

# “THEY KNOW WHAT WE DON’T:”

Meaningful Inclusion of LGBTIQ People  
in Humanitarian Action

June 2024





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**Outright International works together for better LGBTIQ lives.**

Outright is dedicated to working with partners around the globe to strengthen the capacity of the LGBTIQ human rights movement, document and amplify human rights violations against LGBTIQ people, and advocate for inclusion and equality.

Founded in 1990, with staff in over a dozen countries, Outright works with the United Nations, regional human rights monitoring bodies, and civil society partners. Outright holds consultative status at the United Nations, where it serves as the secretariat of the UN LGBTI Core Group.

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Edge Effect is a global diverse SOGIESC (aka LGBTIQ+) humanitarian and development organization established in 2017. Edge Effect's mission is to ensure that the rights, needs and strengths of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics are addressed within the humanitarian and development sectors. Edge Effect works with LGBTIQ+ civil society organizations and communities, alongside donors, UN agencies, and international non-government organizations.

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# Introduction

# 01 Introduction

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The humanitarian sector has evolved over the past 50 years in its rhetoric, governance, delivery models, and decision-making architecture. It is called into action when threats overwhelm the everyday coping capacities of societies. Those threats include disasters such as earthquakes and floods, violent armed conflicts, and health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. States are the primary duty bearers in humanitarian crises, and many lower-impact crises are addressed by national governments, civil society, and other organizations, with little or no involvement by the international system. The international humanitarian system usually activates when states seek assistance, often in response to one-off events for which temporary relief and support recovery is needed; other situations, often conflict-related, can become protracted and require support for longer periods of time.

This report explores how the humanitarian system is responding to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people during humanitarian crises. What commitments have the global humanitarian system made that should apply to LGBTIQ people, as they do to all others? What capacities must the system have to respond to the specific needs and priorities of LGBTIQ people? What challenges exist within the system that may leave those needs unmet? And, what solutions and resources are available to organizations working within the system to make interventions more equitable regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC)?

Addressing or even acknowledging the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ people in emergency contexts has long been cast in the “too hard” basket. In recent years, a steady growth in literature has shed light on the shortcomings of crisis interventions in addressing the needs of LGBTIQ populations. While documenting LGBTIQ exclusion and humanitarian system failures is a crucial step for holding the system accountable, we recognize that criticism alone is not conducive to inspiring action. Accordingly, this report highlights pathways available to humanitarian actors seeking to improve LGBTIQ inclusion, keeping in mind the full complexity of the challenges that exist in crisis settings around the world. Our intended audiences are humanitarian workers and decision-makers at all levels of the humanitarian system, including front-line workers implementing responses at country or regional levels, coordinators and managers at global headquarters, donors who fund interventions around the world, and LGBTIQ activists who have been relentlessly pushing for change and could use support to identify entry points for advocacy.

This report consolidates experiences and efforts that a range of humanitarian organizations and structures are undertaking to advance meaningful inclusion of LGBTIQ populations. Yet, in doing so, we also must acknowledge the imbalances in attention across the SOGIESC spectrum. For instance, the needs and priorities of intersex individuals in crisis settings are still largely unknown and unaddressed by the humanitarian sector. Transgender, nonbinary, and

gender-nonconforming individuals may also be left out of effective responses. The sector also needs to increase attention to lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, especially in policies tackling gender discrimination and gender-based violence.

Our findings, analysis, and recommendations have been developed through original research, including a literature review, in-depth interviews with headquarters or regional representatives from 13 major international humanitarian agencies, and seven case studies of tangible examples of LGBTIQ inclusion in crisis responses in Colombia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, and Ukraine. The Methodology section describes our data collection and analysis process and introduces the conceptual frameworks and tools used throughout the report—namely Edge Effect’s Diverse-SOGIESC Continuum, the Diverse-SOGIESC Partner Appraisal Tool, and the Diverse-SOGIESC Rapid Assessment Tool—as well as our approach to identifying participants for interviews and case studies. The Literature and Context section comprises an overview of the literature on inclusion in humanitarianism, outlines the unique challenges and vulnerabilities faced by LGBTIQ populations in emergency settings, and examines reform within the humanitarian system. The next section, Global Readiness, presents our analysis of a series of in-depth interviews with senior decision-makers within major humanitarian international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). While this section highlights the challenges faced by global actors wanting to implement LGBTIQ inclusion across complex organizations in diverse contexts, we also draw attention to the steps that can be taken at the institutional level to ensure meaningful and sustainable progress in organizational conversations, strategies, programming, and policies.

The subsequent section presents seven case studies which describe promising inclusion practices being undertaken in five very different crisis contexts. From massive refugee influxes and armed conflict in Colombia and Myanmar, to the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, and the multiple crises in Lebanon and war-torn Ukraine, our case studies showcase examples of humanitarian actors productively engaging with local LGBTIQ populations while also confronting challenges and identifying strategies for deeper engagement.

By highlighting promising practices, we hope that our audiences receive this report as a “calling in,” rather than a “calling out.” Throughout the report, we seek to provide recommendations that are actionable, but also cognizant of the many challenges that can impede progress on LGBTIQ inclusion. While our findings are grounded in the complex realities inherent in complex crises, we aim to underscore opportunities and positive pathways available to organizations that strive for better outcomes for LGBTIQ populations.

Outright International and Edge Effect  
June 2024

# Methodology

# 02 Methodology

## 2.1. OVERVIEW

This section details our approach to data collection and analysis. The methodology was designed to generate a snapshot of LGBTIQ inclusion within the humanitarian system. It provides perspectives from LGBTIQ civil society organizations (CSOs), country-level and headquarters-level staff from international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and representatives from regionally based humanitarian organizations.

Data collection took place between January and November 2023. Our findings are derived from:

7 crisis case studies written collaboratively with LGBTIQ CSOs

10 in-depth interviews with country-level INGO staff participating in the case studies (Stream 1)

14 in-depth interviews with headquarter-level INGO representatives (Stream 2)

Major humanitarian organizations work across global and country levels, with some also operating at regional levels. The purpose of having these two different streams was to identify how and at what level actions and decision-making regarding LGBTIQ inclusion have been undertaken within international humanitarian organizations, and to illuminate challenges and best practices in translating headquarters strategies into appropriate action at the crisis response level; or, conversely, how headquarters can support initiatives led from country offices.

### Case Studies

Outright and Edge Effect tapped into our networks to identify crisis contexts in which LGBTIQ organizations specifically had *positive* outcomes in their engagement with the humanitarian system. Once we identified an organization with a promising story, we sent them a standardized set of questions to which they responded and described their experiences in their own words. Question topics covered the actual assistance received, the process of engaging with relevant organizations, the depth of the partnership, safety and protection issues, and challenges and recommendations. Where necessary, Outright and Edge Effect conducted follow-up interviews with representatives from the organization(s) to ensure that we understood their perspectives. Each organization was compensated for their time to draft their responses to the questions, and each reviewed and formally approved the final case study versions.

## In-Depth Interviews

The data collection tools utilized for in-depth interviews were modified versions of Edge Effect's Rapid Assessment Tool (RAT) and Partner Appraisal Tool (PAT).

<b>STREAM 1</b> <b>RAPID ASSESSMENT TOOL</b>	<b>STREAM 2</b> <b>PARTNER APPRAISAL TOOL</b>
<p><b>Purpose of tool:</b> project/intervention-level analysis of diverse-SOGIESC inclusion</p> <p>Condensed to 12 questions for the purpose of this study</p> <p>INGO participants asked to identify 6-8 relevant questions to discuss in interview</p>	<p><b>Purpose of tool:</b> organizational-level of analysis of diverse-SOGIESC inclusion</p> <p>15 questions, 4 thematic areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>Vision</i></li><li><i>Engagement</i></li><li><i>Design</i></li><li><i>Environment</i></li></ul>

### Stream 1: Examination of Partnerships Between Local LGBTIQ Organizations and Humanitarian Agencies

Stream 1 interviews with humanitarian organizations informed the case studies and were identified based on recommendations from our LGBTIQ organizational contacts. These interviews focused on eliciting detail about the decisions and actions that led to formal partnerships between the humanitarian organization and the LGBTIQ organization.

The interview tool was a modified version of Edge Effect's Rapid Assessment Tool.<sup>1</sup> This Tool aims to comprehensively assess LGBTIQ inclusion across a range of factors, including the contextual analysis that informed the design of an intervention; the capabilities of staff to address the rights, needs, and strengths of LGBTIQ people; the proactive engagement of LGBTIQ people and organizations in the design, implementation, and management of projects; and safety considerations.

We modified the questionnaire for this research, reducing it from 20 to 12 core questions. We then provided it to respondents in advance and requested them to identify six to eight questions on which to focus the interview. This allowed us to streamline the interviews and ensure that the questions were as relevant as possible to the case study. Providing the questions in advance also gave participants time to collect any other information that might be helpful for their responses.

The 12 interview questions for the modified Rapid Assessment Tool were grouped into three thematic areas: 1) contextualization, analysis, and design of interventions, 2) engagement, participation, and inclusion of diverse-SOGIESC voices, and 3) safety, security, and protection considerations. The full list of questions can be found in Annex 1.

<sup>1</sup>Edge Effect originally developed the Rapid Assessment Tool for the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

## Stream 2: Interviews with Major Humanitarian Organizations

For the Stream 2 interviews, we sought to understand how decisions on LGBTIQ inclusion take place at the upper levels of international humanitarian organizations, and to shed light on how strategies at this level translate to country and crisis-level decision-making and action.

The interview tool was a modified version of Edge Effect’s Partner Appraisal Tool, which was designed to reverse the standard accountability dynamics where global humanitarian organizations require national or local organizations to be accountable to them. Typically, local partners must undergo rigorous due diligence assessments to ensure that they are capable of managing funds and implementing activities according to standards and procedures set by international entities. While such assessments likely will remain, the Partner Appraisal Tool is meant to be used by local organizations to determine the extent to which international development and humanitarian organizations have the policies and practices needed to engage in safe, relevant, effective, and adaptive work with LGBTIQ people.

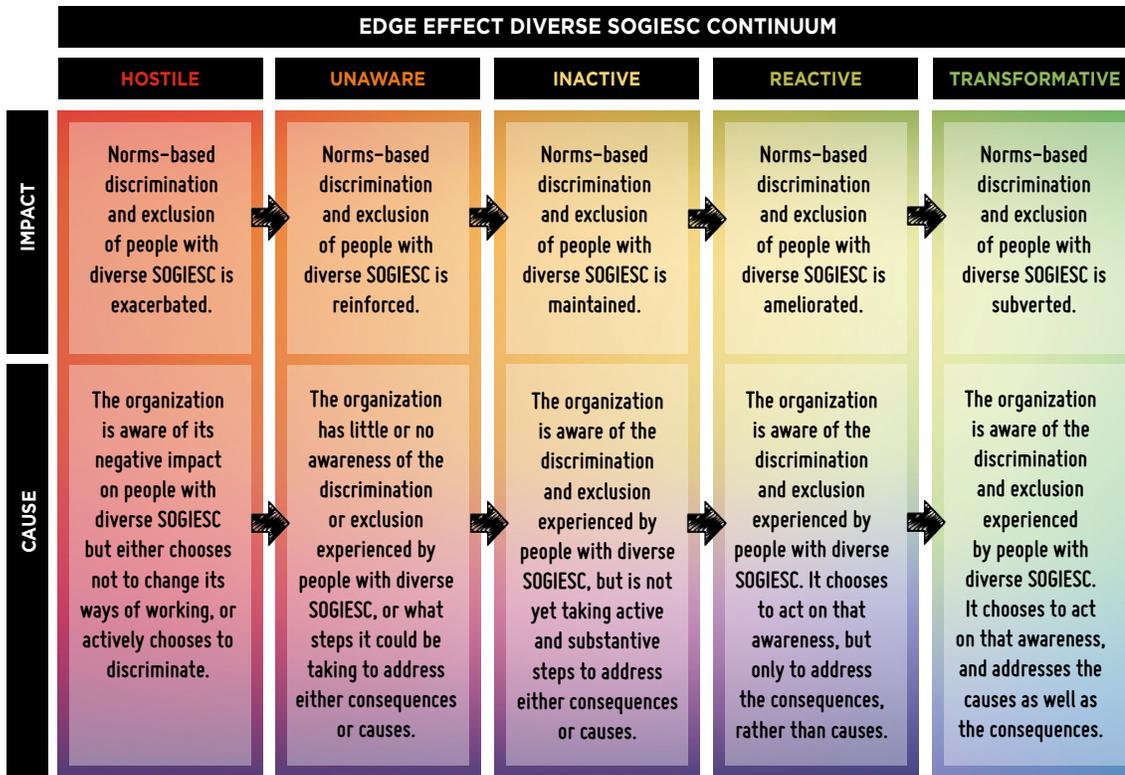
Lines of inquiry within the Partner Appraisal Tool are organized around four areas:



The full list of Rapid Assessment Tool questions can be found in Annex 2.

## 2.2. ANALYSIS

Both tools are linked to Edge Effect’s Diverse SOGIESC Continuum, which evaluates the extent to which an organization or program’s activities are inclusive of LGBTIQ communities. The framework situates an organization’s approach along a spectrum ranging from *hostile* (where marginalization and exclusion of LGBTIQ people are exacerbated) to *transformative* (where marginalization and exclusion of LGBTIQ people are ameliorated or challenged).



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### 2.3. LIMITATIONS

Some methodological limitations exist.

- 1. This report does not provide a comprehensive or representative picture of LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian system.** Rather, our intention is to highlight examples of the system working to benefit LGBTIQ communities—who typically are marginalized, if not actively harmed, in humanitarian responses across the globe. Thus, by design, the featured case studies have been deliberately selected for being positive examples of engagement between LGBTIQ CSOs and humanitarian organizations. We hope that these stories inspire similar actions from other agencies, but we do not claim that these stories are representative of the bigger picture. They most likely are not.
- 2. We have used abbreviated versions of Edge Effect’s Rapid Assessment Tool and Partner Appraisal Tool.** As described above, the survey tools and analytical frameworks used here are modified versions of much more detailed tools. Using these tools as originally designed requires time, resources, and commitment from willing organizations beyond what was feasible within the scope of this project. The intention was instead to provide examples of practices and policies that humanitarian organizations might consider in their strategies and operations moving forward, rather than to comprehensively evaluate or rate INGO performance.
- 3. Our sample represents a self-selected pool of participants, as not all humanitarian organizations that we contacted agreed to be interviewed.** Those who did, especially regarding the case studies, did so because they believed that their organizations’ work with LGBTIQ communities was strong or improving. Voices from those whose organizations have not made progress—or even potentially believe that the

needs of LGBTIQ people during crisis do not need particular attention—were not included. This resulted in a data collection and analysis process that was more collaborative than a formal organizational evaluation or critique. It also means that the reality regarding progress on LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian action may be substantially less positive than the report may indicate.

**4. Our analysis is limited in its reference to specific groups and intersectionality within the LGBTIQ spectrum, with details concerning intersex people being particularly limited.** In this report, we have primarily used the term “LGBTIQ” throughout, although we recognize that the organizations and programs we investigated were not always intersex-inclusive. Further, the programs that we describe may not always be applicable to the needs and priorities of intersex people. As our findings suggest, the majority of organizations and actors interviewed for this research are at the beginning of a long journey of sensitizing their workplaces and programming to meet the needs of LGBTIQ people. At this stage, LGBTIQ groups and issues are typically addressed as a whole. This is also reflective of the lower levels of awareness, funding, and information pertaining to intersex people and their specific needs.

# Literature and Context

# 03 Literature and Context

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This section presents an overview of the literature on LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarianism, noting both progress and challenges. It also provides context for understanding why the humanitarian system needs to urgently address gaps in LGBTIQ inclusion. Finally, it serves as a foundation for the research we undertook to describe the current state of LGBTIQ inclusion within major humanitarian organizations, as reflected in policies and practices.

## 3.1. ENHANCED RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES FACED BY LGBTIQ PEOPLE DURING HUMANITARIAN CRISES

During humanitarian crises, LGBTIQ people share common needs with all affected populations, including, for example, the need for food, water, shelter, psychosocial support, and protection. Yet, LGBTIQ people also face unique challenges and risks in times of humanitarian crises because pre-existing inequalities, discrimination, and violence may be exacerbated. Like all populations, LGBTIQ populations are not monolithic, with vulnerabilities and capabilities differing widely depending on specific identity and other intersectional characteristics. When humanitarian responses are not sensitive to the needs and realities of LGBTIQ people, little or no support reaches them, or it is provided in a way that may expose them to new risks.<sup>2</sup> This section explores how pre-emergency conditions pose unique risk dynamics to LGBTIQ people in crisis environments and how LGBTIQ people, in all their diversity, can be neglected or further harmed by humanitarian responses.

**Humanitarian needs of LGBTIQ people are linked to pre-emergency experiences of bias, violence, and exclusion that stem from criminalization, institutionalized discrimination, and deeply embedded social norms and stigmas.** The marginalization of LGBTIQ people is rooted in legal frameworks and normative assumptions that dictate which sexual orientations, gender identities, or sex characteristics are desirable and permissible.<sup>3</sup> These social norms, alongside laws that criminalize certain behaviors or identities, can manifest in violent actions, discriminatory attitudes and behaviors, and a constant threat of arbitrary arrest.<sup>4</sup> As a result, many LGBTIQ people keep their sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics as a secret. They may internalize stigma and fear being outed.

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<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Billy Tusker Haworth, Scott McKinnon, and Christine Eriksen, “Advancing Disaster Geographies: From Marginalization to Inclusion of Gender and Sexual Minorities,” *Geography Compass* 16, no. 11 (September 2022), <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/gec3.12664>.

<sup>3</sup>Michael O’Flaherty, “The Yogyakarta Principles at Ten,” *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 33, no. 4 (2015), 280–298.

<sup>4</sup>Human Dignity Trust, *Criminalising Homosexuality and LGBT Rights in Times of Conflict, Violence, and Natural Disasters*, November 2015, <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/8.-Criminalisation-Conflict-and-Natural-Disasters.pdf>.

The social norms that harm LGBTIQ populations are by no means put on hold during crises—they are perpetuated and sometimes amplified. LGBTIQ people have found themselves blamed for bringing disasters upon their communities as a form of supernatural retribution.<sup>5</sup> For instance, different groups within Fijian society blamed LGBTIQ communities for bringing the tropical cyclone Winston in 2016 as a form of divine punishment.<sup>6</sup> Stigmatizing discourses are also weaponized against LGBTIQ people to rally communities around political or nationalistic ideologies in times of conflict.<sup>7</sup> Amid these dynamics, LGBTIQ people may avoid accessing assistance provided by governments, local relief organizations, or religious organizations if they fear—often with good reason—that they may experience discrimination, violence, and exclusion from humanitarian staff or harassment from other aid recipients. Where any level of public attention to LGBTIQ issues carries a risk of danger and when the exposure of an individual’s LGBTIQ identity carries a risk of violence from authorities or other armed groups, LGBTIQ people often live in a context of enforced silence and are rendered invisible to broader society as well as to humanitarian responders.

**Long-term marginalization from education, livelihood opportunities, safe housing, and healthcare systems, as well as family and societal ostracization, can result in LGBTIQ people having fewer resources and capacity to support their resilience in the face of external crises.**

Many LGBTIQ people in hostile settings must rely on low-paying, dangerous, or less secure work in informal economies because they face challenges obtaining formal work, rendering them more vulnerable when crises occur. This was particularly apparent during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In research that Outright conducted with 59 LGBTIQ people in 38 countries, interviewees reported experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, disruptions in access to health care, and elevated risk of violence at home.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the informal community networks and supports that are critical lifelines for LGBTIQ people are often disrupted or destroyed by crises, furthering their marginalization.<sup>9</sup> Disasters and crises unmake LGBTIQ homes, neighborhoods, and communities, destroying safe spaces, enhancing specific vulnerabilities, and placing individuals more at risk of violence and abuse—an experience which Dominey-Howes et al. refer to as *domicide*.<sup>10</sup> When possible, LGBTIQ CSOs try to fill the void, even when they are neither trained nor equipped to be humanitarian responders. A 2021 report from the Global Philanthropy Project noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTIQ organizations sought to “fill this void out of

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<sup>5</sup> DRR Dynamics, *LGBTQIA+ People & Disasters*, September 2021, <https://irp.cdn-website.com/cde3424c/files/uploaded/LGBTQIA%2B%20report-3.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Devikara (Prim) Devakula, Elisabeth Dotter, Emily Dwyer, and Maria Holtsberg, *Pride in the Humanitarian System: Bangkok 4–7 June Consultation Report*, 2018, 6, <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/pride-in-the-humanitarian-system-consultation-report>.

<sup>7</sup> Outright International, *LGBTQ Lives in Conflict and Crisis: A Queer Agenda for Peace, Security, and Accountability*, February 2023, [https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/LGBTQLivesConflictCrisis\\_0.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/LGBTQLivesConflictCrisis_0.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Outright, *Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ People*, May 2020, <https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/human-rights-research/vulnerability-amplified-impact-covid-19-pandemic-lgbtiq-people>.

<sup>9</sup> Dale Dominey-Howes, Andrew Gorman-Murray, and Scott McKinnon, “On the Disaster Experiences of Sexual and Gender (LGBTI) Minorities: Insights to Support Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Policy and Practice,” *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 31, no. 4 (2018), <https://researchdirect.westernsydney.edu.au/islandora/object/uws:48711/datastream/PDF/view>; Danielle Roth, Alexandra Blackwell, Mark Canavera, and Kathryn Falb, *Cycles of Displacement: Understanding Exclusion, Discrimination, and Violence Against LGBTIQ People in Humanitarian Contexts*, International Rescue Committee, 2021, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5961/irccyclesofdisplacementfinaljune2021.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Gorman-Murray, Scott McKinnon, and Dale Dominey-Howes, “Queer Domicide: LGBT Displacement and Home Loss in Natural Disaster Impact, Response, and Recovery,” *The Journal of Architecture, Design, and Domestic Space* 11, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174214X13891916944751>.

necessity, providing for basic needs, support, and protection for their communities.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, these organizations can be severely strained during crises and often struggle to be included within the international system’s coordination and funding mechanisms.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a majority of the globe’s humanitarian crises are in countries where LGBTIQ identities and organizations are criminalized. An inability to legally register impedes the access of these organizations to funding and forces many of them to operate discreetly, cutting them off from official humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup>

**Forced displacement exposes LGBTIQ people to new sources of violence and discrimination.**<sup>14</sup>

Experiences of violence perpetrated against displaced LGBTIQ people by security forces and armed groups are well documented, whether in home countries or countries of displacement.<sup>15</sup> Immigration officials may harass or refuse passage to LGBTIQ people crossing borders, or the country in which they are compelled to seek refuge may criminalize LGBTIQ identities and behaviors.<sup>16</sup> Individuals whose gender identity and/or expression does not conform to their sex assigned at birth face higher risks of abuse, detainment, or having their movement restricted due to issues with identification documents, while same-sex couples and families may be forced to conceal their identities to remain safe.<sup>17</sup> Outright has documented the verbal abuse, stripping, and harassment of transgender people attempting to cross the Ukraine border, both in cases where an individual’s documentation did not match their gender identity and/or expression, or simply because of the individual prejudices of specific border security officers.<sup>18</sup>

The continuum of violence and stigmatization faced by LGBTIQ individuals practically means that neither putting an end to conflicts that force displacement nor escaping an emergency situation automatically translates into guaranteed safety.

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<sup>11</sup>Global Philanthropy Project, *Where are the Global COVID-19 Resources for LGBTI Communities?*, 2021, <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Mapping-COVID-Report-2021-Final-1.21.21.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup>Rainbow Pride Foundation Fiji, Edge Effect, and Oxfam, *Down by the River: Addressing the Rights, Needs, and Strengths of Fijian Sexual and Gender Minorities in Disaster Risk Reduction and Humanitarian Response*, May 2018, <https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Down-By-The-River-May2018.pdf>; Henri Myrntinen and Megan Daigle, *When Merely Existing is a Risk: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Conflict, Displacement, and Peacebuilding*, International Alert, February 2017, <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/when-merely-existing-is-a-risk>.

<sup>13</sup>Outright, *Freedom of Assembly and Association: The Global State of LGBTIQ Organizing*, 14 September 2023, <https://outrightinternational.org/right-to-register2023>.

<sup>14</sup>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and United Nations Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, *Summary Conclusions: 2021 Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTIQ+ People in Forced Displacement*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/611e20c77.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup>Ion Margalit, “Still a Blind Spot: The Protection of LGBT Persons During Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 100, no. 907-909 (2018), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/0C9FC5D1F2AFBED6186AC2D1AA8829E1/S1816383119000201a.pdf/still-a-blind-spot-the-protection-of-lgbt-persons-during-armed-conflict-and-other-situations-of-violence.pdf>; Heartland Alliance International, “No Place for People Like You”: *An Analysis of the Needs, Vulnerabilities, and Experiences of LGBT Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*, December 2014, [https://www.heartlandalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/02/no-place-for-people-like-you\\_hai\\_2014.pdf](https://www.heartlandalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/02/no-place-for-people-like-you_hai_2014.pdf).

<sup>16</sup>United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures, “Forcibly Displaced LGBT Persons Face Major Challenges in Search of Safe Haven,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 17 May 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/05/forcibly-displaced-lgbt-persons-face-major-challenges-search-safe-haven>; Sandra Smiley, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Transgender People in Humanitarian Emergencies,” International Committee of the Red Cross: Humanitarian Law and Policy Blog, 31 March 2020, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2020/03/31/out-sight-mind-transgender-people-humanitarian-emergencies>; Kate Pincock, “UNHCR and LGBTI Refugees in Kenya: The Limits of Protection,” *Disasters* 45, no. 4 (22 May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12447>.

<sup>17</sup>Smiley, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Transgender People in Humanitarian Emergencies;” DRR Dynamics, *LGBTQIA+ People & Disasters*.

<sup>18</sup>Outright, Gender Stream, and RFSL, *Advocacy Brief: Barriers for Transgender People Leaving in Ukraine During the War*, 2022, [https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Transborder%20crossingbrief\\_EN.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Transborder%20crossingbrief_EN.pdf).

**Mainstream humanitarian responses can sometimes worsen pre-existing LGBTIQ discrimination and exclusion.** Evidence also suggests that humanitarian actors may exacerbate LGBTIQ marginalization by not understanding the experiences or diversity of LGBTIQ people before crises and how those experiences are relevant during crises. For example, allocating assistance based on a definition of a household or a family that ignores same-sex couples or groups of LGBTIQ people who function as chosen families reinforces marginalization.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it is highly likely that in many circumstances LGBTIQ households are unwilling to “out” themselves and risk exposing themselves to danger by requesting assistance. Outright documented two cases in which lesbian couples in Manila were denied food packages during the COVID-19 lockdown, presumably because local authorities believed that they did not meet the definition of “family” or “household” according to the law dictating COVID-19 relief allocations, although the law at face value was not discriminatory.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, shelters or camps may not be safe places for LGBTIQ people, where they can face danger and harassment in segregated shelters, toilets, and sanitation facilities that do not account for non-normative sexual and gender expressions.<sup>21</sup> For instance, authorities often decide to place intersex refugees and asylum seekers in refugee shelters based on binary sex markers, which puts them at higher risks of experiencing mental, physical, and sexual violence or other forms of abuse at the hands of other refugees.<sup>22</sup> None of these examples imply that workers in the international humanitarian system are overtly hostile toward LGBTIQ people—a lack of concerted outreach can be driven by concerns to not draw attention to LGBTIQ people and risk exposing them to potential violence, or may be explained by a lack of awareness about LGBTIQ people generally or in specific contexts. Accordingly, the next section turns to the structural barriers within the humanitarian system that pose challenges to the meaningful inclusion of LGBTIQ populations.

