

Silent voices, unrealised rights – championing youth participation in Zimbabwe

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Our leaders don't care about us. Our views are not considered. We are treated as if we do not exist.

Cynthia (aged 16), Nkayi District, Zimbabwe.¹

Promoting youth participation in governance in transitional political contexts has its own unique challenges. Complex and shifting power dynamics make it difficult for young people to penetrate and influence decision-making structures. This article describes how one rural-based Zimbabwean youth organisation, Bulawayo Integrated Youth Survival Programme (BUIYSAP), is working with ActionAid International Zimbabwe (AAIZ) to effectively navigate such a context, empowering young rights holders in the process.² It describes:

- the participatory methodologies used to build young people's ability to mobilise and constructively engage with duty bearers;
- how formerly hostile duty bearers were brought on board to fulfil their responsi-

bilities to young people in their communities; and

- the lessons learnt from creating new participatory decision-making platforms for young people in the project area.

The article emphasises the importance of conducting in-depth power analysis and applying a human rights-based approach while implementing a participatory governance programme involving young people in Zimbabwe. It also stresses the need to conduct robust gender analysis to ensure both young men and women are supported to enhance their levels of participation.

Youth participation and violence in Zimbabwe

Engaging with young people to promote their participation in decision-making in Zimbabwe is problematic. Over the past 30 years, youths have periodically been recruited into quasi-military groups or 'youth wings' of political parties, often to

¹ Cynthia's name has been changed to protect her identity.

² This initiative targeted young people aged 15–30 years old, in accordance with BUIYSAP's analysis of those young people most affected by social exclusion and marginalisation in the project area.

perpetrate politically motivated acts of violence. During the 1980s, politically affiliated militarised youth brigades were responsible for large-scale violence that led to the deaths of thousands of people in Matabeleland and Midlands Provinces. More recently, in 2008, renewed violence affected most of Zimbabwe's 57 districts. This violence has had a lasting legacy. The public and state actors tend to perceive any form of institution with links to young people as serving political agendas. This makes it difficult for young people to meaningfully participate in governance, democracy and development work, and for NGOs to support them to do so.

Young people, know your place!

Youths living in the rural areas of Nkayi District, Matabeleland Province, where the learning outlined in this article was generated, face substantial barriers to meaningful involvement in local decision-making. Traditional patriarchal power arrangements across Nkayi's 156 villages result in older male domination of power structures, resources and most decision-making platforms. Participatory consultation – including of marginalised groups such as women, the disabled and the young – is rarely practised. Much of this exclusion of young people is conscious, reflecting strong adult mistrust of youth capabilities. According to a participatory baseline study carried out by BUIYSAP and AAIZ in 2010, 90% of traditional leaders believe that the main barrier to youth engagement lies in age itself, rather than the nature of the patriarchal system.

In Zimbabwe's precarious socio-political landscape, it is also difficult to establish where true power lies in the community. Nkayi is no exception. It is common for political parties to place 'shadow' traditional leaders in a village to compete with another leader who is perceived to be politically partisan. This politicisation of decision-making posts by external actors leads to

much confusion over who has true legitimacy as a leader and contributes to the division of communities, restricting **who** participates and **how**. These 'shadow' leaders have a history of influencing youths to perpetrate acts of violence, known locally as *Ukumkhambi ndlela* (bringing your opponents back on track). Memories of youths beating and raping in Nkayi are still fresh.

As a result of co-option, manipulation and exclusion, youths themselves have either become entirely disillusioned with political processes or divided along political lines. This prevents cohesive, non-confrontational youth actions. Intergenerational relationships are strained and characterised by mutual mistrust. Many youths choose to 'self-exclude' from local governance, believing they have no role or power to influence the process. There is also evidence that young people – especially young women – have internalised their own 'inferior' positions within society. They report low levels of confidence in participating in decision-making processes, linked to their inability to articulate appropriate 'governance language'.

Methodologies employed

Since the beginning of 2010, BUIYSAP and AAIZ have been implementing a participatory project that aims to increase young men and women's capacity to engage in governance processes and decision-making structures in Nkayi District, Zimbabwe. Using a range of participatory methodologies, and a gender-sensitive approach, the project aimed to build young people's ability to mobilise and constructively engage with duty bearers.

Work carried out by BUIYSAP and AAIZ in Nkayi was informed by ActionAid's human rights-based approach (ActionAid, 2010). This draws upon influential thinker Paulo Freire's work on raising 'critical consciousness'. This is a process that helps oppressed groups understand and respond to their oppression.³ Action-

³ The ideas behind this approach can also be traced back to other sources such as Veneklassen with Miller (2002) and Rowlands (1997).

