CASE STUDY ON THE BUILDING PROCESS
OF A SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT
INCLUSIVE OF LESBIANS, BISEXUALS,
GAYS, TRANS* AND QUEER RIGHTS
IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

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QAYN has contributed to the emergence of a LGBTQ movement in West Africa and Cameroon through the mobilization and leadership development of LBQWSW groups. Though we can be proud of the materialization of some of our dreams and visions, the fact remains that the state of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights is still concerning. LGBTQ people are victims of several forms of discrimination and are deprived of fundamental rights due to their real or perceived sexual orientation and/or “unconventional” gender identity. Nevertheless, the African continent is experiencing multiple movements pushing for more social justice. These movements focus on democratic alternation, the participation of women and youth in electoral processes, transparency and accountability in governance, free trade, the fair management of natural resources, access to health care, and more generally, various fights against social inequalities. These could have been an opportunity to support LGBTQ rights. But so far, such agendas do not explicitly and specifically reflect the priorities of LGBTQ groups. Indeed, social justice actors in Africa are oftentimes indifferent, even complicit in the many violations of LGBTQ rights. Nevertheless, when it comes to social justice, it is imperative for movements to take into consideration fundamental issues on all levels, including social and economic vulnerabilities, as well as the exclusion and marginalization of any groups. Furthermore, it is worth noticing that LGBTQ citizens are not engaged in the general social justice movement. Being held on the margins of the general population’s demands could also help explain the fact that the specific interests of LGBTQ people are not taken into consideration within the general movement. This double paradox must be reversed for LGBTQ rights to be recognized as legitimate and fundamental components of an equitable social justice in Africa, rather than the current two-speed system, and for LGBTQ individuals to consider themselves full-fledged citizens who should be interested in all social, political and economic matters relevant to their environment. This is why, since its creation, Queer African Youth Network (QAYN) is engaged in the construction of a strong LGBTQ movement in West Africa and Cameroon, with a constructive political vision conscious of the region’s specific challenges. In 2014, QAYN published a report mapping the social justice movement in West Africa and Cameroon, which led to the following conclusions:

- LGBTQ people are not visible enough and there is a significant lack of awareness when it comes to violations of their rights, which could explain social justice actors’ low level of engagement when it comes to integrating LGBTQ issues in their agenda.

Social justice activists perceive homosexual orientation and gender identity as deliberate choices, rather than parts of their life that queer people eventually come to terms with. This perception seems to be the source of the intolerance towards LGBTQ populations because for these activists, it is incomprehensible why LGBTQ people choose to engage in what they consider to be acts against nature.

The discrimination against LGBTQ people within the social justice movement is an act of injustice on the part of social justice actors. In any case, they could lose their credibility and legitimacy as defenders of fundamental human rights.

Based on those conclusions, the report recommended the following:

- The implementation of an awareness-raising strategy on LGBTQ rights for social justice actors
- The organization of formal conversations within traditional civil society organizations on LGBTQ rights so as to objectively evaluate the position to adopt towards the demands of LGBTQ people.

In accordance with these recommendations, QAYN submitted a proposal to Open Society Foundation (OSF) and received financial support for the implementation of a project to support the development of a social justice movement in favor of LGBTQ populations.

The development of such an initiative, implemented on a regional scale, is a first: for QAYN, its implementation not only resulted in activities but also in valuable learnings on the expectations and motivations of civil society activists in West Africa as well as on the political, social and economic dynamics affecting the movement.

This document is a summary of this movement building initiative, with a critical analysis of the different processes, successes as well as the reluctances observed over the course of the project.
Definition of key concepts

Social Movement
Depending on the field (politics or sociology), there are several definitions of what constitutes a social movement. Here, we will consider the sociological definition according to which a social movement is a set of informal networks of organizations and isolated actors, built on solidarity and shared values, who rally around specific issues using various forms of protest.

Social justice
Social justice is a political and moral principle aiming at equality of rights and collective solidarity, which would enable a just and fair distribution of resources, material or symbolic, among members of society.

Social justice movement for LGBTQ rights
Based on the previous two definitions, a social justice movement should be understood, in this context, as a set of actions carried out by formal or informal networks of organizations or isolated actors sharing the sacred principles of human rights, and advocating equality regardless of one’s gender identity/expression and sexual orientation.

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(2) Della Porta D. et Diani M., Social movements : An introduction.
(3) http://www.toupie.org/Dictionnaire/Justice_sociale.htm
Description of the process

This study will analyze the different phases of the project implementation:

• The situational study: it allowed us to identify actors involved in social justice advocacy in Francophone West Africa and assess the importance given to LGBTQ rights in social justice movements. The results enabled us to target participants and determine what topics the dialogues should focus on.

• The organization of dialogues at the national level: these workshops brought together traditional social justice advocates (human rights movements, women’s organizations, organizations combatting HIV, youth organizations), identity-based organizations as well as independent LGBTQ activists. The objective was to promote the integration of LGBTQ issues in the general social justice movement.

