

Practical Guide for Business: How to Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 in Eastern and Southern Africa

Interim guidance, March 19 2020¹

The worldwide coronavirus pandemic continues to spread exponentially, driving up the numbers of infected people to over 200,000 in more than 150 countries to date. COVID-19 confirmed cases are also rising in Eastern and Southern Africa and time is of the essence to take the right measures to contain and slow down its spread.

In collaboration with the World Health Organization, governments and other partners, UNICEF is engaged in global efforts to address the outbreak and keep children and their families safe. In Eastern and Southern Africa, UNICEF will be supporting governments mainly on risk communication and community mobilization, infection prevention & control, as well as mental health and psychosocial support. UNICEF will also be ensuring critical support to essential health services and related procurement and supply of equipment.

Although the virus presents greater risks to people aged over 65 and those with pre-existing weakened immune systems, it is important to keep in mind the secondary impacts the virus will have on children. As protective measures are taken, family incomes will be hit hard as their businesses are shuttered or they are confined at home, making it difficult to buy food or pay for basic healthcare. In countries where schools are shut, but parents still work, not only will children's education be affected, but many may be left with inadequate or no care.

To protect customers, workers², business partners and communities from existing and future infections, the private sector has a key role to play in support of government efforts. Below are key actions you can take to team up against COVID-19.

¹ This is an interim guidance note, developed on request in a fast-evolving situation. It should not be seen as promoting particular work arrangements generally but provides guidance to support partners (employers) in relation to the unusual work situation created by the COVID-19 outbreak. As such information may date quickly and you are advised to check the sources and online information (via links) regularly.

² We are referring to all 'workers' (not only employees) to ensure that all staff are taken into consideration, and especially those most at risk, such as contract workers and informal workers.

Key Actions for Businesses:

1. Provide hand washing stations, soap and hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs within your business locations, for your customers and workers

Maintaining clean workplaces reduces the propensity of infections inside and outside the workplace.

- Maintain your shops, facilities and workplaces clean, and ensure toilets have clean water and soap.
- Make available alcohol-based hand rubs and strongly encourage their use.
- Where available, clean breastfeeding rooms where women can express milk. The rooms should be equipped with disinfecting wipes, trash bin with lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and access to hand washing facilities.
- Apply safety and health standards to ensure breastfeeding children and mothers are not exposed to the virus, as well as to chemicals and toxins.
- Clean on-site childcare facilities, and equip with clean water, soap and hand-cleaning with alcohol-based hand rubs.

2. Provide customers and workers with guidance to encourage hygiene practices and post visible messages on COVID-19 to prevent future infections

Handwashing and hygiene education remain the most protective actions that can help protect children from a variety of infections, including Coronavirus.

- There is a high risk of wrong COVID-19 information being shared on social media and elsewhere. Take an active role in disseminating information from trusted sources (see recommended links on last page).
- Utilize all internal communication platforms or channels to disseminate validated information about COVID-19. These could include but not limited to: Intranet, email, Website, WhatsApp, Noticeboard, meetings, brownbag and audiovisual mechanisms.
- Distribute educational leaflets for workers to support hygiene practices and other protective measures for them and their families. Messaging should follow WHO advice for the public. See also [UNICEF Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): What parents should know and how to protect themselves and their children](#). Display banners on walls with prevention and protection advice.
- For working mothers who are breastfeeding, encourage and support them to continue breastfeeding. Facilities for breastfeeding or milk expression should include the necessary items for adequate hygiene, including disinfecting wipes, trash bin with lid, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, and access to hand washing facilities.

3. Provide workers with flexible work arrangements in situations of sickness or sickness in the family

- In case meals are offered at the workplace, practice food safety. This includes advising workers with appropriate precautions for handling raw meat, milk or animal organs to avoid cross-contamination with uncooked foods, as per good food safety practices and WHO guidelines.

Flexible work arrangements allow workers to fulfil their job responsibilities while meeting their personal or family needs. This type of arrangement limits the exposure of workers to the virus³, reduces workers' stress and ensures children are not left alone when schools are closed.

