

# Avian & Human Influenza and Humanitarian Action

Geneva, 22-24 February 2006

## Report<sup>1</sup>

### Background

The IASC Working Group of 21-22 November 2005 agreed on “the need for a coordinated IASC approach to prepare for the pandemic, in support of the Office of the UN System Coordinator of Avian and Human Influenza”, noting that “the comparative advantage of the IASC mechanism in addressing preparedness for the pandemic is the involvement of key non-UN humanitarian agencies”. It also agreed on a two-step process, including a small technical consultation on scenario development and planning frameworks and a subsequent, broader meeting on humanitarian preparedness for avian & human influenza.<sup>2</sup> A technical consultation was held on 12 and 13 January 2006 in Boston.<sup>3</sup>

The overall objective of this meeting was to contribute to the development of a coordinated IASC approach to prepare for, and respond to, the humanitarian implications of avian & human influenza. The specific objectives of the meeting were to:

- (a) review the level of preparedness of IASC members for avian & human influenza, review constraints and share best practices;
- (b) review a draft guidance note for IASC Country Teams on humanitarian country-level contingency planning<sup>4</sup> and discuss what other tools are needed and/or available to help IASC Country Teams prepare for avian & human influenza;
- (c) identify, and make recommendations on, strategic issues to be addressed at the March IASC Working Group meeting; and
- (d) identify outstanding issues relating to humanitarian preparedness for avian & human influenza and review the modalities for addressing them.

### Key conclusions

- ▷ Humanitarian agencies recognize that national authorities have the primary responsibility for addressing avian & human influenza.

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<sup>1</sup> The agenda, list of participants, background and other documents distributed at the meeting can be found at

<http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/calendar/calendar/details.asp?meetID=848&publish=7>

<sup>2</sup> It is understood that avian & human influenza (H5N1) are of concern to humanitarian actors only in so far as they can have serious humanitarian implications. Normal seasonal human influenza is therefore not considered here.

<sup>3</sup> The agenda, background documents and report of the meeting can be found at

<http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/iasc/content/calendar/calendar/details.asp?meetID=862&publish=7>

<sup>4</sup> Humanitarian Preparedness for Avian & Human Influenza: Guidance for Country-Level Contingency Planning.

- ▷ Humanitarian agencies need to take urgent, substantial and sustained measures to tackle the humanitarian implications of the current avian influenza epizootic and to prepare for a potential human influenza pandemic.
- ▷ Not all agencies will be involved in dealing with avian influenza and its impact on livelihoods; many agencies will have a role in helping the humanitarian response for containment; all agencies need to plan for a pandemic.
- ▷ The NGO sector's continued contribution will be important in minimising any potential increase in the humanitarian caseload.
- ▷ The measures to be taken by humanitarian agencies include:
  - 1) supporting national authorities and others, as appropriate, in tackling the humanitarian implications of the current avian influenza epizootic;
  - 2) raising public awareness of avian & human influenza and of measures to mitigate its impact (e.g. hygiene education and communication for behavioural change);
  - 3) monitoring and reporting on animal or human cases amongst their populations of concern (i.e. surveillance);
  - 4) planning for UNSIC's Models Two<sup>5</sup> and Three<sup>6</sup> by developing preparedness plans, in close coordination with the government and other actors;
  - 5) preparing for UNSIC's Models Two and Three by i.a. developing stand-by arrangements, making inventories of available resources, forging partnerships with a broad range of actors, testing and updating the contingency plan;
  - 6) advocating for appropriate policies, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups;
  - 7) in countries with a significant humanitarian caseload, building local resilience to deal with UNSIC's Models Two and Three at all levels as part of a multi-hazard risk management framework.
- ▷ Action by humanitarian actors needs to be taken at the country, regional, and global level, as well as by individual agencies, within agreed planning parameters and coordination frameworks, as appropriate, so that due account is taken of all relevant ongoing initiatives, including national planning and preparedness programmes.
- ▷ In order for these measures to be taken with the appropriate speed, additional human and financial resources are required.
- ▷ The primary responsibility of humanitarian agencies is to care for the existing humanitarian caseload. Humanitarian agencies may however be called upon to assist other populations.
- ▷ Consistency in communication efforts is crucial.

