Transformative youth development through heritage projects: connecting political, creative, and cultural capabilities

Abstract

This article draws on our continuous artistic engagement with Tonga youth in Zimbabwe over the last four years and offers a critical analysis of their transformation. We use the intersecting concepts of political and cultural capabilities to argue how arts-based participation in civic spaces has enabled them to shift the power balances, fostering them as epistemic agents and change-makers. Their journey across three arts and heritage workshops showcases that the longitudinal collaborations and social networks developed and built on one another, creating a thick interrelational embodied process of initiating political advocacy and re-creating different and multiple reinterpretations of their cultural heritage. The paper demonstrates the possibilities of envisaging and realising alternative livelihoods amidst the struggles exacerbated by horizontal and vertical inequalities, precarity, political apathy and poverty and highlights the importance of identifying relevant, context-sensitive, and engaging approaches for transformative development and legacy.

Key words: Youth Development, Civic engagement, participatory arts, cultural heritage, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

This paper critically reviews and analyses youth development in Zimbabwe by drawing on three projects conducted with Tonga youth in Binga, Zimbabwe, between 2019 and 2022. The project employed various forms of participatory arts (graffiti, participatory video and a documentary film) to provide youth with a space for civic engagement, co-develop solutions for the developmental challenges they face, and form solidarities with one another. The objective of using various participatory methods was to allow the youth to focus on different issues that concern their communities and aspirations for a progressive and sustainable future. The value of participatory research in our projects, among other things, lies in its objective of power-with and power-alongside experienced researchers and youth who often do not have spaces where their knowledge and contribution potential are recognised or acknowledged (Martin et al. 2019). Using such participatory methods facilitates transformative processes that are likely to result in transformative visions and outcomes to lead more equal social and economic structures of power. This allows youth to thrive and develop to their full potential (Hujo and Carter 2019) in contexts that are politically charged and socioeconomically precarious, requiring several skills, including agency, reflexivity, resourcefulness, and engagement (Kabonga, Zvokuomba, Nyangadza and Dube 2021).

Focusing on findings across three projects, we reflect on how participatory and creative approaches provided a space for youth to embrace their cultural heritage, exhibiting the multiple characteristics highlighted by Kabonga et al. (2023). The paper draws on the work of Amartya Sen (1999) to assess how these imagined (and desired) futures account for available opportunities as a key aspect necessary for youth to lead a life they have reason to value. As will be shown later in the paper, available opportunities (capabilities) form part of an important dimension that is key to youth development, as well as youth-focused policies.

However, the concept of youth is not homogeneous and is a social construct. While we argue that there is no universal definition of who is considered youth, we also acknowledge that the UN defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24. Such categorisation can be contextually deprived and reflect a Western normative conception of youth in relation to the characteristics of young people in terms of age, sex, how they are being treated, what they can achieve, and how they should act, with no particular attention being paid to historical contexts (Ansell 2016). Our understanding of youth within the Zimbabwean context draws on the work of Lopez-Fogues and Cin (2018) in diverse development contexts. We suggest that the concept of youth is not a fixed category, but rather it is shaped by specific historical, social and cultural circumstances. In particular, youth in Zimbabwe are not passive recipients of the intersecting inequalities imposed upon them, but rather they have the potential to be political actors who can challenge these inequalities. We also note that youth in Zimbabwe may not always follow linear trajectories for transitions from studying to work and marriage, as is often assumed in Global North contexts. Social, cultural, and historical norms could give them different responsibilities and life trajectories. For example, some youth may be required to look after their younger siblings at a younger age, start working early to contribute to the household, or be forced into marriage at a very young age. Therefore, in our engagement with young people, we paid attention to the diversity of such experiences, and we acknowledge that their experiences are shaped by broader social, cultural and historical contexts.

Our focus on Tonga youth is underpinned by studies that have shown that young people in Binga, especially those of Tonga descent, have long been marginalized on account of their ethnicity and heritage (Mkwanazi, Cin and Marovah 2021). Across all of our projects, Tonga youth found themselves in precarious situations emanating from structural, economic, and political inequalities. They experienced precariousness in diverse forms such as unemployment, poverty, and unequal access to social services (e.g., education, health, and political exclusion, among other things). Often such conditions are a reinforcement of perpetual social fractures and inequalities (Stuth and Jahn 2020) that have been in existence. Youth are particularly vulnerable to precarious conditions as they seldom have the capabilities to influence the status quo resulting in a complex interplay of social, economic, and political factors that constrain their ability to affect change. Consequently, they are on the receiving end of multiple inequalities and unjust consequences of systems. In some cases, as in Zimbabwe, these inequalities and injustices sit at the intersection of intercommunal conflict between different ethnic groups such as the conflict in Binga where the Tonga youth have been exposed to ethnic marginalization by dominant ethnic groups (Gift et al. 2019). The lack of material resources associated with poverty exacerbates the precariousness and inequalities resulting from marginalisation. In addition, the historical exclusion of marginalised groups may cause feelings of rejection and isolation by those whose culture is dominant. At the national level, the disparities faced by youth are deeply rooted in hierarchical social, economic and political systems that perpetuate horizontal and vertical inequalities where gender and ethnicity related tensions render them as powerless actors. However, global development targets such as Agenda 2030, sustainable development goals, and national development plans emphasize the importance of youth in development. Therefore, it is essential to understand how diverse groups, including those whose heritage is does not constitute the majority, can be incorporated into development discussions.

