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Combating Infectious Disease
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Yesterday afternoon delegates in the "Words to Actions for Sustainable Development" session received convincing evidence why public health strategies needed to be linked to workplace occupational health issues.

Governments at the WSSD, WHO, ILO and OECD have now each in some way linked occupational to public health.

After all, it is now estimated that 2.2 million workers die because of workplace conditions and 160 million more become ill each year, at an estimated cost of 4% of the world Gross domestic product. HIV/AIDS illness and fatality statistics in the world are in addition to this!

One speaker yesterday explored some tools that might exist for promoting public health through the world of work in workplaces, thereby engaging workers and employers to act together in setting common targets, measuring progress and instituting effective change.

Global Union organisations have been working for recognition of such tools, now commonly referred to as "Workplace Assessments". In simple terms, these can be developed when trade unions and employers in one or several worksites, (or sectors or regions), agree to jointly assess some selected issues at the workplace and to monitor progress, be they related to environmental, occupational or social criteria.

Adopting this type of workplace assessment programme could yield positive results of on HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.

Governments at WSSD agreed to:
reduce HIV among young men and women aged 15-24 by 25 % in the most affected countries by 2005, and globally by 2010, as well as combat malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases;
protect the health of workers and promote occupational safety by adopting the voluntary ILO code of practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work;
mobilize support (financial or otherwise) to develop and strengthen health systems;
and
Make available the necessary drugs and technology in a sustainable and affordable manner.

HIV/AIDS is a workplace issue as are some infectious diseases.

HIV/AIDS threatens the most productive segments of the society in many countries, threatening the survival of both workers and enterprises increasing the number of the orphans.

There are many employment repercussions to a worker becoming infected. The productivity costs are the most evident. But there are impacts on the conditions of work themselves, including lost time, compensation, as well as sick leave and replacement issues.

A very complicating factor is what happens to workers in countries or workplaces where minimum human rights are not respected.

Outright discrimination often takes place. Infected workers are often denied equal protection and equality before the law;

- to privacy,
- to liberty of movement
- to work or a job,
- to education, housing, health care,
- to social security assistance and welfare.

Very often the mere suspicion of HIV/AIDS can have similar dire consequences for workers.

Of course, beyond the workplace there are repercussions to the very fabric and livelihood of communities through a wide range of issues ranging from social distress to financial burdens.

However, my point is that these can be minimized by using workplaces as a springboard for action. I also think that the OECD and its member states can help a lot by providing more leadership. Such leadership could yield impacts for dealing with other infectious diseases also.

Workplaces indeed can be part of the problem in the transmission of diseases. They can also be the place where complicating discrimination factors are ignited. However, they can certainly also be part of effective solutions.

Let's begin where there is already a basis of agreement between trade unions and employers. There are about 2.2 million collective agreements in the world they have signed.

Most of these have health and safety provisions and many have joint procedures, like joint health and safety committees, joint capability to assess problems at the workplace level and to engage in joint action.

A most obvious action (as demonstrated by many thousands of good examples) is for joint training, education and awareness raising.

Information distribution can become a joint venture for prevention, as it can for distribution of condoms and many other programs that involve workers in decision-making and community actions.

Employers and trade unions –with the support of governments- can agree to engage in joint public action to sensitize the community and to build local public policy on a host of issues – even contentious ones.

The ILO Code of practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work is precisely the Workplace Assessment-type tool that was alluded to yesterday, which can make of the workplace a vibrant agent of joint action for change.

This code was developed through a tripartite consensus at the ILO with Government, Employer and Trade Union representatives. This tool paves the way for a workplace focus for joint education, prevention training & assistance, and ways of recognizing workers rights, as well as issues of discrimination, and occupational health and safety.

OECD governments at the ILO have endorsed the code. Why not integrate it in the OECD's programme of work too?

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the International Organisation of Employers at the ILO jointly recognise the role of work in developing solutions. And they have signed a memorandum of agreement, encouraging employers and trade unions, and other actors to work together.

There are already many examples of successful cooperation between employers and Trade Unions. Last year a Joint trade union/ employer conference was held in Nairobi, setting the tone for what we hope will continue to be an expanding cooperation in Africa across the Globe.

"Global Union" organizations that I work for have engaged in a mapping exercise showing where they have sponsored hundreds of HIV/AIDS projects and campaigns in the world.

This mapping is useful for trade unions but it can also serve as a guide for employers and other groups who want to work with us in halting the spread of the disease beyond the current 40 million levels of people who are infected. Remember, more than 3 million died of AIDS in 2003 and 5 million became infected.

The OECD is the appropriate place to call for trade, investments and structural adjustment programs to support the types of programmes I am talking about – programs that promote health care delivery and education at the workplace level, crucial to combating infectious diseases.

The international community has yet not acted decisively enough to promote universal access to life-saving drugs. OECD countries can not remain idle in the face of this grave injustice. The financial times reported that now is the time to move on supporting the 3 by 5 initiative by the World Health Organisation. Will OECD countries support these treatment initiatives by 2005?

Deeply-rooted cultural attitudes and taboos often destroy effective action against HIV and AIDS and can be a major faction in its propagation.

Women and young people are particularly vulnerable to such structures which need to be confronted with OECD's help.

What we learn from workplace action in dealing with HIV/IDS can be applied more effectively afterward to other infectious diseases.

The Global Unions Campaign on HIV/AIDS was launched on World Aids Day, 1 December 2003,

It includes

establishing HIV/AIDS as a central issue for trade unions at both the workplace and national levels;

ensuring HIV/AIDS becomes a part of the trade union development and cooperation work, especially in target countries,

encouraging and helping unions that are not yet active to engage in action

promoting better understanding among non-union sectors of workplace roles;

mobilising resources with governments and other actors to support and expand trade union action,

developing partnerships with key intergovernmental organizations in particular, the ILO and UNAIDS but also with governments and employers,

integrating HIV/AIDS work to other fields, such as sustainable development and child labour,

Strengthening information sharing and cooperation among all actors, and

Managing, developing and monitoring the campaign on an ongoing basis.

Thank you