Box 1: Unpacking power

- ‘Power within’ involves working with poor and excluded rights holders and their communities to make them aware of their rights and to strengthen their ability to undertake collective analysis of the ways in which their rights are being denied.
- ‘Power with’ focuses on building solidarity among rights holders through alliance and platform building, mobilising supporters and networking.
- ‘Power to’ aims to enhance the ability of rights holders to effectively campaign and advocate for changes in policies and practices.

Source: ActionAid, 2010

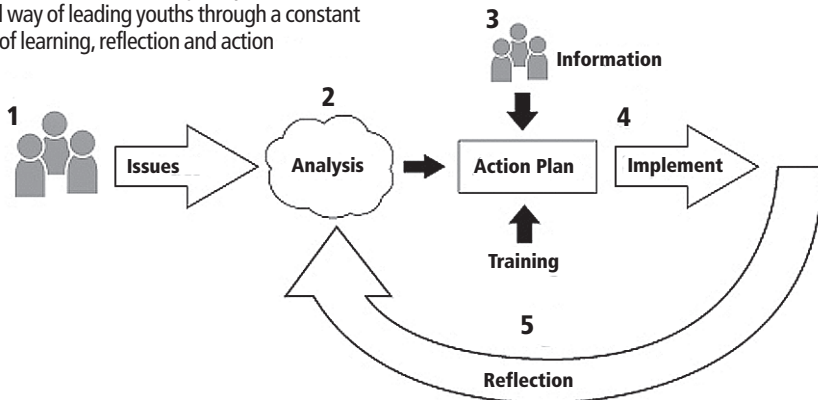
Aid’s approach focuses on the three kinds of power described in Box 1. This approach was applied flexibly to respond to the specific needs of the local context. It was sometimes necessary to focus upon more than one step at the same time, or to purposefully emphasise one stage earlier than another.

Building ‘power within’ – raising consciousness

The baseline study mentioned above highlighted the ways in which many youths – especially young women – internalised and accepted their own subordinate positions. They were unaccustomed to reflecting critically about their societal positions and the reasons underlying gender inequalities. In order to awaken their minds to existing hierarchies and start to foster interest in organising themselves to become agents of change, young people received leadership training. This initially focused on enhancing self-understanding and self-worth, before goal setting. During weekly participatory group meetings, a study cycle approach was introduced to 492 youths (205 male, 271 female) by BUIYSAP (see Box 2). Intensive self-reflection processes prepared youths to move on to the next stage, which involved greater constituency building and action.

Box 2: The study cycle approach, used with youths involved in the project

Study cycles have been developed by BUIYSAP as a practical way of leading youths through a constant process of learning, reflection and action



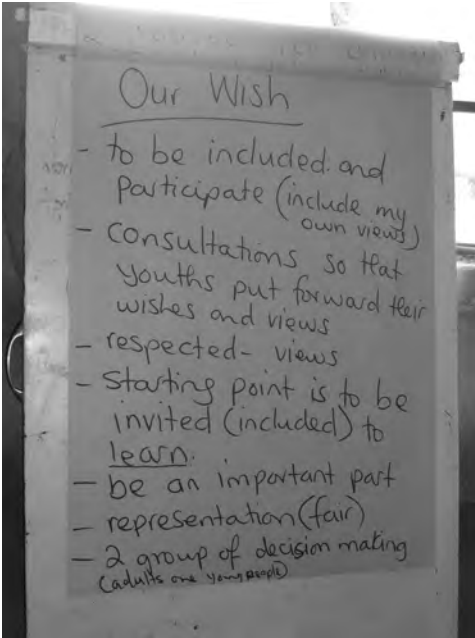
1 Youths meet, identify and prioritise key issues affecting them and their community.

2 Youths analyse how these issues affect themselves and the community; consider their implications; and identify community members with an interest in and influence over these issues.

3 Youths gather more information about the issue at the community level through consultations with community stakeholders. They also receive practical, theoretical or conceptual training on the issue at hand from BUIYSAP before developing an action plan.

4 The action plan is implemented.

5 Reflection on outcomes, analysis of new issues, further planning for implementing follow-up actions.



After being exposed to study cycle approaches, young people began to see the benefits of youth participation.

