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# A wave of hate

## Meeting with UNAIDS on the situation of queer communities in Ghana

In Ghana, a proposed law threatens the LGBTIQ community and its supporters. Without international help, queer people will soon only have the choice between prison or forced "conversion therapy".

It was a milestone for Ghana's queer community. On 31 January 2021, the first LGBTIQ center was inaugurated in the capital Accra. Representatives of the Australian and Danish embassies, but also EU officials were invited and participated and: many members from LGBTI communities.



Opening of the LGBTQ+ community centre in Accra (LGBTI+Rights Ghana)

For a long time, the queer community lived in complete secrecy, says Alex Kofi Donkor. If you were a queer person looking for advice and help, you would not find any supportive information, but only homophobic articles.

The organization LGBT+ Rights Ghana, co-founded by Donkor, wanted to change that. It used social networks to create virtual spaces where the community could exchange ideas, get to know each other, help and inform each other.

The next logical step was to establish a facility: a visible safe space where LGBTIQ people can actually meet. The model for this were LBGTI community centers and counselling facilities in Germany, among others.

### **Massive threats - and eviction soon afterwards**

But the joy over this first community center lasted only for a short time. Soon after the pictures of the opening were published, the organization hit a wave of hatred in social media. They were threatened with burning down the center if the authorities did not close it.

Then, when Moses Foh-Amoaning, executive secretary of the evangelical National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values, fanned the flames of hatred and called for the arrest of all activists involved. The center was stormed by police, members of national security and the press, and was eventually evicted. It had existed for less than a month.

Donkor and his fellow activists, including the press officer of LGBT+ Rights Ghana Moh Abdul-Wadud, had to go into hiding. Even though today, months after the eviction of the center and the escalation in the media, it is difficult for them to remain calm.

### **Media and Christian organizations call for a hunt against LGBTIQ people**

Because the initiators of the center could not be "caught", there was a public call to hunt LGBTIQ communities. Photographs of activists were published in the newspapers and were defamed as leaders of "perverted circles". Homophobia, says Abdul-Wadud, is firmly inscribed in Ghanaian society, but in recent years, hatred of queer people has intensified. It is fueled by targeted campaigns, especially by Christian organizations. Ghana is a country is very religious, explains Abdul-Wadud. 96 percent of the population describe themselves as believers.

However, the fact that a profoundly reactionary idea of sexuality and the family could solidify is mainly due to the influence of groups such as the National Coalition for Proper Human Sexual Rights and Family Values. This organization not only has close ties to the government, but is also aggressively promoted from the USA by international Christian-right networks such as the World Congress of Families.

This ultra-conservative alliance has now achieved what is probably its most significant coup. The draft of a new anti-homosexuality law for Ghana with the telling title "The Promotion of Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values Bill" is said to have been co-written by this organization. In June, it was presented to parliament.

The bill would completely criminalize queer life in Ghana, in fact, queer life in Ghana would be effectively wiped out. LGBT people would be left with only two options, reports Alex Kofi Donkor: either they go to prison or they undergo forced "conversion therapy".

Queer and other organizations that work for the rights of queer people, but also sympathizers who express solidarity or offer support, would be threatened with prison sentences of up to ten years. Even medical care for trans\* or inter\* people would be criminalized. The media - or users of social media - would also have to expect criminal prosecution, if they "propagate homosexuality". And Ghanaian LGBTIQ people would not be immune from imprisonment even outside the country. Those seeking asylum abroad would be extradited to Ghana for prosecution.

## A law from colonial times criminalizes homosexuality

The law is still only a proposal, the voting process has not yet started and process has not yet begun and perhaps it can still be stopped. But time is pressing. The mood in the country has changed. In May, for example, 21 participants in a workshop on LGBTIQ rights were arrested. The police had declared the seminar an "unlawful assembly", which promoted homosexual activities. The arrest was made possible by a rarely used law from colonial times.

Moh Abdul-Wadud, Alex Kofi Donkor and three other activists from LGBT+ Rights Ghana, who were temporarily detained by invitation of the NGO Schwulenberatung Berlin as part of an EU programme for human rights defenders, are therefore looking for allies - in Germany, in Europe, internationally.

## LGBTIQ human rights are under threat



Moh (left), Andreas Zeidler and Efraim Goméz, UNAIDS. Photo: Stephan Jäckel

At an informal meeting with representatives of both governmental and non-governmental organizations, co-organized by Action against AIDS, representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the UN organization UNAIDS, the German AIDS Aid (DAH) and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Ghanaian activists gained a lot of understanding. But they could not find a concrete, tangible solution that would work on the ground. Denouncing the government of Ghana internationally is probably not enough.

According to Efraim Goméz of UNAIDS, it might be more important to make clear to indecisive MPs what the bill actually is: unconstitutional and a clear violation of human rights. And UNAIDS is also obliged to defend them, emphasized Goméz.

What diplomatic ways can now be found in cooperation with LGBT+ Rights Ghana to prevent the law will become clear in the coming weeks and months.

## **Inclusion concept of German foreign policy envisages strengthening LGBTI rights**

The fact that one's own noble goals are often difficult to implement in practice at ground level, and then only in part, is also known to Bernadette Kalz from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Since March 2021, the human rights of LGBTI persons must be consistently taken into account in German foreign policy and development cooperation. The so-called [inclusion concept](#) adopted by the Federal Government provides, among other things, strengthening of civil society organizations in the countries concerned, which work locally, regionally, nationally or internationally for human rights of LGBTI persons and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. But the bureaucracy involved is only one reason, implementation is more difficult than hoped, Bernadette Kalz reports disillusionedly: "We are still in a learning process."



Discussion during the informal meeting with UNAIDS, Photo: Melanie Otto

## **Grassroots organizations easily fall through the cracks when it comes to funding**

The BMZ, UNAIDS or organizations such as the [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH \(GiZ\)](#) and the DAH have ultimately set themselves similar goals: to promote the civil society engagement on the ground, to support marginalized and vulnerable groups in their commitment and to build up necessary structures.

However, they face very different challenges in doing so: How can we ensure that the communities are sufficiently involved? How can small organizations and marginalized groups make their voices heard? And how can it be ensured that funding does not only go to large, well-structured non-governmental organizations?

## **Community projects would be ideal partners for Ghana's governmental HIV prevention**

Moh Abdul-Wadud and Alex Kofi Donkor are also active in HIV prevention and illustrate this with their own experiences. Actually, the small community projects initiated by the most affected groups would be the ideal partners for Ghana's national AIDS commission to successfully carry out prevention. "The community is small and hermetic," Donkor explains. "We know the situation best and we know each other. But the Aids Commission does not accept us as an important partner." For him one of the fatal consequences of the institutionalized marginalization of LGBTIQ people. With the planned law, however, their persecution would not only be legalized, but actually become a reason of state's raison d'être.

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