Development cooperation and the stratification of lesbian, gay, bi- and transsexual activism: international donors, elite activists and community members during Uganda Pride 2022

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Uganda’s infamous state-sanctioned homo-hostility has resulted in intense international attention, development cooperation and Western funding to local lesbian, gay, bi- and transsexual (LGBT+) organisations. However, Western funders and allies in this context are becoming increasingly questioned. Researchers have highlighted the complexities, opportunities and constraints of an increasingly transnational LGBT+ movement, but how is this manifested on the ground in the Global South? Through an inductive and ethnographically inspired study, we set out to explore the Ugandan LGBT+ community and its intra-community relationships and relations with Western funders and allies in the unique setting of Uganda Pride 2022, to which we had rare first-hand access. The results reveal that security concerns, both from outside and within the community, shaped Uganda Pride 2022. The most salient finding is that competition for international funding distorts activists’ relations, as it stratifies the LGBT+ community based on who has access to Western donors and international funders.

Keywords activism • development cooperation • LGBT+ • Pride • stratification • Uganda

Key messages
• Uganda Pride 2022 can be understood as a party with politics renegotiated to fit the Ugandan context.
• Security concerns, both from the outside and within the community, played an important role in Uganda Pride 2022.
• International funding distorts activist relations and stratifies the community based on access and proximity.
Introduction

The following is reconstructed from fieldwork notes (dated 3 July 2022) on the outskirts of Kampala:

X enters the parking lot of an offside Kampala camping ground wearing a rainbow cap, rainbow sunglasses and rainbow sweatbands with the Village People’s gay anthem ‘YMCA’ pumping from the car window – a car decorated with rainbow flags hanging from the side mirrors. The Pride general comes out to the parking lot amid what seems to be an entourage of people constantly seeking his attention. His face lights up when he sees me [the first author, a Western-based academic]. I am awarded a hug. We talk about Y [a representative of one of the international sponsors], who had to cancel his participation due to testing positive for COVID-19. Then he notices X’s grand entrance. He points at the rainbow flags and tells me in a low voice, ‘We have to remove those.’ Pride goes under the banner ‘a human rights festival’, and the Pride general tells me that in a country like Uganda, you cannot blatantly show support for the LGBT+ community.

When I enter the campgrounds, however, I see rainbow flags everywhere. A young man dressed in all pink exclaims that it feels so good – that he feels free – and that he finally can express who he really is. He moves in front of the large speaker and dances to some upbeat Ugandan pop music, but not everyone is as comfortable as he is. A trans activist tells me she thinks Pride is so scary because of the risk of police raids. Nevertheless, when asked what Pride means to her, she explains that it represents empowerment and freedom. It is an opportunity to claim a space for themselves and, for once, be able to self-express and celebrate freely. However, as two police officers enter the campground, she becomes tense. This is her first Pride since 2016 when the police raided the Venom Bar, where the Mister and Missis Pride Pageant was being held. To avoid being arrested, some participants jumped off the roof of the bar to escape and were severely injured.

Back at the campgrounds, the police officers are more interested in checking whether people are having sex in public than in tearing down rainbow flags. At that time, to identify as homosexual was not against the law in Uganda, but having homosexual sex was. Later in the afternoon, I see the two officers happily relaxing under a shady tree with large beer bottles in their hands. The trans activist is happier and tells me she thinks the Pride Committee did a much better job this year compared to 2016, as communication about the Pride events was lacking then. She explains that the larger the number of people who know about Pride, the greater the risk becomes that the wrong people get the information and location, thus putting people in danger. Another trans activist disagrees: ‘I think communication is so bad; it should go out more broadly.’ The activist argues that the lack of communication means that many, particularly non-organised LGBT+ individuals or non-elite community members, do not have the same opportunity to be part of the Pride celebrations.
These fieldwork notes introduce the main elements of our study of Uganda Pride 2022, not only the tensions between the main actors – elite lesbian, gay, bi- and transsexual (LGBT+) activists, less prominent actors, community members, and international donors – but also the tensions from constantly monitoring and managing security threats from a hostile environment and from within the community. With unique access to Pride events, we set out to inductively study the Ugandan LGBT+ community and explore its intra-community relationships and relations to Western funders and allies in the complex setting of Pride celebrations in a homo-hostile context in the Global South.

Our study is based on the observations and first-hand accounts of Uganda Pride 2022 participants. Voices of the Ugandan LGBT+ community have largely been missing in academic research on the Ugandan LGBT+ community (but, for exceptions, see, for example, Strand, 2011; Tamale, 2011; Nyanzi, 2014). Furthermore, postcolonial narratives of donor dependency and the imposition of Western values through aid (Klapeer, 2017; Becker, 2020; Rodriguez, 2022) tend to strip local actors of their agency, approaching them as (helpless) victims unable to uphold cultural norms and values in the face of Western funding. The coordinated resistance against several attempts to pass unfavourable legislation reveals a determined, organised and hard-working community deterred neither by domestic homo-hostility nor by the lack of funding (see, for example, Jjuuko and Mutesi, 2018). Although Pride originates from the West, it does not have a fixed location. However, when Pride moves from the West, it represents a geo–temporal dislocation that generates new avenues for local actors and opens ‘a new set of politics’ (Slootmaeckers and Bosia, 2022: 3). What did this geo–temporal dislocation look like, and how was it experienced by Uganda Pride 2022 participants? People fill Pride with meaning and content; as such, it is up for (re)negotiation as it gets entangled with local sociocultural norms and traditions, as well as with community practices and relationships. Uganda Pride 2022 offers an opportunity to study Global South actors imagining and negotiating their community and its interconnections to a global LGBT+ culture and Western sexual politics. According to Szulc (2018: 10), who studied transnational homosexuals in Poland, a non-Western setting comes with both opportunities and challenges for local LGBT+ individuals and activism. How did this play out during Uganda Pride 2022 (an event that was partly funded by the West and had international donors present)?

