

## LGBTQI+ Community Leaders

Garuga, Uganda

Uganda's queer community will be among the first to suffer the impacts of the 90-day funding freeze imposed on U.S. aid. They depend on the U.S. government for HIV services their own officials will not support.

I asked Apako Williams, a leader in the LGBTQI community, for a briefing on the dangers that are already emerging. He agreed via WhatsApp, then followed with a pin fixed to a resort in Garuga, one of dozens of lazy beach towns along the shore of Lake Victoria.

I follow the pin to a sprawling, slightly seedy establishment. Apako is nowhere to be found. After explaining myself to multiple members of the staff and showing them the messages inviting me to Garuga, one of them relents. Apako is with other leaders of the LGBTQI community. They are holding a private meeting in a far corner of the resort.

In a country where homosexual activity is illegal and the community's workshops subject to raids, the resort staff is collaborating with the activists to shield them.

I find Apako inside a coral-colored conference hall with several other community leaders. They steer me down a concrete promenade to the waterfront, while running through hasty introductions. Along with Apako, there is Hajjati Abdul Jamal, a transgender woman, and Joseph Mumbelja, who uses they/them pronouns. I recognize the fourth person from my time in Kampala nearly a decade before. At the time, her name was Princess Rihanna, but she laughingly tells me she has since been elevated to Queen.

They each run their own organization, all of which started out with a focus on the needs of the LGBTQI community. But Joseph says the political environment has forced them to redefine their work.

**“** We changed the wordings because of the changing legal environment and all of that. We don't use the LGBTIQ anymore. We say our vision is a community of structurally excluded persons empowered to drive innovative change and enjoyment of their fundamental human rights.

Joseph heads an organization in Masaka, a sleepy city about an hour's drive south of the Equator. They have just opened a drop-in center to provide services to Masaka's more vulnerable residents, including sex workers, people who use drugs and, of course, the queer community. This work only exists because of funding from the United States government.

<sup>1</sup> The AIDS Support Organization (TASO) is an indigenous HIV and AIDS service initiative, registered in Uganda as a non-governmental organisation.

I ask them to walk me through what has transpired in the past two weeks, beginning with Washington's abrupt announcement that it had suspended that funding.

*Hajjati: At first it was suspension. After two days, termination.*

*Joseph: Even us, we had to terminate our employees, their contracts, without payment, nothing. It was confusing. People fainted. Myself, I went into a panic attack because I felt like, how am I going to administer the staff?*

They ultimately suspended 14 of the organization's 20 employees.

*Hajjati: One of the hardest things in the regulation is we are not even allowed to actually provide any service until the 90 days are over. So no one in the community is supposed to either provide PrEP\* or ART\* or anything else. They face legal consequences under the federal government of the U.S.*

*There's this PEPFAR\* grant that has been supporting those girls in the field who do PrEP refills. Who do the linking, the referral, the retention, the follow up. They just woke up to a notice of not operationalizing what they are doing. And with a restriction that they are not supposed to carry on any work in the field, or else they're doing it on their own risk.*

*Projects funded by the CDC\* have even been told to send back computers and cameras and motorbikes. It means even the table has to move out of the office.*

*Community members do not know what the order means, what are the implications. They're just looking at how termination of services is happening and how things are not moving the way*

*they have been moving.*

I ask them to describe how things have been moving. And whether the waiver issued by the State Department days after the initial funding suspension afforded them any relief?

