forward a “citizen-as-voter” [3] agenda whereby a very limited knowledge base is promoted among citizens, thus focusing on impacting minimal levels of political literacy and reinforcing a diffuse support of the political status quo [7]. This, in turn, may disrupt the potential exercise of agency and ultimately benefits the state and political elites, who are

often the slowest to show signs of change, adaptation or modernisation, continuing to operate in a logic of self-interest.

In post-colonial societies, where the idea of the state and its role is still often associated with the legacy of colonialism, civic education can become a means of perpetuating the privilege of those in power and either justifying or obscuring the disempowerment of others [5]. State affairs are often seen as reserved to a small elite, a middle-class enclave that, as argued by Cornwall [8], seeks to normalise and “domesticate” the popular classes through interventions involving the “civilising” of citizens. Thus, state-led civic education can be constructed as being at odds with the interests of citizens and civil society at large.

In Cabo Verde, the tendency of political elites to reinforce the traditional gulf between politics and the people, especially the most marginalised segments of the population—such as youth, women and the poor [9,10]—has led to a growing feeling of “democratic deficit”, with 45% of the urban population considering, in 2017, that democracy has major problems, and only 12% recognising the nation as a full democracy [11]. Young people are the main social actors contesting this reality and seeking to influence the way citizens engage with politics in society. Inspired by a similar energy demonstrated by youth all over the world, in movements such as the “Y en marche”, in neighbouring Senegal, youth in Cabo Verde are liberating themselves and have begun to forge new social movements to act as counter-hegemonic strategies to develop agency and active citizenship. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of new sites of social cohesion, enacted by youth through organised protests, the occupation of public spaces and the creation of community associations with a strong social and civic emphasis.

It is within this socio-political background that recent youth-led civic education initiatives have emerged in the peripheries of Praia, the capital of Cabo Verde. These are becoming unexpected sites of civil-society-led initiatives with a strong focus on civic activism, which seek to empower individual citizens and communities through knowledge sharing and the fostering of active civic debate. The unexpectedness of these sites lies in the fact that the practice of debating governmental issues and politics is being moved away from the centre, geographically limited to the richer areas of the city, to the peripheries, often characterised as places of poverty and lack, where nothing happens. Apart from becoming important meeting centres for youth leaders from different communities, these activities also ultimately attract the interest of the wider society, including politicians, citizens from other islands and researchers, thus developing the potential to contribute to the integration of broader segments of the population into the polis. This is particularly important for an insular state with 10 islands (9 inhabited), where social cohesion, although fundamental for the development of a functional civil society, has been difficult to attain. Furthermore, Cabo Verde has a very large diaspora, almost double the national population, with voting rights and a significant parliamentary representation of 8.3% [12], which can greatly benefit from being included in the political and social debates of the different communities.

This paper argues that civil-society-led initiatives such as *Djumbai Libertariu* and *Parlamentu di Guetto* are emerging as tools with the potential to bring politics to marginalised segments of the population. Their main aim is to increase political knowledge and awareness through civic and political education activities within poorer communities, in an effort to democratise civic education and move away from the citizens-as-voters paradigm driven by the state’s lack of promotion of civic spaces. It will start by analysing the question of the demographic dividend in Africa and contextualise the role youth play in their communities. Subsequently, it will review the literature on civic education and examine the bottom-up initiatives introduced by youth in Praia. Lastly, it will discuss the role young people can play in democratising the access to civic education and fostering more debate and knowledge sharing in their communities.

## 2. Youth and the Demographic Dividend in Africa

As Africa is the continent with the highest percentage of young people in the world, with youth making up around 60% of the total population in 2019 [13], the challenge of integrating them in

socio-economic terms is crucial for the future development of the continent, and indeed the world. However, they are often mentioned on international charters as passive agents, repeatedly portrayed as dependent, immature and incapable of assuming responsibility. They are seen as “the next generation”, whose time and role in society is yet to come, yet to be fulfilled [14–20]. Furthermore, youth are excluded from decision-making processes and not afforded enough opportunities to take the lead in initiatives which may have a significant impact on their lives. Therefore, they remain, as a social group, the most vulnerable to the biggest challenges affecting their communities, from poverty to unemployment and crime [21–24].

