

INTER-AGENCY STANDING COMMITTEE
63RD WORKING GROUP MEETING

**Responding to the Avian Influenza Epidemic
and Humanitarian Preparedness
for Pandemic Influenza:
Need for IASC Engagement**

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I Summary

An influenza pandemic will materialize at some time. Several of the preconditions for a pandemic now exist. The H5N1 virus is widespread in the poultry of several countries and among migratory birds. It could well be the source of the next pandemic virus. When it does appear the pandemic will have a direct impact on human health. Health care systems and other basic services will be overwhelmed, at least in the initial stages. There could well be substantial indirect effects of the pandemic on travel and trade, utilities and basic services for populations that are not directly affected. The location, scale and overall impact of the next pandemic cannot be predicted until the virus appears and its characteristics are understood. Its evolution will depend on the success of containment efforts. Preparedness must be undertaken now, within the current pre-Pandemic phase. This is the time to build effective international co-operation, and the humanitarian community is at the centre of this cooperation. Good preparation reduces panic and paralysis and improves the predictability and pattern of pandemic response. Several countries, WHO, FAO, OIE and the World Bank told a meeting in Geneva between November 7th and 9th that they are scaling up efforts to tackle avian influenza and are getting prepared for a pandemic. It is now time for humanitarian agencies to establish their contribution.

II Introduction

There is a scientific and political consensus that there is a threat of a global influenza pandemic that would have massive repercussions for people and the global economy. It could occur at any time. It is made more likely by the major epidemic of avian influenza now affecting the well being of small scale farmers and poultry producers in Asia. It is extending into Europe and threatening the Middle East and Africa. Such a

pandemic will also pose unprecedented challenges to the humanitarian community – affecting their ability to conduct their usual operations and bringing with it new and more intense humanitarian ramifications.

The overall global strategy is two-fold, namely

1. to focus on controlling and containing the spread of H5N1 in fowl and thus **preventing**, or at least delaying, the onset of a pandemic, and
2. developing and/or beefing up **preparedness** measures for a potential Pandemic.¹

Within the United Nations system it is well understood that FAO, in close collaboration with OIE, agricultural ministries and other such entities, is the UN system lead supporter of efforts to monitor and contain avian flu. Similarly, WHO and its health partners, are to the fore in mobilizing action to prepare for a potential pandemic and the threat this represents for the health of millions. But many other national and international organizations have key roles both in supporting national authorities and responding to people's potential needs in relation to the animal disease and to the threat of a human pandemic. The Inter-Action constituency of NGOs, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, UNICEF, UNDP, WFP and OCHA are already actively engaged. At the end of September 2005 the Secretary General appointed a UN System Influenza Coordinator to bring the UN system together and assist with ensuring that communities and countries receive optimal support.

The coordination work programme concentrates on tracking of actions being undertaken by a variety of different agencies and bodies in the international community, with their differing focus on technical, institutional and political issues at global, regional and country levels. When the actions are seen to overlap, leave gaps or become unbalanced, the coordinator stimulates corrective actions by concerned agencies (within and outside the UN system) and monitors their evolution. The coordinator also (a) provides specific services: to support UN Resident Coordinators, Humanitarian Coordinators and SRSGs working within countries, (b) ensures collaborative working by the assistance agencies at global and regional levels (through the Influenza Technical Working Group), and (c) ensures that UN system agency heads are regularly briefed on current issues so that they, in turn, are best able to steer the coordination effort. They do this through a specially constituted Steering Committee. The coordinator interacts closely with a range of intergovernmental coordination and governance processes, such as the International Partnership on Avian and Pandemic Influenza, and inter-agency processes like the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The Coordinator is being asked to prepare joint interagency funding proposals

¹ There is a wealth of information on different websites that explain the basics about avian flu as well as planning and programming initiatives. FAO and OIE websites deals with bird-flu and containment issues. The WHO website, that is constantly updated, also has a variety of planning tools including, for example, "Avian influenza: assessing the pandemic threat", "WHO global influenza preparedness plan", "Responding to the avian influenza pandemic threat", and the "WHO checklist for influenza pandemic preparedness planning".

