

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
PRINCIPALS MEETING

Background document n.7

Responding to threats of avian and pandemic influenza

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The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Working Group of 21-22 November 2005 agreed on “the need for a coordinated IASC approach to prepare for the pandemic”, noting that “the comparative advantage of the IASC mechanism in addressing the preparedness for the pandemic is the involvement of key non-UN humanitarian agencies”. It also agreed to a two-step process, including a brief technical consultation on scenario development and planning frameworks and a subsequent, broader meeting on humanitarian preparedness for avian and human influenza. At the technical consultation (12-13 January 2006) and the larger workshop (22-24 February 2006), IASC members recognized the urgent needs vulnerable communities face through the loss of their poultry¹. They also emphasized the potential needs of those who would lack access to essential services if a pandemic were to emerge.

The IASC addressed the challenges of pandemic preparedness at Working Group level in March 2006². The Working Group concluded that there is a major role for both voluntary sector and UN system humanitarian agencies in providing support. Members agreed that (i) those IASC members with avian influenza planning and preparedness responsibilities should share and review practical steps for humanitarian response preparedness in order to promote harmonization of contingency plans, and that (ii) the IASC Working Group will be periodically updated by UNSIC and other relevant actors. The Group also agreed that IASC Principals should encourage humanitarian actors to take appropriate planning and preparedness action in responding to the humanitarian implications of the H5N1 virus on animal and human health.

¹ Meeting on Avian & Human Influenza and Humanitarian Action, Geneva, 22-24 February 2006

² IASC Working Group, March 2006

Background

1. **The avian influenza situation is changing dramatically.** Within the last 12 weeks, 30 countries have reported the H5N1 virus in poultry populations and wild birds. This is twice the number of countries and territories affected by the virus during the preceding two and a half years. Avian influenza is no longer perceived as just an East Asian problem – the virus has spread rapidly across Asia, into Europe, the Middle East and now Africa. Substantial economic costs have been incurred as a result of the H5N1 avian influenza epizootic, particularly among poorer communities in developing countries.
2. **It seems inevitable that the world will face another influenza pandemic at some stage: it is by no means certain that it will be caused by a mutation of H5N1.** SARS experience suggests that whatever the human costs, the next human influenza pandemic will have far-reaching social and economic consequences. This realization has led Governments, business leaders and community-based organizations to focus on getting ready for the next pandemic despite the widespread uncertainties as to whether and when it will occur. They have invested in action to prevent the spread of H5N1 avian influenza, and to limit human exposure to this virus; in the surveillance of populations for prompt detection of possible sustained inter-human transmission of a highly pathogenic influenza virus; in a WHO-led strategy for rapid and effective containment of the virus; and (should containment fail) in planning for effective action to limit the pandemic's human, economic and societal impact.
3. **Decision makers in governments, corporations and international bodies ask public health experts for their best available assessments of the risk of a pandemic and of its potential consequences.** Neither assessment is easy to make with any precision: the experts cannot provide precise information on the potential timing, location and scale of human suffering that a pandemic would bring. Such uncertainty is hard to communicate – either to decision makers, or to the general public, despite the best efforts of investigative journalists. Those who receive the information need to be in a position to consider its implications for their own professional and personal lives. They benefit from knowing what others are doing. And they usually value the chance to debate what might happen during a pandemic with others who work in different economic sectors – ideally through a simulation.
4. **The specialist international agencies (FAO, World Organization for Animal Health, WHO and UNICEF) have agreed key messages - on pandemic risk, the threats it might bring and means to reduce these threats.** For an individual member of the public, the risk to human health as a result of avian influenza is currently very low indeed unless s/he is exposed to significant levels of a highly pathogenic influenza virus. In general, people would do best to require that their governments, and others responsible for threat prevention, take pandemic risk seriously and respond to it properly. There is no epidemiological justification for the marked reductions in poultry consumption reported from many countries affected by avian influenza.
5. **However, getting prepared for a pandemic is a tough challenge for the governments of poorer countries.** In December 2005, the World Bank and specialized UN agencies finalized estimates of financing needs – and gaps – for influenza action over a three year period. This work focused on the requirements of national governments, so that they would be in a position to implement integrated programmes responding to influenza threats; of regional bodies, so that they can implement critical actions in support of country efforts; and of the specialist international agencies (FAO, OIE and WHO) to address critical inter-

country issues. **The estimated total costs of country actions were estimated at \$1.2 billion, with several hundred thousand more needed by regional and global institutions.**

