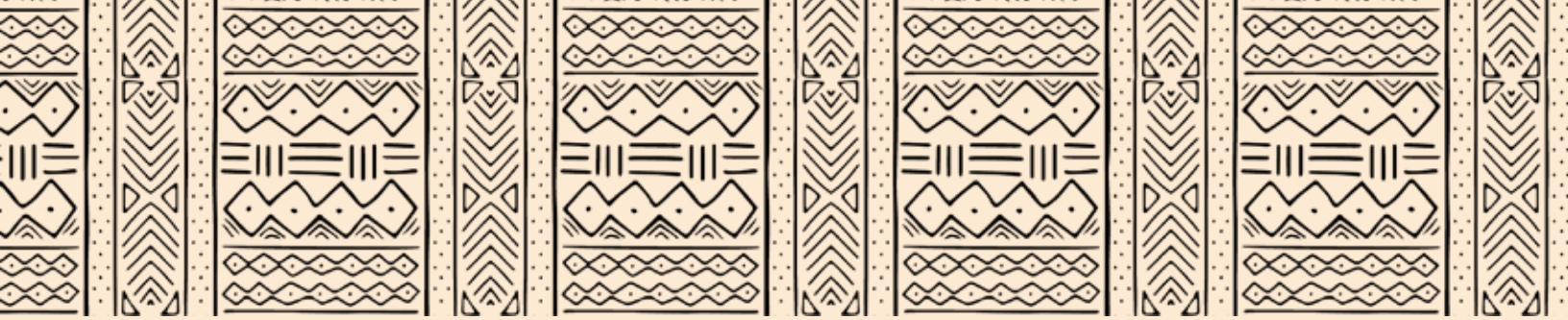


# FLAMBOYANT MOVEMENTS





# FLAMBOYANT MOVEMENTS

"the data, successes, and voices captured in this report tell a story  
of resistance, light, and beauty."

- B. Caroline Kouassiaman

**Our Annual Report - 2023**





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# We are Flamboyant

It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that we present this report for ISDAO's year 2023. Through the stories shared in this report, you'll notice a recurring theme: the cultivation of spaces. Spaces for convening, for being in community, for learning and exchanging, for caring for one another and ourselves.

This report tells the story of how communities are not only creating and developing spaces, but also reclaiming and occupying spaces, including ones that haven't always been built with us in mind, like the radio, courtrooms, family gatherings, and large international conferences. Through the leadership and engagement of our partners, these spaces are evolving to be more inclusive, diverse, and responsive to community needs.

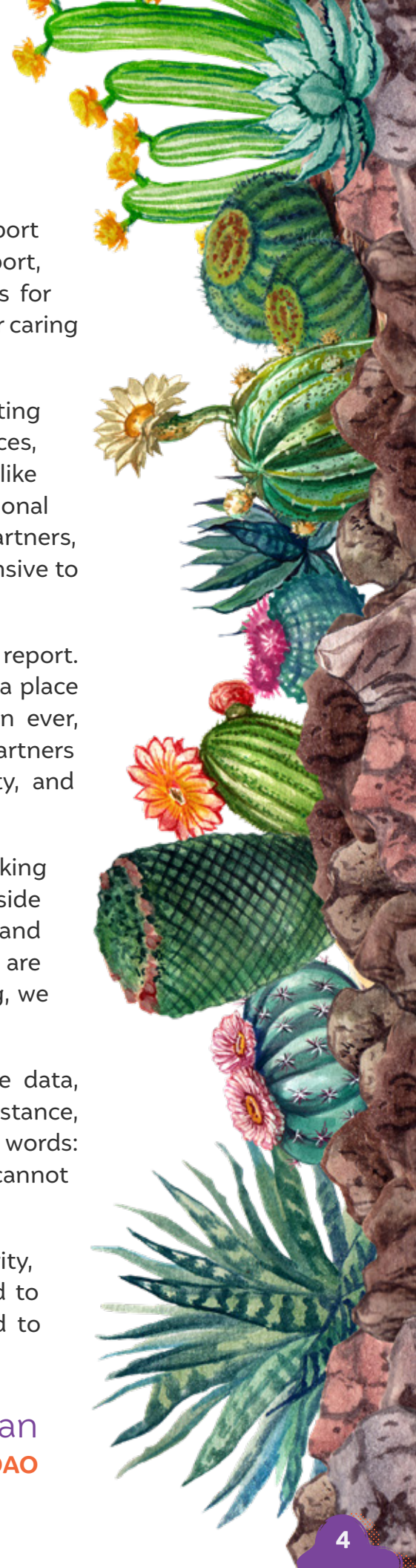
The flamboyant tree serves as a powerful symbol for this year's report. The flamboyant tree provides shade, a place for gathering, and is a place of beauty. At a time when such spaces are more essential than ever, the flamboyant tree embodies the very essence of what our partners are striving to create—spaces that provide comfort, community, and inspiration.

In the face of growing backlash, proposed criminalizing laws, shrinking civic space, and attacks on human rights and civil liberties—alongside the myriad of other impacts from the actions of antirights and antigender movements across West Africa—our communities are resilient. We are connecting, we are gathering, we are strategizing, we are celebrating, we are loving, and we are beautiful.

In the face of the many regressive developments in 2023, the data, successes, and voices captured in this report tell a story of resistance, light, and beauty. They embody the spirit of Martin Luther King Jr's words: Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.

In the face of darkness, it is the collective leadership, vision, solidarity, and boldness of movements that push the light in. We are proud to contribute to and resource this vital work, and we are delighted to share our 2023 journey with you.

B. Caroline Kouassiaman  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ISDAO





## The Flamboyant Tree

*We chose the symbol of the flamboyant tree to represent the state of the movement, as of 2023.*

*Delonix regia, also known as the Royal Poinciana or the Flame of the Forest, is a powerful example of the resilience, hope, strength, and beauty of our community.*

*Its vibrant red flowers are considered symbols of celebration, exuberance, and a sense of joy that cannot be stifled. Its wide canopy provides shade to all those under it, making it a valuable choice for public spaces and gardens.*

*With deep roots that provide stability and sustenance, it is able to thrive even in the harshest conditions.*

*Most importantly, the flamboyant tree can bloom from its dead ends.*

**This means the tree,  
like our community,  
never really dies.**

# We Look Back

As an organization committed to strengthening the LGBTQI movement in West Africa, 2023 was a year of both celebration and concern.

Over the last four years, we have seen a rise in targeted violence against LGBTQI persons and organizations across our nine focal countries Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo – even as they have grown in visibility.

In some countries, this violence is fueled by social and political insecurity and instability, then magnified by the media and often spurred on by religious leaders.

Anti-LGBTQI violence has taken a variety of forms: being publicly denounced, having homes and offices ransacked, detention and evictions, increased restrictions of gender expression, and the adoption of ever more stringent anti-rights legislation. In addition, many people have been forced to live in hiding or subjected to the surveillance of their communications and travel. And trans and nonbinary people with more assertive gender expressions are often most at risk.

