

African graffiti as a driver for change
Zambia
Oberlin College
Mufalo Mufalo '26

The problem

73% of the Zambian population live under poverty. Young people, especially, between the ages of 15-35 are faced with the largest poverty levels, a result of both poor education and unemployment. Poor education is not just in the context of formal education. For example, 22,000 Zambian students obtain grade twelve certificates. Out of that, only 5500 enter formal training or university. The rest of the 16,500 struggle to earn a living through other skills, mostly in the informal sector. However, only 4,600 youths are trained every year through the informal sector such as training institutes, leaving over 10,000 youths wandering on the streets as there are simply not enough structures in place that encourage young people to develop their intrapersonal skills. As a result, young people engage in activities such as drug abuse and criminal activity. The same poverty cycle contributes to youth apathy and underrepresentation in governing bodies.

Visual arts is one sector that has not been adequately promoted among Zambian youth. From primary to tertiary education, visual arts are viewed as something that must be done when one is bored. Only two (St. John's and Kanyonyo secondary schools) of my hometown's ten top high schools offer creative arts as a subject. The government's lack of investment in the arts sectors further limits the resources available to high school students. Not surprisingly, there is a general lack of appreciation for art in most Zambian towns. This is unfortunate given the incredible natural beauty of Zambia, home to one of the world's seven natural wonders, the Victoria Falls. As the famous adage goes, "The artist has one function—to affirm and glorify life.

— W. Edward Brown. There is beauty to life that can only be seen through art and a society simply cannot be without art.

Contribution to peace

JR, a French artist, once stated that art does not change the world; rather, it changes how people perceive the world. People can find refuge in art from many of their daily struggles. When I'm under duress as an artist, for example, I vent my frustrations and force my beliefs onto my canvas rather than on people. That is the value of art that I have discovered. Furthermore, art on its own is a voice for many people that are unable to express themselves. For example, a simple mural that highlights a social issue in a society can have more impact than a protest. This is simply because many people can interpret the mural on their own and at their own time. That mural may be there for years, giving the community something to reflect on.

Murals can be an important tool for longer-term peace making in any space. When the US government announced plans to build a wall between Mexico and America, JR created two pieces of public art at the border that broke the internet and thus minimized the division. As hundreds of guests from the United States and Mexico gathered to celebrate the work, the pieces were the embodiment of harmony between the two sides of the border. The Berlin wall, which displays works by over a hundred artists from around the world, is another well-known location for public art. These murals remind people of their shared history while also encouraging them to resist oppression in any form.

The impact of murals and other public art is well established in urban design principles. Executive Director of Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program, Jane Golden, sums up the impact she has seen in her city this way, "While the end products—the works of public art—are always beautiful, their deeper value lies in the conversations we create, the connections we build, and the legacy of relationships we foster along the way, often with transformative results. As Arlene Goldbard says, 'The experience of art moves us from the everyday into the realm of possibility,' and that goes for individuals, communities, systems, the city, and Mural Arts' own practice."

As previously stated, many young people abuse substances because they believe it allows them to express themselves. As a result, they resort to crime, endangering the entire community's well-being. Substance abuse and crime are, of course, products of poverty, which can be traced back to a lack of recreational skills among young people. Therefore, I believe that encouraging young people to participate in recreational activities is one way to encourage them to spend more time exploring their intrapersonal abilities rather than engaging in other habits that may have long-term negative consequences in their lives.

Context

I witnessed the impact of graffiti on people three years ago when I completed my first mural. When covid struck, I became interested in public art and decided to help in any way I could after noticing how unconcerned everyone in my town was about Covid. I was able to salvage a few art supplies and install a simple mural in order to raise awareness of the virus. A few days later, I woke up to a lot of social media notifications about the mural. A lot of people were having photoshoots on the mural and some even hoped for more. I realized that, for some people, it was more than just about the subject, it was about bringing aesthetics into the neighborhood. That simple mural impacted people in more ways than I had not imagined. This experience opened the way for future opportunities to bring aspiring artists together and to create something that will make even a small difference in our lives as artists, and the lives of our communities. I believe working with other upcoming artists will enhance our skills and promote creativity in the whole community.

Project description

The project will include two major activities: mural painting and art equipment distribution in schools. During the summer, I plan to expand the project by creating more murals in various Zambian towns and involving more artists. The team will consist of myself and my colleague, Kaluwe Mwananyambe, who is also an artist and played a key role in the earlier stages of this project. More artists will be recruited in each town as we go. I've decided to work in three different towns in Zambia: Lusaka, Mongu, and Livingstone. Each of those towns face different challenges and embrace unique opportunities, which I will use to select the subjects for the murals. My goal is to incorporate details that the community can relate to, while also challenging their understanding and opening the possibility of renewal. In doing so, I hope to inspire young people who want to make a difference in their communities. A small portion of the project will also be reserved for buying art supplies to be donated to schools. I believe that providing young people with easy access to these resources will encourage them to explore their creative abilities while in school and long afterwards.