While this is an inductive and ethnographically inspired study (as detailed in the ‘Methods’ section), the complexities – opportunities and constraints – of an increasingly transnational LGBT+ movement (Szulc, 2018; 2020; Slootmaeckers and Bosia, 2022) are our starting point. We elaborate on these complexities in the subsequent ‘Background’ section, where we first attend to the LGBT+ movement in Uganda and compare it to that of the West. Second, we review international development cooperation with the LGBT+ community in Uganda and its consequences for the movement (positive and negative). We end the ‘Background’ section by arguing that Uganda Pride 2022 provides an exceptional research opportunity to explore these complexities further. How are relationships between Western allies and development actors manifested on the ground and experienced by the community, and how are the community and intra-community relationships impacted by Western funding? Uganda Pride 2022 allowed us to explore the nexus of international development cooperation’s influence on LGBT+ activism, the Ugandan community’s own negotiations, local sense-making and negotiations between Western sexual politics...
and realities on the ground. Our unique and first-hand access to Uganda Pride 2022 serves to enrich the empirical data.

The most salient finding revolves around how international funding stratifies the community, which is important for providing an empirical example of how development cooperation/Western sexual politics affects intra-community relationships. Our findings should be of interest to political scientists and development researchers and practitioners. By calling attention to the unexpected consequences of often well-intended support to Global South LGBT+ actors in their human rights struggles, the article aims to highlight the necessity of considering how funding might distort LGBT+ activism, stratify the local community and erode its cohesion.

Background

Being LGBT+ in Uganda compared to the West

We start with the background of the Ugandan context and culture, which is important for understanding the non-Western and transnational context of our research. First, it is not easy to be LGBT+ in a country that has been labelled by the international press as ‘the world’s worst place to be gay’ because of the now-infamous 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill (Peters, 2014: 17; Lusimbo and Bryan, 2018: 323). While the 2009 Bill was successfully challenged in court in 2014, a range of other legislations are used to target the LGBT+ community (interviews with LGBT+ organisations, Kampala, January 2022). People face human rights abuses in the shape of extra-judicial violence and social discrimination, the denial of due legal process in connection with abuse, corrective rape, and the denial of employment and housing. The COVID-19 pandemic was used to arbitrarily terminate employment contracts and arrest LGBT+ persons, who then became isolated due to a partial closure of courts and a ban on prison visits (Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum, 2021). In March 2023, a revised version of the 2009 Bill was reintroduced in parliament and later signed by the president. The Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023 uses the death penalty for aggravated homosexuality and criminalises the promotion of homosexuality, as well as the abetting of homosexuality. According to our contacts and news reports, hate crimes and persecution have worsened in the latter half of 2023 (Daily Monitor, 2023), which is usually the case when homo-hostile legislation comes into force in Uganda (Jjuuko and Mutesi, 2018: 270, 277). During Uganda Pride 2022, the 2023 Bill had not yet been introduced, passed or signed into law; therefore, Pride participants were not breaking the law by congregating for the celebrations.

Despite the harsh circumstances for LGBT+ individuals, same-sex desires, practices and gender displays have a long and rich history in Africa and Uganda. Many scholars have highlighted the existence of considerable sexual diversity before colonisation (see, for example, Murray and Roscoe, 2018 [1998]), as categories of gender were historically fluid, situational and performative. In the old Baganda kingdom (central Uganda), members of the royal family were always constructed as men, while commoners were women in relation to them, regardless of biology (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2009). The Kabaka (king) was the Ssaabasajja, literally meaning ‘the Man among men’ (Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2009: 371). The same person could thus be a woman inside the palace but a man outside the palace. Hence, the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ depended on status, place and situation, describing relations of dominance
and subordination rather than biological gender. Following this, in pre-colonial Uganda, homosexual activity is known to have existed, though without it being considered ‘homosexual’ or even exceptional.

In contemporary Uganda, sexual pleasure and romantic love are not necessarily expected or required in marriage. Marriage is ultimately about childbearing (Iliffe, 2005: 170; Boyd, 2013: 704; Kaoma, 2013: 87), which is pivotal for the survival of the community/nation (Sadgrove et al, 2012: 118). Nyanzi (2014: 37) explains that ‘the singular aim of sexual intercourse within this national imaginary is procreation’. Kaoma (2013: 85) talks about the Ugandan ‘ethic of procreation’, in which a woman is not considered to be a woman until she has given birth to her first child. The more children a woman has, the more they are considered a woman (with giving birth to twins awarding a woman the status of a nnaalongo ['superwoman'] [Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2009: 375]). Similarly, fathering many children is considered a mark of manhood (Nyanzi et al, 2009). This close connection to childbearing and the survival of the community makes marriage and sex a community matter rather than an individual private affair. Hence, the extended family of aunties, grandmas and neighbourhood adults becomes important when raising many children (the so-called ‘delegated parental responsibility’) (see, for example, Draper, 1989: 145). Although sexual life is inseparable from the community obligation of kinship and lineage, sexuality is not generally considered a topic for public discussion (Ssebaggala, 2011: 50), and attempts to discuss homosexuality are usually unsuccessful (Jjuuko, 2013: 403). In contrast, the West addresses sexuality publicly more often as an individual human right, understood as a private matter and more about individual pleasure than a community obligation.

In Uganda, the individual is traditionally defined in relation to their kin and community, which they must respect and honour (most notably by ensuring that there will be future generations). The welfare of the community overrides individual interests (Jjuuko, 2013: 382). The Ugandan empiisa (‘code of conduct’) is defined as good manners and is used in relation to respect for parents and elders in the community (Karlström, 1996: 490). In regard to sexual practices that are viewed as outside the norm (including homosexuality), this becomes a question of what should be visible in the community. Ugandans can thus engage in spontaneous, adventurous and pleasurable sex, but it should be done with empiisa (that is, be hidden). Accordingly, homosexual activity can sometimes be quietly accepted and even permitted if it does not jeopardise family honour and lineage.

