What is CommsLabs?

Astraea’s CommsLabs are a series of regional and national gatherings hosted by Astraea and designed with, by, and for LGBTQI activists.

- What is CommsLabs?
- From CommsLabs 1.0 to 2.0
- About CommsLabs 2.0
- History and context
- The "look": visual and design assets

What is CommsLabs?

Astraea’s CommsLabs are a series of regional and national gatherings hosted by Astraea and designed with, by, and for LGBTQI activists. CommsLabs are built on a vision of a network of linked activists, artists, healers, and technologists from the Global South and East working independently and together to foster the next generation of LGBTQI human rights advocacy. CommsLabs are not a one-time convening, but a strategic element of Astraea's ongoing accompaniment strategy.

We know that how we gather is as important as why we gather. CommsLabs are a methodology for gathering that lives our values into practice - uplifting a horizontal structure, accessible and participatory design, grounded in local contexts, and driven by activists. CommsLabs serve as vital spaces for movement building, collaboration, skills and strategy sharing, and collective care. Each CommsLabs is unique as it reflects the priorities of regional movements, but what remains consistent across all CommsLabs is an engaging activist space embedded with healing and wellness, joy, and accessibility.

» Read more about CommsLabs' intention and rationale

From CommsLabs 1.0 to 2.0

CommsLabs have evolved and grown from the work of many in movement. As one of the key partners in organizing several CommsLabs gatherings with Astraea, Research Action Design (RAD) developed a set of templates based on learnings to support the participatory design of future CommsLabs organizing. In 2019, Association for Progressive Communications (APC) was invited by Astraea to continue the shared task of designing, planning, implementing, and coordinating CommsLabs.

At the end of four years of collaboration, APC contributed to two CommsLabs and this collection we're calling CommsLabs 2.0 - a resource for future collaborators and activists working to build participatory gatherings with, by, and for advancing LGBTQI rights. It aims to offer guidance for convening coordinators, facilitators, and actors interested in addressing remote continuous communication with engagement and participation. Special attention is given to ensuring privacy, confidentiality, safety, and ease of access.

About CommsLabs 2.0

ASTRAEA has organised several CommsLabs in collaboration with RAD, who have developed a resource as part of their learning process and experience with CommsLabs. This resource, now renamedCommsLabs 1.0, is designed to provide guidance for future CommsLabs and to facilitate collaboration with a shared canvas of timelines, work-plans, templates, and workflows that can be adapted to new CommsLabs contexts and instances.

APC was invited by ASTRAEA in 2019. With the global pandemic hitting the world in 2020, the conversation evolved to address and respond to the constantly changing environment. This shift contributed to new collective understandings and sensibilities regarding the use of digital technological infrastructure as a site for network and movement building.

At the end of four years of collaboration, APC contributed to two CommsLabs: the Caribbean (English-speaking countries) and the sub-regions of Central Asia and South Caucasus.

The Caribbean CommsLabs was mostly remote, with the Co-Design Session done entirely online. The gathering had a hybrid format with two physical locations in Barbados and Jamaica, connecting for opening, closing, and plenaries.

The Central Asia and South Caucasus (CASC) CommsLabs had both the Co-Design Session and the final gathering in person, utilizing digital infrastructure for overall planning, hosting, and sharing information.

This resource builds upon CommsLabs 1.0 by sharing reflections, new templates, workflows, timelines, and methods of collaboration and communication. It tells the story and shares the learnings of two distinct and diverse gatherings, introducing a digital infrastructure based on free and open-source practices. These practices are rooted in APC's philosophy, inspired by transfeminist understandings of safety and security, and consider care as an exercise of active listening and contextual responses.

CommsLabs 2.0 serves as a resource for future collaborators and actors that ASTRAEA will convene, as has been the case with RAD and APC. It aims to offer guidance for convening coordinators, facilitators, and actors interested in addressing remote continuous communication with engagement and participation. Special attention is given to ensuring privacy, confidentiality, safety, and ease of access.

History and context



Click on image to view full size

CommsLabs has been convening since 2014 all across the globe!

Colombia



The first CommsLab was hosted in Colombia in **July, 2014** with local host **Colombia Diversa** and participants from Latin America. Gathering together **more than 35 activists from Latin America with 12 technologists and communications practitioners** from around the world, the group worked together to create new media strategies and digital advocacy tools specifically designed to meet the needs of LGBTQI human rights defenders.

Kenya and South Africa



In April, 2015, activists and allies from Kenya and South Africa, the United States and beyond gathered in Cape Town, South Africa to begin the work of setting the strategic direction and vision for CommsLab Kenya and CommsLab South Africa. Participants felt strongly that the two sessions should be linked, and should build in broader participation. They also began to forge the foundation of the most important content to include in the two CommsLabs, work that will be built upon with engagement with activists in both places in the months to come.

Dominican Republic



Co-designed and co-facilitated by grantee partners from Latin America and the Caribbean, the **4th CommsLabs* in Punta Cana in 2015/2016** was an opportunity for LGBTQI+ activists from all over the region to build capacity, experiment with new tools and technologies, and intentionally connect with each other both within and across movements to break down the structures of racism, patriarchy, and colonialism, work together to build creative messaging and develop organizing tactics, as well as discuss the particular challenges they face. Connecting the physical and digital organizing spheres, ultimately building collective power, CommsLabs is much more than a training and exchange space: CommsLab is a space for organizers to rest, rejuvenate, reflect, and recharge.

Caribbean



The Caribbean CommsLabs marks the start of APC’s collaboration with Astraea. COVID impacted CommsLabs in many spheres and re-shaped the whole process: from (deciding and building) infrastructure and switching to online meetings, to handling uncertainty in logistic planning and travel restrictions. We opted for a hybrid format: holding CommsLabs simultaneously in Jamaica and Barbados, connected through the internet to give the feeling of being altogether in one event. This reduced risks related to travel restrictions and created a more manageable and careful space.

Central Asia and South Caucasus



The CASC CommsLab takes place in a moment of heightened tensions in the region with the wars raging in Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh, and multiple laws being discussed in different countries that impacts civil society funding and organizing, specially LGBTQI+ organizations.

With COVID not being a big of threat anymore, the Activist Advisory Board Co-Design consultation happened in person in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The event was held in Tbilisi, Georgia in February 2024.

The "look": visual and design assets



Many talented transfeminist artists have poured their creativity in representing CommsLabs. In this zip file (758MB) you can find all the visual and design assets such as banners, illustrations, merch design and much more produced over the years.