

# A radio project that gives children a voice in the media

Yumna Martin and Mike Rahfaldt

THE CHILDREN'S Institute recently launched its annual gauge of South African children, and one of the greatest areas of concern is the media.

Only 2 percent of all news stories feature the voices of young people.

It's a crisp winter afternoon in Lebowakgomo, a township outside Polokwane. A group of 15 high school pupils sit in a circle, shooting questioning glances at one another. It's just about time to wrap up the final day of a training workshop aimed at giving young people the tools and skills to produce their own radio shows.

At the end of each day, the young reporters-in-training are called upon to reflect on their experiences.

The first time 15-year-old Thoriso Tladi was asked to speak in front of the group she was close to tears. It was a terrifying and unimaginable act – one that many young people dread.

But not for long. After a week of

radio training, Thoriso wasn't afraid to talk. In fact, she was eager. She used every opportunity she saw to make her voice heard.

She said that the radio training built her confidence, and encouraged her to express her opinion.

"It was really nice that we got to share our ideas with each other and expose our talents."

Thoriso is one of 15 youth radio reporters trained by the Children's Radio Foundation at community radio station Greater Lebowakgomo FM. In partnership with Unicef South Africa and Limpopo's Department of Education GEM/BEM clubs, the weekly radio show offers a platform for young people to share their views about what is happening in their community.

During the workshops youth are taught how to research, debate, create and structure stories, interview, and learn how to turn these elements into radio broadcasts.

After a week of training, the young reporters in Lebowakgomo were ready to produce their first show for broadcast on the radio



Children's participation in the making of radio programmes can create spaces through which mutual trust and respect can be fostered with adults.

station. They chose to speak about gangsterism in their local schools.

In their 30-minute broadcast, the group shared youth views about how gangs affect young people's

chances of getting a good education. They interviewed several members of the community, including Lebowakgomo's police captain and a former gangster. They asked

nuanced questions from their own perspectives as young people, as the primary stakeholders in the matter.

Children account for 39 percent of South Africa's population, yet they seldom make the news.

Media Monitoring Africa's research on how children are portrayed in 13 major South African newspapers revealed that children's voices were only heard in 2 percent of all news stories monitored in 2010.

Many journalists argue that children are difficult to access. The practical, ethical and legal framework in place is there to protect young people from exploitation, but these are often seen by journalists as impediments to getting a child's point of view.

Initiatives such as Greater Lebowakgomo FM's youth radio shows allow young people to create content that brims with honest, authentic feeling, that is about young people, for young people, and created by young people.

It allows listeners to hear directly from youth about the issues that matter to them.

Sustainable long-term youth media projects break the traditional media stereotype of framing youth as victims, and balance out the all too dominant adult point of view.

They create a space where young people can speak freely, and where their peers and the wider community can listen, share, and learn in meaningful ways.

Training young people in media requires more than just teaching technical skills. Before you can teach children to produce their own media content, one needs to create a safe space where they feel free to express their thoughts and opinions and where their contributions are seen as relevant and valuable.

Confidence and communication skills are developed at the same time. Mashoto Mphahlele, 15, experienced that in the workshop. "For the first time in my life, I feel myself, I feel like I can express myself, and really get out of my shell."

Actively engaging youth in media and giving them space to be both producers and consumers of media, plays a key role in realising the rights of children and putting

these rights into action.

It encourages youth to not only question, reflect, listen, and learn in front of the mic, but to do the same in their classrooms, homes, and their larger community.

Diane Dikobo, a 16-year-old from Lebowakgomo, expressed this need: "The workshop, for me, was a platform to show us what we can do.

The shows will also be a way to show other young people that they can talk about these issues too."

Children are not characters to be used to substantiate news.

They are able to fill diverse roles and experience many issues featured in the media – offering valuable perspectives and experiences – it's about time we listened.

● Yumna Martin is a trainer and producer for the Children's Radio Foundation (CRF), and Mike Rahfaldt is CRF's executive director. The foundation is featured in South African Child Gauge 2011, which was released this week by the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town.