This contrasts with the West, where LGBT+ rights have been framed as human rights. According to Ayoub and Paternotte (2020), this was partly due to Western/European LGBT+ activists attempting to bypass national borders by redefining sexual rights as universal human rights as human rights became institutionalised after the Second World War, protecting the rights of individuals over state rights [see, for example, Engelke, 1999: 291]). The Western concept of a homosexual, which entails that sexual orientation lies at the core of selfhood (e.g. Murray and Roscoe, 1998: 10), is challenging in Ugandan culture because of the value of ekitiibwa, which is often referred to as ‘respect/honour’, ‘loyalty, and proper management of social allegiances and hierarchies’ (Boyd, 2013: 705), or comparable to that of ‘face’ in the Orient (see, for example, Iliffe, 2005: 167). Ekitiibwa is centred around relatedness and social embeddedness – as in a person’s interdependence and obligation to others, most notably within the same family/community. Kaoma (2013: 98) clarifies this
by adapting Descartes’ famous quotation, ‘I think therefore I am’, to the Ugandan context: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.’

The idea of sexuality as connected to a person and their human (individual) rights challenges ekitiibua (Boyd, 2013: 704). A person who adopts a core, more Western-style homosexual identity will not produce children and risks being perceived as greedy and selfish (Kaoma, 2013: 87; Peters, 2014: 81), not just because of their same-sex desires but because of their supposed lack of connection to community and lineage – decoupling sexuality from kinship and reproduction (Boyd, 2013: 710) and ultimately the survival of the postcolonial nation (Engelke, 1999: 302). Some would therefore argue that the opposition in Uganda towards Western-style homosexual identification is based more on procreation and the related concepts of empiisa and ekitiibua than on sexual conservatism (see, for example, Jjuuko, 2013; Peters, 2014).

**International development cooperation for LGBT+ rights in Uganda: consequences and criticism**

The LGBT+ community in Uganda has been transnational and tightly connected to the West and international development cooperation since at least 2009. Ugandan homo-hostile legislation and the international attention it brought with it have resulted in an increase in Western funding to Ugandan LGBT+ organisations. However, the struggle for decriminalisation started long before the 2009 Bill (see, for example, Jjuuko, 2013). Informal organising in bars can be traced back to the late 1990s (see, for example, Lusimbo and Bryan, 2018: 330), but some argue that it was the 2009 Bill that sparked a larger community (Jjuuko, 2013: 383). The attention to the situation of LGBT+ people led to an increase in international funding to LGBT+ organisations, the number of which has increased exponentially. In 2012, three years after the 2009 Bill, the number of LGBT+ organisations in the country had risen to 24 (Nyanzi, 2013: 962), including five targeting queer youth specifically (Ssebaggala, 2011: 53; Peters, 2014: 178). In 2022, the umbrella organisation Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) received requests from a staggering 128 organisations to join them in their current reorganisation as a network (interview with SMUG director, Kampala, January 2022).

Donors have prioritised Uganda and continue to do so (see, for example, Global Philanthropy Project, 2021a; 2021b; Strand and Svensson, 2023). Poverty is widespread among LGBT+ community members, and with no domestic funding available, international funding for LGBT+ organisations constitutes a critical resource for both individual and community survival. Although the attention and influx of resources have supported the emergence of a local LGBT+ community, Ugandan LGBT+ organisations need to navigate between, at times, incompatible normative systems (Rodriguez, 2022). As mentioned, the community is valued over the individual in Ugandan culture. International development, on the other hand, tends to emphasise the individual as the central agent of social change, not the community. This becomes complicated in Uganda, where organisations need to adhere to donor ideals of LGBT+ rights as human (individual) rights to secure funding and yet be respectful of traditional norms and values (centred around family, kin and community) (see, for example, Boyd, 2013: 700). While this could potentially support the hybridisation, or creolisation, of Western concepts of queerness (see, for example, Szulc, 2020: 5), some claim that LGBT+ organisations have become dominated by donor agendas.
and methods (see, for example, Ssebaggala, 2011: 55; Peters, 2014: 169). Hoad (2007) argues that Western support for LGBT+ organisations puts pressure on recipients to organise around Western-based ideas about sexuality. Recipients might strategically adopt the languages of key development partners and align their work to comply with Western development institutions to ensure a continuation of support (see Lind, 2010; Rodriguez, 2022; Strand and Svensson, 2023). Hoad (2007) argues that Western support for LGBT+ organisations puts pressure on recipients to organise around Western-based ideas about sexuality. Recipients might strategically adopt the languages of key development partners and align their work to comply with Western development institutions to ensure a continuation of support (see Lind, 2010; Rodriguez, 2022; Strand and Svensson, 2023).

International development cooperation has the power to reshape local structures of sexuality (Bosia and Weiss, 2013: 5; Strand and Svensson, 2023). Ali (2017), for example, argues that human rights discourses are used to universalise Western epistemologies on sexualities while silencing others or labelling them as barbaric or unliberated. LGBT+ rights have become a marker of modernity (Ali, 2017), and the acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality are symbols of Western liberal, social and political progress (Rahman, 2014). For example, the European defence of LGBT+ rights is sometimes associated with the supposed moral supremacy of Western Europe (Ayoub and Paternotte, 2020). Rahman (2014: 275) argues that when LGBT+ rights are used in a neo-colonialist fashion to render certain countries and cultures not only as lagging but also as inferior to the West, it constitutes ‘homo-colonialism’. In a similar vein, Jolly (2011) criticises how Western LGBT+ narratives are used as the norm, with implied assumptions that LGBT+ groups in the Global South are best served by imitating the West to catch up. Yang (2020) refers to this as ‘homo-developmentalism’, a paradigm where LGBT+ rights figure both as an indicator of progress and as the goal of international development cooperation. This feeds into the orientalist rhetoric of a so-called ‘white saviour’ (see, for example, Ali, 2017) or ‘pink saviour’ (see, for example, Peters, 2014: 220). In this case, it is when Western funders and organisations set out to save marginalised LGBT+ individuals in repressive contexts but according to Western norms and sexual politics. In a recent critical review of ‘white saviourism’, Ugandan researcher Dickson and his co-authors (2023) show how a need to ‘civilise’ African populations has transformed into a need to ‘develop’ them, though under the same colonial/racist prism of inferiority (that is, Africans as incapable of helping themselves), and how the development industry is based on ‘white values’ as the norm of progress and development. Following this logic of ‘white saviourism’, some nations actively brand themselves as LGBT+-friendly, with the associated connotations of being modern and civilised.