But last year also saw progress within the movement, with grassroots engagement growing in scale and spreading beyond the region's capital cities and major urban centers. Organizational focus also broadened to look at issues in the intersex community, as well as subjects of aging, generational inclusion, faith and spirituality, and even digital outreach. The presence of independent activists who are not affiliated with specific organizations but who contribute to the effort with their expertise and their material, psychological, and financial support has also helped.



Our work remains critical. Activists and movements need flexible funding to support their missions and resist anti-rights repressions by fundamentalists and conservatives. This is why, in 2023, we increased the resources going to the movements we work with. We supported and amplified the participation of West African LGBTQI groups and organizations in global and regional strategic advocacy spaces, and we published several groundbreaking reports and resources.

Internally, our team grew in number and diversity and, as our Interim Governing Body ended its tenure, we began recruiting our Governance Board. We also publicly disclosed the identity of our Activist Grant Making Panel AGMP, as part of our commitment to transparency and accountability.

We not only mobilized and distributed resources to our partners to strengthen and build the movement, but we also helped them find moments of joy and celebration. In the face of adversity, simply existing joyfully can be an act of resistance—a radical spark capable of igniting transformative change.

# We Fund

In 2023, Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ISDAO) increased the overall resources going to the movements we work with. **We funded 129 grants totaling over USD 2.5 million** to organizations and activists that serve the LGBTQI, People who use Drugs (PWUD), and Sex Worker movements through five portfolios: Regional, Love Alliance, ASANKA, Strategic, and Resilience. **This was a 16.5% increase from 2022.** ISDAO's grants empowered partner organizations to undertake a wide range of activities, from capacity building and service delivery to stakeholder engagements, advocacy, and community mobilization.

Recognizing that a true commitment to social change requires longterm investment, we introduced multi-year grant applications at the regional level last year. Our goal is to support both existing work and new initiatives within the movement while addressing the movement's request for longterm support to build lasting impact.

*"...a true commitment to social change requires longterm investment"*



# Regional Grants

Our regional grants refer to our annual portfolio of grants awarded by our Activist Grant Making Panel (AGMP) to LGBTQI-led groups, organizations, and networks in our focal countries. These grants are awarded through an open call for proposals and the funds can apply either to projects or to core operations, such as paying rent or salaries.

Organizations that receive these grants also get an additional USD 1,000 in funding called the RESPOND Fund, which is for responding to safety, security, and community emergencies.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- We received 132 eligible applications with requests totaling USD 2,154,576.73.
- 55 grants were awarded totaling USD 860,522.99 including the supplemental RESPOND Fund.
- 50% of the grants went to organizations and groups led by Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer (LBQ) women, Trans, and Intersex people.
- 55% of grants went to organizations/groups working in francophone countries.
- 77% of the grants were renewals of grants from the previous year, ensuring the sustainability of their work.

## REGIONAL GRANTS BREAKDOWN BY COUNTRY:

COUNTRY	NO. OF ELIGIBLE APPLICATIONS	NO. OF GRANTS APPROVED
BÉNIN	20	15
BURKINA FASO	9	6
CÔTE D'IVOIRE	19	6
GHANA	13	6
LIBERIA	8	4
MALI	2	2
SENEGAL	6	2
NIGERIA	48	12
TOGO	7	2
REGIONAL ORG	2	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>55</b>





# Love Alliance Grants

Through the Love Alliance Initiative, ISDAO strengthens and fosters more inclusive movements that advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights. Under this initiative, we provide funding to groups and organizations led by communities of LGBTQI people, Sex Workers, and People Who Use Drugs in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. The grants are awarded by our Local Activist Grant Making Panels (LAGMP) in each country.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- ✿ We received 86 eligible applications totaling USD 4,020,263.53, with 67 applications originating from Nigeria, and 19 from Burkina Faso
- ✿ The LAGMPs approved 32 grants - 13 in Burkina Faso, and 19 in Nigeria. Most of the grants approved (80%) were renewals from the previous year, ensuring the sustainability of their work.
- ✿ In addition, we made grants to 10 networks (7 in Nigeria and 3 in Burkina Faso) and 9 Joint Movements (6 in Nigeria and 3 in Burkina Faso).
- ✿ We also made 6 strategic grants totaling USD 188,000 to sub-regional groups through a restricted call.
- ✿ Burkina Faso's grants totaled USD 496,532 while Nigeria's grants totaled USD 865,999.63, noting that we received far more applications from Nigeria.



# ASANKA Fund

The ASANKA Creative Initiatives Fund was created to support innovative advocacy projects that use creative mediums such as film, literature, photography, radio, visual arts, digital campaigns, and more, to advocate for the rights of LGBTQI communities in our focal countries. ASANKA is a unique fund because it offers funding opportunities not only to LGBTQI organizations but also to individual activists to support their creative projects.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- 79 concept notes were received - 41 from individuals/activists, and 38 from groups/organizations.
- 9 grants totaling USD 45,000 were awarded - 6 to individuals/activists, and 3 to groups/organizations.

## Strategic and Resilience Grants

Strategic and Resilience grants go towards initiatives that do not fall under our other major grants, but which we are interested in funding because they support our overall mission. Strategic grants can fund activities such as expanding the participation of West African activists in key conferences or training opportunities, or the production of publications, while resilience grants go towards broader initiatives that help sustain organizational, community, or movement resilience. These non-competitive grants are internally identified. ISDAO's program team determines funding recipients based on observed needs within the movement.

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- 2 Resilience Grants, totaling USD 10,000.
- 5 Strategic Grants, totaling USD 49,500.



# We Support

Our mission has always been to provide access to flexible resources that enable our grantee partners to shape, drive, build, and strengthen the movement. To do this effectively, we are constantly learning. Recognizing the different forms of organizing within the region allows us to meet our various movement partners where they are and ensure that our resources are responding to their needs.

As part of this ongoing commitment to learning from our partners' work, we visited 76 partners in nine countries. We also organized grantee

partner forums in Mali, Senegal, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. These forums provided a unique opportunity for us and our partners to learn from each other and build collaborative relationships.

Strengthening movements is a long-term investment that requires supporting new and existing initiatives. In 2023, we amplified the participation of West African LGBTQI movements in global and regional strategic advocacy spaces by supporting activists to attend and meaningfully participate at various conferences, including:

- The NGO Committee on the Status of Women (NGO CSW67)
- Changing Faces, Changing Spaces (CFCS)
- The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)
- The Women Deliver Conference
- The Pan African ILGA Conference
- Adventures Live Festival: Sexual Utopia
- The International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA)

While these advocacy efforts have been largely successful, there have been some challenges. Repressions aimed at LGBTQI+ groups have meant that contributions from our staff and partners have not always been welcomed.



## Some Conferences Attended

### CHANGING FACES, CHANGING SPACES (CFCS) – Botswana

Four team members attended and convened an informal gathering for our grantee partners to meet and connect with other activists from the West African LGBTQI and Sex Worker communities.

