

Backgrounder

Urban; Gender

Keywords:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex (LGBTQI+); gender justice; urban development; urbanisation; social justice

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Issue date

July 2023



Towards queer-centred urban development

Challenging heteronormativity in the sector, for more equitable cities

Challenges to building queer-centred urban development agendas

Many development actors have perceived sexuality and gender diversity to be 'too hard' or 'too political'. Resultingly, inclusive and participatory urban development programming has often ignored gender and sexual diversity. For example, the UN Habitat's New Urban Agenda controversially excluded mention of LGBTQI+ people, at the insistence of certain homophobic governments.

Most demographic data collection by governments and large development actors ignores sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Locally sourced and community knowledge is too often dismissed as lacking credibility. This leaves glaring knowledge gaps regarding socioeconomic indicators and access to vital services, and hinders evidence-based policy and programming.

Examining existing data, the [World Bank](#) concludes that LGBTQI+ people experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and economic vulnerability, with unique barriers to accessing education, due to institutional homophobia and transphobia.

Another challenge is inadequate LGBTQI+ representation in policy arenas and major urban development organisations. Research across geographies indicates that heteronormative and gender-normative assumptions and attitudes are baked into institutional cultures and policies, marginalising people of diverse SOGIESC. In this sense, **queering** development practice questions assumptions about gender, the home, state-society relations, and typical practices of inclusion and participation.

Similarly, LGBTQI+ civil society is often perceived as a niche interest group, separated from traditional fields of urban development. Despite having valuable experience and knowledge of urban development issues and practice, queer civil

KEY TERMS

- **LGBTQI+:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex, with the + acknowledging many other sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. This is one version of a widely used acronym (LGBTQI+), to refer to people with shared or intersecting sexual and gender identities. It was developed as an umbrella term in English-speaking countries and is used globally; however, it does not fully capture the diversity of sexuality and gender identities in non-Western and Indigenous cultures.
- **SOGIESC:** sexual orientation, gender identity/expression and sex characteristics. Everyone has SOGIESC, so this acronym is usually used in the context of 'diverse SOGIESC'. It is employed in global policy and programming for its inclusivity of non-Western identity categories.
- **Heteronormativity:** the assumption that people are sexually and romantically attracted to people of the 'opposite' sex/gender (binary thinking) and that all forms of sexuality should follow stereotypical heterosexual scripts. Such thinking leads to policies and interventions that exclude people with non-conforming sexualities.

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

The mantra of the Sustainable Development Goals, "leave no one behind," is crucial in a post-COVID-19 world: with people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations included. Building this consensus is a

society faces multiple barriers to participating in policy discussions and programming. Underscoring this siloed approach, most [international aid](#) flowing to LGBTQI+ civil society is focused on human/civil rights or HIV/AIDS and public health. Less than 1% targets housing and homelessness, poverty and economic development, or environment and climate change.

Priorities for action research

Research and advocacy that challenges heteronormativity in development practice has improved sectors like sexual and reproductive health and education. Progress can be expanded and furthered by aligning with decolonial initiatives and literature on [Southern urbanism](#). Action-research organisations should prioritise translating research knowledge into practice: conceptually and pragmatically bridging gaps between knowledge production, LGBTQI+ civil society and existing urban development stakeholders.

Considering IIED's fields of expertise and priorities, we have identified several areas where better understanding of LGBTQI+ lives in cities is needed and how development initiatives can respond.

Urban poverty and informality: many informal settlements host vibrant and thriving queer communities. However, we know little about how LGBTQI+ people participate in community development or experience vulnerabilities due to their gender and sexual orientations. Some human rights organisations have begun exploring livelihoods and economic opportunities as a pathway to advancing LGBTQI+ rights and wellbeing. Community-based organisations and NGOs serving transgender populations in cities have had success in building entrepreneurial activities as alternatives to relying on sex work: knowledge that could be expanded, replicated and integrated into larger initiatives.

Urban resilience: resilience building at the community level has become a development priority in the context of climate crisis, global pandemics and economic insecurity; however, initiatives often have heteronormative assumptions underpinning their design and implementation. For example, gender and sexual minorities (including sex workers) faced deepened inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic and, in some cases, were excluded from

relief aid. Many queer solidarity and mutual aid initiatives during that time operated with scarce, crowd-funded resources and were ignored by major pandemic recovery programmes. Such community responses should be supported by resilience-boosting policies and programmes, adding to our understanding of networked solidarity.

Housing justice: people with diverse SOGIESC face unique challenges to securing safe and decent housing, experiencing high rates of homelessness both in the global North and South. Any movements for housing justice must respond to intersectional needs related to gender and sexuality, disability, age and other minority identities. Some social movements for housing have incorporated LGBTQI+ working groups, such as the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MTST). We can and should learn from such experiences and create opportunities for sharing across geographies.

Forced displacement: most of the world's 32.5 million refugees live in cities. Among them are people of diverse genders and sexualities seeking asylum due to sexual and gender-based violence, armed conflict, and environmental and climate disasters. LGBTQI+ refugees face inhospitable political environments, prejudice from refugee service providers, difficulties obtaining documents corresponding to their gender identities, and violence and discrimination in refugee camps and host communities. Rich data and co-produced research can better inform refugee-serving organisations and asylum policies, to improve support to those in need.

Looking ahead

Development actors — including international NGOs, donors and governments, research organisations and other members of civil society — should increase their knowledge and capacity concerning people with diverse SOGIESC and make intentional efforts to include LGBTQI+ communities in their research and programmes. Queering urban development is not a prescriptive process: it looks different across geographies, contexts and actors. Like other change processes, it begins with critical reflection and examination and will likely present opportunities for new partnerships, creativity and growth.

vital part of achieving equitable cities. Diverse opportunities in urban areas lead LGBTQI+ people to migrate to them: seeking community, acceptance, education and livelihoods.

Many LGBTQI+ people struggle for dignified work and access to housing and services in safe, healthy and sustainable communities. They experience specific vulnerabilities, due to homophobia and transphobia, which are often compounded by vulnerabilities associated with gender, poverty and informality, racialisation, migration status, age or disability.

This backgrounder has been produced with the generous support of Irish Aid and Sida (Sweden).



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

FIND OUT MORE

Our work on queer-inclusive urban development is part of IIED's project 'What does queer have to do with it? Making space for LGBTQI+ contributions to sustainable development and climate action'. Find out more at www.iied.org/what-does-queer-have-do-it