

## **What do we do with our one precious drop?**

### **Dreilinden's response to the funding crisis**

Ise Bosch and Claudia Bollwinkel, March 2025

"I don't think we will be affected," our cooperation partner said. The very next week they had lost their job and their programme had been shut down. The speed at which the LGBTIQ rights infrastructure, built up over the course of decades, has come crumbling down is hard to bear. Like many other private funders, Dreilinden has been through a rough few weeks and some painful conversations.

#### **We call our people and ask how they're doing.**

The first thing we did was to reach out to the partners closest to us and ask them how they're doing. One of the first we called was Joy Chia, Executive Director of Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice <https://astraeafoundation.org/home/>. Dreilinden's founder Ise Bosch was a founding donor to Astraea's International Fund decades ago. Over the past year we have also supported the work of the Intersex Human Rights Fund (IHRF), which is housed at Astraea. For us, it came naturally to stand with Astraea in this difficult moment. We sent its yearly grant out immediately and put a triple amount on top for the intersex work. "What a lifeline you have provided!" wrote Julius Kaggwa, Interim Associate Director of the IHRF.

#### **We pause and deepen our focus.**

Luckily for us, we had planned a team retreat that came at exactly the right moment – one week after the first executive orders were announced. We met out in the countryside for two days, feasted on the sweets our colleague Stefan had brought from Switzerland and a traditional Georgian dish cooked by our colleague Claudia, and took a step back. Something we had learned from the experts on crisis funding, the Urgent Action Funds sisterhood <https://urgentactionsisterfunds.org/>, was "In the face of urgency, pause", and so that is what we did.

We looked at this moment from different angles, assessing the level of threat to our own organisation and asking some hard questions: Is this a moment of triage? Is this when we have to decide who to give the meds to, and who is most likely to survive? It was very clear from the beginning of the USAID funding freeze that the holes torn in the fabric of support for queer rights and queer lives were too big to be mended. One colleague spoke of an "extinction level" for trans people. Since the US government money had trickled down through various vessels, the drought reached the people at grassroots level immediately (for more data see: <https://globalphilanthropyproject.org/philanthropic-cuts-response/>)

So we asked ourselves, "What do we do with our one precious drop in the desert?" And then we reminded each other about the tools we created in better times: our set of values, our grant-making principles, and our theory of change. Grounding ourselves in the practices that lie at the core of who we are, we decided to focus our support on those who are hardest hit: trans and intersex people and LGBTIQ individuals in Central Asia (a region that depended very much on US money).

#### **We give more and in new ways.**

Ise committed to give another €1 million on top of our grant-making budget for 2025, as we did in the Covid years. Since we wanted to focus on the grassroots level of the LGBTIQ movement ecosystem, we gave a big part of that funding to intermediaries who best know how to serve their

people, such as the International Trans Fund <https://www.transfund.org/> and the Dalan Fund <https://dalan.fund/>, which created a shield fund to respond to the impact of the US funding freeze on movement-based organisations in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central and North Asia.

But we also walked some new paths. We supported COC Netherlands, which has a portfolio focusing on groups in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Dreilinden does not usually fund the work of other donors in Western Europe, but we knew that the people at COC had close ties and a clear overview and could reach the organisations that we could not. We also knew they coordinate closely with other donors like Mama Cash, making sure support spreads to different groups.

Another new partner is the African Trans Network <https://africantransnetwork.org/>, a pan-African network for trans movements made up of five regional sub-groups. When we heard that it had created an Emergency Response programme to support its member organisations and their people, we reached out and offered support to enable them to respond to more of the calls for help that reach them on a daily basis.

Co-funding for governmental money is a strategy that Dreilinden was originally not very fond of, because we do not agree with many of the requirements and the tiresome administrative procedures that come with bilateral and multilateral funding. In this moment of crisis, however, we keep hearing that many organisations are struggling to find the third-party money they need to unlock that funding. Precious resources that could go to LGBTIQ groups may be lost if private funders do not provide co-funding. So we decided to cooperate with the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL) <https://www.rfsl.se/en/> on its application to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The federation's programming includes funding for trans and intersex rights.

### **We focus on relationships.**

Another opportunity to leverage more funding came through our connections with peer donors. A colleague at the Other Foundation in South Africa alerted us to an opportunity to work with UK-based funder GiveOut to contribute to a matching agreement that would unlock new funding for LGBTIQ groups in the Global South. One such cooperative grant that we contributed to was core support for Legabibo <https://legabibo.org.bw/>, the LGBTIQ rights organisation in Botswana, which had been heavily impacted by the loss of funding from the US. We also joined forces to help TIERS <https://theinitiativeforequalrights.org/> in Nigeria purchase property to create a safe space and autonomy.

The LGBTIQ funders that are organised in the Global Philanthropy Project interact, share, and strategise together. The connections we foster with peer funders knit the safety net that is needed when things get bad. If it had not been for our connections, we might have missed this opportunity to leverage new funding.

### **We look ahead.**

According to our UK colleague James Logan, one sign of a healthy and effective ecosystem for change is “anticipatory capacity”, i.e. the ability to look ahead and prepare accordingly. There were some who saw it coming, but we, like many others, did not. Now we know that this will not go away soon and that the damage that has been caused is huge.

That's why some of the response grants we are giving are three to five-year grants – for example, our support for European intersex umbrella organisation OII Europe <https://www.oii europe.org/>. This is

the right moment to combine a quick response with longer term strategic grant-making. We told ourselves: “We know who we want to fund, so let’s make it multiyear.”

The impact of the “funding drought”, as Jac sm Kee from Numun Fund <https://numun.fund/> calls it, in reference to the climate crisis, brings topics to the forefront that Dreilinden has been working on for several years now: How do we boost the financial autonomy of LGBTIQ organisations? The model of donor dependency is obviously not sustainable. We might experience decolonisation of the sector the hard way, with money from the Global North and West simply going away, taking their paradigms and power dynamics with them. But movements will not stop organising, as we have been seeing in Georgia recently, where people have been protesting in the streets against the “foreign agents” law for over 100 days now.

The question is, how can funders support organisational models strong enough to outlive the changes? We want our programmes for LGBTIQ entrepreneurs and our property purchases to contribute to groups’ independence. And we encourage conversations around new and creative ways of nurturing organisations and building systems that can sustain them.

**We embrace our sadness and accept change.**

We need to change our ways. Our partners are already starting to adapt, and they have a vision – probably more so than we do. Our plans need to change, new allies have to be found. And more change is coming. We aim to stay flexible and open.

But, yes, there is sadness too. Our one precious drop in the desert turns out to be a tear, one that was shed in anger. Yes, we allowed ourselves to be misled. Yes, hopes are destroyed, and much work has been in vain. However, as that teardrop evaporates in the desert, it will not vanish but will expand to exactly 1,763 times its original volume, as it turns into steam.