

# Empowering young people to work within their communities for the greater good

By [Tebogo Suping](#)

1 Jul 2022

Activate Change Drivers launched an open-source, free, Civic Education For Youth toolkit during this year's Youth Month. The toolkit aims to help create a different narrative for South Africa by providing support at grassroots for communities to engage local government - aided by our civic champions comprising youth we have trained in civic education.



Tebogo Suping, executive director, Activate! Change Drivers

For 10 years, as part of the Activate leadership programme, we have helped up to 4,500 young people understand how to navigate the socio-political landscape of local government, providing civic education training, as well as training in leadership and social entrepreneurship.

We identified a lack of understanding within communities about what local government entails and what it is not. For example, RDP housing is the provincial government's responsibility, not the local ward councillor whose own house was burnt down during housing delivery protests.

## Response to violent protests

Our Civic Education Programme, endorsed by the United National Development Programme (UNDP), was created in response to the increasing prevalence of violent protests which South Africa has experienced over the past few years, often led by young people. We saw schools burnt to the ground, clinics vandalised, and infrastructure within communities destroyed. It is not the solution.

This is where the Civic Education For Youth toolkit was born, comprising everything any activist, community champion and organisation needs to know on how local government works and fits into the overall structure of government; and most importantly, how to engage with local government to resolve community issues.

Unfortunately, we are still at work to shift the mindset of communities and young people in terms of the role of violent protest, because they are saying, “This is the only way we know where we can guarantee that we shall be heard.” But what we are saying is that while there is space for some gathering and mobilisation of the masses on issues, there are ways of doing it, and violent protest is not the first nor the best way.



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## Engaging with local government

So, we decided to create other mechanisms for local communities to use to engage more concisely with local government representatives, and to look at ways in how to promote accountability with those representatives and municipalities themselves. The lack of knowledge of how government works at local level is also feeding and fuelling corruption, because that which you do not understand, you cannot interact and engage with.

What we also wanted to do, which is what the Civic Education For Youth toolkit is also focusing on, is place people at the centre of the development of the economy, and determine what they need and require. They need to be part of these conversations. We will not leave a lasting legacy if the people themselves do not feel that they are a critical and the most important aspect of that process.

The toolkit is also a promotion of personal and societal accountabilities. Knowing what we do about the current social economic conditions and the dire state of the living standards of most people – how can we not mobilise in a way that South Africa has always been able to do? We cannot just be spectators. Doing nothing changes nothing.

It is hoped our toolkit will empower communities and public representatives to come together to ensure people receive the dignity that they deserve, to ensure that the right things are done, to ensure that we can leave a powerful legacy for other generations. It is about how we tell the story of 2022.



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## Reaching young people in the spaces they occupy

We believe in the telling of a different story for Africa. There is little hope to go around at present. We want to reach young people in all the spaces that young people are occupying to make a little bit of a difference. We have young people in

Activate who are running reading clubs, being coaches, volunteering after school, being teachers' aids. We have young people who stood for election in the local government elections, saying, "I'm here to be counted as a responsible and ethical leader in my community." We do not want to lose these young people because if we do, it will be a very sad story we tell about South Africa.

We know that there are millions of young people sitting at home right now for whom none of this means anything, who see no point in voting in elections, who have no hope. How sad is that? We need to empower the people to be advocates of those things they want to change.

Given the dire economic conditions that we find ourselves in and which affect us all, the onus then is for us each to decide which side of history we want to choose to be on. Is it the side of perpetual apathy and complacency, or is it the side that acknowledges that the attainment of meaningful change is hard work, but is nonetheless willing to go the distance, regardless of what it may require us to sacrifice temporarily for the greater good, and knowing the angst and the uncertainty that lies ahead?

I still believe we can and will rebuild this beautiful country of ours – if no longer for ourselves, then most certainly for our children. We cannot hand over this burden to future generations - that cannot be our story.

Download a copy of the Civic Education For Youth toolkit at [www.activateleadership.co.za](http://www.activateleadership.co.za).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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