• The development of tools: two toolboxes on the mobilization of LGBTQ individuals and collaboration with other social justice activists were created in order to support the application of resolutions made during dialogues.

• The organization of an exchange workshop at the regional level: to support the movement on a sub-regional level, a workshop brought together participants from the different sub-regional gatherings to share their experience, build relations at the sub-regional level and more importantly, implement a sub-regional advocacy plan with specific strategies applicable at the national level which would contribute to the operationalization of an action unit between LGBTQ organizations and traditional civil society actors in favor of LGBTQ rights.

• The organization of a boot camp: the main weaknesses identified during the national and regional gatherings were related to the participants’ inadequate political analysis competencies and their inability to articulate pertinent demands and arguments. Thus, a boot camp was organized to improve the skills of LGBTQ activists and introduce a political agenda to their current strategies. This would enable them to position themselves within larger social justice movements.
The sequencing of activities can be analyzed not only on the basis of the activities in themselves, but also in the implementation process of each activity. Activities were designed understanding the importance of prior knowledge of the region and the countries’ realities. In addition to the mapping of social justice activists, which enabled us to identify participants for the social justice movement building project, surveys were also carried out to identify participants’ needs and plan the subsequent gatherings.

Through a better understanding of social justice actors and their expectations, we were able to develop activities supporting a reflection process based on the actors’ varying levels of understanding and perception. This approach aimed at raising awareness on different issues by providing tools to guide social justice actors on ways to integrate LGBTQ rights in their advocacy work, and on how LGBTQ activists could collaborate with the larger social justice movement.

The facilitation methods employed during these meetings were an important factor in this process. Indeed, rather than a vertical facilitation, we opted for an approach whereby participants and facilitators worked together to create an environment favorable for reflection and took advantage of opportunities to question their current considerations and perceptions.

Flexibility in programming allowed the content of activities to be adapted to lessons learned and weaknesses identified throughout the process. We chose to focus our efforts on participants’ expectations rather than the requirements of the funding partner (OSF) or the leading organization (QAYN).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successes</th>
<th>Areas for improvement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Project designed based on the knowledge and expectations of participants</td>
<td>• Low level of political awareness of some participants compared to the program’s expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Coaching and support during reflections on the endogenous dynamic (traditional African cultures) of sexual identities</td>
<td>• Tight schedule, giving participants little time to process information gathered during sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Flexibility in programming by taking into consideration lessons learned throughout the process</td>
<td>• Insufficient vulgarization of tools and lack of a monitoring system to follow-up on their implementation</td>
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<td>• High attendance rate and strong participation in discussions, partly due to the high quality of facilitation</td>
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**Recommendations**

• Integrate political reflection activities in the action plans of organizations and/or provide support to independent activists for similar initiatives

• Implement a system of support for a more practical utilization of tools
Analysis of project results

The emergence of a LGBTQ activist community

The emergence of a community with shared values is an important step in the construction and development of a movement, which was our main priority. Throughout the process, our focus was on fostering an environment favorable to networking and the creation of virtual discussion groups. As one activist put it: “this program created strong dynamics among LGBTQ actors who managed to keep in touch”. These connections were maintained mainly through social media networks where activists shared their daily lives, discussed lived experiences relative to their identities and sexual orientations, and organized events.

The promotion of shared values was translated through an emphasis on understanding concepts of gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, and LGBTQ rights.

However, despite a relative awareness of those rights, members did not always share the same values for the community as a whole to become stronger in its advocacy efforts.

“Most of those at the forefront of queer activism are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many take significant risks to bring change in their communities, but the growing feeling of entitlement to financial incentives is destroying our service ethic”. Indeed, for many members of the community, financial benefits like per diems, and travel opportunities take priority over their commitment to defending their own rights.

These two challenges not only undermine group cohesion during the movement building process, but also take participants’ focus away from implementing resolutions agreed upon during gatherings.

Successes
• Political awareness of issues related to the promotion of sexual diversity
• Creation of formal and informal connections between activists in the region

Areas for improvement
• Significant conflicts within the LGBTQ community regarding issues unconstructive to the movement
• Influence of other financial partners with different visions and approaches, and predefined positioning agendas

Recommendations
• Promote a specific set of values among members of the LGBTQ movement
• Encourage political awareness-raising and the creation of connections between activists

The engagement of several actors from various advocacy movements

“One individual or organization doesn’t make a movement” mentioned one of the group facilitators. Demands reach the level of “movement” when they are taken up by a group of actors, organized or not, working together or independently regardless of their respective fields of work (politics, civil society, journalists, artists, etc.).

This initiative aimed to achieve this by bringing together independent LGBTQ activists and LGBTQ organizations. The project was very cautious of ensuring the representation of different identities in these gatherings:

- By bringing together LGBTQ actors with non-LGBTQ actors (traditional human rights advocates, women organizations, groups promoting access to healthcare),
- By connecting independent bloggers
- By seeking the contribution of resource people throughout the process.

