



Workplace
Pride

**FREE TO
BE ME**

KIGALI

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION REPORT

OCTOBER 17, 2023



Hivos
people unlimited

NL Netherlands

KIGALI ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION REPORT

ACTIVITY SUMMARY

On Tuesday, October 17th, 2023, Workplace Pride, in partnership with Hivos and the Dutch embassy in Rwanda, hosted the Kigali Socio-Economic Roundtable and Discussion. The activity, held at the Dutch Ambassador's residence in Kigali under the theme "Building the Future for Diversity and Inclusion in Rwanda," brought together over 30 representatives from the Civil Society, business community, and diplomatic missions with the aim of initiating dialogue, raising awareness and building commitment on LGBTQ+ socio-economic inclusion in Rwanda.

The Kigali forum was the most recent in a series of roundtable dialogues facilitated by Workplace Pride under the Free to Be Me program, an innovative program that builds and maintains a movement of self-confident and diverse LGBTQ+ organizations and activists who advocate for their human and socio-economic rights. The program is being implemented in 14 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia by an alliance of six partners led by Hivos.

Joan Wiegman, the Dutch Ambassador to Rwanda, commenced the forum with an opening speech and welcomed everyone to the residence. Thereafter, representatives from the civil society and business community delivered their remarks. Following this, Graham Sparks, the Free to Be Me program manager at Workplace Pride, took participants through the Civil Society Business toolkit, a publication by Workplace Pride designed to help civil society organizations work more closely with the business world. Following this, participants went into breakout sessions where they explored LGBTQ+ socio economic inclusion



in Rwanda, challenges faced and opportunities that could be exploited to advance LGBTQ+ socio economic inclusion. From the group discussions participants presented their deliberations at a plenary session. Levis Nderitu, the Africa Region strategy advisor at Workplace Pride made closing remarks after which guests went for a networking session over lunch and left at their own pleasure.

From the discussions, it was clear that discrimination and exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons at work is an ever-present reality; several stories of LGBTQ+ individuals being terminated from employment were shared. These individuals have little avenues for legal recourse since Rwanda has no laws protecting LGBTQ+ persons from discrimination. It was emphasized that there's a lot of work to do in terms of building awareness and changing narratives so that the LGBTQ+ community are seen as key talent and

business drivers for growth. Additionally, mere declarations of inclusivity by organizations were deemed insufficient, underlining the necessity to unpack the true meaning of inclusivity and to sincerely implement DEI policies to ensure genuine inclusivity. It was underscored that many businesses will not naturally adopt LGBTQ+ inclusivity; it is the role of civil society to catalyze this process and demonstrate to businesses the advantages of LGBTQ+ inclusion. While advocacy for human rights is crucial, it was noted that businesses often require additional incentives to

actively pursue LGBTQ+ inclusion. This reiterated the necessity of CSOs presenting the business case for LGBTQ+ inclusion in their engagements with the business world. Furthermore, it was brought to light that many issues concerning the socio-economic exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals are linked to extreme poverty and challenges in education. Funding mechanisms and advocacy strategies need to consider LGBTQ+ individuals in informal urban settlements and rural communities, who disproportionately bear the weight of these challenges.



OPENING REMARKS

Joan Wiegman, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Rwanda

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the Dutch Ambassador’s residence in Kigali. This is a wonderful space for inspiring conversations. We are gathered here for the workshop and roundtable discussion on “Building the future for diversity and inclusion in Rwanda,” organized by Workplace Pride and Hivos as part of the Free to Be Me program. I extend my gratitude to Workplace Pride, Hivos, and my team from the Embassy for making this gathering possible.

For the Netherlands government, human rights and the protection of freedoms as formulated in the UN charter is one of the key pillars and highest priorities of our foreign policy. In this time and age of polarization and populism on the rise, it doesn’t simply get better, we have to keep fighting not only to improve but to ensure that we do not lose ground. In this sense, protecting the rights and liberties of the LGBTIQ+ community worldwide and to tackle their social economic exclusion is part of what we strive for. If we are all committed to achieve the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, we have to make sure that we leave no one behind. Studies have shown that inclusive societies fare much better and that businesses with a diverse and inclusive workforce tend to be more successful.

I must say that in the Netherlands we still have a long way to go, we are not there yet. We are not here to lecture others but to foster mutual learning and growth. In certain aspects, I must acknowledge that Rwanda is far ahead of us for example in gender equality and many other areas, which we deeply admire. To underline the importance of inclusion, the Netherlands adopted a feminist foreign policy, the title suggests that it



is about gender only but no, this policy is about equal rights and equality for all. With special attention to women LGBTIQ+ persons and other minorities.

