

# ICASA 2023: HOSTILE TERRITORY

A CALL FOR CORRECTIVE ACTION

**“When activists come into a space they are not there to learn about HIV. That can be done through the internet. They are coming to hold their leaders to account.”**

**—ICASA 2023 Delegate Representing LGBTQ+ Communities**

The International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) is held every two years and is the largest scientific conference on HIV and STIs held on the African continent. The ICASA organizer is the [Society for AIDS in Africa \(SAA\)](#) together with the government of the host country. SAA's vision is of "an African continent free of AIDS, TB, malaria and emerging infections, where the communities are empowered, with no stigma and discrimination against PLHIV, key populations and their families and where there is social justice, and equity to accessing treatment, care and support."<sup>[1]</sup>

The ICASA host country is selected following a bidding process organized by SAA. The process includes an assessment of bids against technical specifications as well as the outcomes from site visits for those countries that qualify for a final round of assessment.

December 4-9, 2023 ICASA was held at the Rainbow Towers Hotel and International Convention Center in Harare, Zimbabwe and hosted by the Government of Zimbabwe. The theme was: "[AIDS is Not Over: Address Inequalities, Accelerate Inclusion and Innovation.](#)" ICASA 2023 attracted 8,118 delegates, comprising people living with HIV; LGBTQ+ people, sex workers, and people who use drugs (Key Populations); civil society; academics; researchers; UN institutions; scientists; care providers; government officials; philanthropists and private sector representatives.

ICASA 2023 was marred by multiple documented cases of suppression, harassment, and intimidation by police and other government security officials targeting HIV communities, particularly targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) people. While these episodes were taking place, the responses of conference organizers did not protect communities who were in danger. Immediately after these episodes of backlash, the meeting continued to be a zone of risk for criminalized and marginalized communities—a direct contradiction of SAA's principles and values regarding the conference.<sup>[2]</sup> Up to now, SAA has provided no response to the formal public concerns lodged by civil society.

Other convenings of ICASA have included protests, activist-led disruptions of ICASA sessions attended by high-level officials, widespread circulation of educational materials focused on Key Populations, and other expressions of HIV community leadership that did not trigger the same level of harsh backlash.<sup>[3]</sup> The retaliation experienced by criminalized communities during ICASA 2023 was gravely concerning and warrants corrective action, particularly as SAA prepares for the next ICASA, which will take place in 2025.

The equal, respectful and meaningful participation of all communities in major scientific HIV conferences is not up for debate. As the SAA states, "The ICASA endorses freedom of expression as an essential principle in the fight against HIV/AIDS and in promoting full participation in our conferences.... [p]eaceful protest has always been and continues to be a key element of participation at the conferences."<sup>[4]</sup>

Community experiences during ICASA 2023 brought back painful memories of ICASA 2015, which was also hosted by the Government of Zimbabwe. In 2015, scientific posters, pamphlets, t-shirts and other educational materials mentioning Key Populations were confiscated by police without justification, along with HIV prevention commodities such as lubricants. At least three transgender activists were detained by police at the Harare airport and subjected to interrogation; at least one activist was made by security forces to strip.<sup>[5]</sup>

Eight years later, after selecting the same country as host, how could SAA be as poorly prepared to anticipate, prevent, and respond to human rights violations? Why did SAA and ICASA partners fail to challenge the public displays of hostility of the Zimbabwean police and security to communities?

ICASA 2023 organizers normalized an anti-LGBTQ+ backlash in real time and prioritized the interests and demands of the host government over the safety, security and empowerment of the communities who are the most vulnerable, the most at risk, and always the first to be pushed aside whenever powerful duty bearers demand their invisibility and silence.

**“Let Communities Lead’ is obviously just rhetoric that no one protects and promotes. At ICASA 2023, all of the people who are gatekeepers for that leadership were just diplomatically silent.”**

**—Ricardo Walters  
ICASA 2023 Delegate and independent consultant**

Health GAP completed interviews with key informants, including LGBTQ+ community members, people living with HIV, civil society representatives, members of the UN family of organizations, representatives from philanthropy and representatives from the private sector.[7] All interviewees had participated in person in the ICASA and had experience with one or more instances of community suppression described below. Informants addressed why, given the SAA's commitment to freedom of expression, they felt that these rights violations had been allowed to occur and what they would want to see happen next.

