



**Statement by Juan Somavia
Director-General of the International Labour Office
on the occasion of
World AIDS Day
(1 December 2004)**

HIV/AIDS is a human catastrophe. It impedes development and erodes hard won progress.

HIV/AIDS is a medical concern. But it is also inextricably linked to gender inequality, unemployment, and poverty. We live in a world of growing imbalance, where the gaps between rich and poor are tending to grow, not decrease; where poverty is the most pervasive global security threat. Unless these are tackled effectively, HIV/AIDS will continue to take a heavy toll on the most vulnerable children, women and men; on society and the economy as a whole.

Those of working age are hardest hit by HIV/AIDS. And HIV/AIDS pushes children into work; it puts a real strain on the old. Decent work deficits split families, force women and men to find work often far from home – commonly they find themselves in conditions of heightened vulnerability to infection.

The ILO response in and through the workplace and related institutions is rights-based and value driven. Tolerance, equality and solidarity are the watchwords of our activities.

HIV/AIDS mobilizes consensus. All have a stake in prevention and in improving the lives and well-being of those infected. The landmark Declaration “Fighting HIV/AIDS together”, signed by the International Organization of Employers and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in May 2003 has been a catalyst for joint workplace action by employers and workers. The ILO is pleased to support such initiatives.

Governments have a lead role to play in the fight against HIV/AIDS. They are responsible for the legal and policy environment that can promote or hinder workplace action based on tripartite involvement.

In many countries where HIV/AIDS is taking its heaviest toll, government is the largest formal-sector employer. As employers, governments can lead by example and be models of good practice in the fight against HIV/AIDS in and through the world of work.

The ILO’s own contribution focuses on analysing the human capacity and labour implications of the epidemic; giving policy guidance; mobilizing workplace action and tripartite engagement.

We have developed guidelines for workplace action and we are now putting them into action through projects in 30 countries, an extensive training and capacity-building programme, and the production of information and training tools for stakeholders. Thousands of workplace trainers

and peer educators are now spreading the message in countries such as Brazil, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon and Ukraine.

And our workplace action must take us to where people work in the formal and informal economy. From a tripartite starting point we must use all possible channels to reach working people.

As a cosponsor of UNAIDS, the ILO will continue to join with our partners in the UN system to scale up the global response to this most urgent of crises.
