**The Amsterdam Network Guiding Principles**

**Part 1: Introduction**

At meetings in Madrid in September 2011 and Dublin in October 2012, a group of NGOs working for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people[[1]](#footnote-2) from countries in Western Europe and North America, which together form the Amsterdam Network, debated an evolving set of guiding principles. These guiding principles were born out of concern that an advocacy community in one country should not speak for groups in another country without a clear and informed mandate to do so. Indeed, some international engagements have the potential to do far more harm than good, and good intentions are not enough to guarantee positive results. The development of that document occurred through ongoing conversations with activists from across the globe and resulted in the first Amsterdam Network Guiding Principles in November 2013.[[2]](#footnote-3) The pace of this work has evolved rapidly, and so that document was updated in 2016.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The primary audience of this document is the members of the Amsterdam Network itself. We see these guidelines as a helpful framework and ethical foundation for our initiatives as individual organizations and as a collective body in relation to our engagements with governments, media, other civil society organizations, and key power brokers on LGBTI rights globally. We welcome feedback to help us sharpen these Guiding Principles and to foster mutual learning.

These guiding principles were born out of the recognition that our governments, donors and media frequently call on our organizations to comment and advise on LGBTI rights globally. These guiding principles are intended to help shape organizational decisions about when and how to react to human rights violations related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) as well as intersex status in other countries. This includes decisions about if and when to call on foreign governments, or other international actors such as the United Nations, to intervene on behalf of LGBTI communities abroad.[[4]](#footnote-5) In our increasingly connected world, we seek to carefully navigate the profound power of bilateral and multilateral relationships on LGBTI communities globally: between the South and the North, within each region, between neighbors, in relation to multilateral and economic institutions, and beyond.

The network has created this document with the hope of raising awareness on the best practices, findings, and challenges faced by organizations seeking to promote the rights of LGBTI people throughout the world. These principles have been developed through many years of experience in international engagement, which at times have been both successful and challenging.

We recognize that international cooperation on LGBTI rights is a fluid and evolving area of discussion. We hope these guiding principles will serve as a point of departure for further discussion and refinement on how best to engage in LGBTI activism bilaterally, regionally and internationally.

The guiding principles below are written in the spirit of dialogue, recognizing that this is a highly complex and evolving discussion that touches on larger geopolitical questions about the goals of diplomacy; development assistance; the persistence of structural economic inequalities which influence the relationships between countries and communities; the enduring realities of post-colonial political legacies; and the broader power imbalances that exist in the world today.

These guiding principles do not attempt to answer these concerns, nor do they attempt to provide a definitive answer on what a good or bad response would be. Rather, they are designed to help guide our organizations in making informed decisions on possible responses or actions; what dimensions we should be aware of in international co-operation; and recognizing imbalances, agency, and ownership of advocacy.

The guiding principles are not designed to be static or unchanging. Instead, the Amsterdam Network hopes that the current iteration of these principles will serve as a starting point in facilitating discussion and debate on international engagement on SOGIESC and will be updated and revised as necessary.

**Part 2: The Amsterdam Network: Guiding Principles and Best Practices**

**2.1 Agency and coordination**

True change comes from within a society, yet bilateral and multilateral relationships and trends are increasingly influential on domestic affairs. Our role as foreign NGO advocates is to support and contribute to that change from the outside, not to supplant it or direct it in any way. When engaging outside of one’s own country, it is important to recognize who is the agent of change or ‘owner’ of the process of change.

This impacts how responses from outside are coordinated with local actors. Whenever organizations from outside are involved, it is important that they are mindful of their responsibilities and the limitations of their role. It is also important that foreign NGOs inform domestic NGOs of their advocacy in relation to the other’s government. Things to remember include: who is speaking on behalf of who, how inclusive is the coordination process (who is at the table?), and who is coordinating who and in whose interest.

**2.2 Context awareness**

When considering engaging internationally, it is of vital importance to pay attention to the local context and embedded power relations of the country. Local activists have the best knowledge of local contexts and should be actively and thoroughly consulted with when formulating a response to a developing human rights situation. Historical developments; the local socio-cultural and political context; regional and international geopolitics; and (former) state interdependencies (including, for example, colonialism, post-Soviet legacies, wartime occupation, EU enlargement criteria) should be taken into account.