### UNIVERSITÉ D'ÉTÉ FÉMINISTE D'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST ET DU CENTRE – Dakar, Senegal

ISDAO staff participated in a panel discussion on funding mechanisms and approaches for marginalized women's groups, including LBQ women, sex workers and women who use drugs.

### ADVENTURES LIVE FESTIVAL: SEXUAL UTOPIA – Nairobi, Kenya

We provided support to make the space more inclusive by providing interpretation and translation in French, and for the attendance of francophone LGBTQI and Sex Worker activists.

### ICASA – Harare, Zimbabwe

We provided support to make the space more inclusive by providing interpretation and translation in French, and for the attendance of francophone LGBTQI and Sex Worker activists.



# Women Deliver 2023 Conference

The Women Deliver conference took place in Kigali, Rwanda from July 17 to 20, 2023. Held every three years, it is one of the world's largest gatherings for advancing gender equality. It is a space for networking and advocacy on programs and policies that contribute to the health, rights, and well-being of women and girls.

This was the first time we had attended this conference as an institution, joining several of our partners who were present in the space as delegates, panelists, and organizers of side events. We aimed to strengthen our alliances with women's and feminist movements and share our knowledge about philanthropy, grant-making, and working with partners from the region. We also wanted to campaign for the inclusion and representation of LGBTIQ+ groups

and activists, countering their historically low level of participation in the space

Before the conference, ISDAO was part of a collective that engaged with the organizers to reflect and strategize around questions of LGBTIQI inclusion, safety, and security. We co-hosted a Community and Networking Space, with AmplifyChange Fund, UHAI EASHRI, and Colombia Diversa to create a space for over 120 LGBTIQI individuals participants attending the conference to exchange and discuss. Moreover, ISDAO staff participated as panelists and moderators on sessions related to anti-gender movements, shifting power in grantmaking and strengthening community resistance and resilience in the face of anti-LGBTIQI threats.



# Pan-African ILGA (PAI)

From the 31st of July to the 4th of August 2023, ISDAO joined LGBTQI movement actors, donors, and stakeholders from across Africa and beyond at the 6th Pan African ILGA conference in Mauritius. The event was the first in-person PAI conference since 2018 after the 2020 conference in Ghana was canceled due to several factors, including COVID-19 travel restrictions and denunciation campaigns by anti-gender actors.

The Pan-African Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex International (PAI) is the African branch of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Association (ILGA), a federation of organizations working to improve human rights based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics.

ISDAO participated in the event's donor pre-conference, where we hosted a session titled

**"Funding Communities on the Move,"** discussing how donors can rethink emergency funding and adapt their funding to better respond to LGBTQI communities experiencing displacement (including internally) or forced to migrate to other parts of the region or continent. We also spoke in sessions examining the anti-gender movement, improving funding in Francophone countries, and improving LGBTQI data and knowledge for the movement. We helped facilitate a conversation and connections between funders and activists from Central Africa who are working to create an activist-led fund for Central Africa (Collectif Mpongo).

Through a strategic grant, we supported PAI to significantly enhance the participation of marginalized West African activists, such as young activists, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, and trans and intersex individuals, in the conference.



# NGO CSW

In March 2023, ISDAO co-hosted and co-organized three parallel sessions in the NGO Committee on the Status of Women (NGO CSW) Forum, in partnership with UHAI EASHRI. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UN CSW) is the world's main policy-making international body dedicated exclusively to the promotion of gender equality and the advancement of women. The official UN CSW forum takes place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and the NGO forum is a gathering of civil society actors that runs parallel to it consisting of hundreds of events across two weeks.

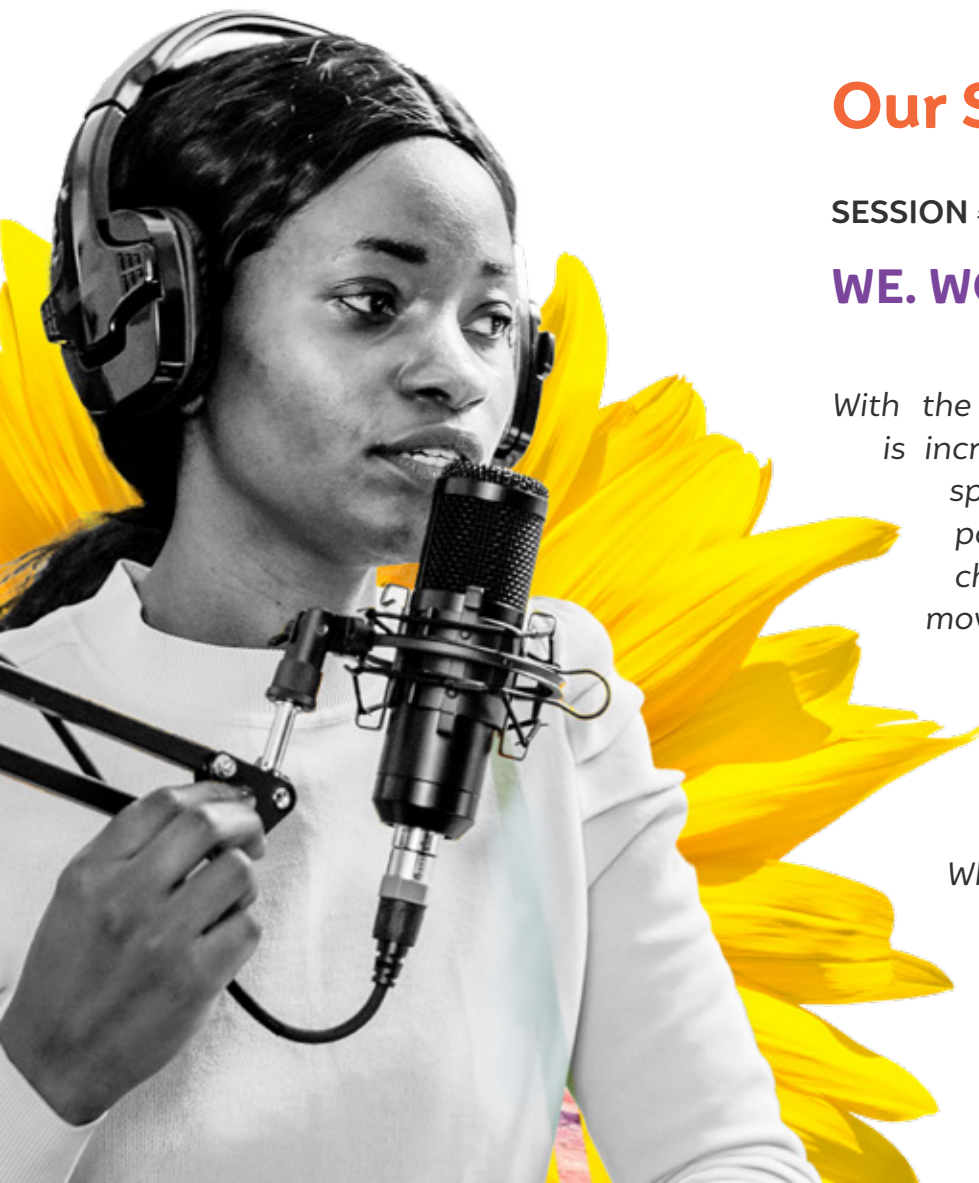
We recognize that too often spaces such as UN CSW are not very inclusive of - and can sometimes be unsafe for - communities that should be a part of the discussion, including LGBQ women, trans persons, intersex persons, and sex workers. In addition, our communities have often focused on global advocacy spaces related to HIV/AIDS. Therefore, our participation was part of a process of visibility and amplification of the work, voices, and commitments of our partners in West Africa. We wanted to identify opportunities for connection, inclusion, and solidarity for our partners within these advocacy spaces.

