



# INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

2019 – 2021

# For all of us who live or love against societal norms

With a history that goes back all the way to 1950, RFSL is one of the oldest LGBTQI organisations in the world. An ever-growing member-based movement, working with a broad program to secure the rights and improve the lives of LGBTQI persons, RFSL has a proud record of successfully advancing LGBTQI rights in Sweden.

Recognising the importance of international solidarity and the possibility to advance rights of LGBTQI persons in cross-national cooperation, RFSL joined the global movement early on. The international work has developed and expanded

immensely over the years, the last five marking a new era for us in partnering with LGBTQI organisations around the world in advocacy, cooperation projects and subgranting partnerships.

Over the past 50 years, the situation for LGBTQI people globally has improved in many regions and countries. The trans movement has won legal battles and access to gender reaffirming care and legal gender recognition has improved. Discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is protected in the legislation of many countries, just as same-sex civil partnerships and marriages. The intersex movement has vocalised their needs within the LGBTQI movement, while LGBTQI people generally are more mobilised and organised in advancing their rights.

LGBTQI people are more visible and issues linked to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics are discussed more openly.

At the same time, the situation for LGBTQI persons is still very

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concerning in a large number of countries.

Criminalisation of LGBTQI persons prevails in a large number of countries, through laws that directly or indirectly targets persons who live and love against the societal norms of gender expression, gender identity and sexual orientation. LGBTQI people are met with discrimination and violence in all countries and issues connected to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression are connected to a high level of stigma. In recent years we have seen that the gains that have been made are threatened due to mobilisation of religiously and politically conservative actors. Continued support to the global LGBTQI movement is therefore of utmost importance.

As a peer organisation with the possibility to support LGBTQI organisations around the world RFSL has a unique role to play. This international strategy outlines the directions for RFSL's international work over the period 2019-2021. It covers the international work that RFSL will do within the framework

”RFSL has a unique role to play.”

of Swedish and International Development Co-operation. It does not, however, cover the international work of RFSL as a civil society movement in Sweden.

Some main components of the strategy and work ahead are international trainings for LGBTQI activists, subgranting and partnerships with LGBTQI organisations globally and advocacy within the United Nations. A special focus is given to the advancements of the goals and indicators included in the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2030.

As a movement RFSL stands by LGBTQI activists around the world and as the President of RFSL I am proud of the role that RFSL, and Sweden, plays in advancing LGBTQI rights internationally.



**Sandra Ehne,**  
*President RFSL*



# International Strategy 2019 – 2021

## Scope and Priorities

The international work of RFSL has developed greatly during the past five years. RFSL engages in international work in three main directions: *advocacy* on a global- and national level, *financial partnership* with LGBTIQI organisations in different regions, and *capacity development strengthening* of activists and organisations.

This strategy covers the international development work that RFSL will be implementing over the three-year period 2019-2021. It includes the advocacy work conducted at a global level, either through processes at the United Nations or at global conferences. The strategy also covers the global organising around LGBTIQI rights, which RFSL supports through capacity building, trainings and events, and through subcontracting partnerships.

The primary geographic focus of RFSL's international work is on the Global South and East as per the list of countries supported by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). During the time period of this strategy RFSL will prioritise continued engagement in Southeast Asia, the Eastern Partnership region, Southern Africa and Eastern Africa.

Should the opportunity arise, RFSL will assess the possibility to expand its work to new regions.

RFSL will pay special attention to the representation and rights of underrepresented groups, including trans, intersex, lesbian and bisexual persons' rights and organising. This means that RFSL will always consider whether underrepresented groups and issues are represented and included in our different programmes and activities.

Over this time period, RFSL has the ambition to diversify its funding sources for the international work. Primarily private foundations and donors will be approached so as to complement the institutional donors currently financing RFSL's international work. It will, however, also be important to ensure continued financial support from institutional donors.

*Advocacy work at the European Union (EU) level is not included in this strategy as it is seen as an extension of RFSL's advocacy work in Sweden and will be covered in RFSL's different strategies for the political work conducted in Sweden. Possible international projects on health and HIV prevention, similarly do not fall into this strategy.*

# Core Principles and Methods

RFSL's vision is a society where diversity, and respect for diversity, is the norm; where all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics, have equal rights and obligations, and equal possibilities to live their lives.

