

**Technical Consultation for Humanitarian Agencies
on Scenario Development and Business Continuity Planning
for an Influenza Pandemic**

Boston, 12-13 January 2006

Summary

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”, and noted 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 formula that included (a) a small Technical Consultation for scenario development and (b) a subsequent, broader – and more representational – meeting on issues relating to humanitarian preparedness.

On 12 and 13 January 2006 a technical consultation for humanitarian agencies on scenario development and business continuity planning for an influenza pandemic was held at the Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, Boston, with the participation of various NGOs, UN humanitarian agencies and the IFRC, as well as resource persons from Tufts University, CDC, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and the private sector (see agenda, list of participants, and experts’ presentations at http://nutrition.tufts.edu/research/famine/publications/avian_flu.html). The purpose of the consultation was to (a) benefit from the experience of the private sector and influenza experts in developing scenarios for a pandemic and planning for business continuity; and (b) define common scenarios and planning assumptions of relevance to humanitarian actors.

Pandemic scenarios

It was noted that a pandemic would differ sharply from other disasters in so far as it would not be a phenomenon localized in time and space. By contrast, a pandemic will affect everyone, everywhere, it will last for a lengthy period, generate a multitude of rational and irrational reactions, and it has the potential to wreak unprecedented damage on every society’s economic, social, and governance systems. While the overwhelming majority of the world’s population is bound to survive a pandemic, it is anticipated that millions will die. It is also likely that a post-pandemic world will be radically different to the situation that existed prior to the pandemic. This is a subject-area that needs further research.

The threat of a pandemic has, in general, been met with two diametrically opposing attitudes, namely catastrophism or denial. Both tend to have a paralyzing effect. Thus, contingency planners and decision-makers need to pursue a sober assessment of the likely implications of a pandemic and to plan and prepare accordingly. Given that there are a number of critical unknowns surrounding a pandemic that threatens to have devastating consequences for individuals and societies, policy and decision-makers

are confronted with a number of difficult choices including, but not only, in terms of allocating resources for planning, preparedness, and mitigation activities in the current pre-pandemic Phase 3 Alert stage. Delaying or not taking appropriate and timely action in the pre-pandemic stage will exacerbate the impact of the pandemic.

Other points raised include:

- The consequences of a pandemic could range from a recession-like disruption of the global economy to multi-system failures. All existing systems are likely to be overwhelmed. With trade and other interactions between states interrupted, societies and communities will be reliant, primarily, on their own resources.
- Today's economy is truly global and interdependent; a pandemic will have significant ramifications everywhere with knock-on effects for livelihoods and household coping mechanisms.
- Nowadays, labour, supplies, and production processes tend to be managed within a just-in-time management system; this greatly limits flexibility and ability to deal with disruptions or slow-downs.
- Given variable capacities for veterinary surveillance & early warning systems in many countries of the world, and also limited compensation mechanisms for culling, many bird flu outbreaks have only been officially announced with delays; hence bird flu cases are not reliable early warning indicators.
- Telecommunications infrastructure will be overloaded, fragile, and progressively degraded if not available.
- Once a pandemic is over, (and, to a lesser degree, in-between pandemic waves), supply chains will take a long time to be re-established.

Implications for Humanitarian Action

While some agencies have already taken a number of steps to prepare for a pandemic, the humanitarian community has, in general, been slow to grasp the potential implications of such a threat for humanitarian action. These are two-fold: in line with other service providers and the private sector, humanitarian agencies will be affected in their capacity to provide help, owing to absenteeism (due to death, illness, caring for sick relatives or out-of-school children), disruptions in supply chains, and restrictions on movements. As relief providers, humanitarian agencies will most likely face an increase in demand for humanitarian action.

Humanitarian agencies have particular vulnerabilities to a pandemic in so far as they (a) rely on voluntary donations which will significantly decrease or disappear; (b) manage staff and supplies according to a just-in-time management system and with limited surge capacity; (c) have a high proportion of expatriates in management functions, (d) invest relatively little in building indigenous and local capacities including preparedness systems; and (e) are physically decentralized but have a centralized management and decision-making system.

Preparing for a pandemic will therefore require rethinking the way humanitarian organizations operate and are managed. In effect, disruptions in the movement of goods and people will mean that **the response effort will have to focus on the local, community level**, with minimal external inputs and support. Agencies would therefore be well advised to start increasing reliance on indigenous resources

and capacity already now, or at least to start planning for it. Furthermore, the disruption in communications will inevitably lead to a **decentralization of decision-making**. Agencies should therefore start decentralizing already now, or at least plan for it. In both cases, the option for humanitarian agencies is not whether or not to rely on local resources or decentralize, but rather whether to plan for it or be forced into it.

Humanitarian agencies were encouraged to reflect on the roles they ought to play in the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases, with the understanding that such roles will differ from one phase to the other. In the pre-pandemic phase, humanitarian agencies have a key role to play in (a) raising public awareness of the threat and promoting basic precautionary messages, and (b) building local resilience, strengthening community coping mechanisms, and enhancing local self-sufficiency. Programmes to that effect should be developed as a matter of priority.

