

FROM 'ENEMIES OF THE STATE' TO ALLIES

ZIMBABWE





In Zimbabwe, advocates from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) communities are fighting for – and achieving – the right to be consulted by the Government in policy making.

“Previously, we were seen as enemies of the state, but now there is a sense from Government about the importance of including us,” says Sylvester Nyamatendedza, Services and Policy Advocacy Officer at Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ), a PITCH partner.



“We are involved in policy formation, and have become accredited trainers, partners and contributors.”

Sylvester Nyamatendedza

Building relationships

“Historically, the relationship between the LGBTI community and the Zimbabwean Government has been really difficult,” says Musa Sibindi, Executive Director of the Sexual Rights Centre (SRC), a key population-led PITCH partner that focuses on championing the rights of marginalised people.

Regime change, coupled with painstaking advocacy work from PITCH partners to forge better relationships with those in power, is seeing the relationship between the state and LGBTI communities improve.

“There are a number of milestones and significant shifts that we have seen through the PITCH programme, which are all a demonstration of community advocates shifting policies, practices and attitudes, right from the grassroots to the national level,” Musa adds.

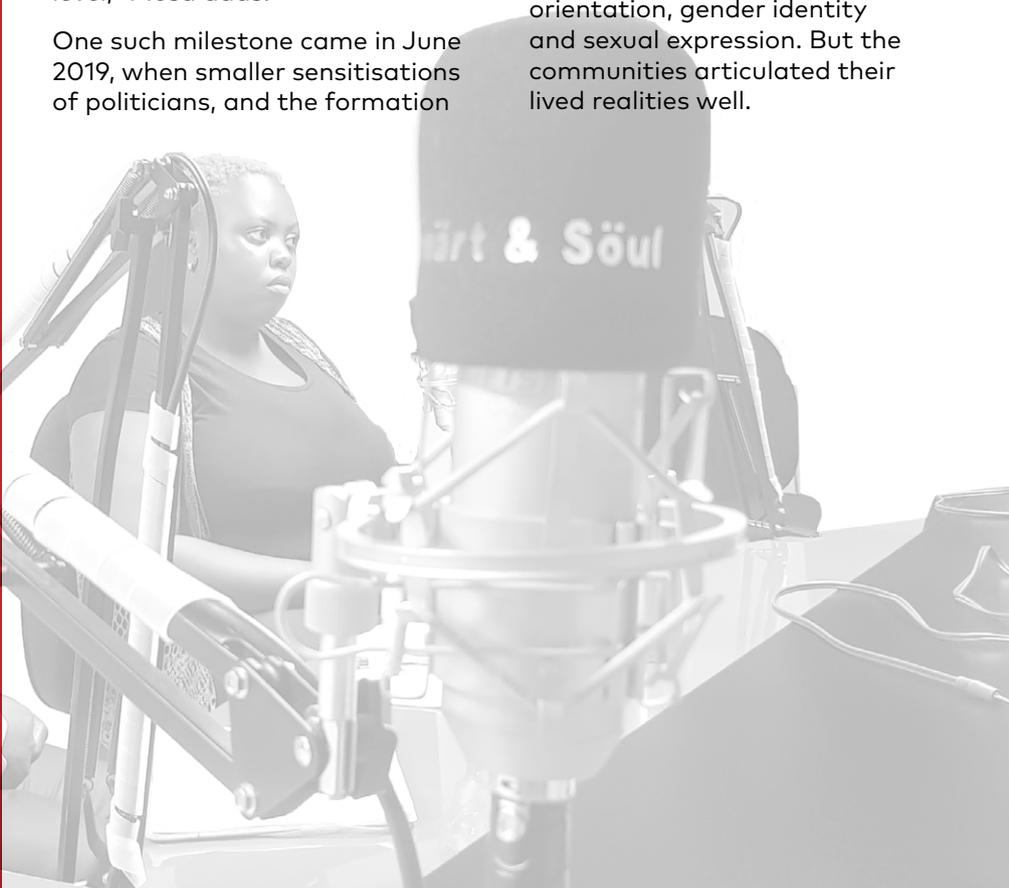
One such milestone came in June 2019, when smaller sensitisations of politicians, and the formation

of a strategic partnership with Zimbabwe’s National AIDS Council and UNDP, led to 70 members of parliament (MPs) visiting drop-in centres in Bulawayo and Mutare run by GALZ and SRC.