## Our Sessions

SESSION #1 (VIRTUAL)

### WE. WOMEN. WEBACTIVISTS

*With the closure of civic spaces, organizing is increasingly taking place online. Digital spaces such as blogs, vlogs and podcasts offer opportunities to change popular narratives and build movements. And they are transforming feminist engagement. How do these new forms of engagement contribute to inclusion in an African context characterized by limited literacy and digital access? What are the benefits, drawbacks, and limitations? Voices from West, East and Central Africa paint a picture of feminist digital activism.*



## SESSION #2 (IN PERSON)

### WHO IS AFRAID OF GENDER?

*Anti-gender opposition movements are spreading across Africa undermining women's rights gains. In 2022, ISDAO and a team of regional consultants conducted a study on these movements to understand their impact in West Africa. We presented the results of this study and facilitated a discussion with African feminist and women's rights activists on the implications of this opposition on our ability to advance gender equality, comprehensive sex.*

## SESSION #3 (IN PERSON)

### BAD WOMEN, WAITING AT THE GATE

*While the intersectionality of gender equality struggles is a shared principle, in reality it is still difficult for women who are queer, lesbian, bisexual, trans, rural, and sex workers to integrate into feminist organizations and spaces in West and East Africa. In this session, we created a framework for organizations that have succeeded in the challenge of inclusion to share their experiences with those for whom this is still a challenge.*





# ICASA

Last year, ISDAO supported West African activists, particularly grantee partners of Love Alliance grants, to attend the 22nd edition of the International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA). The conference, held in partnership with the government of Zimbabwe, took place in Harare from December 4 to 9, 2023.

The annual conference is an important opportunity to highlight Africa's unique response to the HIV epidemic and is a major event in the health sector. Though it is a space for stakeholders to come together and review, strategize, and improve on efforts to eradicate HIV and STIs in Africa, it has historically been dominated by the policy sector and mainstream organizations such as the UN, the World Health Organization, and ECOWAS.

In recent years, more efforts have been made to invite members of the "**key population movement**," activists and advocates from the grassroots organizations who work on the frontlines of the epidemic, to share their thoughts on how the fight against HIV is progressing. However, incidents of discrimination against some of these groups, such as LGBTQI persons and sex workers, show that more work towards true collaboration remains.



# It happened at ICASA

## DANIEL'S STORY

My name is Daniel Adams, a Program Officer with ISDAO and the country focal person for our Love Alliance program in Nigeria. Since joining ISDAO in 2022, I've been supporting advocacy, movement building, and organizing led by LGBTQI movements, PWUDs, and sex workers in Nigeria. My attendance at the 2023 International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) in Harare, Zimbabwe, was a stark reminder of the challenges faced by these communities.

ISDAO supported five Love Alliance grantee-partners to participate in ICASA, representing LGBTQI groups, sex workers, and people who use drugs from Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Our goal was to amplify their voices and contribute to meaningful discussions. The Love Alliance consortium also organized a satellite session at ICASA, and we maintained a dedicated engagement booth to connect with our communities. While previous ICASAs had shown promise of progress in inclusivity, with grassroots activists and organizations being able to participate meaningfully in the program, the 2023 conference marked a significant step backward.

The conference was marred by a series of disturbing incidents that targeted and discriminated against key populations. From the opening ceremony, where a GBQ-MSM group's awareness campaign was abruptly shut down by security agents, to the ongoing harassment of attendees throughout the event, it was clear that the rights and dignity of these communities were being disregarded. Security personnel confiscated promotional materials with messaging they disapproved of, and there were even instances of individuals being pressured to change their attire.



## DANIEL ADAMS

PROGRAM OFFICER WITH ISDAO

During a session where abstracts for upcoming papers were being presented, a paper written by a trans activist on a trans-related topic was deliberately excluded. The presenter read the title of the abstract and then stated, **"This person is not here, so we are moving on to the next abstract,"** even though the author was present in the hall.

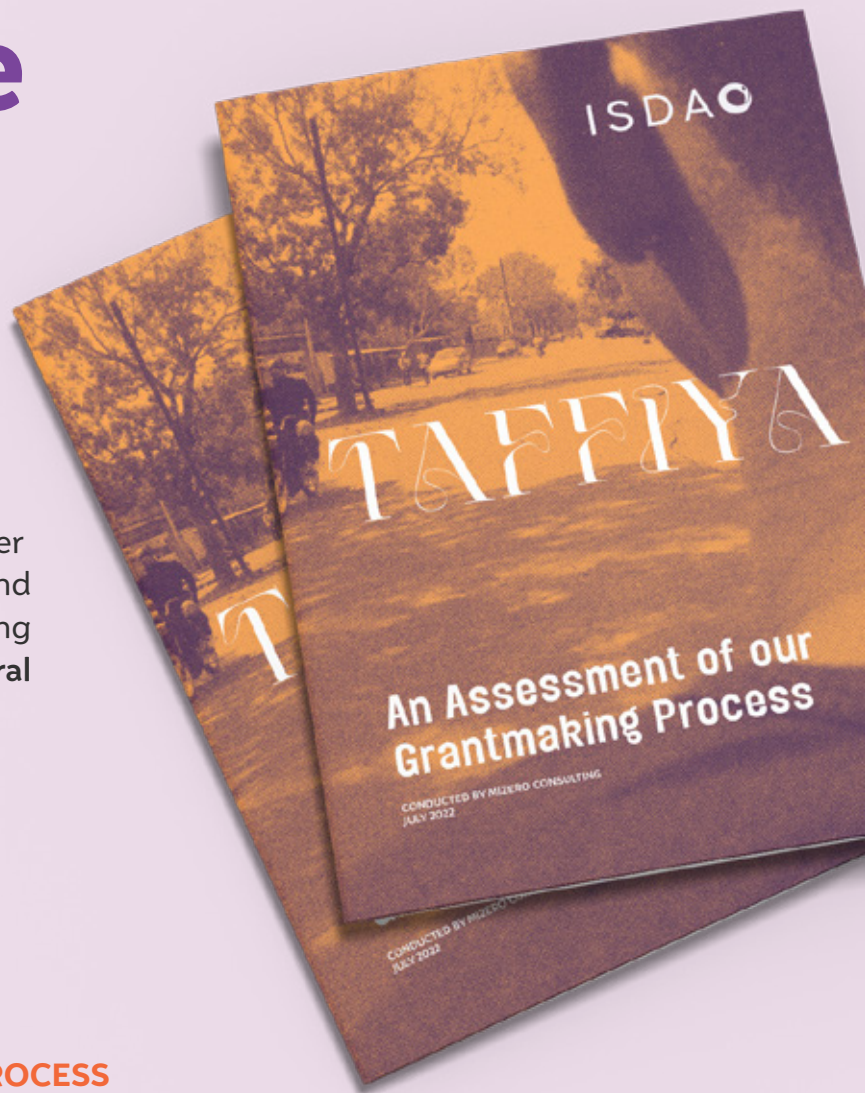
These disrupted events were not spontaneous; they had all been pre-approved before the conference. Their deliberate disruptions created a hostile and discouraging environment for attendees representing key populations

It was an eye-opening experience and a reminder that there is still a lot of progress to be made and that even in the spaces that are ostensibly made for us, we will be shut down and discriminated against.

