



Joannes Paulus Yimbessalu

I am called Joannes Paulus Yimbessalu and currently doing a Masters in Leadership and Community Engagement at York University in Toronto. As a Queens' Young Leader and a Global Youth Ambassador for A World At School, I have spent most of my youthful life advocating for access to quality education and working with children living with disabilities and communities orphaned by HIV/AIDS while ensuring that their rights and those of women and girls are protected and respected.

Think of that young teenage girl, the one you love or admire so very much. Doesn't she deserve the right to a quality education? Isn't her education worth fighting for irrespective of where she comes from? In my travels across the world, I have seen pain, suffering and despair on the faces of children especially child brides. Every 7 seconds, a girl younger than 15 is married off. To them the only difference is an education – one that they will never get.

I stand here today to tell you the story of three girls, 12-year-old Aminatou whom I met in rural Niger on a health-related research trip. She had just arrived the home of one of the community health workers where we were. She looked tired and worried for his sick son. She could barely breastfeed her own son. As I watched little Mohammad cry, he looked so frail, desolated and shivering. She could barely remember the age of her sick son when asked. She didn't utter a word.

Meet young Ramatou, another 13-year-old who came in with her severely malnourished child. I could hardly make out the gender of her baby. Ramatou could barely smile. She looked worried and confused. As I process all of this, it dawned on me that both Ramatou and Aminatou were children themselves and despite free primary education in Niger, their education had been completely snatched away from them as a result of child marriage whose prevalence stands at 89%.

Lastly meet 19-year-old Bertila whom I met in rural Cameroon. At 4, she faced difficulties walking and her parents could barely afford any medical cost. Her condition became so bad that it affected her speech. Despite her condition, she was still forced to carry out chores such as fetching water, firewood and work in the farm. For 17 years, Bertila was denied an education just because of her physical inability until 2 years ago when we intervened. Today she learns how to walk, talk and write again. These are the stories of over 62 million girls globally who are not in school and learning and whose education are just as precious as ours.

Niger is one of 35 crisis-affected countries where 75 million children aged three to 18 years need educational support. Its high fertility rate of 7.6 births/women has exacerbated the out of school crisis. Extreme poverty, discrimination against girls, insecurity, parental illiteracy, early marriage, quality of teachers, overcrowded schools and poor educational infrastructure are some of the major challenges facing the educational system in Niger and most of Africa.

Schools in neighboring Nigeria are being bombed, some militarized, young boys recruited as child soldiers, girls being trafficked, raped or married off before their 15th birthday. Boko Haram has displaced millions of people fleeing from insecurity in Nigeria and Niger. The Diffa refugee camp is host to 213,000 refugees including refugees from neighboring Mali – this has increased the strain on already insufficient basic services.

Today, 263 million children and adolescents are not in school and learning and half of the world's 1.6 billion young people will be out of school or not learning by 2030. Africa has 128 million school-aged children, yet 17 million will never attend school, while another 37 million will learn so little that compared to their out-of-school peers there isn't any striking difference. This is the future of a generation whose contribution is vital for Africa's economic growth and social development. It is likely to remain stagnated and the cost of not acting now could be more catastrophic

According to a 2015 Brookings Institute report, it is estimated that by 2030 over 50% of the world's 2 billion children will not be on track to acquire the basic skills at the secondary school hence the need for investment in key skills to drive economic growth. With the current pace of change it will take another 100 years for both girls and boys in poor countries to catch up to their peers in rich countries. To meet these demands in the near future requires innovations within the educational system, which has become obsolete especially in developing countries. Teaching is therefore at the heart of the learning crisis and for Africa's economic success – one we cannot afford to miss.

Just like Aminatou and Ramatou, millions of girls all over the world continue to face many barriers ranging from gender-based violence, lack of access to safe toilets and social and cultural norms that prevent girls from

attending school in many parts of the world. Overcoming these challenges requires quality education. Investing in education is the most cost effective way to drive economic development, increases skills and opportunities for women and men, unlock progress to all Sustainable Development Goals and is a broker for peace. For every additional year a girl spends in school, her earning power increases by as much 25%

In my country, Cameroon, despite government's efforts to put every child in school the attendance rate is barely 65%. Over 80% of head teachers say budgets don't arrive on time and they lack school materials and supplies to facilitate learning. According to Transparency International, 50% of primary schools in the country have poor infrastructures; only 19% had working toilets, 30% had access to tap water and barely 30% had enough tables and benches for students. Through our organization, HOPE for Children Cameroon, we provide educational materials and computers to primary schools. We have provided support to over 1300 children to help them to become creative, to reason, and to solve very complex problems. We are constructing safe pit toilets in schools so that children especially girls don't miss school and/or learning opportunities, we are teaching children how to grow local foods in a more sustainable way to fight school hunger and malnutrition, we are constructing schools to reduce the long commute by children especially girls and lastly we are engaging fathers and boys in dialogue by breaking some of the stereotypes that affect women and girls. Through our initiatives, school absenteeism has reduced by 27% and schools are safer.

We need to invest in teacher training, personalized learning and support teachers with livable wages. We need to incentivize parents so that children, especially girls can stay in school. Every dollar we invest in an additional year of school generates an additional \$10 in health and earnings in low-income countries. Unless African governments and the international community work in close partnership to raise educational standards, the future of millions of children will be wasted, one we can't afford to risk. We must strive to leave our country with smart and better kids to carry it forward.

Our world today is one characterized by injustice and greed – one where only eight people in the world hold the wealth of the global poor, how is this humanly possible? How did we let this happen? For too long our leaders have failed us. Some are putting “self before our climate”. For too long our institutions have deprived the needy and the powerless of their most basic human rights. For too long our cultures have discriminated against the vulnerable and the oppressed.

If we the young people of today are too young to lead or ignite change as they think, then we must be too young to be victims of war, conflict and natural disasters. We therefore need to invest in new ideas – one that meets the needs of the global poor. Yes, we can change this.

We need the Church more than ever today to continue to stand up for the voiceless, the marginalized – a more inclusive institution. To end, my question to everyone today is:

What is your purpose in life?

What will you be remembered for?

What good will you bring to the world?

What are you worth living or dying for?

As a proud feminist inspired by my mother, a single mother of 4 boys who toiled each day and night to send us all to school in spite of the fact that she could not complete school because she was a girl, I call on everyone here present in the words of John Wesley who reminds me each day to “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can and As long as ever you can”.

Go and create a world you want to see. Go and be the peace.

Thank You.