When a person is blessed with a name at birth that their actions can be measured by, it shapes their destiny. On meeting Delight Muchazonzidwa, you know you have met a young man who is living up to his name, but moreover one who is dedicated to working alongside other activists who want to make change the future health trajectories of Zimbabwe’s youth.

Delight was introduced to the world of activism, when at 16 years he campaigned to become a child legislator in Zimbabwe’s Junior Parliament. It just so happened that the theme for that year was Ending Child Marriage, and this is where he was introduced to the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people. “Since then, I can say that my advocacy has focused on comprehensive SRHR education and services, as well as youth empowerment. SRHR is the root of everything! Because without access to this information and being given choices over our health, we are not in control of our futures as young people.” When asked what the single biggest challenge to this future is, Delight says it’s Zimbabwe’s cultural beliefs and religious values called colloquially. “We see the protection of customary laws in communities, where there may be pecial benefit to traditional leaders to keep the status quo. As their interests tend to lie in more bread and butter issues versus the health and well-being of young people in their communities.” This he says leads to continued challenges around early child marriage, lack of access to SRHR information and services, unfriendly disability, teenage pregnancies, abortions, all which impact the futures of Zimbabwe’s young people. Delight believes that if the country were to promote for female chiefs then it might lessen the rigidity to the customary system with more openness to addressing issues that impact young people, especially young women would see a positive impact. “A recent report showed that in the whole of Zimbabwe, we only have 6 female chiefs versus the plus 200 male chiefs.”

Local Language and Way of Life is sacrosanct
Addressing another significant challenge for the countries young people, especially those in rural areas, Delight shares that language has become one of the major challenges in accessing information on SRHR and health services, as the Zimbabwe government prefers all communication – even district visits by officials to rural areas – to be undertaken in English. But says, Delight, “The problem, is that in most these areas, schooling is done in local vernacular, so young people just don’t understand what is being said. They are also unable to read any of the printed materials, as it’s in English.” Government officials are aware of these language barriers, but the practice continues as it’s the official position of the government. Delight and the organisations he works with, (Socially Active Youth Trust, Zimbabwe Youth Policy Tracking Group, and SRHR Africa Trust) are however making some headway in convincing local authorities to them to translate and distribute relevant SRHR information in local languages that can be accessed easily by young people in rural communities and they are presently undertaking a pilot project in Mashonaland East, “I am very optimistic that by providing materials in easy to understand language that is in the local vernacular, we will start to see a positive impact and improvement in the lives of young people in Zimbabwe.” Delight is so passionate about communicating in local languages, he has even made a local TV show, the Mai Chisamba Show, that was once considered “too old” for young people, popular with a younger audience. “I am passionate about our
local languages and culture. I take pride in our progressive cultural activities and conduct, and wholeheartedly believe that as a people we need to know our roots and who we are. That’s why I want to encourage young people to love our local language and way of life because it’s sacrosanct.”

Covid-19 Impact
In a country where resources were already stretched, the onset of Covid-19 in early 2020 meant that Delight and his fellow youth advocates had to adapt and change their SRHR outreach and youth engagement activities, due to the covid-19 movement and social distancing restrictions put in place. “The nation-wide lockdown saw us being limited to a 5km radius of where we lived and needing a police permit if you wanted to travel beyond that. So, we had to change how we met and engaged with young people. It also meant that we had to find new ways to communicate with them too, as even accessing data and airtime was a challenge for mobile communication.” Delight decided to approach local radio stations, where he convinced the channels to allow him and fellow youth activists to share important and life-saving SRHR health information to young people. “With so many young people being forced to stay at home, they turned to intercourse as a social socialise. Many were unable to access contraceptives, which resulted in many unplanned pregnancies.” The spike in teenage pregnancies, even led to one of the country’s Members of Parliament, and current Chairperson of the Parliamentary committee, Dr. Ruth Labode, stating that the country was in for “a bumper harvest of pregnancies” as a result of the pandemic. Delight also highlights the mental health stress that he witnessed and that he himself experienced as a result of Covid-19. “I was personally challenged, as sometimes I was unable to afford data, so I could not access my emails or WhatsApp messages and this led to a feeling of incompetence, even although I was still trying to advocate through my radio slots.” For others, we saw the result of unplanned pregnancies, leading to devastating outcomes, as girls resorted to using traditional abortion methods with sometimes deadly consequences, and others committing suicide when they found out they were pregnant. For some they were forced onto the streets by parents or guardians. For the country’s homeless, Covid-19 was simply devastating, says Delight. He and his fellow youth hubsters have been undertaking sensitisation outreach to try and assist young people where possible to get back into schools. “Our custodial laws however remain the biggest stumbling block in trying to find pathways back to schooling for these young people.” Says Delight. But he is undaunted and is already working on plans with other advocates on how to find solutions to work around these challenges.

Looking forward, Delight clearly has ambitious plans for the future. “In Zimbabwe, those who know me call me Honourable or President, which is why I made a public confession, that I would do everything to live up to the name bestowed on me. You must aim high in life, which is why I want to represent Zimbabwe’s young people as a key member of the African Union. I want to help build a unified force to ensure that we place SRHR at the centre of young people’s lives and where they are afforded the right to make decisions about their reproductive health and futures.”

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