Despite the obstacles, we still advocated for our communities. It is crucial that future ICASA conferences prioritize the safety and dignity of all participants, especially those from marginalized communities.

# We Produce Knowledge

As a leading voice in the movement, ISDAO is dedicated to creating and sharing knowledge that strengthens our communities and builds a more strategic, resilient movement. Our resources empower activists, organizations, donors, academics, and policymakers to deepen their understanding of critical issues. In 2023, we published several significant resources, including:



## Taffiya

### AN ASSESSMENT OF OUR GRANTMAKING PROCESS

*Committed to a participatory approach, we initiated an assessment study in 2023 to evaluate the effectiveness of our grantmaking process. After three successful funding cycles since our first grant cycle in 2018, we sought to understand how to enhance our approach. What lessons could we learn? What areas could we improve? By understanding our partners' challenges and aspirations, we aimed to identify areas for improvement, enhance our support, and ultimately increase our impact.*

*For the study, an independent researcher interviewed ISDAO's Grantee Partners, Staff, Activist Grant Making Panel, and Interim Governance Body. The consultation also included organizations that had never received funding from ISDAO. The findings highlighted*

*areas for improvement, such as increasing available funding levels, adopting a funding renewal mechanism, and providing multi-year support. Non-funded organizations suggested that ISDAO enhance communication about the grantmaking process and offer feedback to organizations whose applications are not approved. Respondents also recommended streamlining the grantmaking process, adopting an online platform, and clarifying the role of the AGMP to improve overall communication.*

*The insights from this report enable us to learn from our experiences and better align our work with our community's needs. We have already begun implementing some changes based on this evaluation.*

# Doundou

## MAPPING LGBTQI COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IN WEST AFRICA (SUMMARY REPORT)

Published in 2022, Doundou was the first major study mapping LGBTQ organizing across West Africa since 2016. It highlighted the many changes to the movement that had occurred in the sub-region over the previous five years, including the growth and diversifying of the movement and its leadership as well as expansion of approaches and areas of focus. This is in the face of attempts to further criminalize LGBTQI persons and the growth of political and social anti-rights movements that have impacted organizations and activists.

It also emphasized the ongoing problems faced by LGBTQ communities and individuals, from family rejection to human rights violations, organizational challenges, and difficulties in accessing funding – all of which continue to affect the movement's prospects for the future.

In 2023, we published an executive summary of Doundou which presents the data and findings of the research in a shorter, more easily understood format, to ensure that the resource is as accessible as possible.



# Q-Zine, Issue 15: Family

## A COLLABORATION

This special edition of Q-zine came from a "meeting of the minds" between the magazine and ISDAO to explore the role of family in African LGBTQI people's everyday lives.

This special edition of Q-zine came from a "meeting of the minds" between the magazine and ISDAO to explore the role of family in African LGBTQI people's everyday lives.

Anti-gender actors increasingly claim that the existence of and advocacy for LGBTQI people constitutes some of the biggest threats to traditional African society and family structures. And for many individuals, their families of birth have been sources of rejection, conflict, and trauma.

Yet, inspired by the activism we have seen across the region, including in our own lives, we wanted to tell other stories about LGBTQI African experiences of family. The result was an issue that collectively celebrates and affirms the ways in which we embody the essence of family while challenging, expanding, and deepening our understanding of what it means.

## Myria, Issue 2

### ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE LGBTQI MOVEMENT IN WEST AFRICA

Myria is a space we created where LGBTQI persons, activists, and allies in West Africa can gather for conversation on a range of topics relating to the community and the movement. It reflects a diversity of voices, experiences, and perspectives.

In this issue, we showcase some powerful essays on the theme of accountability within the movement. In particular, we ask how we have come to replicate within the movement systems of power in which many activists are afraid to speak out because they will be sanctioned and silenced. We also look at what is the responsibility of donors in holding movement actors accountable.





# We Celebrate

When one thinks of celebration, one tends to want to look for big, grandiose events like anniversaries and milestones. For us at ISDAO, we turn towards the people on the ground who work every day to support the movement, to constantly respond to the needs of the community, and to ensure that people and spaces are protected. They're the ones securing the release of arrested members and connecting those needing medical care with resources. Their dedication is the heart of what ISDAO celebrates. Despite the challenges, there were many opportunities for celebration throughout the year – even in the smallest gaps, even in the briefest moments, and in all the tiny slivers of space that we find for ourselves.

Here are a few that we would like to highlight:

## Where We Can All Be Free

### THE 2023 SEXUAL UTOPIA FESTIVAL

*The Sexual Utopia festival is an annual festival based on the long-running blog, Adventures from the Bedrooms of African Women. It has been billed as a sex-positive safe space where women (in all of their diversity) and gender non-conforming people from all over Africa can gather to share their stories, express their desires, and exchange ideas with each other. According to one of its creators, feminist author Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, it is a "space where people who believe in human rights can imagine a world where we are all free."*

The 5th edition of the festival was held from November 25 to 26, 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya, under the theme of **"Compelling Freedom and Liberation."** Though the last three editions of the festival have been hosted in Accra, Ghana, increased restrictions on LGBTQI expression in the country required moving it in the 4th edition.

**"Increasingly across the world today, not just on the African continent, we have seen far-right actors organize to push back against gains that feminists and queer people have made over decades, and we see a lot of these gains being threatened,"** noted Sekyiamah. **"And for me, that's a really, really important reason why this space and other sex-positive spaces need to be supported and maintained."**

For attendees such as Miss Lylie, a writer and the executive director of the WOMA platform, a digital medium dedicated to women and LGBTQ people, the festival was a much-needed respite from fear and social anxiety.

**"I need to talk about what I've experienced here to all the people I've left behind – to my team, to my partners – about how extraordinary it was to be in an inclusive place where you can freely say what you like to do or don't like to do without judgment, without someone telling you why and all that,"** she said.

For gay Ivorian activist and feminist Koffi Igor, the festival was a chance to imagine what a life free of social restrictions could be like.

