



**Supporting LGBTI rights through development
cooperation in times of authoritarian
resistance**

—
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Introduction

In a time when the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people are undermined across continents, how can development cooperation be used to combat discrimination, exclusion and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE)? Guided by this question, this UI brief provides an overview of global patterns of opposition to the rights of LGBTI people during 2015-2025, identifies challenges and opportunities in SOGIE-inclusive development, and proposes research-based recommendations to policymakers and practitioners.

The analysis builds on a broad review of recent academic research and reports by non-governmental organizations. When this brief speaks of the rights of LGBTI people or SOGIE rights, it does not refer to any “special rights” but to the right of every individual, regardless of SOGIE, to fully access their human rights, such as the right to life and security, the right to non-discrimination, freedom of expression, access to healthcare, the right to bodily integrity, and freedom from poverty.¹ SOGIE-inclusive development thus refers to ensuring that development cooperation programs and interventions are planned and designed in a way that integrates a SOGIE rights perspective. The terminologies of LGBTI, SOGIE and sometimes the more inclusive “sexual and gender minorities” are used in this brief, recognizing that Western-originated identity categories are not applicable in every context, and often coexist with local

terminologies. At a time when Swedish development policy is undergoing major transformations, this UI brief provides research-based advice and knowledge on how to include SOGIE in international development in ways that are impactful and efficient as well as safe and responsible.

Global opposition to the rights of LGBTI people

There are many examples of significant SOGIE rights advances during the last decade, from the passing of same-sex marriage bills in East Asia (Taiwan and Thailand), the removal of bans on consensual homosexual relations in parts of Africa (e.g., Angola and Botswana), or the introduction of more progressive gender recognition laws in Latin America (e.g., Chile and Mexico) and Europe (e.g., Spain and Sweden). At the same time, there is a growing and more organized resistance to the rights of LGBTI people on all continents, manifested both locally and on regional and international arenas (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). New repressive laws criminalizing homosexuality have been introduced and already existing bans have been expanded in some countries in Africa and Asia, the most extreme example being Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 which prescribes life imprisonment and in some cases death penalty for homosexuality. Uganda-inspired bills have since been introduced to parliament in Kenya, Namibia and Tanzania (Brown, 2024). As of 2024, consensual same-sex relations are illegal in 64 countries; about half of these originate

¹ In 2006, the application of international human rights law to SOGIE was codified in the Yogyakarta Principles, which were updated and

complimented in 2017. See <https://yogyakartaprinciples.org>



from British colonial anti-sodomy laws (Waites, 2023: 215). In 12 countries, the penalty scale includes capital punishment (ILGA World, 2024).

Around 60 countries have laws that specifically restrict visibility and freedom of expression related to SOGIE. Russia's 2013 ban on "propaganda for non-traditional sexual relationships" has been an international trendsetter, inspiring others to introduce or pass similar laws (as Georgia did in 2024). Such laws are present also in Europe and North America. Two EU member states have passed laws banning the "promotion" of LGBTI identities to minors (Hungary in 2021, Bulgaria in 2024), and the US state of Florida passed a similar law in 2021, dubbed by critics as the "Don't say gay law". In addition, laws specifically targeting transgender people have proliferated. In 2023 Russia banned legal change of gender as well as gender-affirming care, and in the 2020s dozens of US states have restricted access to gender-affirming care and banned trans people from using public bathrooms (ILGA World, 2024). Already existing oppression and inequalities are aggravated during times of conflict, disaster and humanitarian crisis (USAID, 2023; Hagen et al, 2024; Edenborg, 2024). This has been made evident by Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, where LGBTI Ukrainians in Russia-occupied areas face specific forms of harassment and violence (Kravchuk et al, 2022). Across the world, LGBTI people face discrimination, lack access to healthcare, housing and social services, and are disproportionately targeted by gender-based violence (USAID, 2023).

The above examples indicate a global pattern where sexual and gender minorities are increasingly scapegoated by authoritarian leaders and religious, nationalist and far-right groups and blamed for various invented or real problems. Disinformation campaigns in social or traditional media present distorted and misleading narratives about LGBTI people (EEAS, 2023), often amplified by populist politicians. Such mobilization against a "queer peril" (Bosia, 2013), whether imagined as homosexuals recruiting children, or trans people assaulting women in changing rooms, can serve various purposes. These include distraction from economic problems, serving as a pretext for expanded state repression, or as a way to strengthen collective identity by identifying a threatening "them" (Bosia, 2013). Recurrently, LGBTI identities are depicted as foreign and inauthentic, imposed through indoctrination by external forces or "woke" elites, in opposition to the values of "common people" (Edenborg, 2023). Furthermore, infringements on the rights of LGBTI people are tied to broader processes of de-democratization. Undermining the rights of minority groups is not only itself an aspect of deteriorating democracy, recent history has also shown that targeting of LGBTI people can be a precursor or a "canary in the mine" for further autocratization (Albarracín-Caballero, 2022).