Sustainable change comes from within a society. As a national non-governmental organisation

working internationally to advance the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex people (LGBTQI) outside of our own immediate constituency, our role is also to support organisations and activists in their work to contribute to change while also advocating for LGBTQI rights on a global political level. The following principles are core to all international work by RFSL.

## A RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

RFSL applies an approach where the rights holders, i.e. persons and organisations representing LGBTQI constituencies, and the priorities they identify, are at the centre of the agenda.

## ACTIVE AND MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

of LGBTQI people and organisations to ensure that relevant and strategic measures are taken, and sustainable change can be achieved.

## OWNERSHIP

The international development work that RFSL engages in is always based on the needs and priorities identified by our partner organisations. From planning, through implementation, and follow-up and evaluation, RFSL works in dialogue with each partner. As an LGBTQI organisation with many years of involvement in and commitment to the global LGBTQI movement, RFSL has a unique capacity to engage in a dialogue on program content and exchange knowledge and skills directly with its partners.

## INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS

RFSL uses an intersectional approach in its programming to ensure that interventions are inclusive and serve the purpose of countering discrimination. In doing so, RFSL actively looks into how the most marginalized, such as lesbian, bisexual and queer women, trans and intersex communities, are disproportionately affected by laws, norms and practices, and how marginalization can be exacerbated by factors such as ethnicity/nationality/origin, religion/belief, class/caste, geographic position, socio-economic background, ability, age, way of cohabitation and HIV status.

## RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT AND “DO NO HARM”

RFSL supports organisations in contexts where LGBTQI people face high levels of stigma, discrimination, threats and violence. Work to enhance the rights of LGBTQI people in these contexts is often directly linked to security risks for the ones involved. Therefore, in all our programmes and projects, RFSL prepares a risk assessment where potential risks are identified and assessed together with measures to manage and mitigate the risks.

As a financial partner, RFSL strives to be a responsive donor in the sense that the organisations, groups and networks supported by RFSL decide what activities to implement, when and how. It is equally important that organisations have the mandate to cancel agreed activities, if needed, for example for security reasons. As an international actor, RFSL engages in dialogue with organisations in the affected countries before acting on any crises or current events.

RFSL encourages others to also consult in-country organisations before taking any measures. As an organiser of trainings and events, RFSL works actively to create safe spaces for activists in all programs.

# Theory of Change

In its international work, RFSL seeks to contribute to a strong and well-organised global movement for LGBTQI rights and to work towards the recognition of LGBTQI rights at the national, regional and global level. RFSL recognizes that organisations and actors need to have the capacity to work with their constituencies in order for LGBTQI people to claim their rights and fully participate in the societies they

live in. There also needs to be a legal framework, national and/or international, based on which these actors can hold decision makers and other duty bearers accountable.

Capacity development of organisations and actors, advocacy, and networking will continue to be at the core of RFSL's efforts. Work in these directions in parallel is needed to contribute to long-term change.

The role of RFSL is explained by the rationale that when RFSL has the capacity to engage effectively in international advocacy and to offer relevant support to LGBTQI activists and organisations in difficult contexts, these activists and organisations will then have a better possibility to sustain and develop their work, be more resilient to threats and increasingly develop strategic alliances. This will lead to more effective ways of networking and influencing and improving the situation of LGBTQI persons locally, regionally and globally.

”Capacity development of organisations and actors, advocacy, and networking will continue to be at the core of RFSL's efforts.”



# Objective 1:

*LGBTQI communities are*

*strong and organized*

## BACKGROUND

In all countries and regions, LGBTQI organisations and activists are subject to discrimination, stigma and threats, including physical and psychological violence. Growing fundamentalism and populism is taking root in several regions, this is coupled with a global trend of states limiting the space for civil society organising in different ways. In many countries, the situation is further aggravated by a widespread homo- and transphobia in society, sometimes orchestrated by the state authorities themselves. Also, LGBTQI persons are often more vulnerable to exclusion from social support systems, including support from their own family, and also experience challenges in accessing education, decent work, and living a life free from violence and fear. This leaves LGBTQI people at higher risk of multidimensional poverty, with fewer resources and opportunities to influence their own situation. These factors all contribute to increasing difficulties and risks related to the promotion and organisation of LGBTQI rights. As a result, high stress levels and burnout is common among LGBTQI activists.