It is important to recognize that most laws criminalizing LGBTI behaviors, identities and bodies were imposed by colonial powers. Global power relations have evolved considerably, but outdated colonial stereotypes persist, and those dynamics must be recognized and addressed. Moreover, responses from abroad might be seen in a similar light, and hence, could be counterproductive.

**2.3 Responses should adopt a broad human rights response**

Access to shelter, rule of law, poverty, human rights violations, and other circumstances that affect people affect LGBTI people as well. The NGOs listed here, while calling attention to the unique concerns that limit the ability of LGBTI communities to secure their fundamental human rights, do so from a broad human rights approach that seeks to promote human rights for all by working in solidarity with other movements.

**2.4 Intersectionality and partnerships**

LGBTI people are citizens of the broader society they inhabit and their identities are composed of multiple aspects, such as religion, ethnicity, age, disability and class. The intersection of different identities affects their enjoyment of human rights and inclusion in society. One needs to be mindful of these differences, which play out in in partnerships and impact power dynamics.

**2.5 Homegrown conservative actors**

We are concerned with homophobic and transphobic groups from our countries, whether they are working at home or abroad. Conservative initiatives from the Global North have created well-documented harm to LGBTI communities in the Global South and East. We also recognize that the conservative groups’ success abroad strengthens their position domestically. In solidarity with affected communities internationally, we commit ourselves to working against our homegrown anti-LGBTI opponents wherever they manifest.

**2.6 Government accountability**

Today’s strongest and most effective domestic and foreign policy focused on the rights of LGBTI persons has come as a result of the persistence of NGOs, and we recognize that there is a particular power in our voices domestically. We seek opportunities to hold our own governments to human rights standards, irrespective of SOGIESC, in both domestic and foreign policy. In many of our countries, the domestic advances preceded the integration of LGBTI rights in foreign policy, but the symmetrical commitment has slowly begun. Our efforts have transformed the foreign policies of our governments, and we commit ourselves to that ongoing effort in the service of global LGBTI rights.

**Part 3: Applying the Amsterdam Network Guiding Principles**

LGBTI communities globally need prioritization, resourcing, and engagement to combat the ways that homophobia and transphobia are deeply embedded within law and culture. Solidarity takes at least two forms: short-term crisis response and long-term sustained engagement. While both are needed, we believe that long-term engagement is most likely to lead to substantive change and should be the focus of our efforts.

In all instances, consultation and partnership with local LGBTI stakeholders is crucial. Organizations that are locally rooted should decide whether and how to internationalize the response. Yet, in many instances, local actors will present a range of opinions, in which case we will proceed with caution and due diligence.

**3.1.1 Short-term crisis response**

All short-term crisis response should be understood within the context of historical developments and a long-term strategy of social change.

**3.1.2 Deciding when to ‘internationalize’ an issue or event**

There are various options for internationalizing the response to a human rights situation in a particular country, ranging from quiet offers of support to global calls to action. Foreign NGOs should consider the following:

* It is strongly recommended not to engage abroad unless it is based on a call for action by, in support of, and in consultation with local LGBTI or other credible human rights groups.
* It is important to keep in mind that public responses, which tend to be the most controversial, are not necessarily or always the most effective. Moreover, it is possible to internationalize an issue or event with behind-the-scenes consultations (e.g. with embassy staff in the country of concern). Public statements in the media by foreign organizations or by foreign officials can create unintended consequences and the disempowerment of local LGBTI communities. International solidarity is frequently most effective behind-the-scenes, especially when the strategy is deployed to elevate the priorities and voices of local LGBTI stakeholders.
* Base your analysis of the local situation on solid knowledge and facts provided by local sources. Consult several sources, and ensure that as many as possible are politically independent.
* Coordinate and share information and any plans for an international response with a broad cross-section of local advocates. If you are not able to obtain sufficient information about the situation, or if local groups are not clear or unified in their response, then it is generally better to avoid a hasty international response.
* Your analysis of the situation should show with some certainty that your response is likely to help improve the situation instead of creating negative backlash. Local activists are best placed to assess the potential local impact of a response. If you are unable to reach such a conclusion, then avoid taking action.
* Your response, if made public in the target country, is likely to be framed as pressure from the outside, and often as Western interference. Where possible (and if it is safe to do so), take care to avoid this dynamic by involving local activists. In addition, be sure to have a well-crafted response to allegations of Western inference should they arise. Be particularly aware of tensions between your government and the government of the country you are engaging with, even if those tensions are unrelated to LGBTI issues.
* To avoid future crisis situations in that country you are engaging with, invest in long-term sustainable movement building. Work to strengthen local LGBTI organizations and support their own mobilization and integration into broader social movements.

