

Youth contribution

My revolution footprint in Zambia

Tawen Musa

My name is Tawen Musa and I am a Zambian political activist and the current Executive Director of a youth organisation called Save a Dream Zambia, which champions education, governance and life skills amongst young people.

Young people have always been at the heart of political change in Zambia. At the age of 24, our first President Kenneth Kaunda was a freedom fighter at the forefront of the struggle for Zambian independence. However, over the years the historical role of youth in politics has been slowly forgotten. Increasingly, Zambian politics has become dominated by older men. There is a growing gap between the older and younger generation in politics and a lack of intergenerational solidarity and collaboration. Young people have until recently had zero representation in the National Parliament.

This is a problem because the government is not implementing policies that reflect the priorities and needs of adolescents and young people. More than half of the population is under the age of 18. Zambian youth face high unemployment levels, so we need policies that support entry into work and entrepreneurship. HIV rates are also still very high, but when you go to clinics you will still find older nurses who judge adolescents and young people if they want access to contraceptives. They tell us ‘at your age we were abstaining from sex’ and won’t give them the products they need to protect themselves. We therefore also need more youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.

When I was growing up, my family did not have a lot of money. I wanted to go to high school, but we could not afford the fees. I approached an international organisation to see if they could help me to raise funds for my education. It was here that my understanding of my situation changed. I was introduced to a programme that the organisation was running which was focused on children's rights in relation to governance. They explained that many young people want to go to school but face barriers, and the problem is that the government is not prioritising access to education. Therefore, we need more young people involved in advocating for better education policies, amongst other issues that are important to youth. In order for things to change, we needed to get involved in decision-making.

As a result, I became an activist in 2011 at the age of 18. Over the past ten years, I have been part of the leadership of a youth movement called 'Activista'. In partnership with another social movement called 'Youth 4 Parliament', we have been strategically supporting young people to run for elected political positions around the country – from the grassroots to the national level, where the big decisions are being made that affect our futures. To do this, we reach out to young people in our networks who have political aspirations and offer them solidarity and support through holding meetings in communities to bring attention to the voters on why voting for youth candidates can help to transform the country. We draw on our country's history of youth activism and young freedom fighters to show what can happen when young people lead. We are championing the spirit of a new youth revolution in Zambia. In the past two National Elections, we are proud to say we have helped more than eight youth (18–30) Parliamentarians to become elected, and we have more youths serving in local levels than ever before in the history of Zambia. One of the mayoral candidates (George Mwanza) we supported won an election as independent candidate to become the youngest mayor in southern Africa at the age of 27 years.

Something which makes us optimistic about the future is that in general we are seeing good community support for youth politics. This is somewhat surprising given that politics is often seen as a ruthless, violent, dead-end game in Zambia. We believe this is in part because young people are talking about issues that matter to their communities. They are also seen as more connected to others and therefore accountable and trustworthy. Older politicians leave their community when they are elected, but youth representatives maintain their connections.

However, we are still working to address the barriers facing young women's participation in politics. Despite our encouragement, among our eight young Parliamentarians, only one is female. In Zambian politics, women are undermined and insulted, often labelled as prostitutes and told they should

be at home cooking and serving men, not standing up to represent their communities. This undermines the confidence of younger women to stand. We are slowly starting to see change: in 2017, Buumba Malambo, a female became the first youngest Councillor in Zambia at the age of 24 years and, in 2021, became the youngest ever female mayor in Zambia and has been calling on other young women to get involved in politics. She has demanded that people focus on her policies and not her gender. We hope that going forward, the political environment will change and more young women will come forward.

Another challenge is young people's interest in formal politics and therefore lower turnout in elections by young people. We have been campaigning for the youth vote on social media and radio using the #CantWait2Vote. However, because the previous ruling party implemented restrictions on the use of social media in the run up to the 2021 elections, we know we must go beyond these methods and use our networks to galvanise support – as we like to say, 'our revolution won't be televised'! Regardless of the efforts of the government to restrict information, the Electoral Commission of Zambia recorded that young people voted in the highest numbers ever in the General Election in August 2021, with over 50% turnout. The US President Joe Biden even recognised the power of the Zambian youth votes during his speech at the United Nations. As a result of greater youth engagement, things are beginning to change at the national level. The current government has acknowledged the power of youth for the country's development and declared they will always engage with them.

The youth Members of Parliament we supported during the elections continue to attend our meetings when we call on them, helping to invigorate our next cohort of activists. Whilst we have not seen any major policy changes yet, we are seeing an immediate impact in that youth are increasingly part of the dialogue within political spaces and can advocate on particular issues. For example, when the government sought to abolish meal allowances for students in 2021, we called the youth representatives and asked them to advocate for the students in parliament; the government reconsidered their decision and brought back the allowances.

Our successes motivate us to do more. If we want to change the country then we need to keep getting young people a seat at the table where decisions are made. Our next target is to get 30 young people elected as Members of Parliament in the 2026 National Elections. Nothing about us without us!



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