## RFSL'S RESPONSE:

RFSL partner organisations and organisations in their respective networks have increased access to resources, expertise and training opportunities so that they can sustain their work.

Parallel to these negative trends, there is also more activism and visibility around LGBTQI rights, and an increased number of LGBTQI organisations, working on all levels. The global LGBTQI movement consists of a wide spectrum of organisations; from small, informal, groups to national-, regional- and international level associations. Many organisations struggle in their effort to continue their much-needed work and are constantly balancing strategies on how to work. In many parts of the world, the only safe space for LGBTQI people to meet or access services such as legal aid, psychosocial support, or health services, is through spaces provided by LGBTQI organisations. These activities are often invaluable as

a foundation for advocacy and political strategizing.

LGBTQI people themselves, and the organisations, groups, communities and movements they form, are essential to any change process. Without LGBTQI organisations, there are no rights holders to advocate for equal rights or to testify about the needs, the human rights violations, and the inequalities faced by LGBTQI people in different contexts. Local activists and LGBTQI

human rights defenders are the experts in the field, in their hometown, or country, and need to be organised so that their voices reach decision makers and other audiences with the ability to influence change. The ability to organise and advocate for your own rights is a human right in and of itself.

Accordingly, RFSL sees a continued need to strengthen LGBTQI organising, and to further contribute to sustainable LGBTQI organisations.

## FOCUS AREA 1: SUB-GRANTING AND PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

RFSL will partner with local, national, and regional LGBTQI-organisations and -initiatives through sub-granting of funds.

RFSL will strive to continue to build trustful partnerships with long-term engagements. In each partnership, RFSL, as a peer organisation, should continue to be a resource to the partners, through sharing of expertise, methods, strategies, and networks.

RFSL will strive to complement its current long-term grant making with more flexible means of funding for small scale projects and initiatives. This will enable RFSL to not only support the more established organisations that are stable enough to receive larger grants, but also give opportunities for smaller or less experienced groups and initiatives to receive funding.

## FOCUS AREA 2: CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

RFSL will organise relevant, effective, and sustainable trainings for LGBTQI organisations, networks, and groups through the Rainbow Academy training program. Trainings will be developed based on the needs and interests expressed by LGBTQI organisations.

Within partnership projects, RFSL will support organisations in their efforts to further develop capacity and sustainable internal structures through funding of activities, such as individual capacity development, consultants, and organisational development.

RFSL will provide technical assistance to organisations when they ask for support in program development and/or fundraising, and assess the possibility to co-partner in new project applications that require an international cooperation partner.

## FOCUS AREA 3: EXPERIENCE EXCHANGE

Within partnership projects and programmes, RFSL will include funding for cross-regional or in-region experience and knowledge exchange.

In the design and implementation of the Rainbow Academy training concept, RFSL will enable peer-to-peer exchange and learning, as well as plan to create space for participants to network and engage in strategic dialogue.

RFSL will facilitate contacts between organisations in different networks as well as between organisations and other actors.

# Objective 2:

*LGBTQI persons' rights and access to opportunities through Agenda 2030 & international human rights mechanisms are recognized at the global level*

## BACKGROUND

Progress on a global level as a result of advocacy and civil society engagement has been made with the adoption of the third SOGI resolution at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, in 2016. It was brought to the Council by the core group of eight Latin American states (LAC8). It was historic in its content as it established the first ever UN Special Procedure mandate focusing solely on violence and discrimination based on SOGI, the Independent Expert on SOGI.

The adoption of the Agenda 2030, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, has provided an opportunity for an inclusive, coherent and sustainable global development agenda with the guiding principle of 'Leaving no one behind'. Even though the SDGs framework does not explicitly include any references to LGBTQI people or discrimination based on SOGI, the language and approach

## RFSL'S RESPONSE:

Discussions and negotiations in relation to the international human rights- and development frameworks are informed by the lived realities of LGBTQI people.

of the agenda is inclusive, open and aims at providing conditions for active participation of all. In this context, it is crucial that LGBTQI organisations are meaningfully included in the planning, implementation, reporting, and follow-up of the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

The establishment of the Equal Rights Coalition (ERC) in 2016 is another important development at the global level. The Global LGBTI Conference, which took place in Montevideo and was hosted by the Governments of Uruguay and the Netherlands, resulted in the establishment of a coalition of states

that, in different ways and capacities, work to promote the human rights of LGBTQI persons, in close cooperation with the civil society.

