Clement Makuwa believes that there is beauty in democracy. “It is an ever-evolving dynamic, perfecting itself with time, but it requires governments that are held to account.” That is where the Young Politicians Union, one of Malawi’s leading political and governance youth organisations, has played a pivotal role in mobilising the voice and participation of young people within the country’s political ecosystem. With adolescents and young people accounting for over 60% of the country’s population, they are a powerful force to be reckoned with. This show of power was on full display during the highly effective Youth Decide campaign, in which Clement Makuwa, National Director of Young Politicians Union, and his organisation were key actors of change. Established in 2019, Youth Decide, the youth-led collective undertook country-wide campaigns to rally the country’s youth and engage the political leadership on key socio-economic issues impacting Malawi’s youth. He is clearly very proud of what has been achieved. “The National Youth Manifesto was created out of our determination as young people to ensure that the country’s most important political constituency was not ignored, while a few determined the future trajectory of our country. We knew that it was time for real change and as young people it was up to us, to ensure that our rights and needs was central to the national conversation and the national development planning.” The Youth Manifesto set out 12 critical areas where government policies and implementation were failing the country’s youth. It includes issues such as: lack of decent jobs, limited education and skills development, gender based violence and accessing health services, climate change and access to land, amongst others.

Finding ways to take voices from the ground and garner the necessary attention at the highest levels, is always challenging. As host of not one, but two local media shows, Clement knows full well the importance of using the impact of media to create platforms where young people are able to meaningfully express their aspirations and take citizen action on shaping the development of the country.” On his weekly Transworld Radio show, “Achinyamata Pa Ndale” – Youth in Politics, he zeros in on issues around democratic governance and socio-economic transformation and what this means in real terms for young people. His guests often include government officials, business leaders and youth activists. “I have only been hosting the show for one year, but it has been a phenomenal time in our country’s political landscape and through our show we have been able to tackle sticky issues and solicit responses and commitments towards the social compact from key role players and voices in our country.” His weekly Timveni television show – Youth Forum- is fan favourite and was the perfect platform to spotlight some of the incredible young leaders who will now be representing the voice of Malawi’s youth through their election as Ward Councillors. Media played a critical role in seeding the country’s political leadership change, but Clement warns that it will also be used as a loudspeaker to hold those who made election promises accountable for their commitments. The youth of Malawi are informed and know their rights and they are watching.

There is a sense of change in the air and Clement is cautiously optimistic about the future of his country. “I have always been interested in politics and the
influence that those in politics wield.” As a young boy he recalls seeing district councillors visit his ward and how they engaged the community on issues of access to water and education that captured his attention. And so his journey into political activism started. “For me, honestly, it’s about how I can use my voice, my knowledge and my platforms to make a difference in the lives of ordinary young people.”

The need for choices was one of the rallying themes for change during the Youth Decide campaign. There is real hope that with the endorsement of the Youth Manifesto, that this time around, the newly elected government will reciprocate the goodwill of the youth nation and implement the proposed programmes with direct and meaningful benefit to the young people of Malawi.

When asked if Clement believes that he can now rest, he chuckles replying, “No not really, we have much to do. With the win and what we achieved still fresh there is no time to waste. Our government needs a listening ear and will need to be more open to initiatives that directly benefit young people.” He and others in the youth consortium have been busy conducting a post mortem of the election campaign. In addition, they have identified areas of review for government to undertake, to ensure that old issues of maladministration and corruption in the management of youth programmes and funding is rooted out, thereby ensuring that young people regardless of their affiliations, social standing or connections are able to fully benefit from the socio economic policies of the state.

Turning to leadership and in particular growing the next crop of youth leaders in Malawi, Clement is adamant about the crucial role that he and others in similar leadership positions need to play in bringing others into the space. Equally important is creating spaces where young women are able to move into leadership roles. Sharing an example of a young girl who attended one of Young Politicians Union’s training sessions, the young girl was so inspired that she started proactively defending the rights of people in her communities, often clashing with the headman and local leadership. Eventually however, the local community embraced her passion and today she has been elected to as ward councillor. “She is using her voice and agency as a young person to help shape the conversation around the needs in her community and that will lead to real and meaningful change.”

The young people in Malawi, like Clement and his peers, are indeed a force for change and are an inspiration to many young activists across the region, that with a unified voice and vision, you can shape you future, you can move mountains and you have the power to change the course of leadership in your country.

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