WHO, IDLO and O’Neill Institute Call on Governments to Strengthen Public Health Laws

Lack of Legal Regulation and Government Capacity Risk Health and Safety of People around the World

ROME, 1 MAY 2009 – At a two-day meeting in Rome convened by the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and the O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law at Georgetown University (O’Neill Institute), 22 legal experts from around the world reviewed the urgent need to strengthen public health laws at the national and global level. The group endorsed an initiative to build the capacity of governments to deal with infectious and non-communicable diseases that threaten the health, safety and economic viability of people and their countries.

"There is a vital need for public health preparedness within a strong legal framework," said Larry Gostin, an internationally acclaimed scholar who directs the O’Neill Institute at Georgetown University Law Center. "The world faces enormous problems with public health, especially in the developing world, and the majority of legal systems simply do not protect and promote health adequately. Many governments have not addressed the issues surrounding air and water pollution, sanitation, sewage, child and maternal health, obesity and outbreaks of infectious diseases, and we must give them both the powers and duty to do so if we expect them to ensure the well-being of society."

The public health law group that convened in Rome will focus initially on drafting guidelines for public health legislation, led by the O’Neill Institute. It will then work with other organizations to assess the capacity building needs of different countries and regions, and assemble networks of government, civil society representatives and stakeholders to implement solutions.

"Without functioning health systems underpinned by legislation, it is difficult to respond effectively to outbreaks of infectious diseases, as well as longer term chronic diseases," said Helena Nygren-Krug, Health and Human Rights Advisor of WHO in Geneva. "Countries need modern tools and resources, and we intend to provide governments with the assistance and training that will enable them to deliver services that produce sustainable results."

The group of legal experts assembled in Rome includes representatives from WHO, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Bank, UNAIDS, IDLO, O’Neill Institute and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as civil society organizations and academic institutions from countries including
China, Cameroon, South Africa, Uganda, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Malawi, Egypt, United States, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, Venezuela and Kyrgyzstan. The next meeting in Rome will finalize national public health law guidelines and prepare a strategy for capacity building and implementation.

"Many of these problems require coordinated regional and international legal approaches," said David Patterson, Manager of IDLO's HIV and Health Law Program. "To do this, we need to engage groups at all levels of society to join us in this effort. Only in this way can we be certain that the poor and disadvantaged will gain the health and security they need to advance their social and economic prospects."

**IDLO** is a non-partisan, intergovernmental organization that promotes legal, regulatory and institutional reform to advance economic and social development in post-crisis and developing countries. Founded in 1983 and one of the pioneers of rule of law advocacy, IDLO uses its access to governments and interest groups of differing ideologies, as well as its expertise and vast stakeholder network, to create opportunity for those most in need.

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**The O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law** at Georgetown University is the premier center for health law, scholarship and policy. Housed at Georgetown University Law Center in Washington DC, the Institute's mission is to provide innovative solutions for the leading health problems both domestically and globally. The Institute, a joint project of the Law Center and School of Nursing and Health Studies, also draws upon the University's considerable intellectual resources, including the School of Medicine, the Public Policy Institute, and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics.

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