

Speaking Out Supports the Growth of a Homegrown Regional MSM Network in the Middle East and North Africa

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The MSMGF originally conceived [Speaking Out](#) as an advocacy training initiative, adapted to geographic implementation contexts. More than a Toolkit, [Speaking Out](#) proved to be a powerful catalyst for movement building. By putting people together in conversation about their lives and experiences, [Speaking Out](#) facilitated the creation of safe spaces to (i) discuss and plan advocacy collaborations across and within constituencies, (ii) pursue joint activities, and (iii) establish

national and regional networks and platforms for engagement.

Speaking Out participants in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) first conceived the idea of a regional coalition of advocates working jointly on health and human rights issues for men who have sex with men (MSM) and other sexual minorities in 2012. As one regional voice, with pooled resources and experiences, they felt better able to address gross human rights abuses, discriminatory policies, and dangerous public health practices at the national level. The MSMGF supported mobilizers to conceive of a governance structure, define organizational goal and objectives, and pursue seed funding. [The M-Coalition](#) officially launched at AIDS 2014 in Melbourne, as a representative and legitimate homegrown advocacy platform aiming to coordinate on local, regional, and international levels to facilitate MSM access to prevention, care, treatment, and quality support services. They aim to do this through advocacy, the creation of favorable environments, capacity strengthening and follow-up, research, and exchange of good practices. They also collaborate with other health and human rights structures, and relevant key policy makers.

OVERVIEW

In 2011-2012, participants from 5 MENA countries came together under the auspices of the MSMGF's Speaking Out initiative, facilitated by the [Association de Lutte Contre le Sida](#) (ALCS) in Morocco. The aim was to adapt and translate the [Speaking Out Toolkit](#) for Arab Francophone countries in the region. The process brought together advocates previously working in isolation, and unified them under one regional advocacy umbrella. With encouragement and technical support from the MSMGF, and financial backing from ViiV Healthcare, they formalized their collaboration as the M-Coalition, the first platform working for MSM populations on health and rights issues in the MENA Region. Speaking Out proved the ideal platform to mobilize advocates from different countries towards a regional movement whereby they could collectively, and powerfully, address issues more difficult to tackle solo at the national level.

Key steps and achievements from inception, to formalization, to strategic planning, are discussed in detail below.

A. Speaking Out. In late 2011, the MSMGF began work with a group of regional advocates to adapt, translate, and implement the Speaking Out Toolkit into French for Arab Francophone countries of the MENA Region. Through a multi-stage process, 12 advocates met together in late 2011 and again in mid-2012, successfully launching the completed [Toolkit](#) at the International Aids Conference 2012 in Washington DC.

As an evaluation exercise, participants were asked about next steps to keep the momentum going, and if they had any wishes as a group. They proposed a formal platform to stay connected and collaborate on activities. “We stubbornly did not let the idea go, and began talking about it through email and telephone. We did not have a lot of connections of our own and we wanted to engage all the participants and pool our resources,” says Johnny Tohme, a training participant and current Executive Director of the M-Coalition. “During the training, we heard complaints about the lack of solidarity and coordination among civil society when reacting or denouncing an event or human rights abuse. We were all doing nice work, but we were isolated and some of our efforts were duplicative. We have similar contexts and can share lessons, cooperate on research – which is a big gap in our region – and on advocacy. So it was logical that we felt we would be stronger together at a regional and international level.”

B. Collaborations. In the summer of 2012, several gay men were arrested at a cinema in Beirut. Through the Speaking Out Listserv, participants were able to immediately discuss and share information, and strategize a response. According to Johnny, “This was the first time we worked together as a region to address a crisis situation with joint actions and statements. We used the instructions from the Speaking Out Toolkit to guide our actions.” Participants from Lebanon noted that they felt safer with the backing of their regional colleagues and activists engaged and involved in their cause. “Speaking Out helped us build a strong, and important, regional response system,” noted another activist.



