

## INTERVENTION TRANSCRIPT:

# RESPONSIBILITY OF GLOBAL HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS & YOUNG HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

MARCH 10, 2021

**MODERATOR:** *Richard Dzikunu, What are the lessons you have learnt to ensure that young people have a seat at the table as part of decision-making processes?*

**SPEAKER/ PANELLIST:** *Dr Shakira Choonara*

Let me unapologetically expand on these different factors. I think that when I speak about youth engagement, I am going to speak very frankly about it. So, if you don't like what we or I am saying you would have to leave the room or stay behind and argue with us.

It is on two fronts; the one is, what is the responsibility of global health organisations? It's also not just global health organisations, it is also about our national bodies, continental bodies and regional bodies. The other is, what is the responsibility of young people. Those two come together, as a powerful recipe to change and achieve better healthcare.

When we are speaking about global health institutions, and I am going to speak to 3-4 key areas which I think are important. The first is purpose; why are you inviting young people? Why do you want to include young people? If it is 'just' for a conference, is it a checkbox exercise to the extent that you will even script a youth, in terms of what they will say and how they will say it? This is not inclusion.

Instead, if you are a global health organisation, or any organisation and you're thinking about, how do you build a cohort of young people. I have seen this in the research space, it is exciting, investing in young people for 5-10 years. Is an organisation professionalising youth work? Example, the JPO (Junior Professional Officer) programme by the United Nations. It is unacceptable that in the entire history of development, WHO for example, only under the leadership of Dr Tedros began to provide living expenses/ stipends for interns.

I can give an example from South Africa, I am a product of a Government programme (National Research Foundation of South Africa), a work programme, where the Government post our studies would provide a stipend, place us in a host institution, where they would ensure we had a performance contract. This is critical. They also set up a professional development programme, this was my entry into the workspace. If I think about this. This is a recipe for success.

On the other end of the spectrum, two years within the African Union, I was met with not having a clear terms of reference. Finally, we had a terms of reference, but we were not contracted, we were not given clear roles, we essentially had a "window dressing" role. We could have accepted this "window dressing role" or we could have stood up. I won't get into the politics of it. I personally wrote to the Chairperson of the African Union, to say, "These are my concerns". They eventually flew us to Addis Ababa to discuss it. It was a small win but an important win.

I think it's also critical for us as young people to speak out, when we are in tokenistic positions, not to paint a pretty picture.

The final one that global health organizations need to think about for engagement is work culture. Are we creating modern environments, are we creating technology driven environments. Are you creating environments where young people thrive are you giving young people projects? I think in civil society many people do that very well. Or, are we getting into organisations which are bureaucratic, that still have manual systems? Are the environments toxic for young people, where others take credit for young people's work?



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To then go straight into youth responsibility, I will end off. Figure out the game plan young people, don't just go 'there', ask the questions. Why are they inviting me? What can I influence? You even have the right to say no if the invitation does not align to your passion. Once you get to a conference what is your message? What is your evidence, what policy have you read? Don't just get into the space to ramble on. Very important, which continues to be lacking in our space is - post conference activity. As soon as someone says, let's write a blog, a report, carry out a campaign, everyone disappears. Now I know we all are busy, but it's our responsibility to push the agenda.

Organizations therefore need to set out their purpose for including youth, why do you want to engage youth, what do you want to do with them, or rather with us?

One or two other key issues, young people, how do we mobilise others? That's also part of our responsibility, what we find in global health are elitist circles, how do we give others a chance? How do we also ensure that we translate our messages back to a constituency?

Being within the African Union for example, you find that everything is done at a policy level, but how much of it translates to the ground level? The final one on youth responsibility is, once you're in an organization, don't lose your energetic, creative, fun voice. This really frustrates me, people become 'puppets', I know and I do understand we need to meet our financial needs, our financial well-being is also important, we need to think about our careers, but at the end of the day, if you get into that space, if you conform, if you don't ask the tough questions, what are you really bringing to the table?

## FULL LINK:



[https://vfairs.zoom.us/rec/play/UZWq-SrLVfgkdykjX1p7SlyES2D\\_tB2dyVZD5qWY6KyKRJQxyPystbXRfmALwCJFfpbeETQn7Gc3HpG9.1B8oyuKfX19LHjea?continueMode=true&\\_x\\_zm\\_rtaid=BQufPANUTsOcWdO1w0-nEA.1619549157613.78ca70c69c526d01578670fd29a0457c&\\_x\\_zm\\_rtaid=192](https://vfairs.zoom.us/rec/play/UZWq-SrLVfgkdykjX1p7SlyES2D_tB2dyVZD5qWY6KyKRJQxyPystbXRfmALwCJFfpbeETQn7Gc3HpG9.1B8oyuKfX19LHjea?continueMode=true&_x_zm_rtaid=BQufPANUTsOcWdO1w0-nEA.1619549157613.78ca70c69c526d01578670fd29a0457c&_x_zm_rtaid=192)

*\*Views are those of the panellist not representative of any organisation.*



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