

Guidelines for Businesses

Respecting Human Rights and the COVID-19 Outbreak: addressing the immediate challenges

The COVID-19 outbreak has set an unprecedented global challenge, impacting people all over the world. The present crisis has a direct impact on the right to life and to health, as well as indirect impacts on other fundamental human rights. As the global economy gets hit by a huge crisis, we observe impacts on the right to enjoy just and favourable conditions of work and the right to an adequate standard of living,

This short briefing aims to raise awareness among businesses and to advocate that human rights due diligence is more important than ever. Business leaders should be aware of their responsibilities and act accordingly. We provide 9 ideas on how responsible businesses could face the immediate challenges.

Proposed actions

Action 1: Conduct a mapping exercise to identify who might be most impacted by the crisis.

A key step to conduct human rights due diligence consists of identifying those that can be most impacted by your business activities, presumably your employees, those working in your supply chain and surrounding communities.

Due to the current crisis some of the impacts already faced by these rightsholders will potentially become more severe. Therefore, an updated or a review of your risk assessment might be needed. For instance, workers in agricultural supply chains or in production factories that already faced insufficient health and safety protection before COVID-19, will be even more exposed during this crisis. Also, workers not covered by social security schemes are even more vulnerable given the reduction of industry activity.

Action 2: Prioritise workers' safety and/or their financial security over executive pay and/or short-term returns to shareholders, as recommended by UNPRI¹.

Companies should take all recommended measures to ensure that the health of its own employees and all service providers working inside its premises are protected during the outbreak. Guidance can be found on the [World Health Organization](#) website.

When allocating resources to face the crisis, companies should ensure to put workers' safety and their financial security first and consider, where needed, to review executive pay and short-term returns to shareholders.

¹ [UNPRI – How Responsible Investors Should Respond to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Crisis](#)

Action 3: Get prepared to address potential discrimination in the workplace.

According to ILO, “incidents of racism and xenophobia are likely following the outbreak, in particular towards persons of certain ethnic backgrounds and persons from countries where the virus is more prevalent”².

Based on existing practices to prevent and remediate discrimination, companies should be prepared to address new forms of discrimination related to the health status or racism aspects. This should include, for instance, special attention to the protection of workers' personal data³ and the provision of specific training to the staff responsible for grievance mechanisms.

Action 4: Include CSR representatives and human rights experts in crisis management committees.

In crisis management, it is quite common for companies to establish crisis management committees, working groups and/or task force structures. Bringing in a human rights perspective is key to ensure that decision making is done in a responsible way and that a human rights-based approach is taken.

For that, we suggest having human rights experts and CSR representatives as an integral part of these decision-making structures.

Action 5: Give special attention to workers along supply chains.

As mentioned, many workers in diverse supply chains may face quite severe consequences by being exposed to a high risk of contamination, lower access to health systems and the loss of income.

The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre has been monitoring the impacts faced by workers in supply chains of diverse sectors. According to the organisation, in some cases workers are “predominantly women and the primary caregivers in their families and communities”⁴.

Decisions such as disengagement of suppliers and the cancelling of orders, should take into consideration the impact on workers' rights and ensure a transparent communication. Where possible, companies should consider providing aid packages to suppliers, e.g. by anticipating payments to small and medium-sized business, by reducing payment terms and/or by providing financial support. Engagement at the industry level and in multi-stakeholder initiatives might be crucial to address this challenge.

Action 6: Support local communities located in the influence area of businesses operations.

Many businesses have its operations located in regions with a high presence of vulnerable communities, where public action and health systems are weak and face challenges to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Companies that operate in this environment should consider cooperating with other businesses, civil society and local government officials in order to share expertise and resources and to scale up the sharing of

² ILO – ILO Standards and COVID-19 (coronavirus) FAQ – p. 17

³ ILO – ILO Standards and COVID-19 (coronavirus) FAQ – p. 17

⁴ BRHRC – COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Outbreak: Supply chain workers

information.⁵ There are examples of companies partnering with national health authorities and NGOs to provide handwashing education programmes to local communities.⁶

Action 7: Public positioning on the support of appropriate action.

Companies should avoid any public positioning that misleads the guidance of international references on public health. We welcome the approach suggested by the UNPRI that companies should support publicly appropriate actions taken by governments in the pursuit of “just recovery in public health and the global economy”⁷. Companies can express their views through their websites or through media statements.⁸

Action 8: Transparency.

Companies should be transparent and communicate their efforts to ensure the respect of human rights while addressing the COVID-19 crisis.

Action 9: Support on the provision of health equipment and other required products and services to address the crisis.

In an effort to supply the health system with the high demand for specific health equipment, some companies have adapted their production lines to be able to manufacture artificial ventilators, a crucial equipment to fight the worst symptoms of COVID-19.⁹

Other practical examples are those of companies that are donating medical supplies¹⁰, and deploying available logistics capacities to organizations addressing the crisis¹¹. More examples can be found [here](#).

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About Löning – Human Rights & Responsible Business

We are a Berlin-based management consultancy and think tank with an international team specialised in business and human rights. Our clients are listed companies, family owned businesses and international non-profit organisations with global operations. We help clients establish effective human rights due diligence processes. Working with our clients, we create strategies that strengthen overall compliance with human rights requirements, contributing to the sustainability of the business.

More information about our work and team you'll find on our website at www.loening-berlin.de.

⁵ IRHB - Contending with the Coronavirus - What Should we Expect of Business During Global Health Emergencies?

⁶ Unilever - Helping to protect lives and livelihoods from the Covid-19 pandemic

⁷ UNPRI – How Responsible Investors Should Respond to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Crisis

⁸ UNPRI – How Responsible Investors Should Respond to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Crisis

⁹ GM-Mobilizing to Combat a Global Crisis, Exame - GM, Embraer, Senai: fábricas são adaptadas na luta para fazer respiradores

¹⁰ Plastic News - Covestro, DuPont donate medical supplies to battle coronavirus

¹¹ Nestlé steps up global response to COVID-19 pandemic, joins forces with the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies