



## Summary

A severe influenza pandemic represents one of the most significant potential threats to regional security and stability. The provision of essential services could be jeopardized if business continuity planning is not robust. This requires proactive preparedness and planning efforts at local, national and regional levels.

An analysis of national pandemic preparedness plans from the region suggests that readiness levels vary significantly between countries, and that very little attention has been given so far to non-health aspects of pandemic preparedness and regional synergies.

There is a clear and pressing requirement to raise awareness of the need for greater readiness for an influenza pandemic. This paper outlines a few challenges and opportunities from the pandemic preparedness process. Its purpose is to increase discussion among decision-makers on the need for multi-sector, non-health preparedness for a pandemic or similar catastrophe.

## Background

Pandemics - worldwide epidemics of highly virulent disease - have the potential to destabilize countries or regions, in terms of their economic, governance, health, humanitarian, security and societal impacts. They cause large surges in the numbers of people requiring medical treatment, temporarily overwhelming health services. High rates of worker absenteeism can also interrupt other essential services, such as law enforcement, transport and communications.

Pandemics have happened before. In the 20th century, three pandemics occurred: "Spanish influenza" in 1918, "Asian influenza" in 1957, and "Hong Kong influenza" in 1968. The 1918 pandemic killed an estimated 45 million people worldwide - more than all the victims of World War I - and was one of the deadliest disease events in human history.

The risk of a pandemic is particularly high now because of avian influenza. Since 2003, the H5N1 "bird flu" virus has caused devastation amongst poultry flocks in many countries across the Middle East, Europe, Asia and Africa. In a number of cases, humans have also become infected through close contact with birds. If the virus develops the capacity to be transmitted from human to human, we would face a dangerous human flu pandemic.

## Potential Threats

A severe pandemic would test the resilience of nations, businesses and communities across the globe. Widespread illness and death would occur. Few countries have the staff, facilities, equipment and hospital beds needed to cope with large numbers of people who suddenly fall ill. Supplies of vaccines and antiviral drugs - the most important medical interventions for reducing illness and deaths during a pandemic - will be inadequate in all countries at the start of a pandemic and for many months thereafter.

High rates of worker absenteeism will contribute to social and economic disruption, impair essential services and cause instability in financial markets. A pandemic will also give rise to humanitarian crises, resulting from food, water and energy shortages and large population movements.

Through globalization, world economies are becoming increasingly interdependent and vulnerable to the consequences of global catastrophes, requiring all nations to engage in preparedness and coordinate their actions. Given the volume of international exchanges today, a virus would spread rapidly, possibly reaching all continents in a few months, and affecting nearly all countries worldwide.

## Challenges in Preparedness

Most countries in the Middle East and North Africa region have already published national pandemic preparedness plans. However, preparedness levels vary significantly between countries. Many of the plans do not go beyond health. However, in the context of a pandemic, it is important that providers of essential services, such as water, electricity, telecommunications, banking services, make plans as to how they will continue to operate in the face of significant staff absenteeism.

Amongst the challenges that countries face in pandemic planning are the need to strengthen disease control and surveillance systems, to involve all sectors in planning efforts, to plan at all levels of society, and to enhance international cooperation.

National pandemic planning efforts are typically led by line ministries, such as health. But no single national agency can prepare alone for the pandemic. It is crucial to involve all branches of government and sectors of society (including business, the military, and civil society) in pandemic preparedness planning.

In order for a country to withstand a pandemic, all levels of society (national, regional, local) need to be prepared to play their part in the response. Governments should ensure that necessary legal frameworks and policies are in place. Crisis management plans and procedures should be tested.

During a pandemic, countries will face extraordinary circumstances such as challenges to security and order, cross-border population movements or new humanitarian crises - which will require effective international cooperation and coordination. Preparedness efforts should include joint simulation exercises in cooperation with neighbouring states and international organizations.

PIC focuses on greater readiness of the UN System, national governments and the humanitarian community for the next influenza pandemic or other similar international catastrophe. In 2008, PIC's overall goal is to support implementation of the multi-sector elements of the Chairman's Proposed Road Map from the New Delhi Conference on Avian and Pandemic Influenza, 4-6 December 2007.

## Opportunities

The process of pandemic planning offers countries in the Middle East and North Africa region opportunities to strengthen international partnerships and regional institutions. Regional organisations, such as the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, could serve as platforms to share best practices between countries.

The investment of time and resources into pandemic preparedness and planning helps countries and communities to develop more robust command-and-control systems and stronger information-sharing and communication mechanisms. It provides an opportunity to strengthen legal frameworks to enable rapid intervention in times of crisis.

Pandemic planning efforts can boost the resilience of communities and organisations to cope with a range of other possible future emergencies and threats. It is desirable to integrate pandemic risk into existing national and regional disaster management plans, processes and structures.

## Global Response

A global consensus has recently emerged over the need to address the challenges mentioned above. For instance, the Vision and Road Map, which was adopted at the New Delhi Conference on Avian and Pandemic Influenza on 4-6 December 2007, encourages each nation to 1) establish an inter-ministerial oversight and coordination mechanism; 2) broaden the scope of pandemic preparedness to include continuity of essential services; and 3) incorporate pandemic preparation into national disaster management structures.

## OCHA's Pandemic Influenza Contingency

Pandemic Influenza Contingency (PIC) was created at the beginning of 2007 within the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Geneva, as a part of as part of UN System Influenza Coordination (UNSIC). It is based in Geneva with seven regional officers posted around the world. PIC has a regional officer who covers the Middle East and North Africa. He is established in Cairo as an outpost of the OCHA Regional Office in Dubai.