

# **Operationalizing Human Rights-Based-Approaches: Experiences of Civil Society Organizations Advocating for the Rights of Men who have Sex with Men in Zimbabwe**

## **ABSTRACT**

*In this thesis, I explore the operationalization of Human Rights-based Approaches (HRBAs). The thesis uses the case of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) advocating for the Sexual Rights of Men who have Sex with Men (SR-MSM) in Zimbabwe. I explore how the political context within which donor-funded MSM projects are implemented, global funding rules, conditionalities, dependencies, capacities and constraints internal to CSOs, influence the nature and extent to which the CSOs operationalize HRBAs. I employ two social movement theories - political process theory (PPT) and resource mobilization theory (RMT). PPT emphasizes the influence of relevant political opportunities, while RMT emphasizes the influence of resource-dependent capacities. I use ethnographic methods to gather data from fieldwork over two years in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. My other research methods include participant observation, document review, key informant interviews and online interviews with representatives of donors. I show that the Mugabe government mobilized homophobic tropes and tightened sodomy laws as a ploy to promote a homophobic national agenda and set the tone for cultural and religious debates regarding SR-MSM, all in the name of regime self-preservation. This had a significant adverse impact on the potential for HRBA operationalization. Despite these tropes, dissenting voices from some key figures such as traditional and religious leaders, as well as key institutions like the courts offered a glimmer of hope for HRBA in relation to the SR-MSM. While the Mnangagwa government has yet to establish an agenda and tone of tolerance for SR-MSM, it has acknowledged and challenged activists and allies to canvass for the repeal of sodomy laws and to ensure national development that is inclusive of all people. I also illustrate that the intermediary partnership model, in which donor INGOs receive funding from back-donors and convey the funds to local CSOs, plays a pivotal role in influencing HRBA operationalization within the international funding context. This model has several advantages over the direct recipient model. One key advantage is that intermediaries have a better understanding of both the back-donor and recipient CSOs, making them more effective in countering notions of queer imperialism and supporting context-sensitive operationalization of HRBAs. Furthermore, I demonstrate that CSOs possess sufficient internal capacity to operationalize normative or 'formal' HRBAs as described in the literature, enabling them to deliver their full potential. Notwithstanding this sufficient internal capacity, these CSOs faced significant constraints related to a limiting political context, insufficient NGOization and scarcity of resources. These challenges lead to their operationalization of toned-down versions of HRBAs. I reveal that 'formal' HRBAs often prove impractical on the ground due to the aforementioned factors, prompting local CSOs, with the support of their donors, to operationalizing 'light' versions of HRBAs. I emphasize the importance of CSO activists using approaches or components thereof that are most suitable for each unique context.*

**Keywords:** HRBAs, CSOs, sexual rights, gay men, men who have sex with men, MSM projects, Zimbabwe