Taking the above into account, youth narratives reflect how they envision alternative livelihoods amidst struggles exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities, low educational attainment, increasing

unemployment, and the absence of political participation. For instance, the youth in Zimbabwe have been facing increasing rates of unemployment and political instability for several decades. Among economically active young people, a high proportion (63 percent) of females are working as unpaid family workers on farms (ZimbStat 2017) and risk being married off at a young age. These experiences point to a context of a failed economy, whose collapse is ascribed to a myriad of reasons, including the controversial land reform program, the political turmoil that followed, and the subsequent sanctions imposed on the government by Western powers. This has resulted in increased inflation and a strain on the few remaining jobs, pushing the youth into an abyss. The formal sector responded by significantly shrinking, thereby reducing its capacity to employ new workers. The only alternative for the youth has been the informal sector (Luebker 2008), and there has been little room to discuss the roots of these inequalities or have public deliberations to co-produce solutions, form solidarities, and mitigate some of the social, economic, and political conflicts they have been going through.

Our artistic engagement with youth builds on the everyday creativity that exists in their communities. This paper shows how this engagement forges spaces for cultural consciousness and the advancement of political capabilities, which are key for youth to assist communities in building a stable and sustainable future in the context of their local communities (Gordon and Taft 2011). For the youth in our projects, imagining such a future involves fostering cultural consciousness by participating in politically constrained platforms and becoming active citizens. Several implicit and explicit assumptions have been made regarding how youth inclusion and engagement, socially, economically, and politically, might be achieved. Our projects demonstrate that the one-size-fits-all approach to thinking about and acting towards youth-inclusive development lacks contextual relevance. Although research has often emphasised the role of families and schools in orienting youth's engagement in social spaces, our projects demonstrate that this approach is often inadequate. It is often difficult for youth to explore, expand, or express their political abilities or cultural consciousness in socially, culturally, and politically constrained environments. This paper builds upon this body of work (see Cooke and Solan-Donlan 2019; Mkwananzi et al. 2021) by demonstrating how participatory art methods open new spaces, opportunities, and collectivity to foster cultural consciousness and increase political capabilities.

We start by sketching out the context of three projects informing this paper. This is followed by a capability and human development-based analysis to understand the extent to which the arts-based projects enabled youth's well-being and opportunities. Our analysis also explores the relationship between participatory arts and youth engagement in development issues, with a specific focus on political capabilities and the importance of voice in political inclusion. Ultimately, we argue for the significance of collaborating with youth and civil society organizations to develop sustainable solutions for youth development challenges.

2. Political and Cultural Landscape of the Research Context

To gain a broader understanding of youth development within the Zimbabwean context, and specifically the Binga district, it is important to understand how political, social, and economic developments have evolved over the years. Binga is located in the Matabeleland North Province, in the northwest region of Zimbabwe, on the fringes of the Zambezi River along the Kariba dam, adjacent to the western border with Zambia.

Upon obtaining independence in 1980, the new government inherited segregated systems of government permeating all spheres: social, economic, political, and educational (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009). The new republic aimed to establish an egalitarian society driven by the desire for equality of all, regardless of race, gender, religion, and ethnicity. However, it did not work as smoothly as envisioned. Muzondidya (2009, 169-170) argues that 'elite groups in both rural and urban societies, which included rich peasants and farmers, business people, and educated professionals, benefited most from policies which opened up the state and capital accumulation to blacks.' The possibility of an egalitarian society remained out of reach, which became a potential cause of discontent among some citizens. Moreover, due to colonial imbalances and a settler regime, policies in politics, education, and the economy did not effectively and sustainably improve the livelihoods of the poor majority (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009). Even though there had been relative peace shortly after independence, it was disrupted by an ethnic civil war between 1982 and 1987, primarily between supporters of the Ndebele ethnic group and the ruling party dominated by those from Shona ethnic backgrounds. Disruptions such as this may be used to illuminate the salient struggles of less dominant ethnicities who are often forced to suffer alone and in silence.