However, as we have seen in Uganda, international support for the LGBT+ community has been vital and is often welcomed by the community: ‘Local actors have reached out globally to allies, and international networks are reaching in to claim a foothold’ (Slootmaeckers and Bosia, 2022: 10). Marriages of convenience do not just happen when homo-hostile actors join forces to oppose LGBT+ progress (such as American Christian Rights actors, Ugandan Pentecostal and populist right-wing politicians) (see, for example, Kaoma, 2013). Sweden, for example, has until recently been a vocal supporter of LGBT+ rights under their feminist foreign policy (Rainer, 2021). Swedish support for Ugandan LGBT+ activists dates back to the first 2009 Bill and has resulted in close links between local activists, government officials and development partners. The SMUG director claims to have both the former Swedish ambassador and Swedish secretary of state on speed dial (interview with SMUG director, Kampala, January 2022). The former Swedish secretary of state also spoke at the Pride Award Gala in 2022. These connections and support not only fit the narrative of Sweden as modern, progressive, feminist and LGBT+-friendly but have
also been crucial when, for example, preventing police raids, releasing local LGBT+ individuals from prison and calling for a stop to torture-like anal examinations (to determine whether illegal gay sex has taken place or not) (interview with SMUG director, Kampala, January 2022).

‘Aid conditionality’ (when a donor state imposes conditions on the recipient state or non-state actor in exchange for continued financial support [see, for example, Yang, 2020]) is another example of the rather difficult balancing act for Western development partners when navigating the desire to support LGBT+ people on the ground while still adhering to national ideals and sexual politics. Aid conditionality became widely debated in the aftermath of 2009 when several countries threatened to withdraw aid from Uganda (Rainer, 2021). The threat of aid withdrawal was criticised as a form of gay imperialism/colonialism (Saltines and Thiel, 2021: 113). Aid cuts to Uganda surfaced again in the aftermath of the 2023 legislation. While the current Swedish secretary of state argues that Swedish aid allows the Swedish government to place demands on its Ugandan counterpart (Billström, 2023), there are reports of Ugandan activists criticising donors for not cutting their funding (Reuters, 2023). As Jjuuko and Mutesi (2018: 298) put it, the challenge is to help but without awakening feelings of a ‘Western agenda’ (see also Strand and Svensson, 2023). In recent years, LGBT+ organisations have published guides on how to include LGBT+ people in development programmes (see, for example, Park and Mendos, 2018; OutRight, 2021). These are centred around such principles as ‘do no harm but do something’ and ‘nothing about us without us’. In recent years, LGBT+ organisations have published guides on how to include LGBT+ people in development programmes (see, for example, Park and Mendos, 2018; OutRight, 2021). These are centred around such principles as ‘do no harm but do something’ and ‘nothing about us without us’. The role of international development cooperation in this context is indeed contested, but how does this play out on the ground beyond government offices and high-profile development agendas?

Uganda Pride 2022

Pride celebrations (dis)located in Kampala during some summer days in 2022 offered us the opportunity to explore the intersections of Western sexual politics first-hand with a transnational LGBT+ movement in the Global South. While attempting to be as open as possible to the research field, our focus was on international development cooperation’s impact on the LGBT+ community in Uganda through the voices of Pride participants, local sense-making and the adoption of and/or adaption to Western sexual politics.

Why is Pride such a good research site for this? Development cooperation in relation to claiming LGBT+ rights is often intimately linked with LGBT+ visibility in public spaces. However, the idea of ‘coming out’ to the world is rooted in a Western idea of the self (for an overview of critiques, see, for example, Edenborg, 2020). In some contexts, greater LGBT+ visibility has harmful consequences. Nonetheless, visibility tactics have been adopted by LGBT+ movements in many parts of the world. Creating and using public visibility has been, and continues to be, a central strategy in LGBT+ activism (Svensson et al, 2024). The Pride march, inspired by the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969, is the most notable expression of this. In 2021, Pride events were organised in 107 countries (OutRight, 2022: 15); therefore, Pride is considered a global phenomenon (Slootmaeckers and Bosia, 2022). Pride is defined as ‘any public-facing, open, and visible event to affirm the existence of LGBT+ people, demanding recognition and protection of rights and celebrating
LGBT+ progress to date (OutRight, 2022: 2). Pride can therefore both resemble a protest and a celebration and has been described as ‘a party with politics’ (Browne, 2007). Visibility is a central idea of Pride. The argument is that Pride brings attention to LGBT+ people and their situation, which in turn leads to greater recognition and legitimacy (Ayoub et al, 2021: 469). However, fully public-facing Pride visibility events may be dangerous or even impossible in some countries (see, for example, OutRight, 2022: 14).

Uganda Pride 2022 was organised ten years after Uganda’s first Pride march (for an account of Pride 2012, see Nyanzi, 2014). Although Pride celebrations have been organised in Africa since the 1990s (with or without international support, see, for example, Macharia, 2020), Pride is arguably the poster child of Western-based LGBT+ activism. Furthermore, Pride is a concept that most Western donors understand and are happy to be associated with and support financially. Support of Pride is easily justifiable for home audiences in countries wanting to brand themselves as LGBT+-friendly. For example, an international UK-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) had crowdfunded several Pride celebrations across Africa, including Uganda Pride 2022. The Swedish Embassy was also enthusiastic about organising a roundtable in connection with Uganda Pride 2022.

