

5 things the LGBTI movement must do to continue achieving real change

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This year marked the end of Evelyne Paradis' tenure as Executive Director of ILGA-Europe. Here Evelyne shares five fundamental things she's learned over almost 20 years in the job about how the LGBTI movement can continue and grow as powerful agents of change

Over the past 18 years, I've had the privilege to hold a very unique vantage point on the LGBTI activist movement in our region, the journey of human rights for LGBTI people in the political framework, and how this work has been funded. Here are some reflections that seem particularly relevant to me at this particular moment in time.

As we watch the further rise of far-right, anti-democratic forces, there are many reasons to worry that the work for human rights is unravelling, including a backsliding in places where we thought many LGBTI human rights protections had been secured.

While we find ourselves in a very complex and dim situation right now, one of the unique beauties of having been with ILGA-Europe for almost two decades is that the longevity of those 18 years allows me to see just how much positive change has happened and how far we have actually come.

There have been enormous leaps forward in legal protection of the human rights of LGBTI people; remarkable shifts in public attitudes supporting LGBTI people across the region; an empowering surge of visibility of LGBTI people across parts of society; a multitude of free and affirming Pride marches and other public events taking place every year; a growing diverse and impactful LGBTI movement driving change in every country; and a significant increase in political support for LGBTI human rights and equality across Europe.

Our movement has so much to be proud of, and we continue to be more empowered, resourced and supported as we continue to move forward.

None of the progress happened overnight, nor happened easily. It is first and foremost thanks to the fierce perseverance, unwavering commitment, dedication of time and self of countless past and present activists. It is also about how activists, groups and organisations have been doing the work over the years.

Looking back at this progress, I'm looking forward with the knowledge of what has been core to the change over the years, and how that can be both recognised and harnessed so that this movement can continue to make change happen. Here are my five fundamental understandings:

1. Real change is most often a result of long-term, sustained and collective efforts, including a lot of invisible work

In our social media driven world, it can be tempting to go for fast wins that make for attention grabbing stories, to focus on where immediate opportunities for change lie, to think that a single person, group or organisation can make change happen on their own.

But looking at the bigger picture, at how wins were secured and change has actually come into being, none of this thinking holds.

From my experience, here are key ingredients to our collective successes:

It's been about holding the longer-term vision and being dedicated to planting seeds for longer-term change, while attending to the more immediate needs emerging from communities

It's been about investing in the too often invisible and very time-intensive, yet essential work of building alliances and relationships based on trust and mutual respect across movements

It's been about creating safe and inclusive spaces where communities build their own strengths and become true agents of change about their own lives

It's been about consciously making time to learn from each other and to challenge ourselves and our thinking, and remaining open to new learning from within and outside our movement

It's been about finding ways for all of us to play our part, from local, national, regional and global, knowing that it's when we bring it all together that we achieve most change

It's been about seeing the value of different strategies and knowing we all have a role, whether it is speaking with politicians and policy-makers, providing direct services, organising public action, and so much more.

It's been about placing humanity at the core of our actions, especially in times of turmoil, and making sure the work is about real change in the day-to-day lives of real people.

2. We must embrace and harness the power of our diversity

Diversity is at the core of what makes this movement strong. It is about diversity of lived experiences, of identities, of positions in the world. It's about diversity of strategies, of ways of organising and of ideas.

Our diversity is a richness. It's what makes the movement dynamic and creative. It's what allows us to learn and to grow by having a range of perspectives and insights. It's what makes us more accountable and ultimately more inclusive as we hear, engage with and create spaces for the wide range of voices to have equal share in our communities and societies.

Most of us recognise this, and yet, in our practices and actions, we too easily overlook, brush aside, ignore diversity

in experiences, in ideas and opinions, in privileges. That's because embracing diversity is not always easy. We all know how quickly our differences can become sources of tensions rather than bringing us together.