This is also why we support the Free to Be Me program, an innovative program aiming to strengthen a self-confident LGBTIQ+ community who is enabled to advocate for their human and social economic rights. With that support we aim to send a strong message of commitment of our values and solidarity with the LGBTIQ+ community in Rwanda. Equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities should be given for every person in the world to achieve a more just, fair and dignified society. Unfortunately, LGBTIQ+ plus persons often face discrimination and stigma in their private and professional lives and are too frequently the target of socio-economic exclusion. Their issues are often overlooked and economic development programs are not reaching LGBTIQ+

people adequately or equitably. In our workplaces creating an environment where everyone can be themselves is essential and should be the standard for modern businesses.

With today's workshop we aim to bring together community members and business representatives to build awareness around LGBTQ+ socio economic inclusion. To start conversations and to build a commitment for future dialogues. We therefore want to thank Workplace Pride and Hivos for initiating this event and for creating the opportunity to open up these important conversations.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that this a safe space where everyone can be themselves, can speak their minds and feel free to share their ideas. Today we meet, connect, become stronger and jointly strive for a more inclusive society. Together, we can shape a more inclusive Rwanda. A very warm welcome to every one of you and I wish you the best conversations and new connections.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTATIVE

Kalisa Geoffrey, Executive Director Amahoro Human Respect

Mr. Kalisa observed that while significant efforts have been made to address the stigma and discrimination experienced by the LGBTQ+ community, there has been insufficient focus on economic justice or inclusion. He highlighted that the roundtable serves as an excellent platform to initiate discussions and explore how best to address inclusion within the workplace. He



emphasized that since the majority of our time is spent at work, it is imperative that workplaces are inclusive and considerate of all identities. He stressed the importance of feeling valued, affirmed, and acknowledged in the workplace noting that too many LGBTQ+ persons cannot freely express themselves, are forced to constantly hide who they are and this negatively impacts their motivation and productivity at work.

Addressing the status of LGBTQ+ rights in Rwanda, he highlighted the absence of laws criminalizing homosexuality, which is a positive step considering the situation in many African countries. However, there are also no laws offering discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ persons. He further mentioned that the organization he works for has documented numerous reports of discrimination at workplaces and businesses based on sexual orientation or gender identity. This discrimination leads to difficulties for

LGBTQ+ persons in sustaining livelihoods and fully engaging in the economic development of society. The exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community from active participation in economic development has evident detrimental effects on society as a whole. It is vital that everyone is given the opportunity to contribute to and advance society, bringing their unique skills and capabilities.

Kalisa emphasized that solutions for the challenges facing LGBTQ+ persons can be found locally. He stressed the importance of collaboration between civil society, businesses, and development partners to learn from each other, identify solutions for local issues and adapt global best practices to fit local contexts. He acknowledged that this task is not without its challenges and that stakeholders must be committed to put in the hard work necessary to build a better world for all. He concluded by reiterating the significance of involving the communities in these discussions, emphasizing that LGBTQ+ individuals should not only have a seat at the table but they should be given the space to honestly participate and share their perspectives.

BUSINESS COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE

Mushongore Placide, General Manager Lebanon Hotel Kigali.

Mr. Mushongore reflected on his experience engaging with the LGBTQ+ community for over a decade, highlighting his close collaboration with various CSOs advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. During this time, he has established meaningful connections with individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, and these connections have proven to be valuable in his business ventures. He emphasized that he has nurtured a strong business partnership with the LGBTQ+ community, acknowledging that LGBTQ+ persons are no different from any other people. He noted that he has extended the same welcome to LGBTQ+ individuals in his business as he would to any other client, and he encouraged other businesses to follow suit. He explained, "When a client comes to me, I treat them as a client. My focus is on providing whatever services they require, and they pay for the services they



receive. People from the LGBTIQ+ community are clients, just like any other.”

He also shared accounts of having hired individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ and highlighted their exemplary performance, emphasizing that their sexual orientation did not impede their ability to work. He urged other businesses to adopt a similar approach, stressing that it is essential to practice inclusivity and treat every member of society with the respect they deserve. He emphasized that the primary focus of any business during the hiring process should be whether the individual possesses the relevant qualifications, and pointed out that LGBTQ+ persons are just as likely as heterosexual individuals to have these qualifications. If a person meets the requirements for the job, their sexuality should not hinder a business from hiring and keeping them. The business should concentrate on creating a conducive environment for them to deliver on the work they are hired to do. He concluded by observing that while businesses gain nothing from discriminating against LGBTQ+ persons, there are benefits associated with being an open, accommodating, and inclusive business.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY BUSINESS TOOLKIT

Graham Sparks, Program Manager – Workplace Pride

Graham guided the audience through the [Civil Society Business toolkit](#), a publication co-created by Workplace Pride, Open for Business, and the Other Foundation, designed to facilitate closer collaboration between civil society organizations and the business world. The toolkit offers practical, goal-driven, and sustainable approaches to empower LGBTIQ+ CSOs in effecting lasting changes for the LGBTIQ+ community.

