You know when you have met someone special. Someone who is going to make a meaningful difference to the world and you are better for knowing them. That’s the impression you are left with when you first meet Natasha Mwansa, a 19-year-old health and development activist from Zambia. She says that when she was 8 years, she realised that she wanted to use her voice to change the world, today she focusses on using her voice, influence and numerous platforms to foster collective voices for change of the young people that she helps through the Natasha Mwansa Foundation that she set up in 2018. Speaking on what led her to become an activist, Natasha says that it was the bullying that she was subjected to at the new school she moved to when her family relocated to Livingstone. As one of the academic achievers at school, she recalls the day that she finally decided she had had enough of being bullied, when the bully was trying to take away a hard-earned accolade, she found her voice and decided to stand in her power and fight back. “It was hugely liberating. I knew then, that I wanted to use my voice for good and to help change the world.”

Another defining moment was when at 12, her school was visited by the Media Network for Children’s Rights and Development in Zambia NGO, who were looking to recruit young people who would be able to turn their energy and interests into meaningful advocacy. “Because of my deep love for communications and media from an early age, I just knew that the work of the NGO would be a great fit for me. I decided to grab the opportunity with both hands and see where this journey led.” Here Natasha says she was introduced to the world of advocacy and the activism bug bit hard. “I loved being able to use my voice to push for the rights and development of children in Zambia. We were afforded the opportunity to see the broader global picture and analyse how this impacted the lives of young people in my country.” Here she was also afforded the opportunity to gain valuable experience on how to engage with leaders and policy makers on issues of SRHR and the health and development of young people in Zambia. She is a firm believer that advocacy does lead to change and meaningful impact. “It is incredible to see the growing numbers of young people and other stakeholders who are now really starting to take a keen interest in the health and development of young people in our country, but also in the region.” For Natasha, it’s not only about pushing for policy or budgetary change, but also about growing the collective voice of change where everyone can participate in their own way to create a different pathway and future for young people. Adding that, “Another great way we can measure impact with our work, is the lives that change as a result of us using what is in us to bring change, from the re-entry policy being enacted to a young person realising their rights, from a person not going to school to governments providing for their education. All these stories of change and know we were a part of them should give us hope and let us know that we are making impact.” For her, true impact is not in how far you go with your advocacy, but rather how many lives you transform along the way. Bringing light to the darkness, pushing back against being silenced from speaking out, ensuring that you don’t only point out the problems, but are actively providing solutions to them. One thing the Covid-19 pandemic has taught her, is that young people face the same challenges everyday, whether you live in Lusaka or New York or Lisbon.

Natasha says that Covid-19 has starkly shown the impact that education and information about SRHR can have on a community. “Those who accessed proper information about SRHR have been able to take better care of themselves as they have been equipped to make better decisions about their sexual
health and well-being, whereas those who did not benefit from youth-appropriate information and services, have been impacted with spikes in teenage pregnancies.” She says that school is one of the best places where adolescents and young people can access age appropriate and youth-friendly SRHR information, provided by an education specialist. “So young people are mandated to spend their time at school, this means that they can receive the right information to make informed decisions.” She acknowledges that parents are still concerned that that comprehensive sexuality education as part of the curriculum will lead to their children having sex, but she says that through her work in communities across Zambia, she is starting to see a shift in attitudes. “When I meet up with parents, I always share the story about how my Mum got my brother and I together at a very early age to let us know that although she did not want us to engage in sexual activity at an early age, she knew that she would not always be there at every minute of our day and that in the end it would be up to us to make the decision about what to do with our body or not. I make sure that they fully appreciate the importance of SRHR education for young people, because it arms you with the right knowledge to make the right decision in that moment.”

In 2018, Natasha decided that she wanted to take her activism on a different path, to focus more on empowering and developing young people. She took the bold step and started the Natasha Mwansa Foundation. “One of the biggest challenges for a youth advocate is that you have to align your advocacy to the organisation’s vision and sometimes your agenda starts to diverge and I guess that’s what happened with me.” The Foundation was developed to offer training to equip and strengthen the development of young people in Zambia. “We are not able to solve everyone’s problems, as you would need much more money to do that, but our aim is really to harness the power, energy and spirit of young people, so that they can leverage their strengths and use their voices to make a difference where they can.” For Natasha youth development starts with good health, which is interlinked with SRHR. “If you have poor health, it impacts your education, your financial situation, your opportunities in life, not just for you but for the next generation too. So for us it starts and ends with good health.” She says the foundation was very fortunate to receive good advice and counselling from the World Health Organisation (WHO) Africa team who helped them solidify the idea of health for young people and then identifying which areas to target for development goals. “They have really helped us become great ambassadors in health for young people.” Natasha's continued advocacy efforts led her to being invited to the World Health Assembly in Geneva where she gave the opening remarks at the opening ceremony, WHA72, becoming the youngest person ever to do so. Her extensive work and impact has also been recognised. In the same year she became the youngest ever person to be awarded the Global Health Leaders Award by WHO.

More and more opportunities are opening up for meaningful participation by young people, but Natasha believes that it’s not just about having a seat at the table, but ensuring that young people are integrated fully into the system. That means being involved in the planning and the implementation. She appreciates the experience and wisdom of the leaders who are at the table but also believes that the energy and passion of young people should equally valued, and not looked down upon. For those young people who are at the table with her, she says, “Don’t be tempted to try and eat the whole dinner, let’s all share and bring our value to the table. We are all pieces of a larger puzzle and we are building a future together.”
Looking forward Natasha is rearing to travel again and meet up with other young activists around the globe and take lessons from their experiences during this last year. She is eager to start up more business ventures, expand the foundation, begin her undergraduate studies in health, and oh yes, also finding her life partner and starting a family. For Natasha though it’s about being true and authentic to herself, her Christian values and faith that sustains her and continue to be inspired by the changing lives of young people around her.

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