As argued by Carlos Lopes [25], however, the demographic dynamics in Africa are more than just challenges. Despite their marginalisation, young people remain key actors in their communities, often instigating social change and innovation, and it is recognised that they are crucial for the future of the continent [13,26]. In recent years, governments and organisations across Africa have begun to acknowledge the indisputable role youth play as makers or breakers in society [16] and have shown support for their community initiatives. However, the focus of governments has been mostly on entrepreneurship as a driver of development, and youth remain relatively marginal actors in the political arena. The average age of leadership in the continent remains high, at 62, contrasting with the median age of the continent’s population, of 19.5 [27]. This very significant age gap between “governors and the governed” is the world’s largest and is often highlighted as a limiting factor in how well decision-makers are able to understand the needs and aspirations of young people [27].

In Cabo Verde, according to the National Institute of Statistics (INE), the population between the age of 0 and 34 constitutes 72.4% of the total population, with youth—categorised as the 15–35 age interval, in line with the African Union Youth Charter [28]—constituting 35.9% of this population [29]. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of people in the country are either children or young people, and they correspond to the segment of the national population that is most affected by poverty, unemployment and crime, the biggest challenges affecting the nation for well over a decade [30].

It is important to note, however, that “being young” is a highly heterogeneous experience, which intersects with factors such as socio-economic status, gender, race, ethnicity, political and religious affiliation, the socio-historical context, culture as well as the political settlement [31] of the society in question. As a social category of analysis, youth is a culturally constructed [14], contested and historically charged concept that “indexes shifting relationships of power and authority, responsibility and capability, agency and autonomy, and the moral configurations of society” [17]. Furthermore, it can become a discursive phenomenon, which may be used and manipulated by a myriad of actors, both institutionally and otherwise, for a mixture of purposes, ranging from political campaigns to radical and fundamentalist movements. This paper focuses on youth from the peripheral neighbourhoods of the city of Praia who have become leaders in their communities through associativism and who consider themselves to be social activists with an agenda to transform their communities.

### 3. The Challenges of Civil-Society-Led Civic Education in Post-Colonial Societies

In order for ideals of citizenship to be realised, citizens must internalise and act upon values which are considered democratic, such as equality, fraternity, mutual respect and freedom. The characterisation of these values varies from society to society. In its broadest definition, civic education entails all the processes that affect people’s beliefs, convictions, commitments, capabilities and actions as members of communities [32]. It does not have to be intentional or deliberative and can take place in multiple sites throughout civil society, both in public and in private [5]. In fact, institutions and communities transmit norms and values without necessarily intending to do so [32]. As citizens interact with institutions and communities on different levels throughout their lives, it is also through engagement with these that they acquire the skills and knowledge crucial for the realisation of their citizenship.

Most formal provisions of citizenship education are state-driven and delivered in schools through a national syllabus for civic education which is oftentimes embodied within the national education strategy to provide a very basic understanding of civic life [33]. Over recent decades, this has led to

different outcomes, with varying degrees of success [1,34–36]. One significant limitation has been the prevalence of the classical approach to civic education, whereby citizens are conceived in a narrower sense as citizens of the state [37], with the focus, in terms of content, being placed on developing procedural and institutional knowledge [3,7]. Consequently, as argued by Cartledge [38], the current state-led framing of the democratic participation of citizens in civic life remains restricted and less egalitarian than that conceived by the Athenians. In line with orthodox democratic theory, it sees the “electoral mass” as incapable of civic action other than voting. This has the potential to undermine rather than facilitate citizenship and political participation “from below”, as it does not contribute to the emancipation of citizens.

There is scope for initiatives promoting civic education to be led by civil society. According to Finkel and Smith [39], there has been an explosion of civic education programmes in Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe over several decades, funded mainly by the USA and donors from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ranging from primary and secondary school curricula on democracy to the rights of women, voter education and neighbourhood problem-solving programmes bringing individuals and local authorities together. These are usually promoted by big international organisations and agencies such as UNICEF and the UNDP or by smaller groups of organised citizens working for a specific cause, such as women empowerment, peace-building and electoral education. Furthermore, they can have multiple formats, be targeted at both adults and children and delivered at several sites within society, from schools to religious institutions, families and community organisations [1,2,34,35]. Finkel et al. [40] found that although in some instances donor-sponsored civic education programmes may increase individual knowledge and support for democratic values, it had a direct, negative effect on participant’s levels of institutional trust.

