

Avian Flu and the Workplace: Preparedness and Response Note for the record

On 27th September, 2006, the ILO hosted a Technical Workshop in Geneva on *Avian Flu and the Workplace: Preparedness and Response*.

The following is the list of Attendees:

In representation of ILO's counterparts -

Ms. Marianne Muller (UNSIC), Mr. Sandor Beaukers (UNSIC), Ms. Katinka De Balogh (FAO), Dr. Stephen Martin (WHO), Ms. Jenny Bishop (WHO), Ms. Olga B. Jonas (World Bank), Ms. Angela Raven-Roberts (UNICEF), Ms. Anita Davies (IOM), Mr. Alan Leather (PSI), Ms. Sue Longley (IUF), Mr. Frederick Muia (IOE), Mr. Mike Muller (IATA), Mr. Muarter Kock (Health Protection Agency, UK), Mr. David Gamper (Airports Council International).

In representation of the ILO -

Mr. Stephen Pursey (Cabinet), Mr. Rashid Amjad (ED/EMP), Mr. Alfredo Lazarte-Hoyle (ILO/CRISIS), Mr. Lawrence Jeffery Johnson (EMP/TRENDS), Dr. Igor Fedotov (SAFEWORK), Ms. Anne Herbert (DIALOUGE), Ms. Chantal Dufresne (CIS), Ms. Amrita Sietaram (ACTRAV), Mr. John Woodall (SOC/POL), Dr. Sabine Beckmann (ILO/AIDS), Mr. Seiji Machida (SAFEWORK), Ms. Michelle Nahmias (SAFEWORK), Mr. Donato Kiniger-Passigli (ILO/CRISIS) and Mr. Ahmad Bukhari (ILO/CRISIS)

Summary:

The workshop, attended by employers' and worker's representatives and international agencies, provided an opportunity to examine critical occupational safety and health and employment and livelihood issues in the context of the *Consolidated Action Plan for Contributions of the UN System*, with regard to the potential spread of the Avian Flu virus. It was an occasion for the employers' and workers' representatives to analyze the implications of the Avian Flu and for harmonizing responses with the UN System. The workshop was also attended by the FAO, WHO, UNICEF, the World Bank (WB), IOM and the UN System Influenza Coordinator (UNSIC). All the presentations made at the workshop will be accessible through the ILO website. As soon as the link is established, a note will be sent to all participants.

This was the first instance to review the recently launched UN Action Plan specifically in the context of the world of work by employers' and workers' organizations. The workshop was attended by Public Services International (PSI), International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) and the International Organisation of Employers (IOE).

Even though the avian flu is in and out of the media limelight, the threat posed by the Avian Flu requires immediate and concentrated attention. No country can consider itself to be safe from an Avian Flu outbreak and thus preparedness is essential. In order to prepare for the prevention of an Avian Flu pandemic and mitigate its adverse outcomes UN Agencies have been actively working to develop preparedness plans on a global and regional level. A

Consolidated Action Plan for Contributions of the UN System has been developed and was first issued in July, 2006. This is a rolling plan, which is to be updated every six months. The ILO has been invited to contribute to the next Action Plan due for revision early next year. Thus, this workshop acted as a forum for concrete suggestions to the UN System Influenza Coordinator (UNSIIC) for incorporation in the Action Plan.

ILO's tripartite structure places it in an extremely favorable position to address the concerns of governments, employers and employees with regard to Avian Flu threats. Since 2003 the poultry sector has suffered tremendous losses of up to US\$10 billion, due to the killing of infected livestock worldwide. Furthermore many countries have also experienced a sharp decline in local demand for poultry, which has further battered vulnerable livelihoods. For example Romania experienced an 80% decline in demand for poultry products resulting in a 40% drop in producers' incomes for the first quarter of 2006. In 2004-2005 there has also been a decline in international poultry trade resulting from import bans by many countries on poultry products from South East Asia, which has increased international poultry prices by 20% and has also resulted in an 8% decline in global poultry trade. In addition to these losses, the threat of a pandemic further weakens already delicate structures of trade and livelihoods of backyard poultry farmers.

The World Bank estimates that a severe global influenza pandemic could result in a 3.1% decline in the global GDP, costing the world economy up to US\$1.25 trillion in terms of economic losses. These losses would be incurred due to a loss of livelihoods and increased demand shocks for travel and tourism sectors amongst other affected segments of the economy. Furthermore, based on previous instances of influenza pandemics, it is believed that in a worst-case scenario human deaths can number in the millions.

With regard to preventive action, issues of workers' rights and occupational safety and health are particularly relevant to the ILO's field of operations. Thus there is a need for capacity building and ensuring that efficient mechanisms and infrastructures are in place to combat the Avian Flu at the workplace and in times of possible pandemic. The ILO has established regulatory frameworks and has gained valuable experience in tackling diseases such as HIV/AIDS at the workplace. Such experiences will prove invaluable in developing practices for effective prevention and control of the Avian Flu. Thus governments and the social partners with the assistance of international organizations should have appropriate structures in place in the event of a pandemic.

Information campaigns will be a key tool in succeeding against the adverse outcomes of the Avian Flu. With the passage of time, an increasing number of countries are adopting transparency regarding information on the Avian Flu and are also employing public awareness campaigns. The workplace can be enlisted as an important instrument to inform the employers, workers and the general public of precautionary measures and best practices.

