



Aidspan

Independent observer
of the Global Fund

Key populations, communities and civil society face obstacles in attending international meetings

The [24th International AIDS Conference](#), organized by the International AIDS Society (IAS), will be held between 29 July and 2 August in Montreal, Canada. However, based on present progress, it seems likely that people living with HIV (PLHIV) and key populations (KPs), communities and other civil society representatives will be thin on the ground – thanks to the problems in getting a visa that the IAS has simply failed to cater for.

Social media is alive with complaints from participants from the Global South who are facing challenges in getting their documentation, including Canadian, Schengen and US visas, to attend conferences.

Overly bureaucratic and lengthy processes

The IAS has either underestimated or is unaware of the cumbersome and highly bureaucratic process for participants needing to obtain a visa to enter Canada and attend the conference. Even registration letters for scholarship holders and those who have paid in advance to attend will arrive too late for applicants who have been offered slots for interview dates after the conference by the Canadian Embassies in their countries.

There is a widespread crisis in developing countries, regardless of region, in accessing Canadian visas. Many affected people find that, depending on the country they come from, getting a visa for the United States is surprisingly much simpler than for Canada. Also, visa processing costs are CAD 100 (around \$78) and the biometric data collection costs CAD 80 (\$62) which must be paid in advance by the participants themselves, even if they can claim it back later. For many countries, this is an amount equivalent to a basic basket of food for one to three months, even more if the applicant has to have a

medical examination and X-ray.

Much of the visa processing is outsourced to private companies, which is why consular goodwill is of little use. The IAS has just informed would-be participants that it is in contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to see how the Consulates can speed up the process. As we have learned, exceptions are always at the discretion of the Consul and not the participants' governments.

Table 1 outlines the steps required to obtain the relevant documentation and visa to attend the conference. It is exhausting to read about it, never mind having to go through the process.

Table 1. Steps to obtain a visa for AIDS 2022, challenges and possible consequences

| Step in the process | Challenge | Possible consequence |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Online | | |
| Open a user account | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The process is initiated through an online platform.• In many countries it is not possible to access the page to process the visa.• It requires specific browsers.• Only available in English and French.• There is no step-by-step instruction on the process, nor is it user-friendly or intuitive. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Without a username and password, you cannot proceed. |
| Complete the online questionnaire | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The questionnaire is in English or French.• There are many complex questions that require a good knowledge of one of the two languages.• The applicant must disclose if s/he has had tuberculosis and if so, s/he is excluded. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The visa is rejected if answers are incorrect or incomplete due to lack of experience or lack of command of English or French.• Some questions, depending on how they are answered, exclude the applicant. |

Step in the process

Challenge

Possible consequence

Upload documents

- The requirements for uploading documents online are extremely complex. Including images of all passports with Canadian and US visas and all entry and exit stamps.
- The necessary documents characteristics are unclear and require a very good knowledge of English and French to be eligible.
- A printer and scanner are required.
- Applicants must produce a letter of invitation specifying that the inviting party will cover all expenses.

- The process is stymied because the required documents cannot be uploaded, or the visa is denied for the same reasons.
- Incomplete information may lead to rejection at the consular interview.

Payment of visas and biometric data collection

- Those who have reached the end of the first online process must have a valid credit or debit card to pay online for the procedure (CAD 100/\$78) and the biometric data collection (CAD 80/\$62).
- Most of the process is outsourced to a private company that strictly follows Embassy protocol.

- The process is held up because the applicant cannot afford to pay the visa fees.

In person

Biometric data collection

- Days after successfully completing all the steps described above the applicants receives an invitation for an appointment for fingerprinting and photographing.
- The appointment date offered may be after the conference itself, depending on the demand for visas and the processing company's capacity.
- All procedures are carried out in the applicant's country's capital city and the biometric data are collected in person.

- No appointments are available for biometric data collection prior to the conference.
- The applicant does not reside in the same city where the company contracted by the Embassy to collect biometric data is located.
- Following the biometric data collection, the applicant is supposed to be informed that his/her file has been received and given a date for the interview. However, many participants have still not received any information from the Embassy, including the date of their interview; and are left in limbo.

Step in the process

Challenge

Possible consequence

Passport mailing

- Once the date of the interview has been set, the applicant has to submit his/her passport.
- There is an estimated number of days during which the consulate may retain the passport.
- The passport is returned by mail.

- Passport clearance may take so long that it does not arrive until after the conference.
- All communications are via the online platform and accessing one's personal account is unpredictable.
- The applicant may receive his or her visa rejection without any explanation.
- As the Embassy is holding your passport, you may not be able to travel to attend other meetings.