Paturyan [41] emphasises the importance of distinguishing between two different yet interconnected types of actors in civil society: non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civic activists, the latter being a relatively new phenomena driven mainly by youth social movements. Wainwright [42] adds that it is equally important to be aware of the imbalance of power between these two actors, who often collaborate on initiatives for the promotion of civic education. For instance, data from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) suggests that the USA alone spent \$30–\$50 million a year on civic education between 1990 and 2005 [39]. Thus, NGOs funded through such donor-sponsored partnerships can have their own agenda, which, as argued by Quaynor [36], may sometimes have implications in terms of their legitimacy, as they can be at odds with the interests of the local community. Civic activists, on the other hand, comprise mainly small local groups with minimal levels of formal organisation and limited, often locally sourced funds. Although civic activists usually have fewer resources, they are often locals who understand the cultural implications of what they are advocating and are thus well equipped to transmit their ideas.

Beyond this distinction, the term civil society is often met with confusion, as there are conceptual ambiguities associated to it [33,43,44]. There is a political debate about who gets to define civil society and who is part of it, and therefore able to represent its voice. There is a wide range of actors, from intellectuals and academics to politicians, human rights defenders, activists and journalists, who may consider themselves as representatives of civil society. As argued by Shirinov [45], these challenges are not unique to particular regions, as there has been universal concern regarding the limitations of the term, which has evolved over time. It became popular in the 1980s when it was identified with protest movements in authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America [46]. Over the years, a wide range of organised groups with different forms, purposes and sizes have been prominent, at some point in time, in the civil society space [47], from youth associations to community-based organisations, social movements, online networks and NGOs.

Furthermore, in post-colonial contexts, as posited by Chatterjee [48], civil society has, from its inception, been an enclave for the “privileged few” who have the capacity to exercise their civil, political and social rights, while the majority of the political community remains marginalised, as the lack of formal education still poses a significant barrier to many citizens’ access to civic education [36].

Research in post-socialist societies [49] illustrates that there is also the risk of civil society organisations being vulnerable to the control of state entities, both financially and in ideological terms.

In the context of the African continent, civil society has developed over the years into a structurally weak institution lacking funds and legitimacy and often linked and associated to political parties and the state. Kleibl and Munck [43] argue that the realm of formal civil society activity in Africa is dominated by Western-type NGOs, certain religious institutions and professional organisations, resulting in more traditional forms of African civil society being ignored or deemed irrelevant and denied funding [43]. Thus, the mainstream approach remains highly normative and guided by North-centric epistemologies and perspectives, constituting just another imposition of Western ideals on local realities in Africa.

Nonetheless, as argued by Wainwright [42], the weakness displayed by civil society in many places around the world is not necessarily inherent to the character of civil society organisations. There is recognition that civil society was, at different points in history, not simply a sphere but, more importantly, a source of power for democratic change. Today, it is “recognised as a diverse and ever-wider ecosystem of individuals, communities and organisations” [50], which includes a vibrant range of organised and unorganised groups, as new actors blur the traditional boundaries of the concept and experiment with new organisational forms both online and offline. Youth groups all over the world have taken advantage of technology and the increasing connectivity to create new opportunities for civic participation and demonstrate the potential for civil society to fill a political vacuum in milieus with high levels disillusionment with political elites.

Civil-society-led initiatives promoting citizenship education offer, thus, an interesting lens through which to analyse the emergence of what has been termed “critical citizenship” [51], whereby citizens adhere strongly to democratic values despite finding the existing structures of representative government to be wanting. Youth-led civic education initiatives have the potential to challenge commonly accepted definitions of civic education and question the focus on the state as its main provider. This is particularly relevant in post-colonial societies which have recently experienced rapid political, social and cultural transformation with a significant impact both on the relationship between state and society and in terms of the expectations of citizens.

As citizenship norms are changing [52] and the political realm in modern democratic societies can no longer be considered as interchangeable with the state [37], we require a change of approach which recognises the important role different actors within civil society can play towards sharing knowledge and information and empowering others. Through open and active debate in society, the discourse and regulation of public concerns become an important function of civil society, thus heightening the responsibility of all citizens and playing an important role towards building a more active citizenry [47]. More importantly, following Tocqueville’s perspective, it is crucial to understand the role communal political engagement plays as a medium of civic education, as community meetings bring political engagement within people’s reach and teach citizens how to use and appreciate democratic processes [32], thus paving the way to a better understanding of how an organised and active society can develop the power to transform the State.

#### **4. Peripheral Citizenship**

Liberal democracies need active, informed and responsible citizens who are willing and able to contribute to the political process. Thus, active citizenship requires the engagement with political institutions [53], which, in the process, “make citizens”, in the sense that they engender in them a perception of duties, opportunities and meanings [54]. Through this understanding of citizenship, the citizen is constituted and positioned as an agent in politics by the institutions in and through which politics takes place. In the absence of this engagement between citizens and institutions, people are left feeling inaudible, invisible and marginal, due to inattention and active exclusion [34]. Social and political marginalisation leads to the materialisation of peripheral citizenship, which remains at the margins with regard to equal rights and opportunities, and thus unable to take full effect.