- Provide flexible work arrangements, where possible, especially in cases where workers are 65 or older, or have pre-existing health conditions (e.g., high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, cancer, diseases or treatments which weaken the immune system). They are at higher risk of complications in case they contact the COVID-19 virus.
- Provide flexible time for workers should they or their family members fall ill.
- Be aware that women are particularly affected as they are likely to face most of the care burden at home.
- Ensure working parents have enough time to spend with their children to cope with stress. In case of family separation due to hospitalization or illness, ensure flexible time for workers to keep regular contact with their loved ones.
- Brief your workers, contractors and customers that if COVID-19 starts spreading in their community, anyone with even a mild cough or low-grade fever (37.3 C or more) needs to stay at home. They should also stay home (or work from home).
- If flexible working arrangements are not possible, take steps to understand the needs of working parents in collaboration with worker representatives and trade unions before investing in any childcare solution needed to reduce parental stress.

³ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports>

4. Support workers in seeking early medical care in cases of fever, cough and difficulty breathing

There is currently no vaccine to protect against COVID-19. Help your workers to seek medical care.

- Provide workers with guidance on where they can be referred if they present symptoms consistent with COVID-19 (address and phone number of local hospitals, health authorities, emergency hotlines), and assist in safe transport for referral wherever needed.
- Asymptomatic workers with travel history to affected areas should follow the same precautions as everyone else (i.e. guidance/support for referral). However, depending on policies of local health authorities, they may be placed in quarantine – and thus require support for continued access to food, water, accommodation, telecommunication services, medical services, and psychosocial support.
- See https://www.who.int/ith/Repatriation_Quarantine_nCoV-key-considerations_HQ-final11Feb.pdf?ua=1 .
- Ensure that workers presenting any symptoms are also provided with psychological support.

5. Support workers in accessing continued health care especially for children under five, pregnant mothers and those with chronic conditions

The fear of, and response to COVID-19 may jeopardize continued care for children under five, pregnant mothers and those with chronic conditions.

- Encourage and support workers (especially those pregnant and/or with children under five) to continue accessing preventive, promotive and curative care paying specific attention to: antenatal care visits, facility delivery, post-natal care, immunization and care for infectious diseases (malaria, diarrhea and pneumonia). If needed, provide your workers with a list of nearby facilities who provide these services.
- Support workers in addressing financial and geographic barriers (e.g. transportation) to accessing basic services including medication.
- Advocate for and support workers in accessing nutritious food and safe drinking water especially for pregnant women and children under-five who are most at risk of malnutrition.

6. Reinforce your community's COVID -19 response: lend support to your local health facilities

Your nearby health facility may become overwhelmed with the COVID-19 preparedness and response.

Check with the health facility in your vicinity and explore if you can (depending on your assets and expertise):

- Help them with measuring the temperature of your workers and customers.
- Assist them with any needs that can support them in their COVID preparedness and response including testing kits, regular oxygen supply and other COVID-19 case management commodities.
- Support capacity building of health facility staff on infection prevention and control recommendations and COVID-19 case detection and management.
- For infection prevention and control:
 - Ensure continuity of safe water, sanitation, supplies and commodities to implement standard precautions, contact precautions, airborne precautions, and eye protection (e.g., goggles or face shields) to protect healthcare workers with exposure to the virus.
 - To shield healthcare workers, patients, and visitors from individuals with suspected/confirmed COVID-19, support building physical barriers or partitions in triage areas to guide patients, curtains separating patients in semi-private areas, and airborne infection isolation rooms (AIIRs) with proper ventilation.
- Provide support to their ongoing health assistance to families, mothers and children, which may be jeopardized by the need for health workers to focus on fighting COVID-19 – including efforts to lift the morale of health workers in the form of rewards and recognitions.
- Support the health facility with audiovisual aids for health education and awareness sessions including the availability of posters, projector/screens/television showing information related to COVID-19 and other health issues.
- Assist the health facility in establishing linkages with community health workers/volunteers for early case detection, health education and early referrals.

7. Support workers coping with stress during COVID-19 outbreak

Potential risk to unemployment and workplace inflexibility can increase parenting stress,⁴ which has an impact on parenting practices and parent–child relationships.

- Contribute to reducing stress by re-posting evidence-based information from reliable sources such as WHO and UNICEF. Unverified information from mass media and social media posts could create unnecessary panic or stress.
- Provide workers with sound suggestions on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle.
- Gather information that will help workers under stress to accurately understand and cope with risks.
- Support workers in helping their children cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak (spending more time with them with love and attention, as well as encouraging play and relaxation).
- In case of worker illness, reduce the potential financial implications to workers to the extent possible to ensure they can keep their and their family livelihoods. In times of crises, families particularly depend on employment and income protection. Any business response should be in line with international labour standards set by the ILO.