Building 'power with' – taking collective action

Once study cycles had created the conditions for increased solidarity among youths in Nkayi, 32 villages across the project site were supported to form their own youth village assemblies (YVA). These are platforms where they could gather, practise their negotiation, dialogue and debating skills, and take collective action to claim their rights. In YVAs, youths discuss and agree upon shared visions of good community governance, and start to develop recommendations that they wish to put to the wider community through inter-village debates and public feedback meetings. It is in YVAs where steps 5 onwards in the study cycle approach take place. This underlines how the reflection and consciousness-raising described above overlapped with and continuously fed into the 'building power with' project component, forming a continuous cycle for the youths involved.

Much deliberation took place over whether the creation of a new space for

young people was the best method of increasing youth influence in the district. High levels of youth mistrust of local leaders meant that a specific space exclusively led by young people was a strong incentive for igniting youth interest in the project. Consultation with young people suggested that YVAs would better allow young people to hone their leadership skills in a safe environment where there was no threat of political co-option and where they could determine their own courses of action. This could act as a springboard for engaging with other governance structures that had previously been off-limits to them.

Youths were also excited about joining a platform where the wider social inequalities they perceived as common to other governance structures would not be reproduced. They were the ones who decided how the YVA should operate. Each YVA is run by a committee comprising two young men and two young women. All village youths are entitled to be YVA members, and youths themselves elect the committee.

BUIYSAP took a pre-emptive approach to counter local opposition to YVAs. Long before the idea of youth platforms was even suggested to the youths themselves, traditional leaders received training in community governance from a team comprising BUIYSAP, local youths and powerful authority figures such as the district administrator. The leaders were impressed and surprised by the skills their young constituents displayed and this helped to secure their buy-in for the establishment of youth structures in the project area. The backing of the influential district administrator also persuaded many leaders who might have been sceptical about endorsing a youth platform.

However, there remained isolated cases of traditional leaders (notably those with a history of manipulating youths for violent purposes) opposing youth engagement in activities such as peace-building. Stakeholder analysis of each project site helped

Photo: Leila Billing



BUIYSAP and youth members with local traditional leaders after a meeting to discuss school drop-out rates in Nkayi.

to mitigate these barriers. In one case, it was clear that the village headman had more power than the so-called ‘shadow leaders’ instigating the conflict, and through engagement with him, BUIYSAP could continue to work in that area.

Strengthening ‘power to’ – ability to influence and campaign

The project recognised from its earliest inception that processes of empowerment are problematic where the political climate is repressive. For this reason, it was essential that duty bearers with the potential to derail project objectives were included **from the outset**. This illustrates how the three project components were not always implemented in a linear fashion. It was sometimes necessary to focus upon strengthening ‘power to’ **before** building ‘power with’. BUIYSAP and youths enrolled duty bearer support through the following activities:

- Local councillors were trained in leadership skills. This better equipped them to strengthen their responsiveness and willingness to engage with their constituents, including young people.
- School development committees (SDCs) received ongoing mentorship in leadership and governance. Later on, this made them receptive to including youths as committee members.
- Village heads who wished to tackle community apathy were supported with community mobilisation. This persuaded sceptical citizens, including youths, to start to engage with existing governance structures.

All trainings had action planning as an integral component, meaning YVAs had clearly defined accountabilities they could make reference to in future campaigning. For example, four SDCs promised to lobby the district education department for more money to address the issue of school drop-

out rates; another school promised to set up free evening classes for youths who had been forced to drop out before taking their exams.

Study cycle successes

This methodology has been extremely successful in bringing together young people from opposite sides of the political spectrum and reducing animosities. Youths focused upon their similarities rather than differences, and the importance of peer support in goal attainment. The 'information-gathering' part of the study cycle was particularly successful in challenging self-exclusion. It made young people realise – some for the first time – that community support and self-initiated action is essential in the attainment of personal goals (see step 3, Box 1). For example, in Magazi and Hompani villages, young people have set up a literacy group and managed to persuade a local teacher to support the group three times a week on a voluntary basis.

Leading the pack?

In an annual review of this project, conducted in December 2010, young people credited the study cycle approach with equipping them with skills for taking up leadership positions in the community. Sixteen young women have been successful in securing posts as committee members or secretaries on SDCs, village assemblies and child protection committees. They are now actively involved in campaigning for the rights of rural girls to access education, and on issues of child abuse. Many were invited to take up these posts by local leaders, who have been impressed by their performance on YVAs. Although these posts may be seen as falling squarely within traditional gender roles, this is a step change with the past. It is hoped that, just as youths have used the skills gained in the YVAs to enter other governance spaces, these young women can effect progressive changes in spaces that had previously been closed to them.

