

## **A 31-year perspective from the 1993 International AIDS Conference held in Berlin to this year's to be held in Munich.**

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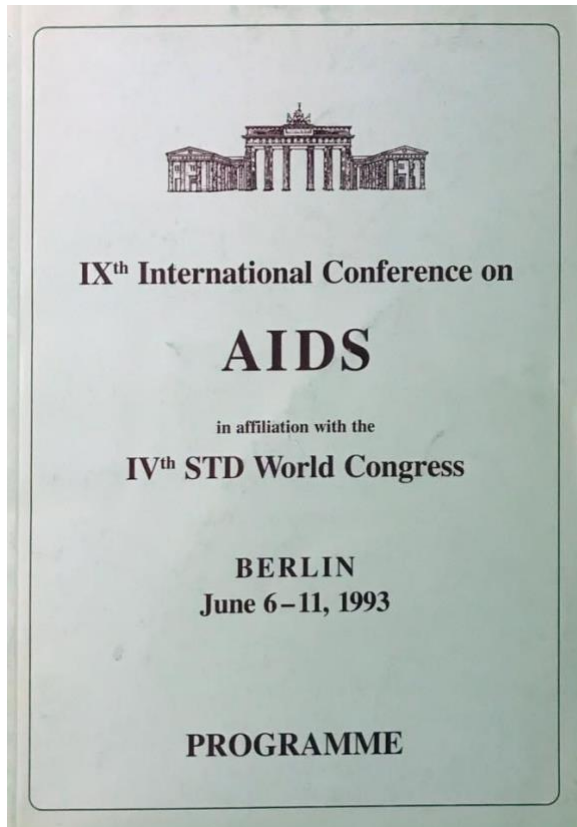
### **Interview with Felix Gallé**

*The 25th World Aids Conference will take place in Munich from the 22nd to the 26th of July 2024. This is the second time that the world's largest conference on HIV will be held in Germany. The 9th World AIDS Conference was held in Germany for the first time 31 years ago. We spoke to Felix Gallé, who was involved in the preparations for the conference as an NGO liaison at the time. The resulting text provides an exciting look back at that time, the main themes and topics of the conference and the involvement of people living with HIV and their communities in the preparations for the conference - but of course also about the changes that have taken place since then. The questions were asked by Peter Wiessner. We are looking forward to the conference in Munich and would like to thank Felix for the interview!*



Foto: Felix Gallé. Copyright: DAH. Brigitte Dummer

**Felix, we've known each other for a few years now. You were involved in the preparations for the first World AIDS Conference in Germany. That was in Berlin in 1993. This summer, the conference is being held in Germany for the second time, this time in Munich. What would you like to tell us about yourself personally and how did you come to be involved in Berlin back then?**



That was all a very long time ago, over 30 years ago. I was a young back then, still a student, studying political science and mainly focussing on development policy and Latin America. My positive test result and my gay coming-out were a few years prior. I was part of the board of Aidshilfe Heidelberg and got in touch with Hans Hengelein from Deutsche Aidshilfe (DAH) and its Positive Peoples Department and Petra Narimani from its International Affairs Department. A year earlier, in 1991, I took part in the International PWA Conference in London. In autumn of 1992, I received an invitation to join the conference preparation team. I was not yet 30 years old at the time and left Heidelberg without much of a plan. You might not do that nowadays. Just embarking on an adventure, leaving the small town behind

Cover, conference programme, Foto: Felix Gallé

and then going to “big” Berlin. In hindsight, the beginning of the 90s was the peak of the AIDS epidemic in Germany. People didn't know how much longer they would have to live. I'm now over 60 years old and happily I'm still here, having worked on counselling for migrants for many years. It's also interesting for me biographically to look back over such a long time.

### **What was your job back then?**

The AIDS conference was held in June 1993, when conferences were still organised on an annual basis. The year before, in 1992, it was held in Amsterdam. It was the first time that NGOs had been involved on a larger scale. At that time, we still spoke of NGOs, non-governmental organisations, nowadays we would rather say civil society organisations. DAH, the German AIDS umbrella organisation, was also present in Amsterdam. They had already demanded in Amsterdam: Okay, if it takes place in Berlin, then we want to be involved in the conference preparations! At that time, the idea was born to establish an NGO liaison committee to influence the organisation of the conference.

