Today’s youth are more vocal and more organised than ever before. This is clearly evident in the large number of young people who are participating in the 2020 Aids Conference, which, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, is being held as a digital conference for the first time in its 20 year history. “As young people we must keep up the pressure to ensure that we have a seat at the table, so that we can meaningfully participate in critical issues and decisions that directly impact our futures.” At just 22 years, Tanaka Chirombo, a board member of Global Network of Young People Living with HIV (Y+) is a real firestarter who has championed the rights of young people, especially those living with HIV, to access quality healthcare services not just in his own country Malawi, but across the region. “I was very excited to get the call to participate. It’s important that the voices of young people are not only represented but that we help set the agenda and pace of healthcare reforms and policies that directly affect us.” One of the conference sessions he’s most looking forward to is the True Accounts sessions, which he along with other activists helped develop, to spotlight real stories of how young people across the region are using their power to improve ART service delivery.

Communities are at the centre of the HIV response and Tanaka knows first-hand the benefits of working closely with communities. He helped set up a network of youth champions that operate from the Mzuzu clinic in the Mapale district in Malawi, training them as peer educators to track defaulters in the community. Tanaka and his team undertook an innovative ground-up initiative, where young people were placed at the front of programming. Young people in the community were sought out and consulted on what services and programmes they wanted and what they believed would work for them. This led to a change of the policy on the ground. “Young people want to talk to other young people and this meant that we had to get buy in from the district health leadership. It took some time but eventually we got them to understand and agree that changing the delivery model would not only be beneficial for young people in the area, but also good for them as healthcare service providers in the district. So a win-win.” Today, district clinics now employ young healthcare workers who are able to provide peer to peer services in a youth friendly environment.

This week saw the launch of the UNAIDS 2020 Global AIDS Update, ‘Seizing the moment, tackling entrenched inequalities to end epidemics’. The report indicates that the global targets for 2020 will be missed by a significant margin and more worryingly that the funding for HIV responses widening. In light of the massive swings by governments to reprioritise funding to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic, many like Tanaka are concerned about how this will impact SRHR and HIV responses in countries that were already struggling to provide proper healthcare services. “Covid-19 has been a major blow for sure and it’s therefore imperative that we raise our voices, push harder and use our networks of influence to ensure that our governments do the right thing and meet the international healthcare targets that they signed up to.”

Another worry for Tanaka is the mental health impact to those living with HIV during this time. He believes that the wins made in HIV prevention and service delivery will be backtracked if the proper
interventions are not kept in place during the Covid-19 response. “Although the government has ensured access to ARTs during Covid, with a six month supply of treatment, we are not seeing access to psychosocial services which is very important, especially when you have been recently diagnosed. You are scared and uncertain. This is the time when you need to see your healthcare worker or speak to a peer.” He feels that this lack of face to face engagement will lead to many defaulting on their treatments. Defaulting and ensuring the retention of care it seems is a constant battle, which is why Teen Clubs that service grassroots communities play a vital role in creating safe spaces where young people know they are supported and are able to access treatments, psychosocial counselling, as well as an all-important meal. “Good nutrition is critical to recovery,” says Tanaka. “There is a high probability that we may well be seeing high levels of malnutrition after Covid 19.” Which is why he is hopeful that organisations such as his and local Teen Clubs will be able to start operating in their communities at full capacity in soon.

Tanaka believes that young people are the creators of their own destiny and is a firm supporter of the African Youth Charter, which places young people the centre of moving Africa forward. “When you give someone a space where they can express themselves and they are able to contribute, you start to see change.” Together with health activists from South Africa and Zimbabwe, Tanaka has set up the True Account platform which has been included as one of the youth sessions at the Aids 2020 Conference. “We are trying to show that young people need to be given a chance to have more impact on the ground. It really starts with creating client-centered youth friendly services. Our success at Mzuzu clinic has shown that you can achieve significant results when you take this approach.” He also hopes that the True Account platform he helped launch will foster greater collaboration between young healthcare activists, where they can share lessons and successes that can be implemented to the benefit of other communities in the region.

On his future plans, Tanaka is very clear. “I am currently a second year Public Health student at Livingstonia University and I am loving it. Public Health is my future career and I plan to use my academic degree, combined with my experience in civil society to make a difference from the inside.

Follow Tanaka on:

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