**3.1.3 Calling on your government to intervene**

After ensuring that national activists want to internationalize an issue or event, it is important to recognize the range of responses, potential pitfalls and the ongoing role that NGOs should play in monitoring the efforts of their own governments and embassies.

* Encourage direct dialogue between your country’s embassy and local LGBTI activists. Help facilitate those meetings where possible. Ensure that both sides honor their commitments, and help manage expectations on both sides.
* Hold staff from your country’s embassy accountable for promoting a supportive, pro-LGBTI policy. Help embassy staff respond in a sensitive way to local requests for assistance.
* Where possible, encourage integration of LGBTI issues within broader, embassy-led human rights responses.
* If you request that your foreign ministry or local embassy engages in a situation, provide your government with a full analysis of the situation crosschecked with local activists. Ensure that your government understands the risk of backlash and is sensitive to local terminology for framing a response.
* When assessing whether to call on your government to engage, determine whether your government has the capacity to protect local activists who could be placed at risk because of its response.
* Create opportunities for local activists to challenge your NGO’s perspectives and your government’s actions and policies. This will strengthen future solidarity work.
* While working with the embassies is crucial, engaging with relevant representatives in capitol is also essential since they often have different yet complimentary functions.

**3.1.4 Calling on regional or multilateral institutions to intervene**

There are times when regional or multilateral institutions should be called on to react to LGBTI rights crises, for instance, the Rapporteurship on the Rights of LGBTI Persons at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States or the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations. Yet, work with regional or international institutions typically requires work in coalition with civil society groups from multiple relevant countries and regions. At a minimum, the members of the Amsterdam Network have found coalitions to be the most effective and politically responsible way to engage regional and multilateral institutions.

**3.2 Creating a long-term strategy of engagement**

The focus of our work is on long-term social change.

**3.3 Conditionality**

All inter-state relations are governed by conditions in one way or another. The policy of conditionality generally refers to the process by which states provide both positive and negative incentives to support democratic development, the recognition of international treaties and the application of international human rights standards in states.

There are several different ways that conditionality is relevant in the LGBTI context. Aid conditionality is one example, and it manifests by the threat of a foreign donor state to reduce, restructure or cut foreign assistance in response to human rights concerns impacting LGBTI communities abroad. Another well-known type of conditionality is the Copenhagen Criteria for countries seeking accession into the EU.[[5]](#footnote-6) Yet another form is non-material sanctioning or rewarding, such as the 2013 EU threat to block visa liberalization for Ukrainian citizens should the anti-propaganda legislation be adopted.

Conditionality is controversial. It is often seen as a coercive attempt to force change from the outside, rather than change occurring through indigenous processes or domestic groups articulating demands to state bodies. Over the years, there has been widespread criticism that aid conditionality, particularly if it is tied to a country adopting particular policies, fails to take into account domestic needs and may weaken the political accountability of governments to their own citizens. More broadly, there is a good deal of evidence that suggests that the kind of foreign aid conditionality adopted by the World Bank and IMF have harmed the economies of many countries in the Global South.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The Amsterdam Network is acutely aware that if a government uses LGBTI people as an instrument to condition or cut life-saving programs, for instance related to maternal health, it is working at cross-purposes to our intersectional identities. We are both LGBTI people and members of other identity-based groups (i.e. based on race, class, gender, etc.), and so we cannot afford to condition or cut aid to one part of our identities in the service of LGBTI identities alone. We are equally concerned with shielding LGBTI people from exploitation in the service of other political agendas, for instance opposition to foreign assistance in general. Finally, we are acutely aware that aid conditionality or cuts to foreign assistance can create backlash if it appears that LGBTI people are being prioritized over other national interests.

We urge extreme caution, consultation, and care when engaging in debates around conditionality. The reduction or elimination of foreign assistance in the name of LGBTI people should never be used to cut lifesaving funding for human development and human rights.

