



Independent observer  
of the Global Fund

## The voices of those who lost out on visas and the response from the conference organizers IAS

### ABSTRACT

Several months before the International AIDS Conference (AIDS2022), community-led organizations received information about the difficulties in applying for visas, including the requirement of medical exams and rejections. A small team of activists has looked into why this happened and how it could be avoided in the future. It is to be hoped that the AIDS2022 organizers will take on board the lessons learnt for the next conference.

In our last GFO, we published an article about the problems faced by applicants in obtaining visa to attend the [24<sup>th</sup> International AIDS Conference](#) (AIDS2022), organized by the International AIDS Society (IAS), between 29 July and 2 August in Montreal, Canada ([Key populations, communities and civil society face obstacles in attending international meetings](#)).

In that article, we said that the International AIDS Society (IAS) was failing to put communities at the heart of the HIV response by not facilitating the visa application process. Key populations and other communities from the developing world complained that they were unable to attend AIDS2022 due to the prolonged and bureaucratic visa process. It is hard to put the most vulnerable at the heart of the HIV response when their very presence is thwarted by bureaucracy.

Now AIDS2022 is about to take place, will key and vulnerable populations (KVP), civil society and community representatives be poorly represented at the Conference as a result of the visa fiasco?

An informal study into why this happened

There were various advocacy efforts concerning the Canadian visa crisis. Among these, the HIV2025 Platform in partnership with the International Council of AIDS Service Organizations ([ICASO](#)) and the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) Key Correspondent Team, organized a virtual survey in English, French and Spanish which was circulated through global and regional networks. The Team received almost 200 responses; however, it was never intended to be a representative or probabilistic study but merely a documentation study. The objective was to organize and document the challenges in obtaining visas, reasons given for rejections and why these were unjustified.

The HIV2025 Platform chose a hundred completed questionnaires that offered a balance of the three languages and all the regions. The questionnaires were anonymous, and only email addresses were recorded. During data collection, some who had their applications rejected agreed to share their information with the IAS and Canadian non-government organizations (NGOs). Though the sample is not representative, 20% of the survey respondents had had their visa application refused.

This article is based on the research undertaken by a Team originally published by the Global Fund Advocates Network listserv (GFAN), other listservs in different languages and social media. It is not a scientific research report; it is an advocacy document based on the voices of those directly affected. The report itself may seem long but reading it is the least we can do for those we will not see in Montreal. Many of us who have been successful in obtaining visa have ourselves experienced the same difficulties first-hand.

Some of the challenges encountered in obtaining a visa

Several months before AIDS2022, community-led organizations were notified about the difficulties in applying for visas, including the requirement for medical exams, and the resulting rejections. Some of the most common challenges were:

- The complexity of initiating the procedure: Access to the Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) was inconsistent. The online application did not work in many countries, perhaps because of the IP or VPN. The application is only available in English and French. Many questions were tricky and misleading, and the applicant must be fluent in those languages to be able to provide a proper answer.
- The cost of the process: To conclude the first phase, the process requires a credit card payment of CAD 100 (over £70) for the visa and CAD 80 (\$62) for the biometric data collection. At this stage, many people abandoned the process because they did not have a credit card or the required money. Also, for many KVPs and other civil society members, the amount of money required is an insurmountable barrier. IAS is only committed to reimbursing applicants with scholarships. For how many weeks would CAD 180 feed a family in a low-income country?
- Consular interviews: At the beginning of the visa application process, many registered to attend the conference had to have a consular interview. Many consular officers admitted to being unaware that AIDS2022 was being organized in Canada. In May, two out of five applicants in developing countries were rejected. Two reasons were given: First, the letter issued by IAS, as conference organizers, did not provide details about financial support from the organizers for food, lodging, or insurance coverage, which was a requirement. The other reason was, as with many immigration procedures, that the applicant could not prove sufficient roots in their home country. In the eyes of the consular officers, it was impossible for young people, members of key populations, and indigenous communities to prove that they would not remain in Canada at the end of the conference; and this was the leading cause of visa rejection.
- Lack of support from the conference organizers: Many people, particularly those who do not speak or write English or French, reported not receiving support from IAS in the face of several stumbling

blocks. Two out of three said IAS provided insufficient or no information to support visa application and processing. Many received no response to their requests for help. The IAS said it had agreed with the Canadian government on a unique code to facilitate visa processing. This code stopped working at the end of May and was never reinstated.

