

**Urgent, Feasible, Impactful,
and Fundable!**
*A Case for LGBTIQ-led
Mental Health Initiatives*



Stephen Lewis
Foundation

20
Years



2023

Introduction

For twenty years, the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) has supported community-led organizations working on the frontlines of the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa by providing care and support to women, orphaned and vulnerable children, grandmothers, LGBTIQ individuals, and people living with HIV. Our commitment to being a flexible, consistent, anti-colonial funding partner is infused into the fabric of our day-to-day work.

The SLF's support for LGBTIQ-led organizations in East Africa began in 2017. From the start we heard from those organizations about the urgent need to integrate mental health and well-being services into their HIV and AIDS programs. They shared how the context in which they worked, one characterized by violent homophobia, legally entrenched discrimination, and political and social persecution, was significantly impacting the safety and well-being of community members and causing vicarious trauma and severe burnout for staff, peer support workers, and volunteers.

At the time, we provided small, supplemental emergency grants to support the immediate safety needs as well as the mental health and well-being of the members of their organizations. However, in 2021, we had the opportunity to co-design a project with six of our LGBTIQ-led partners in Kenya and Uganda (FARUG, IBU, SMUG, HAPA Kenya, HOYMAS, and MAAYGO) to respond to the immediate need for inclusive, quality mental health and well-being support for LGBTIQ leaders and community members in those two countries. This two-year project, The Right to Health and Healing, was funded by Global Affairs Canada, the SLF, and Doug Stollery, a major donor of the SLF. It should be noted that beyond the scope of this grant, the need to get quality funding into the hands of LGBTIQ organizations across sub-Saharan Africa remains great, and other LGBTIQ organizations would equally benefit from such dedicated funds as a matter of urgency.

The positive and reverberating impacts of this project – of supporting mental health and well-being programs and services for LGBTIQ communities and organizational staff and volunteers - are profound. The Right to Health and Healing has provided clear evidence that supporting CLOs to provide LGBTIQ mental health initiatives in their communities is urgent, feasible, impactful, and fundable.

Project partners:

Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG) based in Kampala, Uganda, lobbies for the rights of LBQ persons

HIV and AIDS People's Alliance of Kenya (HAPA) based in Mombasa, Kenya serves LGBTIQ community members who are living with HIV

HOYMAS works to improve health, well-being, and social welfare of male sex workers and men who have sex with men in Nairobi, Kenya

Icebreakers Uganda (IBU) focuses on sexual health, sexual rights and HIV awareness and prevention for LGBTIQ Ugandans

MAAYGO based in Kisumu, Kenya, contributes to reproductive health and human rights of men who have sex with men, male sex workers and gay and bisexual men

Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) is a network of LGBTIQ organizations at the forefront of promoting and advocating for LGBTIQ rights in Uganda

URGENT

This project was implemented during a time of intensified demand on LGBTIQ organizations in East Africa and on the human rights defenders leading those organizations (November 2021 – October 2023). At the onset of the project organizations were still grappling with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on LGBTIQ communities. Just as life was returning to a 'post-COVID normal,' Uganda passed the draconian Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA) in May 2023. Around the same time, Kenyan LGBTIQ organizations won a decade-long legal case securing the right for organizations supporting LGBTIQ communities to register legally. However, this victory was met with intense anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric in the country, resulting in a significant backlash against LGBTIQ communities. This includes the drafting of a 'Family Protection Bill,' which incorporates language similar to Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act (AHA). In both Kenya and Uganda, as well as throughout the East Africa region, where the ripple effects of this homophobia are felt, LGBTIQ communities are harassed, attacked, and terrorized by citizens who have been emboldened by local politicians and religious leaders as well as the global rise in anti-LGBTIQ sentiment.

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Real and perceived LGBTIQ+ persons were exposed, tortured, beaten, arrested, outed and suffered physical, sexual and psychological violence, including evictions and banishments, blackmail, loss of employment and health service disruptions.

– Lives At Risk: A Report on Documented Human Rights Violations and Abuses of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer Plus Persons (LGBTIQ+) in Uganda, SRT Jan–August 2023

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We have been working in daily fear, not knowing what would happen from one day to the next. Colleagues have been threatened and attacked.

