

From representation to amplification: A new model for youth engagement in Zimbabwe

by Mthokozisi Mabhena

Mthokozisi Mabhena (26 years) is a business developer and communications consultant with YIELD Trust, a youth-focused organization in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city. In his submission to fepa journal he proposed to write about young people in Zimbabwe and that «there are no young people who are "voiceless". This article presents Mthokozisi's major arguments in conversation. The longer article with more empirical data can be found on fepa's website.

According to the 2022 census, Zimbabwe has a population of approximately 15.17 million people, and of that, at least 60% are under 35 years of age, yet young people are not represented in government, politics, business and healthcare spaces. To redress this, youth activists and civil society organizations have risen to become "the voice of the voiceless" — that is, to represent or stand on behalf of young people as ambassadors in spaces where young people are not present.

I think, however, that we must move from being the "voice of the voiceless" to "amplifying the voices of the unheard". Because young people anywhere and everywhere in Zimbabwe are speaking yet they are unheard. When I say that young people are not voiceless I am not only saying that young people are heard, on the contrary, I am saying that young people are willing to speak but are not heard. Their voices are largely ignored by people who are in position of power and also by those who seek to represent them.

A typical example is this: when a livelihood project for rural young people is designed, in most instances, the project is designed with intent to benefit young people but without the young people's input.

There are various factors that contribute to this phenomenon such as the paternalistic nature of power and authority in Southern Africa, the levels of education of young people and the prevailing trends. In Southern Africa, from my personal experience growing up in the rural areas and from the research evidence, the high-power distance creates a paternalistic approach to youth engagement where people with authority and power do activities to young people without input from the young people - because they assume they know what is better for young people than the young people themselves.

Furthermore, the low levels of education of [rural and low-income] young people makes high level engagement with complex technicalities inaccessible to young people. Lastly, the prevailing popular engagement frameworks or projects determine how young people are engaged rather than asking the young people themselves for input about how they want to engage.

These factors I have outlined have dual results: i) when projects or policies are enacted there is a façade that young people were consulted, yet the engagement was decorative; ii) it seems that young people have no “voice”, no forms of engaging, and no energy to drive processes yet young people have a voice that have been systemically and structurally muted.

Instead of such decorative and erasing practices, the role of programs and initiatives targeting youth should be to making power effectively hear them. Also, what is needed is that those who represent young people to not be a substitute for their voice but an amplifier.

Recent humanitarian interventions in Zimbabwe, show very low uptake of “youth projects” by young people and there is high drop-out rate from such projects. On the contrary, our own work with YIELD Trust and evidence from other countries show that it is possible to include opportunities for local young people to steer the design and nature of the intervention, lead trainings, participate in youth advisory councils, steering the direction of an intervention, and helping to select which programs to fund. Such an example is the Youth Advisory Council, established by YIELD Trust and part supported by fepa, which is a shadow youth council that directly sits and advises the Bulawayo City Council councilors on youth engagement. Additionally, the European Union Delegation to Zimbabwe has established a Youth Sounding Board which is a diverse group of Zimbabwean young people advising the delegation on youth engagement in Zimbabwe.

These examples show that we must and can move up some steps/rungs on the ladder of participation from a lower level of youth engagement to a higher level of youth engagement.