- Actions toward a solution: Once Canadian activists and journalists became aware of the problem, the Canadian Government started to pay attention. By then, however, IAS had shown that it could not contribute much towards solving the crisis.

Several applicants received the following reason(s) for the rejection of their visa applications:

“I am not satisfied that you will leave Canada at the end of your stay as required by paragraph 179(b) of the IRPR (<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/SOR-2002-227/section-179.html>). I am refusing your application because you have not established that you will leave Canada, based on the following factors: – Your assets and financial situation are insufficient to support the stated purpose of travel for yourself (and any accompanying family member(s), if applicable). – You do not have significant family ties outside Canada. – Your current employment situation does not show that you are financially established in your country of residence”.

Testimonies from some of the visa applicants

The idea is that when you read them, you also hear them. These quotes are verbatim. When a quote has been edited for contextual clarity, it has been indicated with [...] out of respect to the respondent.

“These were vague reasons as they based [them] on my financial statement, yet I had a sponsor fully paying for my trip. Of course, based on my personal assets’ n jeez who owns properties at the age of 22 in Africa, they also based on my family ties in Canada, yet I strained the point that I have no one in Canada; lastly, was my travel experience was the climax ... I am an activist heading not one ongoing project how can I fail to come back yet I have MOUs with donors already.”

“Maybe because we are a low-income trans woman, we cannot demonstrate a solvent financial situation, and maybe because we are in sex work and are HIV positive.”

“Not enough ties in Pakistan, according to the embassy. It was not clear that I [would] come back, and my job shows that it’s not stable and [that] I can stay in Canada.”

“They are not satisfied with the information given for my reason to travel. I can appeal but have to pay an additional processing fee.”

“Visa officer believes that my purpose for visiting Canada, which is to attend the AIDS conference, is not legitimate.”

“I was told I didn’t have sufficient funds to keep me for the conference duration.”

“An inconsistent purpose of visit. When I have an invitation from the IAS as an organizer”.

“They do not believe I will leave Canada after the conference to return to Uganda.”

“They claimed I do not have enough funds to sustain myself in Canada.”

"I can't give reasons [for the rejection yet] because I have registered my biometrics information. And on 25 May, I was informed by Visa Facilitation Office in Nairobi by email that they had shared my biometrics information with the Canadian Embassy in Nairobi. So, from there [more than a month ago], I hadn't received any feedback from the Canadian embassy."

"To begin with, I didn't even know where to apply. The process was very long. The documents required Acrobat Reader, which I had to download to fill in the info; I could not open them without this specific program. They only accept credit cards to pay for the application. I did not have all the supporting documents. They wanted a scanned photo of all the pages of all my three passports, and then the format would not let me upload them because the document was too heavy. The documents must be filled out online, printed, signed, and re-scanned. I had to buy a printer/scanner for that. They don't tell me the waiting time, and the third-party company in charge of the biometrics doesn't know anything."

"The link for the registration is not clear, the filling out of the form is cumbersome, as well as queries for home addresses and event data that were not taken into consideration in the documentation. After that, the service was outsourced to a private company for the biometrics appointment, so it took me a long time to get appointments. In addition, I have been asked for a medical check-up in another outsourced establishment. The costs represent more than 80% of the minimum wage, in addition to paying for chest X-rays, photos, and previous medical reports. In this case, I had to request a reconsideration of the appointment date because if they deny the visa, I would not be able to apply for a new one."

"Too many forms, unnecessary information asked. No support from the organization inviting [me] when it comes to inputting all information, a very long waiting process, and at the end of the day, the embassy doesn't tell you precisely which information is missing, or they are not satisfied with. I have already paid 600 USD for the [registration to the] conference and 250 USD for the visa process. I felt that reapplying with the same information and additional money was a waste of money and time."