### **Were you then commissioned by DAH or by the International AIDS Society, which organised the conference?**

The commission came from the DAH. In Amsterdam, they had already negotiated with the Minister of Health, Horst Seehofer at the time, that DAH would receive separate funding for the conference preparations. I then had a contract with the other colleagues from the NGO Liaison Committee. DAH

provided an office and infrastructure. Four of us started working there and over time more people joined us. Of course, the closer the conference got, the more hectic it became.

**What was your motivation and what experiences did you have?**

I was involved in self-help. You get to know a lot of people in the HIV/AIDS field who put their heart and soul into their work, which always impressed me a lot. I had good contact with Petra Narimani. Petra had confidence in people, she managed to motivate and mobilise people to get involved. At the time, I couldn't have imagined the scale of it! I only realised this during the process, it was like jumping in at the deep end. I was grateful that there were very experienced colleagues on the liaison committee who already had a lot of contacts at international level. And, of course, the head office of DAH also provided great support for the process.

**Who took part in the conference at the time and how was it reported in the media?**

It was a major event with, I think, 15,000 participants. There were people from all over the world who travelled to these huge conferences and then spent a week together, listening to the news and also contributing their own experiences and ideas.

**Did people in the city realise that a conference was taking place? Were there posters? Or did people just take it in their stride?**

To be honest, it was so stressful that I didn't come into the city. I know there was a parallel festival organised by DAH, "Cultural AIDS - AIDS Culture", with lots of events. I know there were some pre-conferences, as with every conference. You take the opportunity to meet in small or smaller groups to discuss content in advance and then bring it to the main conference. Our task at the time was to liaise with the NGOs. We were in contact with NGOs throughout Berlin, Germany and worldwide in the run-up to the conference - at that time without e-mail or mobile phones, everything was done by landline and fax. There were preparatory committees, meetings, and conferences everywhere where

we were present. This also involved a lot of travelling. And

Button: "reach out and touch", 1991. Foto: Felix Gallé



there were press events to which we were invited. I had the pleasure of being interviewed on the TV morning programme Morgenmagazin at 7 a.m. and was also allowed to appear on Sabine Christiansen's show together with Rosa von Praunheim.

**What was your personal highlight of the conference?**

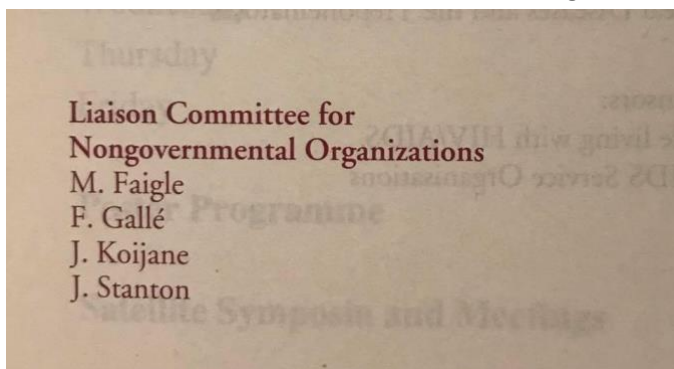
We set up a scholarship programme to invite participants from so-called Third World countries. I remember exactly how the first delegate, an NGO representative from Niger, suddenly stood in our office and effectively had arrived. Goosebumps! We had been communicating with people for months beforehand. And then suddenly there was someone standing in front of you!

**Was there anything that shocked you?**

We were busy from morning till night. We were exhausted and tired. We had our hotel right next to the International Congress Centre so we could relax without having to travel far home. I can't say that I was shocked by anything, I'm not usually that easily put out of countenance. It was a wild time shortly after Germany's reunification, and there were the first racist attacks on refugee shelters: a few months before the attacks in the city of Mölln and then in Solingen just before the conference. And everyone was very worried that something could happen, that delegates of the conference could be attacked, for example. This security issue took a lot of energy in the run-up to the conference. The conference organisers were also very worried. We were all excited: hopefully nothing would happen!