The high levels of unemployment and income erosion experienced by both rural and urban populations between the late 1990s and 2017 contributed to discontent across political divides. Grievances related to issues of social justice, such as human rights abuses, violent elections, and the censorship of independent media, were among the reasons for this discontent (Marovah 2016). As a result, food riots, demonstrations, and strikes by workers and students occurred throughout the country. During this period, there was a gradual shift from a relatively democratic and liberal arrangement to an authoritarian and intolerant approach. In the midst of these developments, hard-to-reach areas such as Binga remained marginalized and unrepresented. Due to the lack of meaningful socio-economic development and political voice, Tonga youth are misrepresented in development discourses and agendas, perpetuating an environment of social and political exclusion (Mkwananzi et al. 2021). Consequently, the Tonga may be viewed as experiencing some level of social disadvantage and economic deprivation (Gift et al. 2019). Due to this invisibility, the community, including the youth, cannot participate in the economic, social, and political spheres (Mkwananzi et al. 2021). However, the issues surrounding unemployment are a nationwide problem, with the economic and political crisis leading to the informal sector becoming the only opportunity for employment (Luebker 2008). Nonetheless, the informal sector cannot absorb all the people, and the majority of those who could not make it in the informal sector became unemployed. According to the Zimbabwe Inter-Censal Demographic Study (2017), the proportion of inter-provincial in-migration is highest in the two metropolitan provinces of Harare and Bulawayo, which have 50% and 48% respectively. Manicaland and Matabeleland North had the lowest rates (28% and 27% respectively). The population aged 15 years and above in Zimbabwe is 8,072,178, and 60% of this population is economically active. Among the economically active, 52% of them are male and 48% of them are female (ZIMSTAT 2017). Most of these economic opportunities were not available to the Tonga youth living in rural and economically deprived areas. We acknowledge that Tonga youth's experiences are not exclusive to youth from other ethnicities or geographically marginalised groups. It should be noted, however, that what makes their experiences unique is the intergenerational structural exclusion that has been ingrained in most Tonga descendants over the years. Many Tonga youth are suffering the consequences of this exclusion, some of whom participated in the study, and their sense of identity and ethnic awareness may not be comparable to those of dominant ethnic groups. Therefore, while socio-political challenges experienced by Tonga may be relatable to other contexts in Zimbabwe, their intangible cultural heritage has intrinsic value, which may not be widely expressed, valued, and shared due to structural marginalisation.

3. The projects: Participatory art with youth for development

Mkwananzi and Cin (2022) conceptualise a contextually sensitive understanding of epistemic (in)justice and reinforce Bishop's (2012) proposition that participatory art-based methods provide a horizontally democratic and inclusive research process that allows engagement with communities living on the margins of society, as opposed to traditional and hierarchical research methods. The bottom-up participation and agenda-setting, which ground participatory approaches, allowed youth in our projects to engage beyond a traditional view that would position them as "participants." Rather, youth were involved as co-researchers and had the opportunity to steer the research process, which recognized them as co-producers of knowledge and challenged oppressive approaches to youth participation in matters of development that concern them (Mkwananzi and Cin 2022).

As mentioned earlier, the available political spaces, particularly in our study context, perpetuate a political culture that leaves scant room for less trained voices to be heard (Young 2002). In addition, the despondency of young people regarding more traditional forms of politics may indicate several shortcomings within the status quo. Gordon and Taft (2011) suggest that responding to the youth disengagement 'crisis' from formal politics requires intentional socialisation of youth by adults to become active and responsible citizens. Learning institutions and adults have been relegated to the role of fostering youth civic and political engagement. It may seem crucial for youth development and transformation, but, in fact, the position overlooks the role and responsibility of political institutions in maintaining a safe and accessible environment. Therefore, despondent attitudes may be the result of youths' reactions to flawed and corrupted institutions (Farthing 2010) or represent their frustration with policies that consider them threats to public order (Pickard 2019). It may also be a manifestation of what we have stressed elsewhere (Chikozho et al. 2021; Mkwananzi et al. 2021) that systematic and persistent exclusionary practices of institutions in power may serve as an epistemic deterrent to the voices and agency of young people. In this paper, we highlight that there are multiple factors involved in youth engagement, making it a multilevel and multidimensional topic. Those from ethnic minorities or low-income backgrounds are more likely to experience systematic exclusion and marginalization. As they may believe that their participation is not valued or that it is not significant, young people are less likely to participate in decision-making events (Collin 2015). Due to such environments, disenfranchised youth are less likely to trust government decision-making (Iwasaki 2016), as they are aware that their voices are not considered. On the other hand, they are part of untrained voices who may not have the resources, skills, or knowledge to engage in public deliberation and debates (Mkwananzi and Cin 2022). To address such a conundrum, methods and space should be created that allow for these groups to express themselves in different, creative, artistic, or cultural ways that align with their everyday life practices.

Concerns about political apathy, disenfranchisement, or undervaluing youth capabilities are all shaped by the intersectionality of multiple inequalities that tend to overlook youth as potential contributors to development initiatives and policies. In any context, the exclusion of a country's youth in development agendas curtails their civic engagement, positioning them as passive epistemic agents. Such passivity indirectly relegates the role and responsibility that youth have in national development, which is crucial for the developmental aspirations of any society. As the transition of society from one generation to another is a critical process for development, it ought to consider the long-term benefits of early youth inclusion in

averting future challenges associated with any form of youth exclusion that some governments are dealing with in modern-day politics. Therefore, each project offers a unique insight into how to foster community engagement among Tongan youth, equip them with a political voice through which they can develop agency, and use different forms of participatory arts to address the diverse challenges and issues in their lives and claim the public and political space. As we present quotes from these projects, we have made sure to use pseudonyms for the participants. However, since there is only one museum in Binga, it was difficult to anonymize it. Therefore, we obtained the consent of the museum manager and curator to use the museum's name.

All three projects were carried out in partnership with local stakeholders. Phase 1 of the project (Street Art to Promote Representation and Epistemic Justice among Marginalized Rural Zimbabwean Youth), conducted in 2019, collaborated with the local community museum and art and crafts centre in Binga, Zimbabwe. The project worked with twelve young people between the ages of 19 and 24 from across Binga and of Tonga heritage and ancestry. The young people came together to visualise youth aspirations and epistemic injustices through graffiti paintings mounted on movable boards. This phase was divided into two strands. The first strand focused on the creative process of making the graffiti artifact, which was a build-up from a series of activities, and the second strand was a multi-city exhibition of the artifacts. Through this process, young people collectively identified often untold practices and experiences that work against their individual and collective aspirations.

