

Acceptance speech for the award: Young European of the Year 2017

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Nozizwe Dube and it is such an honor to be given this opportunity to speak tonight.

I was born in Zimbabwe 21 years ago. My mother came to Belgium as a refugee 9 years ago. I was able to be reunited with her 7 years ago through the process of family reunion. I was 14 years old and eager to study and get a taste of the calm life that I was not quite accustomed to anymore due to the conflicts in Zimbabwe.

As the child of a refugee I had to start off my integration process by learning Dutch in my case, seeing as my mother and I live in Flanders. After a few months of blood, sweat and tears, (because let's be honest here: learning a new language and the process of integration is not always a rosy and easy experience); I was finally able to communicate with other young people of my age. My mother encouraged me to engage in several after-school activities such as the Chiro and other youth work projects.

I eventually also found my way to my local youth council where I saw the impact and difference it made when young people of different backgrounds come together to make a difference in our home town. The diversity amongst us ensured that every meeting and activity we organized was one where I learnt a lot from my age mates. All of us felt very much involved in what was happening around us and we appreciated being heard by the council members.

Today, as president of the Flemish Youth Council, I am able to make difference on a different level. In all of these years I have learnt that the voices and opinions of young people are a crucial element of decision making. The empowerment of young people across Europe depends on the degree of our involvement in civil society.

I believe it begins with us as young Europeans. We are young, we are full of ideas and we of course know what it is that we want to see on the political agenda. We are the ones who know what needs to change for us. We need to keep demanding our share of power in society.

There are so many ways that we can go about this. I see and read of many inspiring movements all over Europe, for and by young people. I see young people joining political parties and being the change they have always wanted to see in the local political landscape. Voting is not the only way of youth participation, but it definitely an important part of it. Others are active in non-aligned youth organizations. I see others volunteering and having a positive impact on their immediate surroundings. Others are utilizing social media to share inspiring good practices that are changing the face of Europe and actively playing a role in building our society. We are our own advocates, and we have to keep our youth rights in mind in everything we do.

Policy makers and politicians are also an important factor in this. As young Europeans, we look up to you to re-evaluate the way politics is currently being done. Are your policies, political agendas and societal debates inclusive enough? Is our voice as young people present in decision making? What have you done to ensure it is, and that it can be improved?

I call myself a new European, though I guess I won't be able to use the prefix 'new' for long anymore. But my next point is that we should all; young people and policy makers, always view the diversity we have as a strength. Inclusion is one of the most important foundations that we have, and we need to ensure this by bringing the different aspects and views together. People of different backgrounds with different cultures are our strength. Let us come together and spark a constructive dialogue. Let us be open to learning from one another, to exchanging ideas. But to have a constructive dialogue, we need to have these different voices bought together to the table. And, we also need to have a listening ear to what the other person is saying. This is where inclusion begins.

I believe in us as young people. We are not only the future of Europe, more importantly, we are also shaping Europe at this very moment, in this very room.

Thank you.