

Ensuring employees' health and safety in the COVID19 pandemic: A short guidance note

With this note, OeEB wants to provide its clients – fund managers, companies, project developers and financial institutions – with a summary of recommendations and measures that you may consider for your employees' health and safety. It is based on a summary of publicly available guidance¹, and practices adopted by some of OeEB's investees.

OeEB recognizes the massive impact that the current corona pandemic has on people's lives: Their health, their families and friends, their communities and last but not least, their businesses, their employees and their standard of living. We understand that responses to COVID-19 outbreaks impact the social and economic lives of every, but the magnitude will be most severe for the most vulnerable countries, their economies and societies we are investing in. We realize that people that are already marginalized and subject to particular vulnerabilities (e.g. people living in poverty, children, elderly people, people with disabilities, migrant workers, refugees, indigenous communities) will be particularly affected by this crisis. Due to a range of factors, women are often particularly at risk: Often, their share in informal employment exceeds the one of men², they might not enjoy the same access to property and financial resources, and social and cultural gender norms and traditions might limit their decision making power in businesses and/or communities. In addition, they are often responsible for taking care of elderly, disabled or sick family members and children. These are some factors that will put them at the forefront of battling the virus and its impacts. It will therefore need a firm stand to ensure that responses to this crisis do not revoke successes of gender equality from the past³. First and foremost, this requires the recognition of women and their work in different aspects of our societies' daily life: As workers, family and community members, shareholders, and entrepreneurs. To ensure that our responses acknowledge women and men equally and taking into account the situation of already marginalized and vulnerable persons, we encourage our investees to actively seek input from representatives of their female workforce and representatives of persons at particular risks of vulnerabilities (e.g. migrant workers, casual workers, workers with disabilities) when developing response plans to the corona virus. We realize that our investees may play a vital role in supporting their clients and communities with information to reduce the virus' impact, by demonstrating hygienic care and by following a transparent and sympathetic communication line to employees, communities and stakeholders.

Disclaimer

This guidance does not constitute medical advice and is not a substitute for professional advice from international public health organisations such as the WHO, national public health authorities, and national governments, which should be consulted for qualified and more detailed information. We strongly encourage our partners to seek daily updates from these sources as COVID-19 spreads/evolves.

If you are facing or anticipating any risks to revenue or business continuity, please speak to your OeEB Investment Officer.

Overall, we encourage our investees to stay informed and follow advice from international health organisations such as the WHO and your national health organization and government.

¹ This information derives partly from CDC Group (<https://www.cdcgroup.com/en/covid-19/>), DEG Sustainability and Corporate Governance Department (https://www.deginvest.de/DEG-Documents-in-English/Range-of-Services/COVID-19-ESG-Guidance_DEG.pdf), BIO (<https://www.bio-invest.be/en/news/covid-19-esg-guidance-note-for-employers>), IFC interim advice (https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/publications/publications_tipsheet_covid-19_supportingworkers), and UN Population Fund Gender Lens on COVID19 (<https://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19-gender-lens>)

² See e.g. ILO, Women and Men in the Informal Economy, 2018, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf, p.21.

³ 2X Challenge and Gender Finance Collaborative response to the COVID-19 pandemic: <https://www.2xchallenge.org/press-news/2020/04/07/2x-challenge-and-gender-finance-collaborative-response-to-covid19-pandemic>

How does COVID-19 spread?

It is possible to catch COVID-19 either by breathing in droplets coughed up or exhaled by a person with COVID-19 or by touching eyes, nose or mouth after handling a contaminated object or surface. All sections of society – including businesses and employees – must play a role if we are to stop the spread of this disease. Following national labour regulations and IFC Performance Standard 2, employers must fulfill their “duty of care”. In other words: They should minimize occupational health and safety risks to employees and their activities. We therefore encourage our investees to identify the business activities that could expose workers, customers, consultants or others, and follow the practical steps suggested in this document to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Steps will vary depending on the nature and location of the industry, potential exposure to the virus, supply chains, etc. The following steps and measures are far from exhaustive and should be reviewed and updated as the situation evolves.