The second project, "Youth Agency, Civic Engagement, and Sustainable Development: Ideas for Southern Africa," was part of a larger project aimed at sharing and embedding findings from Changing the Story projects in Zimbabwe and South Africa. We worked with participants who had been part of the Phase 1 Zimbabwe project and collaborated with a community organisation in South Africa and again with the BaTonga Museum in Zimbabwe. The aim of this Phase 2 project was to establish and strengthen regional channels of engagement between youth, civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other stakeholders, connecting and consolidating lessons learned. The lessons were intended to provide ideas for sustainable and inclusive development with and for young people and to provide evidence of the effects of such collaborations. The six participants in Zimbabwe produced a documentary film which is available on the public platform.

In these two projects, youth acknowledged their role in development; however, they lacked support, knowledge transfer, mentorship, and other resources. Youth amplified unemployment and diminishing cultural heritage as major present-day issues and highlighted a need to create a pathway for realising the potential impact of invigorating ecological heritage and embedding it into everyday lived experiences. Consequently, Phase 3 of the project, "Transnational and Intergenerational Exploration of Ecological Heritage," partnering with the same organizations and working with six of the young people, galvanised youths' interest in the ecological heritage of Moringa oleifera through intensive workshop engagement with both elderly community experts and research and farming experts, and through documenting the workshop learning process, and ultimately through policy engagement. Table 1 provides the demographics of the young people who participated in the project in Zimbabwe.

Table 1 here

Each project built on the other, and we worked with the same participants and the Tonga community over a period of three years in Zimbabwe. Although the last two phases of the projects also included young people and organisations in South Africa, in this paper, we specifically focus on the Zimbabwean component to illuminate the context in a clear and focused approach.

All three projects aimed to provide safe and democratic platforms for youth to disrupt long-standing biases about their own lives (Cooke and Soria-Donlan 2019; Mkwananzi and Cin 2022) and provide epistemic spaces for collective engagement with their communities, especially through local community-based organizations. Here, the use of different arts-based methods with participatory ethos was a methodological approach to co-produce with the Tonga community, build dialogue among different actors, including policymakers, through exhibitions or film displays at the end of each project. The process of participatory arts potentially involved a creative and collaborative process with youth, artists, museum representatives, NGO workers, and researchers, creating and fostering several capabilities that could be significant for transformative youth development.

Given that this project was conducted between 2019 and 2021, during a global pandemic, we faced challenges such as limited mobility, physical constraints, and sustaining communication. While we conducted our workshops in 2020 and 2021 during windows of opportunity when gatherings were allowed, which made it possible for researchers in Zimbabwe, NGO workers, museum representatives, and youth to come together within the limitations of social distancing, we used WhatsApp as an online research and communication platform to mitigate immobility (Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al. 2022) and to stay in touch with the youth. We created an online group in early 2019, long before Covid, to build a community with researchers where we could discuss every day and project-related issues and plan accordingly. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic, this platform became a primary and online space for keeping in touch with one another and contributed to the formation of a community and sense of belonging. We regularly reimbursed the youth for their data costs as such costs can be beyond their affordability. It is also important to note that we did not use WhatsApp for any data collection, and all the interviews were conducted when we had the opportunity to have an in-person meeting. It is possible that not being able to meet in person as much as we would have liked may have affected the short-term impact of the project, while creating an online community enhanced the sustainability of the network we created and brought us closer together. Given that some of the researchers were based in the UK and South Africa, while others in Zimbabwe were in Bulawayo and Gweru, using digitally-mediated online tools enabled us to conduct transnational online research, helping us to consider "the multiple competing constituencies and the diverse social and spatial connectivities and power hierarchies" and to acknowledge "multiple contexts in the process of creating knowledge (...) in variegated African contexts" (Cin et al. 2023, 268).

In Zimbabwe, engaging young people is a complex and challenging task due to shifting power dynamics (Ndebele and Billing, 2015). These dynamics make it difficult for youth to penetrate decision-making structures and perpetuate existing inequalities related to poverty, gender norms, access to quality education, and unemployment, leading to a sense of social and economic disconnection and political apathy. As a result, limited public spaces are available for youth voices to be heard. Therefore, we take a different perspective by viewing youth as ethical citizens and engaging them in co-designing and co-producing participatory arts research, where they have autonomy over setting the agenda, crafting a voice, and disseminating it widely. Through three years of engagement with Tonga youth and consolidating outcomes

from each project, we demonstrate how arts and cultural heritage can develop small-scale and local interventions using arts-based methods to engage with communities and find solutions to local problems (Cooke and Kathori, 2001). These interventions open spaces for civic engagement and create greater awareness about the everyday creativity that underpins youth cultural and social lives. To enable youth to develop their full potential in social and economic spheres, certain conditions need to be in place. In the next section, we discuss these conditions. Our argument is based on Hujo and Carter's (2019) assertion that transformative change allows youth to thrive and develop to their full potential. Therefore, our argument is built on that for youth to develop their full potential in the social and economic spheres, certain conditions need to be in place, which is what we discuss in the next section.