### **What expectations did you have of the conference?**

There were many interesting discussions. For us, the focus was on the fact that this is a scientific conference, originally focussing on basic science, epidemiology and care. The chairman of the Berlin conference was Professor Habermehl, a virologist and researcher. There was also a focus on



prevention and behavioural change. And then suddenly there are representatives of NGOs demanding that they be involved in ALL aspects of

programme planning - demanding that they be heard and wanting to participate shape the programme! That was a bit of a culture shock, for Foto: Felix Gallé. Names of the NGO Liaison-Committee members in the conference programme.

us and also for the other side: when, for example, the conference chairman was greeted on the phone on a beautiful Sunday morning by a well-known AIDS activist at home with the salutation: "Hello, is it Karl-Otto? This is Richard speaking...!" For me, this was a good example of how communication took place at eye level and how you could make yourself heard and actually achieve something in the end. The liaison committee was very close and was always able to bring the NGO demands to the weekly meetings of the programme committee. It was a very impressive experience to have so much influence. I think that was also true for the conference organisers. For Professor Habermehl and the scientific committee, it was certainly an intensive learning process over these six or eight months.

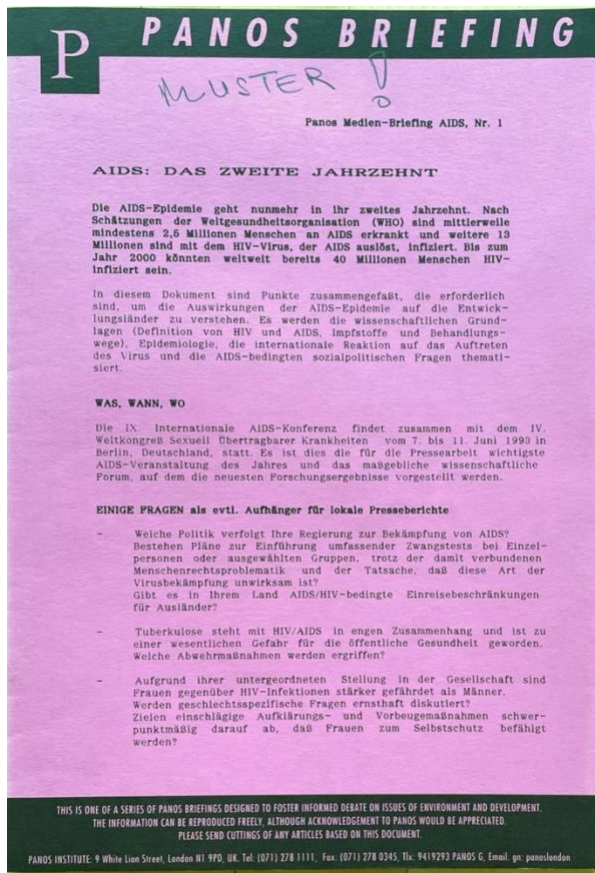
### **Were there any topics that were ignored?**

There was a collection of topics that were important to us as NGOs. In my opinion, all relevant issues could be raised and were not suppressed. It was certainly a great success that a drug user from London was able to give a plenary speech in front of 15,000 people and talk about his situation. He had the full attention of the conference for himself and his presentation. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of this historic moment. Those were dark times for people living with HIV/AIDS: death was omnipresent in our communities. There were one or two medications, but even they didn't really work very well. The breakthrough with combination therapy only came with the Vancouver conference in 1996, it was the big turning point towards treatability. In 1993, the epidemiological data was very depressing, the numbers were rising everywhere, in Africa, in Asia, in South America. There were activist groups, such as ACT UP, the International Positive People's Network or the Women's Network, which organised themselves and formulated their demands, ACT UP mainly in relation to the development and approval of drugs. Pressure was put on the pharmaceutical industry to speed things up. There was also pressure

on governments to become more involved in financing. Women networked and organised internationally at the Berlin conference.