It is important to recognize that social, cultural and gender norms also influence women’s and men’s roles and relations, which reflects their vulnerability to infection, exposure, and treatment. To ensure that the response to COVID-19 does not reproduce, exacerbate or perpetuate marginalization, inequalities or harmful gender norms, consider how these responses may differ among groups of women and men – including contractors (e.g. cleaning personnel, chefs, security personnel) – in your work place, and consult with women representatives and representatives of persons, who are marginalized and at particular risk of vulnerabilities, from your workforce, contractors and surrounding communities where possible. Consulting with women’s rights groups, representatives of marginalized or vulnerable persons and independent experts may also benefit your response plan to avoid potential unintended discrimination and to tap into community knowledge in your operating location.

Which kind of crisis management actions should I consider?

Companies should consider developing specific procedures and policies to prevent, identify, mitigate, and respond to instances of COVID-19 in a formalized manner. These should be informed by the risk identification and mitigation process below and may include:

- Set up a crisis response team, typically consisting of key individuals from management, human resources, legal, finance, public relations and employee’s representative. Outline key roles and responsibilities for crisis response, including also the CEOs’ and Board’s roles, and identify crisis management leaders. You may also consider to identify company external advisory if deemed necessary. Once the teams, roles and responsibilities have been identified, it is important to determine protocols about information flows and sources of information required by the Board.
- Prevention procedures covering basic hygiene, cleaning and disinfection, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), customer engagement, supplier management, and visitor management should be considered. Develop and communicate a clear policy of non-discrimination to reduce stigma so that employees feel safe reporting illness of themselves or within their families. Communication tools such as templates, checklists, posters and manuals should reflect prevention procedures, and should be maintained. Particular consideration is required for policies and procedures on how to determine and manage suspected and identified cases, in line with national requirements. Some companies may be required to report cases and/or follow specific protocols, in line with national mandates.

Step-by-step guidance to set up prevention and mitigation measures at work (by ILO):
https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—ed_protect/—protrav/—safework/documents/instructionalmaterial/wcms_741813.pdf

Posters for advice and distribution in your workplace can be downloaded here:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

- All policies and procedures should be clearly communicated together with contact information and access to a grievance mechanism and/or dedicated contact points, should employees have questions or concerns. (see also: “What should I consider in terms of communication with employees and other stakeholders?”). As applicable, they should also be communicated to contractors/sub-contractors, workers in worker accommodation sites, visitors, customers, supply chain, and the surrounding community through available contact points and/or communication material.
- If occupational policies have to be updated, and particularly vulnerable workforce and your contractors for an informed update. If current employment policies are inadequate to provide protection in the case of a worker or worker family member illness, or in case of reduced or closed operations, companies should review and – if at all possible – update policies and procedures to cover these extenuating circumstances. Liaise with representatives of your workforce (e.g. workers union representatives, female workforce representatives), and consider gathering input from your contractors where necessary when such updates are necessary. Where operations or changes to operations might impact the community (e.g. road closures, etc.) stakeholder engagement procedures should be considered.
- Once developed, policies and procedures should be communicated clearly to all workers including casual workers and, as applicable, to contractors/sub-contractors, supply chain workers, workers in worker accommodation sites, visitors, customers, and the surrounding community (see also: “What should I consider in terms of communication with employees and other stakeholders?”).

How can I avoid/reduce the spread of COVID19 in my work place?

To minimize the spread of COVID19, hygiene measures are among the top priorities to enforce in the work place. Measures should also consider potential entry points of virus to the work place. These should be supported by behavioral and procedural protocols as described in “Which kind of crisis management actions should I consider?”.