### 3.2. THE “I” IN LGBTIQ

It should be noted that while this report sometimes includes intersex people within general claims about LGBTIQ populations, many issues discussed might not apply to intersex people (for instance, those who are heterosexual and cisgender and thus do not face the risk of criminalization). Similarly, many studies referenced in this report are not necessarily intersex-inclusive, and thus the extent to which broader findings about LGBTIQ populations are applicable to intersex people may vary greatly.

While the literature is still scarce regarding the experiences of intersex people in crises, we know that intersex people face a number of vulnerabilities in emergency contexts.<sup>23</sup> As part of

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<sup>19</sup>Roth, Blackwell, Canavera, and Falb, *Cycles of Displacement*.

<sup>20</sup>Outright, *Vulnerability Amplified*; The Republic of the Philippines, Republic Act (RA) No. 11469, 24 March 2020, [https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2020/ra\\_11469\\_2020.html](https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2020/ra_11469_2020.html).

<sup>21</sup>DRR Dynamics, *LGBTQIA+ People & Disasters*; Joshua Aaron Fontanez, “Transgender an At-Risk Population During and Following Emergencies and Disasters” (PhD diss., Walden University, 2019), <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8567&context=dissertations>.

<sup>22</sup>Jana Hugo and Luan Pertl, “Intersex Refugees & Asylum Seekers Toolkit,” OII Europe, March 2024, 34, <https://www.oiiurope.org/new-resource-oii-europe-refugees-asylum-seeker-toolkit>.

<sup>23</sup>Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe people whose sex characteristics do not align with typical medical or social definitions of female or male bodies. There are a range of intersex variations: some are visible, others are not, and depending upon the specific variation, intersex conditions may be identified prenatally, at birth, during puberty, during adulthood, or never. In many societies around the world, babies born with visible intersex variations will be operated upon in their early stages and without their consent to align their body with either a female or a male body. Intersex activists advocate to ban these unnecessary non-consensual medical interventions. There is also a growing body of evidence that documents the harm, trauma, and shame experienced by intersex people as a result of such practices.

our research we sought the expertise of two intersex activists, —one based in New Zealand and another based in Berlin, Germany.

While many issues faced by intersex people may look similar to those faced by other LGBTQ people—such as higher levels of unemployment, poverty, or discrimination—they can also face unique risks. Some of these include:

**Medical concerns:** Emergency situations may severely disrupt access to medication for intersex communities, which can have life-threatening consequences.<sup>24</sup> The difficulty in accessing medical help during a crisis can also be exacerbated by past traumatic experiences in medical settings, resulting in distrust towards unknown medical staff. Some intersex people require medication to stay alive and healthy, particularly those who have Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, which affects cortisol and salt levels in the body. Additionally, many intersex people who have undergone operations to modify their sex characteristics require ongoing hormone replacement medication, access to which can be severely curtailed in crisis settings.

**Psychosocial concerns:** Isolation and mental health problems are other vulnerabilities faced by intersex people.<sup>25</sup> Given the relative invisibility of intersex people, connections among people with shared lived experience can be critical lifelines. These opportunities can be destroyed by crises, —leaving intersex people even more vulnerable and isolated, as documented during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>26</sup> Describing the marginalization and isolation experienced by many people with intersex variations, Luan Pertl, an intersex activist, said, “They often feel like they don’t fit. Many don’t go to doctors, and sometimes don’t go shopping or go out.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Mani Mitchell, another intersex activist, noted that “shame and fear . . . remains a big part of this community.” Reflecting on the impact humanitarian crises, Mitchell stated, “People who have already experienced trauma are going to be much more at risk from a new event adding another layer of trauma in their lives.”<sup>28</sup>

**Physical safety:** For people who have visible intersex variations, a lack of privacy in emergency shelters (such as within toilets, showers, etc.) can lead to exposure that may result in violence, harassment, and shame.

Humanitarian workers and organizations must enhance their understanding of the needs of intersex people in crises to better support them. When engaging with LGBTIQ organizations, they should be cognizant that intersex communities are often represented by separate organizations and activists, and in many cases intersex persons do not identify as LGBTQ, so proactive outreach should be undertaken to determine if there are specific organizations that can be supported. Sometimes, humanitarian actors may identify opportunities to work with intersex populations entirely outside the scope of LGBTQ work. Finally, when expanding awareness about intersex people, it is important to avoid “getting into the voyeuristic nuts and

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<sup>24</sup>Dan Christian Ghattas and Irene Kuzemko, *COVID-19: A Report on the Situation of Intersex People in Europe and Central Asia*, OII Europe, 2021, [https://www.oiiurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/covid-19-survey-report-OII\\_Europe.pdf](https://www.oiiurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/covid-19-survey-report-OII_Europe.pdf).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid; Obioma Chukwuike, *COVID-19: A Report on the Situation of Intersex People in Africa*, Africa Intersex Movement, 2023, <https://intersexnigeria.org/covid-19-report-africa>.

<sup>26</sup>Prashant Singh and Hiker Chiu, “Invisibility Amplified: A Report on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Intersex Community in Asia,” intersexAsia, 2020, [https://intersexasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021\\_06\\_01\\_IA-COVID-19-Report-1.pdf](https://intersexasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021_06_01_IA-COVID-19-Report-1.pdf).

<sup>27</sup>Outright interview with Luan Pertl, by video communication, 26 February 2024.

<sup>28</sup>Edge Effect interview with Mani Mitchell, by video communication, 20 February 2024.

bolts”<sup>29</sup>—and instead focus on who is best situated to advocate on behalf of intersex people in specific settings, and what immediate needs there might be to address.

### 3.3. THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM AT LARGE

While the varying states of precarity that LGBTIQ people face are exacerbated in times of crisis, the international humanitarian system is not set up to address these structural, legal, political, institutional, and societal forms of discrimination.<sup>30</sup> The boundaries of the humanitarian system and where it intersects or merges with the development system have long been questioned. In many contexts, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding systems coexist, but the demarcations of institutions, power, and funding often conspire to keep these architectures functionally apart. Challenging these traditional demarcations is especially important for LGBTIQ people, whose lives involve forms of crisis that span across what international organizations have described as the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Nexus.<sup>31</sup>

This report sits within the boundaries of the current needs-based system, imperfect as it may be. In 2023, the UN and its humanitarian partner organizations recognized crises in 72 countries, 26 of which were severe enough to require their own Humanitarian Response Plan.<sup>32</sup> Attention and funding, however, are only directed to a small subset of those. For example, in 2022, almost two-thirds of humanitarian funding went to just 10 humanitarian responses. Many countries have been on this list for several years, indicating the prevalence of protracted crises. For 2024, the UN estimates that 300 million people will be in need of humanitarian assistance, but it anticipates directing resources to only 60 percent of those—about 181 million people.

While the humanitarian system is built upon principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence, it is fundamentally a needs-based system and, in this way, differs from development and human rights systems with which LGBTIQ organizations and advocates have greater familiarity. Further, the global protection system is severely under-funded and must spread its resources across different marginalized groups. As a result, the number of people reached by any assistance is likely to be much lower than the 181 million people target. Unfortunately, lack of resources can then become a convenient rationale for not making additional efforts to reach those who challenge social norms. According to a study by CARE International regarding the current trends in collecting gender, age, and disability data, an interviewee from an international organization confirmed that no information on LGBTIQ people was included in the organization’s sector response plans and said that the explicit inclusion of LGBTIQ people in the humanitarian mandate still felt like a “debate:”

“I checked sector response plans to see if they included [anything on LGBT] and zero percent of the sector plans included these folks. The sector response plans included sex, age, and disability more often but for LGBT it was zero. There is a debate if this group of people should even be part of the humanitarian mandate.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, December 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrres>.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations – Peacebuilding, Humanitarian, Development, and Peace Nexus, n.d., <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/content/humanitarian-development-and-peace-nexus>

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, December 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2024-enarfrres>.

<sup>33</sup> Dyan Mazurana, Anastasia Marshak, and Kinsey Spears, *Sex, Age (And More) Still Matter: Data Collection, Analysis, and Use in Humanitarian Practice*, CARE International, March 2023, 27, [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Sex-age-and-more-still-matter\\_Final-report.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Sex-age-and-more-still-matter_Final-report.pdf).

An analysis of sector response plans that were active at the time of writing demonstrates a lack of specific reference to LGBTIQ needs and experiences.<sup>34</sup> Humanitarian Needs Overviews (HNOs) and Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) are key to the development of intervention strategies, the articulation of funding needs, and effective coordination and collaboration among humanitarian actors. Of the 28 active humanitarian needs overviews, only eight make explicit reference to LGBTIQ populations, while among the 28 active response plans, there are nine references. Some are considerably more detailed than others. For example, El Salvador’s HNO featured an entire section discussing the needs and risks of LGBTIQ populations, while others were limited to a single sentence in which LGBTIQ people were identified within a list of vulnerable populations, such as in Ethiopia’s HNO. It is worth noting that reports pertaining to crises in Latin American countries were more likely to feature reference to LGBTIQ populations (five out of six for both HNOs and HRPs) than were reports pertaining to crises in the Africa region (one out of 16 for both HNOs and HRPs) or the Asia-Pacific region (one out of five for HNOs and two out of five for HRPs).

Indeed, some reports contained language that may well seek to capture LGBTIQ populations—such as reference to “marginalized” or “vulnerable” groups, or general references to be mindful of diversity and intersectional identities. Similarly, activities related to HIV responses are likely to target and involve LGBTIQ key populations. We did not count these references in the table below, given that they were not explicit. We did, however, include language that, while coded, clearly speaks to SOGIESC diversity—namely the reference to “women, girls, boys and men in all their diversities”—within the Occupied Palestinian Territory response plan.

TYPE OF DOCUMENT	# ACTIVE	# REFERENCING SOGIESC DIVERSITY	EXAMPLES
Humanitarian Needs Overviews	28	8	Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Myanmar, Ukraine
Humanitarian Response Plans	28	9	Chad, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Myanmar, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Ukraine, Venezuela
Others (Flash Appeals, Crisis Response Plans, Refugee Response Plans, etc.)	15	7	Haiti, Lebanon Crisis Response Plan, Afghanistan Refugee Response Plan, Democratic Republic of Congo Refugee Response Plan, South Sudan Refugee Response Plan, Ukraine Refugee Response Plan, Venezuela Refugee Response Plan)

<sup>34</sup> The list of current humanitarian responses are detailed in OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2023, July Update (Snapshot as of 31 July 2023)*, July 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/global-humanitarian-overview-2023-july-update-snapshot-31-july-2023>. Edge Effect staff then searched for relevant HNOs and HRPs specific to each country or crisis listed in the Global Humanitarian Overview within ReliefWeb, and scanned relevant documents for the following key search terms: LGBT\*, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, intersex, divers\*, minorit\*, sexual\*, queer, divers.\*

Other ad hoc documents, such as Flash Appeals and Refugee Response Plans, were more likely to highlight LGBTIQ populations.<sup>35</sup> References were more frequent among refugee and migrant response plans (five out of seven), where there were notable references in especially hostile contexts where there had been no such mention in HNOs/HRPs attached to those crises (Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan). This may suggest that the humanitarian system finds it easier to conceptualize LGBTIQ populations in reference to their displacement as a result of crisis, rather than as a group for whom specific programmatic considerations can be made regarding more basic humanitarian assistance to be delivered on the ground, such as shelter, food, and water, sanitation, and health (WASH). It may also be the result of UNHCR’s efforts to make refugee- and displacement-focused responses more sensitive to LGBTIQ people, and the advocacy and programming of LGBTIQ refugee organizations such as Rainbow Railroad, ORAM, and HIAS.

### 3.4. CURRENT REFORM COMMITMENTS

Work completed by the think tank ODI (formerly known as the Overseas Development Institute), as part of the *Falling Through the Cracks* project, suggests that challenges faced by LGBTIQ people are part of a bigger inclusion problem in the humanitarian system. In one report, Lough et al. argue that inclusion tends to be understood as a narrow “technical or operational concern, rather than a higher-order question of rights, root causes, or political economy.”<sup>36</sup> As a result, “certain populations, vulnerabilities, needs, and capacities catch the attention of practitioners, while others remain overlooked, or unseen entirely.”<sup>37</sup>

**Barriers to LGBTIQ inclusion and attempts to overcome them must be understood within the humanitarian system’s existing reform commitments.** Debates about the entrenched inequality and shortcomings of the humanitarian system are by no means new.<sup>38</sup> With humanitarian needs rising faster than existing humanitarian funding, and with criticism that the system suffers from both efficiency and accountability deficits, the system’s international actors—states, UN agencies, international NGOs, and others—convened at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) to tackle these problems and agreed to pursue a set of reforms known as the Grand Bargain.<sup>39</sup> These included accelerated adoption of cash payments as a more flexible and dignified modality for providing assistance, the commitment of donors and aid organizations to provide at least 25 percent of aid to local and national actors as directly as possible, and initiatives to increase accountability to—and participation of—affected people in decision-making in humanitarian crises.<sup>40</sup> Each of these commitments may provide entry

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<sup>35</sup> A flash appeal is a tool to support the structuring and organizing of a coordinated humanitarian response plan in the first three to six months of a crisis.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver Lough, Veronique Barbelet, and Sarah Njeri, *Inclusion and Exclusion in Humanitarian Action: Findings from a Three-Year Study*, Overseas Development Institute, 12 July 2022, 17, <https://odi.org/en/publications/inclusion-and-exclusion-in-humanitarian-action-findings-from-a-three-year-study>. More information on *Falling Through the Cracks* can be accessed at <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/falling-through-the-cracks-inclusion-and-exclusion-in-humanitarian-action/#:~:text=The%20research%20aims%20to%20understand,being%20excluded%20from%20humanitarian%20action.>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Ramalingam and John Mitchell with John Borton and Kristin Smart, *Counting what Counts: Performance and Effectiveness in the Humanitarian Sector*, ALNAP, 13 July 2009, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/alnaps-8th-review-of-humanitarian-action-counting-what-counts-performance-and>.

<sup>39</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), *The Grand Bargain – A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need*, 23 May 2016, [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2017-02/grand\\_bargain\\_final\\_22\\_may\\_final-2\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2017-02/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> The Grand Bargain, “Caucus on Funding for Localisation: Collective Monitoring and Accountability Framework,” IASC, May 2023, [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-05/Grand%20Bargain%20Caucus%20on%20funding%20for%20localisation\\_Monitoring%20and%20accountability%20framework\\_VF.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-05/Grand%20Bargain%20Caucus%20on%20funding%20for%20localisation_Monitoring%20and%20accountability%20framework_VF.pdf).

points for seeking deeper LGBTIQ inclusion. Progress across The Grand Bargain has been mixed, however, leading to a three-year extension and rebranding as The Grand Bargain 2.0 in 2021 and a second extension to 2026.<sup>41</sup>

**Meaningful LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian sector is inextricably linked to the localization agenda.** Localization means that humanitarian responses should be driven as much as possible by the organizations closest to the people affected by a humanitarian crisis. Those local and national actors (LNAs) are more likely to know the context and have local networks that can be activated, meaning that they can provide relevant assistance effectively and efficiently. A stronger role for LNAs was a central plank of the Grand Bargain, a reform that many hoped would short-circuit the ever-growing cost of the humanitarian system.<sup>42</sup> It was also a recognition that parachuting in international organizations has overtones of paternalism and neo-colonialism that should no longer be tenable. As such, localization efforts fit within a decolonized vision of the humanitarian system, in which Western-dominated institutions and donor agencies yield power—in the form of the governance of decision-making architecture, resource-control, and the definition of who plays what role in aid delivery—to “Global South” and “Global East” organizations and actors who are among those affected by crisis.<sup>43</sup>

Localization has the potential to support LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian responses if it results in more national and local LGBTIQ organizations and initiatives recognized as humanitarian responders and funded to undertake that work. In the absence of local or national LGBTIQ organizations with the capacity of supporting humanitarian relief efforts, localized engagement should still strive to engage with LGBTIQ communities. Localized efforts, however, could also see anti-LGBTIQ governments as well as national and local organizations increase their influence. Localization, thus, potentially represents a double-edged sword in contexts where state-sanctioned crackdowns on LGBTIQ human rights persist or are worsening, or where public hostility to LGBTIQ equality is widespread. Progress toward localization has been slow since 2016, with ongoing debate over what localization means and requires.<sup>44</sup> Yet, the idea of localization remains powerful and has clear connections to more recent calls for the decolonization of humanitarian aid.

**The genuine promotion of greater participation and accountability within humanitarian responses will result in better outcomes for LGBTIQ populations.** The Grand Bargain also promised a participation revolution. In 2016, Grand Bargain participants stated the need “to include the people affected by humanitarian crises and their communities in our decisions to be certain that the humanitarian response is relevant, timely, effective, and efficient.”<sup>45</sup> To do so, it is important to “provide accessible information, ensure that an effective process for participation and feedback is in place and that design and management decisions are responsive to the views of affected communities and people.”<sup>46</sup> In theory, this is also a

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<sup>41</sup>The Grand Bargain, “Grand Bargain Beyond 2023,” IASC, 2 June 2023, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-06/Grand%20Bargain%20beyond%202023%20-%20Framework.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup>Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, Barnaby Willitts-King, and Alexandra Spencer, *The Grand Bargain at Five Years: An Independent Review*, ODI, June 2021, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/251128/1/1778377769.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup>Tammam Aloudat and Themrise Khan, “Decolonising Humanitarianism or Humanitarian Aid,” *Plos Blogs*, 13 July 2021, <https://speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2021/07/13/decolonising-humanitarianism-or-humanitarian-aid>.

<sup>44</sup>Sabina C. Robillard, Teddy Atim, and Daniel Maxwell, *Localization: A “Landscape” Report*, Tufts University, December 2021, <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/localization-a-landscape-report>.

<sup>45</sup>IASC, *The Grand Bargain*, 10.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

useful entry point for LGBTIQ advocacy and for humanitarian sector accountability: greater participation of LGBTIQ people and organizations could help the humanitarian system understand the specific situations that queer people in all their diversity face, and how the system may need to change to meet their needs. However, progress here has also been slow. A 2022 independent review of the Grand Bargain that ODI commissioned found that some LNAs have been more involved in global Grand Bargain processes and that technical efforts have been made to establish mechanisms such as feedback processes, but, overall, “in terms of increasing the actual influence that affected people have in the design, planning and delivery of aid at country level (in strategies and/or programmes/projects), there is as yet no evidence of a substantive shift in practice on the ground.”<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the latest UN-led effort at reform, known as the Flagship Initiative, will have better success. Launched in 2023, the Flagship Initiative seeks to “reimagine a sustainable and ethical humanitarian system, one ready to face the new reality of increasingly complex challenges.”<sup>48</sup> It again emphasizes responding to the needs of affected populations by “localizing humanitarian decision-making, empowering local partners, and putting community priorities, capacities, risks, and resilience at the heart of humanitarian programming,” and is being piloted by OCHA country teams (alongside relevant stakeholders including donors, governments, partners, and community organizations) in Colombia, the Philippines, Niger, and South Sudan.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.5. DELAY NARRATIVES AND CHANGE

While mindsets and rhetoric within the humanitarian system have changed over the years to shift toward localized and decolonized approaches to aid delivery, many actors, processes, and incentives tend to work to maintain the system as it is. Competing agendas and power imbalances embedded within a centralized humanitarian governance architecture mean that substantive efforts to transform the system fail to take hold. A 2023 ODI study of the humanitarian system suggested that narrative policy theory may help explain the phenomenon in which the sector makes “recurrent commitments to make humanitarian aid more people-centered, accountable, and locally led. But despite the ambitious promises, little has changed.”<sup>50</sup> The report defines humanitarian policy narratives as “stories and frames constructed and deployed to shape beliefs, attitudes, and ultimately decisions relating to humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid – in particular, to justify why, when, and where humanitarian aid is needed, who should deliver it and how, and who should receive it.”<sup>51</sup> In essence, the limited progress on humanitarian reforms is partly the result of narratives that the humanitarian sector uses to justify the status quo and what kind of change is or is not possible. ODI identifies four categories of “delay narratives:” 1) that the system cannot change, 2) that *someone else* needs to initiate change, 3) that incremental change is sufficient, and 4) that change will cause other problems. ODI suggests that through enhanced awareness of the narratives used to counter reform, advocates can identify the impediments to change, and “better understand why, despite all the evidence and policy commitments, change has been so

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<sup>47</sup> Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, and Farah Manji, *The Grand Bargain in 2022: An Independent Review*, ODI and Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), June 2023, 19, [https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/HPG\\_report-Grand\\_Bargain\\_2023\\_master\\_rev.pdf](https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/HPG_report-Grand_Bargain_2023_master_rev.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> OCHA, “Flagship Initiative,” <https://www.unocha.org/flagship-initiative>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Saez and John Bryant, *Understanding the Role of Narratives in Humanitarian Policy Change*, ODI, 6 March 2023, 5, <https://odi.org/en/publications/understanding-the-role-of-narratives-in-humanitarian-policy-change>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 12.

slow and limited.” Enhanced awareness may also enable advocates to “explore how modifying narratives, [and] using evidence to support that process, might create greater political will for change.”<sup>52</sup>

This idea of delay narratives has similarly been applied directly to LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian sector by Ilaria Michelis, who identifies five delay narratives that are used to justify lack of progress on LGBTIQ inclusion:

- LGBTIQ inclusion is not possible due to local laws, policies, or other external circumstances.
- Training of local and international staff is needed before other steps can be taken.
- More data is needed before other steps can be taken.
- The inclusion of cisgender and heterosexual women needs to come first.
- Partnerships with LGBTIQ organizations need to be created first.<sup>53</sup>

Taken together, these narratives result in inaction and reluctance to meaningfully pursue LGBTIQ inclusion and a persistent message that “now is not the right time.” In crisis settings, the above sentiments translate into continued underfunding of LGBTIQ-inclusive responses, entrenched legacy-based partnerships rather than the pursuit of new ones, and capacity-building efforts determined and assessed by international partners in relation to immediate project objectives without taking into account their own capacity to understand and work with local LGBTIQ communities.<sup>54</sup>

Still, some change is happening, and it is important to acknowledge this and explore how some humanitarian organizations are beginning to overcome these barriers. Examples of activities to support LGBTIQ inclusion within the humanitarian sector include:

- Programs that are exploring methods for improving LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian sector, such as the United States Agency for International Development’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA)-funded multi-country TRANSFORM project. This project is focused on evaluating existing levels of LGBTIQ inclusion in organizations and programs, strengthening partnerships among traditional humanitarian actors and national or local LGBTIQ organizations, uplifting the role of LGBTIQ organizations and people as community-based responders, and further stimulating solution-oriented discourse on LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian action.
- Service provision targeting LGBTIQ people being funded by public and private donors. For example, in Ukraine, the Center for Disaster Philanthropy is supporting Outright to undertake advocacy with the humanitarian sector to strengthen LGBTIQ inclusion, and is also directly

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid, 16.

<sup>53</sup>Ilaria Michelis, “Later is a Cis-Hetero Patriarchal Time Zone: Narratives of Resistance to LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Amongst Humanitarian Practitioners,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 00, 0 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead072>.

<sup>54</sup>Center for Disaster Philanthropy, “Measuring the State of Disaster Philanthropy 2023,” December 2023, [https://disasterphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CDP-State\\_of\\_Disaster\\_Philanthropy\\_2023.pdf](https://disasterphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CDP-State_of_Disaster_Philanthropy_2023.pdf); Patrick Saez, Jeremy Konyndyk, and Rose Worden, “Rethinking Humanitarian Reform: What Will it Take to Truly Change the System?,” Center for Global Development, September 2021, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/rethinking-humanitarian-reform-what-will-it-take-truly-change-system>; Imogen Wall and Kerren Hedlund, *Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review*, Local 2 Global Protection, May 2016, [https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP\\_SDC\\_Lit\\_Review\\_LocallyLed\\_June\\_2016\\_final.pdf](https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_SDC_Lit_Review_LocallyLed_June_2016_final.pdf).

funding local and national LGBTIQ organizations to respond to their communities’ needs.<sup>55</sup> Several international non-governmental organizations working in Ukraine, such as Mercy Corps, ActionAid, CARE, and the Danish Refugee Council, have also stepped up their support and are funding LGBTIQ organizations involved in humanitarian response. LGBTIQ inclusion has also received attention in humanitarian responses and planning in Lebanon, in coordination mechanisms in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, and in projects in several countries in Latin America, particularly with transgender people.<sup>56</sup>

- Conferences and webinars highlighting challenges and bringing people together to find solutions, such as the 2018 *Pride in the Humanitarian System* conference (largely funded by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade); a series of dialogues on LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian sector organized by InterAction, the United States forum of aid organizations (also funded by USAID); and the UNHCR and High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR/OHCHR) LGBTI Roundtables on refugees and asylum.<sup>57</sup>
- Sectors and organizations producing LGBTIQ inclusion training and guidance materials, such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Handbook, training modules developed for the International Office of Migration and UNHCR staff, and policy and refugee support documentation developed by UNHCR.<sup>58</sup> Other examples include Edge Effect’s guidance developed for Water and Sanitation for Health (WASH) delivery to LGBTIQ people during COVID-19, and Médecins Sans Frontières’ *Introduction to LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Care* guidelines.<sup>59</sup> Donor-funded projects are also developing guidance in areas such as LGBTIQ child protection in humanitarian crises, led by Save the Children.<sup>60</sup>
- Humanitarian donor funding reports on aspects of LGBTIQ inclusion, such as the Women’s Refugee Commission’s work addressing sexual violence and the International Rescue Committee’s guidance on research methods, titled *Recommendations for Ethical Research and Learning with and for LGBTIQ People in Humanitarian Settings*.<sup>61</sup>
- Guidance on inclusion within specific humanitarian responses, such as Mosaic’s and the Global Challenges Research Fund’s work in Syria with displaced refugees and Refuge Point’s

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor Dudley, “Announcing Grants from the Ukraine Humanitarian Crisis Recovery Fund,” Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 14 February 2023, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/announcing-grants-from-the-ukraine-humanitarian-crisis-recovery-fund>.

<sup>56</sup> For more information about the Gender-Diverse Population Working Group, see <https://rohingyaresponse.org/gdpwg>.

<sup>57</sup> Edge Effect, *Pride in the Humanitarian System: Bangkok 4-7 June Consultation Report*, November 2018, [https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Consultation-Report\\_Pride-in-the-Humanitarian-System\\_All-Annexes.pdf](https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Consultation-Report_Pride-in-the-Humanitarian-System_All-Annexes.pdf); The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), “Priorities in Follow Up to the Global Roundtable on Protection and Solutions for LGBTIQ+ People in Forced Displacement,” June 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/priorities-follow-global-roundtable-protection-and-solutions-lgbtq-people-forced>.

