Change Starts With Us

Mama Cash grantee Transgender and Intersex Africa reflects on the ingredients for impact
By Esther Vonk for Mama Cash
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Founded in 2010, Transgender and Intersex Africa (TIA) seeks to break the silence and stop the ignorance surrounding the existence of black transgender and intersex communities in South Africa. The group aims to reduce intolerance and discrimination against transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex individuals in black communities, and to promote acknowledgment of indigenous African knowledge of transgender and intersex identity.

The challenge
Due to pervasive gender and sexual discrimination in South Africa, trans* and intersex people face grave challenges. They may be kicked out of their family homes, unable to finish their education, denied access to employment and health care, or endure mistreatment by health care providers. Prior to 2010, trans* organising in South Africa lacked the voices, presence, and leadership of black trans* and intersex people from ‘disadvantaged’ areas. There was just one organisation in all of Africa voicing the interests of trans* people and advocating for their rights. The needs of poor, black trans* people in South Africa’s townships and rural areas were not being addressed: they had no support structures, and lacked knowledge and information about their rights. To address these challenges, a group of young black trans* people in Pretoria founded Transgender and Intersex Africa.

Looking beyond the symptoms
In a short time TIA has succeeded in building a movement, increasing visibility, and improving understanding of trans* and intersex issues in South Africa. The need for the organisation was clear: when TIA first launched its organisational toll free number, the group received over 50 calls per month. Through its outreach and organising activities—including peer support groups in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and Mpumalanga which meet monthly—TIA now reaches large numbers of trans* and intersex individuals. In just five years it has recruited more than 500 members. “Our theory of change,” TIA explains, “starts with individuals, with people. It then extends to an organisational and movement level: organisations and movements need people to be effective. From there, we change society at large.”

TIA strives for more active engagement of the trans* and intersex community in its work. It has successfully organised a small team of volunteers, but sees capacity building and mobilisation of members as critical for building a real movement. In 2013 the group conducted a formal needs assessment of its trans* and intersex constituency, which has helped guide its programming, public education, and advocacy work since. The assessment helped TIA see the need to develop a specific programme focused on trans* sex workers: TIA has since launched a programme in Johannesburg, where it has over 40 trans* sex worker members. The programme is led by a volunteer who is a trans* sex worker herself.

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Access to comprehensive health care—including both basic and transition-related health care—for trans* and intersex people is a priority for TIA. TIA focuses especially on improved access for those living in less advantaged areas and with the least access to such services. Increasingly, the group focuses on changing practices and attitudes in clinics and hospitals in the provinces where they work. This requires both changes in the norms and attitudes of health care providers, as well as institutional change, such as health care facilities that support trans* and intersex people seeking care and appropriate medical training for staff.

TIA’s efforts have achieved results. In Pretoria and Mpumalanga province, health service providers in primary health care clinics and in two hospitals have been trained to provide adequate service for trans* and intersex people. In 2013 the Chris Hani Baragwaneth Hospital set up a support group for transgender people at the hospital, facilitated by TIA’s psychologist. The following year the hospital agreed to develop a Gender Clinic involving the Endocrinology and Surgery Departments. Building on these experiences, TIA has recently begun to advocate on a national level for trans* and intersex-inclusive guidelines and policies related to health care.

TIA also works on the issue of gender recognition. It assists members in obtaining identity documents that recognise their gender and advocates for correct implementation of South Africa’s 2003 law on gender marker change. According to the law, trans* people do not have to have surgery to apply for a gender change, although they do have to obtain a report from a medical practitioner. The Home Affairs Ministry can reject an application, but it must provide written reasons for its decision and the applicant has the right to appeal. The Ministry committed to a six-week turnaround period for new identity documents and a six-month turnaround period for transgender individuals applying for gender marker change. As TIA tells it, the law was not a problem, but its implementation most certainly was: trans* people often faced long delays or were denied the ID change without due cause. TIA, together with ally Gender DynamiX, drew attention to the problem. They advocated for full and correct implementation of the law, and have subsequently seen an increase in the number of successful gender change applications.

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TIA did not emerge in isolation, and it recognises the significance of the broader movement in the achievements it has been able to make, as well as in raising donor interest for trans* and intersex organising. TIA is one of the three partners in Transitioning Africa, an umbrella organisation founded through the collaboration of Gender DynamiX, Transgender and Intersex Africa, and Support Initiative for People with Atypical Sexual Development. Via Transitioning Africa, the three organisations engage in regional work, facilitate collaboration with other groups, and strengthen transgender and intersex leadership and capacity in the region.

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TIA also collaborates with Gender DynamiX and SHE in the South African Trans* Health Rights Initiative (SATHRI) which published a detailed report on transgender health issues in South Africa in 2014. The initiative also organised and hosted the African Trans* Health and Advocacy Conference in August 2014. Through its membership in the Coalition of African Lesbians (CAL) and the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA), TIA has an entry point into the feminist movement and the HIV/AIDS movement respectively. Via its membership in ARASA (since 2013), TIA contributes to trans*
visibility within the network and the HIV/AIDS movement, and gains access to regional decision-making spaces. TIA was the only trans* organisation invited to present at the Regional Southern African meeting on the roadmap on Shared Responsibility and Global Solidarity for AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Response in Africa. TIA drew attention to the challenges trans* people face in accessing health care, including HIV treatment, due to stigma and discrimination.