Creation Meeting, January 2014, Lebanon



Strategic Meeting, May 2014, Tunisia

C. Conversations. In early 2013, several participants approached MSMGF senior policy staff, including Nadia Rafif (formerly of ALCS in Morocco), about their desire to have a platform for MSM in the MENA Region. They began discussions about what types of assistance they would need to move forward. Throughout the remainder of 2013, they conducted outreach with potential organizations and individuals beyond the original Speaking Out participants, and with regional partners including UNAIDS. Following the successful resolution of the arrests in Lebanon, there was increased momentum to work together. Through their connections, they were able to raise funds from the Dutch, the

Levi Strauss Foundation, and finally ViiV Healthcare, who expressed interest in seeing a funding proposal to help establish a formal network. ViiV Healthcare’s Positive Action Program became their main donor during 2014. “It is hard in the first two years to prove ourselves, and getting the attention of donors to help us kick start our activities,” notes Georges Azzi, executive Director of [Arab Foundation For Freedoms And Equality](#) (AFE), host of the M-Coalition.

D. Creation. The MSMGF agreed to provide technical support towards defining a variety of platform-related issues, including composition, governance mechanisms, a code of ethics, and criteria for membership and participation. The MSMGF helped facilitate a meeting in Lebanon, together with [ITPC MENA](#), in January of 2014. According to Georges, the purpose was “to bring together sexual health and HIV activists in the region, and bring different perspectives. Discussions about access to prevention services, health rights, and changing discriminatory policies did not happen before, so we felt we would concentrate on HIV as an entry door to work on broader gender and sexual rights issues.” Participants from the 5 countries originally involved in Speaking Out attended (Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania).



In addition to taking assessments, participants discussed challenges and opportunities specific to their region, gaps, and what role a coalition could play. As a group, they decided to call themselves the ‘M-Coalition.’ ‘Coalition’ seemed more relevant than network or platform, and together with the single letter ‘M,’ the full meaning and intent is somewhat disguised –



important for security. “We didn’t want it to be too ‘out there’ as being for MSM and working on HIV and rights,” noted one participant, particularly for those countries with the greatest stigma and discrimination against MSM and other sexual minorities.

The new members of the M-Coalition designated AFE as the hosting Secretariat, given that Lebanon was one of the safer and more tolerant areas within the region, making it easier to move funds and manage activities. They concluded their first meeting by talking about the role and composition of a Steering

Committee, the engagement of other MENA countries, and planning a second meeting in April. Immediately following the meeting, an [announcement](#) was disseminated in English, French, and Arabic, on the formation of the M-Coalition. “Every group or entity we sent the announcement to said it was great and really needed,” noted Johnny.

E. Structure. After the first creation meeting, there was a feeling that a broader meeting was needed to go into more detail on function, and include people from other countries. In the MENA Region there are four sub-regions: the Levant region (Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq), the Nile (Egypt, Sudan), the Maghreb (Tunis, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania), and the Gulf area or the countries of the Arab peninsula (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Iran – which is not part of the M-Coalition).

“The reason the M-Coalition happened so quickly was because of the people at the MSMGF. We, the community, said and knew it was the right time. The MSMGF, with major supporters from our region, worked with us not as people coming from the outside to ‘discover’ us, but from within as part of our community. Having the MSMGF behind us at the beginning to help guide us – neutrally – was essential.”

- Georges Azzi, AFE Director

A second meeting of the M-Coalition was held in Tunis in May 2014. Seventeen people attended and participated in activities to define the governance structure, clarify the vision, strategize and identify priority projects. A steering committee of 13 people was selected. They decided to have 2 co-chairs, electing Saja Michael from Palestine, and Badr Baaboo from Tunisia, representing both Francophone- and Arabic-speaking members. The UNAIDS regional office participated by videoconference, and discussed how they would like to involve the M-Coalition in the field, designing, implementing, and monitoring programs. “They talked about us being a hub of information for everything related to MSM and HIV in the region, and hoped we would be able to fill an acknowledged gap in research and data,” noted Johnny.