In Cabo Verde the experience of peripheral citizenship has multiple dimensions. Given the archipelagic nature of the country, there is a feeling of isolation, particularly in smaller islands, in relation to the capital, where everything happens. Out of the 10 islands, 9 are inhabited, and although there are relatively frequent connections through flights and ferries, these are very costly and inaccessible to the majority of the population. For instance, it is sometimes cheaper to fly from London to the islands of Boavista or Sal than to fly from Praia. The average ticket from most islands to the capital has a cost equivalent to twice the minimum wage in the country.

The experience of marginalisation and isolation is, however, amplified within the capital city, Praia, where 30.2% of the national population lives [29]. The city was described by the anthropologist Stefani [24] as schizophrenic, due to growing inequalities between neighbourhoods of haves and have-nots, increasingly split by deep urban, socio-economic and cultural contrasts. This, in turn, has a very significant impact on the citizenship experience of different individuals, depending on which Praia they call home: The one which is home to a multi-million-dollar Chinese investment in a resort complex consisting of hotels and a casino on a small islet? Or rather the one which is characterised by lack, from basic sanitation and dwelling to road infrastructure, and constantly associated to chronic youth unemployment, a fragile healthcare system and urban gang violence? Despite being a relatively small city, decades of neoliberal policies paved the way for these two very distinct realities and social experiences to develop within it.

The socio-political implications of such inequality have resulted in an feeling of abandonment among the poorer segments of society, who inhabit the periphery of the reality of the middle-income country that the nation is renowned for. In Praia, being in the periphery does not necessarily mean living away from, or outside of, the city. It rather means living outside of the paved street area, a sort of catchment area of governance, protection, law and order and social planning, which means that the question is not so much whether one lives in a rich area, but whether one lives in a rich street. Thus, neighbourhoods such as Achada Santo António and Vazia, where the National Assembly and the Government Palace are located, respectively, are notorious for crime and violence coming from poorer *bairros* (poor areas) within it. There is a constant interplay and co-existence between the very rich and the very poor which, although never culminating in civil war or conflict, has certainly been characterised by structural violence and a feeling of existing in opposition. Ultimately, peripheral citizenship for youth living in poor neighbourhoods also means less access to public services such as education and health, not having employment opportunities and remaining excluded from the main privileges of a full citizenship.

## 5. Bottom-up Civic Education Initiatives Led by Youth in Praia

When civic education is understood as an essential tool for the promotion and maintenance of democracy through the creation of spaces for debate and the empowerment of citizens to engage in civic life, it opens a range of possibilities for actors within civil society. Initiatives vary from organising workshops to enacting regular spaces of civic engagement and education across multiple sites. In doing so, youth groups in particular are motivated by the belief that active citizenship requires individuals to be aware of inequalities and marginalisation. This may be due to religion, gender, social class or ethnicity. As argued by Bray and Chappell [34], civic education can be seen as the remedy and instrument of oppressed groups to discuss injustice and lack of access to full democracy. This section will therefore focus on the active role youth are playing in transforming the way citizens engage with politics through civil-society-led civic education initiatives.

Cabo Verde ranks third in Africa for overall Good Governance and first in Civil Society Participation according to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) [55]. However, its high ranking in civil society participation is not a result of a strong civil society presence; rather, it is a reflection of the passing of liberal laws on freedom of assembly. Despite this, there remain very low levels of civic participation outside the election period [56,57], and the political scene remains monopolised by a context of elitist political rivalry, resulting in a substantial “deficit of democracy” [10]. This means that

most citizens are reduced to being spectators, not actors within society [58], with virtually no civic space available for public debate.

One could wonder about what is stopping civil society from becoming more active. One important consideration is that it was not until the early 1990s that the country joined the third wave of democratisation [59] and subsequently adopted a multi-party system, opening the way to the development of a liberal democratic system based on free and fair elections [60]. The negotiated nature of this process meant that there was little change in terms of the power balance. There was no democratisation in the access to power and decision-making processes, and, following an initial period of euphoria, civic engagement and social activism declined [61,62]. By the new millennium, the logic of the post-colonial state was already being put into question, seen as a Western “façade” [63] that served to mask personalised political relations with the sole purpose of benefiting elites.