4. Capabilities, Youth and Development

We frame our analysis within the capability approach and human development paradigm to understand the extent to which these creative and arts-based projects advance youth's well-being and opportunities. Based on the multi-faceted account of human well-being and development, the approach is concerned with the functionings (what people value to do and be) and capabilities (the freedoms or opportunities to realize their functionings) (Sen 1999). These capabilities are relational (Dajeaghere 2020) and are formed in relation to the temporality of socio-political and socio-economic contexts, encompassing both economic and non-economic aspects of development. Economics-based approaches to human development conceptualise skills, education, or any form of post-school training as part of human capital, highlighting its importance for labor market returns to monetise the materialistic values of the skill (Heckman and Corbin 2016). The capability approach, which has an ethical approach to human development based on the idea of human dignity, views the non-economic value of skills as essential to individuals' social and political welfare (Sen 1999). Rejecting the notion that financial metrics such as income, economic growth, and wealth accumulation can fully capture how well a society is doing, the approach allows for a focus on how well each individual is doing by assessing the opportunities available to them. This position builds on giving attention to the diversity of an individual's skills when thinking about and acting for development, in addition to agency, reflexivity, resourcefulness, and engagement, as alluded to by Kabonga, Zvokuomba, Nyangadza, and Dube (2023).

The diversity of skills, in this case, considers the political and socioeconomic sensitivity in each context and what young people and the community in that context have reason to value. It may be associated with preserving cultural heritage, the green economy, and supporting environmental justice causes. What remains important is that individuals from these contexts can take active steps necessary for them to realize the transformative development they envision, beyond benefits that may be economically rewarding. This by no means suggests that the economic aspect of "being and doing" is insignificant in transformative development, but what it means is that in contexts where epistemic injustices have been everyday lived realities, this element of development ought not to be seen as the ultimate desired achievement. Thus, while economic development is plausible and an inescapable part of development in any society, it should not be considered as an end to development but 'as a means' to an end (Sen 1992). This enables us to capture the entanglements of economic and non-economic aspects of youth livelihoods in the projects, particularly the social ecology that informs everyday experiences. Therefore, the use of the capabilities approach in this

paper offers a normative analysis of exploring what youth value in their lives within the local and socio-economic contexts they are situated in. We elucidate the ways in which engaging in these participatory-arts projects with local actors, being part of the research process as co-researchers where they have decided the agenda of the research at the onset of the research and collaborating with artists in the production of different artifacts were part of a skills-acquiring process. Figure 1 shows the convergent relationship of the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres in thinking about youth transformative development.

Figure 1 here

Each of the three projects had the intent of value-capturing, merging cultural, political, economic, and entrepreneurial initiatives to create benefits for the community. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including artists, researchers, arts and community-based organisations, as we collaborated with youth, forged new social organizations and networks aimed at forming a localized bottom-up approach for sustainable development and change. Our starting point was youth development, and we aimed to flesh out the complexity and multiplicity of contexts and issues disabling them from achieving what they have reason to value, as Sen (1999) suggests. Therefore, we grounded the projects in creating spaces and capturing opportunities through artistic engagements for the youth to engage with the development challenges on the ground. This gave us an evaluative space for exploring the social arrangements and conceptions needed for change across the different projects. Drawing on the process on which the artistic engagements were built around widening cultural democracy and production, we build our analysis on two concepts: cultural capability – highlighted as freedoms to give form to our experiences and co-create different and multiple versions of culture (Gross and Wilson 2020; Wilson, Gross and Bull 2017), and the political capability – the freedom to be part of the public deliberation that affects their lives, and the freedom to access skills, resources, and space to advance capacities for public functioning and knowledge production (Cin and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm 2020).

We are interested in understanding the extent to which different forms of artistic engagement expand the means of cultural production, leading to an expansion of the ability to self-articulate a voice under the conditions of political climate, community dynamics, and power dynamics at the regional, national, and local levels. At the same time, we are questioning the entanglement of the cultural landscape with the political and social struggles of youth to examine whether culture-making and cultural opportunities lead to any form of political agency. Such an analysis through the lens of capabilities can enable us to see the extent to which cultural creativity and participation nourish other capabilities, such as the ability to generate income, engage in entrepreneurial initiatives, or create an ethical and political ground of empowerment. It can also provide us with insight into how cultural capability can lead to political capabilities by opening up a fertile space for opportunities, processes, and factors that create a platform and conditions, and dismantle deliberative and structural inequalities that restrict access to the public sphere (Cin and Süleymanoğlu-

Kürüm 2020). Furthermore, it can encourage youth to express their everyday realities and challenges in making decisions about their lives (Mkwananzi et al. 2021).

We are interested in assessing the impact of these capabilities on the lives of youth and seek responses to questions such as: How do the creative qualities and capacities of young people translate into a political project of resistance and accommodation? How do creative activities contribute to the emergence of more egalitarian cultural spaces? Through a series of arts-based creative projects, we investigate youth engagement with everyday development challenges and freedoms of collective creation and culture-making, leading to fostering solidarity formation amidst the structures that silence them. In the next section, we explore how everyday creativity enhances the youth's cultural capability and how they further share their cultural and ecological heritage with a wider audience while also 'co-creating versions of culture' (Wilson et al. 2017).