<sup>58</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), “2021 SOGIESC and Migration Training Package,” IOM and UNHCR, 2021, <https://www.iom.int/2021-sogiesc-and-migration-training-package>; UNHCR, *LGBTI Refugees-UNHCR Resettlement Assessment Tool*, July 2013, <https://www.unhcr.org/au/media/lgbti-refugees-unhcr-resettlement-assessment-tool>.

<sup>59</sup> Edge Effect, *Sexual and Gender Minorities and COVID-19 Guidance for WASH Delivery*, June 2020, [https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WfW\\_EdgeEffect\\_Guidance-Note\\_COVID-19-WASH-SGM-Inclusion-FINAL.pdf](https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WfW_EdgeEffect_Guidance-Note_COVID-19-WASH-SGM-Inclusion-FINAL.pdf); Médecins Sans Frontières, *Introduction to LGBTIQ+ Inclusive Care*, March 2023, <https://www.msf.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Intro%20to%20LGBTIQ%2B%20Inclusive%20care%20NGO%20report%20%283%29%20%281%29.pdf>.

<sup>60</sup> Communication with Leisha Beardmore, Senior Advisor, Save the Children. April 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Women’s Refugee Commission, *Addressing Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and LGBTIQ+ Persons in Humanitarian Settings*, February 2021, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Addressing-Sexual-Violence-against-Men-Boys-LGBTIQ-Persons-Guidance-Note-022021-1.pdf>; Danielle Roth, Alexandra Blackwell, Mark Canavera, and Kathryn Falb, *When “We Know Nothing”: Recommendations for Ethical Research and Learning with and for LGBTIQ People in Humanitarian Settings*, International Rescue Committee, June 2021, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5962/ircwhenweweknownothingfinaljune2021.pdf>.

work on LGBTIQ refugees in Nairobi, Kenya.<sup>62</sup> More research and policy papers are being published on the state of LGBTIQ inclusion across the humanitarian system, and on the funding of LGBTIQ inclusion in the humanitarian system.

These examples, while positive, remain relatively few and far between, and it is not yet clear whether they are an indication of more enduring, systematic work to come. Yet, the mere existence of this emerging body of work suggests that LGBTIQ inclusion is possible in different contexts and that organizations making investments in effective LGBTIQ inclusion are making some progress in advancing the humanitarian system's mandate to reach all in need.

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<sup>62</sup> Charbel Maydaa, Caroline Chayya, and Henri Myrntinen, *Impacts of the Syrian Civil War and Displacement on SOGIESC Populations*, MOSAIC, December 2020, [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc436cb2cf9b86e830bb03b/t/5fe3789a99adbc5413cd5f20/1608743079483/IMPACTS+OF+THE+SYRIAN+CIVIL+WAR+AND+DISPLACEMENT+ON+SOGIESC+POPULATIONS+\\_+MOSAIC+\\_+GCRF.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc436cb2cf9b86e830bb03b/t/5fe3789a99adbc5413cd5f20/1608743079483/IMPACTS+OF+THE+SYRIAN+CIVIL+WAR+AND+DISPLACEMENT+ON+SOGIESC+POPULATIONS+_+MOSAIC+_+GCRF.pdf); Refuge Point, *Disaggregating LGBTIQ+ Protection Concerns: Experiences of Refugee Communities in Nairobi*, 2018, [https://www.refugepoint.org/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/FINAL\\_LGBTIQ\\_07122018\\_web\\_33.pdf](https://www.refugepoint.org/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/FINAL_LGBTIQ_07122018_web_33.pdf).

# Global Readiness: Results from Key Informant Interviews

# 04 Global Readiness: Results from Key Informant Interviews

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Impetus for change can emerge within different parts of the humanitarian system, including from organizational headquarters and as part of global processes. The humanitarian system is complex, and top-down reforms do not cascade mechanistically through organizations within the system. Country- and response-level operations may have limited capacity to absorb global or headquarters-initiated change, and at times staff outside of headquarters may overlook, disregard, or resist change that feels imperious, rigid, inappropriate, or that comes without sufficient funding or other resources. Nevertheless, staff with headquarter roles, just like country-level staffers, often have responsibility for global policy and practice reforms. They often manage conversations and tensions within organizations. And, more than anyone else, they have a birds-eye view across organizations with operations around the world.

Headquarters and regional staff representing 13 humanitarian organizations, as well as one humanitarian inclusion consultant with many years working in the sector, were interviewed for this report.<sup>63</sup> Collectively these interviews reveal the extent to which major aid agencies are grappling with how to address and systematize LGBTIQ inclusion across all organizational levels and sectors. They expose the difficulties of driving LGBTIQ inclusion at the headquarters levels, the disconnect between global offices and country-based staff members, and the positive adaptations being made to mitigate these challenges. Interviews spanned four thematic categories,<sup>64</sup> and questions for each theme were drawn from Edge Effect’s more detailed reverse partner appraisal tool,<sup>65</sup> summarized below:

**Vision:** Genuine advances in LGBTIQ inclusion require humanitarian organizations to take an intentional and systematic approach. Vision questions explored the nature and extent

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<sup>63</sup> Action Against Hunger, ActionAid, Concern, Cordaid, International Federation of the Red Cross, International Planned Parenthood Federation, International Rescue Committee, Médecins Sans Frontières, Mercy Corps, Norwegian Refugee Council, Oxfam, Save the Children, and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

<sup>64</sup> Our analysis is presented within these categories, although there are some inevitable overlaps.

<sup>65</sup> Edge Effect, “Diverse-SOGIESC Partner Appraisal Tool,” n.d., <https://www.edgeeffect.org/2322-2>.

of organization-wide discussion about SOGIESC diversity and whether policies, program strategies, or other concrete commitments are emerging from those discussions.

**Engagement:** Moving beyond “ticking the LGBTIQ box” requires genuine engagement with LGBTIQ organizations and people. Engagement questions explored how humanitarian organizations prepare themselves, including what training staff undertake on LGBTIQ inclusion, how diversity within groups of LGBTIQ people is understood, and how LGBTIQ organizations are treated as partners.

**Design:** Design questions explored the collection and use of data that inform design of specific humanitarian programs, the tools used to implement programs, and the frameworks that guide program strategies and priorities.

**Environment:** Genuine LGBTIQ inclusion is more likely to emerge from organizations that “walk the talk” internally, rather than treating LGBTIQ inclusion as a technical program add-on. Questions about the internal environment explored workplace policies and cultures that encourage LGBTIQ inclusion and prevent discrimination and exclusion.

The interviews also explored dynamics between global headquarters and country-level or response-level offices situated in varying social, cultural, political, and legal contexts.

## 4.1. VISION

The extent to which LGBTIQ sensitivity can become genuinely embedded within organizational mandates and strategies often depends on how, where, and why conversations about LGBTIQ inclusion unfold internally. All interview participants reported that conversations about LGBTIQ inclusion have become more prominent within their organizations in recent years. This section considers whether and how such conversations are being transformed into actual commitments and the dynamics and challenges that global actors face when attempting to systematically advance LGBTIQ inclusion across diverse contexts. Favorable practice involves ensuring inclusion activities are adequately resourced, that a commitment to “do no harm” does not result in inaction, and that progress toward greater inclusion is nurtured where there is greater willingness. Despite some examples of organizations going much farther, with positive change occurring within individual agencies, the overall performance of the sector remains aligned, for the most part, with the “inactive” space of Edge Effect’s diverse SOGIESC continuum (see Methodology section). Yet, there are signs of progress.

**Many interview participants described their organizations as being on journeys to improve LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian action, and often nearer to the beginning of those journeys.** In the words of one interviewee, “It’s an area where some in the team want to shed light on. We’re early in our learning journey and we’re not quite at the strategy stage . . . part of our discovery process is making sure we’re elevating the conversation, hearing from our teams what we need to elevate at the global level.”<sup>66</sup> For most organizations, LGBTIQ inclusion often remains unofficial, unresourced, and unsystematic. Consequently, progress on LGBTIQ inclusion is often driven by individual champions and allies who push for organizational change as a personal or professional commitment, often outside of their regular duties.

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<sup>66</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 6, by video communication, 10 October 2023.

While momentum may be growing within organizations, it is often difficult for LGBTIQ inclusion to gain institutional traction. Regarding the good work that has occurred, interviewees described the progress as fragmented or of uncertain significance. In the words of one interviewee, “I wouldn’t say we have a [position statement]; we don’t have something written . . . It’s more of an organizational and office culture rather than a policy.”<sup>67</sup> Another participant noted that while their organization has had a position statement on LGBTIQ inclusion on their internal intranet for several years, they believe that few staff are aware of the document, and the interviewee expressed that it is unclear whether the statement is intended to influence policy and programs across the organization.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, another interviewee described the development of internal LGBTIQ inclusion statements and mapping at headquarters level but believed that this “willingness in some quarters” to strengthen LGBTIQ inclusion had not translated into strategic organization-wide change, nor were the necessary resources and staffing in place to sustain increased prioritization in this area.<sup>69</sup>

Interviewees explained that these traction issues are sometimes the result of the absence of staff dedicated to LGBTIQ inclusion. One interviewee said, “Making sure that there is someone fully funded with support and budget on LGBTIQ+ inclusion is really important, rather than it becoming an add-on part of an existing role.”<sup>70</sup> Another participant shared the need for more expert-based insights to ensure that internal guidance contains references to LGBTIQ inclusion.<sup>71</sup> This would, however, require funding to hire an external consultant. Thus, while some political will exists within organizations to address LGBTIQ inclusion more formally within official humanitarian strategies and mandates, the work is often unofficial or nascent.

**The diverse legal, political, social, and cultural contexts in which humanitarian organizations operate create challenges for generating systematic approaches to LGBTIQ inclusion across programming.** The reasons for lack of progress on LGBTIQ inclusion are many: humanitarian actors may conceal, curtail, or avoid work on LGBTIQ issues due to fears about the reactions of national governments, other partners, or community leaders, or they may be apprehensive about contributing to backlash. Indeed, numerous interviewees voiced a well-founded concern that explicitly talking about LGBTIQ populations in hostile contexts could result in harm. As one interviewee explained, “It’s a big battle . . . How do we do this properly and politely without creating any issues and, at the same time, standing for the rights of everyone?”<sup>72</sup> Echoing these concerns, another interviewee stated, “We can’t say, ‘yeah, it’s okay, we take risks, and we shouldn’t be silent.’ To a certain extent, we are being more cautious,

**“We’re early in our learning journey and we’re not quite at the strategy stage ... part of our discovery process is making sure we’re elevating the conversation, hearing from our teams what we need to elevate at the global level.”**

*Key Informant 6 Interview*

**“Making sure that there is someone fully funded with support and budget on LGBTIQ+ inclusion is really important, rather than it becoming an add-on part of an existing role.”**

*Key Informant 1 Interview*

<sup>67</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 5, by video communication, 5 October 2023.

<sup>68</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 3, by video communication, 22 September 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Outright and Edge Effect interview with Key Informant 1, by video communication, 27 July 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 12, by video communication, 23 November 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 14, by video communication, 12 December 2023.

we are censoring ourselves.”<sup>73</sup> These comments reveal a central tension that humanitarian actors face. They must strike a balance between proactively acknowledging the vulnerability of LGBTIQ populations while also mitigating a perceived amplification of danger that may arise through increased attention. The “do no harm” principle can, thus, become a barrier to action.

To overcome these dynamics, some organizations prefer to include LGBTIQ as one component within a broader approach to intersectionality and social inclusion that includes gender, disability, and other characteristics, and within which LGBTIQ inclusion may surface in some contexts more than others.<sup>74</sup> Reflecting on how they manage conversations across widely different contexts and country perspectives on LGBTIQ inclusion, one interviewee noted that, in some contexts, they can explicitly mention and target LGBTIQ populations, whereas in other contexts, “the approach has to be different—we’ll talk about ‘inclusion’ from a medical ethics perspective of respect and quality healthcare for all patients.”<sup>75</sup> Other organizations—especially those working across many contexts where aspects of LGBTIQ lives are criminalized or heavily stigmatized—prefer an even broader approach in which they assume that services and assistance provided to larger populations reach at least some LGBTIQ people.

**The perceived gulf between headquarters based in “Global North” countries and country/ response-based offices adds a complicated layer to systematizing LGBTIQ inclusion across humanitarian organizations.**

As one interviewee emphasized, “When you are working in a country, headquarters feels a million miles away and like they don’t really understand what’s happening on the ground . . . It is not surprising that global rhetoric does not filter down to country programs or field locations because there is a pre-existing disconnect within the humanitarian system.”<sup>76</sup> Reflecting on how this works within a federated organizational structure, another interviewee commented, “There’s a lot of discussion as a federation of how much you push and how much you provide guidance and support. They’ve got their own boards in every country and their own risk appetites.”<sup>77</sup> They continued by explaining that operating through a federated model gives them access to local knowledge and networks, thereby allowing them to approach inclusion with contextual sensitivity and awareness. Other interviews suggested that a country office in one part of the world may feel ready to have a public pro-LGBTIQ strategy guiding their humanitarian response but may face resistance from other country offices in more LGBTIQ-hostile areas, which often must balance complex relations with authorities.

For instance, a participant told a story about her organization undertaking an internal security assessment before a staff training about LGBTIQ inclusion could take place.<sup>78</sup> Here, the organization perceived the potential for intolerance and hostility towards LGBTIQ-related information among staff members as a legitimate risk. In another case, an interviewee explained that some staff do not explicitly frame their disagreement as anti-LGBTIQ, but instead focus on concerns about “getting involved in cultural change and political discussions as opposed to meeting people’s needs.”<sup>79</sup> Such biased narratives may lead to further

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<sup>73</sup>Key Informant 5 interview.

<sup>74</sup>Edge Effect interview with Key Informant 4, by video communication, 1 October 2023.

<sup>75</sup>Edge Effect interview with Key Informant 13, by video communication, 6 December 2023.

<sup>76</sup>Outright interview with Key Informant 9, by video communication, 23 October 2023.

<sup>77</sup>Edge Effect interview with Key Informant 7, by video communication, 10 October 2023.

<sup>78</sup>Key Informant 14 interview.

<sup>79</sup>Key Informant 4 interview.

discrimination and marginalization during humanitarian relief efforts and are indicative of the very real prejudice and harm experienced by LGBTIQ populations in society.

Indeed, some hostility is overt. Speaking about the broader global environment, another interviewee reflected on how organizations are also grappling with resistance from some national governments that are fueling anti-gender and anti-rights movements. They explained, “Talking about addressing LGBTIQ-related themes in the current environment is becoming more and more difficult. And without justification. But we are really seeing a growing level of polarization, largely from states.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Nurturing country-level political will is essential for making progress on LGBTIQ inclusion.**

Amidst the “divergence of perspectives” being navigated in another organization, one interviewee concluded that country-based leadership played a significant role in “the relationship that the staff have to the issue” and is more likely to influence programming and support at the country level than are policies at the headquarters level.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, impetus for LGBTIQ inclusion does not always stem from “Global North” headquarters. Numerous interviewees noted Latin America as the location of local pilot programs and emerging good practices that go beyond headquarters’ initiatives.<sup>82</sup> In the words of one participant, “I think that our countries in the Americas region are more active in this inclusive practice. Just recently there were a lot of activities in Colombia and Guatemala that I’m aware of to raise that awareness [of transgender issues] within the teams.”<sup>83</sup> Country-based offices may be further along in their journey than headquarters staff (see case study on Colombia).

**“If you just have individuals advocating, no matter how loud they get, or how much they are saying things that are valid and true ... it can be really hard to keep progress going. And that person leaves, and you fall behind.”**

*Key Informant 1 Interview*

It is clear, however, that headquarter offices can and must play a role in implementing and institutionalizing commitments to LGBTIQ inclusion across their organizations so as not to fatigue individual champions who have dedicated themselves to the issue. Crystallizing this sustainability problem, one interviewee reflected, “If you just have individuals advocating, no matter how loud they get, or how much they are saying things that are valid and true, if you don’t have these common cross-organizational [mandates and strategies] it can be really hard to keep progress going. And that person leaves, and you fall behind.”<sup>84</sup>

Understanding the scale and needs of LGBTIQ populations in humanitarian crises *requires* understanding the societal discrimination that may exacerbate vulnerabilities or create needs specific to LGBTIQ people. Beyond this strict focus on needs among humanitarian actors, other parts of the humanitarian sector are adopting elements of rights-based approaches and strategies that link humanitarian response to longer-term development processes in the same locations.

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<sup>80</sup> Edge Effect interview with Key Informant 2, by video communication, 18 September 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Key Informant 1 interview.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid; Key Informant 6 interview; Key Informant 13 interview.

<sup>83</sup> Key Informant 6 interview.

<sup>84</sup> Key Informant 1 interview.

## 4.2. ENGAGEMENT

Humanitarian organizations often argue that their mainstream programming inevitably reaches LGBTIQ people in humanitarian crises. In fact, it may be true in some cases that mainstream programs may be the safest approach in environments where, for instance, consensual same-sex relations are criminalized and laws are enforced. It may also be true that some assistance is reaching LGBTIQ people. Assuming that mainstream programs will reach LGBTIQ communities, however, should not preclude more active engagement by humanitarian organizations in contexts where it is possible or even where it is difficult. This section focuses on what is being done where engagement is possible, especially if humanitarian actors have taken reasonable steps to go as far as they can.

### **Humanitarian organizations are increasingly fostering productive relationships with LGBTIQ groups at global, regional, and local levels, but barriers persist.**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, engagement with LGBTIQ organizations occurs more readily in response contexts with lower levels of criminalization and societal stigma and where strong LGBTIQ organizations exist. Examples offered by humanitarian actors tended to cluster in Latin America (including Colombia, Brazil, and Guatemala) and in Asia (such as Thailand and Nepal), along with regional outliers such as Lebanon—at least prior to recent growth in anti-LGBTIQ backlash (see case study on Lebanon). Indeed, a common argument offered against centrally mandated LGBTIQ inclusion is that this may encourage or oblige country offices or response staff to engage with—and inadvertently cause harm to—LGBTIQ organizations and populations. The alternative is for these decisions to be taken on a location-by-location basis, with decision-making decentralized to country-level staff. Interview participants noted that determining how to engage may also depend on the priorities of staff working on that response. Put plainly by one interviewee, “It depends on the perception of risk by the country team and on the country context itself.”<sup>85</sup> Other conversations also suggested that there is an element of subjectivity.<sup>86</sup> “The optionality of LGBTIQ inclusion, therefore, results in “a very ad hoc approach . . . we encounter challenges where I might consider an organization with a strong diverse SOGIESC focus [as a potential partner, but], a colleague might not.”<sup>87</sup>

Another barrier to partnerships between humanitarian actors and LGBTIQ groups is that humanitarian responses may occur in places without existing relationships and trust. As highlighted by one interviewee, “When we start reaching out to LGBTQ organizations as part of our response . . . a lot goes into building trust with those organizations. They did not know [us], they may not always trust [us], they don’t think [we] are going to stay for a long time.”<sup>88</sup> This was echoed by another respondent, who noted, “The way it works in our humanitarian responses is that we lean into the relationships we established when there wasn’t a crisis, so the [activities] that happened before have a huge impact on what happens in a crisis.”<sup>89</sup> This suggests the importance of building relationships before crises hit.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Key Informant 3 interview.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Key Informant 2 interview.

<sup>89</sup> Key Informant 7 interview.

“When we start reaching out to LGBTQ organizations as part of our response ... a lot goes into building trust with those organizations. They did not know [us], they may not always trust [us], they don’t think [we] are going to stay for a long time.”

*Key Informant 2 Interview*

**Humanitarian actors are pursuing a variety of pathways to better engage LGBTIQ organizations, ranging from formal partnerships to community consultation.** The most promising examples of engagement with LGBTIQ organizations involve formal and remunerated partnerships. An interviewee who has been pursuing partnerships with LGBTIQ organizations at both global and country levels emphasized the importance of paying for LGBTIQ expertise.<sup>90</sup> They also felt that the mindset was slowly shifting towards recognizing that partnerships must include dedicated resourcing. They continued, “There are some instances where teams want to engage with diverse-SOGIESC organizations but don’t necessarily want to do it for a partnership. I think that’s shifting a mindset, [the LGBTIQ organizations] are experts, you want their time, you want their input. Is there a financial remuneration?”<sup>91</sup> Several interviewees asserted that they are trying to create more partnerships with local LGBTIQ organizations, especially those with lived experiences, even if the amounts of funding are low. Still, administrative obstacles can hamper the establishment of formal partnerships. Many LGBTIQ organizations are small and may not have internal systems that humanitarian organizations require to qualify as partners, and, in some response contexts, LGBTIQ organizations may not be registered. Small amounts of funding can have an impact, but this requires humanitarian organizations to find “more agile ways” of providing funds.<sup>92</sup>

Several interviewees noted that their organizations have engaged with LGBTIQ organizations in the form of unpaid consultations or opportunities to contribute to inclusion measures. Examples included inviting LGBTIQ community members or organizational representatives to be part of co-creating advocacy strategies, requesting input on how humanitarian organizations can best establish referral pathways to LGBTIQ-friendly service providers, or being invited to participate in sectoral working groups (see case study on Nepal). Noting that budgetary constraints are a very real impediment, one interviewee explained that these less formal pathways were the next best option, commenting that they sought these avenues with donors who are open to support LGBTIQ inclusion programming but may not have allocated funds to cover payment.<sup>93</sup> However, another interviewee noted the potential risk of “tokenistic targeting,” whereby LGBTIQ groups are consulted as a tick-box exercise rather than having any substantive influence.<sup>94</sup> Overall, while the interview data suggest a certain degree of willingness to engage LGBTIQ communities, the lack of formal partnerships is likely a symptom of broader sectoral uncertainty about how to more formally partner with and fund groups and organizations that advocate for or provide services to LGBTIQ people.

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<sup>90</sup> Key Informant 3 interview.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Key Informant 2 interview.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Key Informant 3 interview.

**Training on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics diversity is increasingly becoming a feature within the humanitarian ecosystem.** The audiences and objectives of the training examples provided through the interviews ranged from more *systematic* inward-looking sessions that focused on inclusivity within the workplace, to more ad hoc sessions on specific issues or response areas related to external programming. Two clear themes emerged in the interviews. First, humanitarian organizations find it difficult to roll out standardized training given the diverse contexts in which organizations work. Second, such training is often driven by internal working groups and a country-level organizational culture rather than an explicit mandate from headquarters.

**“You can have everyone in the project from cleaners, guards, project co-ordinators, medical staff, be very committed and passionate... but if you’ve got someone waiting in the appointment area and they’re being harassed, they might leave before they even get to the provider.”**

*Key Informant 13 Interview*

A positive training example came from an organization with a team member dedicated to LGBTIQ inclusion who is currently piloting a Values Clarification Attitudes Transformation training across multiple diverse country contexts. The interview participant reflected that because LGBTIQ issues can be taboo to even discuss, there are limited opportunities for organizations to understand what staff really think and feel, and that creating an open, nonjudgmental, and respectful space worked “amazingly well.”<sup>95</sup> A guiding principle behind these trainings is that safety and accessibility for LGBTIQ people needs to be a throughline within every component of an intervention: “You can have everyone in the project from cleaners, guards, project coordinators, medical staff, be very committed and passionate . . . but if you’ve got someone waiting in the appointment area and they’re being harassed, they might leave before they even get to the provider.”<sup>96</sup> Most interviewees also emphasized the importance of ensuring senior leadership buy-in and participation.

Other interviewees reflected on organizational experiences with broader diversity and inclusion topics, and how these can function as entry points to increasing LGBTIQ inclusion. The common thread in these discussions was that organizations felt they were still grappling with diversity areas that are perceived to affect more people, such as gender and race, and that there was an impetus to get *those* areas right before tackling LGBTIQ populations. Several participants noted a few instances of increased interest on LGBTIQ issues from staff members, such as having specific guidance, or specifically asking for more information around what the different letters stand for.<sup>97</sup> One interviewee explained that their organization’s internal capacity-building fund pool, whereby country teams can apply for funding to undertake training not directly related to program implementation, would be a good entry point for LGBTIQ inclusion.<sup>98</sup> Such an approach reinforces the dynamic in which country-level staff need to drive initiatives and ask for assistance from headquarters, rather than initiatives being embraced centrally and introduced meaningfully and intentionally at all levels of the organization. Indeed, one

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<sup>95</sup>Key Informant 13 interview.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Key Informant 3 interview; Key Informant 4 interview; Key Informant 12 interview.

<sup>98</sup>Key Informant 4 interview.

interviewee lamented that even more basic gender, age, and diversity training—let alone SOGIESC diversity training—was not mandatory for all staff but was, instead, part of a non-compulsory introduction package or encouraged for certain categories of staff.<sup>99</sup>

Further still, one participant expressed concerns about an over-emphasis on training staff regarding LGBTIQ inclusion.<sup>100</sup> They argue that the combination of an emphasis on “do no harm” and a constant stress of the humanitarian sectors’ lack of expertise and need for training may actually hinder inclusion. Specifically, such narratives end up reinforcing the idea that providing services and attending to the needs of LGBTIQ populations in humanitarian settings is extremely complex. While building expertise and training staff members on LGBTIQ realities is crucial, humanitarian organizations should not wait until staff feel equipped “enough” to engage with LGBTIQ populations. Otherwise, LGBTIQ inclusion can be continuously postponed and characterized as being “too hard.”

**Humanitarian organizations are grappling with how to recognize diversity within LGBTIQ populations, rather than treating them as a homogenous group.** Another issue is recognizing the diversity across the sexual orientation and gender identity spectrum, as well as the unique needs of intersex people. Said one interviewee, “I think it’s one area where it’s a bit of a gap . . . to acknowledge intersectionality when it comes to LGBTIQ [people] and not view them as a homogeneous group, and we do have that challenge, which requires expertise and resources.”<sup>101</sup> The needs and priorities of intersex people remain almost completely invisible, while cisgender gay men tend to receive somewhat more resources and support, primarily via HIV programming, than LBQ women and transgender and non-binary people.

**Some humanitarian organizations explained that they take an intersectional approach that may not be specific to LGBTIQ inclusion but that includes LGBTIQ issues alongside many others.** “The approach that we’ve used with our tools is to have wide embeddedness of social inclusion . . . which includes partnerships with or engagement with LGBTI-representative or -led organizations, disabled persons, community-based organizations of different civil society activists, and organizations and community groups that represent all sorts of different sectors of the community.”<sup>102</sup> Another interviewee highlighted that in their work on gender, they work from an intersectional approach, mentioning how gender intersects with other identities, including SOGIESC.<sup>103</sup> However, SOGIESC inclusion content remains quite basic and not systematic across all contexts.

### 4.3. DESIGN

More positive practices are emerging on LGBTIQ inclusion in the toolkits, guidance notes, data collection methods, and frameworks that underpin humanitarian work. When asked about whether considerations for LGBTIQ needs, identities, and realities are being integrated into programming, it became clear that in lieu of systematized approaches across an organization, ad hoc design components are being used to equip teams in specific contexts to advance LGBTIQ inclusion in their activities. While it may be difficult for global organizations to have explicit and embedded mandates to work with LGBTIQ populations in every context,

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<sup>99</sup> Key Informant 2 interview.