International Pledging Conference, Beijing, January 2006

6. **At the International Pledging Conference in Beijing, January 2006, donor nations agreed on a framework through which countries would be able to secure financial support for their influenza programmes.** The underlying principle is that countries own national programmes and control the way in which resources made available for these programmes are used. Proposals for external assistance to national plans and programmes are subject to proper appraisal before they are funded. Donors agreed that if these basic conditions could be fulfilled, they would be prepared to pledge up to \$1.9 billion of assistance over the succeeding 3 years: \$1 billion in grants and \$0.9 billion in loans (mixed IDA and IBRD). Donor funds pledged for countries were primarily destined for Asia. Any mechanisms for moving additional resources – rapidly – to poor countries would need to be designed jointly by the countries, the World Bank and the UN if they are to prove attractive to the donor community.
7. **It was envisaged that technical assistance received by countries via international organizations would reflect principles discussed in Beijing.** As well as being predictable and of high quality, and provided in a timely fashion, the technical assistance should respond to country requirements, and harmonize technical support provided through a range of national and external channels. Systems for managing external technical assistance should be capable of being reviewed both by the countries receiving the assistance and to donors who fund it.
8. **In practice, funds for the provision of technical assistance from within the UN system, pledged in Beijing, were largely earmarked for the lead agencies FAO and WHO.** Funds were also committed to ASEAN, OiE and UNICEF. There was minimal financial support pledged to other UN system funds and programmes (including UNDP) or to international NGOs and the Red Cross movement.

National and Regional Experiences

9. **In the last few months many nations have developed and implemented plans to control the avian influenza epizootic and prepare for a human pandemic.** Experiences in five Asian nations³ underscore (a) the importance of strong political leadership for influenza action, in pursuit of (b) a strategy that reflects both scientific evidence and local context, drawing on (c) in-country surge capacity that is trained and able to be deployed rapidly (both to contain disease and to care for the needs of affected populations), using (d) pre-negotiated operating procedures that bring together different branches of government with stakeholders outside government, engaging (e) local communities to the full, with a culture of regular and accurate information dissemination to all interested parties, making (f) necessary financial resources available when needed, ensuring (g) regular monitoring and reporting of progress, and backing implementation with (h) operational plans that are rehearsed, reviewed and maintained. These characteristics of national responses seem to benefit if different stakeholders work together within (i) well-maintained action networks, held together through (ii) loose, but strong, agreements and alliances that involve public, private and voluntary sectors, the media and the security forces, are reinforced by (iii) failsafe and accessible

³ David Nabarro's visit to South Asia April 3rd to 12th 2006

logistic and communications systems (or common services), and are supported by (iv) predictable and trusted technical assistance from an international community whose different parts work in synergy with each other.

Additional Resource Requirements

- 10. Many countries have already sought technical assistance from the international community as they take on these new and unfamiliar tasks and seek help with accessing the resources they need.** Unfortunately the January 2006 Beijing conference yielded only limited financial pledges for international technical assistance agencies, way lower than what was requested. Country needs have increased since January 2006 (so the unfunded gap has grown): the need was made evident at a meeting of senior agriculture and health officials from African countries in Gabon, March 20th 2006. In sum, although some bilateral donors have been particularly generous with their assistance, many of the contributions to influenza action by development and humanitarian agencies, in both the voluntary and public sectors, have depended on their being able to re-programme existing resources. Some have made generous allocations for influenza work by allocating resources from reserves.
- 11. Few poor countries have yet been able to access financial resources pledged in Beijing.** The UN Secretary General issued a public statement on March 29th 2006, requesting donors to consider pledging more resources that could be accessed by countries. He had recognized some of the difficulties faced by countries in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa in obtaining financial assistance for influenza action. As a follow up to the Secretary General's plea, the UN system and the World Bank are working on an extended and flexible **funding mechanism**. There will be no interference either with the Beijing framework or with existing flows of money to key operational agencies. The UN system influenza coordinator will discuss proposals with World Bank and with potential donors 26 April
- 12. UN systems agencies are also working with the World Bank to establish the evolving technical assistance needs of countries as they both initiate and maintain control of avian influenza and prepare for human infections.** UN systems agencies and the World Bank are now considering the extent to which the technical assistance required can be provided by neighboring countries, by existing regional networks, through NGO or private sector channels or (where appropriate) through UN system specialized agencies, funds and programmes. Agency representatives are assessing specific needs for assistance in different technical areas and identifying the particular contributions that can only be made by different elements of the UN system, working together (see table 2). The financial requirements associated with this technical assistance are being assessed, and arrangements for managing these finances are being agreed (enabling agencies to be accountable for their individual contributions and to benefit from the advantages of joint working, to be subject to review both by recipient countries and donors and to advocate for the adequate financing of international technical support). This provides for parallel funding tracks, i.e. bilateral funding to individual organizations and a pooled fund accessible to all who have a contribution to make within the context of a pre-agreed resource allocation arrangement. The funding for this plan would be kept distinct from funding designated for countries: it would be in the regional and global category within the Beijing Financing Framework.

