

# IMPACT STORY

## ACTIF Project 2024

### Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres

The Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres project aims to improve the mental health and well-being of French-speaking LGBTIQ+ activists in Cameroon, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo and more generally in Central and East Africa. This innovative project is based on community exchanges and learning, and places a particular emphasis on the importance of individual and collective well-being in activist spaces, by putting the well-being of activists at the heart of the initiative, to foster strong and resilient LGBTIQ+ movements.

To better understand the needs of participants, an online survey was conducted with French-speaking LGBTIQ+ activists. 70% of the people who participated are from Africa and the Caribbean. Also, four discussion groups with local civil societies were conducted online and in-person, which brought together around 60 activists from West, Central and East Africa and the Caribbean. The surveys and discussions helped identify the underlying assumption that activists face mental health and well-being issues that are specific to their commitments. These same people are often the least equipped to take care of themselves.

Anjeelee Kaur Beegun works with Égides, an organization dedicated to the defence and promotion of LGBTIQ+ communities in the Francophonie and a key member of Dignity Network Canada. At Égides, Beegun is a program officer based in Mauritius and leads the Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres project. She explains: “We often notice that activists burn out at some point. Not only do LGBTIQ+ issues impact them as individuals but also the LGBTIQ+ movement, so we need to give greater importance to the mental health and well-being of activists.”



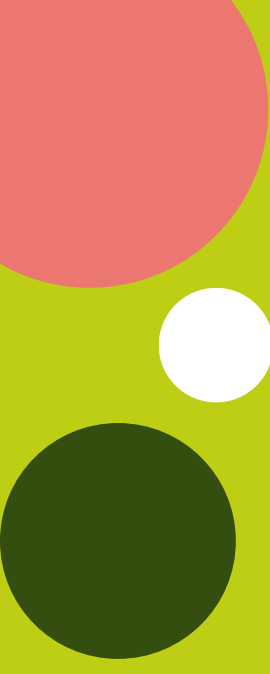


Beegun says the Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres project has three objectives: document and raise awareness of the mental health and well-being needs of activists, build capacity and improve mental health and well-being practices and services for activists on the front lines of the movements, and finally create a practice of mutual aid and kinship between LGBTQ+ activists at the regional and international levels and especially to develop advocacy towards donors and international organizations to integrate mental health as a cross-cutting axis in development programs.

CCAP, the project's field partner in Cameroon, conducted awareness-raising sessions with activists because, as Beegun explains, *"very often, even at the organizational level, we don't talk about the mental health of activists, we often talk about the mental health of the people we work with, the communities we work with, but very rarely about activists."* The first step was therefore awareness-raising among organizations followed by several trainings on individual care, collective well-being, and organizational well-being. A great deal of freedom was given to local partners to build the training plan according to the specific needs of their contexts.

At first, Beegun explains, *"we wanted to do a communication campaign around mental health and the well-being of activists but the reality is that, whether in the DRC, Burundi or Cameroon, awareness campaigns that are accessible to the general public still involve significant risks for LGBTQ+ organizations and especially if these are campaigns on social media, so we were forced to rethink the communication campaign. Finally, the campaign turned into an art therapy session with local artists."*

So, each partner created sessions that involved local LGBTQ+ artists who worked as facilitators of the sessions to create works of art and activities together. *"Instead of doing a communication campaign, we instead commissioned illustrations around mental health and well-being from artists and graphic designers from Cameroon, Burundi and the DRC to use them in the publications for the Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres project."*



In Burundi, when it comes to significant risks, they were proven very real for activists who took part in the Pour Moi, Pour les Autres project. Some of them were arrested in Burundi, accused of “alleged homosexuality”. In February 2023, twenty-four people who were taking part in a seminar on youth entrepreneurship in Gitera, Burundi were arrested by security agents from the police and the National Intelligence Service. *“They are members of human rights and/or HIV/AIDS associations. Several of them are members of the associations ‘MUCO w’Urwaruka (Young Lights of Burundi) and ‘HUMURE’ (Wake Up) which work with people infected with HIV. They were arrested without even being issued an arrest warrant,”* an activist who is a member of the management team of one of these two NGOs told Média Latitudes.

These are risks that Grâce Divine Ingabire knows all too well. Ingabire is a member of Dignity Network Canada’s Global Advisory Board and assistant to the program manager, capacity building at Moli Burundi, one of the field partners of the Pour Moi, Pour les Autres project. Grace explains the context in Burundi is not safe for the LGBTIQ+ community because the Burundian government is generally hostile to questions of human rights, press freedom and freedom in general.

Under Burundian law, consensual same-sex acts are a criminal offence. Article 29 of the Burundian constitution bans same-sex marriage. In December 2023, President Évariste Ndayishimiye said that gay sex is like *“choosing Satan”* and that the death penalty is morally (if not legally) appropriate. He said: *“For me, I think that if we find these people in Burundi they should be taken to stadiums and be stoned, and doing so would not be a crime.”*

#### Article 29

Freedom of marriage is guaranteed, as is the right to choose one's partner. Marriage cannot take place without the free and full consent of the future spouses.

Marriage between two people of the same sex is forbidden.

For Ingabire, it's important to remember that working in such a context has a heavy toll on the mental health and well-being of LGBTIQ+ activists as they are not free to speak and constantly feel like they have a target on their backs. It also creates a climate of mistrust among activists. *“But I feel we have to do the work, in spite of arrests, changes in government and the difficult geo-political situation we are facing,”* says Ingabire.

And through the ACTIF-funded project, Moli was able to break through the fear barriers and climates of mistrust by creating collective discussion spaces that were much preferred to individual therapy sessions with a psychologist - often seen as a Western import. Through these collective discussion spaces (in French *groupe de parole*), they were able to share their fears, sing and dance together knowing that the person next to them shares a common experience to theirs and understands their fears. The wellbeing session allowed LGBTIQ+ activists to pause and think about themselves, which they were not necessarily given the latitude to do prior to the Pour Moi, Pour Les Autres Project.

**For me, this isn't just work, it allows me to build connections with the community, with people who dare to do things and create change in contexts that are very difficult.**

Grâce Divine Ingabire