– Swabra Mumba, HAPA PSS counsellor



The escalating homophobia has subjected LGBTIQ organizations to security threats, leading to their eviction from offices, and forcing staff members out of their homes. In response, staff have had to reinstate COVID-19 work strategies, resorting to remote work and discreet service delivery, while limiting public awareness campaigns and exercising caution on social media. Simultaneously, these dedicated staff members are grappling with a surge in demand for services and support from community members who are living in fear. The mounting pressure has taken a substantial toll on the mental health of staff, pushing many to the brink of complete burnout, thereby affecting the effectiveness of the organizations and movements they lead.

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We have been overwhelmed for the most part. We are not okay mentally and physically. We are falling sick. The stress is too much. We are dealing with a lot of things. There are a lot of sleepless nights and triggers. There is a sense of resilience in having been through this before, but it doesn't take away the anxiety. We are hypervigilant, scared all the time. We don't know who to trust and can't lead normal lives. We have to organize our lives around security and there are many demands. There are staff who deal with emergency responses, seeing cases, vetting cases, and dealing with the traumas that everyone is coming with. It has been rough on everyone's mental health. We are not 100%. We show up, we do it, but it has not been easy.

– Allan Mwasu, SMUG clinical psychologists and strategic initiatives manager

FEASIBLE

The six LGBTIQ-led organizations spearheading this project took on the task of designing and implementing activities to address the mental health needs of their communities. They conducted thorough needs assessments, provided training for their staff and peer educators, raised awareness about mental health, and offered crucial mental health support for both staff and the wider LGBTIQ community. Additionally, they mapped inclusive service providers and collaborated with various stakeholders to enhance access to LGBTIQ-friendly mental health services.

The SLF and our project partners have collaborated to develop a toolkit specifically tailored for LGBTIQ-led organizations. This toolkit provides valuable insights into the practical aspects of designing and running these initiatives. A key takeaway from the project is the clear demonstration of the capacity of LGBTIQ-led organizations to carry out this important work in meaningful ways.



IMPACTFUL

The project has had a profound and inspiring impact on **organizations** dedicated to supporting LGBTIQ communities by:

- **Integrating mental health, healing, and human rights**

The project emphasized the intersection of human rights abuses and mental health, with partners incorporating mental health support into emergency responses. Individuals arrested under the AHA in Uganda received therapy. In addition, some community members who sought therapy after the passage of the AHA were, with their consent, integrated into strategic litigation efforts and featured in petitions and articles. Project partners have provided leadership and direction on providing mental health services in a context of discrimination and injustice.



Zahara didn't envision herself as someone who would need mental health services. As an introvert, she was not inclined to share her issues openly. After the passing of the AHA, however, she found herself grappling with suicidal thoughts. It was then that Zahara turned to the psychologist at IBU for one-on-one therapy.*

*– *Names of clients have been changed to protect confidentiality*

- **Improving the well-being of staff and peers**

The project partners prioritized the integration of mental health and well-being into their organizations through the implementation of new policies and practices. This involved comprehensive training programs for staff, board members, and volunteers, as well as stress management interventions and the provision of mental health services to both staff and peer educators. This holistic approach has empowered staff and peers to navigate challenges more effectively.

The result is evident in enhanced teamwork and unity across participating organizations, leading to a reduction in absenteeism and increased productivity. Particularly significant in the current context of isolation, board retreats and team-building activities have evolved to provide crucial moments of camaraderie, friendship, and connection for staff. This fosters a profound sense of belonging and motivation, transforming these activities into essential components of the organizational culture.



We have been facing a lot of homophobia at community level. There is no one you can share your problems with. When I found MAAIGO, my life changed. I could share what I feel. Sharing is part of the relief from stress. I have felt a sense of belonging where I could express myself and share my creativity.

– MAAIGO peer educator

495 staff and peer educators received support and training that has improved their ability to manage stress and articulate their own mental health needs.

• Building the stature of participating organizations

The project has heightened the visibility and credibility of participating organizations, establishing them as leaders in mental health services and facilitating the development of international relationships within the LGBTIQ rights movements.

The project has been a lifeline for the **LGBTIQ community**, achieving significant impact by:

Creating safe spaces: Safe spaces are more crucial than ever for mental health in the wake of the challenges posed by the AHA in Uganda and anti-LGBTIQ backlash in Kenya. While security concerns have limited some social activities, the participating organizations all found ways to offer safe spaces that provide solace, healing, and connection for LGBTIQ individuals.