**"We don't only speak English, we speak so many languages, and I knew that for this festival to be truly pan-African, we have to speak in multiple languages."**

**"For me, it would be to be free to greet my partner at the airport, for example, and give him a kiss like everyone else would,"** he said. **"Or to hold his hand and go into a restaurant and eat as a happy couple, without there being any prejudices or looks that could disturb us."**

ISDAO provided support for French interpretation and translation for speakers and guests to make the space more inclusive. We also supported the attendance of more Francophone West African LGBTQI activists, as well as ISDAO staff members. This meant the event was much more accessible and helped secure further funding said Sekyiamah.

**"We don't only speak English, we speak so many languages,"** she said. **"And I knew that for this festival to be truly pan-African, we have to speak in multiple languages. And so, this is only a first step."**



# Victories at Home and in Court

## HIRONDELLE CLUB BÉNIN

In many ways, violence is a defining factor for the Hironnelle Club Bénin, an association for the defense of human rights. The organization was created in 2010 when a father murdered his son after finding out that he was gay. The horrific act sent shockwaves throughout the LGBTQI community in the country and reinforced what was an already tense atmosphere.

Since then, the Hironnelle Club has worked towards the integration and acceptance of people with diverse gender and sexual identities into their families and their communities of origin. With the support of ISDAO, the organization developed the Association des Parents Friendly (APF), an awareness-raising program for parents of LGBTQI people. In

particular, it works with parents to mitigate their responses when they learn about their children's gender identity or sexual orientation.

**"Usually children are rejected or abandoned, and the children don't know where to go or what to do,"** said Ulrich Sourou, president of Hironnelle Club. **"We try to mediate, or act as mediators, to facilitate the parents accepting their children back into their home."**

Facilitators also address parents' questions about gender identity to reduce misgendering. Most importantly, parents learn that their child's sexuality is not something that they chose and discover more effective ways to discuss sexual health and reproductive rights.

With a reconciliation rate of 80%, according to Sourou, many of the parents in the program have gone on to become allies and spokespeople for the inclusion and defense of LGBTQI people. These parents often act as peer witnesses, using their own experiences to talk to other parents who may be struggling to accept their children's sexual orientation.

When integration isn't an option, though, Hironnelle Club has not been afraid to protect its community members. During a wave of violence against trans people in 2022, a member of the organization – a trans woman – was attacked by vigilantes who accused her of pretending to be a woman so that she could steal from them. The police were called to the scene, but instead of protecting her, the officers detained her.

**With a reconciliation rate of 80%, many of the parents in the program have gone on to become allies and spokespeople for the inclusion and defense of LGBTQI people.**





Hirondelle Club worked to secure the victim's release and prosecuted both the police officers and the attackers.

*"We obtained a ruling in favor of the person who was assaulted,"*

*"So, the people [who attacked her] were sentenced, and there was also some kind of sanction towards the police commissioner."*

*said Sourou*



It was a rare victory for the community. Although LGBTQI identity is not criminalized, rampant homophobia means that most violence directed against members of the community is unreported or ignored.

Yet, Luc Agblakou, the founder of Hirondelle Club, says more still needs to be done to educate law enforcement and the legal field about LGBTQI issues to bring the courts in line with the international and constitutional instruments already in place to protect human rights.

**"As defenders of sexual minorities, we need these kind of clear court rulings so that we can**

**act upon them. But we also understand that the lawyers of the opposing side are not educated on questions of sexual orientation and gender identity,"** said Agblakou. **"So, for the judges and all of the people at the level of the courts, there needs to be some education that needs to be done so that they know how to better apply the law."**

In the meantime, the activists of Hirondelle Club continue their remarkable commitment to mobilization, training, and advocacy, both at home and abroad, to secure the full rights of human dignity for the LGBTQI community in Bénin.

# A Working Celebration: Awawalé Festival 2023

## ONG GROMO

While many LGBTQI organizations work to secure the health, safety, and full human rights of their communities, ONG-GROMO, based in Cote d'Ivoire, adds one more dimension to its work. It promotes the financial empowerment of its members through entrepreneurship and professional integration.

To do this, the organization created the Awawalé festival, a weekend-long celebration of the talents and diversity of LGBTQI communities in the country. The festival, which translates to "living together" in the Bété language, was first held in 2021 as a forum for exchange and

conversation on issues of queer identity in Africa. Over the years, it has grown. Last year's festival took place in Abidjan from May 13 to 14 and featured a concert, short films, and clothing and jewelry stands, and attracted over 300 participants.

Other features of the event included the Conference for LGBTQI Visibility (colloquially known as The Council), a panel where LGBTQI activists, allies, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and specialists discuss the current concerns of the community.

*The organization created the Awawalé festival, a weekend-long celebration of the talents and diversity of LGBTQI communities in the country.*

*The festival, which translates to "living together" in the Bété language, was first held in 2021 as a forum for exchange and conversation on issues of queer identity in Africa.*



More than economic empowerment, the festival is part of the organization's larger mission to free Ivoirians from the legacies of colonialism which have left many unaware of the queer histories of French-speaking Africa.

**"When we talk about gender-based violence, we invite sociologists and experts from local universities," said Dibahi. "We explain to them that the people who attack us and who assault us are people who look like you. And it's mostly because people are not educated and are ignorant. We want to stress the fact that this ignorance is not African, it's not a reflection of our African heritage."**

Though LGBTQI identity is no longer officially criminalized in the country, homophobia, discrimination, and stigmatization are daily occurrences for LGBTQI people, and the perpetrators of these acts are rarely penalized. In fact, according to a study conducted by the organization, 70-80% of LGBTQI people in the Ivorian capital city have been the victims of homophobic acts.

As a result, movement activism in the country is relatively low-key. But when consultant Cedric Pena joined the ONG-GROMO team in 2019, he brought with him a more assertive approach learned from his time working in English-speaking contexts.

**"We are not even taking advantage of the fact that the French law is a bit in favor of allowing –especially in Cote d'Ivoire – people to be," said Pena. "It is true that we have to be careful. But it was interesting to be able to do that aggressive campaign for the festival. And it went well."**

Organizers harnessed the growing visibility of queer activists on social media sites like TikTok to conduct promotion campaigns for the event. They extended invitations to actors outside the LGBTQI community, including women's rights and religious organizations. And they launched the first edition of *Méléagbo*, a magazine aimed at highlighting the positive visibility of the Ivorian queer community, at the event.

The backlash was immediate, with other activists concerned that the campaign's visibility would endanger their communities.

**"A few days before the festival, we even considered canceling [it]. But thanks to the experience of our consultant, we were able to push through and hold this third edition. And we have to say that it was one of the best successes. It was one of the best events we've had,"** said Dibahi.

At the time of writing, plans were already underway for the 2024 festival. With ISDAO's support and commitments from organizations across West Africa, the upcoming festival will place a stronger emphasis on regional participation, particularly from other Francophone countries.

**"ISDAO is the first donor that supported our organization, giving us the possibility to put forward our activities. This is a donor who trusted our organization. And the support is an ongoing support, which has allowed for institutional development and also helped us strengthen our partnership with other donors."**



# One Day to Be Extravagant

## QET INCLUSION

Few realize that Trans Visibility Day, which is every March 31, was a frustrated response from activists in the United States to a movement that seemed more willing to mourn the murders of transgender people than to acknowledge them while they were alive. Thus, the day was designed not only to raise awareness of the discrimination transgender people face worldwide but also to celebrate their identities and ongoing contributions.