He noted that CSOs and businesses have always been seen to occupy different worlds; while CSOs are focused on human rights, have over-arching principles and a long-term view, businesses are perceived as profit oriented, with an eye to human capital and often have a short-term outlook. Nevertheless, businesses and civil society have a lot in common as there are many shared values that bring them together. The



toolkit takes advantage of these shared values by providing CSOs with a guide on how to interact more effectively and productively by developing and deepening their relationships with business partners so as to progress LGBTQ+ inclusion.

The discussion covered topics such as the selection process for CSOs when choosing which businesses to work with, assessing the current state of LGBTQ+ inclusion within the business, understanding the business case for civil society and business partnerships, dispelling myths and addressing mindsets that might hinder effective collaboration, fostering sustainable partnerships, and effective engagement and communication strategies crucial for building successful business relationships. The discourse also included establishing meaningful targets tailored to local contexts, the role of businesses in advocating for social change, and navigating advocacy in countries where LGBTQ+ rights and legal protections are limited or non-existent.

Graham shared practical examples from his over 35 years of experience working in the business world and CSO sector across several countries globally. His presentation encouraged active engagement from the audience, fostering a dynamic and participatory discussion. Several key contributions emerged from the session, including:

- Businesses have the capacity to drive change, as evidenced by numerous cases of businesses successfully pressuring other businesses and even governments to prioritize LGBTQ+ inclusion. Their influence and financial clout often make their voices more likely to be heard. It is crucial for CSOs to foster these relationships with businesses, as their added voice is critical in advocating for change.
- CSOs need to transcend the stereotypes, myths, and misconceptions surrounding engagement

with business. While these discussions can be challenging, someone must initiate them. There are many cases of productive collaborations with businesses after initially difficult and strained conversations. CSOs must have the courage to take the first step.

- Employing the human rights perspective to advocate for business inclusion is crucial and essential; however, for most businesses, this approach alone may not suffice. Presenting a solid business case for inclusion is vital. This highlights the necessity of investing in research to equip CSOs with concrete data and facts. This data can be used to demonstrate to businesses the potential losses resulting from their lack of inclusivity toward the LGBTQ+ community and the benefits they can attain by fostering a more inclusive environment for the LGBTQ+ community. It is imperative that the arguments are substantiated with credible data.
- For CSOs facing challenges initiating conversations with the business world, an effective starting point is to engage select multinational companies, often headquartered in Europe and America but have local operations. These are businesses that are vocal about their inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community and already have commitments toward LGBTQ+ inclusion, although such activity may be limited in many African countries. These companies serve as an accessible starting point since they are already involved in similar work elsewhere, making it easier to find common ground locally. Diplomatic missions play a critical role as a link between multinational businesses and local CSOs in this pursuit.
- The business-CSO partnership will often need to be symbiotic. In these negotiations, CSOs cannot solely be asking for help without

providing any offerings in return. It is beneficial for CSOs to have valuable resources to provide to businesses, thereby making the partnership more appealing. Such resources might include training programs on DEI, assistance in reviewing and implementing DEI policies, collaboration on branding and marketing initiatives etc. Having solutions to offer businesses facilitates smoother and more productive discussions.

- Progress is not always linear; often, advancements in LGBTQ+ rights are met with setbacks, necessitating the need for reassessment and strategic adjustments. This reality has been echoed in many societies, as seen most recently in Poland, where a previously progressive stance turned increasingly anti-LGBTQ+. However, the recent election in the country appears to signal a positive shift for the LGBTQ+ community. This serves as a reminder of the crucial role played by CSOs in persistently advocating for change, as societal improvement doesn't occur automatically but rather through deliberate and intentional efforts.