This was the first time parliamentarians, representing committees on health, education, gender and justice, directly and openly visited LGBTI spaces.

“The engagement on that day really was an eye opener for the parliamentarians, some of whom doubted that LGBTI communities exist in Zimbabwe” says Musa.

“Initially, you could tell they were going to take a pathological and rehabilitative approach, to say ‘why don’t we as parliamentarians offer you an alternative way of life?’, as if to suggest they could ‘correct’ people’s sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual expression. But the communities articulated their lived realities well.”





"The message was clear: we don't want your pity, we don't want your sympathy, we just want you to uphold the human rights of all citizens – and we are part of Zimbabwe, we are not going anywhere. These conversations began to significantly shift the attitudes they had."
Musa Sibindi

The visits led to 25 MPs becoming as key allies. This group now advises PITCH partners on their advocacy work and will lobby parliament on LGBTI concerns and issues. The creation of this alliance means the LGBTI community is now in a better position to influence key laws and policies as they come up for review.

Strategising for change

In June 2020, SRC went to its parliamentarian allies with a clear and specific ask: help us devise a decriminalisation strategy. The group advised SRC on the best way to begin discussing decriminalisation in parliament and when would to start.

Based on this advice, PITCH partners have made the strategic decision to initially pursue the decriminalisation of sex work and are due to begin this campaign in 2021.

With support from PITCH, SRC is in the final stages of developing its decriminalisation strategy and has reached out to 35 organisations and individuals to collaborate. Of these, 25 are key population-led groups, the rest are a mix of civil society organisations, service providers and policy makers.



"This will eventually lead to parliament relooking at all the laws that are used to criminalise same-sex relationships. So that's what we are beginning to unlock,"
Musa Sibindi



70 MPs visited drop-in centres in Bulawayo and Mutare

Uniting the movement

PITCH has also been instrumental in enabling Zimbabwe's LGBTI movement to become more united.

"For the longest time, GALZ was the only LGBTI organisation in Zimbabwe, then in the last few years eight or nine other organisations have formed," says Sylvester.

"In 2017, PITCH supported the creation of the LGBTI sector, which is a platform where all LGBTI organisations interact to inform programming and policy development for LGBTI communities in Zimbabwe. The LGBTI sector has created guidelines to ensure clear ways of working and shared advocacy goals."

This more united front, coupled with multifaceted approaches to sensitisation and collaboration, is increasing the overall participation of LGBTI communities in decision-making processes. In 2019, LGBTI people and others from key population groups were consulted in the development of Zimbabwe's National Health Strategy. A year later, they were invited to contribute to the development of the country's fourth national HIV and AIDS plan, which will steer the Government's HIV response until 2025.

Particularly significant is the Ministry of Health and Child Care's (MOHCC) decision to partner with GALZ and SRC to train public health workers across the country. These sessions will see LGBTI



Community members participate in a policy development workshop.



"For MoHCC to invite, not only civil society, but key population-serving partners, to co-facilitate national trainings of such significance is not something they would have done before."

Musa

people talk about their difficulties in accessing HIV and sexual and reproductive health services and what can be done to change the situation. A pilot training with 20 health workers took place in March 2020, with national roll-out to begin in October.

Although both Musa and Sylvester agree this collaboration is encouraging, they still see a long way to go.

"The Ministry is still picking and choosing when they want to collaborate with us," says Musa. "We would really appreciate a more deliberate effort to

holistically involve community-based organisations in everything they do because that voice is critical. It should not just be an add-on."

For this to happen community advocacy must continue to be supported.

"Given where we started off to where we are now, with the community taking up advocacy and with the gains we have managed to realise – even in a volatile operating environment like Zimbabwe – this is a clear demonstration that it is worthwhile to invest in communities to bring about the lasting, systemic change we need to see."

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The Partnership to Inspire, Transform and Connect the HIV response (PITCH) strengthens community-based organisations' capacity to uphold the rights of populations most affected by HIV by engaging in effective advocacy, generating robust evidence and developing meaningful policy solutions.

PITCH is a strategic partnership between Aidsfonds, Frontline AIDS and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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