

# Breaking down Barriers



photos: Lindsay Vogelzang

PROJECT SHEET

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## Stepping out of the shadows

# Empowerment and the Young Voices Project in Zambia<sup>1</sup>

Lindsay Vogelzang, Willem Elbers and Thomas Mtonga<sup>2</sup>

### Executive summary

Too often the voices of youth with disabilities remain silent. This raises the question how these youth can best be empowered. As of yet, little research has looked at interventions seeking to empower youth with disabilities. Based on research in Zambia, this paper addresses this gap. It examines a one-year project in which two youth groups were formed and trained in advocacy and leadership skills whilst being taught on different models of disability and disability rights. These groups, which came together in monthly meetings, also undertook outreach activities to sensitise communities and companies about disability issues. The research shows that the project activities had a range of positive effects on the youth that participated in the project. Reported effects include reduced feelings of isolation, a more positive self-image, a strengthened self-confidence and increased assertiveness. Overall, the project enabled the project-participants to envision and pursue life goals they previously could not imagine. As a catalyst for enabling the youth to (also) change their environment, in particular raising awareness in communities and companies on disability issues, the project was severely constrained. In particular, the project-period was too short and the issues too deep-rooted whilst insufficient funds were available to overcome the (transport) costs of follow up activities.

### Introduction

In many developing countries the voices of youth with disabilities are not heard. As persons with disabilities, they face multiple physical and social barriers to participate fully in society. As young people, they are typically confronted with societal

norms that value acceptance of the decisions taken for them by elders.

If we believe that young people should be involved in decisions that have a direct impact on their lives, the same holds for youth with disabilities. Furthermore, youth with disabilities can make valuable

<sup>1</sup>'Breaking down Barriers' was initiated by the Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre (Leiden University) in 2015 to identify the factors leading to successful advocacy for children with disabilities. Together with One Family People in Sierra Leone, The Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services and Cheshire Homes Society of Zambia, the programme used academic research as input to build capacity for effective disability advocacy.

contributions to society in general. This makes the empowerment of youth with disabilities a crucial goal to pursue. The question is, however, what is needed for such empowerment to occur. While there is an extensive literature on empowerment, very few studies have examined interventions targeting youth with disabilities. Drawing on evidence in Zambia, this paper seeks to address this gap.



Young Voices and students from Twatasha Community School are marching together in their community to show their dedication to inclusive education and celebrate the international day for children with disabilities.

### The Young Voices Project

In 2015-2016 the Cheshire Homes Society of Zambia (CSHZ) implemented the Young Voices (YV) project with one year of funding from the German Embassy. The YV-project focused on young persons with disabilities in Zambia as agents of change. The specific goals were (1) to build the capacity of young people with disabilities as change agents, (2) to enable them to push for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in Zambia and (3) in general to improve human rights and living conditions for persons with disabilities. The project built upon the experience gained during the similarly named Young Voices program that was implemented by the Leonard Cheshire Global Disability Alliance in 20 countries in 2009-2012.

To achieve its goals, the YV-project implemented a range of activities. Most importantly, two youth groups of about 30 persons with disabilities in the age range of 16 to 25 years were formed. These groups were subsequently trained in the areas of disability rights, advocacy skills and leadership. In addition, two types of outreach activities were undertaken using awareness raising materials produced in the project. One group visited several communities to convince parents of children with disabilities to stop hiding their children (which is still a common practice in Zambia). The other group tried to sensitize companies about the tax benefits they could enjoy if they employed persons with disabilities.

This paper analyses and discusses whether and how the Young Voices project contributed to the empowerment of youth with disabilities. The analysis distinguishes between internal and external empowerment. Starting from the recognition that marginalized people often refrain from taking action because they lack the self-esteem, assertiveness and knowledge to do so, internal empowerment refers to people gaining the capacity to imagine doing things they never thought themselves to be capable of. External empowerment happens when individuals (and groups) then use this capacity to challenge the power structures in their environment (economic, political, social) that sustain their marginalization. The question for the YV-project is therefore whether the youth with disabilities that participated in the project gained the capacity needed to take action (internal empowerment) and change their environment (external empowerment).

The research was carried out over a period of three months in 2018 in Lusaka, using a combination of semi-structured interviews (29 in total), focus groups (three), Photovoice and participatory observation. Interviews targeted a range of respondents and informants, including members of the Young Voices groups, CSHZ-staff, youth with disabilities that did not participate in the project, and community members and company representatives that were targeted in the outreach activities. Participatory observation was carried out at CSHZ and the two youth groups.

### Stepping out of the shadows

This study found that the YV-project was quite successful in enabling youth with disabilities to 'step out of the shadows' as one participant put it. The youth that participated in the project reported a range of positive changes related to their internal empowerment: reduced feelings of isolation, a more positive self-image, a strengthened self-confidence and increased assertiveness. Overall, these qualities gave them a new confidence to pursue life goals they previously could not imagine. Three characteristics of the project proved crucial for achieving these positive outcomes.

