AIDS: A THREAT TO DECENT WORK

HIV/AIDS epidemic shows no signs of abating in Africa. If anything, the epidemic is spreading faster than was predicted. The ILO views HIV/AIDS as a major development issue with complex economic, social and cultural implications. Of specific concern to the ILO are the following effects of HIV/AIDS on labour:

- A mass killer affecting the most production segment of the labour force (15_49 years) disproportionately.
- Through its impact on the labour force, it reduces productivity and output levels in all sectors and impacts negatively on overall economic growth and social development.
- Discrimination and stigma aimed at people living with HIV/AIDS at the workplace.
- Exacerbation of problem of child labour.
- Affects the poor disproportionately and exacerbates income inequality and absolute poverty.
- Increases gender inequalities in socio_economic opportunities,
- Overtaxes the social systems and affects disproportionately those who are mostly in need of social assistance.
- Undermines private sector and enterprise development by discouraging investments, apart from curtailing skilled labour, increasing expenditure and reducing resources.
- Stifles economic development at a time when developing countries need to become more competitive to cope with rapid globalization.

The pandemic poses a serious threat to the primary goal of the organization, which is “to provide opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.”

The unique tripartite approach of the ILO is a major asset in mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on the labour market and employment.

The ILO Global Programme and the World of Work

Initiatives already undertaken by the ILO to mobilize the social partners into action in Africa included a Regional Tripartite Workshop on the Labour and Social Implications of HIV/AIDS 41 (Windhoek, Namibia, October 1999) which drafted a Platform of action. The draft Platform of action on HIV/AIDS in the context of the world of work in Africa was unanimously approved by African Ministers of Labour and their social partners at the Ninth ILO African Regional Meeting 42 (Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, December 1999). ILO has also collaborated with and participated in meetings of regional organizations of employers and workers in Africa on action against HIV/AIDS in the workplace: the OATUU Seminar on Trade Union Action against HIV/AIDS in Africa (Accra, July 2000); the ICFTU-AFRO Pan-African Conference on HIV/AIDS (Gaborone, September 2000); and a subregional workshop for employers’ organizations organized by the African Employers’ Confederation (Douala, November 2000).

These activities culminated in an urgent request to the ILO to play a fuller role in national and international partnerships against HIV/AIDS. In June 2000 the International Labour
Conference included a Special High-Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS at the Workplace. The Conference adopted a resolution on *HIV/AIDS and the world of work* which, among other things, instructed the ILO Director-General to create a capacity within the ILO to deal with HIV/AIDS at the workplace and to strengthen the capacity of the social partners to formulate and effectively implement appropriate policies, programmes and activities at national and enterprise level. In response to this resolution the ILO has now established a Global Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work.

**The main Objective** of the Programme is to help member States combat the spread and threats of HIV/AIDS through workplace initiatives; cope with the social and economic consequences of the pandemic; and provide protection and support to workers and their families who are affected by HIV/AIDS.

**The five pillars of ILO’s Global Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work**

- To improve *knowledge and understanding* of the economic, labour force and social consequences of HIV/AIDS.
- To pursue *advocacy* at all levels and to raise awareness of the urgency of the socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS and its implications for workers’ rights and enterprises.
- To *set standards and frame laws* that guide national action programmes against HIV/AIDS, which include the world of work components, and oppose discrimination.
- To strengthen the capacity of *employers’ and workers’ organizations*, and mobilize their contacts and resources, for education and prevention, counselling and support, and action against discrimination.
- To apply the specialist expertise of the ILO’s *sectoral and technical cooperation* Programmes to particular workplace needs, especially in training, social security, and safety and health at work.

**ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work**

By decision of the ILO Governing Body at its 279th Session (November 2000) the new ILO Programme was given the responsibility to develop an *ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work*. The Draft Code will be submitted to an ILO tripartite Meeting of Experts in Geneva in mid-May 2001 for review, revision and adoption.

The objective of the Code is to promote prevention, reduction and management of HIV/AIDS in the world of work, and to create a working environment where discrimination and exclusion based on HIV/AIDS status in not tolerated. The Code emphasises the rights and responsibilities of the tripartite constituents in the context of workplace policies and programmes to combat HIV/AIDS.
In seeking to achieve these aims, the Code provides guidance to a broad spectrum of policy makers, organisations and workplace actors on:

- protection, by eliminating discrimination based on real or perceived HIV status in the world of work;
- prevention, by safeguarding the health and welfare of all workers and their families, and by information and education to help reduce or prevent the spread of infection;
- concrete responses, by promoting enterprise-level, local, regional and national action to reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDS in the world of work;
- processes, by promoting dialogue, consultations, negotiations and all forms of cooperation between governments, employers, supervisors, personnel officers, workers and their representatives, with the assistance of occupational health personnel, medical professionals and specialists in HIV/AIDS issues and relevant NGOs.

ILO’s tripartite constituents in Africa took the opportunity of the 24th OAU Labour and Social Affairs Commission Meeting (April 2001) to discuss the draft Code of Practise, to ensure that the needs of the Africa constituents are in the Code, before its adoption by the Expert Meeting.

**Applying ILO principles to the challenge of AIDS**

The ILO’s decent work development agenda and its four strategic objectives provide the basis for a coherent and focused policy related to HIV/AIDS. Each strategic objective will drive a key aspect of the ILO’s response:

- **Fundamental principles and rights at work**: Provides the ethical and legal framework to guide workplace policies and programmes, and to protect the rights of workers – especially those infected or believed to be infected against discrimination.
- **Employment and income opportunities**: Protects employment as well as employees through education and prevention programmes at the workplace, and counseling and support for people living with HIV/AIDS – this support would include skills development and assistance with finding or making new income opportunities where necessary.
- **Social protection**: Provides the policy framework to plan for the social and economic consequences of AIDS and to mitigate the impact on individuals and communities.
- **Social dialogue and tripartism**: Provides both a methodology for negotiation and networks of contacts among the social partners which can be mobilized.

**Conclusion**

HIV/AIDS is no longer just a health issue; it is a development issue with wide-ranging and complex economic, social and cultural implications. It is a threat to the Decent Work Agenda. Efforts to contain and reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS are made harder by the knowledge that fighting against AIDS is not the same as fighting for development – it is defensive, reactive, a rearguard action, not the sort of pioneering action the ILO was set up to promote. But unless we
tackle it with the full range of resources at our disposal, development efforts, community initiatives and technical assistance will be constantly set back by the depredations of the disease.

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