The recent emergence of some youth groups in Praia can be linked to a youth community project which lasted for a year until it ran out of funding, in 2012, but provided nonetheless a platform for different youth leaders to come together and learn to collaborate. Subsequently, many youth groups surfaced with citizenship education initiatives to operate as organised networks of dissent and information sharing. These initiatives are but examples of a myriad of groups which continue to emerge all over the country with varied levels of success and engagement, illustrating that there is potential and scope for these initiatives to transform the political landscape in the country.

### 5.1. Methods

Empirical data was collected as part of a fieldwork conducted in Cabo Verde in March 2019–2020, where there were opportunities to take part in many youth-led community initiatives designed to contribute to the improvement of civic education and political participation among different segments of society. The methodology adopted was qualitative, and the first stage of data collection consisted of participant observation in events such as focus group discussions, group meetings and community sessions, as well as content analysis of video recordings of sessions which took place in the past. These were available on the website of one of the initiatives, Djumbai Libertariu. The themes centred mostly on active citizenship and youth leadership in civil society in light of the marginalisation citizens face in society.

Furthermore, in line with the assumption that face-to-face interaction is an important component of participating in the reality of others and that the social world ought to be interpreted from the perspective of those being studied [64], semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2019 and February 2020, involving 42 youth leaders from different organisations. The purposive sampling of participants was done in context to include individuals based on their affiliation to well-known youth-led community organisations involved in developing and implementing the initiatives in question. There were no efforts to sample participants randomly, as most youth group members were young men and thus steps were taken to ensure gender representation in order to gain insight from both young men (25) and women (17) between the age of 18 and 35. The two initiatives were selected as case studies based on of their (1) focus on contributing to civic education; (2) efforts to appeal to youth leaders from different communities across the city; and (3) drive to bring political knowledge and civic emancipation to poorer communities. Interview questions were designed to function as conversation starters and focused mainly on the role of youth leaders in these initiatives and on what motivates young people to give up their time to engage in civic education. Stakeholders and academics who participated in some of these initiatives were also interviewed.

### 5.2. *Parlamentu Di Guetto: Bringing Politics to the Community*

Parlamentu di guetto, translated as ghetto parliament, was an initiative which took place monthly between January and August 2012. The main aim was to forge a new civic space where people from the periphery who live in poor communities could experiment with the possibility of expressing their own voice and contributing to the collective building of an alternative narrative of the periphery. This was a

space to develop social critique, independent from party dominance, which is somewhat difficult in the context of Cabo Verde, where the citizenry, particularly older generations, are divided along party lines. These young people sought to emphasise as their main message the need for youth to develop critical citizenship skills [51], so as to be able to challenge both the mainstream narratives of political parties and what they often termed as their misinformation propaganda. To that effect, many sessions focused on highlighting the systematic marginalisation faced by their communities and the inability of state institutions to respond to their needs.

The ghetto in Cabo Verde is a place which receives quite a lot of bad press for being linked to gang violence and poor infrastructure. Many people who end up living in these informal settlements originate from different parts of the country and are lured to the capital by the promise of a life with better opportunities. Oftentimes, unfortunately, these promises do not mature, and the lack of opportunities conditions the livelihoods of entire communities. An interesting feature of the ghetto parliament is that it intended to create a social platform whereby former, and sometimes current, gang members could sit down and engage in the resolution of the most pressing issues of their communities. As these neighbourhoods are often left out of urban planning and government budgeting, youth leaders from different communities were encouraged through this initiative to gather with other community members, both young and old, to have an open debate on issues that matter to them, ranging from crime, violence, governance and discrimination to how to solve particular issues affecting the community, such as road infrastructure. This is particularly relevant, as, for instance, 79% of those who answered an Afrobarometer survey in 2017 [11] said that they had never, in the previous year, contacted a local government councillor about an important problem or to share their views. In the absence of effective contact between government agencies and the population, particularly the poorer segments, the fact that youth are developing platforms to engage their communities and practice active citizenship through the enactment of spaces facilitating civic education and activism is crucial.

