

Youth contribution

When children and young people participate, it is possible to make a change

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I am Jason, aged 17, a member of the Children's Parliament in my town in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I am also part of the World Vision's Young Leaders for Ending Violence against Children project, and I have been advocating for children's rights and the well-being of children since 2016.

I live in Beni in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. My province is characterised by war, which encompasses killing and massacre of civilians, sexual violence in all its forms, kidnappings and enrolment of children in armed groups. This has resulted in mass migrations of civilians in search of safety. My country has also faced terrible diseases, such as malaria and Ebola. In this context, I became a child activist.

I recall that in 2016, some of our neighbours announced that the armed groups had just entered into the city and they were close to us. Like many people, my first reaction was to flee to save my life. In the middle of the chaos, I just ran without knowing where to go and unfortunately left my family due to extreme fear. To get to the downtown district, I had to cross a river and I almost drowned, but fortunately a woman was nearby and saved my life by taking me out of the water. Sadly, many other children perished in the river. The same night, the government announced that the news about the rebels was a rumour and no one had attacked the city. That day I might

have died from drowning and later I wondered what I had stayed alive for? What was my mission? I believed that I had to set myself a vision and the one I had chosen was that of saving lives, fighting for the rights of other children and defending the most vulnerable.

A year after this tragic event, everything became calmer, and I met people from World Vision who were inviting children to join the Children's Parliament. World Vision was central in supporting us to overcome the trauma and to thrive. I started feeling more empowered and with a sense of belonging. As a result, I quickly became president for a two-year term. In 2019, I enrolled in the Child Reporters Club run by World Vision as well, where I learned leadership skills and communications techniques to enable me to share our ideas and experiences with the public. For instance, I learned how to write a blog and a newspaper piece and how to speak in a debate or live interview. Then, due to my good work, I was invited to the Philippines to represent children's voices at the World Vision Triennial Council. My main messages at the meeting highlighted the struggles faced by children caught in the middle of armed conflicts and the need to empower them to contribute to positive change. I was informed that my call made an impact, and more programmes are planned to be implemented to address this problem. In order to expand my influence, in 2021, I joined the Urban Council of Youth for Child Protection and the Intergenerational Dialogue, supported by the African Union in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The focus of this group was to discuss issues around education and development skills, peace and security and climate change.

Joining the Children's Parliament was the first step to ensuring I was able to participate in decision-making and contribute my thoughts to the debate around children's rights. However, the journey wasn't easy as children are often discriminated against due to their age and are not listened to. I wanted so much to make my family and school understand that being a child is never a weakness; on the contrary, it is an important time in our lives where we can contribute and take some responsibilities. However, I was shocked by all the barriers imposed on children which limit their abilities to do something and be part of the solution. Despite these challenges, I was determined to get to the decision-making table and bring up our voices. The Children's Parliament gave me the opportunity to learn about my rights and duties and expand children's levels of influence. For instance, we were able to be heard in World Vision meetings and to ask adults to take into account our views and ideas. We also organised rallies and meetings with community leaders to talk about children's rights and protection. Without the Children's Parliament, this would never have happened.

However, whatever the degree of our work, I have never been satisfied with it because I still see children's rights violations everywhere. For example, we gather information on violations, but we do not have a Children's Parliament at the national level to centralise our reports and hand them over to the government or talk about them on the national media. We, members of my Child Parliament, hope to establish a National Children's Parliament soon to strengthen children's actions and connect our work to the Ministry of Gender, Family and Children.

Last year, during strong rebel pressure on the city, the schools remained temporarily closed and the war put us in inhuman conditions. In order to find a solution for our future, my friends and I initiated a peaceful sit-in in front of the town hall of Beni until the resumption of classes. We spent eight days and eight nights in the sit-in. Two months later, the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the African Union received me and encouraged my leadership and promised solutions to our demands.

I believe I draw my courage from my participation in the Young Leaders for Ending Violence against Children project. This initiative made me find my place in the eyes of the world and was the answer to my greatest dream: participating and being heard. Thanks to this project, I met many young leaders from other countries who inspired me with their stories and their struggles. Furthermore, I met great humanitarians from organisations working in child protection who have given me the strength to continue and never give up. Since I joined the programme, I have been invited to participate in major global conferences – in person and online – and I have been taken more seriously by leaders in my community.

The strength of my struggle comes from the opportunities I had in front of the whole world. The speeches I gave in front of the leaders of humanitarian organisations and countries made me believe that the world listens to me and that it is possible to make a change.

The most beautiful decisions relating to children are those taken with them and adopted by adults after letting children explain what they think. For example, asking about the activities we want to do and the topics we want to learn. For instance, once I advocated to do a piece of child-led research on children affected by war and displacement, and this idea was accepted and implemented. However, sometimes adults make strategic decisions that they impose on children, making them believe that they participated but in reality they were just manipulated. In order to improve this, children must feel empowered to hold people to account, and this is only possible if they are given autonomy and confidence to influence adult decision-makers.

Feeling autonomous by acting for the good of children was my biggest dream and reaching it has relieved me. Today, I work a lot to give the same confidence to other children of my generation and tell them that there is no reason to surrender; we need to work together to realise and demand our rights. My dream is to see the dreams of other children become reality, and this requires my commitment, my actions and those of everyone else. With God, we will go further than our expectations.