At present the coordination programme has six elements

1. *country level*: tracking the influenza situation, the current response to animal disease and the pandemic threat, the degree to which an integrated national plan has been prepared and is being implemented, and the extent to which support provided by governments, private entities, non-governmental groups and financiers is coordinated in-country;
2. *at regional and global levels*: tracking the ways in which critical policy issues are being addressed – specifically (i) the availability of stocks of antiviral medicines, plans for their distribution in the event of need: (ii) information flows and triggering changes in levels (iii) vaccine development, (iv) response and containment systems, (v) means for rapidly improve the effectiveness and impact of animal health work
3. *internationally*: tracking, interacting with, and securing UN involvement within, international political partnerships on avian and pandemic influenza
4. *communications*: Seeking consistent messages that communicate risk reliably and stimulate appropriate actions by key groups with critical roles to play
5. *science and technology*: and
6. *the UN's own contingency planning and response*.: seeking to ensure that UN Resident Coordinators have appropriate back-up as they seek to address difficult issues on what the UN system should (and should not) be seeking to do at different stages of a pandemic.

III Humanitarian Action and Preparedness Planning:

Humanitarian agencies are exploring their roles in relation to strategies for containing avian influenza and preparing to contain and respond to a pandemic. Some are developing their own “response plans” in the event that the threat of a pandemic becomes a reality, and will test them to ensure that what they propose can, in practice, be implemented.

Some of the critical issues that the humanitarian community needs to consider include:

1. What is the relevance of *existing planning tools and preparedness measures* in the face of an avian flu pandemic threat? In other words, do current tools need to be adapted and/or new tools developed taking account of alternative pandemic scenarios – which could well include cessation of air travel and significant restrictions on movements? How will the status of country-by-country preparedness measures be assessed?
2. What are the *different strategic options* that should be considered in the event of a suspected or actual Pandemic? How to plan for a large range in both the numbers of people who may require support, and their individual needs? What special measures are needed for those countries and regions where populations survive in a chronic state of vulnerability (eg internally displaced persons and refugees), or

where armed conflict is the major factor resulting in the need for humanitarian action?

3. What measures are needed to identify and quantify who are most vulnerable including numbers that are up-rooted or non-displaced?
4. What are the likely *human rights and protection* dimensions of a pandemic? What measures need to be in place to address these? Will specific advocacy be needed?
5. What *additional resources* need to be mobilized for preparedness (including development of contingency planning tools and their application, training etc)?

IV Proposed Actions by the IASC Working Group

Bearing in mind IASC responsibilities, and the need to maximize synergies with existing Avian Flu containment and Pandemic preparedness measures, it is proposed that the IASC Working Group

1. agree on the need for strategic approaches to preparedness within the humanitarian arena
2. decide on a more energetic and joined-up IASC driven dialogue on policy and programme aspects of containment and response and their implications for preparedness and field, national, regional and global level with the following aims:
 - a) Stocktaking of the existing *level of awareness and preparedness* within the humanitarian arena (number of entities with agency or sector-specific preparedness programmes) beyond the agriculture and health communities: number who have reviewed options for continuity of existing operations, for new activities that are a direct consequence of a pandemic, for staff safety
 - b) Intermittent review of evolving challenges in light of changes in the world influenza situation
 - c) Exchange of methodologies for scenario development, contingency planning, simulations and reviews, and
 - d) Explore options for a coordinated IASC approach to developing preparedness programmes, interagency agreement on modalities for implementation and joint action regarding response to the humanitarian needs of affected groups and the safety of front line personnel. (This dialogue would be facilitated by international experts on scenario development and contingency planning.)
3. decide how best IASC action can be located within and alongside other efforts being implemented within and beyond the UN system. *AFiascNov05*