<sup>100</sup> Key Informant 9 interview; Michelis, “Later is a Cis-Hetero Patriarchal Time Zone.”

<sup>101</sup> Key Informant 2 interview.

<sup>102</sup> Key Informant 4 interview.

<sup>103</sup> Key Informant 12 interview.

programmatically and guidelines can facilitate advances in country offices that are ready to move forward, while at the same time developing good practices to inspire action in other contexts.

**To overcome the challenge of implementing systematic, harmonized approaches to LGBTIQ inclusion, humanitarian actors, including UN agencies and INGOs, are directing efforts toward creating tool kits and best-practice guidance that can be adopted and customized by country offices that are ready to carry out inclusion programming.** Such an approach promotes the capacity-building of country-level staff and allows for existing momentum to gain traction where political will exists. It also facilitates the piloting of different approaches to programming and partnerships through which experience is gained and case studies emerge. This, in turn, can be used for wider organizational learning and inspiration in other settings. Interviewees provided an array of examples of such work across both protection and assistance activities. UNHCR has published guidelines on considerations of asylum cases on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as a set of *Need to Know Guidelines*, and an *Integration Handbook for Resettled Refugees: LGBTIQ+ Refugees*.<sup>104</sup> UNHCR has a variety of training materials for self-study or for managed learning programs offered to staff, some also developed in cooperation and coordination with other international organizations (International Organization for Migration, Council of Europe), LGBTIQ organizations, and experts.<sup>105</sup> International Federation of the Red Cross has developed sexual and gender-based violence guidance notes that address LGBTIQ realities, as well as guidance on trafficking, child protection, and minimum standards in emergencies.<sup>106</sup> Without enforcing top-down mandates, key informants reported that these cross-cutting organizational tools and guidelines are useful for advancing conversations toward tangible action where the country context is conducive and political will within organizations exists.

**The most promising approaches for integrating LGBTIQ sensitivity into context analyses and program tools that inform an intervention are those that proactively include local LGBTIQ expertise.** One interviewee, for example, described their organization’s commitment that needs assessments would be undertaken either in partnership with a local LGBTIQ organization or by bringing on a consultant with lived experience.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, in reference to a different country, an interviewee discussed how the adaptation of its tools and frameworks in collaboration with LGBTIQ activists and groups has been integral to the country office’s journey to systematize greater LGBTIQ inclusion.<sup>108</sup> Specifically, this collaboration with regional and local actors allowed them to adapt their tools in light of a changing context where security concerns became more salient for LGBTIQ populations. The idea of tools growing and adapting as they are used and refined alongside communities is essential and very promising.

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<sup>104</sup> UNHCR, “Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees,” HCR/GIP/12/09, 23 October 2023, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/50348afc2.html>; UNHCR, *Need to Know Guidance: Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer Persons in Forced Displacement*, 2021, [https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e6073972.html?\\_gl=1\\*30fklc\\*\\_rup\\_ga\\*MjA5ODQINTMIMy4xNzAyOTkIMjM4\\*\\_rup\\_ga\\_EVDQTJ4LjY4MTcwMzA4NTc5OC40MTkuMS4xNzAzMDg3NzQzLjAuMC4w](https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e6073972.html?_gl=1*30fklc*_rup_ga*MjA5ODQINTMIMy4xNzAyOTkIMjM4*_rup_ga_EVDQTJ4LjY4MTcwMzA4NTc5OC40MTkuMS4xNzAzMDg3NzQzLjAuMC4w); UNHCR, *Integration Handbook for Resettled Refugees: LGBTIQ+ Refugees*, n.d., <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/ih/age-gender-diversity/lgbtiq-refugees>.

<sup>105</sup> UNHCR, “Training Package: SOGIESC and Working with LGBTIQ+ Persons in Forced Displacement,” n.d., <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/protect-human-rights/safeguarding-individuals/lgbtiq-persons/sogiesc-and-working-lgbtiq>.

<sup>106</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, *Child Safeguarding Policy*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.ifrc.org/document/child-safeguarding-policy>; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, *Minimum Standards for Protection, Gender, and Inclusion in Emergencies*, 9 November 2018, <https://www.ifrc.org/document/minimum-standards-pgi-emergencies>.

<sup>107</sup> Key Informant 7 interview.

<sup>108</sup> Key Informant 5 interview.

Elsewhere, respondents noted that while diversity and inclusion were guiding principles in intervention design, strategic and ethical constraints could hinder the extent to which LGBTIQ inclusion could be an explicit, systemized component in all contexts. For example, an interviewee emphasized the challenges of conducting proactive participatory needs assessments with LGBTIQ individuals, explaining that the organization’s approach tended to be more reactive when problems arose, rather than proactive in identifying needs and developing mitigation strategies as an embedded part of an intervention design.<sup>109</sup> Meanwhile, another interviewee compared the organization’s approach to LGBTIQ individuals with its work with gender-based violence survivors in which it tries not to single people out, especially in more hostile settings, as exposure may lead to enhanced vulnerability.<sup>110</sup> Of course, organizations must be attentive to safety and confidentiality, but these concerns can also override efforts to problem-solve and find ways to provide tailored and meaningful support.

**A lack of data and visibility of LGBTIQ populations is a barrier to action.** Evidence-based responses that are sensitive to the needs of communities require data that illuminate both the needs of communities and the impact of interventions. The invisibility of LGBTIQ populations in many crisis settings, as well as the complications with data collection of SOGIESC identity markers, can impede the collection of evidence on the basis of which programming decisions can be made.<sup>111</sup> However, one interviewee flagged that pursuing data should not be seen as a precondition to developing LGBTIQ-inclusive approaches since it only further delays action.<sup>112</sup>

**Humanitarian actors have begun adapting risk assessment and mitigation tools, although the process remains largely ad hoc.** While some respondents stressed the importance of having an evidence-based decision tree that highlights a step-by-step action process in light of specific risks, most organizations do not currently have such a structured approach. For instance, one interviewee explained that after the passage of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda, their organization attempted to evaluate what the law meant for programming and staff well-being. The process, however, was driven by an individual rather than by organizational leadership.<sup>113</sup> For federated organizations, the development of risk assessment and mitigation tools and frameworks is a process of balancing broader inclusion goals from headquarters and the risk appetites and willingness of local boards and offices. For the moment, progress on developing and adapting LGBTIQ-sensitive risk assessment and mitigation tools is largely reactive rather than proactive.

## 4.4. ENVIRONMENT

For many organizations, shifts within the internal organizational environment produced a tipping point for LGBTIQ inclusion. We asked interviewees to reflect on how policies and codes of conduct have developed to account for LGBTIQ staff, how community-focused protections from sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (PSEAH) and child protection policies factor

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<sup>109</sup> Edge Effect and Outright interview with Key Informant 11, by video communication, 2 November 2023.

<sup>110</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 10, by video communication, 30 October 2023.

<sup>111</sup> The societal norms, laws, and beliefs highly affect the ability of LGBTIQ people to be safely visible in certain spaces. Fear of stigmatization, discrimination, exclusion, and violence may lead many to keep their SOGIESC hidden. In hostile contexts, the risks of individuals hacking, stealing, or unlawfully accessing data are amplified. The need for invisibility or /anonymity in certain situations also exacerbates the damaging consequences of disclosure, whether voluntary or by mistake. Collecting data on LGBTIQ individuals, thus, raises concerns over privacy, self-identification, self-determination, and security. It requires additional care and skill on the part of data collectors and data managers.

<sup>112</sup> Key Informant 9 interview.

<sup>113</sup> Key Informant 3 interview.

in SOGIESC diversity, and about the emergence of organizational cultural developments, such as acknowledging days of significance for LGBTIQ communities or the creation of LGBTIQ peer groups. While it is often not a direct objective at the outset, organizational reflection on LGBTIQ sensitivity in programming often arises out of discussions about the well-being of LGBTIQ staff.

**Staff-facing policies and codes of conduct that prohibit internal discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression are the norm among major humanitarian organizations.**

Some organizations talked about very specific references to sexual orientation and gender identity within anti-discrimination policies and codes of conduct, while others indicated that their policies were more general, tackling discrimination against marginalized groups as a whole. The inclusion of sex characteristics in non-discrimination clauses remains unsystematic and unspecific (i.e. falling in the ambit of more general provisions). While headquarters typically developed these policies, their implementation is incumbent upon the leadership within each country office, the existence of complaint mechanisms, and the extent to which staff feel empowered to speak up should a violation occur. Numerous participants described that the global office sets minimal standards for non-discrimination, which country-level leadership might build upon.

On the more transformative end of the spectrum, one interviewee talked about their organization’s journey to improve inclusion and anti-discrimination practices. One participant highlighted the fact that simply having a policy was inadequate, “You need an organizational culture that enables people to feel that they can [speak up] . . . we are going to do more work with our managers in terms of leading for inclusion. We want to do trainings so that they know they’ve got to be really proactive in spotting instances of discrimination so that it’s not up to the individual to feel the burden of having to report.”<sup>114</sup> Another interviewee said their organization had anti-discrimination and protection policies specific to LGBTIQ staff but expressed that the organizational approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion is more reactive than pre-emptive: “When there is an issue, there are attempts to address it in a way that is equitable . . . it feels like something that’s more of a reactive than systematic addressing . . . but when an issue has been raised, I have seen [the organization] step up to address it.”<sup>115</sup>

**“It feels like something that’s more of a reactive than systematic addressing... but when an issue has been raised, I have seen [the organization] step up to address it.”**

*Key Informant 1 Interview*

Several interviewees pointed out that these organizations are dealing with emergencies, and that while important, it could be difficult to rally resources and momentum behind implementing human resources policies. As one interviewee explained:

The issue is people’s time and prioritization because there are so many demands on country teams, dealing with armed conflicts, humanitarian emergencies, and war, that to take time to look at the culture in the organization [and] consider equality and the experience of colleagues on the basis of our diverse identities is difficult . . . I feel a willingness, but it just slips down the priority table.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Key Informant 11 interview.

<sup>115</sup> Key Informant 1 interview.

<sup>116</sup> Key Informant 11 interview.

**Formal or informal LGBTIQ peer support, social groups, and employee resource groups are essential, especially for LGBTIQ staff.** Such groups serve two purposes. First, they may act as a driving force for prioritizing LGBTIQ staff well-being within an organization. For example, an interviewee explained that these groups can provide feedback on an organization’s internal guidelines and policies on issues such as parental leave to make them more inclusive.<sup>117</sup> Second, these groups act as a safe space of support in which LGBTIQ staff members may ask questions and get advice from people who have encountered similar difficulties. This is particularly crucial for staff working in contexts where LGBTIQ identities are criminalized or heavily stigmatized. An interviewee outlined how they are working with their global security team to identify local “companions” or points of reference for traveling LGBTIQ staff so they can better understand how to safely navigate unfamiliar contexts.<sup>118</sup> They stated, “We want to make sure as an organization that we’re doing right by our team members so that they’re aware and can make choices for themselves, they can safely decline a travel opportunity based on the information that’s provided to them or know how to protect themselves if they go into that context.”<sup>119</sup>

**“When you’re a member of the community, doing this work and being in environments where people are learning—it’s like being a survivor of GBV and working on GBV when people tell you it doesn’t exist.”**

*Key Informant 1 Interview*

**LGBTIQ staff themselves are burdened by being at the forefront of conversations about inclusivity within their organizations.** Open, frank, and personal conversations that center the voices of people with lived experience can galvanize empathy and sensitivity within workplaces. As an interviewee reflected, “You can’t teach everything in a training . . . That’s why people try to teach each other, because you have the queer people who are out who might be asked questions and they volunteer information.”<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, being at the center of conversations on such personal matters can be exhausting and carries the risk of discomfort or re-experiencing traumatic situations. As an interviewee explained, “When you’re a member of the community, doing this work and being in environments where people are learning—it’s like being a survivor of gender-based violence and working on gender-based violence when people tell you it doesn’t exist.”<sup>121</sup>

Having lived experience also does not automatically translate into being an expert on diversity, inclusion, and equity work, explained a participant.<sup>122</sup> These are complicated and delicate matters that organizations should address at a systems level rather than relying on LGBTIQ staff members to fill in the blanks. As another interviewee argued, building an inclusive and supportive environment allows organizations to “tap” into a network of LGBTIQ staff members rather than placing the responsibility on the staff member to figure it out. In their words, “Expertise exists. You just have to look for it.”<sup>123</sup> Another participant echoed this sentiment,

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<sup>117</sup> Outright interview with Key Informant 8, by video communication, 17 October 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Key Informant 6 interview.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Key Informant 5 interview.

<sup>121</sup> Key Informant 1 interview.

<sup>122</sup> Key Informant 3 interview.

<sup>123</sup> Key Informant 9 interview.

“The first thing is to listen to people. The second is to have an open channel. The third is to have people who know [LGBTIQ inclusion good practices] and can give inputs on policies.”<sup>124</sup> While LGBTIQ staff members’ input may be sought after to spot certain gaps, it remains the organization’s responsibility to identify and foster best practices on LGBTIQ inclusion, whether through hiring consultants, attending trainings, or conducting research.

## 4.5. SUMMARIZING KEY TAKE-AWAYS FROM GLOBAL READINESS INTERVIEWS

These interviews shed important light on the many challenges faced in navigating LGBTIQ inclusion within complex organizations across diverse and often hostile contexts. Despite the obstacles encountered, individuals and organizations are forging a number of positive pathways.

Below is a summary of promising and emerging pathways for improving LGBTIQ inclusion that humanitarian organizations are taking:

- 1. Nurturing and facilitating progress in offices that are “ready” through the development of guidelines, toolkits, and other aspects of program design.** It is unsurprising that some country offices are more ready to pursue inclusion than others. Even if the larger organization is unable to implement LGBTIQ inclusion mandates everywhere, headquarters staff should support offices that are further along in their inclusion journey. Currently, we see that regional or country offices are piloting LGBTIQ inclusive toolkits and guidelines on topics ranging from programming to protection, as well as the roll-out of sensitization training courses. Positive momentum in one office can catalyze other country offices and teams to start their own journeys.
- 2. Taking a multi-faceted approach to engaging with LGBTIQ groups while working toward remunerated and formal partnerships where possible.** Humanitarian organizations are increasingly engaging with LGBTIQ expertise in both local contexts to provide programmatic advice and at the global level to guide big-picture decision-making on LGBTIQ inclusion. Organizations should reach out to LGBTIQ organizations when conducting context analyses or forming cluster working groups as a built-in element of intervention design. Embedding such engagement in program design will generate more sustainable and effective responses. Establishing full partnerships can be challenging, but progress is underway in many organizations to find innovative ways to bring LGBTIQ organizations into the fold. Sometimes this may involve capacity-strengthening of LGBTIQ groups so that they are equipped to engage with the humanitarian system, which can ultimately enhance the likelihood of more formal partnerships. Establishing relationships with LGBTIQ organizations will also mean that if any specific crises emerge, the organization will not be starting from scratch.
- 3. Dedicating staff and resources toward formalizing LGBTIQ inclusion within programmatic and organizational workstreams.** Currently, a lot of LGBTIQ inclusion work is undertaken by individual champions or small groups. While these kinds of staff are critical in kick-starting conversations and actions within organizations, relying on willpower alone will fatigue individuals, and it presents a sustainability problem if these individuals leave the organization. Several organizations appear to be moving towards an approach of having

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<sup>124</sup>Key Informant 8 interview.

staff whose remit includes LGBTIQ inclusion. Dedicating funding toward positions where the core focus of the work is LGBTIQ inclusion ensures greater sustainability and capacity to commit to genuine transformative change.

- 4. Fostering and taking seriously organic, staff-led initiatives.** Capitalizing on “softer” approaches to talking about LGBTIQ inclusion within organizations can help humanize the issue. This may look like celebrating specific events that are important to LGBTIQ communities (such as the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia, Transgender Day or Remembrance, or Intersex Awareness Day). Similarly, there are wide-ranging potential benefits of LGBTIQ-focused employee resource groups. While they typically begin with a focus on providing support to staff and discussing internal organizational dynamics, conversations about programming can follow. The most effective employee resource groups will be autonomously led. Creating online platforms where staff across the globe can virtually connect will help staff feel less isolated. Region-specific groups may also help ensure a group’s focus is as relevant as possible to sociocultural challenges faced by staff members in different contexts.

# Case Studies

# 05 Case Studies

The following section presents seven different partnerships between national or local LGBTIQ organizations and international humanitarian actors in Colombia, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nepal, and Ukraine. These diverse case studies demonstrate the importance of pursuing long-term cooperation with organizations who best know what its communities need. The case studies also examine obstacles and how organizations overcome them. It is important to note that the LGBTIQ organizations participating in the research primarily worked on issues pertaining to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, with minor engagement with intersex communities. While these seven partnerships are not perfect, they collectively illustrate a wide range of possibilities for meaningful inclusion.

Each case study focused on one or two particular questions from the Partner Appraisal Tool to emphasize a specific aspect of LGBTIQ inclusion. With input from the case study participants, we also placed each case study on Edge Effect’s Diverse-SOGIESC continuum, which characterizes the inclusivity of the partnership (See Methodology Section). The case studies highlighted below focus on partnerships ranging from inactive to transformative.

## 5.1. CENTERING LGBTIQ VOICES IN PROGRAM DESIGN FOR VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS IN COLOMBIA

**Caribe Afirmativo & Mercy Corps**

—Colombia

### Continuum Placement



### Featured Questions:

- Question 7: Were LGBTIQ people and/or organizations engaged as active contributors to the needs assessment and project design?
- Question 8: Were LGBTIQ people and/or organizations engaged as active contributors to program management, implementation, and monitoring?

**The Context:** Since 2017, the massive influx of 6.5 million Venezuelans, as of November 2023, to neighboring countries in Latin America and the Caribbean represents one of the biggest

humanitarian crises in the world.<sup>125</sup> Escaping economic hardship, rising insecurity, crumbling institutions, and political repression, over 2.8 million Venezuelans have sought refuge in Colombia.<sup>126</sup> While the Colombian government has enacted several policies to support migrants, the reality is that capacity and resources are limited, and impoverished Venezuelans are forced to rely on informal work or join local armed groups or street gangs, and may be subjected to sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Venezuelan LGBTIQ migrants face even higher levels of social marginalization because of the intersection of their LGBTIQ identities and their migrant status.<sup>127</sup> LGBTIQ migrants face a constant denial of their rights, extremely difficult economic situations, and asymmetries and barriers in access to justice and essential support.<sup>128</sup> The inability to access a temporary protection permit for many LGBTIQ migrants translates into a violation of their fundamental rights, including the right to education, health, and employment. For instance, in many cases, transitioning transgender migrants and those living with HIV and other chronic conditions are unable to obtain vital medication.<sup>129</sup> Intersex migrants also likely face disruptions in medications and other essential care. LGBTIQ migrants face severe employment obstacles in the form of discrimination, violence, and degrading treatment.<sup>130</sup>

The conditions for LGBTIQ migrants are exacerbated by the current context of Colombia, which includes, for example, violence targeting their identities and practices, vicious and long-standing internal armed conflicts, and limited access to justice.<sup>131</sup> Armed conflict worsens the situation of LGBTIQ migrants, especially in border areas where they are at higher risk of violence and trafficking.<sup>132</sup> Looking to flee and to avoid being mocked and degraded at official border crossings, nonbinary and transgender people may choose to cross at irregular border points, often without documentation, which heightens their vulnerability and impedes their access to refugee services.<sup>133</sup> Border cities also expose LGBTIQ people, especially sex workers, to territorial conflicts, violent threats, blackmail and extortion, physical abuse, and trafficking into sexual slavery and forced labor across borders.<sup>134</sup> Their vulnerable position is intensified by a

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<sup>125</sup> Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V), *Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela*, last updated 30 November 2023, <https://www.r4v.info/en/refugeeandmigrants>.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid; International Crisis Group, *Hard Times in a Safe Haven: Protecting Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia*, 9 August 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-venezuela/hard-times-safe-haven-protecting-venezuelan>.

<sup>127</sup> Adrian Tamara, “Para dejar de ser Fantasmas: Estudio LGBT-Venezuela exilio,” 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/41502594/Para\\_dejar\\_de\\_ser\\_Fantasmas\\_Tamara\\_Adrian\\_Estudio\\_LGBT\\_Venezuela\\_exilio](https://www.academia.edu/41502594/Para_dejar_de_ser_Fantasmas_Tamara_Adrian_Estudio_LGBT_Venezuela_exilio).

<sup>128</sup> Caribe Afirmativo and Mercy Corps, *Desafiar la incertidumbre: Fragmentos de vida y trayectorias de personas venezolanas LGBT+ en situación de movilidad humana, en Colombia*, 2021, <https://caribeafirmativo.lgbt/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/desafiar-incertidumbre.pdf>.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 25–26.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 67–69.

<sup>131</sup> Carlos Camargo Assis, Luis Andrés Fajardo Arturo, and Maria Fernanda Rangel Esparza, *Una radiografía del prejuicio: Informe anual 2022 de derechos humanos de personas OSIGD-LGBTI y balance de la Política Pública Nacional 2019–2022 en Colombia*, Defensoría Delegada para los Derechos de la Mujeres y los Asuntos de Género, 2023, 22–30 (violence based on SOGIESC), 64–74 (internal armed conflicts), 53–63 (access to justice), [https://www.defensoria.gov.co/documents/20123/1657207/Informe\\_Radiografia\\_Prejuicio.pdf/03f60e87-d632-7fc9-19a0-ddf3435ef499?t=1684272612074](https://www.defensoria.gov.co/documents/20123/1657207/Informe_Radiografia_Prejuicio.pdf/03f60e87-d632-7fc9-19a0-ddf3435ef499?t=1684272612074).

<sup>132</sup> Laura Vasquez Rosa, “Between Invisibility and Discrimination: Venezuelan LGBTIQ+ Refugees in Colombia and Peru,” Amnesty International, 14 June 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/venezuelan-lgbtiq-refugees-colombia-peru>.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Caribe Afirmativo and Observatorio de Asuntos de Género de Norte de Santander, “Yo no quiero esto para mi vida: Informe sobre personas LGBT. Víctimas de trata de personas en Antioquia, Santander y Norte de Santander,” 20 April 2023, <https://caribeafirmativo.lgbt/yo-no-quiero-esto-para-mi-vida-conoce-el-panorama-de-trata-de-personas-lgbtiq-en-antioquia-santander-y-norte-de-santander>.

climate of impunity and lawlessness in certain neighborhoods, as well as the impossibility to access justice due to irregular migration status and mistrust of authorities.<sup>135</sup>

The continuum of violence that LGBTIQ migrants experience is exacerbated by a lack of local expertise on the part of international humanitarian organizations. These agencies often struggle to keep up with the ever-evolving social realities surrounding LGBTIQ issues. For instance, administrative, monitoring, and evaluation policies and procedures are generally based on binary gender models and only include the categories of “female” and “male,” rendering nonbinary and gender nonconforming people invisible. Lastly, the funding that international agencies provide to local organizations is often insufficient and administratively burdensome, which slows down implementation of inclusive support.

**The Partnership:** Caribe Afirmativo is a Colombian LGBTIQ civil society organization that strives to transform institutional and societal attitudes regarding sexual and gender diversity. In 2020, Caribe Afirmativo started working on human mobility issues through its *Casas Afirmativas* project, which builds safe spaces for LGBTIQ migrants in major Colombian cities.<sup>136</sup> The organization had observed how mainstream humanitarian organizations prioritized women, children, and adolescents, with no specific attention to the needs of LGBTIQ people.<sup>137</sup> The *Casas Afirmativas* project sought to fill this gap.

In February 2020, Caribe Afirmativo’s Executive Director, Wilson Casteñeda, was speaking at a meeting about the needs and priorities of LGBTIQ migrants. Carolina Rodríguez, humanitarian



<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Mercy Corps Colombia, “Casa Afirmativa en Valledupar - #avanzadoelfuturo,” February 2023, video, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/hZC29IkFaqc>.

<sup>137</sup> Written response to questionnaire by Giovanni Molinares, 18 May 2023.

project director at Mercy Corps, heard him. Rodríguez suggested to her colleagues that they reach out to Caribe Afirmativo to build a partnership focused on LGBTIQ migrants’ experiences.

The partnership quickly evolved through an organic process based on conversations and a commitment from both organizations to support and learn from one another. As Rodríguez highlighted, “Mercy Corps was completely an ally, with a supportive internal dynamic for this kind of collaboration—but we didn’t fully understand all the vulnerabilities faced by LGBTIQ migrants.”<sup>138</sup> The partnership, funded by the United States Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), became a mutual exchange through which Mercy Corps learned from Caribe Afirmativo’s knowledge of LGBTIQ migrant communities and Caribe Afirmativo learned from Mercy Corps how to better support the development of livelihoods. Their joint project, *Avanzando el Futuro*, has two components: one is protection-related services, such as psychological support, emotional resilience, and regularization of legal status, and the other focuses on entrepreneurship and livelihood creation in the regions of Antioquia and Bolívar, and later in Cesar.<sup>139</sup>

**Elements of Success Included Mutual Respect, Trust, and Shared Power:** For Giovanni Molinares, head of Caribe Afirmativo’s human mobility program, Mercy Corps—and specifically Rodríguez—had the right approach because the organization was interested in achieving fruitful and long-term impact.<sup>140</sup> For instance, after Caribe Afirmativo staff attended a Mercy Corps training on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), staff members directly told Rodríguez that the workshop was designed only for straight people. Rodríguez realized this was true, and asked Caribe Afirmativo to provide training to Mercy Corps on how to expand SRH work to be more inclusive. Mercy Corps’ trustworthy, compassionate, and respectful approach allowed Caribe Afirmativo to implement complementary activities in their joint work plan, as well as help Mercy Corps strengthen its methodologies and pedagogies aimed at LGBTIQ individuals. Molinares explained that Mercy Corps demonstrated a deep trust in Caribe Afirmativo’s approaches, which differed from mainstream training and knowledge-generation methodologies.<sup>141</sup> Mercy Corps learned from Caribe Afirmativo that, in fact, knowledge could be produced through “festive” communal activities, group work, and events, which Caribe Afirmativo complemented through monthly reports from the ground highlighting community-based indicators to exemplify the realities of LGBTIQ migrants.

Molinares also stressed the importance of the comprehensiveness of their joint project as well as its adaptiveness and flexibility, which has allowed Caribe Afirmativo to respond to the evolving and fluctuating needs of LGBTIQ migrants.<sup>142</sup> He explained how most major humanitarian organizations have different programs for different issues, thereby lacking integrated approaches to specific populations, such as LGBTIQ people. An integrated approach spanning across different sectors is essential. For instance, cash-based projects, albeit offering momentary relief, are not enough if LGBTIQ people lack identification documents that would allow them to access employment, education, or healthcare.

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<sup>138</sup> Outright interview with Carolina Rodríguez, by video communication, 8 June 2023.

<sup>139</sup> Mercy Corps Colombia, “Protección, Generación de Ingresos, Atención Humanitaria Integral, 2020, <https://mercycorps.org.co/programas/avanzando-el-futuro-qamfpZfyxaWs0auoy6qanw>.

<sup>140</sup> Molinares written response to questionnaire.