### Main issues discussed

**Impact of the Epizootic on Livelihoods and Vulnerability Levels:** Participants concurred that the impact of the epizootic on livelihoods in low-income countries, particularly in Africa, and the implications of this for humanitarian action, have been underestimated. The availability of compensation for culled poultry is a critical issue; FAO is currently developing guidelines in this respect. The gender implications of livelihood losses were also highlighted, and need to be factored into all planning and programming on this issue. The epizootic will remain of great concern including in the event of a pandemic, as it will continue to lead to livelihood losses and could lead

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<sup>5</sup> Slow-onset Phase 4-5 (pandemic alert) with moderate and localised impact.

<sup>6</sup> Rapid-onset escalation to Phase 6 (pandemic) with widespread impact.

to a further mutation of the virus. There was consensus that the livelihood implications of the epizootic warrant further investigation. FAO agreed to refine the draft paper on this subject that it prepared for the meeting, and several agencies including IOM, ILO, and Oxfam offered their support. It is understood that the finalised paper will be available in May 2006.

**Role of Humanitarian Agencies with Regard to Avian & Human Influenza:** There was general agreement that the livelihood implications of the epizootic are of concern to many humanitarian agencies in settings where outbreaks result in significant livelihood and nutritional losses. While recognizing that continuing control of avian influenza led by FAO, OIE, and the governments of affected countries in partnership with civil society organizations is key to prevent and/or slow the further spread and mutation of the H5N1 virus, participants concurred that humanitarian agencies should not be directly involved in compensation or culling. The humanitarian community has an important role to play in supporting national authorities and others in dealing with the humanitarian implications of the current avian influenza epizootic, as appropriate; raising public awareness of avian & human influenza and of measures to mitigate its impact (e.g. hygiene education and communication for behavioural change); monitoring and reporting on animal or human cases amongst their populations of concern (surveillance); planning and preparing for UNSIC's Models Two and Three; advocating for appropriate policies, particularly in relation to vulnerable groups, including those of direct concern to humanitarian actors; and – in countries with a significant humanitarian caseload – building local resilience to deal with UNSIC's Models Two and Three at all levels as part of a multi-hazard risk management framework. While the primary responsibility of humanitarian agencies is to care for the populations they are currently serving, agencies may be called upon to assist other populations in addition to their usual beneficiaries.

**Pandemic Preparedness:** The urgency of preparing for a pandemic was a central theme of the meeting. There was general consensus that establishing a timeframe for humanitarian preparedness was unrealistic. The UN however was called upon to define a timeframe for its own preparedness plans, as that would be a useful indicator for non-UN IASC actors. Given that a wealth of information and guidance exists on business continuity planning and preparedness, humanitarian actors called for the development of a simple package of planning tools. In this context, WHO is developing guidelines on pandemic influenza preparedness and mitigation for displaced and refugee populations. Participants stressed that preparedness measures are extremely expensive, especially as concerns information technology systems. A crucial component of preparedness is staff training, which at the field level could be conducted in a coordinated manner.

**Coordination Framework:** There was widespread recognition of the mutual value to humanitarian and other actors of operating within an agreed coordination and planning framework that takes account of ongoing initiatives, including national planning and preparedness efforts. There was wide support for the proposal that the IASC formally call upon agencies to work together on the issues related to avian & human influenza, given that the usual, stovepiped response mode of humanitarian and development actors is particularly unhelpful in the face of the avian & human influenza threat. Ideally, mechanisms and procedures should be established to respond collectively, in a flexible manner: this may entail pooling human, financial, material,

and logistical resources whenever possible. The IASC was called upon to devise a humanitarian action plan for avian & human influenza, clearly spelling out roles and responsibilities, and to set up a platform for information sharing. It was also proposed that the IASC request IASC Country Teams to fully include and engage with local and international NGOs and others on this issue.

**Building Local Capacity:** The importance of building the capacity of local actors at the national and community level to deal with UNSIC's Models Two and Three was underscored. In order for these efforts to be sustainable, they should be mainstreamed into programmes aimed at building local resilience to a wide range of hazards. It was agreed that further reflection was required to identify concrete ways of doing so.

