



Outrage Over Visa Denials for 25th International AIDS Conference

About 9% of visa requests have been denied and 14% percent are still pending.

July 17, 2024 By [Tim Murphy](#)

HIV and AIDS activists and advocates worldwide have recently been alarmed and angry to learn that roughly a quarter of documented visa requests—mostly from potential participants in poor nations—to attend the 25th annual International AIDS Conference from July 22 to 26 in Munich, have been denied or unanswered.

According to a July 15 email from a representative of the International AIDS Society (IAS), which produces the conference, out of nearly 700 conference applicants with whom IAS is in touch, 77% have obtained visas, while 14% are still pending and 9% have been denied. The email was widely shared with stakeholders via [The Choice Agenda](#), a digital global prevention discussion group.

Although the IAS rep also noted that Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe thus far had the greatest number of approved visas, contributors on Choice Agenda's discussion thread are saying that people in nations including Kenya, Burundi and Uganda have been denied visas.

The German HIV and AIDS information website Deutsche Aidshilfe also covered [the issue](#). "Delays in visa processing at German embassies put the participation of people from countries of the global South and of people from vulnerable communities in jeopardy," reads the article. "Deutsche Aidshilfe is now calling for political action." The article included a post from X (formerly Twitter) by renowned Ugandan HIV and AIDS and LGBTQ activist Frank Mugisha, executive director of Sexual Minorities Uganda: "Unfortunately, many people from developing countries and vulnerable communities will miss this important conference due to visa issues. When will inequalities end? #AIDS2024."

Jim Pickett, an independent HIV and AIDS consultant in Chicago, who runs The Choice Agenda discussion group, which has almost 2,400 members from more than 40 countries, told POZ: "People are still waiting, and the conference is only a week away. This same drama happens every single year."

Pickett noted that when the conference, which is expected to host 15,000 people, was held in Montreal in 2022, even Winnie Byanyima, executive director of the Joint United Nations HIV/AIDS Programme, had trouble entering Canada, presumably because she is a citizen of Uganda. (At that

time, Byanyima [said](#) she was “very upset” that many people were unable to get to the conference because of denied or not promptly addressed visa requests.)

One person on the Choice Agenda discussion thread shared, “One of our colleagues in Kenya has been denied twice. He has invitations to speak in two separate events, travel and accommodation. And of course it’s taking up valuable time for all involved.”

Shared another: “We are developing a case with fellow advocates in Kenya to sue the embassy and demand compensation and negotiations with key populations, allowing us to probe them further. Why are they denying people visas when it’s evident we have proof and a reason to visit Germany? So many people here were denied visas and wrote to the conference and they said they can’t help with visa processing.” (“Key populations” refers to groups most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS, such as LGBTQ people, people who inject drugs, sex workers and migrants.)

Another contributor commented, “It is unfortunate that in many cases where visas were denied, community members had full scholarships and support from various organizations. They were invited as speakers and abstract presenters, underscoring their importance and the opportunities missed due to these denials. Something needs to be done to address this issue again. Where did our global themes of inclusivity and collaboration go? There is nothing without communities.”

As Pickett noted, the issue isn’t new: Since the 1980s, HIV and AIDS conferences have mostly been held in wealthy places with good infrastructure (e.g., the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia) that often are extremely restrictive when it comes to admitting people from poorer nations, particularly African countries, because they fear that such visitors are going to stay permanently to access job opportunities and health care or because such places, often, have better human rights profiles, particularly toward key populations.

While certainly this has happened, the vast majority of people who attend a conference from another country return to their home country when the event is over. Many people from poor countries aiming to attend international conferences are deeply involved in HIV and AIDS and other health and human rights work in their own countries and hence highly incentivized to return, perhaps only compelled not to if their lives are threatened because of their activism work.

In recent years, in part to sidestep such visa denials, efforts have been made to hold more HIV and AIDS conferences in non-wealthy countries. For example, the IAS HIV and AIDS conference that is held in odd years and focuses more closely on science and data versus the myriad community and cultural issues addressed at the even-year conference, will take place in Rwanda in 2025. But generally, conference organizers default to wealthy nations because they have better infrastructure—hotels, conference centers, digital connectivity—to host large, complex gatherings.

Also in recent years, especially since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, conferences have often adopted an in-person/virtual hybrid model, but even this can impede people participating remotely from poor countries because such countries often have poor digital connectivity.

POZ put a query about the denied AIDS conference visas to a representative for the German embassy in Washington, DC. The rep replied and answered off the record. POZ took the reply to mean that explanations for visa denials or holdups would have to be sought individually from officials at embassies in various countries and that such officials would be unlikely to address individual cases.

POZ also asked IAS what it was doing to help process visa requests. The rep said that since February, the IAS every two weeks had shared information with the German authorities on all persons requiring a visa for the conference, regularly intervening on cases of participants who'd not heard back. The rep said that, though IAS asked such individuals to follow up to see whether their case was resolved, IAS did not always hear back from them.

The rep also said that IAS was trying to mitigate the ongoing visa issue by reinvesting over 15% of the conference budget in facilitating access for people from low- and middle-income countries, significantly reducing registration fees for people from such countries, providing full scholarships (including registration, travel and hotel expenses) for many people from such countries, lobbying for such persons with conference host countries, making the conference accessible both virtually and in-person, and hosting up to six entirely free regional meetings yearly in low- or middle-income countries.

But more broadly, beyond the visa debacle, on the Choice Agenda thread, contributors raised issues with massive international conferences that have been brought up before. Although they provide a wonderful opportunity for HIV and AIDS stakeholders—including many directly affected by the epidemic, such as key populations—to meet and talk in person (assuming they gain access), they also often serve largely as a venue for glossy advertising for large pharmaceutical companies, cost a huge amount of money, create a major carbon footprint in terms of materials generated for the event as well as air travel and put people especially vulnerable to infectious diseases like COVID at risk.

Asked one person on the thread: “Many millions of dollars are spent on the conference, and what is the net gain? Is the juice worth the squeeze?”

In years to come, the International AIDS Conference may, for these reasons and more, become increasingly virtual. But for this year at least, it appears that visa issues will continue to depress participation from many nations most affected by HIV.

“Everyone spouts slogans about centering people living with or vulnerable to people with HIV,” says Pickett. “But those are the very people kept outside the gates.” He mimicked the voice of conference participants from wealthy nations talking to such people: “We’re going to design research for you and talk about you the whole time, but sorry you couldn’t get in—we’ll try better next time!”