

Centering Underrepresented Voices in LGBTQI+ Projects: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

ACTIF working group

The following lessons learned and best practices have been documented through the activities of the Act Together for Inclusion Fund (ACTIF) Working Group. This working group brings together Canadian organizations that have received funding from the ACTIF to carry out, in partnership with organizations in the Global South, projects that strengthen the respect, protection and fulfillment of the human rights of LGBTQI+ people.

Lessons learned:

1 Some voices are less represented than others

Within LGBTQI+ communities, not all experiences receive the same visibility or recognition. For example, women, people living in rural areas, trans and non-binary people, youth, Indigenous people, or criminalized individuals (such as sex workers or people who use drugs) may be less visible and have fewer opportunities to play an active role in LGBTQI+ initiatives. Similarly, in international coordination spaces, people with limited or no proficiency in English are often less heard. Recognizing inequalities in representation and power within LGBTQI+ movements is essential to establishing more equitable practices.

2 We must “centre” underrepresented voices, not just “include” them

Often, during a project, when it becomes clear that certain communities or groups are underrepresented, adjustments are considered to better reach them. But is it enough to ask how to include these groups within an already established project framework?

Ideally, an initiative aimed at engaging a specific community should recognize its members' expertise and centre their leadership to identify issues, define objectives, design activities, and determine who to involve. This means that the community or group themselves can create and control their space and programs as well as identify how allied groups or organisations can provide support and opportunities.



3 The realities of underrepresented communities vary by context

The lived realities of underrepresented LGBTQI+ communities are neither homogeneous nor transferable from one context to another. For example, LGBTQI+ people from Indigenous communities in Latin America do not necessarily share the same experiences or needs as those from Indigenous communities in Canada, although they may have a common understanding of the experience of being marginalized and excluded. Priorities can differ significantly across countries, regions, or even within the same territory. Recognizing this diversity requires avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches and prioritizing interventions grounded in local contexts. This calls for flexibility, active listening, and humility.



Best practices

1 Intentionally centre underrepresented voices

Initiatives aimed at LGBTQI+ communities as a whole often primarily reach the most visible or privileged groups. It is therefore essential to clearly define which groups will be engaged in a project and to intentionally centre their voices. For example, an initiative focused on LBT women in rural areas should include specific strategies to ensure that their leadership guides the design, management, and evaluation of the project. It is important for dominant groups to recognise the power and privilege they hold and how those dynamics play out in the relationship and interactions with other groups. Dominant groups need to be reflective about their own interests and motivations and be and willing to cede power and control.

2 Draw on community expertise while amplifying diverse voices

It is essential to support initiatives that emerge from communities themselves and to build on their expertise when developing new projects. For example, local trans-led organizations are best positioned to identify the priority needs of trans people. It is also important to recognize the diversity of experiences within a single community: trans people may have different needs depending on age, socio-economic status, personal or family background, etc. Initiatives should create spaces where community members can share this diversity of expertise and experience. Amplifying a plurality of voices enriches perspectives and helps ensure that decisions are not guided solely by the most visible or best-resourced groups.





3 Acknowledge internal tensions within communities

LGBTQI+ communities are not homogeneous: they encompass a diversity of perspectives and, at times, tensions surface. It is important to acknowledge these tensions and facilitate discussions with sensitivity, creating spaces where traditionally marginalized voices can be heard. In some cases, it may be more constructive to recognize different needs and perspectives rather than to aim for consensus that risks erasing certain experiences.

4 Provide flexible and diverse participation structures

Projects must take into account the barriers faced by less represented community members, such as language, safety, or lack of time. It is useful to offer different participation formats (online or in person, one-time or ongoing, oral or written, etc.) and allow for multiple levels of engagement. Communities and groups themselves should identify which participation methods are more appropriate and relevant for them. Advisory committees or dialogue circles can help underrepresented community members participate actively - provided their input has a real impact on decisions. It is also important to recognize and value their time and contributions, for example through appropriate compensation, to support sustained and equitable engagement.

5 Reduce linguistic and contextual barriers

In many LGBTQI+ spaces, English dominates, which can limit participation - even for those who speak it but struggle to express themselves with nuance and confidence. Centring underrepresented voices means going beyond translation: valuing local languages, encouraging small-group discussions, avoiding jargon, explaining technical terms, using visual supports, etc. It is essential to work with community members to identify the most appropriate approaches for ensuring diverse voices are heard, taking into account social norms and communication styles specific to different contexts.

6 Respect community autonomy and ways of working

Each community operates according to its own practices, and some groups may not wish to adapt their methods to specific project requirements. For example, some groups prioritize oral traditions and flexible working approaches and may not want to commit to writing formal reports or meeting strict deadlines. It is important to respect community autonomy while explaining constraints related to certain funding requirements. In some cases, flexible solutions - such as alternative reporting formats, tailored support, or logistical assistance - can help enable participation while preserving community practices.



7 Build trust

Recognizing broader political realities is essential to building trust with communities. For example, for Canadian organizations, collaborating with Indigenous LGBTQI+ activists in Latin America may require acknowledging the environmental and social impacts of certain Canadian companies' activities on local populations. Indigenous LGBTQI+ people involved in environmental and territorial struggles may experience specific forms of marginalization or invisibilization, including within environmental movements themselves. This involves reflecting on one's own position and recognizing that North-South partnerships are embedded in global power dynamics that contribute to inequality and marginalization. Transparency and humility in addressing these issues are key to creating an environment where communities feel comfortable expressing themselves and fully exercising their leadership.

8 Commit for the long term

Building meaningful and equitable relationships with underrepresented LGBTQI+ communities and organizations led by them requires a commitment that goes beyond a single project. Short-term funding can be detrimental, as groups whose rights are constantly violated may hesitate to invest time and energy in relationships that could quickly end. Long-term collaboration requires effort but allows for a better understanding of local dynamics, security concerns, and the specific realities experienced by different LGBTQI+ communities, while supporting sustainable change.



9 Question established approaches and identify opportunities for improvement

LGBTQI+ projects should regularly assess their practices and assumptions to identify potential biases or barriers to participation. In a North–South solidarity context, this includes analyzing power dynamics, consultation methods, and modes of collaboration. This reflection may lead to rethinking how partnerships are built, how responsibilities are shared, and how decisions are made. This reflection also involves questioning approaches that are primarily rooted in risk management or the principle of “do no harm.” While the safety of LGBTQI+ people must remain central, decisions about risks and forms of visibility should not be made solely by external organizations. The communities concerned are best positioned to determine what constitutes acceptable risk, appropriate visibility strategies, and relevant forms of mobilization within their own contexts. Excessive caution can sometimes unintentionally contribute to the continuation of dynamics of invisibilization and exclusion. Questioning established approaches should be an ongoing process that involves genuinely listening to communities, acknowledging biases and mistakes, and remaining continuously willing to adapt.

10 Use transitions as opportunities to revisit practices

Transition phases, such as the end of a project phase or the launch of a new initiative, offer valuable opportunities to reflect on lessons learned, reassess practices, and redefine priorities. As the ACTIF projects come to an end, organizations should take this opportunity to question their practices and make conscious efforts to centre the leadership of underrepresented communities.



In partnership with

Canada