In *Parlamentu di guetto* a basic premise was that everyone had the right to take the microphone, symbolising the respect for the citizens' voice, and everyone was allowed to speak. This provided a space of political innovation and emancipation for youth, with many claiming it was the first time they had the opportunity to speak and be heard in public [23,24]. The question of having a voice is particularly meaningful in societies where respect comes with age, and therefore oftentimes little regard is paid to the voice of children and young people, as they are not deemed to have enough experience to have an opinion. Thus, these initiatives, which focus on empowering young people to speak up and have an opinion, have the potential to impact their confidence and agency in their communities and society at large, as they do not usually have such opportunities at school or at home and consequently end up being reluctant to express opinions in public. Scholars often describe civil society in Cabo Verde as "servil society" [56,65], due to its inability to organise and scrutinise government decisions. This lack of engagement is the decade-long legacy of a single party state which neutralised dissent and discouraged active citizen engagement with politics [62,66,67].

From the perspective of civic education, initiatives such as *Parlamentu di guetto* enable youth in the periphery to reappropriate their voice and challenge the social, political and cultural segregation imposed by the political system. An important outcome of this initiative is that it sought to activate citizenship through the invitation of citizens, not only young ones, to exercise their citizenship through debate, contestation, dissent and the proposal of solutions through their own voice, all the while maintaining a distance from the control of higher spheres of society. It had the innovation of giving space and voice to marginalised groups. As argued by Nordberg [68], the exercise of claiming and articulating citizenship from below requires a shift in emphasis away from legal rules and towards norms, practices, meanings and identities. These initiatives empower youth to reconceptualise their relationship with the political and their role in society as key agents of societal transformation.

The young people interviewed highlighted how shy they were before engaging in these *parlamentu di guetto* sessions and how they simply did not know how to organise and express their political opinions. This is something they did not learn at school. While in some meetings a few participants were quiet,



they were frequently encouraged to say something: “What do you have to say?” There was always a reminder that it is everyone’s civic responsibility to have a say. The practice of formulating a political opinion helps citizens to develop communicative civic competences [69], which are a key aspect of active citizenship. These civic competences cannot be learned exclusively at school during civic education classes. Rather, they depend on a process of learning by doing, as argued by Tocqueville [54]. This contributes to the emergence of what Dahlgren termed “doing citizenship” [69], whereby citizens develop civic agency by practising civic skills in public spheres. In the absence of public spaces where citizens can meet to exchange ideas, these initiatives fill an important gap by creating a forum where a form of public sphere can be enacted, oftentimes in completely unexpected sites, thus contributing to the decentralisation of the idea of the political and of where the political ought to occur.

As *parlamentu di guetto* became more popular, however, it was sometimes attended by members of the political elite, including a former youth minister, now leader of the opposition, and other elected members of parliament and of municipal assemblies. It thus attracted significant attention and brought people to have political debates in peripheral neighbourhoods often seen as sites of poverty and violence where not much good happens. On the other hand, the participation of members of the political elite led to significant criticisms and accusations of co-option by the organisers. This, in turn, led to divisions among the group, with some in support of inviting political figures and others defending their deliberate exclusion as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Some key ideological differences ultimately led to the extinction of the initiative, with organisers moving on to less politicised forms of civic engagement, such as creating community associations to maintain the focus on civic activism and education.

The promotion of open civic spaces in the periphery, which saw rival gang members being able to sit together and have a debate, was another significant achievement of this initiative. This is not to be underestimated in a context of urban gang violence where young people are effectively prevented from entering entire neighbourhoods, which severely limits their ability to roam freely around the city. According to both the INE and the National Police Commission (cited in [70]), registered criminal occurrences went from 10,000 in 1996 to 25,000 in 2012. Furthermore, in 2012 alone, registered crime increased by 10.3% in relation to the previous year [71]. Considering that this phenomenon affected mostly young males from the periphery [22], it was timely for youth groups to develop sites for constructive and focused debates, emphasising ideas which they shared due to their citizenship experience, marginalisation and exclusion, rather than their differences, which were more often than not exacerbated by the lack of communication between groups.

A significant limitation of this initiative was the fact that although it attracted important political figures who were involved in debates about gang violence prevention and crime reduction, it failed to appeal to wider members of the community. This applies, in particular, to women, who often argued in interviews that the language used in these events was sometimes hostile and that they could not relate to the themes discussed. Furthermore, quite a few of the participants had a bad reputation for being involved in gang violence, and this discredited the merit of their initiative in the eyes of many members of the community, particularly the more senior ones. *Djumbai Libertariu* was a more mainstream initiative and therefore appealed to a much wider public.