5. Everyday Creativity and Cultural Capability

The idea that creativity emerges from human thought operating within a set of existing representations, concepts, objects, symbols, rules, and notions, as proposed by Shao, Zhang, Zhou, Gu and Yuan (2019), indicates that the creative process is not independent of a variety of materials. Materials, such as representations, concepts, objects, symbols, rules, or notions involved in or processed during creativity, are derived from individual and group context-related experiences or cultures. The practice of everyday creativity in the youth context in the projects was seen in two related ways. Firstly, it was associated with the uniqueness of the narratives that they craft internally and express through the artistic forms available to them. This internal cultural choreography creates a philosophical position that emphasises the moral value of viewing the world through a cultural lens (Tett 2021). Considering that this understanding encompasses how we conceptualise, communicate, and evaluate our cultural value, most youth do not have an opportunity to express their ideas on this matter. In their article, Castro-Koshy and Le Roux (2021) reinforce the importance of cultural creativity by emphasizing that creating spaces for knowledge is nothing less than rewriting history for individuals and communities who fight for the survival of their culture or epistemological heritage, or whose histories have been silenced. The establishment of this body of work is therefore rooted in the voices, thoughts, everyday struggles, and creativity of historically silenced groups, such as the Tonga. Through the multi-city exhibition, the youth had the opportunity to share cultural practices and values with the public, of which many were previously unaware. This kind of space allowed the young people to reflect on the impact of historical events in Binga on their aspirations and future opportunities. Figure 2 shows how artistic communication advanced the youths' cultural capability as they raised cultural awareness. Moreover, the graffiti boards are displayed at the local museum, allowing museum visitors to engage with the Tonga youth stories rooted in their culture.

The second dimension of viewing the concept of everyday creativity, as observed in our case, is how young people easily link their everyday practices and lived realities to their cultural heritage. Additionally, everyday creativity is intertwined with the arts and creative industries, and strengthening the engagement between arts organisations, artists, and communities is an important way of expanding the cultural

capabilities of communities (Wilson et al., 2017). As noted by Castro-Koshy and Le Roux (2016), such collaboration and consultation among each other can, in some cases, produce new cultural material. In our case, recognising everyday creativity and ecological and cultural heritage in the community expanded the youth's internal creativity, enabled them to claim ownership of their heritage and revive it, and transcended cultural productions and creativity beyond the communities.

An example of expanded youth creativity was seen during the first phase when youth used graffiti on board to showcase their everyday experiences, as seen in the picture below by youth artist Farai (2019, Phase 1).

Figure 2 here

Farai explained that the image he created reflects a common experience in his community of Binga, where fishing is a vital source of food and income. For the BaTonga people, who have depended on the fish industry and the Zambezi River for generations, this cultural practice is deeply intertwined with their identity and way of life (McGregor, 2008). Through his artwork, Farai not only portrays his personal perspective and imagination, but also demonstrates how his creative expression is linked to his cultural capability and heritage.

In contexts with high youth unemployment, like Zimbabwe, creativity drawing on cultural capability can be instrumental in carving out livelihoods in diverse ways. In the midst of economic instability, the youth highlighted the importance of the soft and creative skills gained across the projects, along with the networks and interactions built throughout the project. During the Phase 3 project in 2022, our artistic engagement with the youth built on the everyday creativity that exists in their communities and embedded the local ecological heritage (Moringa tree) into an intervention programme of equipping them with knowledge, resources, and entrepreneurial strategies of how they could make a living and create employment opportunities for their communities. Thus, we created broader engagement at the community level through exhibition spaces, film displays, brochures of farming moringa, and included the community members to advisory boards of the projects to pursue and support cultural creativity inclusively and broadly. Our findings across the projects showed that everyday creativity grows exponentially as the youth networked with different NGOs and the BaTonga community museum and artists. In many cases across the project, we also found that a creative environment is mediated and produced being in constant deliberation and dialogue with one another. The sense of solidarity and the value of traditional or artistic practices in relation to contemporary issues that youth have brought up created spaces for skills development, knowledge exchange, all of which in return improved the breadth, richness, and depth of everyday creative practices and the fullness of their experiences, the aesthetic qualities reflected in the projects. Most importantly, the collaboration across different actors created an awareness of how much everyday creativity in the community and accomplishments indeed remain unrecognised. For Tonga youth, the passivity and timid way they embrace their cultural heritage created a momentum that turned into exploration of identity and agency in a living community that they value immensely.

