

Lusaka Voice

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Washington Fellowship: Week 1 update

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My journey to the United States as a participant in the Washington Fellowship of the Young African Leaders Initiative began 10 years ago as a teenager eager to be part of something bigger than myself. I didn't understand it fully then, but my numerous volunteer activities opened up new ways of seeing my place in society as girl that grew up with immense privileges and had a responsibility to give back to those that were not so lucky.

From charity work at school, through leadership in advocacy groups at University to my early career in various government, international government and human development institutions, I have been driven to give back as a professional in public service. Earlier on this year, I took a leap of faith and assumed full-time management of a non-governmental organisation that I co-founded in 2013. The NGO, based in Lusaka, is called Winners' Circle Association and strives to create platforms for the social and economic development of Zambia's youth. In recognition of the vision of Winners' Circle and its modest achievements to date, as well as some of my own community organising initiatives, I have been selected as one in twenty-one Zambians (and one of five hundred African youth) to participate in President Obama's inaugural Washington Fellowship under his Young African Leaders Initiative. Through my weekly updates, I hope to document and share some of the personal lessons that I take away that have helped me to critically reflect on myself, the work of my NGO and more generally, my society.

The Washington Fellowship is essentially an intensive academic experience at a US education institute in one of three tracks: business and entrepreneurship; public management, and; civic leadership. It is an investment by the Obama Administration in young Africans in the hope that new skills and shared experiences will further empower participants to become movers and shakers in their respective fields for the betterment of their communities, countries and for our continent. Because of my passion for the work I do with Winners' Circle Association, I chose the civic leadership track. I've been fortunate to have been placed at Wagner College in New York which has a nationwide reputation for excellence in promoting civic engagement.

I came here assuming I would learn more on how to better manage projects and administration in an NGO; how to become better at applying for much needed funding to expand the work of Winners' Circle; to better communicate our agenda; to better lobby government for change, and so on. In other words, I wanted to know how to push what I already believed was a plausible model for the developmental progress of youth. To be sure, all these elements have been or will in some way be important aspects of our training. However, I didn't expect that, in addition to this, my own assumptions about approaches to achieving change as part of civic society would be challenged. But this is precisely what my first week at Wagner College studying theories of leadership has done. It has opened my world to a new approach to leadership that rediscovers that power is not only exercised in a hierarchical, top-down manner, but rather has given me a new appreciation for the inherent power that can be built through fostering relationships between ordinary people. That true power is invested in the people that we as public workers serve is concept that is so often reiterated that we presume its realisation in all

areas of organised society. Yet, in our broken democracies, we have become accustomed to a more manipulative form of power where leaders neglect the voices of those that legitimize their incumbencies. Further still, we often associate this with governmental failures, but even more surprising are the less obvious ways that civil society inadvertently perpetuates these very systems of power that we oppose.

We live in a world in which, on a day-to-day basis, our chants of “power to the people” are often drowned out by the customs in which privilege is placed eminent above deprivation. Those that have give to those that do not; those with knowledge teach those without, and those that are better off come to the aid those in need. Whilst there is nothing inherently objectionable about this, a common end result is that the very people that we wish to serve are seen as mere recipients of predetermined solutions, rather than as communities with expert knowledge of their own needs and capabilities. In this way, resultantly, civic society replicates the top-down, hierarchical and presumptuous custom of driving change that ignores the voice of the masses but which we commonly only associate with governments.

Civil society cries out against the lack of democratic deliberation in government decision-making processes, yet rarely do we conceptualize our own projects on the basis of a full consultation with beneficiary communities. We bemoan the lack of government accountability, but often privilege accountability to our funders than accountability to our beneficiaries. We urge governments to empower its citizenry, yet we rarely leave tangible structures of leadership once our projects are completed. We call in to heckle opposition politicians on TV and radio programmes at their inability to consolidate, whilst we insist on our own institution’s solo mission, rather than considering strategic partnerships with other public and private institutions. We are irritated by the persistent imagery of a helpless continent from foreign well-wishes, even though we never take the time to map the assets (and not only the challenges) of the communities we wish to uplift. In a sense, NGOs have become by-products of flawed systems, failing to see our own contributions to those systems. As such, surmounting some of these intuitive practices will require brutally honest and critical self-examination of our underlying assumptions as to how we can best drive change that can revolutionize our societies.

On a personal level, two key aspects speak loudly to me in beginning this self-critique. Firstly, it is crucial that we resituate the nature of the problem that we aim to solve at the epicentre of change initiatives and take ourselves out of the middle of the equation. In other words, rather than seeing our organisations as the crucial element for change, we must begin to understand that we are only one amongst a community of many institutions and individuals with particular strengths and capacities that can help a community overcome the problem. This will mean a shift in starting points from, for example, “Winners Circle is going to drive economic growth for small businesses owned by youth” to simply “small businesses owned by youth struggle to grow”. This also re-emphasises the need for ownership and self-empowerment to drive social change for the beneficiaries and will encourage them to take responsibility for the successes and failures of empowerment initiatives. It also emphasises the need to build and foster leadership in all stages of the community by creating positions of responsibility and accountability for project outcomes amongst them. Putting the problem at the centre further steers us towards strategic partnerships with other public and private organisations. Partnership and indeed interaction with the beneficiaries should be underlined by deliberative consultation and accountability to each other, which will enhance the likelihood that that problem is being addressed in a holistic manner.

Secondly, and related to empowerment of beneficiaries, we must begin to appreciate that change emanates from an emotional decision, rather than a simply rational decision based on empirical evidence and views of experts. Similar to patients recovering from trauma, healing of our societal ills often entails various cognitive stages that may include shock, defensiveness, denial and acceptance. Even where the change that we want to facilitate is for the good of the beneficiaries, therefore, we must respect the different stages of emotional development that accompany change and take time to foster these stages of development if our communities are to arrive at wholehearted understanding and support for change. This necessitates a shift of emphasis away from short-term outcomes to long-term sustainability.

Whilst some of these may be familiar concepts to many that work in the field, these realisations have been instrumental in beginning to shift the focus of a girl whose commitment to community service began ten years ago away from herself as a privileged benefactor and towards self-image of a supporter of change that is activated from within communities. Indeed, discussions with other fellows in the programme reveal that putting these lessons into practice is difficult in a world that values instant results and is somewhat more unforgiving of failures of public service institutions than of failures in the business world. NGOs don't often get second chances and so the impulse to stick with the status quo is incentivised as a safer option. But if as young African leaders we know better, then we must begin to do better. This may involve painful processes of fighting pre-existing structures to insist on modes of long-term, sustainable social change and that truly values the empowerment of those we seek to help, rather than simply enhancing our positions to help them. As I begin this journey of re-discovery of approaches to achieving the ultimate purpose of my NGO, I sincerely hope that leaders of social change, whether in the public or private sphere, will too make similar bold decisions to radically enhance selfless service to our communities.

More online

- For more on Winners' Circle Association, please see www.ourwinnerscircle.org
- For more information on the Washington Fellowship and the Young African Leaders Initiative, and to learn how to apply, please visit www.youngafricanleaders.state.gov/washington-fellowship