This report documents the experiences of communities at ICASA 2023 and includes recommendations to the SAA, the ICASA 2023 Steering Committee, and ICASA sponsors. These recommendations should be used by SAA to inform their review and decision-making over bids to host ICASA 2025, which will be decided April 30, 2024.[8]

## “ICASA 2023 was not a space conducive for activists to express themselves without fear.”

—Teddy Munyimani, Programmes Manager, Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe

Key Populations were extensively involved in ICASA 2023 planning efforts, including participation in the work of the ICASA 2023 Steering Committee and participation in ICASA 2023 Marathon Meeting. Despite this engagement, once representatives from the Government of Zimbabwe began suppressing community engagement and expression during the conference, the SAA and the ICASA Steering Committee were unable to assert control and were unable to negotiate protection of community participation in line with the SAA’s vision and the principles of ICASA.

Key Population interviewees reported that they had received formal, repeated assurances from SAA in the run-up to the conference that ICASA 2023 would be a “safe space” for Key Population representatives and other communities and that the mistakes of 2015 would not be repeated. Indeed, these assurances had been a major factor in the decision of many people to participate, particularly given the experience with censorship, harassment, surveillance and arrest during ICASA 2015 in Zimbabwe.

When the backlash began at ICASA 2023 on December 4, it became clear that those prior assurances did not come with any commitment to enforcement on the part of SAA. “The SAA was in charge of the conference —until they weren’t,” said one LGBTQ+ community leader.

Interviewees reported that while officials from SAA were privately apologetic and expressed shock and shared frustration with communities, they had no emergency strategy to protect communities and keep people safe, no plan to prevent further backlash, or plan to seek commitment from the Government of Zimbabwe to stop endangering Key Populations during and after ICASA 2023.

One important factor to consider in assessing the ICASA 2023 backlash against communities was the effect of artistic images of men kissing, used by Global Black Gay Men Connect (GBGMC) during the conference on T-shirts, signs and other outreach materials including the GBGMC booth display to promote LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion.[1] People associated with those powerful images were frequently subjected to controversy, scrutiny, attention and intimidation. The images challenged taboos and social norms and confronted criminalization and marginalization. Activists staffing the GBGMC booth were repeatedly questioned by a range of actors, including armed Zimbabwean security who asked “Are you recruiting gay people here?” and “Are you imposing [being gay] on people?” The images, which unapologetically expressed acceptance and celebration of Black African LGBTQ+ identity, were widely disseminated by communities and likely contributed to waves of repression and retaliation that followed. Likewise, this community intervention to demand visibility and liberation transformed the agenda of ICASA 2023 by challenging duty bearers to live up to an imperative of acceptance, non-discrimination and tolerance. Communities were refusing silence and invisibility.

Three examples of suppression during ICASA 2023 were raised repeatedly by informants:

### **1) Government security targeting of civil society during the ICASA opening ceremony, held December 4, and during the Global Village opening, held December 5.**

Community members had planned to enter the opening ceremony with placards and banners reading “Let Communities Lead” (the UNAIDS 2023 World AIDS Day theme) and related slogans. Instead plainclothes security officials targeted LGBTQ+ participants before they entered and snatched their placards.

One delegate, Peter Njane, ISHTAR MSM Executive Director, was forcibly separated from a larger group and detained for 30 minutes in the Conference Center. He was questioned by plainclothes police, who refused to identify themselves and who took his name. Police told Peter: “We do not want you in this country, we do not allow this in this country.” A staffer for the conference happened to be walking by and noticed Peter was being detained and questioned. The staffer urged the police to release him, which they did.

For those still filing into the opening ceremony, participants were subjected to security screening by armed guards who were dividing everyone into man or woman, whatever gender the guards perceived them to be. Participants were misgendered and non-binary peoples’ needs were not accommodated.

Duty bearers from PEPFAR, UNAIDS and other partners organizations saw what was taking place (the confiscation of placards and banners and the targeting of communities), or were told about it by Key Population activists, and did not get involved. They remained bystanders. When a participant who was interviewed for this report asked a nearby official from Zimbabwe’s National AIDS Council (NAC) to intervene as he could see what was happening, the NAC official replied, “What would you like me to do?” This NAC official had earlier that day expressed his solidarity with Key Populations during the Key Populations pre-conference.

Micheal Ighodaro, Executive Director of GBGMC, noted that those delegates who refused to allow their signs and placards to be taken were ejected from the hall by armed security personnel.

“We, as a collective of African gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men, stand in solidarity with the young people and women’s groups who also faced silencing at the ICASA opening ceremony. Our activists, alongside these vital voices, holding placards for respect, equity, and visibility for all Africans, were unjustly removed. One of our members was even detained. This suppression of peaceful advocacy, especially during a pivotal global

discussion on community leadership in the AIDS conference, contradicts the core values of inclusivity and free speech. We demand immediate corrective action and call on the organizers to honor and protect the rights of all participants to express their views.”

