This article was co-authored by John Kachakwale and Yin Tao Zekko and was first published in the Zambia Daily Mail newspaper on International Youth Day (12th August 2020), as part of a collection of inspirational stories featuring local youth activists. In celebration of International Youth Day, we are republishing the story on Brighton Mukupa Kaoma.

As Zambia joins the rest of the world in commemorating International Youth Day; Brighton Mukupa Kaoma shares how his ‘wooden spoon’ turned into a silver spoon. At 26 years, he is easily one of Zambia’s most achieving and promising young men. His passion and hard work towards youth meaningful engagement and climate change, has earned him a number of awards including, the WWF International Presidents’ Award (2016) and the Queen’s leadership Award (2017) amongst others. Even though his success could appear to be overnight, Brighton comes from a humble background and has had to brave the odds, preferring to make a difference in his community vs the country as a whole. Looking back, Brighton says, “if you were to refuse on betting on my chances to complete my high school, I wouldn’t consider you crazy.” His background, however, is not different from many Zambian young people, whose dreams might seem far-fetched due to the many social and economic constraints they face. Brighton’s journey started on the Copperbelt, when he was just 14 years old. As a young person growing up in a community battling harsh economic conditions, where a good number of young people were indulging in illicit activities, radio was the ladder that Brighton took to get where he is today. He has come to define himself as an African, not just because he is a black man amidst the colourism debates being had, but because his identity is deeply rooted in the African culture. He believes that he is a friend and an agent of change to this world. Brighton’s contribution and engagement, at both a local and global level, personifies this year’s International Youth Day (IYD) theme; Youth Engagement for Global Action. To him, Youth Engagement for Global Action is all about creating an environment that enables young people to participate in the political landscape of the country, giving them 21st century skills and competencies, which importantly includes critical thinking. Brighton states, “There is nothing more saddening than a group of young people who are less informed. It’s more dangerous than an atomic bomb.” Furthermore, “If young people are not empowered with the right skillset and tools for them to compete favourably in this competitive market, then the future is bleak.” This year’s IYD theme is not just an ordinary theme, but is a call to action for every citizen, to say that young people must engage and fully participate in determining their futures. To Brighton, the theme also means creating opportunities for young people to innovate, but says that this will require financial support, financial incentives and business development activities.

In 2019, Brighton was one of the five young people across the globe who were selected to train over 1,000 fellow young people on critical thinking and innovation, in Hong Kong. Prior to this, his track record included youth leadership and his work as a climate change ambassador, which included offering training and facilitation sessions with UNICEF, as well as other local and international organisations. He is a firm believer that young people can change the path and trajectory of their lives and their society. Even though he acknowledges the challenges that different societies and backgrounds present to young
because his identity is deeply rooted in the African man amidst the colourism debates being had, but took to get where he is today. He has come to define 14 years old. As a young person growing up in a journey started on the Copperbelt, when he was just and economic constraints they face. Brighton’s opportunities to complete my high school, I wouldn’t turned into a silver spoon. At 26 years, he is easily one Mukupa Kaoma shares how his ‘wooden spoon’ commemorating International Youth Day; Brighton as Zambia joins the rest of the world in Daily Mail newspaper on International Youth Day This article was co-authored by John Kachakwale and of different societies and backgrounds present to young though he acknowledges the challenges that and trajectory of their lives and their society. Even training and facilitation sessions with UNICEF, as well climate change ambassador, which included offering innovation, in Hong Kong. Prior to this, his track across the globe who were selected to train over incentives and business development activities. That this will require financial support, financial odds, preferring to make a difference in his success could appear to be overnight, Brighton comes Presidents’ Award (2016) and the Queen’s leadership Award (2017), amongst others. Even though his community vs the country as a whole. Looking back, meaningful youth participation refers to having the thirst for knowledge and understanding. This year’s IYD theme cannot be a reality if young people in Zambia only depend on Tweets and Facebook posts as a source of information. Saying that there is a need to go beyond the surface and that calls for reading policy documents, books and attending networking events. “Meaningful youth participation means transitioning from being ordinary to extraordinary. And you can only be extraordinary by doing extraordinary things, but knowledge is critical.” On the other hand, meaningful youth participation refers to the attitude the duty bearers have toward young people, the time they take to listen and the way they respond to the voices of the country’s young people. Meaningful youth participation is a two-way system. And for that, young people should learn to form partnerships with decent adults. He says, Decent adults are those who are willing to collaborate with young people and not to see them as threats. The moment young people are seen as threats, is the moment meaningful youth participation comes to an end.” Brighton’s work started by him acknowledging, what should not be considered as okay in his community and then challenging the status quo. He shared how he has always refused to go by the saying, ndiya mwamene vilili” (That’s how things are). He urges young people to start investing and collaborating with others, no matter how hard it is. “There is more power and learning in collaborating then working alone.”

Coming to the issue of Covid-19, Brighton thinks it has affected the globe both negatively and positively. Since the virus became a global pandemic, there has been a reduction in carbon emissions, which is a good thing. However, he also understands that as a result,
over 200 million people might be hit with a food crisis by the end of 2020. The pandemic is a threat to meaningful youth participation and engagement but there is always a silver lining. “The Coronavirus has presented a window for us to plan forward. The entire recovering process should be holistic, and should take a systems approach to responding to the pandemic. We already have documents that can guide us, such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, the African Union Youth Charter, the 7th National Development Plan and others. The recovery process should be embedded in green growth.”

Brighton Kaoma’s life is something that many young people can learn from. His focus on youth participation and engagement has always been a deliberate process, and young people must fight to be meaningful and adults must welcome them. He adds, that if the world is to see many other young people achieving and spearheading development locally and globally, then young people should develop a thirst for knowledge, and become active in their communities and school.

Follow Brighton on:
- Facebook: @BrightonMukupaKaoma
- Instagram @brightonkaoma