

**Interview:**  
**Joep Lange, President International AIDS Society**

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**Interviewer:** Professor Joep Lange, thanks for speaking with us. Here in Bangkok the International AIDS Conference is about to get underway. As one of the chairs for the conference, what's your single greatest hope for the progress that can come out of this event?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** I think the most important is to create awareness in the region in Asia about how big the problem's become here and hopefully that awareness will then lead to concrete steps to stem the epidemic from growing.

**Interviewer:** And at that, in deciding to hold the conference in Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, was that part of the decision making that went into it?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Yes, it was a strategic choice, and I think we should be making those types of decisions for future locations as well. Dublin obviously had a huge impact because of that particular location, and I think Bangkok can also have a very great impact.

**Interviewer:** Thailand in particular both has had many problems with HIV/AIDS, with commercial sex workers, with intravenous drug use problems, but it has also been a model with how to deal with the epidemic. What's your sense of how Thailand has reacted to the problems it has had?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** The real success story of Thailand took place in the early to mid-90's when they had a rapidly

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growing epidemic with infection rates of ten percent in adults. They really turned it around by having a very effective campaign, 100 percent condom campaign. They've done relatively well since then, but I think we have to be very careful that they don't become complacent. And there's a risk that the epidemic will also grow again here in Thailand. From that perspective it's very good to honor Thailand for the leadership they've shown, and it's also good to make them aware of the fact that this epidemic is not yet over.

**Interviewer:** You know, recent UNAIDS report did point to Asia as one of the potential hotspots for the epidemic, not yet at the point where sub-Saharan Africa is, but could get there if action is not taken yet.

**Prof. Joep Lange:** In absolute numbers obviously there are so many people living in Asia if you only have a few percent of the population living in India or China living infected, that already is going to be more people than are infected in Africa. Fortunately, I don't think it will get to the same figures as in Southern Africa.

**Interviewer:** We certainly, relative to where we were ten years ago when the epidemic in Africa was really raging, have made tremendous scientific progress in being able to treat HIV/AIDS with medications, though progress in some sense has slowed in recent years. Is it your sense in that what we can

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expect both out of the conference and in future years more incremental progress rather than major breakthroughs?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Yeah, I do. I think that a lot of things have happened in the drug field. We had a very dramatic [inaudible] obviously in the mid-90's when [inaudible] became the standard of care, and from two drugs to three drugs, and that made all the difference. I think since then, to my relief, there has still been a lot of progress on drug [inaudible]. There are two classes of agents, and so I think that actually progress has been really well, but you don't get that same watershed event as we saw then, because in fact, we've come to almost the top of what we can be.

**Interviewer:** And the problem is not solved, not licked, but AIDS is treatable now, which it was not by in large a decade ago.

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Obviously we need to find less toxic medications. I think that chronic toxicity is a big issue. That is the biggest threat, and to develop therapy in the long term. I also think simplification is very important, which is happening. We started in the mid-90's, people had to take 30 to 40 pills a day. They're taking two pills a day now, so that is enormous progress.

**Interviewer:** Which helps with people adhering—

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Adherence, yes.

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**Interviewer:** And resistance.

**Prof. Joep Lange:** However, I don't think we put enough emphasis on adherence, and don't create enough support structures. We're doing all this fancy laboratory monitoring, which is important, but if you make sure that people take their pills and if you help people take their pills, that you're actually doing something that's much more valuable, because data show that if people take their pills, 99 percent has a successful response.

**Interviewer:** In some sense, the progress of science has outpaced the progress in politics. We know more about how to treat this disease than we're actually showing with political leadership. As a scientist yourself, how do you deal with this?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** I've actually become an advocate. Over the first years, because it is so frustrating that you know we have the tools to make sick people healthy again, to let them live relatively normal lives, and here we have only a happy few in the rich countries that have access to these medications. So it's highly frustrating for me, and it has changed my direction. I'm spending more and more time on, let's say the obstacles to scaling up access to therapy. And then you go ever further into why there are no effective healthcare systems in African countries, and why is there no insurance?

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**Interviewer:** Putting a lens on the—

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Yes, and if you solve the problem, if we are really able to get those people on therapy, we've actually solved the problem of delivering healthcare in Africa.

**Interviewer:** Do you perhaps, in recognition of these political challenges, that at the conference for the first time this year created a leadership, an official leadership track—the conference hasn't happened yet, but what's your sense of how successful this leadership might be?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** It's an experiment. We saw a little bit of it in Barcelona when Sandy Furman had it with her foundation of a number of leaders to come to the conference, and the first lady, so she needs to be credited with being, let's say, standing at the beginning of this. It's very important, obviously to involve leaders, because the success stories in developing countries have always been there where there was great leadership, like in Uganda with President [inaudible]. In Thailand, for example, there was actually very much committed to do something about HIV/AIDS. We have a number of eminent people coming to the conference, both heads of state, we have heads of government, also people from the media, actors like Richard Gere. We have Nelson Mandela; we have Kofi Annan. And I was very skeptical about it. I must say now that coming closer I see how the sessions are coming together. I'm actually quite optimistic that it will have an impact.

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**Interviewer:** Let me just ask you just as a final question. At the end of this conference, you will be turning over the reins of the International AIDS Society where you served as president to Helene Gale of the Gates Foundation. Will you find yourself maybe with more free time on your hands after this? What's next for you? Science and politics?

**Prof. Joep Lange:** I'm very glad to go back to work. I've really neglected my work. I think it's been a useful experience because I have built up a network during those years that I'm to use. My real ambition is to start an institute for public health within our institution and put together all the different activities that I'm pursuing.

**Interviewer:** Professor Joep Lange, thanks very much for speaking with us, and best of luck over the next week.

**Prof. Joep Lange:** Thanks, Barry.

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