Sitting down to interview Taweni Musa, the conversation is overtaken by his energy passion and deep sense of responsibility to care for young people in Zambia. Born in Motungwa village, in rural Zambia, Taweni is one of eight siblings and describes his upbringing as humbling. His sense of pride is tangible, as he shares that he is currently the only one of his siblings to have completed high school, although he is very optimistic that the youngest sibling might follow in his footsteps.

Growing up wasn’t easy. Taweni recalls being left in the village at very young age, while both his parents moved to Lusaka in search for better financial prospects to support their family. In 2005, after completing grade 7, he joined his parents in Lusaka, but the reality of their struggle soon became very apparent. He vividly remembers attending school for shorter time periods. This was because students who had not managed to pay their school fees in full, or on time, were called out in front of their classmates, or simply chased away. To avoid embarrassment, students owing fees would often leave classes when the school accountant walked in to follow up on overdue payments.

Taweni’s spirit was not dampened. Just the opposite in fact. “This is where my passion was born to actually do something for others. My passion is directly connected to what I went through in my lifetime.”

After school, Taweni joined the NGO sector. He laughs as he explains that he had ulterior motives. He did not join this sector originally to help promote positive change. In actual fact he acknowledges that knew very little about the NGO world, except that that they could possibly assist him in continuing with his education. He joined the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) in 2011, which he had first became aware of when he was still attending high school. As he walked to school there were many street kids begging for food and money. “I was so bitter about them. I used to shout at them and just say bad things about them. But one day I found people talking to these street kids. I gathered my courage and while still in my school uniform, I went to ask them what they were doing as these kids were irritating me.” Taweni soon learnt that the YMCA had programmes dedicated to looking after these vulnerable kids. From this interaction, he knew that this was the NGO he wanted to join. He says that he was thrown into the deep-end, as on the day he started at the YMCA, the volunteers were all on training and on instruction from the only person available at that time, the cook, he was sent out to gather street kids and “teach them something”.

“I had a lot of training and was taught about vulnerable children. And because I could relate with my own story, I became so passionate, that within only three months I was recognised by the staff who appreciated my efforts.” Unfortunately, the Street Kid programme was short lived, as the funding was short term and not renewed. Many kids suddenly found themselves without food and facilities to even clean themselves and because they could not understand the reasons why, became incredibly angry with Taweni and the other volunteers. Not resting on his laurels, he decided to look for media opportunities to advocate on behalf of these children and share their stories. But this was not enough for him. He realised that “advocating” and “speaking about these issues” does not mean effecting actual change in the children’s’ lives.
Knowing that he had no knowledge about how to put together an organisation or even a programme to help the street children, Taweni approached Restless Development an International NGO in Zambia. Here they gave him an opportunity to work in Luapula province as a College Volunteer Facilitator. Again, he was thrown into the deep end with no formal education on how to teach young people, he was asked to facilitated classes on SRHR, Civic Participation and Life Skills. “I was put through a grueling one month-training which I appreciated, but there was so much to learn.” Taweni even took on the coordination of all student research and sport activities which was not part of his duties, but his passion to make a change and help others seemed to open more doors with more responsibilities.

His time at Restless Development quickly taught him how to manage stakeholder relationships, coordinate events, bring in specialists where needed. He realised that being an activist who wants to make a change, also means that you have to be an entrepreneur and businessman in your approach to helping others.

His journey in growing and learning how to become an effective change agent, saw him working with numerous organisations. One of these included Action Aid Zambia where he joined their social movement, Activista. He was asked represent Zambia on a mission in Denmark, where young people participated in looking at how to sustainably transition from Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals. Throughout this journey, he kept coming back to the question, “Are my actions truly making a difference to the lives of young people in Zambia.” This inspired him to again start working with the street children on his return from Denmark. But this time around, Taweni went back to the streets alone. He knew he had built up sufficient knowledge and, most importantly he already knew these kids. This meant that it was easier to help and mobilise them. He started off with just talking to them about condom use, hygiene and then linking them with organisations that could assist them. But, this was still not enough. He knew that more needed to be done.

He met up with an old college friend of his, sharing his experiences with the children and his vision to ‘save a lot of dreams.’ “The reason I wanted to start this organisation is because I wanted to respond to the needs of these kids.” But, they needed at least seven people to structure and register the NGO. True to form, Taweni roped in volunteers and using his own savings registered the organisation. “Save a Dream” was born in 2015. He used his last savings to book a venue and organise a workshop to share and sell his vision in the hopes that people would themselves be inspired to volunteer for his organisation.

“The first programme we wanted to implement was an education support programme, because we realised that the only way to get them off the streets, was to get them into school.” Leveraging all his experience and knowledge, Taweni tried to manage the gaps and shortcomings he saw in their programmes. He knew that if he took the children to community schools, they would just end up back in street after school. He decided to rather invest in getting them into boarding schools, where they would be cared for and have a roof over their heads. “Cause that is where we could work on their behaviour”. As is often the case, one solution can
lead to another challenge. As Zambia had no boarding schools for primary students, and the Save a Dream organisation focused on children between 7-14 years of age there was a gap. “We realised that after the age of 14 it required a lot of work for someone to change their behaviour.”

With no financial backing and no savings, Taweni and his team hit the streets and started identifying a small group of young children who they thought were eligible to form part of the Education Support Programme. They still had no idea where they would find a school that would assist the children, but they were undeterred. A month into their search, they came across an Irish Zambian school that supported vulnerable children. But it only assisted with the cost of education and not the boarding or food costs. Being a true entrepreneur, Taweni convinced the school to give him a term to come up with the money to pay for the children’s boarding and food costs. This was not an easy task, as boarding and food costs for three children would be massively expensive. Thinking out of the box, he and his team took to washing cars at churches and malls and managed to raise enough funds to pay for the children’s expenses. Through their continued efforts, they were able to increase the number of young people attending school from the initial three to six and later to 10. However as the numbers increased so did the realization that they funding structure to source funds was not sustainable. “But I knew that if we even only helped 10 out of the next hundred young people on the street, we had made a tangible difference in their lives. We would be giving them their dreams and futures back.”

Four years down the line, Taweni proudly shares that they are still fully supporting all 10 young people, not only with their boarding and food, but also with the costs related to their education. His immense pride is evident, as he advises that one has now graduated from high school and another is in the top five achieving students at their school. “He is a hero!” he adds. In 2020, Save a Dream still has no formal source of funding but with his experience as volunteer, trainer, activist and the business acumen learnt through his experiences growing up, Taweni still manages to keep afloat and make a difference in the lives of street kids in Zambia. Giving a percentage of his monthly income to the organisation, he is a living example of the motto: Putting your money where your mouth is.

On his plans for the future. “In 10 years, we envision that Save a Dream will have two schools, BIG schools! And in these schools we want to incorporate life skills and formal education.” This is a big dream for Taweni and his team, but one which they are working towards day and night to save the dreams of the young people living on the streets of Zambia. Taweni ends by saying: “The advice I would give other activists, is that activism is not only about talking, it’s about action. And action in this context means that you have to be the change you want to see. It is not sweet, it is bitter, but if you achieve it, it is glorifying!”.

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