Research project: „How can development cooperation support civil society groups working on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity in their attempts to counter socially entrenched discrimination?”

Duration 2011-2014 (part-time)

Key questions: How do groups in the global east and south strategize in order to combat socially entrenched discrimination? How do they link their struggle to the international human rights discourse? And how can donors support them - without exposing them to the prejudice of being in cahoots with "western cultural imperialism"?

In most parts of the world, persons whose sexual orientations or gender identities differ from what is considered socially acceptable are confronted with discrimination. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) people, as they sometimes refer to themselves, are frequently discriminated against by state institutions, for example through criminalisation of their sexual activities and discrimination in access to services. In addition, society at large often turns against them - they may be stigmatised, physically assaulted or even murdered because of their sexual orientations and gender identities. As one activist from Uganda put it, “Our biggest threat is the general public.”

Socially entrenched discrimination is a human rights infringement. Human rights oblige states to counter discrimination and discriminatory attitudes through legal as well as administrative measures. However, state representatives often do not comply because the issue is considered unpopular, or may even lend support to discriminatory attitudes to increase their own popularity. Civil society groups working on sexuality and gender identity discrimination have adopted a variety of strategies to advance their cause, such as lobbying and advocacy, human rights litigation, educational activities, and networking with other civil society organisations.

Most bi- or multilateral development agencies have no systematic approach to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) - be it out of ignorance, reluctance, or for lack of strategy. Support to groups challenging such discrimination has largely been confined to allowing them to obtain funding and training through HIV/Aids programmes. In some cases however, donors have suspended or withdrawn funding in response to the adoption of national laws criminalising certain sexual orientations and gender identities, and - by extension - the activities of the NGOs.

If development cooperation is to support positive change with respect to societal attitudes and the legal and political framework, sexual and gender identity discrimination will have to be addressed on a broader scale. In doing so, donors will have to carefully consider their approaches so as not to prompt defensive stances by governments against “cultural imperialism” or, worse still, reprisals against groups and individuals in the countries concerned. Consequently, donors must pursue a two-pronged strategy: to support individuals and groups working on SOGI issues while also seeking out government partners to pursue systemic change at state level.

To strengthen donor policies and approaches on sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination, the German Institute for Human Rights will be conducting a research project between 2011 and 2014. Funded by the German foundation Dreilinden gGmbH, the project aims to identify ways in which state-funded development cooperation can support civil society in advancing
human rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Based on field research in two African countries, it will analyse how NGOs work in order to combat socially entrenched discrimination and how they relate their strategies to the international human rights discourse: Why do LGBTI groups decide to frame socially entrenched discrimination as a human rights issue - even though the human rights discourse on SOGI discrimination is often labelled as cultural imperialism? How do they make the international human rights discourse relevant to their local struggles? What strategies do they adopt to work towards legal and social recognition? And last but not least: what kind of donor support and action do they consider useful?

Drawing on principles for participatory and ethical research, the project applies a human rights-based approach throughout the research process. LGBTI groups will be consulted on the work plan and are invited to provide feedback - along with selected donors - at critical steps of the project. Local organisations participating in the research will be given the opportunity to comment on draft findings and recommendations.

The main research output will be a study in English containing an overview of the normative framework, a review of relevant research on social movements and human rights, an assessment of existing donor strategies, a summary of the findings of the field studies and recommendations to shape future donor engagement. The study will be published online. A shorter policy paper in German summarising key findings and recommendations will be presented at an expert meeting in spring 2014.

The German Institute for Human Rights is the independent National Human Rights Institution in Germany. It is accredited according to the Paris Principles of the United Nations (A-Status). The Institute’s activities include the provision of advice on policy issues, human rights education, applied research on human rights issues and cooperation with international organizations. It is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Justice, the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The National Monitoring Body for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was established at the Institute in May 2009. [http://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/en/homepage.html](http://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/en/homepage.html)

Dreilinden assists the target groups in their work for self-empowerment, and pushes for a mainstreaming of gender issues. For this purpose Dreilinden encourages the infrastructure for human rights and democracy by grants to existing organisations, by project grants, by social investments, and through networking. Funding is aimed at the Global South, Central and Eastern Europe, the former CIS states, and Germany. [http://www.dreilinden.org/eng/news.html](http://www.dreilinden.org/eng/news.html)