Group work on building a strategic vision, May 2014, Tunisia

The MSMGF, together with ITPC MENA, co-facilitated this strategic meeting with Johnny Tohme. Saja notes: “The MSMGF did a good job as co-facilitators – they did not impose their ideas, were flexible, and helped us come up with ideas of our own to create what we wanted to create. They shared information and their own experiences to put things into perspective. They left the floor open to be participatory and so the ideas we came up with were owned by us. This is extremely

important! The rhetoric we commonly hear that the M-Coalition is an idea ‘imposed from the West.’ It is therefore important that none of the ideas we come up with are introduced through an international body or individual; rather, that it is the ideology of people and activists from *within* the region.” Johnny adds that, “It is important that members of the steering committee have built networks within their country organizations, and they are known personalities in their countries. Usually, when the police, the media, a government, or an individual wants to go after

a stigmatized community, they go after the less privileged and less connected, so one of our safety nets is having people who are well known and with a higher profile on our steering committee.”

As a concluding activity, the new steering committee identified a number of next steps including (i) finding funding, (ii) developing a strategic plan and (iii) ensuring the M-Coalition was vocal and well represented regionally and globally. This included involvement in advocacy spaces including the UN and national governments, and use of new technology and social media to conduct work. “It will be challenging to break into these old circles of people,” says Georges. “We want a regional presence and don’t want to be banned from getting into a country. But, it is also our job to report human rights abuses. We decided to approach cases one by one. We discussed mapping services and providers – doctors to trust, lawyers to trust – so that when something bad happens, the process of getting assistance whether financial support, legal protections, or getting out of the country, happens quickly.” To achieve this, they planned a launch in Melbourne at IAS 2014, supplemented by publications, lobbying, and political work to engage governance in the region.

F. The Launch. In Melbourne, Australia, on July 21st, as part of the International AIDS Conference, MSM advocates from the MENA Region launched the M-Coalition as the first Arab coalition on MSM and HIV. According to Johnny in their [press release](#) accompanying the launch, “At this key moment where the end of the HIV epidemic is potentially within reach, we have committed to increase our efforts envisioning an Arab world where the right to health and all other human rights of MSM and LGBT are recognized, realized, and protected.” This was a change from previous AIDS meetings, where it was felt that the same people presented the same very general and vague discourse for the region. “We have not been aggressive enough. This time it was the community, the target population, who handled presentations on the MENA Region, and the booth,” noted Georges.



Launching session, July 2014, IAS, Melbourne



MENA booth (817), Global Village, IAS Melbourne, July 2014

The M-Coalition representatives in Melbourne were supported at the launch by the MSMGF, and co-organized the [MENA booth in the networking zone](#) together with ITPC MENA and AFE. They simultaneously launched a [Facebook page](#), a [website](#), and a newsletter (with 283 current subscribers), to disseminate information regionally and globally. The launch of the M-Coalition itself

was part of an IAS preconference workshop that attracted many different stakeholders. “Most of the questions we were asked were filled with misperceptions about our region – about the risks, the dangers, whether we were afraid. Yes, there are risks and we do not deny this. We are ready to take those risks. We must take a lead, and we cannot work underground all the time. Still, we do not advertise that we are MSM, and are known in some places only as researchers or service providers,” said Johnny.

Overall, people expressed surprised by the rapid emergence of the M-Coalition, given the perceptions that nothing is possible in the MENA Region, that all countries face the same issues, and that security risks are too great. “In reality, Tunisia and Morocco are way ahead in HIV work than Middle Eastern countries, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and especially Saudi Arabia. There are acknowledged gaps in understanding and deciding things within the group. Our general objectives are therefore broad because there isn’t a uniform macro picture,” notes Saja. “We expect to face challenges in the region just on the idea of MSM itself. Working on something that is taboo in most represented countries will cause us to face some resistance. Even talking about HIV is taboo in some places as it is socially linked to drug use or sex work or homosexuality.”