Interestingly, young men have been less successful in this regard. This is partly because they are a more mobile group than young women (young men regularly travel to neighbouring countries to seek economic employment), but also because girls have proven to be better at speaking fluent 'governance language'. This often means adopting a humble, deferential position in front of traditional leaders. Local leaders complain about the lack of humility and – in their view – inappropriate dress favoured by young men. Are young males refusing to 'play by the rules of the game' in a bid to assert their own power, autonomy and manhood over older generations? If so, this needs to be channelled in a more constructive way. The fact that relations between some older and younger men remain resistant to change suggests a more sophisticated analysis is needed as the project enters its second year.

Meanwhile, young women are managing to bridge the public-private divide by acknowledging that traditional gender roles and behaviour can sometimes gain them increased influence in a way that challenges discriminatory patriarchal structures. However, we must continue to monitor whether this behaviour reflects a continued internalised sense of inferiority among young women. Will this compromise their ability to hold their leaders to account and undertake the full spectrum of leadership responsibilities demanded by the posts they hold? It may be the case that further support is needed to consolidate and strengthen young women's leadership skills and that gender training is prioritised for traditional leaders themselves.

No YVA is an island

Fears that YVAs would prove to be isolated structures have been so far unfounded. One year into the project, there is already evidence that they are institutionally enmeshed and interlinked with other governance structures at the local level, and are providing youth with an opportunity to

engage with other community structures. For example, some are working closely with local child protection committees to address challenges faced by orphans and other vulnerable children. YVAs are also working with local clinics to advocate for youth-friendly services, as well as with the police in crime reduction and prevention.

However, there have been isolated cases of young men holding on to the idea that YVAs are 'youth' structures and that other community institutions belong to 'the others' – that is, the adults. This has been an unintended consequence of establishing a parallel platform for youth participation. Some males are injecting undemocratic characteristics into what was originally intended to be a democratic, open space by making the YVA unwelcoming to older generations. In hindsight, such attitudes are hardly surprising given the historical lack of examples of inclusive spaces led by local leaders who welcome youth input. In many ways, male youths are emulating the masculine leadership qualities they have been exposed to – namely, those that exclude, divide and are not participatory. Such attitudes may take longer to transform, as alternative leadership models emerge, develop and embed themselves in Nkayi.

Duty bearers come on board

Early investments in winning over duty bearers are paying off. According to the 2010 project review, 80% of the 50 youths sampled say that traditional leaders are inviting young people to community events more often than before. They also report that during village meetings, it is commonplace to ask for the 'youth perspective' on agenda items. There is now evidence of duty bearer willingness to work jointly with youths to improve service delivery. In Nkayi, the district administrator, education officer and representatives from the police and rural district council responded favourably to youth suggestions that they **jointly** form a district education monitor-

ing team to provide progress updates on issues including teacher absenteeism and school drop-out rates to parents and relevant authorities. This youth-initiated endeavour shows how youths are already taking action with minimal support from BUTYSAP. This bodes well for the future sustainability of the project.

However, not all community members have been willing to engage with young people. Some villagers – in particular war veterans, a notoriously volatile group – have opposed youth involvement and traditional leaders have failed to respond to such conflicts for fear of a violent outcome. This highlights the need to provide further support and training to leaders in conflict resolution and risk analysis as the project progresses.

Upcoming challenges

The possibility of presidential elections in Zimbabwe in 2011 means Nkayi District will see political factions engaging in negative campaigning in a way that threatens to fragment YVAs. Voter education and conflict prevention with local communities must be prioritised. Traditional leaders will require more support than ever to implement local solutions to emerging conflict. Young people will need more in-depth support to deal with the enhanced complexity of manoeuvring their way through local power struggles during elections if they are to avoid co-option and make their participation meaningful.

Conclusion

Investing time in detailed power analysis has enabled successful navigation of a precarious political environment. Young Zimbabweans have become assets to their community and generators of solutions to local problems. **Flexible** application of the 'power within', 'power with' and 'power to' approach was necessary to respond directly to the local context. The different responses to the project by young men and young women mean that a deeper

gender analysis is essential as we go forward. Young women must continue to gain influence in governance structures, and self-exclusion among some young men must be combated to ensure that they, and the spaces they have created, operate in a democratically accountable way.

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