



Credits: DW

COVID-19: a call for youth leadership

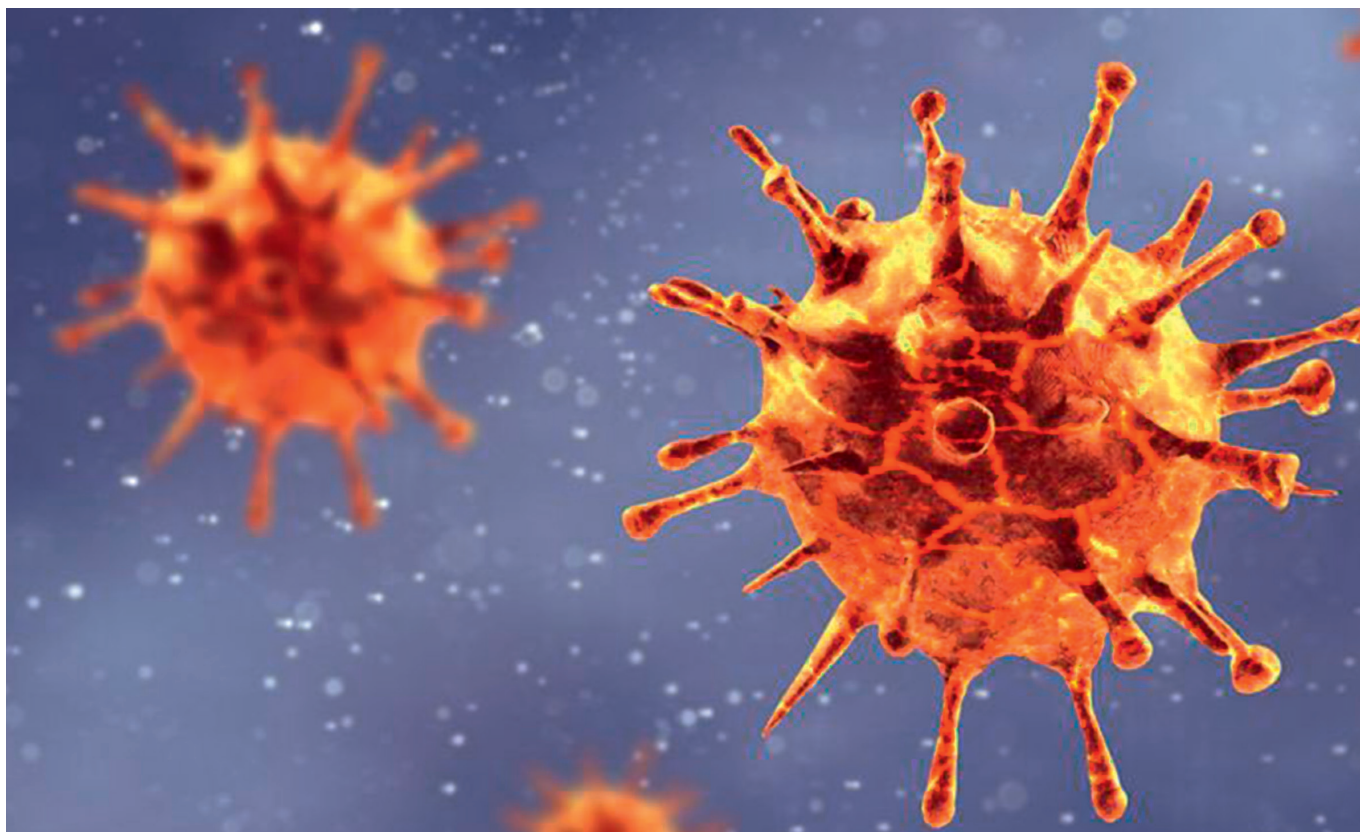
Leadership competences are crucial to ensuring young people's rise to the circle of decision makers at every level in this country, starting at the community level. While some people may forcefully, and maybe rightfully, argue that COVID-19, this invisible enemy, is the greatest threat to development that Mozambique faces these days, I propose that COVID-19 is the greatest opportunity for young people to show their true character, unleash their innovative skills, rally the power behind their numbers, display their physical energy, and take center-stage in the fight against this pandemic, thus winning themselves permanent seats in decision-making forums for all development processes from local communities up to the national level. If there ever were a time you-

ng people could wrest away a seat at the decision-making table in this country, that time is NOW.

The world has particularly called upon young people to adopt responsible behaviors and become proactive actors in the fight against coronavirus. Early this March, WHO Director¹ told young people "you are not invincible" and called upon them to adopt responsible behavior in the prevention and fight against COVID-19. Donald Trump² echoed the same words telling young people to stop gathering in beaches and restaurants because they can get infected and infect their parents and grandparents at home. Mozambique State Secretary for Youth and Employment, Oswaldo Petersburgo, has recently called upon young people to take lea-

¹ "You are not invincible" – the WHO's message to young people on coronavirus. Accessed from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/who-message-to-youth-on-coronavirus-you-are-not-invincible/>

² "Yes, young adults are sick and spreading coronavirus – but they can help stop it" <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/20/health/covid-19-young-adults-sick-spreading/index.html>



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dership in the fight against this invisible enemy³.