### 5.3. *Djumbai Libertariu: Open Discussion Forum*

*Djumbai Libertariu* was created by a group of young people from different communities in Praia who shared the desire to create a space of dialogue and debate focusing on local, regional and global issues. The term *djumbai* is a concept borrowed from the Creole of Guiné-Bissau which means an informal meeting within the community where people can voice their opinions and concerns freely, share experiences and knowledge, as well as make decisions for the community. *Libertariu*, from the root *liberdade*, meaning freedom, highlights that it should be a place free from the influence of political parties, a space for civil society. The monthly-session initiative took place between March 2014 and November 2017 at different communities, mainly within the city of Praia, but also in communities

in the interior of Santiago island. The sessions started with a short presentation given by an invited guest to introduce a topic of discussion, followed by a lively discussion where everyone was actively encouraged to talk and share views and experiences. The first session of Djumbai Libertariu took place on 23 March 2014, as an initiative described as “social intervention for action and citizenship”. It was attended by over 30 people, mostly youths, and streamed live on YouTube so that citizens in the diaspora and in other islands could also participate. It lasted for over two hours.

This initiative was much more mainstream and involved academics and invited guests, to bring some structure and focus to the discussion theme. There were men and women of all age groups present, and the discussions focused on different themes. The main goals of the organisation were defined on their website as: (1) the promotion of a culture of reflection, experimentation and self-awareness; (2) the creation of mechanisms for rescuing the potentially emancipatory knowledge and practices developed and tested both in Cabo Verde and in the global African world; (3) the construction of strategies aiming at the development of an effective intellectual and epistemological struggle as a tool of resistance against the process of re-colonisation. The initiative was conceived as an educational tool to shift the passive citizen towards a culture of political reflection and consciousness. As argued by Dudley [7], the sharing of political knowledge is an enabling component of the emancipation of the political subject. This initiative placed a strong focus on the re-education of citizens who are perceived as having been denied this education in the formal schooling delivered by the state. Allied to this is an effort to move citizens from the periphery to the centre of the political debate through their empowerment. Thus, citizens are no longer seen as beneficiaries of the government and become active agents expected to take part in debates and civic action.

The fact that the sessions were streamed live on YouTube enabled the participation of citizens from other islands and the diaspora. Considering there are more citizens living abroad than within the islands and that the diaspora has a representation of 8.3% in parliament, the highest in the world [12], this initiative increased the possibility of more citizens engaging in political debates and interactive civic education. Bearing in mind that these citizens vote in both parliamentary and presidential elections, it is important that they are also included in such initiatives and are able to take part in political debates which are both informative and challenging. Political parties in Cabo Verde tend to engage with the diaspora following the same logic they apply to the rest of the population—namely, to ask for votes, thus subjecting them to the same marginalisation. Furthermore, live streaming also meant that citizens in more remote parts of the country, both in other islands and in other parts of the main island, could take part in the debate and have a voice. All sessions incorporated moments in which questions and observations from individuals in the diaspora and in other islands were read and integrated into the wider discussion. This was consistently highlighted as crucial to keep the sessions as inclusive as possible.

## 6. Can Participation in Community Meetings Contribute to Civic Education?

The two youth-led community initiatives presented fall under Habermas’ [72] elaboration of “weak” informal settings, which, although not linked to formal decision-making processes, allow for the circulation of ideas and the development of political will and public opinion, while at the same time remaining important sites for the development and emergence of collective identities [69]. The collective interaction of young people coming together to share political knowledge and foment discussion is instrumental for the development of civic agency among citizens in the public sphere [69].

Whereas active exclusion in the form of overt discrimination and oppression is a rare phenomenon in modern democracies [73], indirect exclusion, by contrast, in the form of “social invisibility”—in which the exclusion is implicit in often unintentional cultural and institutional practices—is much more commonplace. In Cabo Verde, the policing of the use of the colonial language, Portuguese, acts as a significant excluding factor in the integration of citizens in the polis. Consequently, there is the preoccupation of organising youth-led civic education initiatives exclusively in the local language, Creole, which, according to the INE [29], is spoken by 100% of the national population. For many

of the youths interviewed, the insistence on the use of the Portuguese language in various media, such as television, radio, parliamentary debates and other civic spaces, constitutes cultural alienation and a perpetuation of the colonial project of oppressing African subjects and privileging Western ideals and culture to the detriment of local identities. This is particularly relevant to youth from the peripheries/poorer communities, as many abandon formal schooling quite early and, due to the lack of exposure to the Portuguese language, do not speak it fluently. Thus, speaking Portuguese is perceived as a choice, a political one, to marginalise the majority of the population and exclude them from the political community. For instance, all parliamentary sessions are broadcast on the national radio and are thus, in theory, widely available to citizens. However, because debates take place in Portuguese, most citizens do not pay attention to them and are often unaware of what is being discussed. This imposed marginalisation has a direct impact on how citizens relate to their political system, as illustrated by data from a recent Afrobarometer survey in which 71% agreed with the statement: “for someone like me it doesn’t matter what kind of government we have” and only 15% agreed that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government [11].

