VOICES INSPIRING CHANGE - THE ACTIVIST

LUCIANO KAMBALA

Namibia
When Luciano strolls into the café, he immediately apologizes for being late, even though he’s right on time and has taken hours out of his day to come to meet with us. He’s wearing an elegant black coat, grey turtleneck, and pointy leather loafers, an outfit so debonair he looks like he just stepped out of a Parisian café.

Luciano is the Secretary General of the African Youth and Adolescent Network on Population and Development (AfriYAN), a UNFPA-funded network active in 43 African countries that coordinates and empowers youth around issues of sexual and reproductive health and development. Luciano also works with the Namibia National Students Organization (NANSO) where he serves as the National Programs and Projects Coordinator.

“I’ve always known I wanted to help people,” he says.

Luciano was born in Oshakati, moved to Walvis Bay in high school, and came to Windhoek for university. “Growing up,” he says, “my parents would take care of other people. It was an environment where, if someone didn’t have what they needed, it was about: what can we do to take care of that need that exists in their house or their community? I think their example instilled the same sort of passion in me.”

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Today, Luciano works as an accountant for Coca Cola by day, spends his nights and weekends working with AfriYAN on projects to support youth in both rural and urban Namibia. AfriYAN’s all-volunteer executive team of ten has been instrumental in the Condomize Campaign, which teaches adolescents and young adults about condoms; Free Flow Campaign, which distributes sanitary pads to young women in rural areas; and in incorporating comprehensive sex education into schools.
In Namibia, he says, there are “a lot of misconceptions and a lot of cultural norms and cultural values that block out all the necessary information. If you go to rural Namibia, you will see early childhood marriages. You have girls as young as 12 years old getting married, being forced into marriages, they’re forced to have sexual intercourse. This girl doesn’t know that she can protect herself, or that she can get contraception to not get pregnant. And then she has to drop out of school, and now she’s at home, unemployed, uneducated, and she’s a mother. And her children will go through the same cycle. So, I think especially in rural Namibia, we want to ensure that these people know their rights, that they know: There are options for you, despite what the culture says, despite what you’ve known; things can be different because you have choices.”

“Universal health coverage is something everyone should be concerned about.” - Luciano Kambala

Sixty-six per cent of the Namibian population is below the age of 30, and 10 to 24-year-olds make up 33 percent of the total population.[1] This huge community of young people are growing up in a different world than their parents and face a different set of challenges. Whereas the older generation was shaped by the struggle against apartheid, and saw vast (but unequally shared) wealth creation and poverty reduction, the younger generation is being defined by unemployment—the rate of which stood at 44 percent in 2016; HIV; and changing social norms around sexuality and sexual health.

The national adolescent pregnancy rate is 19 percent, with regional variations ranging from 38.9 and 36.3 in Kunene and Omaheke respectively, to 9 percent in Oshana.[2] A 2016 UNFPA study on teenage pregnancy in Namibia, found that the first sexual experience is unwanted for 54 percent of girls, and 76 percent of sexually active adolescent girls do not use modern methods of contraception, particularly rural adolescents. Only 42 percent of girls complete secondary school.

While Luciano spends time traveling to rural communities, he also spends time in the capital,
Not everyone he meets with is enthusiastic about the work AfriYAN is doing. Some church leaders, for example, object to Comprehensive Sexuality Education being introduced into the public school curriculum. But Luciano is comfortable with the dissonance.

"It feels good to have the opportunity to meet people like this," he says, "and to be able to echo the voices of young people, speaking of our experiences and expectations."

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As an accountant, I think in black and white, but as an advocate, there are grey areas," he says.

One of the things he sees consistently—whether in rural areas or the urban bustle of Windhoek—is challenges in the health system.

People complain, he says, about long lines, too few doctors, poor quality service, lack of privacy, and not enough resources. More fundamentally, this results in broken trust between the people and the health system. This keeps young people away from health facilities and they opt to use home remedies and over the counter medication from pharmacies.

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He thinks more needs to be done to bring quality primary healthcare to remote areas, and to improve the quality everywhere—so that trust can be regained between the people and the system.
“Universal health coverage is something everyone should be concerned about.”

Though he’s only 23 years old, Luciano is, in some ways, a veteran in civic engagement, having got his start in high school. He wishes more young people would engage, and that there were more constructive spaces for them to engage in civil discourse.

“I think the problem in Namibia is that a lot of young people don’t actually realize that there is a space for them that people want to listen to young people. A lot of politicians and government officials want young people to come to them, they want to hear from young people.”

At the same time, Luciano says there is a need for spaces where young people can raise their voice, and be informed, not with the often sensational content that is blasted out on social media, but with evidence.

He’s a firm believer in the power to influence policymakers and political figures by engaging with them. “We have to go to them. Remind them that they’re important and tell them what you want them to hear. They don’t know what’s happening at the grassroots level. Holding them accountable requires that we go to them and tell them what we think and what we know—all while providing solutions and not just complaining.”

“Every time I go somewhere, and I see that the situation isn’t good, there is some sort of responsibility that lies within me that says: you can’t stop now because there are still people suffering.”

Indeed, he’s not stopping now. AfriYAN is busy updating their strategy and expanding their scope. Though discussions are still underway, the road forward is clear for Luciano. As AfriYAN continues “to empower and educate youth, particularly around issues of health, well being, and civic engagement,” Luciano believes firmly that continued and new efforts should be a response to community needs.

Luciano says: “Whatever you’re doing should be community-based. The community needs to have a voice, their voice to be echoed in whatever you’re doing, because you’re doing it for them. Many civil society organizations forget that; they start doing what they believe people want, not what they actually want. That’s why it’s important to remember that the work isn’t for you, it isn’t for the organization, it’s for the people—it’s for the community.”

This story was written by Lindsay Morgan based on an interview conducted by Lindsay Morgan, Iyaloo Ngodji (Synergos), and Katherine Matus (R4D).
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