However, some non-LGBTQ organizations were reluctant to participate in our dialogues. At best, some non-LGBTQ participants partook in our activities but were not willing to explicitly commit on behalf of their organizations, even though they were meant to represent said organizations.

Our hope that these participants could serve as spokespersons in their respective organizations and support the integration of LGBTQ rights in their organizations’ advocacy work thus never came to reality.

The project failed to capitalize on initiatives carried out by other financial and technical partners or even associate itself with certain types of partners. Even though QAYN had the political vision of supporting the social justice movement in the region, which was not necessary in line with the vision of certain partners, it also failed to take advantage of collaboration opportunities to demonstrate the validity of its approach and vision. Consequently, the movement building process that QAYN initiated remained an isolated initiative, which significantly reduced its potential to influence the larger social justice movement.

Successes
- Awareness of gender diversity in the makeup of participants
- Connections between organizations and independent and multidisciplinary activists
- Involvement of non-LGBTQ social justice organizations

Areas for improvement
- Non-incitement of discussions within non-LGBTQ organizations on the issues of sexual diversity
- Lack of collaboration with other initiatives and/or lack of implication of other financial and technical partners supporting the development of the movement in the region

Recommendations
- Implement a strategy to promote conversations on issues of sexual diversity within non-LGBTQ organizations
- Reinforce communication among partners supporting the development of a LGBTQ movement in the region in order to promote synergistic initiatives
The implementation of multifaceted advocacy initiatives

The involvement of several partners in a movement has the advantage of instigating multifaceted advocacy initiatives, each with their own potential for impact, and which can, overall, lead to valuable change. This is why, during conversations, participants were invited to elaborate plans to strengthen collaboration and initiate advocacy actions. Consequently, the community currently has targeted approaches at the national and sub-regional levels for strong initiatives in favor of LGBTQ rights. However, the implementation of these advocacy actions is mitigated. Indeed, civil society organizations in the region generally find it difficult to embrace initiatives that they did not start. The initiating organization thus ends up filling in every role and assuming all responsibilities. Our movement building initiative was not immune to this reality, but additional reasons are worth noting: low level of focus or low participants’ capacity to define their advocacy priorities, poor adherence of non-LGBTQ activists, insufficient vulgarization of tools, insufficient monitoring of the implementation of advocacy resolutions.

Successes

- Elaboration of national advocacy action plans as well as a general sub-regional strategy

Areas for improvement

- Mitigated implementation of the national and sub-regional advocacy plans
- Lack of monitoring and support from QAYN

Recommendations

- Support regional social justice movement partners in the implementation of national and sub-regional strategies.
Analytical summary of the project strengths

The main strengths of this initiative were a good understanding of the context prior to the project launch, its inclusivity, flexibility as well as empowerment of participants.

Understanding the current context started from the mapping of social justice advocacy actors, which enabled us to identify the potential contribution of the project in building a social justice movement.

Inclusivity was reflected by the involvement of different gender identities and types of activists likely to contribute to the promotion of LGBTQ rights.

Our flexibility was apparent through our continuous attention to participants’ needs and analysis of lessons learned throughout the process to adapt the content of activities.

Lastly, participants had the discretion to think about the meaning of their engagement, identify areas they would like to get involved with and define their own agenda based on their realities.

Analytical summary of the project weaknesses

The main weakness of this initiative resided in the lack of deep appreciation for shared values within identity-based organizations and among those who identified as their leaders. Given the precarious context in which many operate and the ongoing race towards financial resources, material and economic considerations have taken precedence over political engagement. Thus, the initiative was not able to create a strong and committed LGBTQ community capable of attracting other social justice activists toward their goals.

The reluctance of these other social justice actors, an important weakness of the project, could have been mitigated if a unified and engaged LGBTQ community had been able to exploit relationships with the few actors who were already on board.

But it must be recognized that the LGBTQ community is sometimes a reflection of the system in which it evolves and against which it forges its resilience.

Lastly, there was a lack of agreement among partners supporting LGBTQ actors in the region. This lack of agreement among partners, each with their different approaches, exacerbated the divide among LGBTQ activists.
Analytical summary of the project recommendations

Given the main weakness of the project, it would be appropriate for next efforts to concentrate on strengthening political engagement within the LGBTQ community itself, before seeking external social justice partners. This strengthening of our political engagement should not, however, only come from organizations, but also from individuals within the community, with the collective motivation to create a better world for LGBTQ people. Reinforcing leaders’ engagement will facilitate the establishment of stronger identity-based organizations who will become credible interlocutors to mobilize social justice actors external to the LGBTQ community. However, this can only be successful in a serene and harmonious atmosphere among partners supporting LGBTQ actors in the region.

QAYN, as the initiating organization of this innovative project, must engage in an internal reflection in order to fully play its role as a catalyst for the creation of a LGBTQ movement in the region. It must understand that building a social movement is a lengthy process, and that its role calls for the creation of, within itself, a mechanism of thorough and proactive monitoring to support activists and guide the supporting partners.
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Crédits

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