



FOR INFORMATION

SEVENTEENTH ITEM ON THE AGENDA

Report of the Director-General**Fourth Supplementary Report:
Progress report on ILO influenza action****Prevention and preparedness in the
face of pandemic**

1. The spread of the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic continues to prompt worldwide concern. Besides the direct consequences on the health of the world's population, its propagation threatens to take a high toll on the world of work. The impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which by nature are less equipped to face unexpected events, may cause major disruptions to the economy and society, especially in developing countries. The Office, through its programmes on influenza prevention and pandemic preparedness, has prepared a set of tools to help constituents improve resilience, mitigate risk and lay the foundations for fast recovery. The ILO's influenza action programme is engaged in the fight against two strains of influenza: H5N1 (known as avian flu) and the more recent H1N1.
2. The lack of pandemic preparedness outside the health sector results in added problems for communities, such as reduced resource availability, diminished response capacity, and longer recovery time. A pandemic can have direct and indirect impacts on society. Direct impacts include illness, in some cases leading to death, and the probability that massive demands overwhelm an inadequately prepared health-care system. Indirect impacts include work absenteeism (involuntary or forced), reduced supplies, disruption of services and changes in the demand for certain products and services. These can be tackled through the adoption of a multi-sector pandemic prevention and preparedness approach.

Influenza action programme

3. Realizing the importance of the workplace as an entry point for pandemic prevention and preparedness, in 2006 the ILO launched efforts to combat the effects of influenza outbreaks on livelihoods and safety and health. The ILO was asked to get involved in influenza issues when it hosted the technical workshop "Avian flu and the workplace: Preparedness and response", which was organized by the ILO Task Force on Influenza and

Pandemic Preparedness (Task Force).¹ Since then, three projects have been implemented in South-East Asia with financial support from the UN Central Fund for Influenza Action (CFIA). The first project started in Thailand in 2007, followed by a programme in Indonesia in 2008. In 2009 a new project was launched to include Viet Nam, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Malaysia. Project activities are carried out by the ILO Offices in Bangkok and Jakarta, while the Crisis Response and Reconstruction Programme is responsible for coordination and resource mobilization. The latter also represents the ILO in the CFIA Steering Committee and the UN System Technical Working Group on Influenza, which ensures synergies and avoids overlaps among the different agencies.

4. The original goals of ILO action in this area were to reduce the risk of infection for workers and induce behavioural change and to support and assist livelihoods in SMEs most at risk of being seriously affected by a possible pandemic outbreak. In total, more than 2,000 participants – mainly SME managers, workers and farmers, trade union representatives, and provincial government officials – have attended ILO workshops and training of trainers' sessions in Thailand and Indonesia. Two training manuals were developed, translated into local languages and disseminated in the region.² The most relevant achievements include promoting collective good practices, providing advice to workers on ways to improve safety and health standards, and conducting awareness-raising and advocacy activities at enterprise level. A particularly fruitful cooperation has been established with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), which collaborates in organizing workshops for workers, and building the capacity of occupational safety and health committees in Thailand.
5. The work done in recent years has contributed to strengthening preparedness of workers, employers and their communities for a possible future pandemic. When in early 2009 the new influenza strain (H1N1) was identified and began spreading globally, the Office, through the Task Force, responded to the increased need for information and guidance in a number of ways. In particular, a communication campaign targeting the workplace was launched to raise awareness of the importance of collecting information on the risks of influenza, protecting the workforce through promotion of good hygiene practices and reduction of contact, preparing a contingency plan to sustain businesses, and supporting the most affected through dedicated policies and compensation schemes. On 29 May 2009 the ILO released an official *communiqué* mentioning that safety and health of workers was the primary concern of the Organization and its constituents. It joined the World Health Organization (WHO) in its invitation to avoid disproportional reactions that could cause social and economic distress, urging the international community to respect the latest official advice and act on the basis of scientific evidence with regard to trade and consumption of pork and derived food products. The importance of social dialogue to design and implement protective and recovery measures was emphasized. In addition, the Office recently broadened its range of tools with a manual providing specific guidelines against the H1N1 virus and a model business continuity plan to assist SMEs in their efforts

¹ Established in 2006, the ILO Task Force on Influenza and Pandemic Preparedness is an Office-wide thematic group which monitors the effects of influenza at the socio-economic level, and makes proposals for action.

² The manual *Protecting your health and business from avian influenza* promotes good hygiene and prevention practices amongst workers and farmers, while the manual *Protecting your employees and business from pandemic human influenza* enables employers and managers to enhance safety at the workplace through the application of easy, low-cost measures.

to develop contingency plans to protect their workers and businesses from the consequences of the pandemic.³

Challenges for specific sectors

6. The protraction and possible worsening of the current influenza pandemic will affect all countries and regions. A new influenza wave is expected to hit the world economy just as it starts to recover from the global economic and financial crisis. Changes in demand – as a result of the efforts to avoid crowded places – combined with absenteeism could create a downward spiral, becoming a further cause of economic and social disruption. Prevailing scenarios indicate that the impact will be most deeply felt in emerging and developing countries, which might not have the necessary means to respond. A special effort will be required to ensure continuity of essential services and help SMEs in the hardest hit sectors. Under the circumstances, discrimination and abuses in the workplace could go unnoticed. To avoid this, targeted measures should be taken ahead of time to protect workers' rights in line with international labour standards.

Business continuity planning

7. Prevention and preparedness are key factors in crisis response. The development of sector-specific contingency plans helps identify the risks that might affect a business in times of pandemic and of crisis more in general as well as devise strategies to reduce their impact and prepare for recovery. With adequate support, even smaller organizations can develop tailor-made plans. These would provide opportunities not only to cope with adverse events, but also to develop a stronger strategic approach that would improve overall business operations and processes. In fact, besides making a workplace safer, preventive measures can improve productivity by reducing work hazards and upgrading efficiency. Similarly, preparedness actions enhance an organization's ability to recognize its weaknesses and to address them effectively. Business continuity planning also has a positive rebound on local communities, mitigating the economic and social repercussions of the pandemic and improving local preparedness and capacity to recover.
8. The ILO can encourage the implementation of prevention and preparedness measures in the most vulnerable sectors. Its tripartite structure puts the Organization in a favourable position to promote social dialogue in the design of specific policies and actions at country level. A technical seminar on business continuity planning on 29–30 October will gather experts from those economic sectors which are expected to suffer most from the consequences of the pandemic, in a joint effort to devise solutions to their unique challenges.

³ *Protecting your health and business from animal influenza and Business continuity planning – Guidelines for small and medium-sized enterprises.*

The way forward

9. The ILO's influenza action programme has helped create a network of actors engaged in pandemic prevention and preparedness and has facilitated inter-ministerial cooperation in selected countries. The involvement of governments and workers' and employers' organizations in the design of dedicated training sessions and seminars ensures that the diverse interests of constituents are duly represented. A full set of tools has been developed and tested for broad dissemination through events at regional, national and local level. Wider geographical coverage of the programme is being planned for the months ahead.
10. So far, the programme has been funded by the CFIA and Norway. Due to the complex reality of the current pandemic, which is expected to last for two more years and will likely spread further, future action may require the ILO to mobilize additional resources. This would be a unique opportunity for the Office to support preparedness and resilience of workers and employers confronted with multiple crises, including the fears of an escalating pandemic.

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Submitted for information.