<sup>141</sup> Outright interview with Giovanni Molinares, by video communication, 13 June 2023.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

Said Rodríguez, “We don’t see them as a subcontractor where we have to check indicators and boxes. For us, they are specialists. They know what we don’t know. They are complementing us, and we complement them.”<sup>143</sup> Mercy Corps’ mutually respectful approach means that Caribe Afirmativo is involved in program management discussions, monitoring and evaluation work, program planning, lessons learned meetings, and budgeting. While Mercy Corps helps Caribe Afirmativo build financial and program management capacity, Caribe Afirmativo remains in control of its own budget. “We are growing together,” Rodríguez explained, with the objective for Caribe Afirmativo to ultimately become self-sufficient and qualified to receive large grants directly from donors such as the US government.<sup>144</sup>

**“We don’t see them as a subcontractor where we have to check indicators and boxes. For us, they are specialists. They know what we don’t know. They are complementing us, and we complement them.”**  
*Carolina Rodríguez, Mercy Corps*

Molinares believes that the partnership has been particularly successful because it was 1) horizontal and equal, 2) based on an understanding that humanitarian work can be done differently, and 3) inherently humane towards LGBTIQ populations in different contexts. Rodríguez also stressed the importance of strong local leadership, especially among hired staff, and particular attention paid to safeguarding.<sup>145</sup>



<sup>143</sup> Rodríguez interview.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Molinares interview.

**A Partnership With Far-Reaching Effects:** In addition to providing critical support to LGBTIQ migrants, the program led to positive change within Mercy Corps’ programming and culture, influencing other areas of work, such as the Mercy Corps Land and Development Program.<sup>146</sup> And the impact of inclusion has been profound for Mercy Corps staff in Colombia. Rodríguez underlined that, “our work with Caribe Afirmativo makes the staff feel that the office is a safe space.”<sup>147</sup> Many staff members from Mercy Corps came out after the work with Caribe Afirmativo started—Rodríguez estimated that 10 percent of the staff in Colombia now openly identify as queer. Building on this very safe and accepting atmosphere, Mercy Corps recently hired a transgender woman, as well as several Venezuelan migrants identifying as gay or lesbian, to work in its Bogotá office.

Beyond Colombia, Mercy Corps’ partnership with Caribe Afirmativo has also influenced organizational culture. Although Rodríguez and her department initially experienced some internal and external pushback for working on LGBTIQ inclusion, she advocated for her approach and showed the importance of building such partnerships. For example, at the 2023 Mercy Corps regional meeting for the Americas, Rodríguez and Caribe Afirmativo’s Executive Director Wilson Casteñeda were featured in a session in which they discussed their partnership and what they have accomplished together. Following the presentation, the CEO of Mercy Corps invited them to come to Washington, DC, to replicate the conversation for their board of directors. Although the meeting was postponed at the last minute when Rodríguez and others developed COVID-19 symptoms, the invitation is a testament to how an inclusive partnership can positively influence the internal culture of an organization and foster more inclusion. In a similar vein, Casteñeda was invited to help organize an internal campaign with Mercy Corps offices to celebrate the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexphobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT),<sup>148</sup> exchanging postcards between different offices, and educating the staff on the importance of this day. As Rodríguez explained, “the Colombia team is now like a model for other offices,” and for Mercy Corps Global staff, who will soon participate in a workshop led by Casteñeda on LGBTIQ inclusion and partnership.

As Rodríguez noted, “local partnerships need to give agency and autonomy to LGBTIQ organizations, support their growth, and, most important, cultivate their trust.”<sup>149</sup>

“...local partnerships need to give agency and autonomy to LGBTIQ organizations, support their growth, and most importantly, cultivate their trust.”

*Carolina Rodríguez, Mercy Corps*

## Recommendations

- 1. Humanitarian organizations should pursue equitable partnerships with LGBTIQ organizations in which decisions about inclusive programming are driven by LGBTIQ people themselves.** Programming should be guided by the needs and

<sup>146</sup> Following the success of the partnership with Caribe Afirmativo, Mercy Corps’ Director of the Land and Development Program inquired about bringing Caribe Afirmativo into the conversation given that LGBTIQ people are also farmers or landowners and may have specific insights.

<sup>147</sup> Rodríguez interview.

<sup>148</sup> Mercy Corps Colombia, “International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia - #WeAreAllColors, 17 May 2023, video, accessed 5 May 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL\\_AQNd3mpk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL_AQNd3mpk).

<sup>149</sup> Rodríguez interview.

guidance of communities as articulated by LGBTIQ organizations, and these actors should be engaged in activities such as sensitization training and the development of inclusion guidelines (such as the operation of shelters that address safety and security of people regardless of their SOGIESC).

- 2. Humanitarian organizations should be open to having their ways of working challenged and their internal culture transformed beyond program implementation.** Cultivating strong relationships with LGBTIQ organizations can also have far-reaching impacts within organizations—such as making the workplace safer for LGBTIQ staff to openly identify themselves. Country offices that have made progress on inclusion should act as inspiration for other offices, spurring conversations at regional and global levels.

## 5.2. CREATING “ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS” FOR INCLUSIVITY IN NEPAL

Blue Diamond Society,  
Nepal Red Cross Society & UNFPA

—Nepal

### Continuum Placement



### Featured Question:

- **Question 5: Do relevant staff, contractors and implementing partners have sufficient capability to address the rights, needs, and strengths of people with diverse-SOGIESC?**

**The Context:** On 25 April 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake rocked Nepal. With its epicenter in the Gorkha District, 85 kilometers northwest of central Kathmandu, the tremor resulted in the deaths of almost 9,000 people, injury of some 20,000 more, and the destruction of cities and villages across the country.<sup>150</sup> Following the immediate deployment of national response teams, in the months that followed, a joint local-international response was coordinated to provide shelter, food, water, and sanitation to the 2.8 million displaced people and to undertake the enormous effort of rebuilding a shattered country.<sup>151</sup>

For Manisha Dhakal, leader of the LGBTIQ advocacy group Blue Diamond Society (BDS), the 2015 earthquake presented a “big lesson” in highlighting how underprepared her community was to respond to disaster. Until then, BDS’s work had focused primarily on issues such as

<sup>150</sup> United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, “Nepal: Gorkha Earthquake 2015,” n.d., <https://www.preventionweb.net/collections/nepal-gorkha-earthquake-2015>.

<sup>151</sup> Puk Oveson and Stine Heiselberg, “The Humanitarian Response to the 2015 Nepal Earthquake,” *UN Chronicle* 53, no. 1, May 2016, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/humanitarian-response-2015-nepal-earthquake>.

health, citizenship, marriage equality, and equal opportunities in education and employment. Dealing with the everyday realities of LGBTIQ marginalization left little time to think about disaster preparedness. Yet, almost overnight, her team was thrust into the world of humanitarian response coordination to meet the needs of her often-overlooked community.



“We were not prepared at that time and did not have any resources to support our community,” Dhakal reflected. “On the other hand, we have a great responsibility towards our community as we are running an LGBTIQ organization.”<sup>152</sup>

**The Partnership Involved Reciprocal Learning Between BDS and the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS):**

In the immediate aftermath, Dhakal remembers the immense distress of community members desperate for support. The organization had connections with some UN agencies and INGO networks through previous work related to HIV reduction and human rights issues, and received assistance from UNAIDS, Save the Children, and UNICEF in the form of tents, bedding, food, and medicine. Through these networks, Dhakal found that the Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) was also offering help. She arranged a meeting at its compound to request support. When she entered the NRCS premises, she noted the number of international staff that had been brought in to assist in the response.

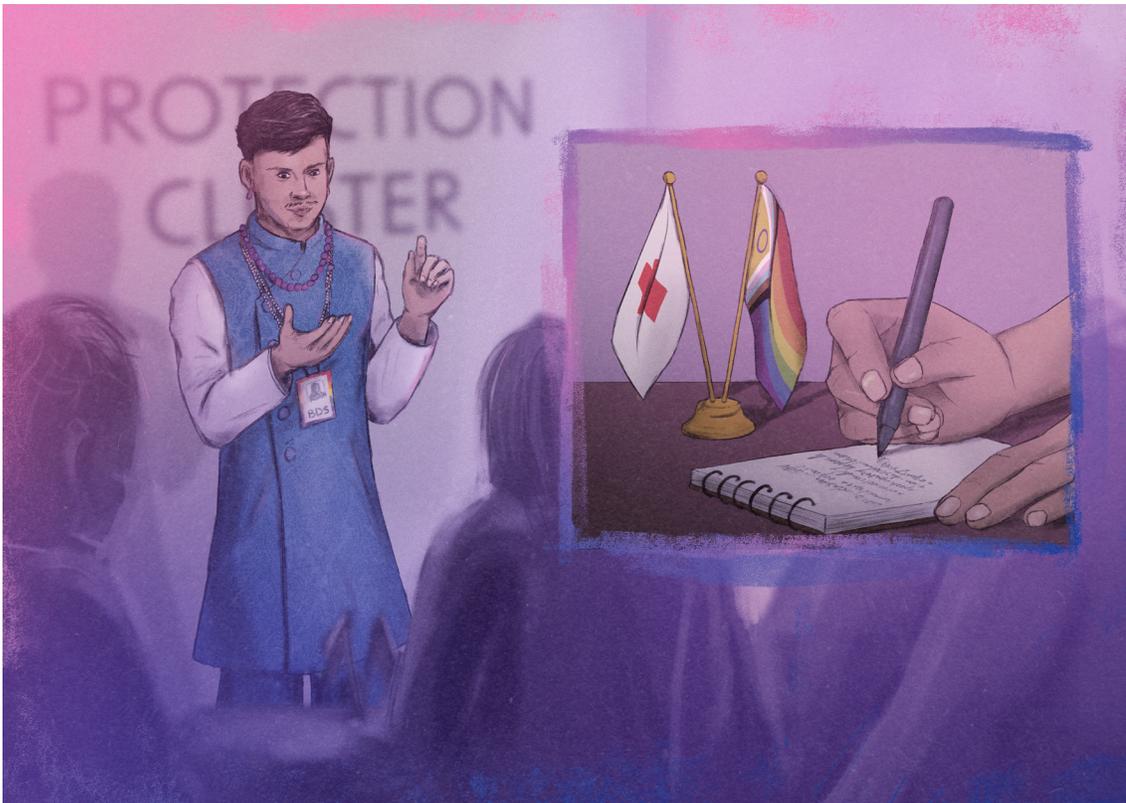
“At that time, I realized that the volunteers from other countries wouldn’t know the issues facing LGBTIQ people in Nepal,” recalled Dhakal, cognizant of Nepal’s culturally unique gender groups, such as *meti* (someone assigned male at birth who presents with a feminine gender identity).<sup>153</sup> Motivated to ensure her already-vulnerable community did not face discrimination in response efforts, she made a point of addressing this concern with her contacts at the

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<sup>152</sup> Edge Effect interview with Manisha Dhakal, by video communication, 21 April 2023.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

NRCS after she had secured immediate short-term assistance to distribute support within her network. What followed was an ongoing relationship of reciprocal learning between the two organizations.



In the subsequent months, NRCS collaborated with BDS to implement a series of trainings with NRCS staff—ranging from managers in national or regional offices to those working as front-line responders—with a focus on building the cultural competency and sensitivity of the NRCS response team to LGBTIQ identities, experiences, and realities. In return, NRCS invited BDS team members to numerous district-level trainings about disaster preparedness that NRCS’s provincial teams conducted.

Shabnam Pokharel, Protection and Inclusion Technical Lead at NRCS, describes the engagement with BDS as having had a substantive impact on the organization. Specifically, LGBTIQ sensitivity became a main consideration within their programming design and community outreach, and the Nepal office became a leading example among other National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies for LGBTIQ-inclusive practices. “Previously people [on staff] had no understanding of the LGBTIQ community,” she recalled. “But now, they are more aware and sensitized to the risks and vulnerabilities of the population not only during emergency periods, but in normal times.”<sup>154</sup>

Pokharel and her team at NRCS have helped steer her organization from a “blanket” approach to reaching affected communities, to more tailored strategies for addressing LGBTIQ marginalization within emergency responses. Specifically, she feels that should there be another major crisis in Nepal, her organization is much better equipped to support LGBTIQ populations. “Now in the pre-crisis planning phase, we are identifying specific needs, so if

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<sup>154</sup> Edge Effect interview with Shabnam Pokharel, by video communication, 7 August 2023.

there were a huge disaster, I think it would be different,” said Pokharel.<sup>155</sup> “We’re incorporating their needs from the planning through to the implementation phase.” One example cited was the office’s increasing efforts to expand the collection of gender data to be more sensitive to gender identities beyond women and men, so that third gender, transgender, and nonbinary individuals would be included and data could be disaggregated to better understand how their needs and experiences might differ. Another example was the distribution of dignity kits to transgender women.<sup>156</sup>

Indeed, having a pre-existing relationship with NRCS was also useful when the country was struck by COVID-19 in 2020, as NRCS reached out to BDS inviting them to submit a concept note to gain access to NRCS’s relief activities. Nevertheless, while appreciative of the engagement between the two organizations, Dhakal envisions a relationship that is less reactive and more transformative. “When a situation comes, we collaborate, and then it stops,” she explained.

“The engagement at the time is good, but [I want to be engaged] not only when there is a disaster. I want to be involved in long-term conversations, not just incident-based coordination.”<sup>157</sup> While she sees the trainings conducted with NRCS as being a valuable step in the right direction, the bulk of the ongoing sensitization and inclusion work that Phokarel described appears to have taken place using internal expertise rather than sustained engagement with LGBTIQ organizations such as BDS.

Phokarel agreed that routine communication between her organization and BDS could be improved. “It’s been a long time since we’ve had communication with BDS. Maybe we could do more to improve our relationship,” she conceded. “We could create a communication platform to get connected with them on a monthly or quarterly basis . . . I think the issue should be kept in the forefront of our minds.”<sup>158</sup>

**Inclusion in Coordinating Bodies:** Since COVID-19, other humanitarian actors have engaged BDS through different development and humanitarian coordination sub-clusters. The first engagement came when the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Nepal office invited BDS to join a general Protection Group cluster, and then a specialized gender-based violence sub-cluster within the Protection Group. Alisha Ghimire, humanitarian officer and gender-based violence sub-cluster coordinator at UNFPA Nepal, says that engaging BDS kick-started her office into more strategic thinking about how to better meet the needs of LGBTIQ populations—but it has taken time as both teams learn more about how to engage each other.

“[LGBTIQ inclusion] was a ‘Pandora’s Box’ issue for us before,” described Ghimire. “We knew we had to work with these groups, but we didn’t know how to approach it . . . we thought there might be a lot of issues that we might not be able to handle or address correctly.”<sup>159</sup>

**“I want to be involved in long-term conversations, not just incident-based coordination.”**

*Manisha Dhakal, Blue Diamond Society*

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<sup>155</sup> Pokharel interview.

<sup>156</sup> Dignity kits contain items such as soap, washing powder, toothpaste, toothbrushes, underwear, and menstrual hygiene materials. They often also include items that promote safety, such as flashlights and referral information to gender-based violence services. In some contexts, agencies such as UNFPA have been making active efforts to distribute dignity kits to transgender women and non-binary people to allow them to maintain a level of wellbeing and hygiene during emergencies.

<sup>157</sup> Dhakal interview.

<sup>158</sup> Phokarel interview.

<sup>159</sup> Edge Effect interview with Alisha Ghimire, by video communication, 3 July 2023.

Likewise, being unfamiliar with Nepal’s humanitarian infrastructure, Dhakal and BDS experienced some frustration after their initial engagement with the general protection sub-cluster. Dhakal was invited to make a presentation on behalf of BDS but felt like the invitation was not accompanied with a clear explanation of the sub-cluster’s objectives or what the benefits of joining would be for her organization. “After my presentation, I didn’t know what the next steps should be from my side, or if there would be any from their side,” said Dhakal. “It’s *their* role to educate and empower marginalized communities, to help us learn about the point of the sub-cluster so that we can share the right information.”<sup>160</sup>

“[LGBTIQ inclusion] was a ‘Pandora’s Box’ issue for us before... We knew we had to work with these groups, but we didn’t know how to approach it.”

Alisha Ghimire, UNFPA Nepal

Ghimire remembered the situation similarly: “We started hearing their issues, but there were no concrete actions. Everyone was a little confused—this was new. But then when we set up a dedicated thematic group in the [form of the] sub-cluster on gender-based violence, that was when the group started to feel really heard.”<sup>161</sup>

Once BDS found its rhythm in the newly established sub-cluster on gender-based violence, Dhakal felt excited to have her organization included in something that felt strategic and had a long-term purpose, and that embedded BDS within broader coordination and relationships beyond project implementation. The opportunity to use the platform to highlight SOGIESC diversity to numerous organizations working on gender-based violence presented a valuable opportunity to broaden the mindsets of different actors. These platforms open up space to address the physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence experienced by LGBTIQ people in Nepal that is rooted in gender-based norms, and to shed light on how discrimination results in LGBTIQ people having a lower socioeconomic status that can expose them to further violence—whether it be through undertaking dangerous work, in interactions with police, or from other members of the community.<sup>162</sup> “If we were not in the sub-cluster and were raising our issues and sharing our stories, they would be missed,” said Dhakal. “So, it’s important to be involved and engaged.”<sup>163</sup>

Ghimire similarly described the sub-cluster inclusion as “creating an enabling environment for both sides.” After enhancing interactions with BDS and other LGBTIQ groups and building a stronger picture of the needs of LGBTIQ communities, starting from 2023, UNFPA Nepal has built LGBTIQ awareness and inclusion into its country framework for their next five-year cycle. According to Ghimire, UNFPA Nepal now sees LGBTIQ groups as critical stakeholders regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights.

## Recommendations

- 1. National and local LGBTIQ organizations are the best-placed actors to increase awareness and sensitivity of INGOs and humanitarian actors wanting to better**

<sup>160</sup> Dhakal interview.

<sup>161</sup> Ghimire interview.

<sup>162</sup> UN Women, *Evidence to Action: Addressing Violence Against LGBTIQ+ People in Nepal*, 2023, <https://un.org.np/resource/evidence-action-addressing-violence-against-lgbtq-people-nepal>.

<sup>163</sup> Dhakal interview.

**meet the needs of LGBTIQ populations in situations of vulnerability.** Sustained engagement to educate core staff along the entire process of intervention decision-making—from community-facing responders to upper management—will ensure the best chance of mitigating exclusion within humanitarian outreach programming. So will approaches that take into account staff turnover and possible differences in knowledge and sensitivity between national and international staff.

**2. LGBTIQ organizations should be adequately compensated for their contributions.**

The most effective engagements will work towards building a sustainable and reciprocal relationship where humanitarian actors engage LGBTIQ civil society organizations beyond an ad hoc basis, in which their expertise and community knowledge become the backbone of humanitarian organizations' long-term inclusion strategies.

**3. Proactively engaging LGBTIQ organizations within coordination mechanisms—such as sector-specific clusters and working groups—can be a useful way to weave diverse representation into humanitarian infrastructure.**

These efforts will have the greatest impact if LGBTIQ organizations are not simply shoehorned into existing coordination and communication mechanisms but are instead meaningfully introduced to forums that may be unfamiliar to them. Also crucial is ensuring LGBTIQ organizations have the opportunity to express how the objectives and operations of relevant clusters and working groups could better support the needs and priorities of their communities.

### 5.3. FLEXIBLE, RESPECTFUL, AND TRUSTFUL PARTNERSHIPS DURING MYANMAR'S COUP

Rainbow Foundation, Foundation for a Just Society,  
Center for Justice and Accountability,  
& International Donors

—Myanmar

#### Continuum Placement



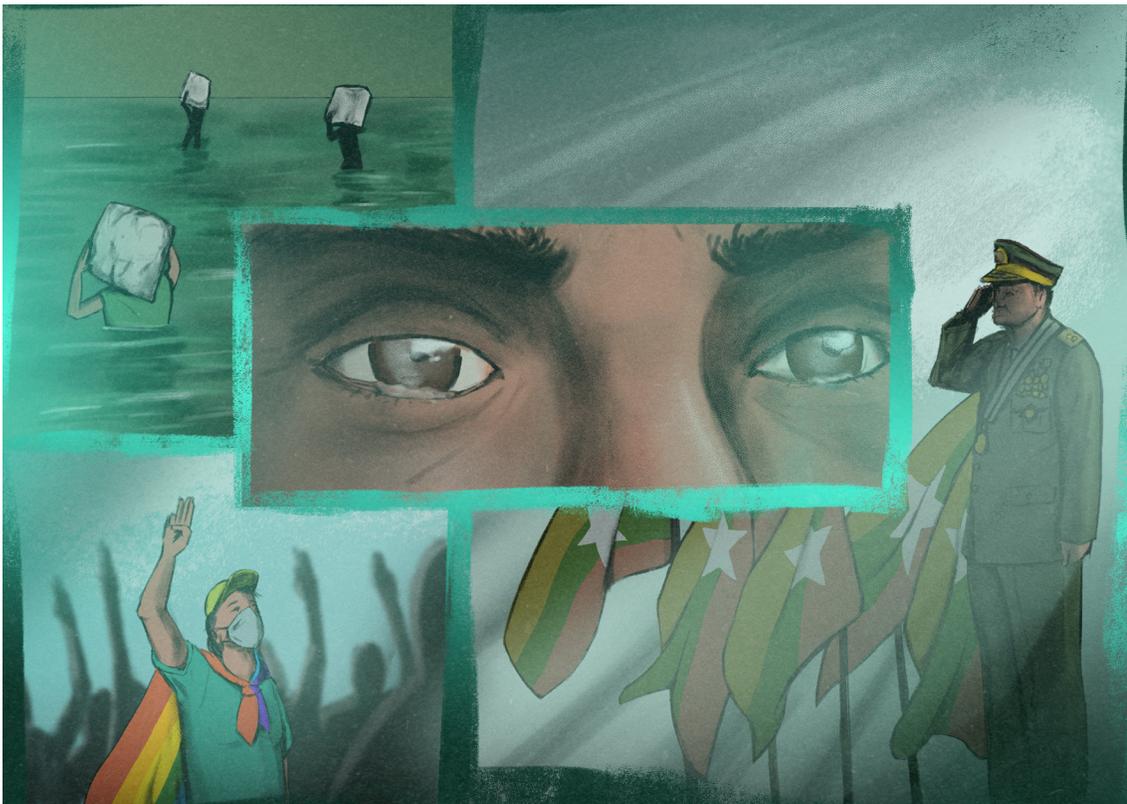
#### Featured Question:

- **Question 2: Did your organization continue monitoring the experiences of LGBTIQ people in this crisis, including efforts to understand new forms of discrimination and challenges that may have emerged? If so, how did you respond to these emergent challenges?**

**The Context:** On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military ended the country's 10 short years of civilian rule on the day the new parliament was due to convene following the November 2020

elections.<sup>164</sup> The military, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, disputed election results in which the military-backed party had suffered considerable losses to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. It mounted a coup and established the State Administrative Council as an alleged caretaker government. The coup and subsequent imprisonment of key elected figures prompted overwhelming resistance from the public, with mass peaceful demonstrations taking place across the country as well as a coordinated civil disobedience movement in which civil servants refused to work.<sup>165</sup>

Following two and a half weeks of peaceful demonstrations, the military initiated a brutal crackdown, killing and arresting thousands of civilians and driving civil society and human rights defenders into hiding.<sup>166</sup> Across the country, the military has engaged in ruthless tactics including the shelling and burning of entire villages, as well as targeting schools and places of worship, with ethnic armed organizations and a newly formed People's Defense Force (PDF) fighting back against the military in both protracted battles and guerilla warfare.<sup>167</sup> As of February 2024, the junta has killed over 4,500 civilians and has made more than 26,000 arrests on political grounds.<sup>168</sup> 17.6 million people, roughly a third of the entire population, need urgent



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<sup>164</sup> Richard Horsey, "One Year On from the Myanmar Coup," International Crisis Group, 25 January 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/one-year-myanmar-coup>.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Min Zaw Oo and Stein Tønnesson, *Counting Myanmar's Dead: Reported Civilian Casualties since the 2021 Military Coup*, Peace Research Institute of Oslo, 13 June 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/counting-myanmars-dead-reported-civilian-casualties-2021-military-coup>; Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma, homepage, accessed 5 May 2024, <https://aappb.org>.

<sup>167</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Myanmar: Events of 2023," in *World Report 2024*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/myanmar>.

<sup>168</sup> Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma.

humanitarian assistance, and more than 1.6 million have been internally displaced, while thousands more have fled into neighboring countries.<sup>169</sup>

Entrenched marginalization of and discrimination against Myanmar’s LGBTIQ populations put them in particularly precarious circumstances under the junta’s rule, exacerbating pre-existing challenges such as violence, livelihood exclusion, societal isolation, and poor mental health. LGBTIQ people face unique risks and vulnerabilities under the regime. For example, the State Administrative Council is appealing to a conservative and “traditional” vision of Myanmar society that excludes sexual and gender diversity. Also, LGBTIQ activists were very visible throughout anti-regime demonstrations, and soldiers and police have engaged in targeted sexualized violence and abuse against LGBTQ people.<sup>170</sup>

Formed in 2007, the Rainbow Foundation advocates for Myanmar’s LGBTQ population across the country.<sup>171</sup> Their capacity to do so grew substantially during the 10 years of civilian rule (2010–2020) when there was relative freedom for civil society organizations to operate, and foreign donors were able to support the organization’s range of human rights-focused activities. With the coup, however, the Rainbow Foundation was required to become a de-facto humanitarian responder—seemingly overnight—to meet the needs of LGBTQ people within their networks. Due to the violent and oppressive crackdown on civil society and human rights actors, as well as the restrictions placed on international money transfers into local bank accounts, the Rainbow Foundation was faced with the decision to stop its work, or relocate to Thailand and continue supporting LGBTQ people from over the border. The flexibility and support of several donors was integral to aiding its decision to move key staff and finances into Thailand, and to pivot its work towards emergency response. Notably, the two core organizations referenced in this story are human rights organizations, rather than humanitarian assistance organizations. The autonomy that both these organizations enabled through their trust in the Rainbow Foundation to assist LGBTQ communities in a time of major instability demonstrates the power of a flexible, rights-based approach where decision-making capacity is put into the hands of the affected population, rather than traditional humanitarian assistance models that render vulnerable populations as mere beneficiaries.

**Flexibility Demonstrated by Donors, Grounded in Long-Established, Trustful Relationships:**

Following the coup, many Myanmar organizations refused to operate under their national registration in Myanmar, as this would feed the regime through taxes and legitimize junta rule. In addition, the junta was increasingly monitoring and restricting money transfers from foreign entities, curtailing the operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) that received foreign funding. While fraught with administrative, financial, and physical risk, given that the military was closely monitoring human rights organizations and those receiving foreign funding, relocating and registering in Thailand became a sensible option for many CSOs.

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<sup>169</sup> United Nations, “More than Two Years on, Impact of Myanmar Military Coup ‘Devastating,’” UN News, 16 March 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134682>.

<sup>170</sup> NRM, *Rainbow Resilience: LGBTIQ+ Lives and Civil Society in Myanmar’s Coup*, 2022, available upon request from NRM/UNOPS Myanmar.