Although opponents to SOGIE rights use localized claims that appeal to "traditional values", national identity and cultural authenticity, they are also increasingly transnationally connected and often use nearly copy-pasted rhetoric. If the rights advances for LGBTI people during the last decades have been driven by what



researchers have described as a “velvet triangle” composed by progressive states, transnational civil society movements, and some intergovernmental organizations, this constellation of actors is now mirrored by a rival set of conservative actors opposing LGBTI rights, sometimes labelled the “anti-gender movement” (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Thus, there are competing transnational advocacy coalitions (TANs), all of which engage on both national and international arenas. Research has shown that these rival TANs do not exist in isolation from each other, but interact, mimic and take inspiration from each other. For example, conservative traditionalist movements increasingly borrow their language and forms of activism from the action repertoire of progressive actors such as women’s rights movements. They increasingly use the language of rights (of the child or the family) and freedom (of speech or religion), engage in social media campaigns and organize protests outside international summits (Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024).

International anti-LGBTI resistance is driven by a diverse group of actors, which includes states like Russia, Egypt and Hungary and religious actors such as the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. These are joined by well-funded transnational civil society organizations such as CitizenGo, Alliance Defending Freedom and the International Organization of the Family – the latter organization regularly organizes the World Congress of Families where opponents of SOGIE rights and abortion meet and exchange strategies. Anti-LGBTI mobilizing

creates strange bedfellows and coalitions between actors that share little beyond their opposition to “liberal values”: Muslim and Christian fundamentalists of various denominations, secular far-right movements and autocrats of different stripes and colors (Edenborg 2023, Ayoub and Stoeckl, 2024). One example is the 2020 Geneva Consensus Declaration on Promoting Women’s Health and Strengthening the Family, a joint statement expressing opposition to abortion and SOGIE rights, co-sponsored by Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia, Uganda and the United States.² Another example of how conservative actors connect transnationally is the economic support by the US Christian Right to anti-LGBTI and anti-abortion purposes in Africa, the sum of which increased by 50% in the period 2019-2022, according to a recent report (IJSC 2024). Russia’s increased economic and military engagement in Africa, framed by a rhetoric of opposing Western neocolonialism and protecting “traditional values”, is yet an example of how anti-LGBTI actors cooperate across religious, cultural and ideological divides. In sum, whereas legal discrimination, social marginalization and violence targeting LGBTI people are certainly not new phenomena, the contemporary resurgence of anti-LGBTI government policies across the world, fueled by transnational actors, contributes to institutionalizing and legitimizing such disparities.

² Brazil and the US signed under the governments of Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump, and withdrew after changes of government.



Addressing SOGIE in development cooperation: research-based insights

Two decades ago, some states started to include SOGIE in international development policy, with the Netherlands and Sweden leading the way. Today, around a dozen governments and one intergovernmental organization – the EU – address SOGIE issues in their development policies and provide international funding for LGBTI-oriented programs and organizations. The largest donors in absolute numbers are (in order) the Netherlands, the United States, Canada and Sweden, together making up 77% of total government LGBTI funding (GPP, 2024). Still, only a tiny fragment of international development funding goes to LGBTI support. In 2021-22, funds directed to LGBTI programs and organizations were equivalent to 0.04% of total worldwide official development assistance (ODA). To put this in perspective, three of the largest organizations working to oppose LGBTI rights reported a combined income of \$1 billion in 2021-22, which is more than the combined income of 8,000 grant-receiving LGBTI organizations worldwide (GPP, 2024). While anti-LGBTI movements are thus often very well-financed (see Datta, 2019), LGBTI organizations are severely underfunded, especially in Global South and East contexts. In many cases, local organizations defending the rights of LGBTI people are dependent on international funding for their survival, as they lack domestic sources of funding. In addition to funding, SOGIE-inclusive development policies provide essential forms of support to rights-defenders in LGBTI-hostile contexts, including providing safe spaces for

arrangements and meetings, facilitating domestic and international networking, and assisting in the dissemination of knowledge and expertise.