**Communication:** Participants concurred that humanitarian agencies have a major role to play in raising public awareness of avian & human influenza and of measures to mitigate its impact (e.g. hygiene education and communication for behavioural change). The urgent need for a short, clear, and unified list of behavioural objectives was stressed. It is understood that such a list will be produced by the WHO/FAO/UNICEF working group on Communications, which is scheduled to start its work shortly. The crucial importance of consistency in communication efforts was repeatedly underlined. Humanitarian actors have a critical role to play in disseminating messages that allow vulnerable groups to make informed decisions, given issues of trust and reliability of official sources in some settings. It was noted that communities should be seen as partners in communication efforts, rather than merely as recipients of information. Participants were also invited to consider the communications infrastructure required to disseminate messages.

**Partnerships:** The need to develop partnerships with a broad range of actors, including the private sector, was flagged. Humanitarian actors need to overcome their reluctance to deal with some of these actors and develop partnerships with them, if possible not as individual agencies but collectively.

**Dedicated Resources:** While humanitarian agencies intend as much as possible to mainstream their efforts vis-à-vis avian & human influenza into their existing programmes, dedicated human, technical and financial resources will be required to enhance their engagement at both the field and headquarters level. Different modalities for obtaining additional financial resources were discussed, including using agencies' contingency reserves, issuing a joint appeal, and establishing a global fund that could be accessed quickly and easily. Some US-based NGOs stated that they have already appealed to the US Government for funding. Participants asked for an update on the allocation of the funds pledged at the Beijing conference of January 2006, and called for greater transparency on this matter. According to UNSIC, these funds have been allocated to Asian countries in the form of World Bank soft loans for their national pandemic preparedness planning, as well as to WHO and FAO. Funds pledged to WHO are designated to be used by WHO to provide technical assistance to countries in their pandemic preparedness planning.

#### Issues requiring further reflection

The following issues were identified as requiring further reflection:

**Minimum Level of Preparedness:** Many humanitarian entities have indicated the importance of clear guidance on critical measures that need to be taken, particularly at the field level, so that all essential steps, in a given context, are undertaken in a manner, and to a level of quality assurance, that is generally deemed satisfactory. It is understood that UNSIC is working on such a guidance note that will provide a good basis for subsequent review by humanitarian actors, if deemed necessary, taking into account humanitarian-specific concerns.

**Urban-based Humanitarian Action:** Given the possibility that there will be a demand for assistance by humanitarian actors in urban settings, participants called for further examination of this issue as a contribution to an overall humanitarian guidance package.

**Standards of Care:** Participants requested that WHO, in collaboration with relevant partners, prepare succinct and clear guidelines on the provision of care by health and other personnel, both in the home and at the community level, so that necessary support can be provided in a safe manner.

**Societal Coping Mechanisms:** A short discussion on the likely behavior of different societies in the face of such an extraordinary event as a severe pandemic resulted in a recommendation that this issue needed further examination so that humanitarian and other actors in the field could have better informed insights on this issue.

**Ethics:** A short discussion on ethical considerations that, ideally, should inform planning and subsequent activities, underlined the importance of this topic and the need for further elaboration and consultation on a short policy paper.

**Humanitarian Code:** A short discussion as to whether the humanitarian community needs to consider the formulation of a Code concerning the responsibility of humanitarian actors, at the organizational and individual level, in the event of a pandemic confirmed the need for collective action in the formulation of such a Code taking into account existing international treaties and protocols.

**Access Protocol:** A short discussion on the desirability and feasibility of a pandemic-specific “access protocol” resulted in a recommendation that this needed further reflection and clarification so that appropriate steps are taken, at the national level, as deemed necessary in the event of a pandemic.

**Humanitarian Advocacy Agenda:** Closely related to the issue of communication is the need for a clear advocacy agenda, at the global, regional and national level in order to mobilize, and support action, on issues of concern to humanitarian actors including, but not only, in relation to vulnerable issues/groups. It is proposed that an agenda is defined and reviewed by a cross-section of colleagues from the humanitarian arena before distribution to IASC members.