Secondly, the youth expressed concern that their Tonga culture was at risk of extinction as dominant external cultures, including "western" cultures, were dominating their everyday lives. For the youth, the risk is associated with a lack of resources and local skills transfer necessary for sustaining cultural practices. For example, tangible practices such as weaving, basketry, and sculpting require both resources and skills. Although raw materials for creating cultural creatives such as baskets and other curios are available at minimal cost (such as transportation and tools), skills to do the work were limited due to a lack of skills transfer between the older generation and the youth. Therefore, through collaboration with the artist and the local museum, the project provided a space for engagement among the youth to revive cultural knowledge, which youth viewed as important in shaping aspirations that are in line with preserving their cultural heritage. This recognition allows everyone the opportunity to practice the culture they have reason to value, help them contribute to the societal, economic, cultural, and political knowledge, which can influence the social fabric of the country (Chikozho et al., 2021). This also implies that everyday creativity and cultural capabilities have an intimate connection (Shao et al., 2019). Through participatory art, young people like Farai were able to magnify their valued cultural capabilities when given the opportunity for continuous engagement and development, resulting in great visibility for the Tonga culture. This is particularly important in the context of convergences between cultural, economic, and political capabilities, as shown earlier in Figure 1. In claiming ownership of their heritage and reviving it, Luba shared:

> *We can't run away from [our culture], it's our identity, and we must practice it. Not being taught how to practice it is destroying our culture. Since I can't do anything that resembles my culture, my children will not be able to do it. We need to develop our culture. I applied to Lupane State university, and they gave me the offer letter I wanted to do African languages and communication studies so, unfortunately, I was not able to register on time. I then I applied elsewhere to do Chinese and cultural studies which were my first preference and my second was Law, and my third was Linguistics and Tonga I have decided to do Chinese and Culture, our economy right now is involved with Chinese they're coming here, and the people are going to China. (Luba, 2019 Phase 1)*

Thirdly, building on everyday creative activities in their communities and capitalising on the social and political networks they built, the youth transcended cultural productions and creativity beyond their communities. For instance, landscaping, local culinary practices (such as the fish in the Zambezi River), woodcraft, and Tonga poetry are fundamental examples of everyday creative practices that communities have realised and that have enriched artistic productions. They have increased the opportunities for everyday creativity in the lives of the community by reframing the value they have attached to these practices and archiving them through videos and documentary photos. The relationality of everyday creativity with communities, arts organizations, artists, and modes of artistic production has revived the potential of such practices to be shared with those outside of their communities. The director of the local museum noted that:

> *When people are creative, it enables sustainable development, for example, basket making done in Binga. Tonga art is also a fascinating way of conveying messages which contribute to the empowerment of the local people. (Museum Director, 2020-Phase 2).*

This excerpt demonstrates how art can empower local communities (in this case, through the youth sharing their histories and knowledge of Tonga) while also conveying a message that goes beyond their immediate surroundings. The exhibition of artifacts within the local community makes the youths' stories accessible to people from different cultures who visit the museum, transcending cultural boundaries and promoting creativity. Consequently, the findings of this study indicate that integrating cultural and creative industries into sustainable development policies and strategies can generate significant value. This approach to development is human-centred, inclusive, and represents a potent socioeconomic resource.

6. Forging spaces for political capabilities

As we highlighted above, the projects engaged with a wide range of creative arts, which were central to every stage of the process, from design to dissemination. The use of art-based methods and activities aimed to "observe the community's sociocultural environment and traditions, which can undergo transformations in artistic processes and affect the future and to influence people through art," while also seeking "social change, environmental responsibility, participatory thinking and enhanced communality" (Jokela, 2015, p. 441). Therefore, the creative skills opened up opportunities beyond the economic capability of youth and also created a space to bring together the community, establish communality for collective agency, emancipation, and empowerment as they built a collective voice and community to address development challenges such as land, poverty, unemployment, or epistemic justice. Such engagement took place at two levels: first, towards building "activist capital" (Zihnioğlu, 2023) among young people to strategize activities to address the development challenges of their communities, and secondly, at a more community level of creating political advocacy by engaging with a wider audience and acting on behalf of their communities in public spaces. As we have argued elsewhere (Mkwananzi et al., 2021), participatory and creative engagements, and the exhibition spaces or public meetings where they engage with a wider audience, provide a more emancipatory platform to flourish their political capabilities and develop political agency. Below, we explain how these two levels of political capability emerged across the project and formed an embodied practice.

Throughout the projects, the youth developed their activist capital through collective engagement. The process included building social and political networks among museum staff, artists, non-governmental organizations, us as researchers, as well as in exhibition spaces and with policymakers. This engagement led to collective resistance, contention, mobilisation of communities, strategizing on how to effectively communicate their agendas to the public, and finding a political voice to express their concerns. One such example was seen during Phase 2 of the project when there was consensus among the youth and partnering local organizations on the need to amplify collective voices. The following was shared:

> *To deal with youth issues, there is an urgent need to devise a Sustainable Youth Development Agenda, which maps a sustainable development path for youth and the communities they live in by acknowledging that youth issues are complex, multi-dimensional, and evolve with the times. All interested partners, individuals, communities, CBOs, and NGO ought to be part of the meaningful youth engagement, which works hand in hand with multi-partners.* (Film Documentary, 2020)

Such spaces for collective engagement with the activists with the desired change, but also for advocacy and public engagement built in 'activist capital' (Zihnioğlu 2023) among young people which led to the emergence of new grassroots formations. What is important to consider is that both youth and stakeholders acknowledge that for effective engagement possible impact, there needs to be a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach. In the projects, the collaboration with the local NGOs and academics gave the youth a momentum and buy-in to capitalise on their strength of collectivity and resilience for mobilisation in their communities to develop vocal and artistic demand for the everyday challenges they face. This thick critical engagement provided through filmmaking, graffiti or moringa training created an empathic response to their lives whilst expanding their interpersonal networks and enabling them build political allegiance with groups (e.g. artists, activists, NGO workers) outside their communities. As one of the youth, Marielle noted: '*Through arts, we have engaged with a network of people that we would not be able to meet and embarked on a journey of saying that we are here and our voices matter as youth*.' This implies that such interactions formed the layers of forming an activism among the youth who have used the participatory arts methods as a constructive language to relay their concerns in public.

