**Essay**

**Come and learn: an invitation from Zvandiri Youth Advocates**

Imagine that a young person is invited to a global policy meeting and allocated 5 min to present on what young people need. Moments before the meeting starts, their time slot is reduced to 2 min. How do they fit 5 min’s worth of speaking notes, which they have been preparing for weeks, into 2 min? It can feel like they have only been invited to share their story, their trauma, and their life experience to entertain. Their ideas, thoughts, and suggestions are not considered. Yet, they are there because they are an expert, a specialist even, on young people’s needs. Often, it feels we young people are invited just to welcome and celebrate the event, but during the rest of the meeting, we just sit there without an opportunity to use our voices while other stakeholders brainstorm and make decisions on our behalf. Where are the spaces for young people to share the wisdom and real-time knowledge that we have about the lives we lead outside the conference or summit? We have creative, informed ideas, but are we being heard?

As young people, we are often engaged by organisations as an afterthought to be on stage and to speak at conferences or summits. Some organisers are getting it right, but others have a long way to go—whether intentionally or not, they invite us to fulfil their indicators and goals but are not willing to invest in us. If our experiences and ideas really matter, then we need investment in us! We need you to support us with the logistics for participating as you do for adults, compensate us for our time, and provide passport, visa, and local transport support. When you engage us in virtual participation, provide us with phone data to take part. If you really want to invest in our ideas, then where are the resources to back up the enthusiasm you say you have for youth-led initiatives? Too often we are invited to talk about what we have been implementing but are not given resources to scale-up our own initiatives or to help you find the solutions in the first place. We receive incredible opportunities to attend high-level global events where we are asked to spend time preparing documentation for presidents, member states, politicians, and policy makers, but where we are not given the time to present or debate our ideas or recommendations and our solutions.

We need to have conversations in which we can be listened to, conversations that ensures you are listening to the right young people who can genuinely speak with expertise on a particular topic. We need to appreciate and demand the inclusion of diverse voices and needs of young people, so that global policy can better address the real-time needs of the many different marginalised groups who are otherwise left behind. Decision making by young people in the development of policies, strategies, and guidelines can only be effective if we are knowledgeable and equipped to speak up. Many times, we are not mentored or provided with the right tools to unleash our potential. Participation is undeniably a powerful tool that empowers adolescents and young people, but their full potential can only be reached if participation is done properly. In the absence of genuine, tailored support, participation alone is not enough.

As young people, do we need to come to adult spaces with adult-centric rules? If you want to really hear and understand us—all of us in our diversity—then why don’t you come to our spaces to listen and learn? At Zvandiri, young people are at the heart of the organisation’s work. Zvandiri, based in Zimbabwe, is supporting our government and others across the region to deliver evidence-based clinical, community, and digital services to promote the health and wellbeing of young people living with HIV. We are the ones who experience life with HIV, so we are the ones who know what works for us. In our own space, we work together, we talk, we debate, and we are supported and mentored (for example, in public speaking and delivering our key points to a range of audiences in an effective way). If you meet us where we are, we can tell you so much more about the things that need to change to address the challenges we face. You would learn much more than you will ever hear from the spaces we are provided with at a conference panel or with a poster presentation.

Globally, we have contributed to the development of WHO guidelines for HIV service delivery through participation in guideline review committees and a global consultation, and advocated for improved Global Fund resource allocation for adolescents. In Zimbabwe, we play a pivotal role in the decision-making process, policy and strategy development, and service delivery at multiple levels. The Ministry of Health and Child Care engages us with at a conference panel or with a poster presentation.

For more on the WHO guidelines see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAQvTT2mWW0

For more on Global Fund resource allocation see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Yr6n6fC994

For more on Zvandiri see www.zvandiri.org
integrated within the national operational and service delivery manual, which is used by health-care workers across the country. Our experiences, ideas, and solutions are central—this is true participation in action. At the community level, we are engaged in community dialogues with chiefs, village herds, counsellors, and church members. We are young people who meet every day, talking, learning, and solving problems. We hold support groups, hold client case conferences, train nurses, make comics, films, and radio shows, counsel children, and care for each other. There are many of us.

We are young HIV advocates who are striving to create a world where access to quality health services is a human right and not a privilege; a world where treatment, care, and support is made available, accessible, equitable, and youth friendly; and a world that is inclusive and diverse in fostering wellbeing, promoting health with zero stigma and discrimination. We do that in our own communities and our own spaces. We are young people who have grown up with HIV at a time when stigma was rampant, and emotional and verbal abuse led to a loss of confidence and purpose. If you come to Zvandiri you will see how young people support one another to become resilient and confident, and to realise their true value to their communities. They are examples of the ones you need to be listening to.

As a global community, we have come a long way on our journey to improve health outcomes for children, adolescents, and young people. Our needs are now being prioritised in global, regional, and national policies and plans. But it is now time to turn the policies and plans into action through even greater commitment to listening to children and young people and engaging them in the decisions that affect them in every sphere of their lives. We need to engage young people as leaders, as partners, as service providers. We need to truly invest in youth spaces and youth-led organisations. Trust our expertise and work alongside us in our spaces—where we work best and can be our authentic selves—and show our communities that you will listen and value our experiences and solutions. As young people, we are not only beneficiaries or clients of the programmes. We are equal stakeholders.

We call on funders to invest and support governments to scale evidence-based, youth-led interventions such as Zvandiri for all children and young people. The evidence shows that these models work, and that young people can lead change in ensuring equitable access to health for all. We believe that the priorities, voices, and experiences of young people must inform, shape, and direct all policies, strategies, and programmes aimed at improving the health and lives of adolescents and young people.

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