

Avenues for Donors to Promote Sexuality and Gender Justice

Donor agencies agree that addressing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) is not only an important human rights issue but is also integral to efforts to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development. However, with limited support and evidence of what works, and even hostility from many governments, incorporating SOGI issues into the day-to-day development work of country offices, NGO partners and diplomatic missions presents many challenges. Nonetheless, progress is being made. Investment in leadership, clear policies and training, effective coordination across agencies and sectors, and a stronger evidence base are among the crucial steps to positive change.

Fresh focus on sexuality, gender and development

Until relatively recently, sexual and gender justice, as they relate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, were not considered worthy of investment in the context of international aid and development. Further, while campaigns for LGBT equality have historically been located in the United States and Europe, the international human rights focus has been on criminalisation and related human rights abuses in the 79 countries that criminalise LGBT people.

Historically, the primary interface of international development agencies and non-conforming sexuality and gender has been the prevention and treatment of HIV among men who have sex with men and transwomen who have sex with men. Although this public health approach includes supporting communities of men and transwomen to mobilise around HIV in ways that reduce discrimination and increase social capital, it does not address wider issues of economic inequality that are bound up with

LGBT rights. But HIV resources, better access to communications and improved links between international SOGI activists and other social movements have combined to enable LGBT organisations and advocates in the global South to grow and become vocal within conversations about social and economic development.

For international and local development agencies this political shift towards ensuring that LGBT persons benefit from development initiatives has meant that, in a short period of time, donor engagement has moved from focusing almost exclusively on men's health, which involves a limited reach, to a much broader approach to advancing economic and social rights and attaining broader development goals. This shift to a deeper and wider engagement is driven by recognition that the conditions in which sexual and gender minorities learn, work and live confer significant economic disadvantage to individuals and undermine countries' economic progress and stability.

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In order to ensure that ‘no one is left behind’ in the post-2015 era, this briefing provides a series of recommendations to support national governments, civil society organisations and donors to ensure that in their own practices and engagements, they are able to craft a new era of development that is sensitive to multiple forms of inequality, including those created by marginalising people because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Bridging the gap between rhetoric and action

It is itself important progress that donor governments and development agencies substantially agree that human rights play a key role in ending poverty and inequality and that the benefits of development should extend to LGBT issues. However, this raises the question of how rhetorical developments and even policy changes translate to action. Even where there is consensus that LGBT people should benefit from development, the ways that various agencies can actually do that in different political and cultural contexts are not yet clear.

In practice, divergent approaches to LGBT issues are emerging. Some of the larger bilateral and multilateral agencies have identified LGBT issues as a priority and have integrated them into their policy and strategy documents. These agencies include: the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Department for International Development (DFID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example. The same is true of large philanthropic organisations, such as the Open Society Foundation (OSF) and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which have made funds available directly to LGBT organisations in countries and supported direct anti-discrimination and law reform campaigns. There are also examples of UN agencies beginning to work proactively on LGBT issues such as UNESCO’s large-scale programme to reduce homophobic bullying in school which is proving successful.

Other agencies make little or no mention of LGBT or SOGI issues in official documents but support LGBT-related work through promoting acceptance of ‘rights-based approaches’ to service provision. Where this happens, improved LGBT rights are not framed as an outcome, but as a part of the process of ensuring that aid is delivered in a way that leaves no one behind. DFID broadly addresses LGBT issues within ‘inclusion’ and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) as part of a wider discourse on gender equality and social justice.

Public commitments, through government agencies such as DFID and DANIDA, have generally been welcomed by civil society organisations. However, it has been widely noted, including by some development agencies and NGOs themselves, that commitment to promote LGBT rights in theory at international level is not always matched by a commitment to meaningfully fund programmes for LGBT at a local level.

Further, while good practice guides and toolkits are beginning to emerge, very little has been written about what these commitments mean for the day-to-day work of programme planners, service providers and policy advocates in developing countries. Some agencies have committed new funding for LGBT initiatives, as well as for more inclusive programming, such as human rights training which includes an LGBT component. However, others have not, and it is unclear how new commitments are to be paid for. Only the European Union clearly prohibits discrimination on the basis of SOGI in its procurement guidelines, leaving agencies exposed to the charge of double standards. Identifying and tracking development aid and government spending with an LGBT component is crucial for promoting funding transparency and ensuring that ‘no one is left behind’ in the post-2015 development era.

What are the obstacles?

Language and framing

While ‘LGBT’ is widely used as a collective term for reasons of pragmatism, in practice, it conflates issues in ways that are unhelpful for agency staff. Cultural and geographical

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differences, as well as diversity within and between groups identified as 'LGBT' strongly mitigate against a 'one size fits all' model for either defining who falls in to the LGBT category or as a formula for integrating LGBT issues into development programming.

