

*Africa's First Indigenous
Activist Fund:
UHAI*

UHAI, the East African Sexual Health and Rights Initiative (UHAI-EASHRI), has been operating in East Africa since 2009. It focuses on marginalised communities in Burundi, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia and further supports pan-African organising across the continent. The organisation mainly targets sexual and gender minorities, sex workers, and people who use drugs and the unique challenges and funding inequalities they face by leveraging their comprehensive understanding of the human rights issues affecting these communities.

UHAI was founded by the sexual and gender minority movements it currently supports. In 2009, a surge in the far-right movement created a polarised environment in the region, further marginalising vulnerable communities, who, in response, realised they needed to participate in the civil society sector actively, organising and mobilising resources to host a community that was facing cultural attacks, legal challenges, and political repression. In this hostile context, *“UHAI was formed to accommodate exclusion”* (UHAI's Director of Programmes), allowing activists to redefine how they assert control over civil society spaces and communicate their own narratives.

UHAI has pioneered an innovative funding approach characterised by participatory, flexible and accessible grant-making. In this model, the communities and activists supported by UHAI are key decision-makers instead of mere beneficiaries. Rather than prescribing solutions, UHAI actively listens to activists and allows the passion driving them and their proximity to the context and their own lived experience to inform funding decisions. This ensures that funding addresses their diverse needs and priorities. This initiative, in their own words,

“It wasn't really a solution to a problem as predetermined, but when you bring folk together to find their own solutions, they will look like them, they will not be over-thematised, they will not be over-prescriptive, and they will allow them space to innovate.”

UHAI's Director of Programmes

UHAI's work is organised around four key areas: grant-making and enhanced capacity strengthening, movement building and pan-African engagement, knowledge management and thought leadership, and institutional development and strengthening.

The grant-making process is dynamic and context-driven, reflecting an intersectional approach. This approach acknowledges and adjusts to the intricate layers of oppression that intersect within the context of sexual and gender minority movements.

The Peer Grants Committee (PGC) is the cornerstone of UHAI's participatory grant-making efforts. Comprised of 18 activists representing the seven countries supported by UHAI, this committee plays a key role in setting the fund's priorities and determining grant allocations. The establishment of the PGC is made possible by UHAI's commitment to meaningful participation and language justice. UHAI prioritises partners and staff being able to convene in the languages and ways reflective of how movements converse. This includes ensuring the grants and discussions about them are in languages such as Swahili and Amharic, moving away from relying only on English and French so

“everyone can bring their full voices into a room and make relevant funding decisions.”

UHAI's Director of Programmes

Moreover, UHAI's team, including staff, Secretariat, and Board members, consists of individuals deeply ingrained in the sexual and gender minority movements. Focal points and programme officers

are also actively engaged as activists. This environment fosters a culture of active listening and engagement within their funding model, enabling them to identify issues and priorities that partners may not have previously raised. With an open-door policy, UHAI constantly communicates and collaborates with the movement, encouraging ongoing dialogue and participation.

Participatory grant-making is coupled with capacity building and support, fostering

“a dynamic environment of mutual learning and knowledge sharing. This not only empowers activists but also facilitates their engagement in regional and global spaces”.

UHAI's Director of Programmes

Through exposure to various perspectives and experiences, activists engage in collaborative exchanges, sharing insights and best practices. This fosters synergies with fellow activists and frontline responders across Africa, as well as other regions of the global south and north. This mutual learning process enriches the collective knowledge base, enabling a more effective and sustainable approach to addressing shared challenges and advancing common goals.

Philanthropic advocacy is one way UHAI leverages its resources and connections to support the movements it champions. Additionally, through trauma-based philanthropy, UHAI addresses the impact of trauma on activists and communities and collaborates with donors to explore ways they can better support the movement without further exposing the already vulnerable communities they work with to harm.

UHAI acknowledges that the philanthropic sector is embracing alternative funding models. The current environment is more conducive to the funding practices proposed by UHAI, as civic space in Africa has diminished and engaging with severely attacked communities flexibly and collaboratively is now more crucial than ever. This provides fertile ground for promoting the domestic solutions proposed by the sexual and gender movements, which create lasting connections and longevity since communities implement and practise their own solutions in this supportive environment. Close collaboration with feminist movements and moving away from working in silos by sharing information enables them to cross-pollinate ideas and a more participatory and intersectional way of funding.

All funders operate differently; not everyone adopts a flexible, less

prescriptive approach to funding. The most significant pushback has come from those unfamiliar with participatory grant-making, who believe that academic expertise is necessary for effective grant-making and disqualified activist funds. The challenge lies in contesting such notions and ensuring that individuals with relevant lived experiences are included in grant-making processes. Certain funders may be unwilling to reform their funding practices to meet community needs and do not trust communities to know the solutions to their problems. That is why they believe in *“creating more spaces where our funders can interact with civil society, which helps appreciate that we are both part of the same solution doing different roles.”* (UHAI's Director of Programmes)

UHAI's efforts have led to activists not just being viewed as beneficiaries of funds but acknowledged as valuable contributors to discussions, decision-making, and collective problem-solving. They have the autonomy to identify their priorities and actions rather than conforming to funders' directives and strategic goals. In addition, funders are increasingly adopting a consultative approach.

UHAI's unique position as both an activist fund and a funder enables it to engage in various spaces and foster partnerships across various sectors,

including health, emergency response, and human rights.

Learnings:

- ▶ Organisations can highlight the significance of lived experience by initiating contact with activist movements before engaging with sexual and gender minorities. This proactive step allows for the collaborative design of proposals tailored to their specific issues and needs. They can assemble teams where lived experience is also a fundamental requirement.
- ▶ Engaging key recipients of funds in grant decision-making strengthens community representation and enhances outcomes. Drawing on their lived experiences and contextual understanding, organisations could allocate funds more effectively to address pressing issues within the community.
- ▶ ICSOs can develop targeted initiatives for activists representing sexual and gender minorities, providing capacity-building in proposal writing and funds management. They can do this while incorporating a trauma-conscious approach.
- ▶ Engaging in collaborative spaces, such as feminist circles, where activists, ICSOs, and donors can share their work and learn from each other, can help foster an intersectoral approach to funding.