<sup>171</sup> Given the ongoing security concerns for civil society organizations working on and in Myanmar, we have obscured the name of both the organization and staff involved in this case study. The name “Rainbow Foundation” and the names of staff referenced in these passages are pseudonyms.

“Registering the organization in Thailand was the most challenging,” recalled Sai Kham La (pseudonym) of the Rainbow Foundation. “But we needed registration to be able to continue working with most of our donors . . . It was a long process.”<sup>172</sup>

Sai Kham La identified several long-term donors, including two human rights grantmakers, that were particularly accommodating during this tumultuous period. One was the US-based Foundation for a Just Society (FJS), which has funded the Rainbow Foundation since 2017. For Phoebe De Padua, Senior Program Associate at FJS, the strengths-based approach behind FJS’s multi-year support grants is guided by a view that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution” and aims to “fund the mission rather than a specific project.”<sup>173</sup> In practice, this translates to flexible, adaptable core funding for operational and administrative costs that allows organizations to build long-term resilience—which, for the Rainbow Foundation, was critical to its operational decision to relocate to Thailand.

**“Our strengths-based approach is to make sure that we fund not just in times of need, not just in times of emergency or crisis. But to prepare the organization to be resilient in the long-term.”**

*Phoebe De Padua, FJS*

After consulting with its board and determining that its operations needed to shift over the border, the Rainbow Foundation informed donors such as FJS about its decision. The Rainbow Foundation said this conversation was straightforward, due to the long-running and deeply trusting relationship that had been built prior to the coup.



<sup>172</sup>Edge Effect interview with Rainbow Foundation, by video communication, 16 June 2023.

<sup>173</sup>Edge Effect interview with Phoebe De Padua, by video communication, 25 July 2023.

“The key to building trust with donors and why we had such a good relationship is that we have always been super-transparent and have open communication channels with them,” explained Ma Vi from the Rainbow Foundation.<sup>174</sup>

For FJS, the decision to allow flexibility in reporting, to trust Rainbow Foundation to handle transitioning finances to new bank accounts, and to offer additional funding for the costly registration process in Thailand, was easy. “We just made ourselves available to them to have the conversations they needed to have,” recalled De Padua. “We tried our best to support them as much as possible and be a listening ear and connect them to resources—but recognize that they hold the expertise.”<sup>175</sup> By ensuring that the Rainbow Foundation held the power to make decisions on how best to respond to the unfolding crisis, the partnership with FJS demonstrates a transformative model of engagement. That FJS is a human rights donor working in a crisis setting—rather than a traditional humanitarian agency—may have led to a more accelerated model of power-sharing and partnership.

Having strong lines of communication and trust also put the Rainbow Foundation in a position where the organization could negotiate for its funding from other donors—the bulk of which was intended for project work focused on political and legal reform—to be redirected to emergency cash distributions to help activists and LGBTQ people displaced or endangered by conflict or persecution. The Rainbow Foundation uses a series of informal networks spread across the country to relay information and to distribute emergency funds through mobile banking and networks of money agents across the two countries. By necessity, this work takes place covertly with documentation kept to a minimum, and interpersonal connections and community “chatter” become key to deciding where, how much, and to whom funds should be sent.<sup>176</sup> This way of operating clearly does not fit into the traditional accountability and reporting mechanisms through which aid usually is distributed—and yet in just the first year of pivoting towards emergency response, the Rainbow Foundation’s team repurposed US\$150,000 to reach nearly 3,000 vulnerable LGBTQ individuals with critical support. Without the flexibility and understanding of its donors, the Rainbow Foundation says distributing aid to LGBTQ communities would have been impossible.<sup>177</sup>

**Trauma-Sensitive Human Rights Documentation and Storytelling:** Sai Kham La noted that over the past two years, many different organizations and news outlets have been in contact with the Rainbow Foundation to understand the experiences of Myanmar’s LGBTQ communities since the coup. While he believes storytelling efforts can be powerful in mobilizing action and funding from international donors and policy makers, he also noted that these types of activities take a financial and human resources toll, especially given the inherent security risks in data collection and the emotional stress of all involved in re-telling traumatic stories.

Sai Kham La believes that the best partners with whom to engage in information-gathering and storytelling activities are those who recognize the burden of data collection and employ a trauma-sensitive approach. The Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), a US-based legal and human rights organization, has proven to be a particularly fruitful partner in such collaborations.

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<sup>174</sup>Rainbow Foundation interview.

<sup>175</sup>De Padua interview.

<sup>176</sup>NRM, Rainbow Resilience.

<sup>177</sup>Rainbow Foundation interview.

“They approached us in June 2022 and encouraged us to apply for a grant,” recalled Sai Kham La. “They’ve now provided us with technical training for human rights documentation . . . data security, how to interview witnesses, training on psychosocial counselling—and they’ve also provided counselling for our staff who were traumatized by the interviews.”<sup>178</sup>

In addition to imparting technical skills, the nature of the partnership placed the data and stories in Rainbow Foundation’s hands, rather than it being a process of extraction. “They provided a platform for documentation, and they have access to it, but we can use it however we want,” described Sai Kham La. “They don’t own or manipulate the data and stories; they just help us with data quality. There was a lot of room to improve, but now we’re even being chased by another donor [for similar documentation activities].”<sup>179</sup>

This approach differs starkly from the Rainbow Foundation’s experience with other organizations, whose means of engagement felt more like “helicopter journalism” rather than a sincere effort to ensure that data collection and story-harvesting is led by and serves the interests of the communities in question. Reflecting on this from CJA’s perspective, Deputy Executive Director, Jennifer Rasmussen, said, “I think in our field of work . . . there’s sometimes a conceptualization that the end justifies the means.”<sup>180</sup>

In disaster settings where blatant atrocities have occurred, there can be a tendency for international organizations to prioritize what they see as the most efficient extraction of information from affected populations, whether it be to justify humanitarian interventions or for journalism or advocacy. Such approaches often take place with little or no consideration of the agency of the communities involved, and while the result may center the voices of affected populations, the process itself disenfranchises and patronizes them.

“We stand back and say this is a *community* issue,” explained Rasmussen on how CJA’s approach to data and evidence collection differs. “[Our partners] are at the forefront of these crimes, they are the impacted communities, so they must be a part of the conversation of the movement to hold those responsible to account.”<sup>181</sup>

For CJA, a non-extractive approach is embedded throughout the process of information gathering and within a holistic vision of partnership. Communities themselves make decisions about what information to gather and why.

Being the frontline information-collectors while also being directly impacted by conflict and atrocities can be deeply traumatizing, so funding and attention is required to address the psychosocial needs of partners. Ela Matthews, senior staff attorney at CJA, emphasized the need for flexibility and the space to reassess the priorities and needs of partners: “We take time to get to know the organizations, how they work, what their processes are, and where they see gaps in their own capacities . . . We reassess together when new things come up, we think about legal, digital security, and psychosocial needs *throughout* the project.”<sup>182</sup>

**“We take time to get to know the organizations, how they work, what their processes are and where they see gaps in their own capacities.”**

*Ela Matthews, CJA*

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Edge Effect interview with Jennifer Rasmussen and Ela Matthews, by video communication, 30 August 2023.

<sup>181</sup> Rasmussen and Matthews interview.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

With a commitment to genuine collaboration being at the heart of its engagement with the Rainbow Foundation—centering the Rainbow Foundation’s priorities, embedding a non-extractive approach that puts Rainbow Foundation in charge of information-gathering and data ownership, and promoting a trauma-informed approach—the two organizations have built a transformative partnership.

## Recommendations

- 1. Humanitarian and human rights organizations operating in crisis contexts should extend trust to LGBTIQ organizations to advocate and provide for their communities, even if this means operating more informally than would typically be the organization’s preference.** LGBTIQ organizations often operate through informal networks and may need to prioritize anonymity to keep individuals and communities safe from being “outed” in hostile contexts. Establishing respectful, long-term relationships with LGBTIQ organizations is the most effective way to ensure a foundational level of trust that allows them to support their communities through informal networks without burdensome documentation requirements. Furthermore, funding LGBTIQ organizations outside the context of conflict or disaster builds long-term resilience and capacity for when a crisis strikes.
- 2. Storytelling, data collection, and documentation on LGBTIQ experiences during crises should be led by affected communities.** Building in capacity-strengthening with local civil society organizations (such as interviewing techniques, triangulating data, and other research methods) as a part of documentation activities enables LGBTIQ people actors to lead and own the data collection process, rather than being involved in extractive or onerous approaches. LGBTIQ organizations should be compensated for the time they contribute to documentation activities, and humanitarian partners should be particularly cognizant of the emotional and psychological toll that these activities may take. Documentation and data collection activities should thus be guided by trauma-sensitive best practice, and consideration should be given to the provision of psychosocial support for both interviewees and interviewers.

## 5.4. SUPPORTING THE NEEDS OF LGBTIQ UKRAINIANS DURING RUSSIA’S FULL-SCALE INVASION

**Context:** Since February 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused widespread catastrophe. More than 14 million Ukrainians have been forced to flee their homes with many subjected to horrific abuses.<sup>183</sup> While the war has caused devastating consequences for Ukrainians across the country, LGBTIQ Ukrainians endure additional challenges both in conflict and humanitarian assistance settings due to violence, discrimination, and marginalization that predates the war.<sup>184</sup> For example, many transgender women with male identity cards have been denied exit or faced difficulties crossing borders or using humanitarian corridors due

<sup>183</sup>Human Rights Watch, “Ukraine: Russian Invasion Causing Widespread Suffering for Civilians,” 12 January 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/ukraine-russian-invasion-causing-widespread-suffering-civilians>.

<sup>184</sup>NASH SVIT, “The Battle for Freedom. LGBTQ Situation in Ukraine in 2022,” 12 February 2023, <https://gay.org.ua/en/blog/2023/02/12/the-battle-for-freedom-lgbtq-situation-in-ukraine-in-2022>.

to Ukrainian conscription policies.<sup>185</sup> LGBTIQ people who are able to leave may face political intolerance and social exclusion in neighboring host countries.<sup>186</sup> LGBTIQ individuals and couples have been refused at shelters or else find them to be unsafe spaces, especially where sheltering is segregated by sex. They also may face ongoing difficulties accessing medical assistance, food supplies, and hormones.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, Russian occupying forces have been documented to subject anyone who is perceived to be LGBTIQ to insults, violence, extortion, restriction of freedom, and in extreme cases, threatening their lives.<sup>188</sup>

The war, however, has also galvanized support for and acceptance of LGBTIQ people in Ukraine as never before. Although progress was being made in advancing LGBTIQ equality in Ukraine before the full-scale invasion, it lagged behind other European countries. The reality that LGBTIQ soldiers are on the front-lines defending Ukrainian democracy despite entrenched societal discrimination has helped move popular opinion towards greater support for equal rights for LGBTIQ citizens.<sup>189</sup> Calls for equal rights were also accelerated by Ukraine’s commitment to reject the anti-gender, anti-rights, and homophobic rhetoric that President Vladimir Putin has woven into his justification to invade.<sup>190</sup> In addition, the war has pushed many LGBTIQ soldiers to come out publicly and stand against intolerance and discrimination within the Ukrainian military and society. In March 2023, Member of Parliament Inna Sovsun introduced Parliamentary bill 9103 to the *Verkhovna Rada* to legalize civil registered partnerships.<sup>191</sup> Such a move may help Ukraine build its case for accession to the European Union.

Meanwhile, while the war drags on, Ukraine’s robust LGBTIQ civil society has been forced to pivot away from advocacy to urgently provide humanitarian assistance to its constituents. In a matter of days after the invasion began, at least 30 LGBTIQ civil society organizations<sup>192</sup> mobilized donations and other resources, opened shelters for LGBTIQ displaced people, launched programs to distribute medical and food supplies, and provided legal and psychological support to LGBTIQ survivors—all while facing the trauma of war themselves.<sup>193</sup> Despite the European Union, its member states, and other countries such as Iceland, Norway, and the US pledging US\$17 billion in bilateral humanitarian aid to Ukraine from February 2022 until February 2023, few LGBTIQ organizations were able to access these resources. In March 2023, the first call to apply to the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund, a UN-led country-based pooled

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<sup>185</sup> Outright, Gender Stream, and RFSL, *Advocacy Brief: Barriers for Transgender People Leaving in Ukraine During the War*.

<sup>186</sup> Joanna Jaworska, “They Fled War – Now, LGBTQ Refugees Battle Discrimination,” Chatham House, 2 June 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-06/they-fled-war-now-lgbtq-refugees-battle-discrimination>.

<sup>187</sup> Aurore Bourdin, “En Ukraine, ‘Les décennies de progrès des droits LGBTI+ ont été détruites par la guerre,’” UN News, 31 May 2022, <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2022/05/1120912>.

<sup>188</sup> NASH SVIT, “The Battle for Freedom.”

<sup>189</sup> Johanna Chisholm, “Putin’s Homophobia is Advancing LGBTQ Rights in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/16/ukraine-russia-war-putin-homophobia-lgbtq-rights-military-civil-unions>.

<sup>190</sup> J. Lester Feder, “How Russia’s War Against Ukraine is Advancing LGBTQ Rights,” *Politico*, 3 July 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/03/07/russias-war-ukraine-advancing-lgbtq-rights-000858412>.

<sup>191</sup> NASH SVIT, Situation of LGBTQ in Ukraine January – June 2023, 8 July 2023, <https://gay.org.ua/en/blog/2023/07/08/situation-of-lgbtq-in-ukraine-january-june-2023>.

<sup>192</sup> Outright has been directly in touch with 30 Ukrainian LGBTIQ organizations since the start of the full-scale invasion. There may be more.

<sup>193</sup> Neela Ghoshal, “Supporting LGBTIQ Ukrainians, Inside and Outside Ukraine,” Outright, 14 October 2022, <https://outrightinternational.org/insights/supporting-lgbtq-ukrainians-inside-and-outside-ukraine>.

fund, had no LGBTIQ organization among the list of 127 pre-approved organizations.<sup>194</sup> By the second standard allocation strategy, in November 2023, there is still no LGBTIQ organization present in the list of eligible partners.<sup>195</sup> The specific needs of LGBTIQ communities are rarely included in national and international humanitarian programs, and few reports on humanitarian response in Ukraine mention the needs or priorities of LGBTIQ citizens.<sup>196</sup>

The following three brief case studies highlight the partnerships, successes, and challenges of Ukrainian LGBTIQ organizations in working with international humanitarian actors in the context of the war.

## Gender Stream & UNHCR —Ukraine

### Continuum Placement



### Featured Question:

- **Question 11: Did your organization provide adequate funding and support to facilitate participation of people with diverse SOGIESC?**

**First Contact:** In early 2022, the UNHCR field office in Uzhhorod in western Ukraine learned about Gender Stream, a Ukrainian feminist inclusive organization that had established emergency shelters for LGBTIQ refugees, especially transgender people, in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, and Bratislava, Slovakia. Gender Stream was also providing psychosocial support, hormones and medication, and other forms of humanitarian aid to its communities. Meanwhile, the Protection Cluster in Ukraine, led by UNHCR, had already had some engagement with ILGA Europe and several local groups to develop an advocacy note to address the needs of LGBTIQ persons during displacement, published in May 2022.<sup>197</sup> UNHCR invited some of the organizations that had provided comments on the advocacy note to join Protection Cluster

**“Without a lawyer, it’s impossible to form a partnership. There are so many documents to fill in, tons of requirements, and to enter a partnership, you need to have internal rules, policies, and confirmations that the organization can perform the project.”**

*Oliha Poliakova, Gender Stream*

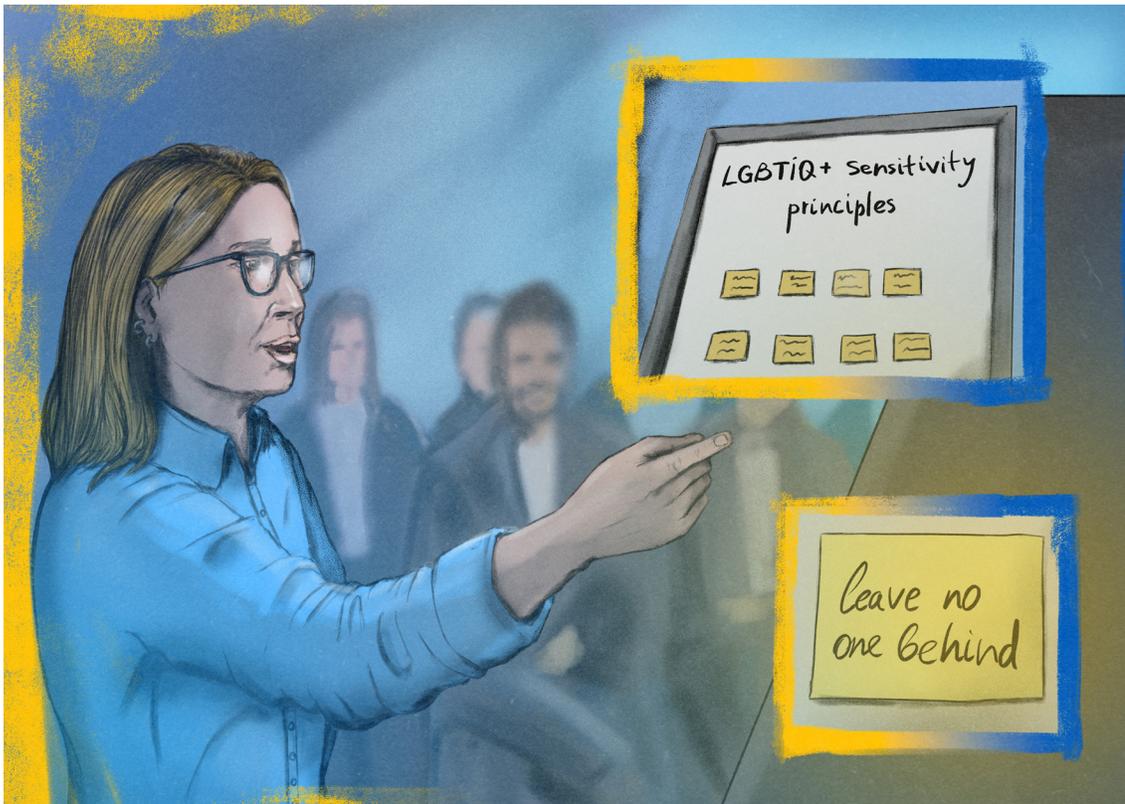
<sup>194</sup>Corinne Redfern, “One Year On, Ukraine Exposes the Limits of Well-Funded International Aid,” *The New Humanitarian*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/02/14/Why-international-aid-is-not-reaching-Ukraine>; OCHA, *Ukraine Humanitarian Fund 2023 First Standard Allocation Strategy*, 8 March 2023, [https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-2023-first-standard-allocation-strategy-8-march-2023-enuk?\\_gl=1\\*1p8xhk4\\*\\_ga\\*ODI0Njk3NjM4LjE3MTE2MzQ3MTI.\\*\\_ga\\_E60ZNX2F68\\*MTcxMjA0NjQ0MS4yLjEuMTcxMjA0NjU4Ni4zNy4wLjA](https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-2023-first-standard-allocation-strategy-8-march-2023-enuk?_gl=1*1p8xhk4*_ga*ODI0Njk3NjM4LjE3MTE2MzQ3MTI.*_ga_E60ZNX2F68*MTcxMjA0NjQ0MS4yLjEuMTcxMjA0NjU4Ni4zNy4wLjA).

<sup>195</sup>OCHA, *Ukraine Humanitarian Fund 2023 2023 Second Standard Allocation Strategy*, 30 November 2023, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-fund-2023-2023-second-standard-allocation-strategy-30-november-2023-enuk>.

<sup>196</sup>The most recent Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Ukraine references LGBTQIA+ populations 7 times in 114 pages. OCHA, *Ukraine Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024*, 3 January 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-december-2023-enuk>.

<sup>197</sup>Protection Cluster Ukraine, *Protection of LGBTIQ+ People in the Context of the Response in Ukraine*, May 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/protection-lgbtqi-people-context-response-ukraine>.

meetings, one of which was Gender Stream. A UNHCR staff member heard Gender Stream’s Executive Director, Olha Poliakov, speak at several coordination meetings and shortly thereafter, a former Protection Cluster Coordinator introduced Poliakov to the UNHCR Field Office in Uzhhorod.<sup>198</sup> The field office then invited Gender Stream to participate in a needs assessment on internally displaced LGBTIQ communities to inform their program goals and priorities for the next year. While the invitation was welcome, it unfortunately came with just 18 hours advance notice, making it impossible for Gender Stream to participate since they did not have time to ensure the physical and mental safety of potential focus group members.<sup>199</sup> Fortunately, Gender Stream was able to participate in the next round of needs assessments, which eventually led to a formal partnership with UNHCR.



**The Partnership:** One of the challenges for all community-based organizations in accessing UN agency humanitarian funds is the very stringent requirements and extensive paperwork needed to submit a proposal. As Poliakov highlights, “Without a lawyer, it’s impossible to form a partnership. There are so many documents to fill in, tons of requirements, and to enter a partnership, you need to have internal rules, policies, and confirmations that the organization can perform the project.”<sup>200</sup> After extensive consultations over many months, in November, 2022, the Protection Cluster provided Gender Stream with some modest supplies (20 blankets and other supplies), followed by a US\$4,000 micro-grant to provide psychosocial support to shelter residents in Zakarpattia, the region where Uzhhorod is located, and to conduct two

<sup>198</sup> UNHCR oversees the Protection Cluster, part of the UN humanitarian coordination system.

<sup>199</sup> UNHCR annual participatory assessment in 2022 included a focus group discussion held with members of the LGBTIQ Community Centre managed by Insight in Chernivtsi. The report mentions, in particular, the needs of the LGBTIQ community with regard to access to information on humanitarian assistance and LGBTIQ friendly services. UNHCR, *Ukraine Participatory Assessment*, November 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99165>.

<sup>200</sup> Outright interview with Olha Poliakov, by video communication, 14 June 2023.

basic LGBTIQ sensitization trainings to about 30 UNHCR partner service providers. While the efforts expended to secure this grant far outweighed the amount provided, Poliakova nevertheless believes that the partnership is moving in the right direction.

UNHCR officials in Ukraine (who lead the Protection Cluster) have expressed a strong commitment to inclusion, which motivated them to reach out to Gender Stream. According to the Protection Officer for UNHCR in Uzhhorod, “UNHCR has applied an age, gender, and diversity (AGD) approach to its work to ensure equality in decision-making and in the provision of services as well as to create meaningful partnerships. It is very important to make sure our program is designed as inclusive as possible taking into account of different capacities, needs, and exposure to protection risks of persons of all AGD groups.”<sup>201</sup> Her colleague, a UNHCR gender-based violence officer based in Kyiv, when asked about UNHCR’s approaches to meeting the protection needs of LGBTIQ people, noted, generally, that understanding the context and realities of Ukraine was important, as was sensitizing local partners on diversity and equal access to assistance and protection.<sup>202</sup> From UNHCR’s perspective, Gender Stream’s trainings have played an important role in building the capacity of local UNHCR partner organizations to be more attentive to the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals who may seek their services. At the same time, while appreciative of the support, Poliakova would like to see UNHCR more consistently mention LGBTIQ needs in its national and global strategies and to include LGBTIQ organizations in coordination or other meetings where humanitarian priorities are discussed.

**Challenges:** While Poliakova is pleased that UNHCR has been supportive of her organization, Gender Stream remains only one of two LGBTIQ organizations that UNHCR has funded so far in Ukraine.<sup>203</sup> The other, funded in 2022, was Insight, a feminist LGBTQ organization based in Kyiv. Poliakova noted that, in addition to simplifying application processes, UNHCR—and UN organizations, in general—need to improve their sensitivity to working with marginalized communities, perhaps by hiring additional diversity specialists who know the context and realities of being LGBTIQ in Ukraine. And there have been some difficult moments. Poliakova recalled an occasion when a planned meeting with a visiting UN representative had been cut short with her so that the representative could spend more time on other issues that he perceived to be “more important.”<sup>204</sup> Going forward, Poliakova hopes that the engagement of UNHCR and the Protection Cluster with LGBTIQ issues and local LGBTIQ organizations will deepen and move toward longer-term, more comprehensive projects.

Another issue is a lack of disaggregated data. Currently, UNHCR disaggregates data by age and gender, but it does not systematically gather any information on sexual orientation or gender identity of individual beneficiaries. Said the UNHCR gender-based violence officer in Kyiv, “We do not collect specifically on SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity] of individuals. To address the needs of LGBTIQ people, we have to work closely with LGBTIQ organizations and communities. Community-based assessments with LGBTIQ communities are critical to identify the specific needs of their members.”<sup>205</sup> Indeed, they are.

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<sup>201</sup> Outright interview with UNHCR staff members, by video communication, 20 June 2023.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> As of March 2024, UNHCR listed 18 partners on its Ukraine website, none of which were LGBTIQ civil society organizations. UNHCR, “Partners - UNHCR Ukraine,” 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/ua/en/ngo-partners>.

<sup>204</sup> Written response to questionnaire by Olha Poliakova, 12 May 2023.

<sup>205</sup> UNHCR staff members interview. A UNHCR staff member stated that the decision not to collect data on sexual orientation and gender identity was based on safety and confidentiality considerations. UNHCR routinely handles sensitive data regarding persons under its protection, and it was not clear why heightened safety and confidentiality concerns might apply to this information in the Ukrainian context.

## Sphere & ActionAid

—Ukraine

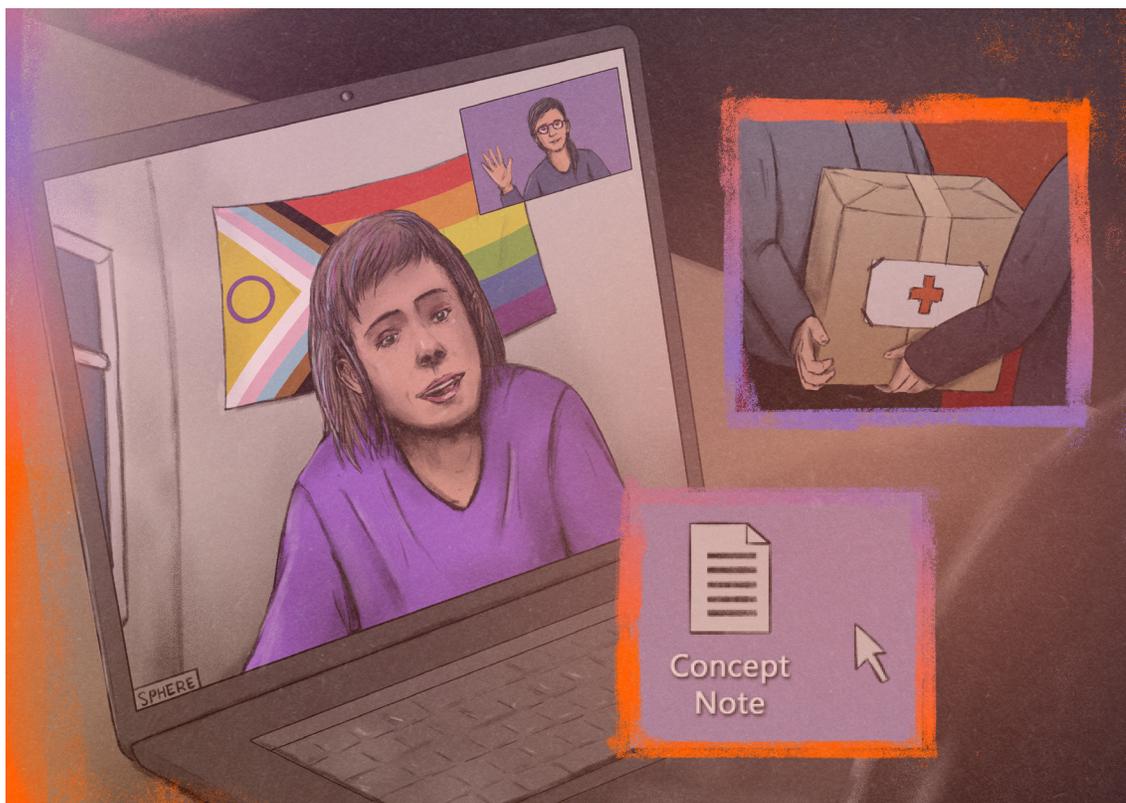
### Continuum Placement



### Featured Question:

- **Question 10: Did your organization provide adequate funding and support to facilitate participation of people with diverse SOGIESC?**

**The Partnership:** ActionAid strives for social, economic, and environmental justice, working primarily on poverty and exclusion issues. In March 2022, just after the full-scale Russian invasion, ActionAid determined that it would like to support specific vulnerable communities in Ukraine, including LGBTQ populations. Atria Mier, ActionAid’s Senior Emergency Manager for Moldova and Ukraine, reached out to Sphere, a Ukrainian feminist and LGBTQ organization based in Kharkiv.