Recognizing this, the M-Coalition prioritizes security in how they do business. Part of the M-Coalition’s mandate is to work with the media and key stakeholders to dispel myths – both those that stigmatize and discriminate, and those that exaggerate and present the region as ‘impossible’ to work in. “It is true that some countries are easier to work in, while others are harder. This is where a regional representative organization like the M-Coalition is important, for they can speak for those in Saudi Arabia, for example, who cannot, using new technology to ensure all information is accurate and timely,” says Georges.

G. Strategic Planning. In December 2014, the [MARSA Sexual Health Clinic](#) (Lebanon) finalized translation and adaptation of [Speaking Out Toolkit](#) into Arabic. Then, in January 2015, the M-Coalition used the piloting of the Arabic version as an innovative platform for strategic planning, attended by participants from Lebanon, Palestine, Morocco, and Algeria. “We took the second part of the Toolkit and worked on exercises on each of the main themes, did group work, and came up with projects the M-Coalition could do on a regional basis,” says Johnny. As an excellent example of the further adaptation and utilization of the Speaking Out Toolkit, the M-Coalition came up with “realistic projects we can pursue, not just dreams.”

One of the issues members of the M-Coalition are grappling with is taking macro vision goals and breaking them down into micro activities with sub-committees. “We realized that advocacy and legal changes need to be done locally because of context specificities, but regionally we could have a list of lawyers and media outlets and journalists who can highlight issues every time there is a human rights violation, and can be part of a dynamic referral system if there is an emergency in a certain country,” adds Johnny. They also talked about (i) creating a template for reporting human



Piloting of the Speaking Out Arabic version, January 2015, Lebanon

rights violations for rapid dissemination; (ii) developing awareness materials that specifically target MSM and their sexual behavior, not just generally condom use, and (iii) addressing the research and data gap, particularly for size estimation.

During strategic planning, the M-Coalition defined several long-range, necessary, and practical plans for the future. Broadly, they want to eliminate discrimination, reduce violence, and change the taboo for MSM and HIV, still associated with abnormal behavior in MENA societies. More narrowly, they identified 5 objectives to move forward:

1. Strengthened regional, sub-regional, and national networks of MSM across the Arab region linked to each other, including networks of MSM living with HIV, networks of organizations working on human rights, and those working on sexual and bodily rights
2. Increased knowledge and data on MSM and HIV through the promotion of research, and its broad-based dissemination locally, regionally, and internationally
3. Increased investment (funding) in effective HIV prevention, care, treatment, and support programs for MSM
4. Expanded coverage of rollout and access to quality HIV-related services for MSM
5. Decreased stigma, discrimination, and violence against MSM

They discussed project ideas to take these objectives and implement them, and submitted proposals to the Robert Carr Network Fund and the Municipality of Paris, and are preparing a submission at the request of HIVOS to:

- Share informational materials with partners, peers, and other technical support providers using social and other media
- Develop a risk assessment and security planning handbook as a guiding tool for activists engaged in human rights advocacy work, specifically MSM and transgender communities in MENA
- Develop and translate relevant, easy-to-read documents that can explain the Global Fund's New Funding Model and its processes to MSM and transgender communities interested in accessing funding through the Global Fund or monitoring processes as key affected populations
- Build, maintain, and share databases of consultants working at regional and global levels
- Issue 4 comic books focused on MSM and HIV causes and needs
- Create informational pamphlets for each chapter of the Speaking Out Toolkit.
- Put together a publication with testimonials of people living with HIV, in order to improve awareness and sensitize the public

H. Other Activities. The M-Coalition has had an immediate need to engage in regional human rights developments. In August of 2014, they issued their first official rights-related press release after a raid on the Agha Hammam Sauna in Lebanon. The raid followed an incident where the sauna was branded as a gathering place for men seeking sexual encounters with other men. Sixteen men, mostly migrant laborers, were arrested and tortured during detention.