Furthermore, during the current Covid-19 crisis, the government has been frequently criticised for opting to disseminate information and guidance which is crucial to fight the pandemic in Portuguese, despite being aware that the majority of the population does not relate to, or understand, the language. Once again, many youth groups intervened to translate information for people in their communities and continue to play a pivotal role in actively raising context-sensitive awareness about the virus in society.

In light of such politics of exclusion, the assumption is that most citizens will find that the political world has little to offer them and that their time and effort are better spent outside the political sphere [7]. However, youth are contributing to the re-conceptualisation of citizenship away from the citizens-as-voters paradigm [7] and towards fomenting civic agency [69] among the population. Civil society is changing and becoming more representative of the population. In Africa that means that it is becoming younger, more active and more dynamic. Community-driven youth-led civic education initiatives point towards a recognition of the potential of civil society as a diverse and ever-wider ecosystem of individuals, communities and organisations [50], which includes a vibrant range of organised and unorganised groups. As a collective, civil society is much closer to communities, and its various actors are therefore adequately placed to make a difference in their neighbourhoods, particularly in relation to promoting active citizenship.

Within this emancipatory framework, civil society becomes a space where conceptions of democracy and the state are influenced by varied political and ideological grounds and (re)constructed in their diverse interpretations. It can equally be a ground for conquering space through the amplification of the public sphere in the process of democratisation. In Cabo Verde the transition to democracy did not lead to the emergence of democrats; instead, it gave rise to the development of an authoritarian political habitus by a small politico-administrative elite, who adopted a “copy-paste” process of democratisation and state-building, mimicking the institutional frameworks of Western states without taking notice of local realities. In other words, there was little effort to reflect on the needs of the population. This, in turn, led to the development of weak institutions with an “imported character” [67] and ill-adapted to meet the new demands of the post-colonial state, alienating the masses by serving the interests of small elites [61,62]. Such initiatives have the potential to contribute to non-institutional, bottom-up democratisation efforts which contribute to better state-society relations and the enactment of a more active citizenry.

The appropriation of civic education by civil society is therefore vital to prioritise the development of a more democratic citizenship, which recognises the capacity of all citizens to take part in civic life and have a say in how the idea of citizenship is promoted within society [74,75]. These youth groups recognise that there is an emancipatory dimension to civil-society-led civic education as it promotes the re-appropriation of democracy and politics to bring power back to the base. Citizens are thus able to organise and challenge the trap of becoming customers or patients of political parties, as, at a deeper

level, political change is only possible when those excluded and marginalised can formulate their own alternative political common sense.

Youth groups all over the world are taking advantage of technology and the increasing connectivity to create new opportunities for civic participation in their communities and demonstrate the potential for civil society to fill a political vacuum in milieus with high levels of disillusionment with political elites. This applies particularly to youth from the peripheries, and the initiatives promoting citizenship education offer an interesting lens through which to analyse how to engage young people as actors in civil society who feel empowered to orient themselves and participate in non-state arenas. This is particularly relevant in post-colonial societies which have recently experienced rapid political, social and cultural transformations with significant impact both on the relationship between state and society and in terms of the expectations of citizens.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper argued that despite the challenges of civil society groups in post-colonial societies, a fundamental paradigm shift is currently underway to reposition the citizen at the very centre of politics and the political. This requires moving the centre of politics away from elitist spaces, mainly dominated by a male bourgeois minority. The initiatives analysed, consisting of organised meetings and debates, have enabled youth actors to contribute to increasing political knowledge and literacy among citizens and improving the judgement capacity of citizens within society. Furthermore, these educative and interactive tools for sharing information and reflection can contribute to increasing the interest in politics among youth and other members of society and consequently help reduce feelings of helplessness in communities. Through this transformation, youth become important social actors, and the periphery gains a new prominence as a space for political debate and civic education, in an effort to tackle community problems. This results in freeing the subjects of oppression and marginalisation by enacting public spaces of decision-making and participation accessible to all citizens. It requires, by the very rationale of active citizenship, “taking action” in order to empower citizens and mitigate feelings of political homelessness, which are becoming increasingly common in citizenry all over the world.

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