For trans activists in West Africa, it is more than a passing holiday. It can mean a chance to be seen for who they really are – even if it is only for one day. Over the past decade, violence

directed at LGBTQI people – particularly those who identify as trans and non-binary – has increased, according to ISDAO's internal research. And violent rhetoric seems to be coming from everywhere – from the most powerful parliamentarians to the most obscure social media influencers.

This is why QET Inclusion, a trans-feminist non-governmental organization based in Cote d'Ivoire, goes out of its way to plan and host La Nuit des Identités (Reconnaissance), a series of Trans Visibility Day events designed to honor members of the community and boost their self-esteem.

*"Trans people have to find a way to basically disappear or become part of the broader society without being identified easily,"*

*said Roxanne Campbell Aïe Matip, the Program Monitoring and Evaluation Manager for QET Inclusion.*

*"And so, this is the opportunity to facilitate a space in which, on that specific day, they can be less vulnerable and be freely themselves."*



The festivities took place in Abidjan from March 30 to 31, 2023. The theme of the edition was, **"My Identity Behind My Mask."** And many of the 200 guests who honored the invitation arrived wearing colorful masks adorned with feathers and fruit.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, such events have grown more difficult to organize, admitted Cedric Koffi, the organization's Finance and Administration Officer. Funding has not always been easy to come by, which is why ISDAO's support was so necessary.

Safety was also a particular concern. QET Inclusion is one of the first trans-led organizations in West Africa, with a management team almost entirely made up of people who identify as trans and/or gender non-conforming. However, stringent security protocols, including working with trusted police officers, helped ensure the protection of both the organizers and their guests.

The event kicked off with a lively opening ceremony featuring artists and dancers, and a welcome address from the director of QET Inclusion, Davila Tano. But the highlight of the day was the discussion panel titled, *Let's Talk Positive Visibility: The Transgender Community and the Use of Digital*, which saw activists and civil society leaders exploring communicating on the internet. They highlighted the dangers that members of the trans community can face when using social media such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram, as well as online dating sites and forums.

Attendees saw the panel as an opportunity to talk about the fears and the concerns that people from civil society might have towards transgender people, and how the trans community might navigate their lives and find fulfillment in the face of those fears.

What stood out for Matip was the fact that some attendees offered to provide some

needed services for the community. This was quite surprising, because many feminist organizations in the country tend to exclude LGBTQI organizations, ignoring their invitations and calls for collaboration.

**"For us to be able to have them, to have them respond to our emails, or to even want to have representatives at this event, it was already a success in itself,"** said Matip.

The next evening featured artist presentations and prominent fashion designers and stylists displaying their latest collections.

**"Every year, we try to find ways to make the evening interesting. So, not just having panels or giving advice,"** said Matip. **"We try to plan fun activities, for example, dance competitions or, voting on the best dressed."**



Last year, organizers chose to vote on the best-dressed people and created a selection for the best suit and the best dress. In the middle of that activity, a young fashion designer who had dressed ten of the guests in attendance decided to use the opportunity to present her brand, and she put on an impromptu fashion show at the end of the event.

The designer, an Ivorian trans woman, was one of the recipients of QET's pilot funding project, Trans Family, which gives grants to community members who don't have funding for their

ventures. She had used her funds to start her fashion line and wanted to showcase what QET had done for her.

**"It was a last-minute thing, but the participants were very open, and this led to this designer receiving orders for several events,"** said Matip.

Organizers have described the event as a great moment of **"flamboyance communautaire,"** where trans people could present themselves as who they really are – without prejudice judgment, or fear.

**"For someone who doesn't have freedom of expression. Out of 365 days of the year, they're able for one day to be extravagant and flamboyant in a way that is different from their daily life,"**

said Koffi

The event is so important to the mental well-being of the community, that organizers have promised to continue to hold it, even if one day they no longer have the benefit of funding from organizations like ISDAO.

**"We are part of a community where we're being marginalized daily, we're dealing with prejudice, with stress, and mentally we feel overwhelmed. This event comes like a pain reliever, and it heals your mind and your soul."**



# Combining Advocacy and Celebrations: A Vital Strategy

## EXCOHSEAI

For the **Excellent Community Health and Socio-Economic Empowerment Africa Initiative (EXCOHSEAI)**, a sex worker-led organization in Nigeria, advocacy is intertwined with celebration, both of which are central to their work. EXCOHSEAI advocates for marginalized groups, including sex workers and LGBTQI individuals, with a particular focus on LBQ women who are sex workers. The organization addresses critical issues such as HIV prevention, gender-based violence, and the promotion of **Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)**.

EXCOHSEAI places significant importance on commemorating days such as World AIDS Day, the International Day of Sex Workers, and LGBTQI Pride. These celebrations are strategic avenues for raising awareness, creating visibility, and fostering a sense of belonging among the communities they serve. Through these events, EXCOHSEAI advocates for the rights and health of communities that are often marginalized, stigmatized, and subjected to violence and discrimination.

A key strategy for EXCOHSEAI during these events has been organizing public awareness rallies with advocacy messages displayed on

placards, banners, and vibrant t-shirts, aimed at engaging both community members and the broader public, including policymakers and government officials.

**"We decided to use these celebrations as an avenue to reach out to community members who may not know about our work, and also to reach out to other stakeholders and the public in general,"** said Julie Okeh, the Executive Director of EXCOHSEAI. **"It is a way to create awareness and visibility and seek solidarity. We want sex workers and LGBTQI people to see our activities and know that they are not alone."**

As part of the commemorations, EXCOHSEAI also conducts human rights training, safety and security sessions, and provides psychosocial therapy to community members. The focus of these activities alternates between the LGBTQI community and the sex worker community, depending on the occasion, while recognizing the intersections between these identities. These activities not only empower the individuals involved but also create a platform for experience sharing and collective action, helping to build a resilient and supportive community.

**"We decided to use these celebrations as an avenue to reach out to community members who may not know about our work..."**

**"We want sex workers and LGBTQI people to see our activities and know that they are not alone."**

*Julie Okeh, the Executive Director of EXCOHSEAI*

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These advocacy efforts have led to significant outcomes, especially in raising awareness and

building alliances with key stakeholders. The events drew attention and even participation from public health officials, law enforcement, and human rights bodies. These alliances have been crucial in helping the organization address stigma, discrimination, and violence against sex workers in their locality.

Community members have reported feeling more empowered and connected, knowing that there are organizations like EXCOHSEAI that advocate for their rights and well-being. Moreover, the visibility created by these events has led to an increase in the reporting of human rights abuses, as more individuals now know where to seek help.

***"We noticed that following these events, more community members began approaching us to report human rights abuses or to seek healthcare,"***

***said Julie Okeh***

Despite significant challenges like insecurity, threats from the public and law enforcement, and rising living costs, ISDAO's grant has enabled EXCOHSEAI to provide essential services—such as HIV prevention, STI treatment, and mental health counseling—and to create safe spaces for community members to connect, build resilience, and access much-needed support.