The Inter Agency Standing Committee

13. **The full engagement of IASC members is critical:** to define the technical (and operational) assistance that they can offer especially in settings where government implementation capacity is limited, to propose ways in which this contribution can be dovetailed with the interests and actions of respective national institutions and authorities, and to establish the resources needed to do this. All constituencies represented in the IASC have a key contribution to make – the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the broad groupings of international NGOs, the IOM and UN system funds and programmes. All have been engaged in influenza work for many months now, and all have analyzed the issues faced by them and those with whom they work. All are in a position to make an extremely important contribution to the overall national and international response, particularly in fragile settings.
14. **The strong involvement of IASC members** in the work being undertaken by the World Bank and UN to develop an overall plan for international technical and operational assistance will be critical during the next few weeks, in the run up to the early June 2006 Vienna Senior Officials Meeting on avian and pandemic influenza. This joint working will increase the likelihood that IASC members' contributions will be experience-based, financially sound, likely to be well implemented and capable of being monitored. It should also increase the potential for raising donor resources to cover the cost of the contributions as joint working is the key to mobilizing significant resources. It is evident that donors are wary of responding to piecemeal requests from individual bodies – whether NGO, Red Cross or UN – for actions which are bound to be more effective if they are planned and implemented in synergy.
15. **During the IASC Principals' meeting, members will** be asked about the extent they would wish to operate within a joint approach to the provision of technical and operational assistance for influenza action. Are they also prepared to work within a joint mechanism for mobilizing resources – as summarized within this paper? Do they consider that the complexity of joint working yields valuable benefits in terms of effective, networked and synergized operations?

Table 1: UN Systems Bodies : Funds requested, pledged and received for influenza action following the International Pledging Conference in Beijing January 2006 (\$ millions): Status as at end March 2006

Agency, Fund, Programme	Request For 05 - 06	Pledge	Agreements Signed 01/04/06
FAO	*131.0	65	35
WHO	**138.0	54	****26
UNDP	9.5	0	0
UNICEF	9.0	?	*** (49)
WFP	7.0	0	0
OCHA	4.2	0	0
UN Coordination (UNSIC)	2.4	1	1

* Global and Regional activities

** 2 years

**** Actual receipts \$7 million

*** Earmarked grant for communication and supplies at country level

Table 2: Areas in which countries seek technical assistance for tackling avian and human influenza threats, and indication of the possible lead agencies within the UN system for coordinating this assistance

Area of Technical Support	Possible Lead Agency
Animal Health, Livestock Sector Reform and Bio-security	FAO (with OiE)
Human Health and Containment (lead WHO)	WHO
Governance issues: national (in-country) coordination, engagement of private sector and civil society, impact on economic systems, gender dimensions, impact on poverty	UNDP UNICEF (Child aspects) ICAO (Air Travel) UN Economic Commissions (Close working with World Bank and IMF)
Risk communication, societal mobilization, behaviour change support, information campaigns child/related issues in pandemic planning	UNICEF UNWTO (Tourism)
Continuity of essential services under pandemic conditions, planning for relief and humanitarian actions	OCHA WFP (Vulnerability assessments)
Logistics support and common services	WFP JLC

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