



Opening Remarks – MSM Pre-Meeting

August 1, 2008

It is high time, in fact long overdue, that the world, the whole world, accepts, if not celebrates, that there have always been and always will be men who have sex with men. Some men only have sex with men, others have sex with men and women. All of them, all of us, have the right to health, the right to life, the right to freedom from discrimination and persecution. Twenty five years into the AIDS epidemic fewer than one in twenty men who have sex with men around the world has access to HIV prevention, treatment and care, according to UNAIDS. Homophobia continues to fuel the spread of HIV – in countries with concentrated epidemics and in countries with generalized epidemics alike. This must change. Research has demonstrated over and over and over again that reducing the social exclusion of men who have sex with men through the promotion and protection of human rights is not only consistent with, but a prerequisite to, good public health. The International AIDS Society considers it a major priority to put this evidence into practice – everywhere and now.

On behalf of the International AIDS Society, I would like to welcome you all to the Global Forum on MSM and HIV pre-conference to the XVII International AIDS Conference. Bienvenidos y bienvenidas. Estamos muy felices que la conferencia a venido a Mexico, la primera vez en la region de America Latina. This is a region where the fight for human rights, for women's rights, for gay rights, for migrants' rights, has been at the forefront of the response to HIV since the beginning. It is therefore fitting that the rights of men who have sex with men throughout the world– to their lives, to their love and to their health – begins to take centre stage at this conference.

Many of you are aware that the International AIDS Society has undergone significant changes since our relocation and reorganization began in 2004. We have built up a small but strong central secretariat of 40 persons, both to organize and ensure institutional memory of our conferences, and to link our conferences to a structured education, policy and advocacy agenda to accelerate research and implementation of evidence into sound policy and programming throughout the world. In 2007 the IAS adopted 5 policy priorities, one of which is to combat stigma and discrimination. This priority stems from 25 years of evidence that clearly shows that public health is undermined where stigma and discrimination persist. In the past year, IAS work in this area has focused on three fronts – working more effectively with our partners through the "Living Partnership" to strengthen meaningful participation of people living with HIV in the response, acting as the secretariat for a global task team convened by UNAIDS to eliminate entry, stay and residence restrictions on people living with HIV, and working with our partners more effectively to expand research, programming and the protection of human rights for men who have sex with men. Our work in the past year to expand the meaningful involvement of people living with HIV in the response has resulted in the Living 2008 Positive Leadership Summit, taking place 31 July-1 Aug here in Mexico, an expanded roster of presenters and sessions in the conference programme devoted to the issue and within the IAS

secretariat itself through the recruitment of strong leadership in senior positions of well-qualified, openly HIV positive individuals. On the issue of entry, stay and residence restrictions for people living with HIV we have seen how a concerted effort of a diverse, committed group of individuals and organizations can lead quickly to results – on Wednesday of this week the US President signed into law the PEPFAR reauthorization bill, which includes the striking of the shameful and discriminatory 20-year long entry ban for people living with HIV. China has committed to removing its entry restrictions on PLWHA, and in the past two weeks there have been reports that Russia and a number of Middle Eastern countries aim to do the same. A comprehensive database of country-by-country information on restrictions is now available at www.hivtravel.org. Turning to the issue of men who have sex with men, at the end of February this year IAS convened a meeting with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation focused on the state of global advocacy for the HIV prevention needs of gay men and other men who have sex with men, with 25 leading gay and human rights advocates from around the world. Five recommendations emerged from the discussion:

- 1) The policy of criminalizing homosexuality is a contributing factor in violence towards and HIV transmission between gay and other MSM. All international actors engaged in HIV or human rights advocacy should adopt decriminalization as part of their advocacy agenda
- 2) UN agencies must expand their leadership on and identify their responsibilities towards MSM –HIV advocacy. To this end, we are pleased that UNDP has been agreed upon as the UNAIDS co-sponsoring agency with overall responsibility for MSM issues.
- 3) Organizations involved in planning global and regional HIV responses (e.g. CCMs and National AIDS Control committees) must ensure that HIV-related services are available to MSM and that funds dedicated to these services at national level are proportional to the impact of HIV on MSM in that country. National AIDS Commissions and other bodies should monitor spending against these allocations
- 4) MSM must be included in national surveillance and independent epidemiological and behavioural research studies. The IAS believes that much more research with MSM across disciplines should be funded and completed in order to drive effective policy and programming
- 5) Donors must create systems of accountability that require implementing agencies to expand access to prevention and treatment technologies for gay and other MSM.

We can and we must implement these recommendations and more. Throughout the world, gay and other men who have sex with men continue to be harassed, beaten and jailed. And we continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV, under-represented in treatment cohorts and in many cases remain “invisible” in our societies. As some countries move towards full rights for homosexuals, including the right to marriage and to adopt children, the disparities become ever-more acute against countries that execute, jail or condone state-sponsored harassment. The recent case of three Ugandan gay activists, arrested at the PEPFAR conference in June, is just one glaring example of increasing intolerance that can no longer be tolerated. IAS is committed to continue to speak out in the media and to work with all of you to challenge and eliminate homophobia.

In my own 45 years of life I have evolved from a young man, terrified that my desire for other men would at worst result in burning eternally in the fires of hell, and at

best result in a life of loneliness and social exclusion, to finding great support, fun and acceptance in the gay community, to watching friends, lovers and colleagues die of AIDS, to finding a lover I could never dream to be so wonderful, to embracing the love and celebration by our families for the love we share, to having my government – Canada- recognize our love through the right to marriage. I consider it a privilege and a responsibility to fight for everyone to have the same dignity and respect that I have acquired.

I wish you well over the next two days and at the conference, and I look forward to working with you all towards an AIDS-free, homophobe-free world.

Thank you for listening.