Uganda Pride 2022 thus provided us with an opportunity to study: (1) the nexus of Western influence on LGBT+ activism in Uganda; (2) community members’ negotiations on the ground; (3) local sense-making; and (4) mediation between Western sexual politics and cultural sensibilities. Given the lack of community voices in the academic literature, we centre the analysis around Pride participants’ voices, which leads us to the ‘Methodology’ section.

Methodology and empirical data

This study originates from a project in which we are researching visibility logics in relation to international development cooperation for LGBT+ people in repressive contexts, and Uganda is one of the case countries. This research project has been approved by the Swedish Research Council as complying with its ethical principles (23 May 2021; Approval Number 2021-02157). With 2022 marking the tenth anniversary of Pride in Uganda, we approached the Ugandan Pride organisation, which agreed to let us participate in and study the events. To our knowledge, we were the only researchers given permission to study Uganda Pride 2022 first-hand, to take part in the festivities and to engage directly with participants.

While the authoring of this article was a joint effort, it was the first author who conducted the empirical data gathering. In Hawkins’ (2023: 21) smartphone ethnography in Uganda, she underlines that ‘there are no neutral visitors in this inherited context’, and this is indeed true of us as well. The first author identifies as LGBT+, and both authors hope that a better understanding of Western development cooperation’s influence on LGBT+ activism and the Ugandan LGBT+ community will not only contribute to research on international LGBT+ politics but also be beneficial for the community in their important fight for their human rights. We support this fight and have supported it for over a decade. This engagement proved beneficial in terms of the ease of access to Pride events and participants to interview. The interviews also allowed us to share our research with segments of the community and, together with them, reason about the meaning of
our results. Given that this study is conducted by two Western-based researchers, there is no escaping the fact that it reflects larger patterns in this research field (see, for example, Weerawardhana, 2018). Although this research is guided by a desire to provide spaces for LGBT+ activists’ voices and recognition of their agency (our intention to include local researchers and voices in our references should be noted), we do not claim to speak for or uncover the authentic experiences of Ugandan LGBT+ individuals. The empirical data are inevitably filtered through our understandings, preconceptions and positions. Nonetheless, with this research, we wish to critically, scholarly and yet respectfully explore international development cooperation and its influence on LGBT+ activism in the Global South and the Ugandan LGBT+ community, given what other scholars have described as the complexities of an increasingly transnational LGBT+ movement (Lind, 2010; Bosia and Weiss, 2013; Boyd, 2013; Kaoma, 2013; Szulc, 2018; 2020; Rodriguez, 2022; Slootmaekers and Bosia, 2022).

However, rather than bringing a set of hypotheses to falsify or not, we adopted an inductive approach. Inductive research is flexible, open to unexpected results and often used to study complex social phenomena, such as Pride celebrations (dis) located in the Global South. We chose this approach because it underlines being responsive to what happens in the research field rather than being restricted by pre-formulated hypotheses (see, for example, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2005). Indeed, inductive explorative research is considered as hypotheses generating rather than as hypotheses testing. This does not mean that our study is non-academic or scholarly unguided; rather, it means that our interest in the intersection of local LGBT+ activism, international development cooperation and negotiations between Western sexual politics and local cultural sensibilities prompted our entry into the field with a sense of direction.

An inductive approach is most often connected to ethnographic research using the methods of interviews and observations, and this is also the case in our study. Furthermore, being Western-based researchers resonates in early ethnographic accounts of mainly Western anthropologists travelling to faraway places to study and understand unknown cultures (see, for example, Malinowski, 1922; Mead, 1928). However, since the 1970s, there has been a push away from the unknown and far away to the known and nearby (Hylland Eriksen and Nielsen, 2004). This study complicates this turn to the known and nearby in that the community we set out to explore is known to us, given that we have worked in the context of Pride for a long time, while we are still based far away from Uganda. Nonetheless, we have attempted to stay as open to the field as possible.

Initially, a variety of events and activities were planned for Uganda Pride 2022, such as sports events, the production of a documentary film and a Mister and Missis Pride Pageant preceded by a drag queen boot camp, among other activities. However, in the end, only three events were scheduled during Pride, which took place between 25 June and 9 July 2022: a red-carpet and black-tie Pride Awards Gala (henceforth, the Gala), an outdoor festival (henceforth, the Festival) and a bar night. The bar night was cancelled/postponed due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in Kampala (interview with the Pride general). The first author attended and observed the Gala and the Festival, chatted with as many people as he could, took pictures (when allowed), wrote down as much as he could remember directly after, and then emailed these writings to the co-author. Apart from observation notes of the events,
Development cooperation and the stratification of lesbian, gay, bi- and transsexual... 

the first author conducted guided conversations with 14 people at the Gala and 21 people at the Festival. These conversations lasted from 5 minutes to as much as 30 minutes. The people approached at these two events were not strategically selected but approached out of accessibility, introductions by previously established contacts, nearby physical presence to the first author during the events and their willingness to talk. The first author presented himself and his scholarly interest in the events and intention with his questions. While people, in general, were happy to talk to the first author, we cannot ensure representativity, given that we did not have access to any detailed lists of participants (if such even exists).

The study also relies on detailed notes taken during a roundtable event that was held at the Swedish Embassy on 4 July 2022. The event was organised by the authors in collaboration with the embassy. The roundtable consisted of two executive directors (EDIs) of Ugandan LGBT+ NGOs, the Pride general and two civil society donor organisation representatives. The roundtable was moderated by the first author and preceded by short research presentations via links on funding patterns (by the co-author) and the role of academia in supporting Pride (by a researcher from the UK). Invitations to the roundtable were handled by the embassy, which departed from a participation list from the Danish Embassy’s International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) celebrations in May 2022. Due to COVID-19, the roundtable was held outdoors and was limited to 30 people in the audience.

