



# Responsible Business Alliance

Advancing Sustainability Globally

## RESPONSIBLE BUSINESS CONDUCT DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has caused widespread global business and human rights-related concerns throughout the membership of the Responsible Business Alliance (RBA), its Initiatives and stakeholder communities. COVID-19 is a [global pandemic](#) affecting nearly every industry and every country. Its impact is wide and deep, affecting not only public health but also the global economy and employment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>1</sup>, as of April 7, 2020, full or partial lockdown measures were affecting almost 2.7 billion workers, representing around 81 percent of the world's workforce. The ILO's estimates indicate that working hours will decline by 6.7 percent in the second quarter of 2020, which is equivalent to 195 million full-time workers.

This impact will surely be most acutely felt by vulnerable workers in global supply chains who may face an impact both in terms of working conditions but also unemployment. Migrant workers could be disproportionately impacted by the negative effects of COVID-19 on businesses, including through soaring unemployment rates, acute health risks and possible loss of income.<sup>2</sup>

Many countries have issued guidance on the coronavirus and companies are encouraged to implement those guidelines across their businesses. The World Health Organization has published regular [Situation Reports](#) that offer statistics globally. They have also published a [Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#) that "outlines the public health measures that the international community stands ready to provide to support all countries to prepare for and respond to COVID-19."

While governments around the world have mobilized to develop extraordinary measures to address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, the private sector has a critical role to play in not only providing necessary goods and services but ensuring employment and a strong recovery. This is particularly the case for global supply chains, a highly complex web of business and trading relationships spread across numerous countries, drawing upon human and other resources that come from diverse regions with varying cultures, standards and government regulations. Most companies have hundreds if not thousands of customers and suppliers, and suppliers typically provide services to more than one industry sector. Emergency situations such as this require additional attention to business relationships where buyers and suppliers must maintain heightened levels of due diligence and communication to manage potential risks and any associated negative consequences.

### ROLE OF THE RBA

As an industry body, the RBA has been advancing human rights due diligence across its membership by helping members implement human rights and environmental due diligence in their operations and supply chains over the past 15 years. Our mission and vision are centered on the principal of shared value as what is good for workers and the environment is good for business.

During this difficult period, protection of workers and the environment in international supply chains are top priorities for the RBA and its members. Focusing on worker health and well-being, rights protection and engagement is paramount to successfully navigating the COVID-19 crisis. The RBA and its Initiatives are mobilizing nearly 400 members, with combined annual revenues of greater than \$7.7 trillion, directly employing over 21.5 million people, and products manufactured in more than 120 countries, to help combat the COVID-19 crisis and deliver business continuity.

### RBA RESOURCES TO MANAGE COVID-19

The RBA has provided members and suppliers a range of resources and tools to help manage the COVID-19 crisis. These include:

- Member advisories and guidance on COVID-19
- Insights into the effects of the global pandemic through RBA COVID-19 survey results
- Biweekly expert webinar series
- A forum for sharing best practices and peer learning
- Custom training programs in the RBA Learning Academy for members and their suppliers
- Curated resources including relevant information from key governments, inter-governmental organizations and stakeholders
- Existing assessment tools and programs as well as new ones in development

<sup>1</sup> [ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, 7 April 2020.](#)

<sup>2</sup> [COVID-19: Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis, International Organization on Migration \(IOM\).](#)

# HUMAN RIGHTS AND COVID-19

Managing through this crisis requires vigilance to respect human rights while promoting business continuity. Buyers and suppliers working closely together with these goals in mind can create an environment to proactively address these challenges. The RBA has outlined the following measures to help bridge the gap between now and the return to full production.

## MEASURES TO PROTECT WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY

Factory management should work to contain the spread of the virus through clear procedures that include providing immediate proactive measures, such as:

- Availability of facemasks (along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them)<sup>3</sup> and hand sanitizer outside of dormitories and canteens, as well as in places where workers congregate, such as for team meetings and on the factory floor.
- Prompt on-site medical care to those showing flu or associated symptoms, especially respiratory related, isolating those who may have come in contact with individuals that have contracted the virus.
- Providing additional COVID-19 communications to workers on a regular basis.
- Engaging workers as part of the process to manage operational issues.

## INCREASED BUYER AND SUPPLIER DISCUSSIONS

Buyers and suppliers should have transparent discussions regarding the impact of the outbreak on workplace operations and develop plans to mitigate disruptions while considering worker well-being and avoiding exploitation.

Buyers are encouraged to:

- Provide flexibility on delivery schedules, financial arrangements, and other business agreement terms to avoid unintended consequences to workers.

## OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19

Buyers and suppliers must remain diligent about protecting workers' rights, specifically:

- Ensuring that, while waivers may be granted as an "Emergency Situation," working hours should be monitored to avoid significant stress and harm to employees.
- Overtime must be voluntary, paid at a premium, must end when the crisis is over, and must be managed in compliance with local law.
- Closely monitoring that labor shortages are not addressed exclusively with workers vulnerable to exploitation such as dispatch, outsourced, student, young or irregular foreign workers and/or those who may be subject to conditions that contribute to forced labor. Under no circumstances should underage labor be permitted.
- Ensuring that workers are not asked to return to work until completely recovered from the illness or before the end of the incubation period if they are known to have come in contact with the virus.
- Monitoring wage and social insurance contribution calculations and payments to ensure they are accurate, fair and reflect RBA Code of Conduct expectations.
- Respect the terms of labor contracts and related legal requirements and ensure that there are no instances of medical discrimination as a result of the health crisis.
- Additional recommendations specific to migrant workers can be found in the [International Organization for Migration's Guidance for Employers and Businesses on Protection of Migrant Workers During the COVID-19 Crisis](#).

## GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

As factories resume normal business functions, we suggest the following:

- Ensure workers are given the ability to return to work in a manner consistent with their health and family needs.
- Ensure workers receive accurate and timely communications about returning to work.
- Adequately manage new and temporary workers who have been hired to cover the backlog in production.
- Assist workers financially until the global crisis is resolved.
- Communicate to your customers a delivery schedule that will respect the rights and protect the health and well-being of workers.