Looking ahead, EXCOHSEAI remains dedicated to advocating for the rights of marginalized communities. The organization's future plans include strengthening alliances with key stakeholders, expanding its reach to more vulnerable populations, mobilizing more resources, and advocating for policy changes that protect the rights and dignity of sex workers and LGBTQI persons.

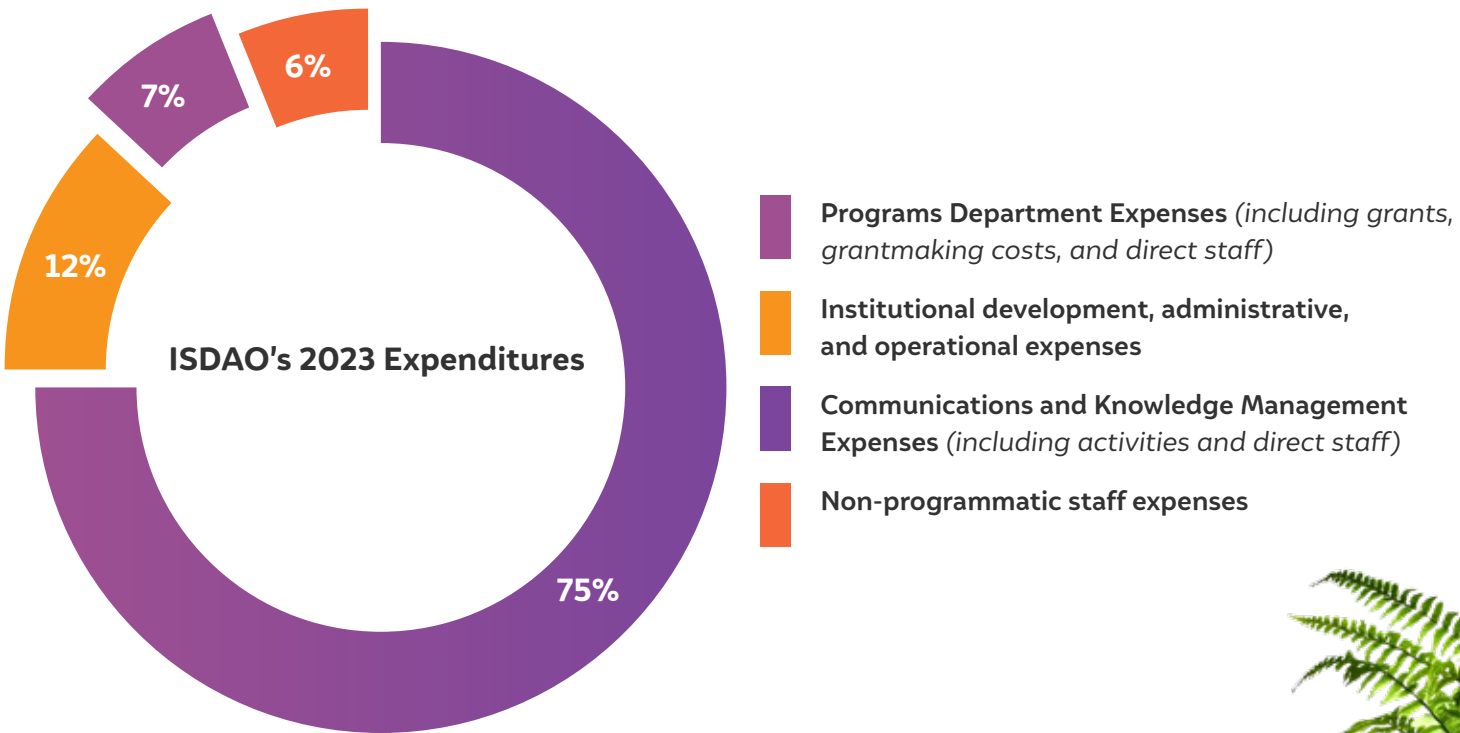




# Our Finances

## ISDAO'S 2023 EXPENDITURES

EXPENDITURES	
<b>Programs Department Expenses</b> (including grants, grantmaking costs, and direct staff)	\$ 3,386,205
<b>Communications and Knowledge Management Expenses</b> (including activities and direct staff)	\$ 324,408
<b>Non-programmatic staff expenses</b>	\$ 282,554
<b>Institutional development, administrative, and operational expenses</b>	\$ 525,786
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$ 4,518,953</b>





# We Are Grateful

Our work is made possible through the invaluable support of our funders.

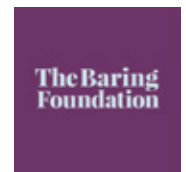
**OPEN SOCIETY  
FOUNDATIONS**



**Wellspring**  
Philanthropic Fund

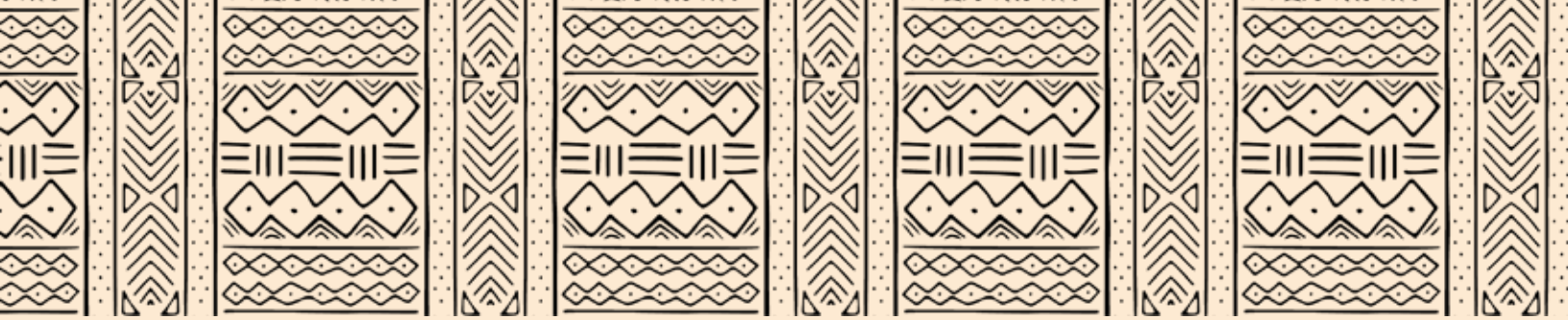


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WOMEN**



We extend our heartfelt gratitude to our sister organization, **UHAI-EASHRI**, for their technical support in 2023.

We also deeply appreciate all the individuals, organizations, legal entities, and technical supporters who contributed in various capacities throughout the year.



# FLAMBOYANT MOVEMENTS

"the data, successes, and voices captured in this report tell a story  
of resistance, light, and beauty."

- B. Caroline Kouassiaman

**Our Annual Report - 2023**





# ISDAO

INITIATIVE SANKOFA D'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST

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