- Promote and enforce frequent handwashing and respiratory hygiene, including discouraging touching eyes, nose and mouth; Communicate good practices to workers and visitors at key areas, such as entry points or lavatories, through posters and signs as well as reminders from designated staff like receptionists
- Make hand sanitizer and/or ablution facilities with soap available in all areas where risk of transmission is identified (e.g. upon entry to the premises, in canteen, in toilets, etc.); Where hand sanitizers are not available due to shortages, the importance of personal hygiene and the practice of proper handwashing with soap will be essential
- Ensure workplace is clean and hygienic, and regularly disinfect surfaces and objects; consider increasing the frequency of cleaning routines
- Avoid customary social contact such as handshakes
- Practice social distancing where possible (e.g. entrances/exits, canteens, etc.); consider reduce number of workers in the workplace to enable social distancing, supported by appropriating additional space, e.g. conference rooms, to allow people to spread out
- Where possible, consider use of infrared laser thermometers to check workers’ and visitors’ temperature before entering the premises

You can find posters for advice and distribution in your workplace here:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

Guidance for schools, workplaces & institutions are provided here:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/guidance-for-schools-workplaces-institutions>

WHO provides a Q&A service in multiple languages through WhatsApp:
<https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/who-health-alert-brings-covid-19-facts-to-billions-via-whatsapp>

Measures to consider when isolating at home (also available in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean):
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/steps-when-sick.html>

- Identify which workers can work from home, if possible, and provide them with the appropriate technology; especially vulnerable people (e.g. older employees, people with existing respiratory, cardiac and/or metabolic disorders and immunodeficiencies, etc.)
- Develop measures to ensure the temporary transfer of responsibilities of affected personnel to their colleagues, in particular contact points for grievances, sexual harassment, and other internal reporting protocols.
- Where applicable, update gender-based violence referral pathways to reflect changes in available services (e.g. way to communicate a grievance, change in access to suitable person, etc.)
- Advise employees to stay at home when sick and to seek medical advice if they have a fever, cough and/or difficulty breathing; inform your workforce how such self-isolation will be treated in terms of occupational rights (e.g. paid leave, sick leave, etc.) and direct them to contact points where they can address occupational and health issues.

How can I avoid/reduce the spread of COVID19 to/from my suppliers/customers/community?

- Identify areas of transmission risk through e.g. food preparation, engagement with the public, etc. and consider following international recommendations of personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Companies with direct-to-consumer sales should consider hygiene practices when dealing with cash and products
- Where possible, communicate with surrounding communities and supply chain to confirm awareness of the virus and discuss good hygiene practices and precautionary measures
- If restrictions on site access will impact the community, e.g. by closing access paths, clearly communicate this with community leaders and women representatives, and discuss the implications; make sure that a grievance mechanism and thus required and adequately trained personnel are available and communicate the line of grievance reporting to the community
- It is important for senior leadership to provide clear and regular communication about preventive measures and precautions to workers and, where applicable, contractors, the supply chain, customers, and the wider community. (see also response to “What should I consider in terms of communication with employees and other stakeholders?”)

US’ Occupational Safety and Health Administration provides interim guidance for specific industries in English and Spanish:

<https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/covid-19/controlprevention.html#interim>

Guidances on the use of PPE:

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/infection-prevention-and-control>

What should I consider in terms of communication with employees and other stakeholders?

Communication is key to maintain confidence, avoid rumors and raise awareness for preventive measures. The following points are a non-exhaustive list of items you may consider:

- Setting up focal points or dedicated hotlines/email addresses to specific occupational topics help workers direct questions or concerns to competent sources. These can include focal points for e.g. work arrangements, information on gender-based violence that may arise or exacerbate due to workers’ lock down at home, etc. In addition to email and verbal communication, companies may consider the use of SMS messaging to keep workers informed.
- Good practices to workers and visitors in key areas, such as entry points or lavatories, through posters and signs serves as reminders; consider specific training for designated staff like receptionists, who could serve as multipliers of such good practices to communities, visitors, etc.

- Regular updates to the workforce, including contractors, should be provided by the senior management, including information on:
 - Current status of COVID-19 and how it may impact the different kind of workforce and, as appropriate, other relevant stakeholders such as the company's clients;
 - Summary of how different areas of the business will operate and key risk mitigation priorities
 - Actions being taken on different areas including travel, working from home, organization and participation in meetings and conferences, screening processes, social distancing in the office, hygiene, and transportation
 - Workers' rights including information on relevant workplace flexibilities and protections as well as medical evidence requirements for sickness, sick leave and pay, working from home; Where possible, clearly communicate that employment contracts will be honored in case of absence due to illness to discourage workers from coming in sick.
 - Resources for any physical or mental health concerns; consider raising awareness on domestic violence; highlight established focal/contact points to which workers, contractors and stakeholders can address specific questions.
 - If appropriate, and in close consultation with local health authorities, updates on any cases within the workforce and advice for anyone who might have come in contact with the affected individuals.

What can I do if social tensions associated with COVID-19 put my workers and contractors at risk?

Support for tensions in domestic environments: Countries facing lockdowns and movement restrictions are reporting increasing domestic abuse. Consider informing your employees about confidential psychological support, legal information and counselling in cases of threats and violence via telephone, SMS or email. You may also want to consider partnering with a local women rights group, and communicate this partnership to your workforce.

Support for tensions in community environments: Should social conditions deteriorate and companies want to engage private security personnel to ensure worker safety while maintaining business continuity, it must be in line with IFC Performance Standard 4. When obtaining private security personnel, the company should put particular attention to the functionality of its grievance mechanism for its workforce and surrounding communities. This includes, but is not limited to,

- Clearly communicating contact lines/persons for grievances on site (e.g. by hanging up illustrative posters in strategic locations such as bathrooms, folders, etc.) and highlighting confidentiality and non-retaliation of the process;
- Ensuring easy accessibility (e.g. confidential phone number, email address, app, etc.) of the grievance process to staff and security personnel
- Ensuring that the security personnel is adequately trained and understands the rules it is operating on (in particular the use of excessive force and sexual harassment), consider also adhering to the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights (<https://www.voluntaryprinciples.org/the-principles/>)
- Considering creating reporting or monitoring measures to avoid harassment; e.g. consider working with local NGOs and/or independent experts for training/informing security personnel, regular checks, etc.

Guidance on how to address violence against women can be found here:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

IFC's Good Practice Handbook on the use of security forces, tools and templates:

https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/publications/publications_handbook_securityforces

How can I protect jobs while maintaining business continuity?

While companies and businesses may face difficulties in continuing their business, cost reductions must consider options to protect jobs (as per IFC Performance Standard 2) before considering retrenchment/dismissal of large shares of employees. As an employer, consider the following:

- Identify jobs as key to business continuity – What sectors need some labour continuity or ability to pick up quickly?
- Analyse and prioritise your business - Understand your liquidity risks and draw linkages to jobs risks. Understand where business continuity could impact the maintenance of jobs.
- Where jobs are under threat due to business continuity concerns, but business is viable, identify financing options available to support job preservation. These must be in line with national legal and contractual provisions, and could including (a.o.):
 - Continued work with full wages by e.g. supporting working from home or other flexible working schedule, redeployment to other business parts, training programs or paid leave (incl. sick leave and caring leave) where applicable
 - Modifying jobs with some implication to the workers' income, e.g. by reducing working hours, shifts or overtime, implement job sharing arrangements where employees on reduced hours share a single full-time job, and wage moderation.
 - Keeping workers with some income, e.g. by negotiating a combination of paid and unpaid leave or rotating (paid) leave.

Companies may also explore measures to connect workers to other temporary in-demand jobs, support emergency response with their workforce or provide livelihood support (e.g. food subsidies or remaining in workplace accommodation) if no salary income is envisaged. If available, companies may also advise their workforce about state income support.

IFC's Performance Standard 2:

https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/policies-standards/performance-standards/ps2

The benefits of job protection are elaborated by McKinsey:

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/how-to-rebuild-and-reimagine-jobs-amid-the-coronavirus-crisis>

How do I manage retrenchment?