In all international interventions there are challenges and risks, including in SOGIE-inclusive development policy. Recognizing and seeking to mitigate known problems is crucial for designing efficient and responsible strategies. Western efforts to push for LGBTI rights in Global South and East countries have been criticized for being *inefficient* and even counterproductive. For example, Western actors have condemned anti-LGBTI legislation in countries such as Malawi, Uganda, and Tanzania, and imposed or threatened with economic sanctions. However, the positive effects in these countries have been short-lived, and followed by even more repressive policies (Brown, 2023). Research has shown that Western interventions have too often been focused on achieving short-term, visible results and a desire to show determination in response to events in the media (Ibid.). Punitive actions and loud condemnations may lock in positions that are difficult to back away from. In some cases, Western actors have cancelled or threatened to cut development aid in response to LGBTI rights infringements, like when the World Bank in 2014 cancelled a US\$90 million loan to Uganda intended for maternal health projects. Researchers are generally skeptical to such aid conditionality, as there is little evidence of any lasting positive effects, and it may strengthen local perceptions that the rights of LGBTI people are opposed to the majority population's wellbeing (Rainer et al, 2021; Brown, 2023). Likewise, symbolic actions like flying a large rainbow flag on a



Western embassy in a country hostile to LGBTI rights, or other ways of creating visibility, may backfire and have negative effects for local rights defenders (Conway and Edenborg, 2025). Instead, researchers suggest the need for long-term, less visible strategies that center on the needs and priorities of local rights defenders (Velasco, 2021; Rainer et al, 2021). Western actors should be humble about what kind of change they can achieve and realize that real and durable progress is most likely to be locally driven, which strengthens the case for supporting grassroots rights defenders (Altman and Symons, 2015; Brown, 2023).

Moreover, researchers have shown how enduring legacies of *colonialism* impact contemporary practices of LGBTI rights promotion. Pro-LGBTI interventions have sometimes rested on civilizational assumptions of universalizing Western models of freedom to the rest of the world and homophobic elites in postcolonial countries have depicted all forms of SOGIE rights as neocolonialism (Rao, 2020; Hossain and Rahman, 2024). The latter accusations are given fuel when Western LGBTI rights promotion is inconsistent and selective, only being pushed where it aligns with geopolitical and economic interests (for example in poor aid-dependent countries in Africa, but not in Saudi Arabia). It is therefore important to recognize and take into account the multiple impacts of colonialism, including the persistence of colonial-era sodomy laws, and contemporary neocolonial influence of Western Christian conservative networks in the Global South. Likewise, Western actors should avoid using a rhetoric of exporting “Western values” or depicting other countries as “backwards” (Klapeer, 2018).

Instead, SOGIE-inclusive development should strive for genuine dialogue and exchange, humbly recognize the shortcomings of LGBTI rights in the West and that Global South countries may in some respects be more “advanced” (e.g., legal recognition of “third gender” categories in South Asia and South America).

In addition to such structural critiques, research has also criticized the more concrete forms that SOGIE inclusive development and LGBTI funding take. As funding of LGBTI rights defenders typically go to programs or projects, with certain set goals and pre-defined content, such support is often *inflexible* and can lock local rights defenders into specific activities. The majority of LGBTI funding goes to advocacy, whereas a very small part is dedicated to humanitarian and emergency response (GPP, 2024). This inflexibility becomes acute during conflict and disaster (for example Russia’s war in Ukraine), when Western-funded LGBTI organizations often cannot use their resources to meet emergency needs such as evacuations and shelters, as these are earmarked for other things. Moreover, the rise of “result-based management” in Western international development, where aid interventions are tied and evaluated in relation to specific goals and measurable results, risk creating excessive bureaucratization as LGBTI rights defenders are forced to dedicate their time to writing reports. Western donor demands for proven efficiency will also make certain activities more “fundable” than others, favoring activities that can be accounted for in tangible, quantifiable ways (Edenborg and Strand, 2024). These may not represent the



activities local rights defenders themselves find most useful.