In addition, ten more formal interviews were organised with the Swedish Embassy (a government donor), two donor civil society organisations (one international and one regional), three members of the Pride Committee and four members of a local LGBT+ organisation with which we have collaborated for some years. These formal interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. Following Ayoub and his co-authors (2021), interview participants were selected for their direct involvement in Pride. Being well connected and having followed the Ugandan LGBT+ movement for a long time allowed us access to those interview participants we deemed important for our study. Hence, the formal interviews were strategically selected to include donors, the Pride Committee and the members of local LGBT+ organisations.

Despite being well connected to the community and the cause, we could not record the interviews, as this would have resulted in significant difficulties in recruiting participants. Many LGBT+ individuals, including activists in LGBT+ organisations, hide their same-sex desires (see, for example, Svensson and Strand, 2023). Anonymity is thus a pivotal strategy in navigating norms and contemporary interpretations of non-conforming sexuality and gender displays. Once again, the first author took detailed notes and emailed transcripts to the co-author. Hence, in the upcoming ‘Results’ section, we only provide short interview quotations reconstructed from these fieldwork notes. People with insight into the Ugandan LGBT+ community probably know who the SMUG director is and who the Pride general was. They hold positions that are already in the public eye and hence were not deemed necessary to fully anonymise (with their consent). Interviews with organisations’ members and donors were conducted in public places, such as cafés and restaurants, but nevertheless away from prying ears due to the contentious nature of the topic. Interviewees were provided food and beverages in connection with the interview, but no other compensation was offered.
**Results**

*The actors and the events*

In this first descriptive part of the ‘Results’ section, we describe who the main actors were and the two Pride events attended. With Pride being dependent on international resources, international donors constitute a key set of actors. It is also apparent that there are different layers within local LGBT+ organisations, with the EDI at the top and a management team (or entourage) around them. A third level consists of organisations’ members with no function or less important functions in the organisation. Non-organised individuals with same-sex desires have not been included in this study, and most of them did not even know that Pride was happening at all (the first author knows about 15 non-organised individuals with same-sex desires and met six of them during his visit [see, for example, Svensson et al, 2024]).

The two Pride events, both by invitation, were organised by a loosely composed Pride Committee of about five members headed by a Pride general. However, the Gala was not open for all the organisations’ members, while the Festival was. The Gala was an exclusive red-carpet and black-tie event hosted at a fancy hotel with embassy presence from Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. Unlike the Gala, the Festival was open to organisations’ members and relied on word-of-mouth invitations (the same day as it took place) passed down through the organisations. Unlike the Gala, no one made sure the attendees were invited. An interesting observation is that while the Gala was full of EDIs, only one made it to the Festival.

*Negotiating Pride*

How was Pride – initially a Western-introduced street-based festival/protest – negotiated when (dis)located to the Ugandan context and culture? It was understood as a celebration: ‘Pride means a moment to celebrate who I am, love, acceptance and togetherness as a queer community’, as one organisation member expressed it. Its Western and historical roots were referred to when award recipients at the Gala chanted: ‘We are the children of Stonewall.’ At the same time, no attempt was made to mimic the traditional format of taking to the streets in a Pride parade to claim one’s right to exist in the public space. One Pride Committee member explained that ‘Pride needs to be organised in a context-specific way’, which entailed that they could not ‘have dicks and titties hanging out in the streets’, as one Gala participant expressed it. In other words, people celebrated but without the public-facing visibility events that some (see, for example, OutRight, 2022) would argue should be a defining character of any Pride. Although Pride’s historical format of visual street-based activism loomed in the background, the Pride general explained the Ugandan interpretation of the event: ‘At the level we are in Uganda, we cannot have a public event or take it to the streets.’

Uganda Pride 2022 was renegotiated from a public street party format to that of a celebration that people were invited to (or informed about from their organisation) and an event that could boost local activism. A key theme was the need for a safe space for self-expression and the celebration of achievements: ‘We have to celebrate who we are and what we have achieved’, as one organisation member phrased it. In this sense, Uganda Pride 2022 strengthened the bonds between organisations and community members and allowed the community to become more tangible for...
dispersed members. Celebration and the boosting of intra-community relationships are important because the collective denial of frustrations with activism in times of a lack of progress (combined with a failure to provide spaces and processes that give community members a chance to recover and re-energise) may ultimately be the downfall of a movement (Gould, 2009). Nevertheless, when interviewed after the Gala, the international donor (who was one of the main financial contributors to Uganda Pride 2022) told the first author somewhat sceptically that Pride must challenge power, ‘otherwise, it is just a party’, clearly evaluating Uganda Pride 2022 on the basis of its Western template. The Gala could nonetheless be understood as a ‘party with politics’ (see, for example, Browne, 2007) when, for example, an awarded activist, in his acceptance speech, prompted the audience (including ambassadors) to chant, ‘We have nothing to lose but our chains.’

Security concerns

These initial observations are perhaps not surprising. However, more interesting is the role that security concerns played in shaping the events and how they were affected by community relations and, in turn, affected those same relations.