"Applying for the visa online is very cumbersome, the answers are only handled in French or English, when one wants to answer in Spanish the web platform does not help much, then they ask endless questions, such as specific information about our parents, current work certificates, information about travel outside the country for the past 5 years, other visas (American). It is also important to demonstrate financial resources for the trip."

"You need technical expertise to apply online. The online payment took me 5 days because they did not accept my card. Then I had to travel to another city because Canada does not have consular service in Bolivia. I sent emails to the page of the consular service of Canada in Peru (designated for Bolivia), but they never responded."

"We have to do everything virtually; the platform is difficult to understand for some and makes it difficult to fill out the forms and the processes involved. There is no office that can collaborate in person with the filling of these documents, although there is a company that does it virtually and lets you do it all alone."

"I completed the application form online. I got an appointment for my biometrics in Dar es Salaam and had to fly there as we don't have a Canadian embassy in Zambia. So I did my biometrics on Monday 13/06/22, and I flew back to Zambia on Tuesday 14/6/22, and now I am waiting to be told when to send the passport."

"Listing the extensive amount of information. It took me a week to figure out why I couldn't pass the work history section because I couldn't list periods where I had said I was studying. It was very confusing and delayed the visa process. IAS should have facilitated a simpler process for conference goers."

“In Brazil, I had to pay \$160 for the renewal of the American visa; then I had to pay \$100 to apply for the Canadian visa. Both visas require 60 days to be issued, meaning I would get them after the AIDS conference.”

Perhaps it is time to move the organizational responsibility to another body

Multilateral organizations dedicated to these health issues and global networks of PLHIV or KPs have been glaringly silent. When AIDS2022 opens at the end of July, most of the delegates attending from other continents and representing different ethnicities, KPs, and demographics will be walking those hallways thanks to international advocates, especially Canadian civil society.

It is not only a problem that the world is divided between hemispheres and incomes, but if the organization responsible for these events remains in developed countries, the North-centric, Eurocentric and colonialist views will persist. There will be first- and second-class delegates, those who are indispensable and those who are dispensable. The next IAS conference (IAS2023) will be organized in Brisbane, Australia, another rich country (albeit in the Southern hemisphere) that will present another migration nightmare.

Perhaps the conclusion is that conferences should no longer be the property of the IAS, which only decides on financial matters. Years ago, conferences were for doctors and researchers. We thought we had ‘bridged the gap’ between science and communities but not for long. Without civil society, PLHIV, KPs, and communities, no matter what science brings, in a context of exacerbated inequality, we will not end AIDS.

## IAS’ RESPONSE TO THE ARTICLE

As always, we at GFO strive to present a balanced view of events where possible. We forwarded a copy of the draft article to the IAS and invited its media department to respond. We publish IAS’ response below.

Many thanks for giving us a possibility to comment. The article is based on several assumptions.

1. Organizing the International AIDS Conference in another location, such as a low- or middle-income country, would automatically open access to those most affected by HIV.

There simply isn’t one location or host city that will be equally safe for- and accessible by- persons most affected by HIV. The IAS is addressing the dilemma of unequal access by reinvesting over 15% of the conference budget in facilitating access for persons from low and middle-income countries. The IAS has also invested in making this an entirely hybrid conference, accessible virtually from everywhere and offering data support packages to individuals with low bandwidth.

2. The conference “is the property of the IAS”

The IAS conference committee is responsible for the strategic planning of all IAS conferences taking place over a four-year cycle.

It is composed of three CSO representatives from GNP+ & ICW, GATE and ASHA Foundation as well as 4 IAS officers.

è The IAS Executive Board defines a target region or regions for a request for proposals from potential host cities.

è The Conference Committee reviews the bids and creates a shortlist.

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è The IAS conducts a site visit.

è The final decision rests with the IAS Executive Board.

Once a host city is selected, the Conference Committee is boosted with the addition of further community representatives, researchers and policy specialists to form the conference's Organizing Committee. The broad representation ensures that the program design of the International AIDS Conference is participatory, puts people first and follows the science.