These several, significant, and recent changes in the political context influence the work and possibilities of RFSLs work and possi-

bility to impact. While gains have been made, there is a need to continually safeguard progress as well as to work to counter any backlash. Based on years of experience, we know that access, information and capacity are key to ensure active participation. The shrinking space for civil society

## FOCUS AREA 1: STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

RFSL will work together with strategic partners in the global LGBTQI movement, such as international, regional, national and local LGBTQI networks and organisations, so that the lived realities of LGBTQI persons are made visible.

RFSL will partner with various UN Agencies and Permanent Missions to the UN.

RFSL will continue to take an active leadership role together with other LGBTQI organisations and activists prior to and during various processes, to ensure that planned actions are relevant, based on an up-to-date analysis, and serve the needs of different communities.

RFSL will continue its engagement in strategic structures and networks, of which it is a member, such as the Amsterdam Network, Equal Rights Coalition, ILGA Europe, ILGA World. It will remain open for engagement in new initiatives and processes when deemed relevant and strategic.



negatively affects the possibility of LGBTQI groups to organise and promote their rights in many countries, as well as their ability to access global spaces for advocacy. At the same time, the increasingly polarised political climate is seriously impacting the context in which advocacy

for LGBTQI rights is conducted, both at a national and global level. Advocating at a global level requires funding, specific capacity and possibilities to travel, which in themselves are barriers for many LGBTQI activists in accessing the United Nations and other global processes.

## FOCUS AREA 2: DIVERSE REPRESENTATION AND VISIBILITY

RFSL will support the participation of LGBTQI activists and organisations from the global South and East in strategic meetings at a global level to advocate for LGBTQI persons' rights and their inclusion in Agenda 2030 processes. RFSL's UN consultative status, ECO-SOC, will be used to enable attendance at strategic meetings and give direct access to the UN.

RFSL will, through advocacy training programs, provide opportunities for LGBTQI organizations and activists from the Global South and East to strengthen their capacity and knowledge of human rights and development frameworks, as well as exchange expertise on how to engage in international advocacy.

### FOCUS AREA 3: RELEVANCE AND INCLUSION OF LGBTQI RIGHTS ISSUES

RFSL will monitor the developments around relevant issues for LGBTQI people and advocate for the priorities and inclusion of LGBTQI people at a global policy making level within the United Nations, in global processes connected to the Sustainable Development Goals, and at relevant global conferences.

RFSL will use its strategic role as a strong and expertise driven actor when engaging in the prioritised advocacy processes.

RFSL will support its partners to contribute to the fulfilment of LGBTQI rights on partners' national and regional level. When requested by partners, and value of RFSL's direct contribution is clear, RFSL may engage in joint advocacy initiatives on national and regional levels.

# Objective 3:

*Sweden continues its strong engagement*

*for LGBTQI rights internationally*

## BACKGROUND

With today's growing LGBTQI movements and their influence, governments and other actors have a unique opportunity to contribute to the positive developments. Sweden with its long term and strong commitment to LGBTQI persons' human rights through inclusive programming, funding initiatives, and implementing activities to promote LGBTQI human rights, continues to be at the forefront of that progress at the global level.

While more and more countries commit to advancing the rights of LGBTQI people, Sweden, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including its Permanent Mission to the UN, as well as the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, continues to play an important role as one of the most experienced bilateral actors in the field of LGBTQI rights in development contexts. Other key actors that contribute to the Swedish position include Swedish organisations working for human rights, women's rights, and sexual- and reproductive health and rights, among others.

## RFSL'S RESPONSE:

The Swedish government, implementing agencies, embassies, Permanent Missions to the UN, and other relevant stakeholders are continuously informed about the lived realities of LGBTQI people.

Though more countries are including LGBTQI issues in their foreign aid strategies, the human rights of LGBTQI persons are still far from being prioritised in most countries. Therefore, Sweden's continued support and engagement in LGBTQI issues is of utmost importance to serve as a role model and good example for other countries to follow and learn from. Equality and human rights for all are fundamental in reducing poverty, establishing and maintaining peace and security, and in achieving sustainable development that leaves no one behind. With LGBTQI persons being disproportionately exposed to multidimensional poverty, this group should continue to be prioritized in Sweden's development cooperation work.

