In Mali, My Rights, My Voice (MRMV) experience shows how empowering young people and giving them the space and opportunity to engage directly with duty-bearers can achieve successful national-level advocacy.

The socio-political crisis following the 2012 coup d’état and the ongoing conflict in the north meant that many people in Mali were wary of taking an active role in the 2013 presidential elections. But after learning about their right to health and education, and receiving training in advocacy approaches, members of the MRMV Youth Advisory Board (YAB) recognised the importance of young people participating in the political process and were eager to mobilise them to vote.

Although this was not in the original programme plan, the MRMV team gave the YAB the space to lead this work, negotiating agreement with partners which were initially reluctant for them to do so. The YAB formed a strategic alliance with a coalition of organisations, including youth and media groups, to create a united civil society voice around the elections. Oxfam played an advisory role, but stood back to allow the YAB to lead mobilisation of youth organisations and organise activities to encourage youth both to vote – and to vote for candidates who supported their right to health and education.

A range of creative approaches helped to get the message across. Campaigning floats in public places such as markets, crossroads and playgrounds in the capital, Bamako, raised awareness of the importance of voting. A short film was broadcast on national TV, in which 500 young people called on their peers to vote. And a radio panel discussion brought together young people to debate health and education issues. A young woman chairing the YAB led the mobilisation, and ensured that both young women and young men were able to take an active role in campaigning activities.

The coalition also developed a three-point manifesto on health and education, and MRMV youth analysed the policies of presidential candidates in relation to these ‘asks’. As part of this process, young people interviewed three candidates and persuaded two of them to sign a commitment card agreeing to implement policies in the manifesto. One of these candidates became prime minister for a period after the election, and continues to be a useful ally to MRMV in government since taking up a new ministerial position.

Youth campaigning around the presidential election was a truly extraordinary achievement. While Oxfam offered support on tactics and avoiding political manipulation, most of the activities
were conceived, developed and implemented by young people themselves. And the effective mobilisation of citizens clearly showed politicians that young people wanted to engage in the political process and would hold them to account for their election promises and actions in power.

Since then, MRMV has continued to build the advocacy capacity of the YAB and youth groups and to give them space to engage directly with duty-bearers. Youth campaigners have mobilised around health and education issues at festivals and events such as International Youth Day, and have continued to raise awareness through radio programmes, TV debates and TV reality shows. A particular highlight was the Intergenerational Dialogue in May 2014, which was organised by the YAB and attended by almost 200 people including high-level government ministers, NGOs and youth associations. The event built support for sexual and reproductive health rights and quality education for young people. The YAB has also set up a network of youth groups in disadvantaged areas to engage marginalised and out-of-school youth, spreading the MRMV model to a wider group of young people and helping to ensure its sustainability.

The YAB has now developed to the point where its members have formed an independent youth association which is continuing an active advocacy programme. It is now working with Oxfam as a partner to implement the final year of the MRMV programme, and is supporting the implementation in Mali of Oxfam’s global Even It Up campaign on inequality.

Mali Youth Advisory Board

The YAB in Mali was established as part of a global initiative to set up YABs in all MRMV countries. A terms of reference was developed for the YAB and widely shared with partners, youth organisations and other agencies to attract the widest possible range of applicants. Eight young people were then selected, four boys and four girls, as being those who demonstrated the most engagement with the programme and the strongest commitment to work on behalf of young people in Mali.

Since its inception, the YAB has been the focus of intensive capacity-building on rights, advocacy, communications and many aspects of programme management. It has also been invited into all of Oxfam’s strategic conversations, and has taken an active role in programme planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. With this intensive input, the YAB has been able to develop into an extremely skilled and effective group that is able to make a real contribution to MRMV, Oxfam’s wider work, and development in Mali. At the end of MRMV’s third year, YAB members created an independent youth association together with other Malian youth; this association will implement the programme’s final year as an Oxfam partner.

"This experience during the presidential elections was energising, motivational and very informative. More than ever, I am convinced of young people’s commitment to change attitudes. We were with thousands of youth, we all had our voter cards, and we wanted to vote for someone who takes into account our needs with regards to sexual and reproductive health rights and quality education. The candidates told us, ‘that’s not our priority right now, our priority is the war’. We told them, ‘health and education are essential. If you don’t sign this commitment, we’re not going to vote for you.’ We discussed and discussed, until they all signed.”

Adam, MRMV YAB Chair, Mali

KEY LEARNING

- With appropriate capacity-building and training, young people can be effective advocates and are those best able to mobilise their peers.
- Young people should be given trust and space to lead and implement advocacy and influencing work. They can achieve more than you might imagine.