People in the community need spaces where they are not judged. That's where Freedom and Roam Uganda comes in. We provide a living room for people who are queer and have been abandoned by their families... Even when you experience backlash there are people who know what you are going through and embrace you.
– Dorothy Amuron, FARUG board chairperson

Providing diverse support pathways and resources: Recognizing the intricacies of mental health, the partners committed to addressing the unique needs of individuals, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. A team of dedicated psychologists, therapists, and counsellors implemented various therapeutic approaches, including support groups and individual sessions, both in-person and online. Moreover, peer educators were equipped to complement these professional services through one-on-one and group interactions. Finally, innovative resources, such as FARUG's wellness journal, ensured that community members could access information on mental health and well-being, even if they couldn't, or chose not to, utilize direct mental health services.

Improving the success of HIV and other health services: The project demonstrated that mental health services and support play a crucial role in enhancing the success of other health services, including those related to HIV, TB, GBV, and STIs. The improvement of mental health contributes to positive health-seeking behavior. At the same time, the project leveraged learnings from successful HIV programming to expand mental health services starting with reducing stigma around mental health care.





In 2022, Edward's life took a turn when he tested positive for HIV during the Covid-19 lockdown. Struggling with depression and isolation, he felt overwhelmed, 'I thought that it was a death sentence.' A friend introduced him to HOYMAS, where he received counselling and joined a support group of people living with HIV. After participating in the support group for some time, Edward accepted his HIV status. He started taking his medication regularly and learnt more about mental health. Thanks to the connections and support that he received through the group, Edward's physical and mental health improved significantly.

Creating an ecosystem of support: Organizations advocated for quality, non-judgmental, friendly services from mainstream and other service providers. By actively building networks with other organizations and trusted individuals, including local health facilities, psychologists, psychiatrists, and even the police, organizations have started to create a supportive ecosystem for the LGBTIQ community and build empathy and understanding among service providers.

FUNDABLE



I want funders to know that this project, in this time, meets one of the biggest needs of the community. It is a time when everyone is losing hope and is scared. ...We have graduated from a point where mental health was just awareness [raising] to building a solution and learning from that and finding ways to make the solution work.

– Allan Mwasa, SMUG clinical psychologist/ strategic initiatives manager

The six organizations that led this project are deeply committed to sustaining and expanding their mental health and well-being work. In addition, there are hundreds of other LGBTIQ-led organizations throughout East Africa, as well as others around the world, who already have the knowledge and ability to implement mental health and well-being projects and the capacity to gain any additional knowledge they need. These organizations need funders of all sorts and sizes to fund this work.

Given the context in which many LGBTIQ-led organizations work, it is especially important that when funding is made available to support this work it comes with **as few restrictions and administrative burdens as possible**. Due to reporting requirements associated with Global Affairs Canada funding, the SLF and our 6 partners spent an exorbitant amount of time on meeting the administrative requirements of the project. This not only detracted from the work itself but also took a toll on the mental health of already stressed and over-worked organizational staff.

More than 17,000 people were reached online or in-person with stigma-free messages about mental health and well-being for LGBTIQ communities including how and where to access services.

Funding must also be flexible. Community-led organizations always benefit from funding that allows them to adapt their work to changing needs and realities. And this is true many times over for LGBTIQ organizations that are navigating unprecedented uncertainties. Their plans and programming will need to change much more quickly than most budget re-allocation processes can accommodate.

Some funders will easily identify how they can meaningfully support mental health work for LGBTIQ-led organizations, and others will need to do more work to determine how to make this possible within their operational systems. However, in either case, the journey needs to start with acknowledging that mental health support for LGBTIQ-led organizations is not a 'nice to have'; it is a necessity.

Whether it is supplementing existing grants to LGBTIQ partners, transitioning to core and unrestricted funding that encourages spending on mental health, working through intermediaries with a commitment to this work, or finding another solution, this work is **urgent, it's feasible, it's impactful, and it's fundable.**



Getting people to seek mental health care is a defining moment...I cannot overstate the value of it.
- John Maina, project officer, HOYMAS

1746 LGBTIQ individuals have been reached with online or in-person counselling and psychosocial support services.



With much appreciation and acknowledgement to Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG), Icebreakers Uganda (IBU), Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), HIV & AIDS People's Alliance of Kenya (HAPA-Kenya), HOYMAS and MAAYGO, and Stephen Lewis Foundation Field Representative Jenny Parsley for their contributions to the creation of this resource document.

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Doug Stollery



Championing health and human rights to end AIDS.



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