Kintu Kenny is a new generation of youth activists. He believes that the only way to achieve any of the youth health goals, such as universal health coverage and sexual and reproductive health and rights, means that young people must be in the driving seat of their futures. “Young people are the future of our continent, that’s why we need to be setting the agendas and driving the policies and planning where the interests of young people is being addressed. We owe it to the next generation coming behind us, to ensure that we create a better outcome and future prospects for all young people.” For Kintu it’s not just about getting a table at the seat, but actually being able to meaningfully participate in all areas that impact young people.

As the current Head of Programmes, with the African Young Positives Network (AY+) in Uganda, the 27 year-old says he has been afforded the opportunity not just to give back to his community through his work at AY+, but also to attend in high level meetings with key policy makers, at a national, regional and global level. But, he says that this opportunity to engage is a little bitter sweet, as although young people and youth-led organisations are being seen to participate at high level meetings and forums, many a time it’s the heads of state and government organisations that are afforded opportunities to speak on behalf of the young people in their countries. “So even although we are there as young people, our slots are only ‘listening slots’, which means that you are seen but not heard.” Says Kintu.

But Kintu is hopeful that the upcoming UN High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS taking place later this year, things might be a little different. “So we have a young person who is part of the coordinating committee and they are trying to see how the issues and concerns of young people in Africa will be heard loud and clear.” He says that the futures of young people in Africa is not secured and that is why it’s important for organisations such as AY+ to actively seek out and engage other youth-led organisations to mobilise and strategise in a more intentional and structured way. The Covid-19 pandemic made organisations like his step out of their comfort zones. “It showed that they were not as in touch with their networks and communities as they believed and there were some gaps in their network data. “It was initially challenging to find out feet, but we persevered and in fact the pandemic has pushed us to think out of the box and it showed just what young people are capable of when they need to adjust to a new normal and way of doing things. We had to unlearn and then relearn new ways of doing things.” With the understanding that everyone was in the ‘same boat’ Kintu says that after an initial period of confusion and inaction, organisation’s like his stepped up and reached out to other like-minded youth-led organisations to the-think, re-organise and re-design their way of working towards one that is more collaborative and connected.

He is a passionate advocate for young leaders to be recognised for the value that they bring to the table. “We are standing as Africans and African youth. We are standing strongly to challenge our leaders and the long outdated laws that do not address the reality that young people face today.” He is referring to policies and laws adopted in the late 1980s and early 1990’s before HIV became the crippling problem it is today. He says that the laws that determine when and how an adolescent and young person is able to access age appropriate information about their sexual health and rights were enacted at a time long before the internet became the most important source of news and information. With no adjustments that take into account the information that can be accessed by an adolescent or young person who might not fully comprehend what is being shared, as it’s often not age or content appropriate. “Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a fundamental right for adolescents and young people and they deserve to be given the
right and appropriate information so that they can make informed decisions about their health and sexuality and are able to achieve their full potential.” He adds that by ensuring that governments have empowering laws and policies that recognised the power and agency of young people, countries can achieve their development goals towards a prosperous society.

Kintu believes that there is power in unity and collaboration, especially with young people taking the lead and refers to the ‘workforce’ that he says the continent has in abundance. “We have young people who are skilled across a variety of fields and sectors and by bringing this youth workforce together we can start addressing the challenges and issues that face young people in a more structured and meaningful way.” He is interested in working with others to find different channels and networks to create a 360 degree coalition of young people from grassroots to the highest echelons of power. His message to leaders is simple, “We want to work with leaders, but they need to know that tomorrow we are going to be sitting in those positions of power, so if we want to continue and build on the work that our current leaders are doing, as young people we need to be actively involved and have our voice embedded into the laws and policies of young people today.” Looking ahead he is excited about the collaboration efforts being driven by young people across the region and the role that he and other activists are playing at building a healthier future for the next generation.

Follow Kintu on:
• Twitter: @kintukenny

The African Young Positives Network (AY+) is a regional network for young people living with HIV and AIDS across the Africa that was launched in 2011 during the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa. AY+ was born out of a pertinent need for a platform to engage young people living with HIV to take charge, lead the process and protect their Human Rights and for greater and meaningful involvement in the fight to end the AIDS epidemic. Aiming at greater participation of young men and women living with HIV in Africa in the HIV and AIDS response at the national level specifically in policy and law development processes, research program development, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Since its inception in 2011, AY+ has been driven by an underlying philosophy that young men and women living with HIV are not “just beneficiaries but great contributors to the AIDS Success Story”. We refuse to be treated as being ‘Vulnerable’ but rather we demand that young people living with HIV be recognized and engaged as Key Actors and Partners that are a Solution and Critical Resource to achieve the 90-90-90 Global targets to end AIDS by 2030.

Learn more about African Young Postives Network
• Facebook: @African Young Positives Network
• Twitter: @AYplusteam