8. Protect the workplace against discrimination and social stigma

With massive attention on COVID-19 developments, fear and anxiety spread easily and stigmas may develop against those who fall ill or have been exposed.

- Develop a corporate policy against discrimination in the workplace.
- Provide trainings to workers to reduce social stigma and prevent discrimination among them.
- Encourage workers to be pro-active in reporting incidents of inappropriate, discriminatory, harassing or abusive behavior to your supervisor, HR department, union, or management.
- Take steps to ensure that the reporting mechanism is confidential, gender-sensitive and safe. Encourage the wide and non-discriminative use of such service and ensure that it is easily accessible by all, including people with disabilities.
- Identify cases of discrimination and promptly act upon them.

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5014428/>

School closures: flexible work arrangements and childcare

With the closure of schools and childcare facilities, promoting flexible working arrangements and/or support to childcare, your workers will be in a better position to address any childcare challenges and not be distracted by concerns about their children's safety and wellbeing at home.

Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are alternate arrangements or schedules from the traditional work setting. Under flexible work arrangement, employers and workers are given greater freedom in how they fulfil their job responsibilities and may therefore meet personal or family needs and achieve better work-life balance. Meanwhile, the needs of employers, such as timely delivery of tasks with quality, are not compromised. In short, workplace flexibility arrangements are expected to create a win-win working relationship, which simultaneously recognises and realises the needs of both employers and workers.

Not all types of flexible work arrangements are manageable or worthwhile for all sizes and types of organisations, so every employer considering flexible work arrangement should undertake an organisational assessment to determine whether and what kind of flexible scheduling will meet their needs the best.

Flexible Work Arrangement for Workers		
Flex Time	Flex Time Off	Flex Location/Roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Banking of working hours Compressed work week Flexible working hours Job sharing Switch shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extra or prolonged holiday or personal leave Long-term leave with position being kept Reduced hours (part-time) with the same hourly rate Paid lactation breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Telework or telecommuting Temporary remote work for caring purposes Job sharing Change of responsibilities

Childcare

Childcare is a key part of family friendly policies and in supporting families in providing nurturing care for young children. In the context of COVID-19 and the decision of some authorities to enforce school closures, many working parents are faced with lack of childcare options. Workers may be faced with low accessibility due to varied factors including lack of professional childcare workers and centres, opening hours that do not fit workers' working schedule, working conditions such as long and unpredictable hours, shift work, long travel times, and unreliable and expensive transport. As a result, caregivers may find it necessary to take their children to the workplace, which increase the risk of exposing young children to unsafe conditions.

Best Practices

1. **Needs-based:** Workers' childcare needs can vary greatly and there are multiple childcare arrangements available. Employer should take steps to understand the needs of working parents in collaboration with worker representatives and trade unions before investing in any childcare solution.
2. **Cover particularly the most vulnerable:** The childcare programme shall cover as many working families as possible, particularly the most vulnerable children who are from the most deprived families (poor families, families in rural areas, families with unemployed, disabled or parents with mental or physical conditions, families from marginalised groups and ethnic minorities, single-headed families, parents without support from the extended-family, etc.), children who suffer from chronic illness or who are marginalized, such as the left-behind children or migrant children with little or no care from their parents, children whose parents are working in the informal sectors or whose caregivers may be less informed of their rights and procedures for childcare access.
3. **Clearly defined objectives:** The childcare programme developed or adopted shall have clearly defined objectives. Bearing in mind the purpose and focus of childcare, the childcare programmes adopted by employer should foster incremental developmental progress in a healthy and safe environment and should be flexible to capture the interests of the children and the individual abilities of the children.
4. **Ensure availability:** When employer decided to introduce childcare programmes in its business operation, efforts shall be made to ensure continued availability.

Useful online resources

UNICEF is working with global health experts around the clock to provide accurate information. Information you can trust is grounded in the latest scientific evidence. Be sure to get your facts from reliable sources, like UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

- WHO Coronavirus resources:
<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>
- CDC-2019 nCOV factsheet:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/about/index.html>
- WHO getting your workplace ready:
<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/getting-workplace-ready-for-covid-19.pdf>
- UNICEF Coronavirus disease (COVID-19): What parents should know
<https://www.unicef.org/stories/novel-coronavirus-outbreak-what-parents-should-know>
- How to talk to your child about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)
<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-talk-your-child-about-coronavirus-covid-19>
- WHO Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) advice for the public: Myth busters
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>
- Advice for health workers:
https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/who-rights-roles-respon-hw-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bcabd401_0