3. "The International AIDS Society (IAS) was failing to put communities at the heart of the HIV response by not facilitating the visa application process."

Perhaps this statement overestimates the role and power of the IAS in resolving the visa challenge that preceded AIDS 2022 and is not particular to Canada only. Our statement on the visa question, which was published some time ago, is:

IAS – the International AIDS Society – remains deeply concerned by the high number of denied and pending visas by Canadian authorities.

This is preventing many people from some of the countries most affected by HIV from entering Canada and attending AIDS 2022, including IAS staff and leadership.

We are doing everything we can to push Canadian authorities to expedite and approve visas to attend the conference.

Visa delays and denied visas are an urgent concern and affect our ability to host a conference that is truly inclusive and representative of the communities most affected by HIV. The Conference Organizing Committee has escalated its concerns to the highest levels so that as many people who wish to attend AIDS 2022 are able to do so.

For those who were denied a visa despite applying on time and would like a full reimbursement rather than attend the conference virtually, the IAS amended its policy to ensure that this is possible. Please [click here](#) to learn more.

4. IAS is only committed to reimbursing applicants with scholarships.

Incorrect. For reimbursement info please consult [this page](#).

5. By then, however, IAS had shown that it could not contribute much towards solving the crisis.

In fact, the IAS was in constant exchange with the Ottawa, reached out to its Canadian members encouraging them to contact their local MPs and enlisted the help of global bodies such as UNAIDS. The IAS also spoke out publicly on the issue several times and the statement is still on the home page of AIDS2022.org.

6. "The International AIDS Society (IAS) was failing to put communities at the heart of the HIV response"

The IAS provides significantly reduced registration fees for low and middle-income countries.

The IAS provides full scholarships for hundreds of individuals from low and middle-income countries

covering registration, travel and accommodation.

Free access to the global Village: The International AIDS Conference is perhaps the only global public health conference that provides a significant section of the event – the Global Village – entirely free of cost. The Global Village is a gathering place where communities from around the world meet to share their experiences and learn about HIV, and where the public can witness how science translates into community action and intervention.

All AIDS 2022 content will be publicly available online two months after the conference at no cost (one month for IAS Members).

The IAS hosts up to six regional meetings in low- and middle-income countries each year, entirely free, to share the latest science from our or other international conferences.

After the conference, we will go to Tanzania, Chile, Indonesia and Latvia and bring the latest science to 100s of persons in the local language. We pay for transport and accommodation for participants and access is totally free.

Also, to note:

Originally, the IAS selected a middle-income country to host AIDS 2022. Unfortunately, the IAS had to pull out of these negotiations as the host government made it a condition that it would vet and thereby influence the conference program. The Organizing Committee insists on full independence in putting together a program that puts people first and is guided by the latest scientific evidence.

Location and financial viability are not the only factors the IAS considers when selecting a host city but so is our ability to design a conference program in an independent manner. Here are the various criteria used:

#### Health and safety

Many of our attendees are immunocompromised or work closely with immunocompromised communities. A requirement of the host city is that it will work with us to ensure high health and safety protocols for all delegates, staff and speakers.

#### Venue

The International AIDS Conference is the largest HIV conference in the world. In-person participation requires a venue, accommodation and travel infrastructure large enough to host such an event.

#### Human rights

A key selection criterion is that the host city provides a safe environment and equal treatment for people most affected by HIV. HIV disproportionately affects some of the most marginalized people and finding an environment for such communities to feel safe and express themselves freely is central.

#### Independence

The Organizing Committee must be able to operate independently. It must be empowered to create a conference program shielded from outside vetting or influencing.

Let me close with a statement from Erika Castellanos from Global Action for Trans\* Equality (GATE), who sits on the IAS Conference Committee:

“In recent discussions, much emphasis has been placed on the location of the host city, but we also need to consider the safety of marginalized groups as not all locations are equally welcoming to many of us.”

About [70 countries](#) criminalize consensual same-sex activity and 15 criminalize trans expression, which would immediately exclude important key populations from attending a conference.

I hope this long answer helped shed some light on the various points posited in the article you shared.

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