

Democracy Is Not One-Size-Fits-All

From Zambia to Germany: A Young Voice Reimagining Democracy



Careen Samatamba

What Does Democracy Mean to You?

“Democracy is not one-size-fits-all; it is shaped by our histories, cultures, and everyday realities.”

What does democracy mean to you? Is it the right to vote? The freedom to speak your mind? Or is it something deeper shaped by your history, your culture, and your everyday struggles?

As a young Zambian currently working with Brot für die Welt in Germany, I have been privileged to facilitate two workshops on democracy. Both experiences were eye-opening, not only because I could share my own perspectives but also because I could engage with diverse groups of young people. The conversations reinforced a belief I have long held: democracy is not a one-size-fits-all model. Rather, it is a concept that needs to be constantly redefined and contextualized, shaped by the lived experiences of different societies.

From Theory to Reality: Democracy in Different Contexts

“In Zambia, democracy is not just an abstract concept; it is lived, contested, and evolving.”

My first encounters with democracy were through textbooks and formal education in Zambia. Democracy was often defined in abstract terms: government “by the people, for the people.” These definitions sounded noble, yet I always felt a gap between the theory and the reality on the ground. In Zambia, as in many other countries, democracy is challenged by issues of inequality, limited participation, and weak institutions.

Coming to Germany, I encountered a different perspective. Here, democracy is often seen as a “finished product” a system that works, more or less, as intended. Many young Germans I have interacted with grew up in stable democratic structures. For them, democracy is something given, a foundation they can rely on. This contrast has been at the center of my reflections and the workshops I have facilitated: democracy is not universal in practice, and its meaning shifts depending on where you stand.

Redefining Democracy with Scholarship Holders

“We realized that democracy cannot be confined to Western textbook definitions; it must embrace our lived experiences.”

At the General Assembly of Brot für die Welt scholarship holders, I hosted a workshop titled Youth Leadership and the Future of Democratic Governance. This was a space where I could share both personal reflections and academic insights. I spoke about democracy from a Zambian perspective and used textbook definitions as starting points. But the real turning point of our discussion came when I stressed that democracy means different things to different people.

The participants strongly agreed. Together, we resonated with the idea that democracy needs to be redefined and contextualized. Many of the scholarship holders felt that the common definition of democracy is too Westernized and does not adequately reflect the complexities of different countries. They highlighted the need to move beyond “ideal” textbook versions and instead create definitions that encompass diverse lived experiences. The key outcome of the workshop was a shared commitment to reimagining democracy in a way that is inclusive, flexible, and responsive to cultural and historical contexts.

Challenging the “Ideal” Democracy: Youth Voices from Germany

“Democracy is never finished. It requires constant questioning and reflection.”

The second workshop I facilitated was with the North-South volunteers, and I titled it Democracy and Us: The Role of Young People. These were young people mostly born and raised in Germany, preparing for their placements in Zambia, Cambodia, and Costa Rica. At the start, many expressed the view that the democracy they had grown up with – German democracy was the “ideal” form. For them, democracy felt natural, even unquestionable.

However, after a series of activities and deeper conversations, their perspective began to shift. They realized that democracy cannot be taken at face value when people still lack equal rights or access to resources. We cannot claim to live in a perfect democracy when systemic inequalities remain unresolved. For these young volunteers, the workshop opened a space to critically question democracy and to see it not as a static achievement but as an ongoing process.

I challenged them to compare the democracy they know in Germany with the systems they will encounter in their host countries. How would democracy in Zambia, Cambodia, or Costa Rica look and feel different? What lessons could be drawn from these comparisons? The conversation underscored the importance of humility and openness when engaging across cultures.

Pause and Reflect

“Do you see democracy as something ‘finished’, or as a process still unfolding in your community?”

Dear Reader, at this point, I invite you to think about your own context:

1. Do you see democracy as something “finished” in your country, or as something still evolving?
2. Are there groups of people around you who remain excluded from fully participating in democratic life?
3. What does that tell you about the kind of democracy you are living in?
4. Take a moment to reflect before moving on.

Young People Shaping the Future of Democracy

“We are not passive recipients; we are critical voices shaping inclusive governance.”

Across both workshops, one theme stood out: young people have a vital role to play in redefining democracy. We are not passive recipients of governance systems. Instead, we are critical voices and active participants shaping the future of democratic governance.

Our role as youth is twofold. First, we must question and challenge existing structures that exclude or marginalize. Second, we must bring fresh ideas and perspectives that push democracy to be more inclusive and participatory. This means expanding the idea of democracy beyond elections and formal institutions to include social justice, equity, and lived dignity.

Workshops like the ones I facilitated demonstrate the power of youth dialogue. When young people from different cultural backgrounds come together to exchange perspectives, they not only enrich their understanding of democracy but also contribute to building global solidarity.



Careen Samatamba talks to young people at Youthopia about democracy.



Democracy is a Journey, Not a Destination

“The future of democracy depends on dialogue, inclusion, and the courage of young people to ask difficult questions.”

For me personally, these workshops have been transformative. I have learned that democracy is not a fixed definition but a living process, constantly evolving through dialogue and struggle. I have seen how context shapes perception: for some, democracy is an unquestioned system; for others, it is an aspiration still out of reach.

I have also come to appreciate the importance of questioning. To question democracy is not to reject it but to strengthen it. Questioning opens the door to reform, innovation, and inclusivity. As young people, we cannot afford to take democracy for granted. We must continue to ask difficult questions, challenge injustices, and demand systems that truly serve all people.

The future of democracy cannot be built on rigid, universal definitions. It must be contextualized, reflecting the diverse realities of different societies. For Zambia, Germany, and the many other countries represented in my workshops, democracy will mean different things. And that is not a weakness but a strength if we are willing to listen, learn, and adapt.

Your Turn: Redefine Democracy

“Democracy is how we live it, question it, and shape it every day.”

Before you close this article, I invite you to pause and reflect:

Activity: Take a blank page and write at the top: “Democracy is ...”

1. Write down the first definition that comes to your mind.
2. Cross-check that definition against your lived reality. Does it truly capture the democracy you see and experience?
3. Rewrite your definition so that it reflects both your ideals and your context.
4. Finally, ask yourself: What role can I play in making that definition a reality?

Democracy is not just about what is written in textbooks or practiced by governments. It is about how we, as individuals and communities, live it, question it, and shape it every day.