First, the Pride attendees feared being raided by the police. Hence, Pride preparations and its execution were marked by security concerns. Participants remembered the 2016 Venom Bar incident, and this effectively made the 2022 Pride a more ‘hidden celebration’, as one organisation member phrased it. Even though security concerns have existed since the first Pride in 2012, we were told that security was an even bigger concern this year. Preparations were shrouded in secrecy, and only a few community members knew the details about when and where the events would take place, with the reasoning that the greater the number of people who know, the greater the risk that the wrong people would know. Moreover, the more in advance the wrong people would know, the more time they would have to alert the police. Invitations to the Festival were given by word of mouth and by phone calls – most of them on the same day. We received the date a few days in advance, but not the location until the same day. One Pride committee member explained that in 2018, they released the events schedule in advance, and this, she believed, made them easier to target that year. The Festival date was announced as 29 June but always planned for 3 July. The Pride general explained that this strategy was to see if there would be heightened police activity on 29 June. Given that there was not, they felt safe to continue planning for 3 July. Despite this, some participants nevertheless felt unsafe, as manifested in the opening fieldwork note. At the Gala, some attendees were shocked that words such as LGBT+ and homosexual were explicitly expressed from the podium: ‘Did you see the reaction of the hotel waiters? They could have called the police.’ Others were less worried. With ambassadors present, the police would be very reluctant to disrupt the event. Inviting high-profile Western allies was thus not only for networking and fundraising purposes but also a safety measure, knowing from experience that when Western ambassadors are present (or show up), the police will leave them alone.

However, what we witnessed was more than simply a party with politics and a community boost made safe by high-profile Western allies; under the surface loomed security threats from within the community. One Pride Committee member openly stated that community members were the biggest threat to Pride and that there had
been attempts to blackmail the committee. Community visibility and inclusivity become compromised here, with the effect that Trans participants we talked to during the Festival openly complained about what they perceived as their exclusion. At the same time, one Pride Committee member explained that Pride 2018 ‘didn’t happen because we involved too many people’. Hence, this year, they only shared information among the committee members, not with any partners. By limiting the number of people involved in the preparations, the Pride Committee attempted to avoid a repeat of Pride 2018, where they cancelled events at the last minute. Nevertheless, the lack of information about the upcoming celebrations and invitations to the event ultimately translated to a sense of a lack of openness and inclusion for some community members. This secrecy was contested and debated at the embassy roundtable, clearly showing that it had caused friction within the community.

Security concerns and the role of international funding

We connect the observation that negotiations between security and inclusion/visibility created friction within the community regarding Western funding and international development cooperation. High levels of poverty within the Ugandan LGBT+ community and almost no available local funding create competition for funding. One Pride Committee member explained quite bluntly that international funding has been regarded as an opportunity to escape poverty. Furthermore, with international funding providing relative affluence for some top-tier elite activists, those who have fewer privileges resent and question how resources are distributed. This was elaborated in the interview with the regional donor (also a local community member), who claimed that some LGBT+ people feel entitled to their share of the funding. Organisations’ members see EDIs in fancy cars and expensive clothing and feel that they too should receive a part of the funding, he explained. When requests for financial support are denied, blackmail may be used to extort money from individuals and organisations.

During Uganda Pride 2022, such a case unfolded. An LGBT+ organisation member took his organisation to court because the member felt that he and his subproject were not considered by the organisation’s leadership. Blackmail on the grounds of same-sex desires is, in many respects, the perfect crime in a country with homo-hostile legislation. On the other hand, the regional donor also claimed that leaders in some organisations did not always help lower-tier members who, for example, ended up in prison and thus needed financial and psychological support. There are probably truths on both sides of this argument. However, what this shows is that there are frictions within the Ugandan LGBT+ community and that these are related to access to funding: ‘It is all about funding’, as the international donor put it.

At the Gala, the first author was seated next to this donor. When he and his organisation were outed as major donors and supporters of the event, he turned around with a sigh and said, ‘Oh no, everyone is going to approach me now with the hope of money; my email inbox will be flooded tomorrow.’ This is something we have experienced ourselves, though on a much smaller scale, when securing funding for projects with a partner organisation in Uganda. During the Gala, many attendees wanted to take pictures with and be seen next to the first author. We interpret this from the perspective of him being from the West and having a track record of securing international funding for a local LGBT+ organisation.
International funding stratifying the LGBT+ community

The implication of international funding flows is hard to fully assess (for an overview, see Rodriguez, 2022), but our study indicates that it creates a new set of hierarchies within the community. Funding creates a stratification of the community based on who is close to international resources. For example, the same people who congratulated the Gala’s Pride Award recipients and literally and metaphorically back-patted the EDIs and other elite top-tier activists (who seemed keener on taking photographs with and staying close to ambassadors and international funders) complained behind their backs that the funds they control are not benefitting the larger community. After the Gala, the first author joined some lower-ranked, middle-tier organisation members at a nearby pub. On being asked about his impression of the Gala, he answered that it felt like ‘a bunch of people giving awards to each other’. This response opened a flood of criticism of some elite top-tier activists, their organisations and their (mis) use of international funds. The Gala can thus be interpreted as a frontstage event, being important for building bridges and alliances and negotiating proximity to those close to international donors and funds. The absence of elite top-tier activists at the pub made this more of a backstage arena, where middle-tier organisation members could express themselves more freely.

When interviewed, the regional donor confirmed the centrality of international funding: ‘Everything is about funding – who and what organisations have access to money and how this money is spent.’ Those organisations without funding accuse those with funding of corruption and misconduct. Organisations that have managed to secure funding dismiss the accusations as mere jealousy. There are probably truths in both positions. That money ‘makes the world go around’ is well known, but learning how international funding stratifies the community, creates power relations and imbalances within the community, and, in some ways, divides it surprised us. For example, the regional donor revealed that the Pride Committee had applied for funds to go on vacation to recover after the events. In the interview, he seemed not that keen on granting them these funds. At the same time, some elite top-tier activists have become important through their international connections: ‘You know what? We might just give them this money because it is about politics – to stay on good terms with important people.’ Staying close to and back-patting the Ugandan LGBT+ elite was important to him.

