

ILO Online - Monday 12 March 2007

**HIV/AIDS and the European workplace:
Bringing the fight against AIDS to the shopfloor**

HIV/AIDS is a matter of growing concern across Europe as a whole, and in particular Eastern and Central Europe and Central Asia. On 12-13 March, Ministers of Health from the European Union (EU), along with representatives of international agencies, multinational companies and civil society meet at the Conference “Responsibility and Partnership – together against HIV/AIDS” in Bremen to consider new initiatives for fighting AIDS in the European context. Significantly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel will address the conference. What’s more, EU states will be joined by 16 non-EU countries where AIDS is of mounting concern. ILO Online spoke with Dr. Sophia Kisting, Director of the ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work, about the significance of the meeting.

ILO Online: What are the critical issues linked to HIV/AIDS for Europe?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: Each year, the relentless advance of HIV/AIDS costs more than one million jobs in the worst-hit countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America but it is also a growing challenge for a region with lower-prevalence like Europe. According to UNAIDS, the number of people living with HIV in Eastern Europe and several countries in Western Europe rose in 2006, as it did in 2005. An estimated 270, 000 people were newly infected with HIV in 2006, bringing to 1.7 million the number of people living with HIV – a twentyfold increase in less than a decade.

Critical issues for Europe, especially in the world of work, are discrimination and the protection of rights, confidentiality and the reintegration in the labour market of HIV-positive workers on anti-retroviral treatment. The ILO has provided guidance in all these areas, based on its Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the world of work^{*}. This blueprint for workplace action is internationally recognized and globally applicable – employers and trade unions in industrialized countries increasingly recognize the value of HIV/AIDS policies and use the ILO code as a point of reference. The ILO’s approach is to mainstream HIV/AIDS in its Decent Work Country Programmes, at the same time as collaborating with fellow co-sponsors of UNAIDS in implementation.

ILO Online: What is the motivation for this meeting in a region with a low prevalence of HIV/AIDS?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: No country is free of the disease, and several European countries – East and West – are reporting rising infection rates. We need to renew our vigilance with respect to prevention. The global challenge of the HIV epidemic – even in lower-prevalence regions - is the motivation for this high-level meeting, called for by Germany in their dual role as President of the EU and the G8. The ILO has received a special invitation to present its work owing to the high priority given by the German Government to workplace action on HIV/AIDS. This has been the basis for the long-standing partnership between the German development agency GTZ and the ILO, and it was also the topic of a roundtable last September in Berlin.

ILO Online: Can you tell us more about the role of the ILO in this partnership?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: Major German corporations with global operations met with GTZ, NGOs and the ILO to see how the lessons learnt from workplace programmes in the worst-hit region, Africa, could be adapted and transferred to regions and countries with lower prevalence, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, Russia and China. Companies such as Daimler Chrysler explained how they based their apprenticeship HIV/AIDS programmes on the ILO Code of Practice, while Deutsche Post has the Code on its website. Lessons learnt from this meeting will feed into the Bremen Conference.

Since 2002, the ILO and GTZ have had a partnership programme to support ILO constituents in Eastern Europe and Africa to implement workplace policies and programmes through capacity building, socio-economic research, exchange of good practices, and support of public-private partnerships. One example is the co-investment model for extending workplace benefits to the families of workers and the local community. The German government has decided to continue this collaboration beyond 2007 in the frame of the BACKUP initiative.

What's more, the ILO has taken part in the EU Think Tank on HIV/AIDS since its inception at the Dublin Summit for Ministers of Health in 2004. The Think Tank prepared the European Commission paper on HIV/AIDS in the European Union and Neighbouring Countries and the draft Declaration that delegates to the Bremen meeting will consider. The role of the workplace is acknowledged, and employers and trade unions are invited to play their part by applying the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS.

ILO Online: How is the ILO's SHARE programme, with its focus on discrimination and protection of rights, particularly relevant for the European region?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: The ILO's Strategic HIV/AIDS Responses by Enterprises (SHARE) is a global programme funded by the US Department of Labor which promotes prevention and protects rights through a combination of action at the national policy level and at the workplace. In Russia, for example, enterprises in the metallurgy, food, media, and transport sectors, as well as the public service, are developing workplace policies and programmes on HIV/AIDS. With the help of SHARE, the Ministry of Health issued a national declaration on HIV/AIDS with a directive to all 88 regions of the Federation for its implementation.

ILO Online: Can you give us some more examples of ILO activities in Central and Eastern Europe?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: The ILO concentrates its activities in the region on the creation of a suitable legal framework; research on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, particularly on social security schemes; capacity-building of constituents in the public and private sectors so that they can implement workplace programmes; and exchange of good practices between the stakeholders. Also on our agenda are the needs of migrant workers and the challenge of the gender dimensions of the epidemic.

In Ukraine, for example, we have helped put in place a prevention programme for the staff of Kyiv International Airlines, as well as developed a training programme for the employment service and a number of education departments. In Russia, HIV education has been introduced in 97 vocational schools in two regions, and the training module used is now shared with several other CIS countries. In countries of Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, HIV/AIDS has become an integral part of the occupational safety and health structures and training programmes.

ILO Online: What is the message of the ILO at this conference?

Dr. Sophia Kisting: We will explain to the conference the practical ways the ILO has provided policy guidance and technical support for national labour laws, policies at all levels from the subregional to the enterprise, and concrete responses at the workplace. We will show how the world of work is a vital gateway to universal access, with services on prevention, care and treatment, measures to protect rights, campaigns on 'Know your status', and promotion of employment opportunities for people living with HIV. This how the ILO plays its role as lead agency for the world of work within the UNAIDS family.

Both prevention and treatment can bring significant benefits to the global labour force and the world of work, even if prevention is too late for millions of persons already living with HIV. Each labour force life preserved represents a potential productive gain for the economy, the household and the family, especially children, as well as recognition of the fundamental rights of each and every working man and woman.

For more information on the Conference in Bremen, please go to:

www.bmg.bund.de/cln_040/nn_1030704/DE/Themenschwerpunkte/Internationales/EU-Ratspraesidentschaft/Konferenzen/bremen-12-3.html

^{*/} The Code can be downloaded in more than 30 languages at www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/trav/aids/publ/codelanguage.htm