Main Conclusions:

It was suggested that the ILO would remain seized of this matter in terms of its preparedness and possible response. The ILO social partners expressed their interest in maintaining this item on their agenda and there was consensus over the need to bring this issue to the attention of the ILO Governing Body. The participants agreed to recommend the following:

- The ILO would assist the UN and country efforts, while remaining in the existing framework laid down by the UN Action Plan, and will endeavor to pursue programs in order to meet the seven objectives laid down in the Action Plan.
- The ILO would thus be a part of the consolidated UN effort and would address areas of occupational health and safety, modeling for the loss of livelihoods and labour market implications and information dissemination. The ILO would also emphasize the need to address the issues of workers' rights, social dialogue at all levels, social protection and the loss of incomes as a result of the Avian Flu.
- The ILO will identify areas in which it has a comparative advantage and can add value to already existing UN efforts. One specific area would be to mobilize the social partners in gathering first-hand information and disseminating it through effective channels.
- The ILO could also work with other agencies, especially the World Bank and FAO, in devising appropriate compensation, social protection, safety net measures.
- The ILO will forward the first draft of suggestions to be incorporated in the UN Action Plan to UNSIC by mid-October; the suggestions would be built upon already available inputs and would be refined after consultations with the social partners and ILO technical units.

Consolidated UN Action Plan:

With regard to the UN Action Plan the following proposals have been made during the workshop:

Overall:

The UN Action Plan should explicitly recognize that employers' and workers' organizations, including the sectoral organizations, can play a critical role in the implementation of the UN Action Plan and contribute to strategy development and practical activities.

Action at workplaces, both formal and informal, where humans come into contact with potentially infected poultry – and where the risk of virus crossover from animals to humans is highest – is a key element in preventing the spread of the disease.

Avian influenza should be considered as a work-related disease for those persons who might be exposed to the virus while carrying out their professional activities. This is in fact a work-related disease affecting in the first instance agricultural and poultry workers, who require specific safeguard measures.

Recognition should also be given to the special rights of health service workers who will be in the frontline of avian flu preparedness. Their role will be essential in curbing the transmission of the flu and in the provision of care, treatment and support in the event of an outbreak.

In this context, social security is an important tool to counteract the impact of the disease. Benefit payments, compensations and medical facilities for affected workers might be

required and provisions should be made well in advance. In the case of an avian flu pandemic, income support might be required for large sectors of the affected populations.

ILO standards provide a base for development of a rights-based approach, including on occupational health and safety, to be included in national and international action plans, in particular Convention 184, the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001.

Specific measures should be taken to protect migrant workers (including undocumented workers) and other workers in precarious conditions. Moreover, specific measures should be taken to protect children in villages and on farms working in the poultry sector.

Objective 2: Protection of Livelihoods

- The ILO will mobilize its tripartite constituents, compiling information and providing support to monitoring efforts, and also provide technical assistance for possible compensations and livelihood support.
- The importance of the workplace to educate the public on matters concerning the Avian Flu should be recognized. The ILO will be instrumental in affirming the importance of the workplace as an appropriate educational forum.
- Given appropriate financial resources, the ILO will assist in the development of a methodology to assess the labour market implications of the Avian Flu and to examine the measures adopted to mitigate health and livelihood-related hazards. These assessments will not be limited to the poultry sector but would also encompass other productive sectors, such as travel and tourism.
- The need for coordination and collaboration among international organizations and UN agencies, such as the World Bank, FAO, UNDP and the ILO, in analyzing and estimating the employment and labour market impact of an avian flu pandemic should also be given appropriate recognition. In parallel, there is a need for “business continuity planning” for different scenarios.
- The ILO will be involved in capacity development of Labour Ministries and health departments to respond to a possible pandemic. In this regard the role of the private sector should be recognized as it could play a vital role in preparing for a pandemic. Due to its tripartite mandate the ILO is well situated to further this goal.

Objective 3: Ensure Respect of International Health Regulations and set in place Early Warning:

- The ILO together with the social partners will assist countries to improve working conditions and protect workers against the Avian Flu, drawing from ILO international standards and technical guidelines dealing with occupational safety and health.
- The ILO together with its tripartite partners will promote the principles and approaches established in the ILO international instruments on occupational safety and health through intensified cooperation with the ILO tripartite constituents towards the containment of an Avian Flu pandemic.

- The ILO will prepare and disseminate technical information from international and national sources providing guidelines for the prevention of the risks of avian flu at the workplace. If appropriate resources become available, the ILO will assist in enhancing measures and developing systems for the protection of frontline workers, health workers and labour and food inspectors.
- The ILO will take appropriate measures by supporting a state of preparedness among its constituents through data collection, especially on existing preparedness plans and by sharing good practices with other member states.

Objective 4: Achieve Synergy between National, Regional and International Stakeholders

- The ILO will emphasize the importance of consultation and social dialogue. Effective consultative procedures will be set up among governments, UN Agencies, and employers' and workers' organizations at the international, national and regional levels.
- While encouraging collaboration and consultation among governments, employers' and workers' organizations, the ILO will work towards improved coordination for policy development and knowledge sharing.

Objective 5: Provide Key Decision Makers with Timely Information and Encourage Behavior Change

- The ILO together with employers' and workers' organizations will be active in offering, disseminating and exchanging up-to-date information on risks and control measures among governmental agencies and national institutions responsible for occupational safety and health-related issues, thus promoting preventive behaviour at the workplace.
- The ILO will be active in disseminating and exchanging information among governments and national institutions on occupational safety and health issues. Through its constituents and networks, the ILO will reach out to the local community level, where information dissemination so far has been difficult, encouraging preparedness measures and behaviour change.

Specific proposals could be developed for fund raising through the Action Plan.

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