Step in the process

Challenge

Possible consequence

Consular interviews

- Depending on the country, each consulate will request supporting documentation such as a Letter of Invitation (with the details provided by Canada), receipt of the purchased ticket (not just a reservation) and proof of health insurance and hotel booking.
 - The conference and othersponsors will not purchase ticketsor insurance until the applicant has a visa, which creates a chickenand egg situation.
 - It is likely that the Consul or consulate official will require proof of employment, income and other evidence of a robust financial situation that will not give rise to suspicion of the applicant's intention to migrate or seek asylum while in Canada.
 - The Canadian Government can instruct all its Ambassadors and Consuls to support and expedite arrangements for conference participants, but it is at the discretion of the Consul to grantthe visa, as well as to accept a special request.
 - The Consul or an official does not have to provide explanations onthe grounds for visa rejection.
 - People who indicate on their application that they have had TB or work with TB patients will be required to have an official medical examination including a chest X-ray at a total cost to the applicant of \$230.
- Applicants will go to consular interviews without having purchased tickets and insurance, lack of which are likely to be the most common grounds for rejection.
 - Even though the conference promoted visa management three months in advance, neither the organizers nor other sponsors have produced the supporting documentation in time, nor have they supported applicants with user-friendly information.
 - Applicants who need to be screened for TB do not have \$230 to go to a doctor and have an X-ray so they will end the process at this step. Yet who will reimburse all the visa-related costs (CAD180 ³/₄and \$230 if they do visit a doctor)?

Step in the process

Challenge

Possible consequence

Migration and transit

- The Government of Canada considers it a highly positive sign for the applicant to have a multiple entry visa to the US.
 - Traveling at a lower cost to Montreal (rather than a directflight) may require additional visas with the Schengen countries and the US for transit connections, with additional costs and times.
 - Upon entering Canadian territory an immigration officer may refuse entry and deport participants, a decision based on a brief entry interview, even if the visitor has a valid visa.
 - COVID-19-related requirements (vaccinations and testing) for each traveler are unknown at the time of the conference.
- The applicant does not have the time or financial resources to process additional visas for connections.
 - The participant may be rejected and deported at the discretion of the immigration officer in the transiting country.
 - Travel may be cancelled for failure to meet COVID-19 requirements for country of origin and entry by the time of the conference.

Policy and financial constraints discriminate against vulnerable groups

In addition, the application form requires access to a computer with a particular browser and many hours of trying, completing, and uploading six or more sets of scanned information into a faulty webpage. Then it's time to pay with a credit card (CAD180 or \$140). Then you have to get an appointment for biometric data collection and thereafter send the passport to the embassy through the outsourced private company with no estimated date for the next step, e.g., a consular interview. Many PLHIV and KPs will be turned away because they cannot demonstrate formal employment and a credit history and must have a confirmed ticket and paid travel insurance in hand.

According to the application form, having or having had tuberculosis is an exclusion criterion and any indication of a health issue may result in a new step of review and certification by a physician.

Exclusion of communities from being at the center of the response

While the Global Fund and its partners such as the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have strategies which give a key role to communities by putting them at the heart of the response, the stark reality does not reflect this. By holding conferences first in the US and now in Canada and failing to provide applicants with the support needed to obtain their visas, the IAS is demonstrating a clear bias: its conferences are elitist, for people and communities living in developed countries and those who do not require a visa.

Surely the IAS cannot know about the visa crisis for developing countries' participants and yet continue with a venue in a Canadian city? Sadly, we know the answer. For decades IAS and civil society/communities have been working to build bridges between communities and science. But this concept seems to have gone out of fashion. That alone explains how a conference can be organized where most of its participants will be health professionals, researchers and communities from the so-

called North. Promoting a double standard, whereby those living in the so-called South are, at best, passive virtual spectators.

The IAS is wrong to believe that the International AIDS Conference belongs solely to the organization itself, rather than those who participate in it. Moreover, it is also wrong to believe that its decisions have no consequences. The time has come for the IAS secretariat and its board to be held accountable for so many blunders and discriminatory decisions.

If the scientific and academic establishments still believe that they will end AIDS without the meaningful participation of civil society and communities, they have learned nothing in forty years. And we know how this will end.

Have your say!

The Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) Key Correspondents team and the HIV 2025 Platform, are receiving many reports of stalled scholarship application processes, challenges, and bottlenecks, as well as rejections. With the support of organizations in Canada and globally, they are gathering information about the processes faced by people planning to attend the upcoming AIDS 2022 International AIDS Conference in Montreal in person.

As a result, a survey has been set up to collect the experiences of applying for a visa and document this crisis of participation restrictions on individuals, especially delegates from developing countries. Its findings will be used to inform advocacy with the IAS, its sponsors, and partners to prevent conferences from continuing to be organized in places with very limited access.

The survey is available in English, Spanish and French through the links below. Please do participate and share this tool with your colleagues,

English: <https://forms.gle/ZKXnmQ8XwdY9QViV7>

Español: <https://forms.gle/bw53oMNaCdGkm1o27>

Français: <https://forms.gle/ZhRXvDH3nHytCxdL6>

* Javier Hourcade Bellocq represents the [Communities Delegation](#) to the Global Fund Board. The Communities Delegation comprises a group of up to 40 individuals living with HIV, and affected by TB and malaria, working on Global Fund-related issues from around the world.

[Read More](#)