*Joseph: There's been disruption of services. There's been a cut off of services. Members are also not getting treatment. We've improvised. When you look at the waiver, it doesn't provide for prevention services. It only looks at prevention of mother-to-child transmission, which is not for us.*

*We had a lot of members on PrEP, especially those doing sex work. Those injecting drug users. Those who are actually people who have disabilities in the community. So where can they be able to get services, if all services have been altered by the administration?*

*It's going to cause more new infections. Someone who is now not on preventive care and they have to do sex work to survive in Uganda. You expect to have new infections. Most of these services have been introduced to us by the Western world and now they are being cut off instantly.*

*There are some people we know who are going to kill themselves.*

*Apako: Because Trump woke up one morning and aid has been cut out. He's literally sending people out there to say, You go and die. How do you wake up in the morning and curtail a service, a life-saving medication? We are seeing the signage of USAID\* is being broken down. It really, really posed a lot of risk for us.*

*We were trying to move away from HIV to now. How do we build more sustainable interventions beyond HIV?*

*Now we are going back to the drawing board, where we are seeing services have been curtailed. We are seeing now people who are living with HIV at the point where they don't know where to run to. They don't know where to go.*

*Joseph: USAID was giving support to community members. They have ventured into economic empowerment. They give you support. They support your business, so you're able to employ other community members. We are tired of our community to always be talking about HIV only. We need to empower each other economically. We need to see rich community members, because when we have money, at least we are able to influence, we are able to contribute to our movement.*

*They finally gave us a livelihood project\* and it is terminated. Meaning we are going to go back to being very, very broke. Right now we are broke, but we are going to be even more broke. We are going to see a lot of dependency. That will influence me to do a lot of decisions that I wouldn't have done.*

*Apako: So what's happening now, we are working within different community structures to see what is still available. We are trying to do all those assessments. Work within our communities. But then we don't know how this will take.*

*Hajjati: Amidst all these the Ministry of Health goes ahead to issue a circular.*

She stops and scoffs. Three days before our meeting, Uganda's Ministry of Health unveiled its plan to weather the pause in U.S. funding by delivering HIV services through the outpatient departments of government health facilities.

This was a non-starter for the LGBTQI community. They have championed the development of secure, independent drop-in centers explicitly because of their experience trying to get services in general government facilities. Seated among pregnant women and diabetic patients waiting for dialysis, Hajjati says they were singled out and harassed. Their HIV status casually revealed.

*When you get to that particular point, it means erasing the existence of us and how we can be able to access the basic services that have been provided.*

The activists actually anticipate an increase in harassment, which

would make the government facilities even more intolerable. The withdrawal of U.S. funding was a signal that Washington is no longer concerned with their fate.

Joseph compares the current situation to the 2023 passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, which introduced the death penalty in Uganda for some homosexual activity.

*This is worse because when the AHA passed, we saw an increase in the funding basket from the U.S. government. They were supporting us to organize. To see how we address this. This is even worse.*

*Apako: Because if people are seeing what is happening in the U.S. or wherever, it trickles down to the country. And if this is an example the Americans are showing, how do you think the local people down here are going to react to us in terms of access to basic services, in terms of access to health? In terms of even us having the social spaces to convene and talk and even address issues?*

*Even in my own neighborhood, where people don't understand trans, it was not a conversation. Now the target is going to go to us. They call it those girls and boys who dress otherwise. Who pretend to be men or pretend to be women. That increases stigma and discrimination.*

*It's very painful for a trans person, first of all, to just exist in this country. And then you are put in a position where even to access life-saving medication, the environment is scary. And it has opened up actually a pool of people who are going to express their attitudes openly without hiding.*

*You'll go to health facility and show you're openly trans and we will no longer have access. This is something we are seeing that is going to happen to the trans community. Heightened stigma. Heightened discrimination. Heightened hate speech.*

*Joseph: We're already seeing political leaders, who are posting how Uganda has been receiving five million U.S. dollars only this year for the promotion of homosexuality. You know what*

*that means? It means they are influencing attacks on us, on the community.*

*We are going through a lot. Some of the leaders are thinking about relocating, leaving the country because it's going to be worse.*

*Hajjati: Now there are needs for us to set up a safety and security kind of plan or public committee that is going to be responding to some of these things.*

They start to gather their things in preparation for a Zoom meeting with a committee of international activists. Hajjati turns back. She wants to make a final point. That she does not believe solidarity will save them.

*Even if we stand to march, to pitch, to do what, we're not changing what Trump has as the values of family. So we just are going to live with the four years of him.*