As a body, the Amsterdam Network does not have a unified position regarding when and if aid conditionality should ever be applied to an issue pertaining to LGBTI rights. This discussion remains sensitive, but the members of the Amsterdam Network agree that the following factors should be considered when a party contemplates any form of conditionality:

* Do not ask or threaten to cut aid unless local LGBTI groups or actors have explicitly recommended this strategy.
* Do not endorse the removal of funding to programs providing services and assistance for general health, i.e. clean water drinking projects, health clinics, HIV/AIDS programs, maternal healthcare, etc.
* Understand the difference between forms of conditionality.
* Consider the broader political context beyond LGBTI rights.
* In times of crisis, increase funding and other forms of non-monetary support for LGBTI organizations.
* Consider other means of supporting local LGBTI communities than conditioning aid, i.e. monitoring by embassies, financial and practical support for capacity building and organizational development, legal support of human rights defenders at risk, organization of inclusive human rights events or specific LGBTI events, facilitating dialogue between states or promoting active participation of civil society in state and multilateral processes.
* Recognize that it is not advisable to support conditionality in every country that criminalizes homosexual relationships or maintains other discriminatory provisions.
* If conditionality is pursued, insist on a plan for how the country adopting conditionality will support the local LGBTI community.
* Commitment to human rights and any conditions should ideally be built into an aid agreement or clearly stated in negotiations from the onset.

**3.4 Using the media responsibly**

Images and stories in the media influence our understanding of ourselves and others. In an LGBTI context, the media – including online campaigns – may perpetuate or challenge harmful stereotypes about historical legacies, foreign dependence or regional trends. International solidarity requires that we identify and understand such stereotypes and that we actively counter them when applicable.

* Be mindful that you are not contributing to the victimization of the people you are trying to support, especially when speaking to the international media.
* Ensure that you do not fuel, but rather counter any stereotypes about a particular country or community.
* If your response is public, try to ensure that the community and the activists you are supporting are visible. Always cede your own visibility, both at home and abroad, to activists who are rooted in the struggle. Be aware, however, that there may be strategic or security concerns that limit the ability of local activists to speak publicly in the media.
* If your response gains media attention, do not oversimplify the story. Find a way to tell the full story in an accessible and understandable manner that does justice to the complexities or nuances of reality.
* Have your arguments, quotes, facts and spokespeople ready. Attempt to frame the story first, using fact-based knowledge, representative spokespeople and a message that counters other harmful stereotypes or racist perceptions about those you support, as well as any characterization of your work as an external or “Western” imposition.
* Educate the media and public opinion through your communications and outreach tools even when you are not intervening.
* Be mindful that in certain parts of the world English is not the first or second language; therefore, the accessibility of information to communities at stake may be limited due to language barriers. Try to involve them through translation by local counterparts or facilitate translation where necessary.
1. This document uses “LGBTI rights” as shorthand for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people. For further discussion about the intersection of language and identity, see footnote #5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Signatories include: COC Netherlands; Council for Global Equality - (United States); Egale Canada Human Rights Trust; Fundacióu Triiaci H - (Spain); GLEN - (Ireland); HIVOS - (The Netherlands); IDAHO Committee - International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia; ILGA-Europe; Inter-LGBT (France); Kaleidoscope Trust - (UK); LGBT Denmark; LLH - (Norway); LSVD - (Germany); RFSL - (Sweden); and Stonewall - (UK). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The signatories of the 2016 principles include all of the groups listed in footnote 2 along with: XYZ. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is important to recognize that this list of identities is not exhaustive. The Amsterdam Network recognizes and affirms that there are many identities not captured within the term LGBTI, and that LGBTI terminology does not capture the universal experience (eg. third gender, metis, khotis, zenanas, hijras, etc.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The Copenhagen Criteria outlines three significant requirements that applicant countries must meet before accession to the EU. Relevant here is that political criteria that applicant countries must have “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities.” The Copenhagen Criteria is widely believed to have improved the situation for LGBTI people in many Central- and Eastern European countries. Please see <http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhague_en.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See, for example Joseph E. Stiglitz (2002). *Globalization and its Discontents.* New York: W.W. Norton and Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)