—Reaction to community suppression in a GBGMC social media post (available [here](#))

Teddy Munyimani, the Programmes Manager for GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe), had been selected to speak on behalf of all communities at Global Village Opening on December 5. On December 4, Teddy was abruptly told he would not be allowed to speak alongside the First Lady of Zimbabwe, who was also appearing at the opening. “I had been preparing since July as a speaker selected by the community for this role. SAA was aware I am gay. On the eve of the opening of the Global Village, I heard that I would not be speaking. If ICASA is not for LGBTQ+ people and if the Community Village is not for all LGBTQ+ people, then who is it for? SAA has never reached out to explain themselves. Who are these conferences for? Why do we invest so much time and money if we do not belong?”

## 2) Searching and raiding community exhibitions and confiscating community materials (including educational materials such as pamphlets, stickers, signs, and banners).

Security officials descended on KP community exhibition stalls, confiscating materials with no warning or explanation and intimidating ICASA 2023 delegates with impunity. No explanation was provided by SAA or ICASA officials for the intrusion, intimidation and harassment.

“The raiding of booths in the Global Village happened in a way that was horrible, homophobic and transphobic, there was no reason that had to happen.”

—ICASA 2023 Delegate representing a philanthropy

“Having placards taken and activists harassed for t-shirts—the whole point of ICASA is lost! After that happened, the rest of ICASA was nothing more than the ticking of a box.”

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### 3) Cancellation of the “People’s March,” a permitted, planned protest on HIV, TB, malaria and health justice issues, planned for December 5, 2023.

For months ahead of the conference, civil society had been planning a public protest for December 5, called the “People’s March,” that would bring ICASA 2023 delegates together to push for greater accountability and action on HIV, TB and malaria. The march was anchored by WACI Health and GFAN Africa; the organizers had sought and secured police permission and had kept SAA and other partners in the planning loop. By December 5 participants were finalizing preparations ahead of the kick-off of the march. A chief protest organizer was abruptly summoned by police; they told him that the march had been banned, without any reason provided. Furthermore, police said that if anyone continued with any protest they would be arrested.

“Zimbabwe made sure that they followed all the steps they needed to get the bid from SAA but then they broke their promises. The cancellation came after they had pledged that the march could proceed without fear.”

—Nombasa Gxuluwe, WACI Health, GFAN Africa and ICASA 2023 Delegate

The march organizers were intimidated, shocked and saddened, particularly considering all of the care they had taken to comply with every demand from police. UNAIDS Executive Director Winnie Binyayima and

Executive Director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (Global Fund) Peter Sands and other high-ranking public leaders were nearby—they agreed to represent the outrage and dismay of communities to Ministry of Health officials and other Government of Zimbabwe officials whom they were meeting during the course of the conference. Sands and Binyayima shared the outcomes with civil society from those efforts, including during Sands’ town hall meeting December 6 in the Global Village with civil society and communities. Unfortunately nothing consequential was gained.

Communities immediately published a joint statement following the cancellation of the People’s March and delivered it to SAA and other duty bearers.[10] While the statement received media attention, there was no response from ICASA organizers.[11]

“We strongly condemn the obstruction of community-led advocacy during ICASA 2023. The authorities have no right to suppress our voices. We also unanimously express our disappointment with the ICASA organizers, who have not sufficiently supported civil society voices to be heard, as they should be. Progress in defeating HIV will only be possible when communities are able to demand for their rights. This should be welcomed and encouraged by the ICASA and the host country. The slogan “Let Communities Lead” means nothing if our voices are suppressed and silenced.”

—Joint civil society statement in response to cancellation of the People’s March

**“It is clear these conferences are not for or truly about the people who this work is all about—these conferences are not created to center their needs and insights. They are for narrow ideas regarding scientific research and the people who already have power in the movement—to pat themselves on the back. This will not get us to ending AIDS.”**

—ICASA 2023 Delegate

- **SAA should apologize for the suppression of community participation that transpired during ICASA 2023.** Grave and avoidable harms were done to Key Populations and the larger HIV community. SAA has done nothing yet to repair those harms or to show accountability from this experience apart from apologizing privately to individuals. Aside from community statements, there has been no formal accounting of the retaliation, intimidation and hostility that took place. This should include speaking out against the banning of the People's March, which had been permitted to by local authorities.
- **SAA must prevent ICASA 2025 and future conferences from being opportunities for recrimination targeting KP communities. Instead, ICASA 2025 should systematically expand the visibility and leadership of Key Populations at every level.** SAA should plan ICASA 2025 so that the focus is rebalanced—care and respect for the safety and welfare of Key Populations should be at least as important in selecting the winning ICASA 2025 bid as whether or not a high level political leader commits to appearing at the opening ceremony. Freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and respecting the dignity of attendees should be paramount for all future conferences.