Secondly, this dialogical process and collective setting of participatory arts, where participants come together and engage in discussions of creativity, message, and experiences to be delivered, also creates a thick interrelational embodied process of initiating political advocacy. In a collectively produced documentary involving the youth, there was an interactive process of content development, and one of the stakeholders noted:

> *As stakeholders, we need to support the youth as they strive toward their aspirations and hopes. As stakeholders we cannot be in the forefront, the stakeholders must be behind as the youth lead us into the future. This is what will make the world better. They have the future in their hands, they need to carry the communities in their hands. So, it is important as stakeholders to support and facilitate the processes as youth forge ahead with their lives.* (Film Documentary, 2020)

The documentary creation process and the discussion workshops informing the final product created a space for dialogical interactions, which played an important role in developing awareness of issues experienced by youth, as well as the collaborative role that stakeholders were willing to play in supporting youth's cultural creativity, political voice, and economic agency in the process of transforming youth development, as depicted in Figure 1.

Across the projects, mobilisation emerged in media representations, national art galleries, museums, and other forms of cultural expression to disrupt the silence and passivity of communities and encourage them to be part of public spaces. In Zimbabwe, the use of creative art methods with youth enabled them to develop a political voice to disrupt the dehumanising narratives about Tonga cultural heritage (Mkwananzi et al. 2021). Furthermore, both the political voice and the embracing of their cultural heritage by youth resulted in advanced capabilities for networking skills through the use of arts-based methods. Thus, the use of creative and artistic methods with youth included them in the research process as 'auteurs,' who are in charge of the stories they want to tell and the way in which they are produced (McLaughlin and Coleman-Fountain 2019), providing them space to allow participants to become who they are, along with opportunities for developing collectivity and expressing the values and cultural heritage of their communities. Consequently, the methods challenged the hierarchically binding power structures of traditional methods by offering an

alternative way of expressing and presenting their knowledge and realities. As asserted by Mkwananzi et al. (2021), such methods can be seen as a language through which youth are able to develop a political voice and agency to construct an image that the public would be unfamiliar with.

While we see the expansion of political capabilities and freedoms through cultural practices, these sites do not exist in a vacuum without tensions and conflicts. One criticism brought in relation to the use of creative and art methods with young people is that the authenticity of the accounts they provide may have too much focus on creating political advocacy for a better life, but at the same time, they may underestimate the context and social conditions that shape their lives (Gallagher 2009), thus causing 'injurious cruel optimism' (Roberts 2013, 384). Therefore, the issue of representation and who gets to represent and how is a critical question that one needs to consider when working with youth. Otherwise, the creative arts may reproduce power dynamics that underestimate, ignore, and exclude the least heard and most marginalized counterparts of marginalized communities (such as the disabled or women living under sheer poverty), thus leading to an 'epistemic dead end.'"

7. Conclusion: Sustainability and moving on

This paper aims to provide examples of the tangible impact of using arts-based methods in communities where youth development is constrained by cultural oppression. We acknowledge the importance of representing youth in a way that does not promise the unattainable, as cautioned by Roberts (2013). Additionally, we do not intend for the participatory nature of our work to lead to young people suffering from cruel optimism, a condition which Berlant (2006) describes as leaving individuals worse off than before. Therefore, the projects presented in this paper support and encourage the expansion of youth engagement by creating spaces for self-expression where they can identify their capabilities and act on them within the available and provided creative art platforms. Engaging with the final artistic outputs raises critical consciousness, introducing socio-political issues to the public and bringing communities into dialogue (Mkwananzi et al. 2021). Such an approach promotes a bottom-up approach to dealing with cultural marginalization and political exclusion of youth, considering ethnic and cultural views, values, positions, and practices as legitimate influences on knowledge creation.

The exclusion of youth from political dialogue due to cultural dominance impedes efforts to support and preserve cultural practices, and fails to recognise their importance in both youth and national development. Thus, participatory methods can be utilised in unconventional ways to create spaces of recognition within cultural and political arenas. However, this does not negate the need for political institutions to show interest in youth issues. The purpose of participatory methods is to provide a platform for creativity and expression.

Moving forward, it is crucial to strengthen collaboration with youth to identify relevant, context-sensitive, and engaging approaches that address the legacy of past violence. Civil society organisations also deserve recognition for their role in identifying and supporting multiple ways to ensure that youth voices are heard, regardless of culture or ethnicity. Innovative art methods are necessary for inclusive and conflict-averse development. We conclude by acknowledging that political voice developed through the arts may not be sufficient to effect change unless there are consistent and collective approaches to addressing issues of

concern. Therefore, any attempt to influence and impact oppressive and unjust political, economic, cultural, and social systems and structures must be grounded in a philosophy of collectivity.

Acknowledgement

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