During the pandemic, the operational capacity of humanitarian agencies is likely to be significantly affected by absenteeism, disruptions in supply chains and communication facilities, and restrictions to movement. Agencies should therefore carefully consider how to make the best use of their strengths, so as to add the value in a extra-ordinary situation. This may require a **qualitative shift from an operational to an advisory role**. Humanitarian agencies for instance might focus on providing normative and technical advice to governments and communities in their own areas of expertise (e.g. setting standards of care, advising on food distributions, water & sanitation, etc.), managing information (i.e. collecting and disseminating information at the local, national, and international levels), raising public awareness of the threat and of how to mitigate its impact, advocating for vulnerable groups, mobilizing and coordinating human, material, and financial resources, and providing good offices. In particular, in countries where governance systems are weak or unaccountable, the population will distrust the authorities, and humanitarian agencies will have a key role to play in providing reliable information that is accessible to the public. Agencies must therefore be prepared and able to do so in a credible, accurate, timely, and professional manner in order to facilitate informed decision-making and to maintain credibility.

In the post-pandemic recovery phase there will be significant pent-up demand for humanitarian assistance, and humanitarian agencies are likely to play a major role as relief providers.

Preparedness

Preparedness initiatives that will help mitigate the effects of a pandemic – including in particular measures geared to strengthening the survival mechanisms of vulnerable groups – and humanitarian “business continuity” plans, were deemed to be critical. Preparedness efforts need to be undertaken (a) at the field level, (b) by each humanitarian agency, and (c) at the level of the humanitarian community as a whole. The need to invest in community preparedness, and the key role that NGOs and civil society play in this respect, were underscored.

Securing institutional buy-in for preparedness within individual humanitarian agencies and the broader humanitarian community will be a challenge. Effective leadership will play a critical role. Heeding the “moral imperative” to prepare will

also be a factor. A strong case can also be made for strengthening multi-hazard preparedness capabilities.

Currently, an important window of opportunity exists, as the level of awareness of the threat is high. It is unclear however how long this window will remain open as the current level of awareness/concern may not be sustained if the pandemic alert phase remains stable for a lengthy period.

Humanitarian agencies need to plan for three distinct phases: pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic, and they should start planning for each of them (including the post-pandemic phase) as soon as possible. A thorough analysis of the likely economic, social, and governance implications of a pandemic should be conducted before starting the development of a preparedness plan. The high number of unknowns is a major challenge in this respect and needs to be factored in to the overall strategy. It also highlights the need for periodic review of available plans and need to maintain minimum preparedness standards.

A core objective of humanitarian preparedness plans is the maintenance of support for humanitarian caseload(s) and to maintain the ability to serve affected populations. Some key preparedness planning principles that were reviewed included:

- expect the worst
- think primitive
- plan simple solutions
- plan for what *you* can control
- communications systems are essential

Preparing for a pandemic is qualitatively different from preparing for any other type of upheaval, whether conflict-driven, associated with natural hazards, or famine-related. Existing contingency plans are of limited use, as they assume that the disaster is localized in time and space. Also, they rely heavily on bringing external human and material resources into the disaster area, which will not be possible in case of a pandemic. At the same time, the pandemic preparedness plans that have been developed by governments, local authorities and private businesses can provide useful insights. A good source for such plans and other materials is the site www.fluwikie.com.

Preparedness plans should be developed in a participatory manner, and a process should be established to test and maintain the plans once they are drafted. Preparedness measures should be sustainable, as a pandemic may not happen in the short term. It might be difficult to maintain interest in and focus on preparedness in the longer term.

Agencies were advised to stockpile not only goods but also labor, as no surge capacity will be available at the height of a pandemic. They should also cross-train staff, so that they can perform the tasks of those who will not report to work. Maintaining communications infrastructure and systems will be vital; agencies should therefore identify essential communications needs, and the resilient networks that are most appropriate to these needs. Ethical issues should be addressed openly. Agencies should define minimum staff security standards, as well as criteria for identifying

trigger points for operationalizing preparedness plans, and for re-prioritizing programs after the onset of a pandemic. Agencies were also encouraged to start developing partnerships with non-traditional actors (e.g. the private sector, the military).

The preparedness plans of humanitarian organizations should be closely coordinated with those developed by national governments. In many settings, preparing for a pandemic is unlikely to be a high priority. It is, therefore, important that pandemic planning is broached within the broader context of disaster management planning. Humanitarian agencies should forcefully advocate for local communities to be consulted and involved in the preparation of national preparedness plans.

Response

During a pandemic, humanitarian agencies will have to scale down in some respects, and scale up in others. Headquarters activities will most likely grind to a halt, whereas field activities will intensify. A constant reprioritization of programs will be required as circumstances evolve. “Assistance by remote” (as in Chechnya) is likely to grow. One of the challenges facing humanitarian agencies will be to ensure impartiality in the delivery of services; in order to do so, they will have to assess needs, which however is bound to be very difficult in a context of restrictions to movement. Providing assistance to both rural and urban populations will also be a major challenge. At the global level, humanitarian agencies will most likely have a crucial role to play in promoting impartiality and proportionality in response allocations among countries and regions.

Concluding Comment

This summary does not attempt to capture all of the useful insights that emerged in the course of an interesting and inspirational two days that also provided a lot of sobering reflections. The Boston consultation will also be used to enhance existing planning tools including Guidance Note for pandemic contingency planning and preparedness.