The sight of youth in urban and rural areas not adhering to prevention against COVID-19 in Mozambique is impossible to avoid. In its *Bom Dia Moçambique* program on March 7, TVM had a report on young people mingling in big groups without masks at a market in Beira. Now young people can respond to the call of the world by showing their responsible character and become a determinant factor in the fight against COVID-19.

At the heart of social distancing, one of the key methods to defeat the new coronavirus is the message to stay at home, which causes great disruption to our way of communal living. In addition to disrupting our economic activities and great events such as sports, parties, weddings and education activities, the “stay at home” message has made it very difficult for us to visit our relatives and friends in prisons and hospitals, and to accord proper burial to our departed loved ones. The “stay at home” message has also disrupted many traditional decision-making forums based on physical presence, leaving communities deprived of leadership

in key community moments such as death.

With their innovative skills, young people can play a crucial role to promote physical distancing as they help provide a sense of direction and make people feel together through social media. According to the 2017 Population Census, more than 6.4 million people had cell phones and more than 1.3 million people had access to internet in their phones⁴ in that year. Certainly, these numbers have ballooned since then, providing young people with a large audience to promote and disseminate prevention methods as well as create virtual socialization hubs.

Young people can and must assume leadership now. Numbers are on their side. In 2017, about 32.4% (more than 8.7 million) of the population were youth between the ages of 15 and 35. Imagine the vicious blow on this invisible enemy if all these young people simply showed their great character and stayed home. Imagine the strength of the fight if these young people kept their more than 12.6 million younger siblings at home. That would be about 79% of the population of Mozambique depriving the new coronavirus its major means of spreading – physical con-

³ Covid-19: “Líderes juvenis devem ser mais proactivos” -- Oswaldo Ptersburgo. <https://www.jornaltxopela.com/2020/05/covid-19-lideres-juvenis-devem-ser-mais-proactivos-oswaldo-peterburgo/>

⁴ Instituto Nacional de Estatística. *IV Recenseamento Geral da População e Habitação 2017*.

tact and proximity. Imagine the influence of millions of young people with their masks on whenever they must go out.

Add physical and mental energy to their character, numbers and innovative skills, what you see is unlimited possibilities. You could see flyers posted everywhere with prevention messages. You could see duets and trios of young people working as community law enforcement officers helping enforce the stay at home order, helping enforce the wearing of masks, or helping enforce the limit of participants in necessary gatherings such as funerals. There is more we could see. We could see young people leading virtual petitions for religious institutions (churches and mosques included) to live up to their message of love and provide for the physical needs of their communities. Imagine young people addressing and, if the worst comes to the worst, pestering their pastors and sheiks on the need to provide bread for the hungry. You could see young people flooding NGOs with petitions for food and soap. They can put their hands into their deep pockets and serve bread to the hungry. You could see young people engaging companies and sports clubs, both big and small, to provide for the needs of their customers and fans who have made them the companies they are today.

Add physical and mental energy to their character, numbers and innovative skills and you could see young people engaging the government to provide the basic food basket to the most vulnerable. You could see young people overwhelmingly engaging

their community and district authorities to come up with tangible help for the most vulnerable. You could see young people calling for an end to lavish living by our leaders while we, the people, languish in abject hunger during this pandemic. You could see young people move up to provincial and national offices and farther up to the parliament, to the council of ministers and farther still to the highest office in the land demanding for wage cuts for high level state officers as these officers endeavor to provide for the needs of the most vulnerable. Young people, in their millions, can engage all these people and institutions through social media.

Doors are wide open for youth to step forward and help lead the country in the fight against COVID-19. This is the moment young people must show their great character, put their innovative skills to work, rally all the millions of themselves and their energy, and become the determining factor in the development of this country using the current pandemic as their entry point. Talking with USA soldiers ready to deploy for war in Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of Defense, said "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time"⁵. Our young people are at their very best to lead a winning war against COVID-19 and assume center stage in the development process of this country. There is not and there cannot be a valid excuse for youth inaction. The time is now for young people to mobilize and begin to make life-saving contributions in their communities.

The call for youth leadership has been made, loud and clear. Will they respond?

A few young people have started taking small steps towards a positive answer to the call. For instance, through their LEAD program, CDD Youth are currently implementing the second phase of their Community Resilience and Public Awareness Social Media Campaign across the country. So far, they have recorded and disseminated 25 videos in several languages including Portuguese, eMakua, Chopi, Changanana, Shona, Sena, Ndau, Chuabo, Kimwani, Nhanja, Swahili, and Xitswa. They have also posted flyers on public streets and gone out in small numbers to sensitize and encourage people on bus stops and markets to adhere to prevention methods. They have created WhatsApp

groups to promote virtual socialization and prevention of COVID-19 and sent out SMS providing accurate information on prevention methods. These CDD Youth hope to enlist as many as 5 000 young people in the fight against COVID-19 by the end of May.

These initiatives by CDD youth and other youth are encouraging. But more is expected of millions of young people in this country. There is no excuse for youth inaction. In every community, in every administrative post and in every district, young people should organize and mobilize themselves and act against the new coronavirus. The call has been made. Let young people respond NOW.

5 Iraq-Bound Troops Confront Rumsfeld Over Lack of Armour. (2004). <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/international/middleeast/iraqbound-troops-confront-rumsfeld-over-lack-of.html>

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