Two weeks after a preliminary meeting over Skype, ActionAid invited Sphere to prepare a concept note. The project focused on providing emergency humanitarian assistance to women and LGBTQ people. ActionAid provided the funding and kept the scope of work flexible, allowing Sphere to prioritize meeting the acute needs of LGBTQ communities as they emerged.

Four months after their first contact, in July 2022, Sphere began implementation. From the start, Sphere’s staff appreciated ActionAid’s flexibility, respect, and understanding regarding the realities of working in war-torn Kharkiv.

**Elements of Success:** For Ruslana Hnatchenko, then the fundraising manager at Sphere, ActionAid had the right approach because, “They (ActionAid) are very open to working with LGBTIQ people, and their staff probably has appropriate training on diversity . . . They have been sensitive towards LGBTIQ people and intersectionality.”<sup>206</sup> Jara Henar, Senior Humanitarian Policy Advisor Ukraine Response at ActionAid, highlighted ActionAid’s commitment to focus on women’s and young people’s leadership, an emphasis on localization, and to ActionAid’s commitment to “change the humanitarian system, bringing down its patriarchal roots.”<sup>207</sup>

ActionAid does not do any direct implementation in Ukraine. Instead, 100 percent of its support goes through local organizations. Henar noted that ActionAid was looking for local organizations that not only experienced additional challenges, such as sex worker-led, young women-led, or LGBTIQ-led groups, but also acted as first responders for their own communities.<sup>208</sup> She added, “They know best what is needed for their populations, and we have the flexibility to meet, vet, and invite them to submit a concept note. We are not proposing a program. They are proposing what they want to do. This is part of our effort to advocate for more flexible funding. We can be a platform that can open international spaces for others who may not have access, including at the UN level.”<sup>209</sup> The needed flexibility that ActionAid champions is essential to enabling local organizations to overcome the current challenges in securing funding and accessing spaces where decisions are being made about humanitarian priorities.

**“They know best what is needed for their populations, and we have the flexibility to meet, vet, and invite them to submit a concept note. We are not proposing a program. They are proposing what they want to do. This is part of our effort to advocate for more flexible funding.”**

*Jara Henar, ActionAid*

Hnatchenko told Outright that ActionAid “trusted us from the beginning and did not overbear us with requirements.”<sup>210</sup> While she also outlined that some humanitarian standards, procedures, and rules could have been introduced sooner to them, at the start of the project, she noted that ActionAid supported them to find solutions. For instance, Hnatchenko stated, “When we realized that there were things that ActionAid expected of their partners that Sphere did not have, such as formalized and comprehensive safeguarding policies or expertise on physical and mental first aid, they offered to conduct training and help us find suitable solutions, to facilitate, for instance, the development of new humanitarian-related policies.”<sup>211</sup> ActionAid staff also continues to forward Sphere different training and funding opportunities, which has been appreciated. For instance, in June 2023, ActionAid approached Sphere to join a consortium of organizations to apply for the next round of pooled funding in Ukraine—funds that Sphere would have difficulty accessing on its own. The June 2023 funding application with the Ukraine Humanitarian Fund was successful and has resulted in the current implementation of a collaborative project between Sphere, ActionAid, People in Need (PIN), and four other Ukrainian partners.

<sup>206</sup> Written response to questionnaire by Ruslana Hnatchenko, 26 May 2023.

<sup>207</sup> Outright interview with Jara Henar, by video communication, 11 June 2023.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Hnatchenko written response questionnaire.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

**Challenges:** Without a doubt, ActionAid has demonstrated commitment to supporting Sphere, other women-led organizations, and Ukraine’s LGBTQ communities more broadly, including at least three other LGBTQ organizations. Yet, ActionAid had not worked in Ukraine before the war. The organization’s headquarters decided to get involved in part due to the larger implications of the war regarding food supply. Lack of specific Ukraine experience led to a few missteps along the way. Hnatchenko described as one challenge “a lack of coordination and adaptability to the local context inside ActionAid’s organization.”<sup>212</sup> For example, at times, Sphere was in contact with over five people from ActionAid simultaneously, unclear about who oversaw which area. None of them spoke Ukrainian, which slowed down the work. In addition, some of the materials that ActionAid sent Sphere were developed in and for very different contexts in Africa and the Middle East. As Hnatchenko observed, “Just because an agency has been engaged in a war or conflict response somewhere in the world before, it does not mean that they have an understanding of the situation in Ukraine. Please, do not assume—ask.”<sup>213</sup> Sphere discussed these challenges with ActionAid directly during the post-project partner monitoring and evaluation phase in June 2023, which was a positive experience.

ActionAid’s funding to Sphere for this project ended in February 2023, but it has since become one of Sphere’s core donors. In October 2023, Sphere and ActionAid signed an agreement for the largest grant in Sphere’s history, which included, among other things, significant funding for Sphere’s new community center for LGBTIQ people in Kharkiv, northeast Ukraine. Henar’s interview echoed this commitment, pointing out that working intersectionally is part of ActionAid’s strategic framework. She stated, “Part of our agenda is trying to change the humanitarian system, so we try to focus on Roma, women, LGBTIQ, IDPs [internally displaced persons], and other excluded groups where decisions are being made about them but not with them.”<sup>214</sup> Her advice to other international NGOs is straightforward: “Build alliances.”<sup>215</sup> For LGBTIQ organizations, she advises, “Not all international organizations are the same. Do not necessarily go with the first international partner but understand what the options are. Know in advance what you want from international partners—present your demands and get what you want.”<sup>216</sup>

**ALLIANCE.GLOBAL & Mercy Corps**  
—Ukraine

**Continuum Placement**



<sup>212</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>213</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>214</sup> Henar interview.  
<sup>215</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

### Featured Question:

- **Question 4: Overall, did the project address the rights, needs, and strengths of people with diverse SOGIESC, as identified through the assessment, gender analysis, and/or monitoring or other sources?**
- **Question 7: Were diverse SOGIESC people/organizations engaged as active contributors to the needs assessment, project design, and proposal?**

**The Partnership:** After receiving an award from the United Kingdom's Foreign Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO) in 2022 for cash and protection activities that prioritize marginalized communities in Ukraine, Mercy Corps started working with Roma communities, older people, and people with disabilities but did not engage with any LGBTIQ organizations. Realizing that this key element was missing in its work, Robert Dolan, Emergency Program Manager at Mercy Corps, undertook a mapping exercise and contacted Andrii Chernyshev, Head of External Communications and Advocacy at ALLIANCE.GLOBAL (AG), a national non-governmental organization that focuses on health and human rights for LGBTIQ+ people in Ukraine.<sup>217</sup> ALLIANCE.GLOBAL's multi-year cooperation with Mercy Corps started in November 2022. The program consists of cash assistance paired with protection activities (e.g., legal services and sheltering) and outreach and information services to increase ALLIANCE.GLOBAL's reach.

The first joint project focused on identifying potential LGBTQ clients and their households to register them for a multi-purpose cash assistance program. Dolan explained that the partners worked within communities to enroll people, while Mercy Corps validated the referrals before moving to the next stage and transferring funds.<sup>218</sup> During this project, Mercy Corps pushed for a paradigm shift with donors and coordination bodies, beyond the traditional understanding of a household as 2.3 members.<sup>219</sup> As Dolan stressed, "Marginalized communities' vulnerabilities are going to look different from the 'average household' in Ukraine. Vulnerable communities look different. It should not be a one-size-fits-all situation."<sup>220</sup> In this regard, Mercy Corps' collaboration with ALLIANCE.GLOBAL was particularly helpful in gaining insights into the needs of LGBTQ households and communicating back to donors and coordination bodies to push for the creation of new inclusive standards that recognize various family structures.

The second project focuses on communities near the front-line, where Mercy Corps financially supports ALLIANCE.GLOBAL's LGBTQ shelters in Dnipro and Kharkiv. The shelters provide living conditions for LGBTQ populations who fled war-torn areas and support them in looking for jobs and permanent housing. Despite the success of the partnership, Chernyshev acknowledged some frustrations in preparing the second iteration.<sup>221</sup> For instance, Chernyshev wanted Mercy Corps to finance the provision of gift certificates for food and hygiene items, which it refused due to concerns that certain modalities of assistance might be duplicative of support provided through other channels. For this second iteration, following ALLIANCE.GLOBAL's input, the program will still support displaced LGBTQ people who live further away from the front-line,

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<sup>217</sup> Outright interview with Robert Dolan, by video communication, 27 June 2023.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> The traditional understanding of a family unit is of a couple who may or may not have a child or children. The 2.3 refers to the average family size according to statistics. Humanitarian assistance is often understood through the 2.3 figure, which may not reflect the reality of contemporary family structures, especially for single-parent families, extended families, and rainbow families.

<sup>220</sup> Dolan interview.

<sup>221</sup> Written response to questionnaire by Andrii Chernyshev, 15 June 2023.



as their needs remain unmet due to discrimination and exclusion. Dolan also stressed the critical importance of the United Kingdom’s support to marginalized populations, including LGBTQ communities.<sup>222</sup> Indeed, having a major funder actively pushing for inclusive implementation can be game-changing.<sup>223</sup>

**Elements of Success:** Despite some early challenges, ALLIANCE.GLOBAL’s partnership with Mercy Corps has been productive. At first, ALLIANCE.GLOBAL had to learn how to stay true to its mission while providing humanitarian assistance, and Mercy Corps had to learn how to understand and design projects specific to LGBTQ needs in Ukraine, rather than reproduce approaches used with general populations. After many meetings, both organizations found common ground. Chernyshev notes, “Of those humanitarian organizations working directly in Ukraine, Mercy Corps was the most open to cooperation with ALLIANCE.GLOBAL.”<sup>224</sup>

Chernyshev stressed Mercy Corps’ commitment to taking on LGBTQ issues: “The political will in this organization was quite strong, partly because this NGO employs people friendly to LGBTQ people.”<sup>225</sup> He added, “With our help, our humanitarian partners, such as Mercy Corps, are good at demonstrating a gender-sensitive approach [and are sensitive to] age, disability, and health status in their work.”<sup>226</sup> The partnership has allowed both organizations to grow. For example, ALLIANCE.GLOBAL provided Mercy Corps with data on the realities of LGBTQ communities in Ukraine while Mercy Corps provided formal training to ALLIANCE.GLOBAL on cash registration and how to identify vulnerable households.

<sup>222</sup> Dolan interview.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Chernyshev written response questionnaire.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

As Dolan stated, “ALLIANCE.GLOBAL is very essential to needs assessment and mapping work, in understanding that vulnerability is going to look different community by community. AG still provides information about what they are learning that influences Mercy Corps and FCDO.”<sup>227</sup> Mercy Corps also suggested that ALLIANCE.GLOBAL develop separate protocols and mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence, including domestic violence, in its shelters. Collaboration was nurtured by formal monthly progress review meetings, monthly reports highlighting needs and challenges, and since March 2023, a quarterly partners roundtable in which all of Mercy Corps’ partners discuss their main advocacy points, including those working with the elderly, people with disabilities, Roma populations, and African students. Dolan highlighted how crucial it is to have a living approach to cycles of cash assistance, especially for cash registration, so it can be responsive to ever-changing needs.<sup>228</sup>

As Dolan expresses, the success of a strong partnership depends on “transparency, learning from each other, ensuring that the benefits are mutual, and being an advocate for inclusive change.”<sup>229</sup>

## Recommendations

- 1. Humanitarian organizations and international donors should simplify and facilitate administrative processes.** LGBTIQ organizations are often volunteer-led and comprise informal networks that do not necessarily have the financial structures required by humanitarian organizations and mechanisms. Nevertheless, in crises, these organizations become first responders. Donors must ensure that grant and funding applications are accessible and that administrative processes do not unnecessarily stall the release of critical support so that LGBTIQ groups can provide timely support in emergencies. The need for formal recognition as a non-governmental organization, institutionalized policies, codes of conduct, and access to a lawyer can cause obstacles for community organizations that otherwise have the sufficient capacity and expertise to assist their communities.
- 2. Where appropriate, humanitarian agencies should create bridges between local LGBTIQ organizations and national and international structures that provide other opportunities for assistance.** Although many LGBTIQ organizations must become front-line service providers for their communities during emergencies, most are unfamiliar with the architecture of the humanitarian system. As a result, they may miss opportunities for funding, lack access to spaces where they can advocate for their communities, or be excluded from forums where critical information is shared or priorities are set. This may be the result of intentional marginalization and discrimination, or simply that LGBTIQ organizations are not used to operating within the humanitarian ecosystem. Humanitarian organizations should support LGBTIQ organizations to build alliances and identify different entry points to decision-making structures.

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<sup>227</sup> Dolan interview.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

**3. Humanitarian organizations should seek to understand the specific realities and experiences in providing humanitarian assistance for LGBTIQ organizations in different contexts, and, where feasible, generate new data that can be used in providing services for LGBTIQ populations.**

When planning and monitoring programs, collecting intersectional data on sex, gender identity, age, disability, or other relevant markers is essential for understanding the specific realities, protection needs, risks, and potential barriers to access facing a given population. As part of this work, humanitarian organizations should hire and train experts who know the country's context, speak relevant local languages, and are well-versed in local diversity and LGBTIQ work in a specific country or region. Humanitarian organizations should document cases of SOGIESC-based exclusion or discrimination within humanitarian action, so that such instances can be immediately addressed.

**5.5. REVISING AN UNSUSTAINABLE APPROACH TO LGBTIQ ENGAGEMENT IN LEBANON**

**The Queer Coordination Platform,  
Helem & International Organisations**

—Lebanon

**Continuum Placement**



**Featured Question:**

- **Question 11: Did your organization provide adequate funding and support to facilitate participation of people with diverse-SOGIESC?**

**The Context:** In recent years, Lebanon has faced a series of compounding humanitarian crises, including a massive influx of refugees from Syria, the COVID-19 pandemic, a crippling economic crisis, and the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Living at the margins of society in an environment where political elites are using religious conservatism and the politicization of homophobia as tools, LGBTIQ people are deeply impacted by Lebanon's deteriorating situation.<sup>230</sup> Due to sensitivities in Lebanon and at our interviewees' request, this case study does not specifically name humanitarian organizations involved. We also use pseudonyms for LGBTIQ organizations and one of the individuals interviewed.

Reeling from an economic and financial crisis that the World Bank described in 2021 as "likely to rank in the top 10, possibly top 3, most severe crises episodes globally since the

<sup>230</sup> Emily Lewis, "Coronavirus: Lebanon's LGBT+ Community is Locked Down and Unprotected," *The New Arab*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/coronavirus-lebanons-lgbt-community-locked-down-and-unprotected>.

mid-nineteenth century," Lebanon's economy has been derailed for nearly four years.<sup>231</sup> The combination of high inflation, currency devaluation, tens of thousands of job losses, and the evaporation of people's life savings has adversely impacted rights and driven over 80 percent of the population into multidimensional poverty.<sup>232</sup> Social assistance programs are "almost non-existent."<sup>233</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic and the multiple lockdowns and curfews also exacerbated the economic hardship.<sup>234</sup>

Then, on 4 August 2020, a devastating explosion at the Beirut port killed at least 218 people, injured more than 7,000 others, and destroyed the neighborhoods of Mar Mikhael, Karantina, and Gemmayze. These neighborhoods were once hubs for Beirut's LGBTQ community.<sup>235</sup> The explosion thus left many LGBTQ people homeless, and vital lifelines, such as drop-in centers, queer-friendly bars and cafes, and LGBTIQ organizations' offices, were reduced to rubble.<sup>236</sup>



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<sup>231</sup> The World Bank, "Lebanon Sinking Into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction," 1 June 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>.

<sup>232</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Events of 2022," in *World Report 2023*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon>.

<sup>233</sup> CARE Lebanon, "Lebanon: Acute Economic Crisis Forces Families to Skip Meals," 3 March 2023, <https://www.care-international.org/news/lebanon-acute-economic-crisis-forces-families-skip-meals>.

<sup>234</sup> Will Todman and Anna McAffrey, "Navigating Collapse in Lebanon's Covid-19 Response," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 13 April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/navigating-collapse-lebanons-covid-19-response>.

<sup>235</sup> Andrea Lopez-Tomas, "Lebanese LGBT Community Fights to Keep Safe Spaces," *Al-Monitor*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/lebanese-lgbt-community-fights-keep-safe-spaces>.

<sup>236</sup> Ban Barkawi, "Beirut Blast Destroys Vital Lifeline for LGBT+ Lebanese," Reuters, 12 August 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-lgbt-aid-idUSL8N2FD3LA>.

These crises are happening against a backdrop of increased discrimination and government crackdowns targeting LGBTIQ people. Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code criminalizes sexual relations “contradicting the laws of nature,” and is used as a basis to arrest LGBTIQ people—although, in 2018, a district court of appeal issued a landmark ruling that consensual same-sex relations were not unlawful.<sup>237</sup> In spite of the court’s ruling, Lebanese political and religious leaders, including the Minister of Interior, have made multiple public declarations against LGBTIQ-related activities, inciting violence against LGBTIQ individuals, and proposing to criminalize homosexuality more directly.<sup>238</sup> LGBTIQ activists are frequently harassed, and public Pride events have been shut down due to safety issues.<sup>239</sup> For example, in 2018, the Pride event organizer was arrested the night before the celebrations and forced to cancel the event, and in 2019, organizers called off the event because they could not guarantee the safety of participants.<sup>240</sup>

Further, on 23 August 2023, members of Jnoud El-Rab—a far-right Christian group—violently raided a LGBTIQ-friendly bar in Beirut, destroying furniture and beating up customers.<sup>241</sup> Although the Internal Security Forces arrived at the scene, they did not stop the attack, failed to arrest any of the assailants, attempted to identify who in the bar was LGBTIQ, and have not conducted further investigations.<sup>242</sup> In September 2023, other attackers stormed an inclusive sexual health center in Tripoli, north Lebanon, forcing it to shut down because it had LGBTIQ-specific programming.<sup>243</sup> These attacks reflect the rising conservatism and shrinking space and services for sexual and reproductive health in the country.<sup>244</sup> According to Tarek Zeidan, former executive director of the Lebanese LGBTIQIA+ advocacy organization Helem, “A rising anti-gender movement in the region scapegoats diverse-SOGIESC communities [and] blames them for economic and social anxieties.”<sup>245</sup> Indeed, analysts and activists have drawn attention to the timing of the government’s announcement of unpopular policy decisions with instances of increased anti-LGBTIQ rhetoric.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Lebanon: Same-Sex Relations Not Illegal,” 19 July 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/19/lebanon-same-sex-relations-not-illegal>.

<sup>238</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Lebanon: Unlawful Crackdown on LGBTI Gatherings,” 4 July 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/04/lebanon-unlawful-crackdown-lgbti-gatherings>; Emmanuel Haddad, “Lebanon’s LGBTIQ+ Community Targeted from Every Direction,” *L’Orient Today*, 14 August 2023, <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1346389/lebanons-lgbtq-community-targeted-from-every-direction.html>.

<sup>239</sup> AFP, “‘Scary to be Queer’: Lebanon Cracks Down on LGBTIQ Rights,” *France 24*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220707-scary-to-be-queer-lebanon-cracks-down-on-lgbtq-rights>.

<sup>240</sup> Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Crackdown on Beirut Pride an ‘Outrageous Attempt To Deny Human Rights of LGBTI People,’” 17 May 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/lebanoncrackdown-on-beirut-pride-an-outrageous-attempt-to-deny-human-rights-of-lgbti-people/>; Rachel Savage, “Beirut Pride Organizers Cancel Opening Event After Threats,” *Reuters*, 27 September 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBNIWC01A/>.

<sup>241</sup> Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Attack on LGBTI Bar Another ‘Ominous Sign’ of Deteriorating Rights Situation,” 24 August 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/lebanon-attack-on-lgbti-bar-another-ominous-sign-of-deteriorating-rights-situation/>.

<sup>242</sup> Edge Effect and Outright interview with Fadi Mezher, Queer Co-ordination Platform, 4 October 2023. At the request of the participant, we are using a pseudonym.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> Megan Daigle, Alexandra Spencer, Jasmin Lilian Diab, Bechara Samneh, and Aida Afandi, *Sex, Health and Rights in Displacement and Humanitarian Response: Crises Upon Crises in Lebanon and Beyond*, ODI, 5 October 2023, <https://odi.org/en/publications/sex-health-and-rights-in-displacement-and-humanitarian-response-crises-upon-crises-in-lebanon-and-beyond>.

<sup>245</sup> Email correspondence from Tarek Zeidan to Outright, 8 January 2024.

<sup>246</sup> Dana Hourany, “The Government’s Favourite Scapegoat,” *Now Lebanon*, 4 July 2022, <https://nowlebanon.com/the-governments-favorite-scapegoat>.



These hateful campaigns against LGBTIQ people have led to a form of “rainbow panic” whereby religious and political leaders scapegoat as evil and perverse anything that can be remotely linked to sexual and gender diversity. For humanitarian organizations working in Lebanon, such campaigns complicated the work that some had quietly started with LGBTIQ civil society, mostly in the form of civil society strengthening, the provision of basic needs to vulnerable LGBTIQ people, and health services. With tensions rising, some humanitarian organizations started to self-censor and cancel workshops, fundraising events, and community-building events, fearing retaliation by police, religious organizations, or society at large.<sup>247</sup>

In light of these and other threats on freedom of expression, assembly, and association, more than 24 civil society organizations came together on 30 September 2023 to denounce the increasing oppression and to demand the protection of personal and political freedoms.<sup>248</sup> Dozens of attackers on motorcycles physically assaulted the demonstrators and shouted homophobic slurs at them, with Internal Security Forces officers present at the scene failing to intervene.<sup>249</sup>

**Establishment of the Queer Coordination Platform:** Building off the momentum of Lebanese LGBTIQ organizations and motivated actors within international organizations, in July 2021, two major humanitarian organizations (who wish to remain anonymous) joined forces to launch the Queer Coordination Platform (QCP, a pseudonym), a working group aimed at ensuring greater inclusion of LGBTIQ+ communities within humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding work. With a membership spanning 38 national and international organizations

<sup>247</sup> Mezher interview.

<sup>248</sup> Amnesty International, “Lebanon: Investigate Assault on Freedom March Protesters,” 3 October 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/lebanon-investigate-assault-on-freedom-march-protesters>.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

by the end of 2021—including activist and civil society organizations, community service provision organizations, and humanitarian and development actors—the QCP focuses on coordination, information-sharing, technical assistance, capacity-building, and advocacy within the development and humanitarian sector. In a context where safe spaces for LGBTIQ groups to convene and organize have been shrinking, the support of major agencies has been a critical factor in allowing Lebanese LGBTIQ organizations to continue to serve their communities by providing physical safe spaces where they can meet and collaborate. The platform also provides LGBTIQ groups opportunities to engage with the United Nations and international non-governmental organizations sectors’ plans and humanitarian networks that guide crisis responses in Lebanon. Local LGBTIQ activist Fadi Mezher, a co-chair and founding member of the QCP, describes the establishment of the platform as having a significant impact on LGBTIQ organizing.<sup>250</sup>

“It’s the first time that LGBTIQ organizations and members of the humanitarianism, development, and peacebuilding nexus are sitting at the same table to strategize for LGBTIQ humanitarian and development responses,” explained Mezher.<sup>251</sup> “Queer issues have often been restricted to the [gender-based violence] sector, whereas the needs of the community obviously go beyond this.” Mezher explained that the QCP has been able to advance visibility and mainstreaming of LGBTIQ issues outside of issues of violence and discrimination, so that humanitarian actors were now considering LGBTIQ inclusion within work related to health, water, sanitation and hygiene, shelter, basic assistance, and food security.

Some of QCP’s most constructive outcomes include the enhancement of coordination and dialogue among different stakeholders about the needs of LGBTIQ communities; the promotion of funding opportunities, and the facilitation of partnerships among Lebanese organizations, international actors, and donors. Central to these successes are the legitimization and infrastructural strength extended by the participation of major UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations, and donor embassies. This has resulted in LGBTIQ organizations receiving critical funds to continue their operations, as well as enabling them to provide cash and housing assistance to vulnerable community members. The platform also allows civil society organizations to provide input on calls for proposals to ensure that funding opportunities are relevant to LGBTIQ realities and provides opportunities for LGBTIQ organizations to pitch to humanitarian actors the needs of their communities. In an increasingly hostile setting, LGBTIQ voices from eight participating Lebanese LGBTIQ organizations have been embedded at the center of the group’s operations.

“The QCP follows the lead of local organizations when it comes to safety and security,” explained Mezher.<sup>252</sup> “Any potential member of the Task Force—including INGOs—needs to

**“It’s the first time that LGBTIQ organisations and members of the HDP nexus are sitting at the same table to strategize for diverse-SOGIESC humanitarian and development responses.”**

*Fadi Mezher, QCP*

**“Queer issues have often been restricted to the GBV sector, whereas the needs of the community obviously go beyond this... the QCP has been able to advance visibility and mainstreaming of LGBTIQ issues beyond the GBV sector, to include health, WASH, shelter, basic assistance, and food security.”**

*Fadi Mezher, QCP*

<sup>250</sup> Mezher interview.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

be vetted by the co-chairs and sub-committee of local LGBTIQ organizations in order to be admitted as a member.”

Nevertheless, as with any mechanism in its early stages, Mezher pointed out that there are structural challenges and weaknesses that are still being worked through. The challenges of developing a unified agenda with clear objectives and well-defined roles and responsibilities of QCP members has somewhat hampered organizational commitment, productivity, and active participation.<sup>253</sup> Leadership changes among participating international non-governmental organizations have demonstrated that genuine interest and commitment from their side is somewhat dependent on how engaged the designated focal point is—rather than being seen as a formal and irreversible mandate of the relevant agencies. Mezher also pointed out that the use of English as a working language curtailed some members’ participation.

