Lesson Two – An Example Of Civic Life: The Ecology Club

Objectives
The students will:
• Review the concept of citizenship, and understand that citizens have both rights and responsibilities.
• Examine the concept of civic life and how it applies to individuals in a community.
• Identify examples of civic life from a written narrative.

Materials
• Student Handout: “Our Ecology Club” (one per student)
• Student Handout: “Venn Diagram of Two Clubs” (one per student)
• Teacher’s Reference Sheet: “Venn Diagram of Two Clubs”
• “Once There Was and Was Not: A Modern Day Folktale from Armenia” book

Procedure
1. Review the role of citizens. Start by discussing what it means to be a citizen. Citizens are people living in a country, state or town who have certain rights and responsibilities.

   Identify rights of a citizen:
   Ask students if they can name some rights a citizen of a country might have. (Possible answers may include the right to live anywhere within the country, the right to vote, the right to choose what type of work to do in order to support oneself or one’s family.)

   Identify responsibilities of a citizen:
   Explain that citizens also have responsibilities. Ask students if they can name some responsibilities of citizens, or things that citizens are expected to do. (Possible answers may include obeying laws, paying taxes, being informed about public issues, and deciding whether and how to vote.)

   Explain that there are citizens in countries all over the world. What it means to be a citizen in one country might be very similar or very different to what it means to be a citizen in another country.
2. **Review the concept of civic life.** Explain that civic life is a common part of citizenship in most countries around the world.

What is civic life?
When citizens become involved in issues facing their communities, they are taking part in civic life. A community can range dramatically in size from small (for example, a school or neighborhood) to large (such as a state or country). The issues are problems that affect most people in the community, not just one individual’s private problems.

Have students brainstorm examples of participation in civic life from their own experiences or from experiences of friends and family members.

3. **Identify examples of civic life from the story, “Our Ecology Club.”** Distribute copies of the story, “Our Ecology Club,” and have students read it either as a class or individually. In Armenia, Heifer International supports many after-school youth programs. “Our Ecology Club” is about an after-school club at the same school where the story “Once There Was and Was Not” takes place. That school hosts multiple after-school clubs that are sponsored by Heifer International. The story of “Our Ecology Club” reflects real activities and experiences of the Ecology Club at that particular school. These types of ecology-related activities are carried out in many Ecology Clubs sponsored by Heifer International throughout the Caucasus region.

Have students mark parts of the story that show how members were participating in civic life. Whenever possible, have students refer to information they learned about the Agriculture Club for additional comparison points.

By marking parts of the story where they see examples of participation in civic life, and by discussing the accompanying questions, the students should get a solid understanding of responsible citizenship and what it means to participate actively in civic life.

4. **Create a Venn diagram to visibly distill the meaning of civic life.** Now that your students have learned about two community groups, the Agriculture Club and the Ecology Club, have them compare the activities of the groups to get a deeper understanding of what it means to participate in civic life.

Copy and distribute the Venn Diagram of Two Clubs Student Handout. Have students come up with ideas of activities that members of either or both clubs participate in, and write them down in the appropriate section of the Venn diagram. If needed, you can supplement the students’ ideas with the following list of activities. This list includes specific as well as more generalized descriptions of activities so that the students will be able to place some in each section of the Venn diagram.
Procedure (continued)

Activities of the Clubs:
• Raise money to buy trees
• Organize public events
• Vote on what activities to do and how to organize them
• Identify environmental hot spots
• Assign tasks/responsibilities to individuals in the club
• Let the public know about club activities
• Learn how to raise calves
• Make posters to invite people to a tree planting ceremony
• Have people from different parts of the community meet each other and work together
• Plan an animal fair to show how animals were raised and see who did the best job
• Hold a tree planting ceremony
• Help each other or help the community
• Develop leadership skills (e.g., older students lead meetings or help younger students)
• Review what club members have been feeding their calves
• Give public speeches so others can learn about what the club does
• Invite journalists to write stories about club activities

5. **Review what the two clubs have in common in terms of civic life.** When the students have completed the Venn diagram, review the overlapping section with them. These are activities that the members of both clubs have in common. Explain that these are general descriptions of activities that are part of civic life. Group together the types of activities in the overlapping section of the Venn diagram into the general categories of:
   • Informing/Educating Ourselves and Others
   • Helping the Community
   • Making Decisions
   • Developing Leadership Skills

![Venn Diagram](image)

Explain to the students that the overlapping section of the Venn diagram contains activities that are described in broad terms. The non-overlapping sections describe activities that are more specific to each distinct club. All three sections of the diagram show activities that are part of civic life; the overlapping section merely states examples in more general terms.

