

Youth using creative media for change

As youth across the country are called to activism and political engagement, many of them are using creative media as a new mechanism for change, particularly the Umuzi Photo Club, a youth participation and advocacy organisation.

"Umuzi gives learners from marginalised communities photographic training and engages them in identifying social issues and advocating change," says David Dini, founder and executive director of Umuzi. "Through exhibitions of their work and media coverage, it provides learners with a powerful platform to address their community, the press and the public in dialogues about issues they are passionate about changing."

Over the past few months, Umuzi has conducted photographic advocacy workshops and exhibitions in Diepsloot, Sandton and Hillbrow, Johannesburg. The issues raised by its young photographers are as diverse as the two communities but familiar to many youth throughout South Africa.

Creating Diepsloot petition

The learners of Kwena Molapo, a high school serving Diepsloot Township, north of Johannesburg, highlighted the lack of sanitation, clean running water and electricity as their chief community concern.

"We discovered that service delivery was the learners' leading issue through a brainstorming session, which also listed other community challenges, including poverty, crime, unemployment, education, sexual harassment, hunger and pollution," said Emily Coppel, Umuzi workshop coordinator.

Whilst many of the adult residents of Diepsloot have taken to the streets in violent protest of service delivery failures, these young activists found more peaceful means to get their voices heard. After interviewing and photographing local residents who had experienced shack fires, burst sewer pipes, and survived cholera, the learners raised a petition for improved service delivery, which they presented to local ward councillor, MJ Ndlazi of the ANC.

Learners Rudzani Matshili and Lawrence Makoti appeared on SABC 2's Morning Live last week to share their experience and give their views on service delivery failures in the run-up to the elections. During the interview, the learners spoke out about the continual neglect of the situation in Diepsloot.

Addressing teenage pregnancy

Another group of learners from Barnato Park high school in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, are dissatisfied with the rising incidence of teenage pregnancy they observe among their peers.

"We want people to be aware that teen pregnancy is out there," said Mbali Nkosi of Barnato Park High School. "We all should be helping and not just judging."

Underage drinking, recreational drug activity and the influence of sugar daddy taxi drivers were some of the causal factors these Barnato learners identified in their investigation.

Abortion has become a cottage industry in the back streets of Hillbrow and Berea, as Mbali Moagi, Jimmy Kena and several other learners illustrated with their photo-essay on the prolific advertising of illegal abortions in the community. Their photos show the streets surrounding the school littered with posters and pamphlets advertising, "Safe and pain free abortions, 100% guaranteed!!" Another reads, "Quick, same day, plus cleaning, from R100. Call Dr Jackie."

Babies carried to term, or born premature are often abandoned. Learner Tebogo Mabye investigated a local shelter for orphaned infants called, "The Door of Hope." The shelter is open 24 hours a day, for desperate mothers to anonymously abandon their infants. "Those are the lucky ones," says centre manager Lindsey Groenewald, "the police bring us babies salvaged from dustbins in a much worse condition."

Learners found that the teenage mothers who decide to keep their babies face discrimination, a high drop out rate from school, and costs that exceed the child grant they are entitled to from the government.

"Teen mothers are children themselves," explains 16-year-old Jimmy, "We have too many children raising children in this country."

Photo exhibition

Thapelo Motsumi, an Umuzi youth photographer, will be featuring his first solo exhibition with the Urban Arts Platform at the Anstey's building, Johannesburg CBD, as part of the three-day Youth Day festival. After working on both the Diepsloot and Hillbrow social awareness projects, he has turned his work to give a voice to everyday people as they define what love means to them. Attend '[Youth In The City](#)' on 15-17 June at 6pm.

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