If retrenchment is unavoidable, a responsible retrenchment plan should be developed in a way that achieves the commercial aims of the process while minimising the impact of job losses on workers (including casual workers and contract workers) and communities. The following principles should be considered when developing a Retrenchment Plan:

- Impact mitigation: During the process, efforts should be made to reduce number of job losses (e.g. reduction in hours; productivity improvements; temporary layoff; and salary reduction) and mitigate effects on individuals, groups and communities;
- Consultation: Consult workers' representatives and unions on the plan and integrate feedback in line with national and international regulations; ensure that female staff representatives are consulted in the process.
- Fair and transparent selection criteria: Ensure that the selection of workers for dismissal is based on principles that are fair and transparent and do not discriminate against particular groups. More typically, selection criteria involve one or a combination of the following factors: length of service, performance record, disciplinary record, absence record, skills, knowledge.

IFC Good Practice Note: Managing Retrenchment (2005):

https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/publications/publications_gpn_retrenchment

IFC Performance Standard 2:

https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/topics_ext_content/ifc_external_corporate_site/sustainability-at-ifc/policies-standards/performance-standards/ps2

- **Grievance Mechanism:** Develop or communicate the existence of a grievance and appeal procedure to ensure the sense of fairness and consultation reaches down to an individual level. It should ensure that each individual can use his/her right to put forward reasons why he or she should not be selected for dismissal or to raise complaints about the way in which the process has been handled.
- **Communication:** Communicate transparently about the process to workers, in line with national regulations and collective agreements signed by the company.

Which sectors may be exposed to a higher risk of COVID19?

Some industry sectors and company interactions may present a higher risk of coming into contact with affected people or spreading COVID-19. Each company must assess the risks to their workforce, operations, and community individually. Sectors and company interactions listed below are selected examples where COVID-19 may be more easily transferred among workers or service users. This list is intended to highlight health risk and may not reflect sectors at higher financial risk. See also general and sector-specific guidance further below.

Guidance for schools, workplaces & institutions are provided here:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/guidance-for-schools-workplaces-institutions>

- Healthcare including hospitals, laboratories, clinics, dentists, ambulances, and pharmacies.
- Food and agriculture including food processing and those handling live animals and animal products, should practice good personal hygiene and follow food safety guidelines. According to the WHO, based on available information, it is not known whether COVID-19 has any impact on the health of animals and no particular event has been reported in any species.
- Education sector (though schools often shut in affected countries).
- Projects that involve construction and/or worker accommodation camps, where social distancing and robust hygiene measures may be more difficult to implement.
- Solid waste and wastewater management.
- Consumer businesses where workers may come into regular contact with customers including hotels and retail.
- Businesses where workers come into contact with suppliers and supply chains operating in affected areas.
- Businesses where there is a large number of workers that may be concentrated closely together, particularly those where it is difficult to work remotely.
- Tourism and related sectors linked to travel and mobility.
- Logistics and transport, where workers come into contact with a large number of people over potentially a large geographic region.

Who are particularly vulnerable to COVID19, physically and socially?

- Those with underlying health conditions and older people are most at risk of developing serious health issues.
- Pregnant women are advised to take all preventive actions to avoid infection.
- Women have less access to social protection and will bear a disproportionate burden in the care economy, for example when schools close or care systems shut down. Consider, where possible, flexible work arrangements, teleworking, care-holiday, etc. in consultation with employee representatives

- Unprotected workers, including the self-employed, casual and gig workers, are likely to be disproportionately hit by the virus as they do not have access to paid or sick leave mechanisms, and are less protected by conventional social protection mechanisms and other forms of income smoothing. Also consider literacy/language challenges when distributing COVID-19 related information.
- Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which will constrain both their ability to access their places of work in destination countries and return to their families. Possible literacy/comprehension challenges should be considered when distributing COVID-19 related information.

For more information/ feedback/ questions, please contact your counterpart at OeEB or contact us at:

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