

## Young people using art to build peace in Zimbabwe



In the midst of celebrating the victory of his friend and colleague who had just been elected councillor, terror struck. Hordes of people could be seen scattering in the mist that engulfed the community as rubble burned, and Chishuwo (not his real name) could not hold back his tears and rage. Homeless and bitter at the age of 23, he could not grasp the new reality – a world with no home! About three years on, as part of a lively arts festival, the young man is at the centre of the stage, as onlookers are ecstatically reciting peace chants.

Epworth south-east of Harare is a semi-formal settlement characterised by a bulging population. The area is prone to a lot of delinquent behaviour, especially amongst unemployed youth. Epworth has been at the epicenter of various conflicts with regards to property rights, freedom of association and the abuse of human rights, given the political polarisation of communities across Zimbabwe. Against this background, the National Association of Youth Organisations (NAYO), through its annual Jacaranda Youth Festival of Arts, has created a window of hope in a divided and vulnerable community in dire need of transformation.

The festival is linked to the United Nations International Day of Peace observed on 21 September, when NAYO actively engages youth in non-violent processes. The blossoms of Jacaranda trees are a welcome sign of spring in Zimbabwe, emphasising new beginnings, a new harvest, new blossoms and coming fresh rains. The idea of a new start is important with regard to the reputation of Zimbabwean youths who are labelled as violent irresponsible rabble rousers, among other names. The Jacaranda Youth Festival of Arts is one of NAYO's initiatives to showcase that youths are in fact willing and able to be positive examples in their communities.

It was part of the 2011 festival that NAYO intervened in the Epworth community and came across Chishuwo. Mayhem began in the life of this politically conscious young man when he was forcibly evicted out of his home along with his family, namely his wife and three children, during the violent Presidential Run-off Elections campaign in June 2008. Township residents lost their plots due to intensified differences on political ideology within their community, as coercion and intimidation became the order of the day. Some of them were even threatened with death. NAYO interviewed locals who talked about repeated heavy clashes between various political factions, with youths being largely the victims and perpetrators. All this tore the community apart.



As narrated by Chishuwo: “It was on a Sunday evening when my wife said I was not safe to stay at home because some people were coming to destroy our house. I don’t understand why they chased us from our home when we had not done any wrong to them, and why they wanted to harm us. We had to hide in the tall grass in the dark until early morning.” Another family from the same ward was told that they were no longer welcome in the community. The invaders marched to their homesteads, ravishing houses and reallocating land to residents sympathetic to their own political ideology.

The life of Chishuwo became a daily struggle as he sought to provide for his family and also articulate some of the issues within his community. In the midst of all this he saw a window of hope. As the world was crumbling around him, the potential of his talent to communicate through various forms of arts was ignited. His group was performing a play, when members from NAYO were getting ready to engage youths in a workshop to diagnose the growing polarisation in their township. Chishuwo realised the light that was seemingly at the end of his tunnel, as NAYO invited him to feature in the 2011 edition of the Jacaranda Arts Festival. A discussion was held with his group members for a possible collaboration in

peace messaging during this event. Initially, they were not willing to even talk about the word ‘peace’ because of the political connotations it had derived within their township.

As Chishuwo noted, it was difficult enough to have youths with different political outlooks working together and have community elders accepting arts as a form of communication – especially on socio-political topics when issues of justice were yet to be dealt with. Given Chishuwo’s known political involvement, the community was not willing to accept peace messages from him, since all his statements were viewed within political lenses. The group was also convinced that there was a surveillance system monitoring their activities, and any association with outsiders seemed totally unacceptable to them. However, through continued engagements, namely in community dialogue meetings, the group finally agreed to take the bull by its horns and partake in peace messaging. NAYO decided to use Chishuwo’s plays in the streets of Harare where people did not know his group. The team members were given a platform to perform from which they gained confidence. They articulately delivered messages on peace in dance, poetry and drama. Finally, they performed on the big festival stage together with other young artists to a thunderous applause from government ministers and other stakeholders that were present. Chishuwo and his crew were an instant hit.

Their confidence was boosted, and they decided to go back to their community Epworth to spread the message of peace and begin to speak to a torn-apart community. From small crowds to gathering hordes of people, the group – now dubbed “Vahombe Performing Theatre Arts” – has become a sensation and a timely voice to community transformation, as tolerance, forgiveness and unity is now possible. They are also being hired by other organisations to perform at their functions which has opened up a channel for income in their previously poverty stricken lives.

In 2012 they became ambassadors of the Jacaranda Arts Festival and featured in the main event of the theatre category through a themed and well choreographed performance in Harare’s Africa Unity Square. That year’s festival coincided with a “Youth Fair” which brought together many youth organizations from across Zimbabwe, creating a chance for the group to perform in other marginalized communities and make a clarion call for peace and non-violence there as well.

NAYO’s youth-led interventions are envisioned to foster peace and a sustainable future in Zimbabwean communities and the country as a whole. The organisation calls on all of us to be aware of the importance of youths in the national discourse. As “Vahombe Performing Theatre Arts” now say, “nothing for the youths without the youths”.