The emerging hierarchy appears to consist of a three-tier community structure centred around access and proximity to international funding and donors. Through the interviews and observations, we discerned a top tier made up of a handful of elite activists who are well connected and lead organisations that have access to international funding. These top-tier community members are out and thus conforming to Western ideals of visibility and publicness. A second tier – the middle tier – consists of lower-ranking members of the larger organisations and individuals connected to smaller organisations. This second tier appears to have a contentious relationship with the top tier, as they both seek proximity and access to them and, at the same time, struggle with resentment concerning how resources trickle down (or not). Finally, the third tier consists of various organisations’ members, who, with some exceptions, are just happy to have been invited and appreciate the free beer and food. Outside of this three-tiered structure, we have the non-organised individuals with same-sex desires, who would probably not even recognise elite activists like the SMUG director (as evidenced in private conversations with non-affiliated same-sex-desiring individuals during the events). That the top elite activist, who probably would be recognised...
by LGBT+-friendly Western state secretaries around the globe, is not recognised by local non-affiliates tells us something about the LGBT+ community in Uganda: it is both faced towards and seen by the West.

**Summary and concluding thoughts**

To summarise, Uganda Pride 2022 was renegotiated from a public, street-party format to a more hidden, invitation-only celebration. It was an opportunity to boost activism, both locally and among high-profile Western allies, not only for networking and fundraising purposes but also as a safety measure to keep the police away. However, under the surface loomed security threats from within the community. This led to a difficult balancing act between security and inclusion/visibility, which created friction within the community. Our most salient observations revolve around the role of and competition for funding in a context where domestic financial resources for LGBT+ rights work are lacking and where poverty is rife among community members.

This brings forward the question of whether community members strip themselves of agency and their own independence when embracing the view that being LGBT+ in Uganda entitles them to international funding, or whether this view is an example of strategic victimisation to fit a Western narrative of poor Ugandan LGBT+ people in need of being saved by white/pink saviours. Is sexuality, money and livelihood so deeply entrenched in Ugandan culture that this could be understood as a viable way of navigating poverty in a context that has been long marked by the presence of Western NGOs (see, for example, Peters, 2014)? As researchers sympathetic to the cause, we navigate a tricky terrain, not wishing to portray Ugandan LGBT+ community members from a Western perspective as either helplessly dependent on international funding (as also highlighted by Lusimbo and Bryan [2018]) or as unscrupulous strategists wanting to get the most out of the international attention towards Ugandan homo-hostility.

Studies show that international development cooperation in contexts with few other resources available creates relations of dependency (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Klapeer, 2017). However, the finding that it also distorts community cohesion was unexpected. Our most salient finding is how the local LGBT+ community became stratified as a result of international funding, which seems to be what the community and LGBT+ advocacy in Uganda is currently organised around. Competition for resources has an impact on intra-community relations. During Uganda Pride 2022, community members tried to portray themselves as unified, but under the surface, they were not. What we encountered was a community negotiating internal and external politics, full of paying lip service, backstabbing and security risks, even from within the community. While political scientists and development researchers have discussed donor dependency (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Klapeer, 2017) and queer scholars have discussed transnationalism and geo-temporal dislocations (Szulc, 2018; 2020; Slootmaekers and Bosia, 2022), the stratification of the LGBT+ community around who has access to international funding and Western donors has, to our knowledge, not been as explicitly detailed before. As this has been an inductively inspired and explorative study, future research should more quantitatively test hypotheses formulated around this finding. Does international development cooperation and Western funding influence other communities in the Global South in similar stratifying ways?
From a development practitioner perspective, what should Western donors do? Many community members we talked to were happy about the international attention and had no problem navigating between both complying with donor expectations and doing advocacy work their way and being relevant in the Ugandan context (see, for example, Szulc, 2020). Should all so-called ‘white (pink) saviourism’ be condemned and all Western LGBT+ supporters and funders distance themselves from Uganda and leave the Ugandan LGBT+ community to fend for itself? Or, should we trust in local activists’ capabilities to navigate donors’ expectations within the Ugandan context and culture? We believe that it is possible to nurture two thoughts at the same time. International funding is important, particularly in a context with few available domestic resources. To avoid the spreading of ‘white cultural ways’ (Dickson et al., 2023: 9), more decisions over this funding – as in how it is channelled, for what projects and at what cost – should perhaps be made together with the community. This takes us back to the principles of ‘do no harm but do something’ and ‘nothing about us without us’ (see, for example, Park and Mendos, 2018; OutRight, 2021). In practice, these principles seem hard to follow. Furthermore, Western donors should be aware that their funding is likely to influence community relationships and factor this insight into their proceedings.

From an academic perspective, Slootmaeckers and Bosia (2022: 15) argue that a more complex understanding of global LGBT+ rights struggles and the interconnections between the West and, in this case, Uganda may open more radical questions. What (homo)normativities arise out of these interconnections, and how will these play out in Uganda? Slootmaeckers and Bosia (2022) suggest the alienation of shame. Ideas of shame, entangled in the intricacies of community expectations and staying true to the idea of an individual core self, are however also context specific. Uganda has a culture historically centred around the ideals of empiisa and ekitibwa, which are more focused on procreation (with large families as the norm) and delegated parental responsibility (with a different kind of bond between children and their parents as the norm) compared to the West. As a result, hiding same-sex desires (or not blatantly flagging them) and leading a double life become viable options, which are neither considered strange nor inauthentic (see, for example, Svensson and Strand, 2023).

To end on a positive note, we would like to emphasise the joyous atmosphere at the Festival: ‘We wanted a successful event this year’, the Pride general explained. In 2016, the Venom Bar incident happened. In 2018, the festival failed, and then there was COVID-19. More than a ten-year celebration, Uganda Pride 2022 became something to build from. Despite the distressing news of the Anti-Homosexuality Act 2023, it is our hope that Uganda will witness plenty of LGBT+ individuals hand in hand, dancing and expressing themselves in whatever consensual way they feel comfortable in the years to come. It would not be the first time the Ugandan LGBT+ community has successfully overruled homophobic laws and navigated between local legislation, donor expectations and its own intentions.

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**Ethical approval**
The research has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Approval No. 2021-02157).

**Conflict of interest**
The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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