That's why for our diversity to be a real strength, it requires everyone in the movement to be committed to learning and to having conversations, some of them challenging and uncomfortable. It requires that each of us question our own points of resistance to diverse perspectives and realities, and work on how we each contribute to connecting across our differences.

Even though it may not always feel like it, this movement has shown it can have those difficult conversations. What I have seen over my years at ILGA-Europe is that when we embrace those differences, and when we create conditions to address any tension expressed in a safe and constructive manner, when we are open to being shaken to our core, that's also where learning and growth happens. And we need to continue to learn if we are to move ever closer to our vision of truly equitable spaces in communities, movements and societies.

I do hope that activists in our movement will have full trust in their ability to have these harder yet necessary conversations collectively. What I've seen over all these years is that people care deeply about continuing to learn about each other's different realities, and to explore what is the best and better way of doing the work. And that at the end of the day, kindness and care prevail.

3. Trusting and supporting others to change is essential to our work

We have to trust that people can learn and do change. I say this with great confidence because none of the achievements of the past decades would have been possible if politicians, allies across our societies, the communities in which we live, had not changed.

This said, trusting that people can learn and change requires from us that we can take a big leap of faith and that we are patient. There is no denying that it is often such a hard thing to do. Especially because it asks of us that we accept that people will make mistakes along the way, and that if they are to learn from those mistakes, it often means that we are the ones taking on a responsibility in supporting them to do so.

It is hard because it also requires us to have the humility to recognise that learning and changing is hard for everyone, including ourselves. None of us like to change. In fact, very few of us change our minds easily, especially on what we hold most dear in our lives. We have to acknowledge this about ourselves so we can see this and accept it in others. As difficult as this is to do, this is also where we can connect as human beings and bring people along.

4. We have every right to ask with confidence for the resources we need

As I offer these reflections, I want every activist to know that I see and have seen, just like the whole ILGA-Europe team has, that there is a huge pressure on everyone in this moment. While profound and lasting change has happened over the past two decades, we cannot deny that this moment in time is difficult.

As activists, you truly deserve to have adequate means, both in money and people, and to receive truly meaningful support from people and institutions who have resources to accompany you.

LGBTI groups and organisations, big and small, are carrying a very heavy load. They are continuing to adapt their actions to make progress despite the increasing number of obstacles, and they are taking on many new tasks in addition to work they've been doing for years already, finding ways to continue to be there for their communities in sometimes very high-risk and conflict-ridden contexts, all the while continuing to care for each other and still show up for other movements.

In many places, activists are not only carrying the LGBTI work, they are at the forefront of fights for gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, democracy and social justice, and they are delivering humanitarian aid.

This work is not only about LGBTI rights and equality, but is about the survival of democracy, so you should know you can be confident and clear in saying to donors and institutions who have means to support you: "This is what we need from you, and this is how we need you to show up for us".

5. We must share power, elevate each other, and invest in collective strength

Thinking back to what ILGA-Europe look liked when I started, it might look profoundly different. From a team of six to one of 25, a budget that is six times what it was, a membership that more than triple in size, ILGA-Europe has grown so much over those years.

And yet, to me, ILGA-Europe has not changed in what matters most. Beyond the growth markers in the organisation, such as staff numbers and annual budget, far-reaching political reach and impact, we have stayed true to our core values, the values that I arrived into, the values and vision of how to do movement work that came from the many people who paved the way.

The strength of ILGA-Europe comes from the core belief that it is only by working together, by sharing power and by elevating each other that we achieve the change we want to see in our world. When an organisation is built around nurturing the best in all of us and bringing it all together so that everyone can contribute and feel part of a shared purpose, therein lies true strength.

I have been asked what I thought my legacy with ILGA-Europe would be. If there's a legacy to be had, I'd like it to be this: that ILGA-Europe will continue to strive, to innovate, to meet the moment, and get even more beautiful as time continues. To show that it is never about one person but about what is built collectively over time.