Firstly, the project brought youth with disabilities together, some of which were role models to their peers. The youth participating in the project all share the experience of being different from the rest of their family and/or community. Some of them were 'hidden' from the outside world when they were young. Besides experiencing feelings of isolation, many of the project-participants explained that they lacked self-confidence and had low self-esteem prior to participating in the project. The YV-project brought youth with disabilities together which reduced



Young Voices, students, parents, community members and representatives of local politics gather together to join the youth their creative performances of all schools in the Kafue community.

feelings of isolation whilst having a positive effect on their self-image. Many youth explained that working closely with group members who already had leadership skills and an entrepreneurial mindset had been particularly inspiring. These 'successful' peers challenged their own negative self-image and showed them that persons with disabilities can create their own success.

Secondly, the project taught the youth (also) about the social model of disability, which says that disability is caused by the way society is organized, rather than by someone's impairment, whilst making them aware of disability rights. A recurring topic in the life stories told by the Young Voices is that they are often seen as 'the problem' by their environment. As such, it is not surprising that many

of them to some degree have internalized this idea. In the YV-project trainings, however, they were introduced to different ways of understanding disability, with an emphasis on the social model. For several of the youth, this was a liberating eye opener. By discussing the social model they learned to view their limitations as (also) arising from their environment, not necessarily from within themselves. Furthermore, the youth learned about disability legislation and their rights. For many of the YV-participants the training was their first encounter with the notion of having rights. Rights awareness provided the youth with a new perspective about the opportunities they have for realizing change. In particular, it boosted their confidence to take action.

Thirdly, the project paid explicit attention to public speaking, both in theory and practice. A recurring topic in the interviews was that youth with disabilities often refrain from speaking out due to a negative self-image, shyness and lack of communication skills. Public speaking played an important role in the skills trainings that were offered to participants. The youth could subsequently practice these skills during their monthly group meetings and outreach activities. A number of the YV-participants explained that they overcame (part of) their shyness while becoming more confident to speak out and defend their rights. Furthermore, several of the youth explained how they became inspired by the project and gained a new sense of purpose as disability activists.



Members of Young Voices participating in a focus group to discuss the impact of the program on their notion of empowerment.

### Inbuilt project constraints

Besides internally empowering youth with disabilities, the YV-project also aimed to change the broader environment via disability sensitization work that was undertaken in communities and companies (external empowerment). Unfortunately, the research found little evidence of (lasting) effects of the outreach activities. The study identified three key characteristics of the project-design that constrained the sensitization work.

First, the outreach activities were one-off, whilst the intended changes of sensitizing communities and companies require a sustained effort over a longer time period. The fact that the research found little evidence of sensitization is not particularly surprising. Creating awareness and changing societal beliefs about disability are difficult to achieve, let alone in activities without follow up. Unfortunately, the YV-project did not have sufficient financial resources for sustained outreach work.

Second, the youth still lacked the capacity needed to undertake sensitization work at communities and companies. The youth who participated in the project learned a lot, but their starting levels in terms

of disability (rights) awareness and advocacy skills were also very low. At any rate, changing deeply engrained thinking and practices requires considerable capacity. The trainings offered by the YV-project were insufficient to get the youth to the required level of capacity.

Third, the outreach activities were constrained by limited funds for transport. Transport and mobility constraints have a major impact on the lives of youth with disabilities in Zambia. Besides having to wait longer for mini-busses to pick them up (drivers are not keen to pick up individuals with disabilities as this can be more time consuming), public transport is particularly challenging for wheelchair users who have to pay higher fees as they need more space in the vehicle. In the YV-project a significant share of the resources was spent on covering transport costs for the project-participants. Although the higher costs of transport were foreseen in the original project-proposal, the amount earmarked for transport had to be reduced before the proposal could be funded.

### Recommendations

From this study the following lessons can be learned for future interventions seeking to empower youth with disabilities:

- 1 Ensure that youth groups are of mixed composition reflecting different levels of capacity and personal growth to enable role effects to occur;
- 2 Helping youth to realize that the constraints they experience (also) arise from society as opposed to (only) their impairment is crucial for overcoming a negative self-image;
- 3 Creating opportunities for youth to learn about, and practice, public speaking is key for gaining self-confidence and enabling them to defend their rights;
- 4 Ensure that empowerment interventions acknowledge that changing deep-rooted beliefs, policies and practices requires considerable capacity and adopting a long term perspective;
- 5 Take into account that youth with disabilities face additional mobility constraints that affect their ability to mobilize and undertake collective action.



Young Voices discussing the impact of the activities they undertook to raise awareness in the society and reduce stigma.

### Further reading

Vogelzang L. (2018). *Disability is not Inability. A Case Study of Empowerment of Young Persons with Disabilities in Zambia*. MA-thesis. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam. See [www.barriersfree.org](http://www.barriersfree.org)

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge the German Embassy for enabling us to learn lessons from Young Voices programme.
- <sup>2</sup> Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of 'Breaking Down Barriers' at the African Studies Centre Leiden (Netherlands). Thomas Mtonga is lecturer at the School of Education, University of Zambia (Zambia).