**"If it's a choice between [accommodating the needs of] civil society and a political leader at the conference, civil society should always win."**

—ICASA 2023 Delegate

**"The conference organizers should reach out to Key Populations and apologize for what happened. They should do their best to prevent the same thing from happening again."**

— ICASA 2023 Delegate

- Preference should be given to awarding the ICASA to countries that do not criminalize LGBTQ+ people.
- Competitive bids from countries that do criminalize LGBTQ+ people must provide a description about how hosting the conference will advance progressive efforts toward defeating LGBTQ+ criminalization and criminalization of other most affected communities, and how the conference will support accountability by duty bearers to Key Populations. That information should be shared publicly so successful bidders are held accountable for their promises.
- SAA must always consider the possibility that bidders will misrepresent the environment for Key Populations, particularly during site visits, when intimidation or coercion of communities who interact with SAA officials is a real risk, and the motivation to omit or lie about the effects of criminalization is strong.
- All security personnel must undergo training and sensitization regarding sexual orientation and gender diversity.
- Host Governments must provide written commitments to safeguard the freedom of assembly, expression, safety and non-discrimination of communities before, during and after the conference. Censorship, harassment, intimidation, arrest and bigotry by the Host Government must not be tolerated by the SAA. ICASA must be a place that prioritizes the safety and freedom of communities. These commitments must be enforceable, for example through a consequence of financial penalty borne by the Host Government should human rights violations occur.

- **SAA must develop comprehensive safety and security protocols and retain a dedicated KP Community Liaison and a dedicated Community Liaison to address any and all community concerns. Their responsibility will be to ensure communities have the freedom they require to express themselves and hold duty bearers accountable. Security plans must be made well in advance, in collaboration with community representatives, and shared with communities before the conference begins so attendees are prepared and can make informed decisions about their participation. Security protocols must not be changed at the last minute or in a chaotic fashion.**
- **SAA must commit to ring fencing adequate funding for robust and vibrant community participation.** Enough funding should be spent on the Global Village so that it is a comfortable and welcoming space that has amenities and infrastructure equivalent to those available for exhibitors in the Commercial Exhibition Hall. The Global Village at ICASA 2023 further revealed the systematic devaluation of community contributions. The Global Village was oppressively hot, loud, poorly maintained, far from the main venue and there was not enough water or food for participants, who reported feeling like second-class participants because of shambolic infrastructure.
  - Funds for per diems should be paid in full in advance—during ICASA 2023 local participants reported having to pay out of pocket for their subsistence (food and local transportation), creating hardship.
  - Harm reduction services including methadone and other treatments should be accessible, in order to facilitate participation by people who use drugs.

**“Air ticket costs, accommodation, hosting sessions—ICASA was expensive. It was exorbitant. If they can manage to silence us by their heavy-handedness then they will have won and we might as well give up and get jobs in the corporate sector.”**

—ICASA 2023 Delegate

- **SAA must support efforts to defeat criminalization of LGBTQ+ people, including by speaking out against the recently passed anti-LGBTQ+ bill in Ghana (particularly since SAA headquarters are in Ghana), as well as all criminalizing and stigmatizing laws across the continent.**
- **All ICASA sponsors should endorse these recommendations, and commit to refusing to sponsor ICASA 2025 should the recommendations not be adopted.[12]**

[1] [About Society for AIDS in Africa \(SAA\)](#)

[2] [General Terms and Conditions | ICASA 2023 Official Website](#)

[3] Notable exceptions to this include: In 2008, nine AIDS activists were arrested in Senegal immediately after the government of Senegal was the host of ICASA, in what was described as an anti-LGBTQ+ crackdown. See: [Senegal: Free AIDS Activists | Human Rights Watch](#). In 2015, Key Populations attending ICASA were also targeted by Zimbabwe police and security, the first time Zimbabwe hosted the conference (described herein).

[4] *ibid.*

[5] [Outright Activism as ICASA 2015 Starts with Violations and Silence on Key Populations | LEGABIBO](#)

[6] [Let Communities Lead](#) was the UNAIDS World AIDS Day 2023 theme and featured prominently during ICASA 2023.

[7] Key informants who are cited in this report gave permission for their names to be used.

[8] [ICASA 2025: Call for Bids](#)

[9] Examples of these images are available here: [https://x.com/GBGMC\\_Int/status/1731654803430756857?s=20](https://x.com/GBGMC_Int/status/1731654803430756857?s=20)

[10] Upholding Civil Society Voices in International Health Conferences: A Response to the Suppression and Cancellation of Communities at ICASA 2023

[11] ICASA 2023: Civil society condemns suppression of voices at global forum on AIDS and STIs in Zimbabwe

[12] For a list of ICASA 2023 partners and sponsors, see: <https://www.saafrica.org/pages/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ICASA-2023-Report.pdf>