Despite these challenges and concerns about LGBTIQ organizations and activists becoming fatigued and “burning out” in Lebanon’s increasingly hostile environment, Mezher sees the continuation of the QCP as critical to sustaining Lebanon’s LGBTIQ movement.<sup>254</sup>

However, the limitations of the QCP in its start-up phase posed challenges in terms of streamlining the different activities of its members. This resulted in much of the burden of responding to the humanitarian crisis among LGBTIQ communities falling upon one well-established organization, Helem, which proved to be unsustainable.

**Sustainable Engagement with LGBTIQ Organizations and the Risk of Fatigue:** Tarek Zeidan knows the feeling of “burn-out” well. Founded in 2001, Helem, which means “dream” in Arabic, was the first organization to champion LGBTIQ rights in the Middle East and North Africa region. Since its inception, the organization has sought to provide protection and safety for individuals with diverse SOGIESC by creating safe spaces, fostering knowledge creation and access to information, providing legal representation, advocating for legal and policy reforms, and supporting the community in emergency situations. However, the turbulent events of Lebanon’s recent history found Helem moving away from its usual civil and political advocacy toward meeting the immediate survival needs of Lebanon’s LGBTIQ communities. In Zeidan’s words, “We woke up one day to find our currency devalued, our city blown up in the middle of a pandemic, and a humanitarian crisis.”<sup>255</sup>

To respond to the massive uptick in crisis response needs, Helem expanded its scope of action to include housing, livelihoods, and access to mental and physical health care. This was achieved through different streams of funding that humanitarian organizations provided specifically for LGBTIQ populations; however, donors often earmarked such funding to benefit specific sub-identities, such as women or refugees, even though acute needs existed across all LGBTIQ populations in Lebanon. Restrictions on how funding could be used thus meant Helem was unable to meet the mounting needs of all of its constituents, and, as a result, Helem’s team bore the brunt of community frustration due to perceptions that the organization was actively withholding support. Zeidan explained how Helem’s relationships with different facets of the LGBTIQ community were “devastated,” impacting the organization’s ability to pursue its foundational mandate of social and political advocacy—which felt largely

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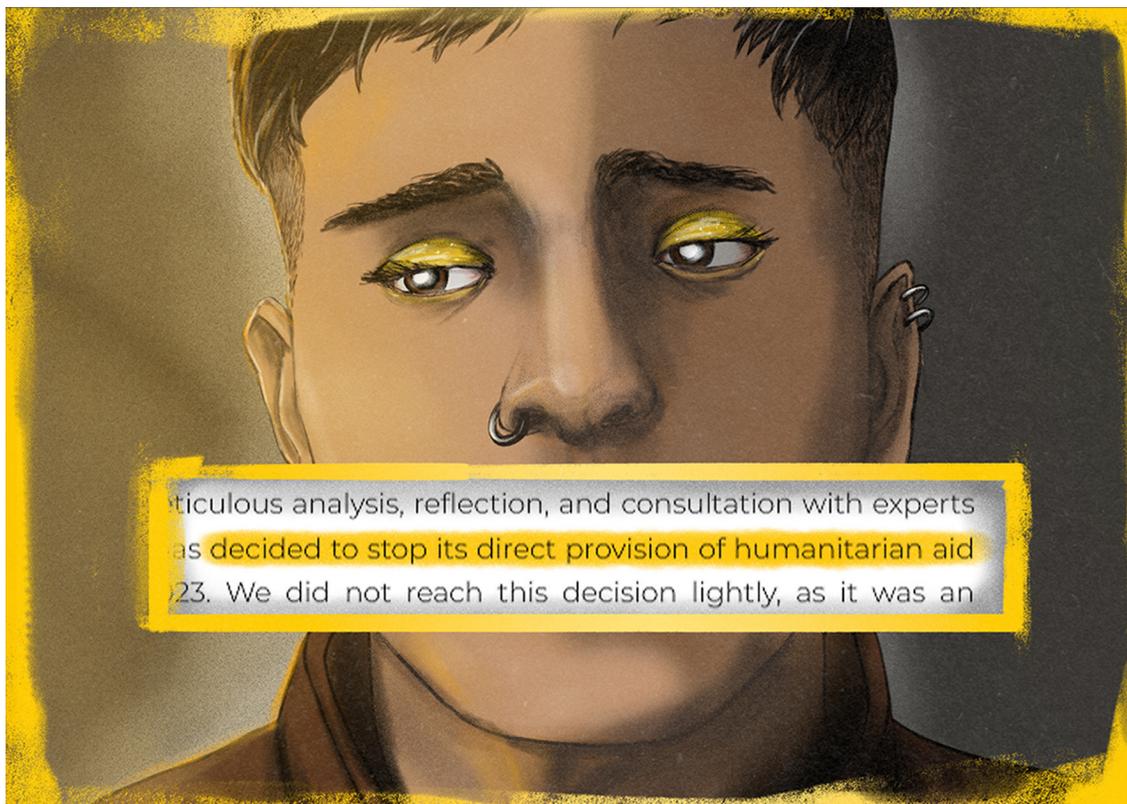
<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Edge Effect and Outright Interview with Tarek Zeidan, by video communication, 22 May 2023.

derailed by the pivot towards humanitarian service provision.<sup>256</sup> With Helem becoming known as *the* service provider for LGBTIQ populations, mainstream humanitarian assistance service providers and partners began automatically referring LGBTIQ people to Helem for assistance rather than assisting them, without adequate coordination or communication with Helem. As such, Helem found itself receiving applications and requests for support from thousands of vulnerable LGBTIQ people for which they had neither the financial nor human resources—with the organization’s four case workers sometimes handling as many as 125 active cases at one time.<sup>257</sup> With burnout mounting among its overworked employees, finding case workers who were qualified to work with LGBTIQ populations became another concern. Amidst all of this, Helem was experiencing mounting harassment and attacks from conservative political actors.

The situation eventually became untenable. In January 2023, Helem formally withdrew from humanitarian service provision—“We gave the work back,” describes Zeidan—sending ripples throughout the humanitarian sector.<sup>258</sup> At a time when Lebanon’s crises were compounding, Helem’s decision sounded an alarm that the humanitarian community’s approach to inclusion was failing LGBTIQ communities by exhausting the civil society organizations upon which they relied.



In Zeidan’s eyes, Helem’s experience illustrates what happens when responsibility for LGBTIQ populations is put squarely in the hands of LGBTIQ organizations. “*Nothing about us without us*” doesn’t mean we do everything,” he reflected.<sup>259</sup> This case study amplifies the importance of ensuring that approaches to LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian efforts are deeply-informed

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Edge Effect interview with Tarek Zeidan, by video communication, 8 March 2024.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

by the sociocultural and political context. As Zeidan described, in Lebanon, an approach that relinquishes all interactions and service provision for LGBTIQ populations solely to LGBTIQ organizations meant that “[anti-LGBTQ] and hesitant orgs [could] completely wash their hands of the mandate of humanity and say ‘*We will not extend our services to queer people as there is a queer organization to do that.*’”<sup>260</sup> The driving argument is that while there are many instances where LGBTIQ organizations are best placed to lead specific services and outreach to their communities (such as sexual health services), mainstream humanitarian service providers need to adapt their programming to meet, at minimum, the *basic* needs of LGBTIQ populations, such as cash, food, and shelter assistance. Zeidan argues that in a context like Lebanon, channeling LGBTIQ service provision and assistance purely through LGBTIQ organizations reinforces the marginalization of these community members—resulting in situations, for example, where a women’s shelter refuses entry to a transgender woman, justifying the discriminatory treatment on the grounds that her needs should be provided for by an LGBTIQ specific service.

The story in Lebanon highlights how critical it is for humanitarian actors to take into account the wider socio-cultural realities when devising humanitarian programming in specific contexts. In spite of both increasing economic hardship and a worrying backlash against LGBTIQ rights, the QCP presents a beacon of progress towards a more inclusive humanitarian sector in Lebanon, fostering much-needed coordination and communication. Nevertheless, Helem’s decision to “give work back” to mainstream humanitarian service providers reveals an issue of overburdening LGBTIQ organizations with being the sole or primary assistance provider for their communities.

In Zeidan’s eyes, if LGBTIQ organizations become the only means of LGBTIQ service provision, then the system perpetuates a status quo where mainstream organizations will never be required to adapt their policies, procedures, and working cultures to take into account the realities of LGBTIQ populations. With Helem no longer willing to play a role in humanitarian service provision, the handful of agencies that had been directly funding Helem found themselves needing to strengthen existing partnerships and establish new ones to meet the gap. It also underscored the importance of more proactive and visible efforts to improve the LGBTIQ sensitivity of programs covering the general population. This points to a need for the international community to be wary of fatiguing LGBTIQ organizations, and to establish multiple pathways and partnerships so that humanitarian support for LGBTIQ populations can be sustained.

## Recommendations

- 1. Humanitarian agencies should proactively open space for LGBTIQ-specific coordination and formally bring LGBTIQ organizations into the humanitarian ecosystem.** Mechanisms such as task forces or working groups provide opportunities for information-sharing, joint learning, and synergized approaches to inclusive programming and can link LGBTIQ organizations to potential funding opportunities. The success of these networks, however, relies on clear objectives, strong leadership, and well-defined roles and responsibilities among their members. Carefully considering how decision-making power is shared within the group is also critical.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

**2. While partnering with LGBTIQ organizations during humanitarian crises is essential, so too is improving LGBTIQ sensitivity within mainstream responses and with the local partners of international organizations.** While LGBTIQ organizations are the best placed to advocate for the needs of their communities, assuming the organization has the capacity to do any or all work related to LGBTIQ people may risk overburdening and exhausting organizations that may have extremely limited financial and human resources. Humanitarian work can pull them away from other mandates that are critical to their communities, such as social, political, and legal advocacy. Humanitarian organizations must learn how best to operate with and alongside LGBTIQ groups in ways that harmonize the strengths and capacities of both.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

# 06 Conclusion and Recommendations

Genuine and meaningful LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian action takes time, resources, and commitment.

A sincere commitment to humanitarian principles compels action toward improving outcomes for all people, including LGBTIQ populations within emergencies. All actors within the humanitarian ecosystem have a role in generating transformative change—from headquarters offices far from crisis settings, to the country teams designing and implementing responses, to the local organizations directly engaging with vulnerable communities.

Transformative change requires embedding LGBTIQ sensitivity as a throughline—including as part of organizational mandates and strategies, intervention design and implementation, conversations with donors, development of partnerships, and staff selection and internal organizational policies. For each of these actions, organizations must establish mechanisms to ensure accountability and determine if inclusive values are genuinely being practiced—and if not, they must be prepared to shift gears to ensure better outcomes for LGBTIQ populations, as well as other marginalized or under-served people.

This report has demonstrated that LGBTIQ inclusion within humanitarian action is not only an imperative but that it can no longer be considered “too hard” to achieve. We conclude with following overarching recommendations for humanitarian practitioners and donors to consider. These are aligned with the analytical categories that have been used throughout this report.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN PRACTITIONERS

### VISION

- 1. Nurture political will at the country level.** International humanitarian organizations are complex, and the contexts in which they work are diverse. As such, there will always be friction in embedding a top-down, systematized approach to LGBTIQ inclusion across an organization. These institutional challenges, however, should not impede momentum and action in contexts where staff are pushing for more inclusive interventions. Investing in teams that are “ready” to implement LGBTIQ-sensitive responses results in better outcomes for vulnerable populations and generates key lessons for future programming, as highlighted in the Colombia case study. Country-based actions may build confidence across the organization that LGBTIQ-inclusive approaches are achievable.
- 2. Change must be documented and institutionalized through organizational policies, practices, investments, and learning initiatives.** Individual champions often drive LGBTIQ inclusion within humanitarian organizations, and most will be shouldering these advocacy roles on top of their existing responsibilities. However, no matter how competent and passionate, individuals cannot drive sustainable and transformative change alone. These efforts require institutionalized investment and support. One finding emerging from this research is that dedicating funding and staff to work on LGBTIQ inclusion is critical for ensuring LGBTIQ populations are appropriately considered in humanitarian action.
- 3. Organizations should pursue formal partnerships with LGBTIQ organizations whenever possible.** Local and national LGBTIQ organizations and advocates will always be best placed to determine the needs and priorities of their communities as part of crisis response. Sustained consultative and remunerative partnerships will result in the best outcomes for LGBTIQ populations. There are, of course, contexts in which formal partnerships may be difficult to establish—whether due to unsafe or hostile environments that force LGBTIQ organizations underground, the inability of LGBTIQ organizations to legally register, or lack of sufficient financial or administrative capacity to absorb international funding. Other options may be considered in these circumstances, such as including LGBTIQ organizations in broader localization efforts, inviting representatives to join formal or informal working groups, or using trusted intermediary local or regional organizations or individual consultants to reach hidden populations. The lack of visible LGBTIQ organizing does not mean that LGBTIQ people and communities do not exist.

### ENGAGEMENT

- 4. Place trust, dignity, and respect at the heart of all partnerships and engagements with local LGBTIQ communities.** To ensure that the humanitarian sector does not reinforce or generate new forms of discrimination and harm, humanitarian actors must approach relationship-building with LGBTIQ organizations with sensitivity and commitment to safety, security, and confidentiality that reflects local knowledge. LGBTIQ organizations are best placed to determine the risks, priorities, strategies for ensuring safety, and means of reaching their communities. By necessity, many LGBTIQ organizations operate covertly and communicate and distribute goods and services through informal networks, which can look very different from the more structured and documented operations of other organizations. Humanitarian actors must be flexible and adaptable, ensuring that they respect how LGBTIQ organizations and networks operate to remain safe and effective, rather than

deciding unilaterally how risks should be mitigated. Working with LGBTIQ organizations and networks can and should be as much of a learning process for the humanitarian sector as it is an opportunity to strengthen small organizations.

**5. Recognize diversity within LGBTIQ populations and find a balance between targeted LGBTIQ programming and sensitizing mainstream programming to meet LGBTIQ needs.**

The LGBTIQ umbrella captures a broad array of identities and experiences that may inhibit or enhance visibility, access to services, and trust in institutions. The needs, preferences, and capabilities of individuals will be informed by the intersecting components of their identity. For example, the best ways to reach lesbian women will be different for gay men. The needs of a transgender person will differ from those of a cisgender person. Meeting the needs of an intersex person, often completely overlooked, may require an entirely different set of approaches. Similarly, an individual’s characteristics as a migrant, a sex worker, a parent, as living with HIV or a chronic illness, or a person with a disability—or any combination of these identities—will shape their experience of the world and the assistance they may require. Not all LGBTIQ organizations will reach—or should have to reach—all LGBTIQ people in need. Ensuring that mainstream assistance is safe and accessible for people regardless of their SOGIESC is critical to meeting humanitarian principles. Additionally, relying solely on LGBTIQ organizations to meet the humanitarian needs of their communities risks fatiguing these organizations, particularly if their work is not adequately funded, as highlighted in our case study on Lebanon. Taking vulnerable LGBTIQ people out of the “too hard” basket requires shouldering responsibility for inclusive responsiveness alongside LGBTIQ organizations.

**6. Ensure that training on LGBTIQ inclusion focuses on capacity-building that is tied to tangible programmatic and organizational change and, where possible, engages LGBTIQ organizations as facilitators.**

General awareness-raising training can be a good way to begin conversations, but if learning objectives and activities are not oriented toward identifying *practical* improvements to intervention design, implementation, and evaluation, the training is unlikely to result in meaningful outcomes. In the country or crisis context, engaging LGBTIQ organizations to advise on training content and, if they have the skills, to facilitate training, will ensure that the training is relevant and informed by LGBTIQ people’s lived realities—with the bonus of building stronger relationships and trust between humanitarian organizations and local LGBTIQ organizations. Inclusivity training will feel tokenistic if the organization does not dedicate sufficient time and resources or lacks clear buy-in and participation from senior leadership.

## DESIGN

**7. LGBTIQ needs and experiences should be an automatic consideration within the needs assessments and context analyses that inform humanitarian interventions.**

Research and analysis, sometimes ad hoc and sometimes institutionally backed (such as the *Humanitarian Needs Overviews* and *Humanitarian Response Plans* produced by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), form the backbone of actions and resource distribution within humanitarian activities. While these types of analyses have increasingly considered different vulnerabilities faced by groups due to specific individual characteristics (such as gender, age, and disability), LGBTIQ people are rarely meaningfully considered. This is concerning, given that the places where the most significant amount of humanitarian aid is channeled are also largely contexts where LGBTIQ people face

acute forms of legal and cultural discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Humanitarian actors should comprehensively research the contextual factors that may result in greater vulnerabilities for LGBTIQ populations in crisis settings—not simply as a tick-box exercise, but in genuine partnership with local expertise as much as possible.

- 8. Humanitarian actors should develop or sponsor the development of guidelines and toolkits for LGBTIQ inclusion in humanitarian activities in consultation with LGBTIQ specialists and communities.** Implementing systematized approaches to LGBTIQ inclusion across a complex array of legal and cultural contexts presents obvious challenges for humanitarian organizations. Nevertheless, as stated previously, a lack of readiness in some contexts should not impede momentum and energy in other settings. Ad hoc products could be specific to a country or region, address a particular issue or sector (such as water, sanitation, and hygiene or cash provision), or provide guidance to specific audiences (such as medical service providers or emergency shelter intake staff). These products should be developed in collaboration with relevant LGBTIQ experts and in consultation with local LGBTIQ communities. While having an immediate practical benefit in the contexts in which they are intended to be used, the application of guidelines and toolkits in one setting may also inspire adaptation and testing in other settings, which can help reinforce an institutional vision for LGBTIQ inclusion without imposing a top-down mandate. When transferring knowledge and frameworks that have been used in other settings, practitioners need to ensure that there is an adequate process of re-contextualization in consultation with local communities—what was successful in one context cannot be assumed to be entirely transferrable to another setting.
- 9. Be comfortable operating with “imperfect” data sets when it comes to assisting LGBTIQ populations.** Population data sets are, of course, integral to designing, implementing, and evaluating humanitarian activities. Given that LGBTIQ people may conceal their identities or defy the rigid binary categories of identification within standardized collection tools, collecting precise data concerning LGBTIQ populations presents a range of challenges. Developing methods to collect and disaggregate data based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics is important and will assist in developing more targeted programming. Deciding not to work directly with LGBTIQ populations simply because data are lacking reinforces invisibility and vulnerability. Fine-tuning and experimenting with LGBTIQ-sensitive data collection approaches that are safe and secure should be pursued where possible, but incomplete data should not be a barrier to action.

## ENVIRONMENT

- 10. Humanitarian organizations should ensure that internal human resources policies and training directly address non-discrimination based on SOGIESC.** This may seem simple, but it is an essential component of demonstrating organizational commitment to the inclusion of LGBTIQ people. More basic approaches will involve an explicit non-discrimination policy and references to LGBTIQ inclusion within core administrative documents and organizational policies, while transformative approaches will embed LGBTIQ sensitivity as a throughline with onboarding training—as is common, for example, for reinforcing commitment to inclusion of women and girls.
- 11. SOGIESC sensitivity should be standardized within community-facing policies such as protection from sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (PSEAH) and protection policies.** LGBTIQ people face unique vulnerabilities to violence and other forms of abuse,

as well as distinct challenges in reporting such incidents. The humanitarian sector’s policies and processes must be equipped to address and mitigate incidents that involve LGBTIQ people. These should be developed in consultation with LGBTIQ experts at the country level, considering specific contextual barriers and, where feasible, seeking to make linkages and identify referral pathways with LGBTIQ organizations.

**12. Internal staff initiatives to increase attention to LGBTIQ issues should be nurtured.** This can take many forms—such as employee resource groups, acknowledging global days of importance to LGBTIQ communities, or establishing informal connections with local LGBTIQ community groups. Often, internal initiatives can develop into meaningful conversations and opportunities within programming. These initiatives should have institutional approval where appropriate, but the extent to which senior management or leadership should be involved will depend upon the specific initiative. In some cases, stringent oversight may discourage participation, such as in an Employee Resource Group. In other circumstances, it can powerfully signal an organizational commitment to inclusivity, such as the acknowledgment of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex-phobia, and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT, 17 May), International Transgender Day of Visibility (31 March), International Human Rights Day (10 December), or Pride months.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS

- 1. Proactively enter into open conversations with implementing partners about LGBTIQ inclusion.** Inaction on LGBTIQ inclusion among humanitarian organizations can sometimes be attributed to a cyclical and self-perpetuating dynamic whereby fund recipients say they are unable to implement agendas that are not explicitly endorsed by donors, and where donors say that implementing partners are not requesting funds for LGBTIQ inclusion activities. Acknowledging the donor-recipient power dynamic, we urge donors to enter practical and transparent conversations with implementing partners that are not characterized as additional demands but, instead, are framed as questions about what additional funding and support would be required to make progress on LGBTIQ inclusion at that level. That being said, humanitarian agencies should begin their work on LGBTIQ inclusion regardless of whether they secure dedicated funds.
- 2. Fund LGBTIQ inclusion to allow meaningful change to happen.** Frustrations build between donors and primary fund recipients when new inclusion activities feel vague or appear to be tacked onto the end of a long list of expectations—without being reflected in the funding received. Committing to LGBTIQ inclusion should include funding for dedicated staff positions and consultants, undertaking programmatic reviews to identify gaps and opportunities, commissioning needs assessments or developing guidelines and training for humanitarian implementers, strengthening the capacity of national or local LGBTIQ organizations, and financing new activities that target LGBTIQ populations. For these to become realities, dedicated funding streams need to be available.
- 3. Be comfortable with the reality that outcomes for LGBTIQ inclusion can be tricky to measure.** Data collection for LGBTIQ populations is inherently challenging, and tangible impact can be difficult for humanitarian implementers to demonstrate. Improving and encouraging LGBTIQ-sensitive data collection is important, but it should not be the key decisive factor in allocation decisions. Transformative change takes time, and progress may not be reflected in data.

- 4. Be flexible when it comes to expectations regarding financial administration and reporting, and aware of the registration difficulties that LGBTIQ organizations may face.** Many LGBTIQ organizations do not operate in the same ways that other NGOs do, as many face issues with resourcing, registration, and a need to conduct work covertly through informal networks. Due to safety, security, or legal reasons, many do not or cannot officially register. Nevertheless, LGBTIQ networks and advocates often provide wide-ranging support to their respective communities. Donors and implementing partners should find ways to engage smaller LGBTIQ organizations in ways that respect how they operate and that account for varying administrative and reporting capacity—with the burden being shouldered by primary fund recipients (such as UN agencies or INGOs) rather than by community-level organizations.
  
- 5. Funding and strategies should be diversified to ensure that different subpopulations under the LGBTIQ umbrella are included in interventions.** Diverse-SOGIESC populations are by no means homogenous, and multiple other identities may intersect with an individual’s SOGIESC, thereby altering the challenges or barriers they may face in accessing humanitarian assistance. This diversity should be top-of-mind when allocation and strategy decisions are being made.

# Annexes

# Annex 1: Edge Effect's Diverse-SOGIESC Rapid Assessment Tool (Adapted Questionnaire)

## CONTEXTUALIZATION, ANALYSIS, DESIGN

- 1 Was the activity design informed by a needs assessment and gender analysis that took into account the pre-emergency marginalization and life context of LGBTIQ+ people? (including how pre-emergency marginalization plays out in shaping challenges in current crisis?) (or: including how pre-emergency marginalization heightens vulnerability during crisis?)
- 2 Did your organization continue monitoring the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people in this crisis, including efforts to understand new forms of discrimination or challenges that may have emerged during the response? If so, how did you respond to those emergent challenges?
- 3 Did the needs assessment, gender analysis and/or monitoring activities recognise differences in identities, experiences and needs between different people with diverse SOGIESC (and adjust programs accordingly)? I.e. were LGBTIQ+ people considered as a homogenous group or not?
- 4 Overall, did the project address the rights, needs and strengths of people with diverse SOGIESC, as identified through the assessment, gender analysis, and/or monitoring, or other sources?
- 5 Do relevant staff, contractors and implementing partners associated with your organization have sufficient capability to address the rights, needs and strengths of people with diverse SOGIESC?

## ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION, INCLUSION

- 6 Were diverse SOGIESC people/organizations engaged as active contributors to the needs assessment, project design and proposal?
- 7 Were diverse SOGIESC people/organizations engaged as active contributors to program management, implementation and monitoring?
- 8 Did your organization take an intersectional approach to inclusion of diverse SOGIESC people, taking into account factors such as age, disability and other characteristics?

9 Did your organization provide adequate funding and support to facilitate participation of people with diverse SOGIESC?

10 Does your organization have feedback mechanisms that are accessible to people with diverse SOGIESC engaged directly or indirectly in the program?

**SAFETY, SECURITY, PROTECTION**

11 Was your program designed and operated in way that did all it reasonably could to anticipate and address safety and protection issues for people with diverse SOGIESC?

12 Did your organization safely collect, store, use and dispose of data about people with diverse SOGIESC?

# Annex 2: Edge Effect’s Diverse–SOGIESC Reverse Partner Appraisal Tool (Adapted Questionnaire)

VISION	1	What kind of <b>internal process</b> exists within your organization to expand diverse SOGIESC inclusivity across the organization?
	2	Does your organization have an overall <b>specific position statement or program strategy</b> designed to expand diverse SOGIESC inclusion in your programming/influencing work?
	3	To what extent does your organization’s policies and programs design in <i>specific programming areas include diversity of SOGIESC</i> in meaningful ways? (such as SRHR, GBV, etc.)
ENGAGEMENT	4	Does your organization actively target <b>diverse–SOGIESC communities as participants</b> ?
	5	Does your organization have <b>partnerships with diverse SOGIESC CSOs</b> ? If so, what kind of partnerships?
	6	Does your organization promote the inclusion of people with diverse–SOGIESC in your engagement with your <b>implementing partners and other stakeholders</b> ?
	7	Does your organization provide SOGIESC <b>sensitivity training to staff and partners</b> ? Does it go further to include program specific training?
DESIGN	8	Does your organization incorporate people with diverse SOGIESC in <b>context analysis</b> ? If so, how?
	9	Has your organization adapted its <b>program-focused frameworks and tools</b> to be safe and relevant for programs that engage people with diverse SOGIESC?
	10	Has your organization adapted your <b>risk assessment and mitigation tools</b> to be safe and relevant to people with diverse–SOGIESC?
	11	Does your organization track SOGIESC inclusion through a <b>gender/age/diversity marker tool or disaggregation of program funding</b> ?
	12	Is there an expectation that <b>needs assessments include specific consideration</b> of diverse SOGIESC inclusion?

<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	13	Does your organization's <b>PSEAH policies, child protection policies and other protection policies</b> take into account people with diverse SOGIESC?
	14	Does the organization have an internal <b>non-discrimination policy and other HR policies</b> that protect diverse-SOGIESC individuals?
	15	Does the organization promote an <b>internal office culture</b> that is accepting and tolerant of SOGIESC diversity?



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