BREAK OUT SESSIONS

To delve more deeply into the subjects under consideration, participants formed breakout groups to share perspectives. The groups comprised representatives from civil society, business, and diplomatic missions. These discussions revolved around three main questions: What has the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals been like in the workplace in Rwanda? What challenges are encountered in attempting to work with businesses on LGBTQ+ inclusion and how can stakeholders collaborate to promote the socio-economic inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in Rwanda? Following the group discussions, participants reconvened in a plenary session to share their deliberations. The discussions brought to light the following key observations: “

- LGBTQ+ individuals in Rwanda experience workplace discrimination, both in business and employment settings. Several accounts were shared, detailing instances of individuals being fired courtesy of their sexuality and gender



identity. Moreover, LGBTQ+ individuals face exclusion from business circles, resulting in the loss of clients when their sexualities and gender identity become known.

- There are currently no laws or policies in place to protect LGBTQ+ individuals from workplace discrimination. Although some may consider seeking legal action for wrongful termination, the absence of specific protective laws limits the legal avenues available for the LGBTQ+ community.
- For most organizations, claims of inclusion are empty rhetoric. While they say they have inclusive policies, there are no deliberate and intentional efforts to enforce these practices. Among those making some efforts, this inclusivity seldom extends to the LGBTQ+ community.
- Many companies remain hesitant to go public about engaging with the LGBTQ+ community. An account was shared about a media company that agreed to host LGBTQ+ activists to talk about inclusion but censored the context of the discussion, fearing backlash from their listeners.
- While development partners, diplomatic missions, and global corporations like Workplace Pride and Hivos can collaborate on areas such as financing, strategy, and capacity building, direct engagement with local businesses and other relevant stakeholders must be undertaken by local CSOs. External partners can contribute by providing strategic guidance and sharing their experiences on what works and what doesn't, preventing the replication of errors made elsewhere. However, the hands-on work must be carried out by local CSOs, who are responsible for contextualizing these lessons and incorporating them into their advocacy strategies.
- Many of the socio-economic issues faced by LGBTQ+ individuals stem from extreme poverty and educational challenges. Some of these problems arise from homophobia in families where LGBTQ+ children are ostracized forcing them to abandon their education. Similarly, stigma and discrimination within educational institutions compels many LGBTQ+ individuals to drop out, placing them at a significant disadvantage in terms of acquiring the necessary qualifications to compete in the job market. As strategies to engage with businesses are devised, it must be acknowledged that many LGBTQ individuals might lack the qualifications required for employment in these companies. Initiatives that address the situation of such individuals must be similarly considered.
- LGBTI individuals in rural communities are often overlooked. It is essential to be intentional about understanding their unique contexts and challenges and to include them in programming.
- While there have been efforts by Civil Society to work with businesses in Rwanda, these initiatives have been limited to players in the hospitality industry. There needs to be deliberate efforts to engage with businesses in other sectors of the economy.
- Working with individual businesses alone is not enough. These discussions should involve policymakers, trade associations, and government bodies. They are the ones responsible for shaping policies and laws, and it would be beneficial to engage with them on LGBTQ+ socio-economic inclusion.
- The task of advocating for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community should not solely fall on civil society. There are LGBTQ+ individuals who own businesses or hold prominent positions within organizations. While it's understandable

that they might be hesitant to publicly advocate, it's important to find ways for these individuals in positions of privilege to collaborate with civil society in advancing socio-economic inclusion for the community.

- Allyship should go beyond internal measures and symbolic hiring practices. While these efforts are commendable, true allyship involves active advocacy. Businesses that support the LGBTQ+ community should engage in conversations with other businesses and policy makers, emphasizing the importance of inclusion. True allyship means these

businesses leverage their networks to promote the cause of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

- More progress could be achieved if development partners and civil society organizations coordinate their efforts on LGBTQ+ inclusion. In Rwanda, numerous development partners are involved in these initiatives, often resulting in duplicative activities. It would be beneficial for these entities to collaborate and develop a unified approach to prevent the current situation where efforts appear fragmented and uncoordinated

AGENDA

TIME	ACTIVITY/ TOPIC	FACILITATOR
8:30am – 9:00am	Arrival and Registration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace Pride • Embassy
9:00am – 9:45am	Introductions and welcome remarks General overview of the workshop's objectives & program.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador • Communities of Action • Business Representative • Audience • Workplace Pride
9:45am-11:00am	The civil society Business Toolkit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What it is • Why it matters • Audience discusiion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace Pride
Tea Break		
11.30am – 12:30pm	Group Discusssion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the journey of advocating for LGBTIQ+ inclusion been experienced? • How can Businesses and CSOs work together • Challenges & opportunities • Shaping narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All
12:30pm – 1:00pm	Plenary Closing Remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace Pride • Embassy
Lunch and Networking		
2: 30 pm	Guests Leave at their pleasure	