The group’s decision to focus on normative and structural change came from experience. At one point, the group explains, “we felt we almost drowned in the need—the need of the community, for direct services, support, and accompaniment. We sat down as an organisation and reflected. If we spend all our time on accompanying individuals to the hospital, what will change in the long term? How will the need ever end?” TIA reconfirmed its long-term goals and set priorities accordingly, providing support, community building and outreach, engaging new activists, and encouraging activism on a local level and nationally. The group keeps an eye on long-term change—normative change and policy change—that will affect the lives of trans* and intersex people. “We have learned to look beyond the symptoms,” TIA says. “How will handing out condoms help, how will even educating staff in a local hospital help if [we don’t] at the same time set in motion a change in how trans* and inter people are seen, perceived?”

TIA has been successful in securing favourable media attention: staff members appear on radio and television several times a month and are regularly interviewed by newspapers and magazines. TIA has also contributed to academic publications, a sign of the organisation’s credibility and the increased importance given to the trans* and intersex community in South Africa. “The issues we address were previously unaddressed,” the group asserts. “We can safely say that the total silence and ignorance that surrounded trans* and intersex people has disappeared. We are not there yet, but at least a conversation is happening around the issues of trans* and intersex people... more and more people are beginning to speak out.”

“The fact that we are self-led convinces,” says TIA. “We are experts on our own lives and experiences, and at the same time we are professionals. Our achievements and our alliances with mainstream institutions convince, give us credibility. We moved from identity politics to a politics that addresses the root causes of what we face. Patriarchy and heteronormativity affect us as well as other groups—women, lesbians and gay people. Starting with black trans* people in townships in five provinces we expanded politically, strategically, and geographically. TIA is a feminist organisation—identifies explicitly as feminist—and this influences the vision we have for the trans* movement and our vision of the change we want to see. It helped us to move away from the strong identity based politics.”

A clear plan

“There was no way we could have achieved what we have if we were not a strong organisation, with at least the minimal financial and human resources. What has really helped us is that we plan, that we have our long-term goals clear, that we decide on priorities and strategies accordingly.” TIA was founded in 2010 and received its first grant, from Mama Cash, in 2011. TIA registered as a non-profit organisation in February 2012 and opened an organisational bank account in June 2012. This enabled the group to access funding from other institutional donors. By 2014 the group had five institutional donors in addition to Mama Cash, a budget of nearly €150,000, and four paid staff members. Having paid staff has been essential to TIA’s grow and expansion of its activities. According to the group, few people can afford to commit a lot of time to the organisation alongside another paid job. In addition to dedicated volunteers who work part-time, the paid staff has enabled TIA to become the expert organisation it now is.

TIA has volunteers in each of the provinces where it runs outreach programs. All board and
staff members are representative of the constituency the group works with: black trans* and intersex people between the ages of 22 and 38, with key staff all under 30. TIA has a board of seven which is also comprised of black trans* and intersex people, plus two cisgendered women who are allies to the movement. TIA has participated in various programmes to build staff and organisational capacity, including the TWAFIIKA programme. After just a few years, TIA has matured into a well-governed organisation with a strategic plan, professional and capable staff with clear job responsibilities, clear programme plans, solid review mechanisms and systems in place, access to donors, and a stable annual budget.

Role of Mama Cash

Mama Cash was TIA’s first funder: the 2011 grant covered operational costs as well as TIA’s core activities, which, at the time, focused primarily on outreach and support groups. TIA considers Mama Cash’s support—both then and now—as crucial. Mama Cash’s support has been key in the development and strengthening of the organisation, enabling TIA to implement and further develop its strategies while also successfully building and diversifying its donor base and income. Raising core support, however, remains a challenge. It is hard for TIA, as for many other organisations, to raise funds to cover operational costs. The group uses its grant from Mama Cash almost entirely for operational costs while other grants cover its various activities. Without core support, TIA argues, it would be impossible to carry out their work. At the same time, TIA is making progress in convincing its other donors that in order for the group to be effective, a strong organisation is needed: in 2014, all of its donors contributed a percentage to operational costs.

In addition to the financial support, TIA values opportunities like participation in the trans* feminism meeting organised by Mama Cash in 2012. “Learning meetings like this are important for TIA. We learn from Mama Cash as a feminist funder, and learn from the experience of other grantees, our peers.”

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Building... TIA changed as a result of the meeting: in our work we place more emphasis on feminist politics, on gender power analysis. Things have changed in the movement more broadly since, too. Trans* women are more organised, have taken leadership. The development has been from resistance, to critique of problematic gender norms and practices, to more openness and collaboration. SHE, the feminist collective of trans* and intersex women, plays an important role in this development, too. We need more such meetings. In the continent and beyond, also to learn from movements in other parts of the world.” TIA would appreciate more of these opportunities, as well as more direct contact with Mama Cash staff. Skype calls are fine, says the group, but they have their limits for building the relationship and deepening understanding. TIA welcomes the chance to show Mama Cash staff its work in communities on the ground and to further strengthen their relationship.

From 2010 to 2015, Transgender and Intersex Africa received a total of €173,000 from Mama Cash.

[This story of change is based on documents TIA submitted as part of Mama Cash’s monitoring and evaluation during the grant periods; progress review conversations conducted over skype with Tebogo Nkoane and Nthabiseng Mokoena; and an interview with Nthabiseng Mokoena. All quotes are Nthabiseng’s. The original case study was researched and compiled by Esther Vonk.]
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