I was also involved in a pre-conference on HIV/AIDS and migration in Berlin. The topic was not yet on the radar in Germany at the time and then became a bit of a life topic for me. And I was involved in organising a pre-conference by the Panos Institute in London for journalists from so-called Third World countries to raise their awareness Foto: Felix Gallé. Panos Briefing AIDS, Nr. 1.

and train them in non-discriminatory media coverage. I still have the "Panos Briefing: AIDS - The Second Decade" from back then, a brochure on the topic of the HIV/AIDS situation in developing countries. The Panos briefing was actually a precursor project to the later Action against AIDS Germany: development organisations in Germany started to network in a working group, and this then resulted



in a translation of the brochure into German, in which the Missionsärztliches Institut Würzburg played a major role, as it did later in the founding of Action against AIDS Germany.

### Were stigma, discrimination and marginalisation already an issue back then?

Starting from the conference in Amsterdam in 1992, the human rights aspect got more priority, thanks in part to the commitment of the then Chairman Jonathan Mann, who died in a plane crash in 1998. It became obvious that you can take even better care of your health if you are not discriminated against, persecuted or stigmatised. In Berlin, it became clear that the pandemic was escalating out of control worldwide and that greater efforts were needed to do something about it. At that time, the WHO and its Global Programme on AIDS were still in charge. And I think it was after the Berlin conference that the idea emerged that the existing structures were

inadequate and that all the other UN agencies needed to be involved in the global fight against AIDS alongside the WHO.

**Yes, UNAIDS - the HIV/AIDS programme of the United Nations - was founded in 1996, a short time later, with its first Executive Director Peter Piot. This was done in close association with, but also deliberately outside the framework of the WHO, which at the time was thought to be a little too unwieldy to respond appropriately to the pandemic. All of this is HIV/AIDS history. But now back to the conference: were there any protests back then?**

There was a lot of pressure from ACT UP New York to get as many free tickets for the conference as possible. We passed the list of names on to the conference organisers. In the end, the free tickets were all allocated. And ACT UP then also used the platform during the conference, a representative was allowed to speak at the opening ceremony after a long back and forth and protest actions were organised in the familiar manner.

**Younger people may no longer be able to imagine what "familiar manner" means today...**

Yes, so they marched through the conference exhibition with whistles and loud noises, stopped off at the pharmaceutical industry to vandalise their stands and spread all their advertising material around. And, of course, there were loud confrontations with industry representatives.

**That was always part of it. It was "good tradition", so to speak, at the World AIDS Conferences. Nowadays there are other forms of protest. People glue themselves down. That didn't exist back then.**

Yes, I think it's different nowadays. The anger was just huge back then, as was the fear and the grief. People died all the time. Among the activists too, of course. You can't really imagine that today. Even when I look at the list of people who died among the activists in Germany: in 1992, 1993, 1994, there were deaths every week, every month. And at the same time there was - also a way of dealing with this extreme situation - a totally weird, sometimes bordering on macabre, gallows humour. The cohesion and solidarity among and with each other was much greater than it is today.

**In the run-up to the conference, the DAH organised a campaign entitled "It's time to act!". What was it all about?**

That was the motto for our fundraising campaign. Our aim was to get as many delegates as possible from poorer countries to the conference. And for months beforehand, we were beating the advertising drum to raise funds so that participants from poorer countries could also take part in the conference. And in the end, we also sponsored more than 200 delegates, in full or in part, for registration, travel costs, accommodation and daily allowances, depending on their needs.

**How were HIV and AIDS discussed back then? Did the conference change anything?**

I think those were still the days when HIV support services were comparatively well-funded in our country. In this respect, it was right to focus on bringing people from what we now call the Global South to the conference. The cuts began when it was easier to provide treatment. In this respect, AIDS here in Germany was an issue that was gladly handed over to the AIDS service organisations. And they were then supposed to deal with it and get it under control. The relationship between the conference organisers and civil society probably has to be negotiated and defined anew each time, but there are certainly a lot more standards now.

**What are your expectations of the conference in Munich?**

We are now in the fifth decade of HIV/AIDS and I am ambitiously heading towards retirement age. The COVID pandemic is also on the move, and AIDS conferences are still a top seller. After the breakthroughs on treatment and non-infectiousness, perhaps there will be news on the cure issue this year in Munich? Probably not. But maybe there will? Let's not give up hope. In any case, I expect to have some good encounters with people who have also managed to get there. By looking beyond from the small details of the day-to-day work, you get a good impression of what the big picture is all about.

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