

## **Upholding Civil Society Voices in Health International Conferences: A Response to the Suppression and Cancellation of Communities at ICASA 2023**

We, the participants, activists, and community members affected by HIV, TB, and Malaria, are expressing our profound disappointment and condemnation regarding the treatment of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the unexpected cancellation – with no notice or justification – of the People's March during the International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa (ICASA) 2023 in Harare. This statement aims to not only address the specific incident of the March but also reflect the broader context of how communities and civil society have been treated since the beginning of ICASA 2023.

### **Context and Problem Statement:**

The People's March, scheduled for December 5, 2023, in Harare, Zimbabwe, was intended as a vital forum for raising awareness and demanding action for critical health issues. However, the March's cancellation – coupled with disturbing reports of activists being detained and community stalls being dismantled, paints a picture of systemic suppression of communities and civil society voices. These actions represent significant infringement on our rights to peaceful assembly and advocacy.

While we recognize and appreciate the government's efforts in hosting this Conference, we must express our concerns. The branding and conduct of the event have shown two conflicting approaches. On the one hand, there is a facade of engagement of communities and civil society, but on the other, there is a clear suppression of their activities and voices. It is critical to acknowledge that the promises made regarding inclusivity and engagement were not honored.

We condemn the actions that led to the suppression of communities and civil society voices and the dismantling of their platforms. We also lament the loss of resources incurred by communities and civil society due to the cancellation of the March, including materials and logistic costs.

We strongly condemn the obstruction of community-led advocacy during ICASA 2023. The authorities have no right to suppress our voices. We also unanimously express our disappointment with the ICASA organizers, who have not sufficiently supported civil society voices to be heard, as they should be.

Progress in defeating HIV will only be possible when communities are able to demand for their rights. This should be welcomed and encouraged by the ICASA and the host country.

**The slogan “Let Communities Lead” means nothing if our VOICES are suppressed and silenced.**

The theme of ICASA 2023, "AIDS IS NOT OVER: dress inequalities, accelerate inclusion and innovation" embodies our commitment to ensuring that **no one is left behind**, especially in such critical dialogues impacting millions of lives.

The March was a symbol of our solidarity and our collective determination to confront the severe health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, global economic challenges, and inadequate healthcare systems. It was an opportunity for us, communities and civil society to present our petition directly to the high-level delegations attending the Conference, calling for immediate and effective action to address the urgent health needs of the continent.

Our petition, reflecting the consensus of communities, civil society, and activists, highlighted critical issues such as the alarming HIV treatment access gaps, the inexcusable rise in TB-related fatalities, the increasing Malaria cases and deaths, particularly among children, and the pressing need for increased and sustainable health funding. We also emphasized the importance of decriminalizing LGBTQIA+ people, People living with HIV, sex workers, and people who use drugs; ensuring everyone's right to access public health services with dignity.

In solidarity with all participants and communities affected:

1. We strongly urge the ICASA organizers and relevant authorities to reconsider their decision to cancel the March and acknowledge the importance of community-led advocacy in shaping health policies and actions that affect us all.
2. Failure to reconsider this decision to cancel the March, we will call for all participants to refuse to participate in the closing plenary. This Conference is meaningless if our voices are not heard. This stance is not taken lightly but is a necessary measure in the pursuit of a Conference that truly represents and respects the voices of all its participants.
3. We call on world leaders and development partners to amplify this message in support of community and civil society voices and to secure their rightful place in expressing their needs and concerns to truly leave no one behind.

### **Recommendations to ICASA Secretariat:**

1. **Written commitment for future host countries:** We strongly recommend that the ICASA Secretariat requires a written commitment from future host countries to ensure that CSOs' voices are heard and their activities are not hindered.
2. **Reflection on Conference organization:** We urge the ICASA Secretariat to reflect on the organization of the Conference to ensure that such suppressive actions are not repeated.
3. **Opposition to host countries against civil society expression:** If a prospective host country has policies or tendencies against the expression of CSOs, the ICASA Secretariat must strongly oppose its bid to host the event.

We will continue to seek ways to make our voices heard and contribute to the fight against HIV, TB, Malaria, and other pressing health challenges facing our continent.

We the undersigned:

1. GFAN Africa
2. International Community of Women Living with HIV.
3. AVAC
4. Swaziland Network of Young Positives
5. Health GAP
6. Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG)
7. AfNHi
8. Positive-Generation
9. Treatment Action Campaign
10. Stop TB Partnership-Kenya
11. The People's Matrix Association, Lesotho
12. WACI Health

5<sup>th</sup> December 2023.