In December 2014, the M-Coalition issued another [press statement](#) after the raid of a Cairo bathhouse where the police detained 27 men on charges of public indecency and group debauchery. In their press release, the M-Coalition denounced the incident “as a case of homophobic practice that aims to police the sexual rights and liberties of the individuals involved,” calling for the immediate release of all the detainees from “under charges which violate their sexual and bodily rights and integrity.” They also issued 3 messages using social media. As of today, all 27 men are released, and several organizations have filed lawsuits against the journalist who instigated the raid.



The M-Coalition also signed a [statement](#) against the Gilead policies on Hepatitis C medications, and what is happening in India around the pricing of drugs.

In addition to responding to human rights violations and issuing press statements, the M-Coalition has been attending meetings organized by global partners. In October, they attended a [meeting](#) in Thailand, co-organized by the MSMGF and the Pangaea Global AIDS Foundation, on operationalizing the [WHO Guidelines on HIV Prevention, Diagnosis, Treatment and Care for Key Populations](#), as the first representatives at any such meeting from the MENA Region. All the global MSM networks were present, along with all major stakeholders, so it was a high profile opportunity to speak out.

M-Coalition was also invited to attend a regional meeting in Beirut organized by the Global Fund, to introduce the New Funding Model to the Arab world. Johnny gave a presentation introducing the M-Coalition at the meeting, and critical discussions were held on how to create better and more direct links between civil society and the GF without always having to go through the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM), or the government.

Finally, the MSMGF’s Consortium of MSM Networks addressed its weak representation in the North Africa and Middle East region by adding the M-Coalition into the Consortium, inviting them to bimonthly Consortium meetings for discussion about regional and global issues. In September, the MSMGF submitted a proposal for Robert Carr NF’s Global Fund-related work on behalf of the Consortium, which now includes M-Coalition. The project proposal now funded, focuses on increasing engagement of MSM and transgender people in national AIDS planning processes and the inclusion of high quality, rights-based, and evidence informed programs into concept notes submitted to the Global Fund for funding consideration.

“We own the M-Coalition 100%. We got support from the MSMGF and others, but it was us, the participants, who were highly motivated from Speaking Out to lead this work. Without that motivation, the M-Coalition would never have happened. The people involved are really motivated and feel this is their work. At the end of the meeting in Tunisia, we looked in each other’s eyes and we could see how proud we were. That pride is like when you have a baby. Yeah! We finally did it! And rather quickly. It was the perfect time in the region for the coalition.”

- Johnny Tohme, M-Coalition Executive Director

NEXT STEPS

Today, activists in the region and worldwide are hearing more and more about the M-Coalition, and governments are beginning to take note. “The first year was about creating the M-Coalition. We did not do a lot of projects, we did not lobby or launch campaigns, mostly we participated in regional work with UNAIDS, WHO, and Global

Fund, including other Arabic initiatives (like the Regional Arab Network Against Aids, [RANAA](#)), attended meetings, and focused on getting our voice heard. The year was about time and exposure. Now, in the second year (2015), we are working on a media strategy to facilitate our work, and will begin engaging on specific projects based on our strategic plan,” notes Johnny.

Running a regional network the size of MENA, with all the diversity and politics and socio-economic challenges present, is not going to be easy. However, the M-Coalition is firm that their most crucial role as a regional coalition is to be a voice for the people in the region who cannot organize or speak out. According to Saja, “The M-Coalition is important because there are so many gaps in activities and research and what has been implemented in different countries in our region. The M-Coalition creates a space where sharing information is easier and simplified. We are building on each other’s work and tackling taboos. We are part of the change that will take the issue of MSM and key populations out from under the rug. We cannot wait for communities to be more open minded, and we know they will not become more understanding on their own.”

M-Coalition leaders have incredible passion and the energy. Resource mobilization remains a challenge, and finding a handful of dedicated funders is high priority to further the work possibilities of this vibrant young organization.