Research shows a growing awareness among Western development actors of the need to *put local SOGIE rights defenders in charge of interventions*, rather than imposing one's own pre-defined priorities. While this is clearly in line with what researchers have recommended, the push to locally-led work creates its own challenges. When Western actors decide what local activists to collaborate with, they inevitably will favor some organizations and segments of the local community, over others. It is well-known that Western funding of organizations stratifies civil society, where those actors with access to Western funding benefit and others are further marginalized (Svensson and Strand, 2024). Certain groups within the LGBTI umbrella, such as trans activists, tend to be sidelined, and LGBTI organizations that present themselves and their priorities in ways that are easily recognizable to Western actors, e.g., organizing Pride parades, have a greater chance of attracting funding and support than groups that push more contextually specific claims (Conway and Edenborg, 2024). Thus, donors must be aware that LGBTI communities and their needs are diverse. One organization can normally not speak for everyone, and instead of "one-size-fits-all" approaches, Western actors should engage with multiple organizations and design portfolio strategies that address diverse needs (Brown, 2024).

Lastly, given that lasting change can only be realized through locally led efforts that depend on long-term, stable support, a major risk is *inconsistency and rapid policy shifts* on the part of Western actors. Research has

documented that Western engagement in LGBTI rights issues all-to-often depends on engaged individuals within embassies or development agencies, which makes it vulnerable to staff rotations (Janoff, 2022; Conway and Edenborg, 2025). Moreover, sudden policy reversals or large cuts in development budgets, for example in response to an external crisis or following a change of government, may have dramatic consequences for LGBTI-focused development work, and established frameworks of cooperation, transnational networks and expert knowledge risk being lost (Waites, 2024).

Conclusion and policy recommendations

Donald Trump's return as president of the United States in 2025, with a Republican majority in Congress, gives new momentum to the international opposition to SOGIE rights. Several groups that are key nodes in the international anti-LGBTI movement, including the Alliance Defending Freedom and the Heritage Foundation, are closely aligned with Trump and co-signatories of the controversial "Project 2025", which outlines policy proposals for a second Trump administration. Moreover, the Republican party has made resistance to transgender rights an important part of its political agenda and Trump has nominated well-known anti-LGBTI politicians to his cabinet, such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio. It is likely that key steps towards integrating SOGIE in US development policy that have been taken during Biden's presidency will be reversed, that LGBTI issues will be de-emphasized and defunded. It is therefore essential that other actors step in.



For Sweden, advancing the human rights of LGBTI people and combatting discrimination and exclusion built on SOGIE has been a consistent priority in development and foreign policy since the early 2000s, regardless of government orientation. On a more general level, human rights are considered a vital security interest for Sweden, as a fundamental part of maintaining peace and security. Swedish funding and support have been crucial to building up and maintaining LGBTI rights civil society organizations, for example in Eastern Europe and Eurasia where Sweden is the largest LGBTI funder (GPP, 2024). For many LGBTI rights defenders around the world, Sweden is a trusted and valued international ally. This capital of trust, as well as the expertise, experience and networks built up during two decades, should be preserved and built upon.

On the basis of this report, the following recommendations are given to policymakers and practitioners on how to continue the work of integrating SOGIE in development, navigate its challenges and steer off pitfalls.³

- *Maintain and, where possible, increase funding* to LGBTI rights defenders with focus on the long-term horizon, ensuring the stability and sustainability of their work.
- *Do no harm...but do something*, i.e., before taking action, consult with local rights defenders to minimize the risk of unintended consequences, but do not let

potential risks lead to non-action and passivity.

- *Trust local activists* to define their own priorities and design strategies that fit their specific context. Make efforts to reach grassroots activists who are grounded in the local context, and avoid solely relying on diaspora groups.
- Be aware that *visibility is not always desirable* and at worst may put local rights defenders in danger. Ensure that any actions which increase attention and visibility around LGBTI issues in a specific country are anchored with locally based activists. In many cases, discrete action is preferable.
- *Make funding as flexible as possible* to avoid locking activists into specific activities, and allowing for quick response in cases of emergencies and crises. Ensure that demands of measuring and accounting for results do not lead to administrative burdens, preventing rights defenders from focusing on their core work.
- *Work with different groups and make room for underrepresented communities*. Be cognizant that there is no monolithic LGBTI community and that a portfolio of approaches, rather than a "one-size-fits-all" strategy, is needed to ensure that different needs are met and multiple voices heard.
- *Ensure durability, consistency and sustainability of the work* by integrating SOGIE concerns in

³ For more detailed guidelines, see for example RFSL, 2018; Rainer et al, 2021; USAID, 2023.



different policy areas, designating LGBTI focal point roles rather than relying on engaged individuals, and acting in coordination with like-minded actors.

- *Maintain and cultivate frameworks of collaboration, networks and expertise.* Continue working with

Sweden-based and international civil society organizations which, having established long-term contacts with many local rights-defenders, fill an indispensable function as intermediaries and sources of knowledge.



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