

CASE STUDY: BUILDING A PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY-ROOTED FUND IN WEST AFRICA: INITIATIVE SANKOFA D'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST

Initiative Sankofa d'Afrique de l'Ouest (ISDAO) is a participatory, activist-led fund dedicated to strengthening and supporting a West African movement for gender diversity and sexual rights by adopting a flexible approach to grantmaking and building a culture of philanthropy committed to equality and social justice.^d ISDAO's inaugural call for proposals took place in 2018. In 2019, it hired its first staff member, Executive Director Caroline Kouassiaman. In 2020, its second year of grantmaking, ISDAO made 42 grants totaling \$429,811 through its Activist Grant-Making Panel, which supported 41 LGBTQI-led organizations and groups in eight countries. Today, ISDAO is a distributed organization, in which many staff are remote — its eight staff members are located in five countries in West Africa.

The process and path leading up to ISDAO's first few rounds of grantmaking were deliberate and deeply consultative. In 2014, a group of queer women activists came together to imagine a funding structure with a feminist perspective and a movement-building focus that would not duplicate what other funders were doing in the region; their ideas were informed in part by the structure and processes of ISDAO's sister fund, the UHAI EASHRI in East Africa. From 2014 to 2017, extensive community consultation and research was carried out, and activist steering committees set up to shape and determine the strategic framework and organizational structure of ISDAO and to identify key funding gaps and needs for West African LGBTQI organizing.³ According to Kouassiaman, "When we were in building mode, it was important to have a group of funders who believed in the process and recognized that we weren't ready to do grants. They wanted to support us collectively, with multiyear funding. They understood that consultative processes take time."

ISDAO's third round of grantmaking took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The grants did not provide much additional funding for grantee partners compared with past years, but they ensured a high level of flexibility in how the funds could be used, prioritizing what communities needed the most. They also introduced "resilience grants" a mechanism to provide additional core support for its grantee-partners, understanding the emerging resource gap created by the global pandemic and the long-term impact of this on groups working at the community level. What they are now hearing, after meeting with and listening to partners over the past three months, is that the ability to reallocate ISDAO funding has opened doors to other sources of funding both for COVID-19 emergency response and generally. One partner was able to expand its organizational resources fivefold for its COVID-19 response as a result of the ISDAO grant.

^d ISDAO's mission statement can be found at <https://www.isdao.org/>.

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What are some of the challenges that ISDAO faces as it continues to grow? Kouassiaman noted that as a “young” organization, it is hard to get long-term funding, partly because the universe of donors willing to provide long-term funding remains small. Finding donors who understand the true costs of participatory work that centers LGBTQI activists and keeps them safe in hostile contexts can also be challenging.

Finally, in its philanthropic advocacy work, ISDAO recognizes the importance of increasing resources for LGBTQI groups in the region and celebrates when groups can access funding from larger donors as a result of initial grants from ISDAO. At the same time, Kouassiaman encouraged donors to think about complementarity in their funding strategies. Direct support for individual organizations from donors outside West Africa is important and needed, but long-term, flexible support for place-based intermediaries like ISDAO is also critical. These intermediaries bring to the table a strong movement-building lens and deep understanding of context and relationships among movement actors within the region.