'LGBT' is still a contested term for its linear reference to sexuality as identity. It has been usurped to some degree by 'SOGI' which many think better captures same-sex attraction as an 'orientation' and distinguishes it from gender identity. Many academics favour the term 'queer' which has behind it a rich seam of thinking about the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and performed. But regardless of the terminology, these boundaries and configurations are controversial and they generate debates that leave organisations and individuals working to improve rights or expand access to health for SOGI in exposing both to charges of 'Western' imposition and of betraying local values, culture and context.

Attitudes, skills and understanding

Internal research indicates that the majority of donor agency staff have limited knowledge of issues relating to SOGI and are ill-equipped to integrate them into areas such as education, agriculture or social protection. Reviews by Plan (UK), SIDA and USAID revealed that homophobia and transphobia exist amongst agency staff at all levels and many staff remain hostile to the agenda or unwilling to engage. Better policies and training for staff focusing on terminology and highlighting the needs and experiences of LGBT people are favoured as responses to attitudinal issues but strategies are limited and success elusive. Faith leaders and communities are emerging as key allies for transforming harmful social norms within countries, including for in-country agency staff.

Data, indicators and guidance

Evidence of 'what works' is limited, particularly in countries where same-sex sexual conduct and other forms of non-conforming sexual or gendered behaviour are criminalised. The lack of disaggregated data and standard indicators means that the experiences of LGBT persons are often

hidden so that the mechanics of economic exclusion and resilience are not well understood outside of LGBT communities. This makes it difficult to develop strategies and integrate them into programme design. Agencies also risk replicating or even exacerbating existing inequalities by failing to recognise how their programming is implicated. Even where the official or 'head office' rhetoric and policy of an agency suggests LGBT inclusion in practice, the fear of working in controversial and unfamiliar territory and of doing harm can mean that embassies and country offices of development agencies and NGOs do nothing.

Leadership and institutional incentives

Despite the recognition of economic marginalisation of LGBT persons by the World Bank and other key agencies and some progress in some areas, there remains a pervasive assumption that 'LGBT rights' are not a development priority and that the issues are not relevant to the core work of poverty reduction. Even within agencies with a long history of working on LGBT issues, this agenda continues to be driven by the knowledge and dedication of a small number of individuals who may not have the backing of their peers or superiors.

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Policy recommendations

Invest in leadership and mobilisation

Building relationships between development agencies, local civil society and LGBT communities is central to ensuring LGBT benefit from development.

Improve understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity within institutions at country and partner level

To move beyond the easy dismissal that the agenda is 'too sensitive' or not relevant to poverty reduction, emphasis should be placed on using available data to strengthen the design of new programmes and ensure that existing inequalities are not replicated or exacerbated. Institutions should:

- Design and implement audits of the laws, policies and conditions that illuminate economic exclusion.
- Develop clear policy, guidance and resources for staff and create opportunities for sensitively managed internal discussions.
- Support LGBT organisations to provide training to increase staff awareness of the cultural context and key economic and social challenges facing different sectors of the LGBT community. The quality and take-up of this training is crucial. To be effective, efforts must involve all staff and must be backed up by clear management policy.
- Consult with LGBT organisations when planning or designing programmes, even when they do not have an explicit focus on SOGI.
- Use existing entry points, such as a review of human resources policies, induction, training, appraisal systems and ongoing professional development, to ensure provision for non-discrimination and the promotion of affirmative policies.
- Acknowledge that some staff members, and/or their family or friends, are LGBT. Explore how to make offices supportive environments and welcoming of difference and diversity.

Innovate and coordinate across agencies and sectors

- Explore new ways to frame LGBT issues that promote dialogue and understanding, at least to a level that lowers resistance.
- Offer flexible grants for LGBT groups that enable them to grow and share information in local languages.
- Support advocacy for LGBT inclusion in poverty alleviation and economic development programmes available to women, rural communities, young people, etc.
- Support education and protection for human rights defenders in countries where these defenders are most likely to be exposed to violence and human rights abuse as a result of homophobic and transphobic laws and discriminatory social attitudes.
- Support the development and sharing of resources that enable LGBT people to conduct research and to document their own lives and issues as a means to lobby for policy change and social transformation directly.

Build the evidence base and the conceptual framework

Although some research is starting to feed into guidance documents (e.g. SIDA's 'country briefs' and UNESCO's good practice guides) the evidence base remains sparse and there is much work to do to understand contexts and to develop and test interventions. For example, an association but not a causal relationship has been established between LGBT discrimination and poor national economic outcomes but the impact of social protection and other poverty alleviation programming on LGBT rights is unknown.

Further reading

Lalor, K.; Mills, E.; Sánchez García, A. and Haste, P. (eds) (2016) *Gender, Sexuality and Social Justice: What's Law Got to Do with It?*, Brighton: IDS

Mills, E. (2015) 'Leave No One Behind': *Gender, Sexuality and the Sustainable Development Goals*, IDS Evidence Report 154, Brighton: IDS

Country case studies from the Sexuality, Poverty and Law programme: <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/>

Sexuality and Social Justice Toolkit: <http://spl.ids.ac.uk/sexuality-and-social-justice-toolkit>

Credits

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