## FOCUS AREA 1: MONITORING OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND SDGs PROCESSES

RFSL will monitor and contribute to Sweden's engagement in human rights for LGBTQI people in relevant foreign policy processes, development cooperation policy and at the UN level, as well as bilaterally in the countries where RFSL has partnerships. This also encompasses the inclusion of LGBTQI rights issues in the processes connected to the Sustainable Development Goals.

## FOCUS AREA 2: SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

RFSL will provide the Swedish government, implementing agencies, embassies, *Permanent Missions to the UN*, and other relevant stakeholders, with up-to-date information about LGBTQI rights and on LGBTI inclusion in the SDGs framework.

RFSL will engage in a dialogue with Sida and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to share its expertise for increased inclusion and prioritization of LGBTQI rights in relevant steering documents such as strategies for funding and thematic policies.

RFSL will connect local LGBTQI organisations with relevant actors such as embassies, consulates and visiting government delegations primarily in countries where RFSL has partnerships, and arrange meetings with staff from relevant agencies and Ministries when activists visit Sweden.

In response to crisis situations and urgent security threats towards activists and organisations, RFSL will, to the extent possible, sign and share statements of support, secure that information from the local LGBTQI communities reach Swedish authorities, and work together with other international organisations to coordinate possible support, responses and awareness raising efforts.

# Objective 4:

*RFSL is a strong and responsible  
international actor*

## BACKGROUND

RFSL's international work dates back to 1979, when the organisation joined ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association. Over the years, RFSL has developed into an organisation with a well-established role in the national as well as global LGBTQ movement, being one of the very few national organisations with the capacity and ability to have a global impact. Being grounded in a national context gives us credibility as a partner in advocacy and as an intermediary, sub-granting funds to partners in the global South and East.

During the past five years, RFSL international unit has invested in strengthening internal structures, governance, and working methods. There has in addition been an overall transformation of RFSL as an organization, where the organisation has moved from being

## RFSL'S RESPONSE:

RFSL has capacity to engage in the struggle for human rights for LGBTQI people internationally in a responsible manner and be a key actor and trusted partner.

project based, and working ad hoc when opportunities arose, activist based, and much dependent on individuals own force, to becoming a professional organisation with a clear structure. Steering documents have been developed and updated, division of roles and responsibilities have been clarified, and financial and program management capacity and routines have been strengthened, including security routines for different parts of the work.



## FOCUS AREA 1: RESPONSIBLE ENGAGEMENT

RFSL will strive to work with responsible methods for international engagement. This includes building all programs on a rights-based approach and putting the principle of do no harm before other priorities.

RFSL will further ensure responsible methods and strategies for LGBTQI inclusion in development work and for grant making, including routines and structures for forwarding of funds.

RFSL will continue to map, document, and analyse methods for responsible LGBTQI programming developed by other actors.

RFSL will continue to apply a holistic approach to security in all its work, including well-being as a key component to ensure sustainability and resilience. This implies, among other things, that RFSL includes well-being components in projects and programs, and is willing to adjust financial support to the security needs of partner organisations, including allowing for enough human resources to implement programs or projects in challenging contexts.

## FOCUS AREA 2: STRENGTHENED CAPACITIES

RFSL will engage in internal capacity building activities to further develop its capacity. Capacity building involves, but is not limited to, trainings or other forms of capacity development in advocacy, risk management and security, financial management, and program management.

RFSL will continue to ensure appropriate internal structures, methods and routines, and develop mechanisms for cooperation between different activity areas within the organisation, including raising awareness about international issues in the larger organisation.

## FOCUS AREA 3: INCREASED AND DIVERSIFIED FUNDING

RFSL will strive to maintain the financial support from institutional donors. The possibility to become a Frame Organisation for Sida will be explored.

In order to diversify funding sources for the international work, RFSL will primarily approach private foundations and donors during this strategy period.

In all its fundraising efforts, RFSL will cooperate closely with RFSL Fundraising Foundation, a separate legal entity within RFSL with the aim to increase its public and corporate fundraising in Sweden.



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