Extension Activity
Have students create a flag for the Ecology Club and a flag for the Agriculture Club. The students might create symbols representing the activities and the values of the clubs, and use these symbols on the flags.
Links To Heifer International

Community Involvement and the Real Life Ecology Club

When Armenia broke away from the Soviet Union in 1990, the country had long been under authoritarian rule. Decisions had been made by a central government and citizens were expected to follow rules without questioning them. When Armenia became an independent nation, many Armenians were looking forward to having an atmosphere where civic life could flourish. However, most of the citizenry had not grown up in an atmosphere of civil society and were unfamiliar with examples of civic life. Several local non-profit groups decided to establish youth groups in order to provide youth with specific skills and teach them about participating in civic life.

Heifer International collaborates with local partner organizations to promote youth groups that have an emphasis on community participation. The youth groups may focus on any subject matter, such as ecology, health and agriculture. They also focus on teaching young people how to work together in groups to help one another and improve their communities. For specific information on Heifer International’s work in Armenia, see www.heifer.org.
Heifer International has sponsored multiple after-school clubs in Armenia. The Ecology Club in this story is from the same school as the Agriculture Club in “Once There Was and Was Not.”

As you read the story, circle any examples of participation in civic life that you find. Also, think about these questions as you read:

1. How did participating in the club help the students get to know one another?
2. How did club members think of problems that they wanted to fix?
3. Were the hot spots problematic for just a few individuals or for the community as a whole?
4. How were decisions made in the club? What types of processes did the club go through to make decisions on what they would do as a club?
5. Who organized the different tasks that needed to be done in the project?

Our Ecology Club

My name is Mariam and I want to tell you about our school’s Ecology Club. At our school, there are different after-school clubs that you can join. My friend Julietta and I decided to join the Ecology Club because we both believe it is important to keep the place where you live clean and healthy.

Our school goes from grade one though grade eleven. The Ecology Club has students from all different grade levels. I usually don’t have a chance to talk to older kids or younger kids, so it was fun to get to know them. The older students served as the club leaders, and we had one teacher who attended all our club meetings.

Mapping the Problem Hot Spots

We started out the school year by talking about problems we saw in our village. For example, there is a lot of garbage that litters the main street of our village, and there are no trash bins there. Also, there is a very big pothole at the place where two main roads meet in our village. Cars have to be very careful to drive around it; otherwise they might get stuck. Water and garbage get stuck in the pothole for long periods of time. It is not very pretty to have in the middle of town, and it sometimes gets smelly when the water has been there too long.

Another problem in our village is air pollution. Our village is right next to the main highway that trucks use to bring things into the Armenian capital city of Yerevan. Since there are so many trucks going by polluting the air, it is sometimes hard to breathe around here. A lot of people have coughing problems.
There’s also a river that runs through the village. Many of the families go to the river to wash their clothes or to collect water to bring back to their houses to use for cooking or cleaning. At the spot where people go to the river, there is a lot of trash that people leave on the river bank. It looks ugly, and sometimes the trash falls into the river.

There are many other examples of problem spots, like the local museum made from a famous artist’s old home. The museum has a lot of garbage around the front, and it is not a very pretty place. If there were a garden there near the museum, it would be a nicer place to visit and a good place for us to gather and have picnics.

The students in grades 8-11 told us that these should be called “Environmental Hot Spots.” This meant that they were places in the village that needed help. The student leaders helped us to draw a map of the “Environmental Hot Spots.” We took a big piece of paper (about as tall as me!) and some students drew the streets in our village. Others drew the main buildings, like the school and the mayor’s office. Then we drew something to show the hot spot problem, and circled those hot spots in red. For the air pollution problem, we drew a truck on the highway spewing out smoke, and we circled that in red. We hung our “Environmental Hot Spots” map in the school hallway so everyone in the school could see it. We wanted other students to start thinking about those problem spots, too.

