

ICASA 2023

YOUNG PEOPLE UNITE
ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES, ENDING AIDS

**The Global
Network of Young
People Living with
HIV (Y+ Global)
Statement on
ICASA in December
2023 in Zimbabwe**



**GLOBAL NETWORK OF
YOUNG PEOPLE
LIVING WITH HIV**



Background

The International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) is a biennial event of significant importance. The conference focuses on various issues related to HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other public health concerns. In 2023, the ICASA conference took place from 4-9 December in Harare, Zimbabwe.

The conference brings together policymakers, healthcare professionals, researchers, activists, and people living with HIV to discuss and share knowledge about the latest developments in the fight against

HIV/AIDS and other related diseases. This usually involves a variety of activities, such as panel discussions, informative sessions, networking opportunities, and exhibitions. Of particular significance was the village and youth corner, which provided an excellent platform for young people to participate and share their views. The conference was an excellent opportunity for stakeholders to discuss important issues and influence healthcare policies. It was also a chance to ensure that resources are allocated where they are most needed.

Y+ Global played a critical role in facilitating the participation of 67 young individuals from over 13 countries by offering scholarships to deserving candidates. Y+ Global was also actively involved in the conference, leading 12 out of 16 sessions and supporting the remaining 4. Additionally, Y+ Global set up a youth corner booth where various activities were conducted.



Insights, Proposed Actions, and Key Recommendations

At the ICASA conference, attendees had the chance to learn and engage through various activities such as abstract presentations, discussions, and networking opportunities. While the conference was beneficial, there is room for improvement in future events. Y+ Global collected feedback from participants and identified the following recommendations:

SAFETY AND SECURITY

- ~ We urge ICASA organisers to reconsider their stance on protesting and peaceful demonstrations. The issue of tight and heavy security almost banned the peaceful march by adolescent girls and young women calling for their voices to be heard in the HIV space. Knowingly, inequalities are the primary drivers of HIV and can be a barrier to ending AIDS by 2030, and the AGYW has been at the receiving end of male domination, SGBV, and early marriage; they had planned a peaceful demonstration, which the planning committee had been made aware of. Despite the notification, the heavy security disrupted the peaceful march and shut the hope of the many AGYW to speak out and have their voices heard. We are glad Yolanda Muyengwa, a community representative, still managed to present a **declaration document** to Winne Byanyima, Executive Director of UNAIDS.
- ~ We remind ICASA organisers that although the current legal status of sex work and the LGBTQI community in Zimbabwe is criminalised, these identities must be protected and not silenced.

In light of this, it would benefit future hosts of large-scale events to be countries that actively promote and celebrate diversity.

- ~ We kindly request ICASA organisers to take into account the potential threat and mental health concerns that may arise from displaying security personnel with weapons. Instead of overt displays of security measures, we propose implementing more subtle security protocols. Uniformed officers and conspicuous security barriers can create an atmosphere of tension and unease. We suggest using plainclothes security personnel and discreet security measures that can blend seamlessly into the conference environment.
- ~ We strongly recommend proactive communication between the organisers and the delegated. Transparent communication regarding security protocols is essential for assuaging concerns and fostering trust among attendees. Provide clear and concise information about the measures in place to ensure their safety without sensationalising or exaggerating potential threats.



- ~ We urge ICASA organisers to adopt an inclusive approach by involving community members in the planning and implementation of security measures to ensure that their perspectives and concerns are adequately addressed. Establish channels for feedback and dialogue where attendees can voice their apprehensions and suggestions for improving security without fear of retribution or marginalisation.
- ~ We suggest ICASA organisers place greater emphasis on support services. In addition to security measures, prioritise the availability of support services such as mental health resources, medical assistance, and safe spaces for individuals who may experience heightened anxiety or distress during the conference. Ensure that attendees feel supported and cared for, both physically and emotionally.

CONFERENCE PROGRAM & YOUTH-PRE CONFERENCE

- ~ We request that ICASA organisers respect the time and commitments of attendees. Some sessions were shortened to only 45 minutes, which did not provide enough time for engaging in discussions and learning. The limited time given to panellists resulted in a lack of meaningful contributions from participants, who needed more time to reflect on the discussions. We strongly recommend that session durations be reconsidered in future events to allow for adequate time for reflection and contribution from all parties involved. This is especially important for key sessions where important decisions are made.
- ~ During the youth pre-conference, multiple sessions were combined to accommodate high-ranking officials, resulting in an inadequate representation of young key populations' voices.





INFRASTRUCTURE & PROPER PLANNING

- ~ We request the ICASA organisers choose a venue equipped with basic infrastructure such as internet access and water facilities. The lack of reliable internet connectivity was a significant issue for the conference attendees. As the conference involves participants from various parts of the world, accessing the internet is crucial for the event's success. The inability to share updates using hashtags and highlight key events in real time was a further challenge. Therefore, the planning committee should take the necessary measures to address these concerns efficiently before the conference begins.
- ~ During discussions, concerns were raised about the high cost of ICASA compared to the event's perceived quality, which has led to questions regarding its future sustainability. These concerns highlight the need for a careful evaluation of the costs and benefits of the event to ensure that it continues to be a valuable platform for stakeholders. A thorough analysis of the event's value proposition, including the quality of its content and the level of engagement it generates, may be necessary to address these concerns and ensure the event's long-term viability.
- ~ We urge ICASA organisers to improve their support for delegates during the registration process. Some participants faced difficulties registering on the first day of the event. Long queues were observed, which caused delays and inconvenience for the attendees. Moreover, some participants had trouble acquiring their tags or badges, which resulted in them using different names throughout the event. It's important to note that all participants had already paid their registration fees. We suggest implementing better coordination for mobile registration apps, barcoded badges, dedicated registration desks, early badge distribution, and clear communication channels."

Conclusion

Despite facing numerous challenges, young advocates and activists showed unwavering determination to achieve their objectives. They pushed forward, demonstrating solidarity, unity, and understanding of critical issues that affect the health and well-being of sex workers, people who use drugs, and other key populations. They also stood up for LGBTIQ+ rights and raised awareness to counteract the anti-gender movement.

This united front of activists, both young and older, serves as a poignant reminder that progress in the fight against AIDS and social inequality must be rooted in principles of justice, respect, and dignity for all. The future of the response to HIV/AIDS depends on the collective efforts of those who are committed to building a society where every voice is heard and every individual is treated with dignity and compassion. We urge you to consider our recommendations to ensure the safety and security of all communities by selecting venues and host countries that uphold human rights. These actions not only contradict human rights principles but also impede the conference's ability to address the diverse needs of those affected by HIV/AIDS.