Making a Decision on What Project to Do
After we identified the hot spots, it was time to decide which hot spot to fix. We wanted to fix all of them, but we had to start with just one. I thought the teacher would choose a hot spot to fix, and then tell us what we needed to do. I was so surprised when the student leaders told us that we would be making the decision, not the teacher. I remember Julietta leaned over and whispered to me, “Wow, we never get to make decisions in regular class!” The student leaders told us to think about which hot spot we thought we should fix first, and why.

The next time we met, the student leaders asked some of us to stand up and explain why we thought one problem should be fixed first. After hearing some students talk about their opinions, everybody in the class got to vote on which hot spot to work on first. I had never voted on something before that involved making a promise to help the group accomplish something. It was interesting. I wanted to work on getting trash bins around the main street of the village. I think it looks terrible when someone drives by and sees all that garbage out on the main part of our town. Julietta wanted to work on fixing the pothole. She hates the smell that comes out of it when water has been sitting there too long. But the hot spot that got the most votes was to do something about the air pollution. I had never been bothered with coughing, so it wasn’t so important to me. But I did know some other kids that had a lot of coughing problems, and my uncle is always complaining about the pollution in the air, so I can see that it is a serious problem. Even though it wasn’t my first choice, I felt happy to work on it.
Organizing the Project
How were we going to fix the problem of air pollution? I thought that the teacher would tell us what we needed to do. Wrong again! The student leaders asked the other club members to suggest ways to help clean the air. Some students made ridiculous suggestions, like moving the highway. Since we couldn’t do something like that, the only suggestion that made sense was to plant trees. Most of us already knew that trees help clean the air. We decided we would plant some trees by the front of the school to combat the air pollution. Then we had to figure out exactly what steps we needed to take, and who would do them.

Everyone in the club was free to suggest ideas. It was a very strange club meeting. We were not used to being able to talk much in class, or to talk about our opinions. At first everyone was shy to speak, and then people lost their shyness and were interrupting each other. The student leaders had to create a speaker’s stick. They would hand the speaker’s stick to one person, who could speak for up to three minutes. Only the person holding the speaker’s stick could speak. This made it much easier to hear what other people had to say. Here are some of the ideas we came up with:

- Get the school principal to agree to let us plant trees in the front school yard. Some club members need to write a letter to the principal and get a response.
- Raise money to purchase the trees. We decided on planting 12 trees. We thought we could ask the school principal to donate some money to purchase trees, and the village mayor, too. We also thought of ways to raise some money in the village to help buy the trees.
- Organize a tree planting day. This way a lot of people from our school and the village could come help, and we could teach them about the problems of air pollution and how trees help clean the air. For the tree planting day, someone needed to organize getting the trees to the school, getting enough shovels, deciding where the holes would be dug and cleaning up afterward. For the ceremony part, someone would have to write a speech and speak in front of everyone.
- After the tree planting day, we had to return the tools back to the people who owned them, send thank you letters and write an article about the tree planting day for the school newspaper.

I was surprised at how many meetings it took for us to make all of these decisions. We spent most of the winter months figuring out all these details. I learned that it isn’t easy to get a big group of people to agree on something! But we finally made the decisions and assigned the tasks. By springtime, we were ready for action!

The Tree Planting Ceremony
Our tree planting ceremony took place in springtime, near the end of the school year. We made posters inviting everyone in the school to attend. We also invited our families and friends in the village. Both the school principal and the mayor came to the ceremony. All the trees and equipment were there on time, and the digging was fun even though it was hot. Some students from the Journalism Club were there interviewing us so that they could write a story about us for the school newspaper. Now we have 12 beautiful trees standing in the front of the school. They help clean the air and make the school entrance a prettier place. I can’t wait until next year to tackle another environmental hot spot!
Lesson Two – An Example Of Civic Life: The Ecology Club

Student Handout:
Venn Diagram of Two Clubs

Name
Lesson Two – An Example Of Civic Life: The Ecology Club