



The Impact of Covid-19 on Suppliers and Workers in Africa



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Introduction

The UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights outline the responsibility of businesses to identify and assess actual or potential adverse human rights impacts as a result of their operations. The guidance stresses that, 'because human rights situations are dynamic, assessments of human rights impacts should be undertaken at regular intervals.'ⁱ Few situations have had consequences as fast paced and far reaching on business practices across the globe as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, given the imperatives of social distancing and the subsequent lockdown of over 100 countries by the end of March 2020ⁱⁱ, the nature of the pandemic response limited the ability of businesses to assess the impact of these changes on human rights across supply chains. Across the African continent, in-

person auditing stopped entirely for between one and two months, and six months later is only now beginning to reach pre-Covid-19 levels.ⁱⁱⁱ

In response to this challenge, Partner Africa and &Wider have been working with global businesses and their suppliers in the agri-business and textiles industries across Africa; to monitor the reality on the ground for both suppliers and their workers in relation to human rights risk and impact. This has been achieved through a combination of direct worker reporting, where data was gathered twice from workers and once from management through a series of anonymous call cycles, and semi-structured interviews with suppliers across supply chains.

18
SUPPLIERS

7425
WORKERS CALLED

297
MANAGERS CALLED

31
KEY STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

FUNCTION OF SUPPLIERS



AGRICULTURE



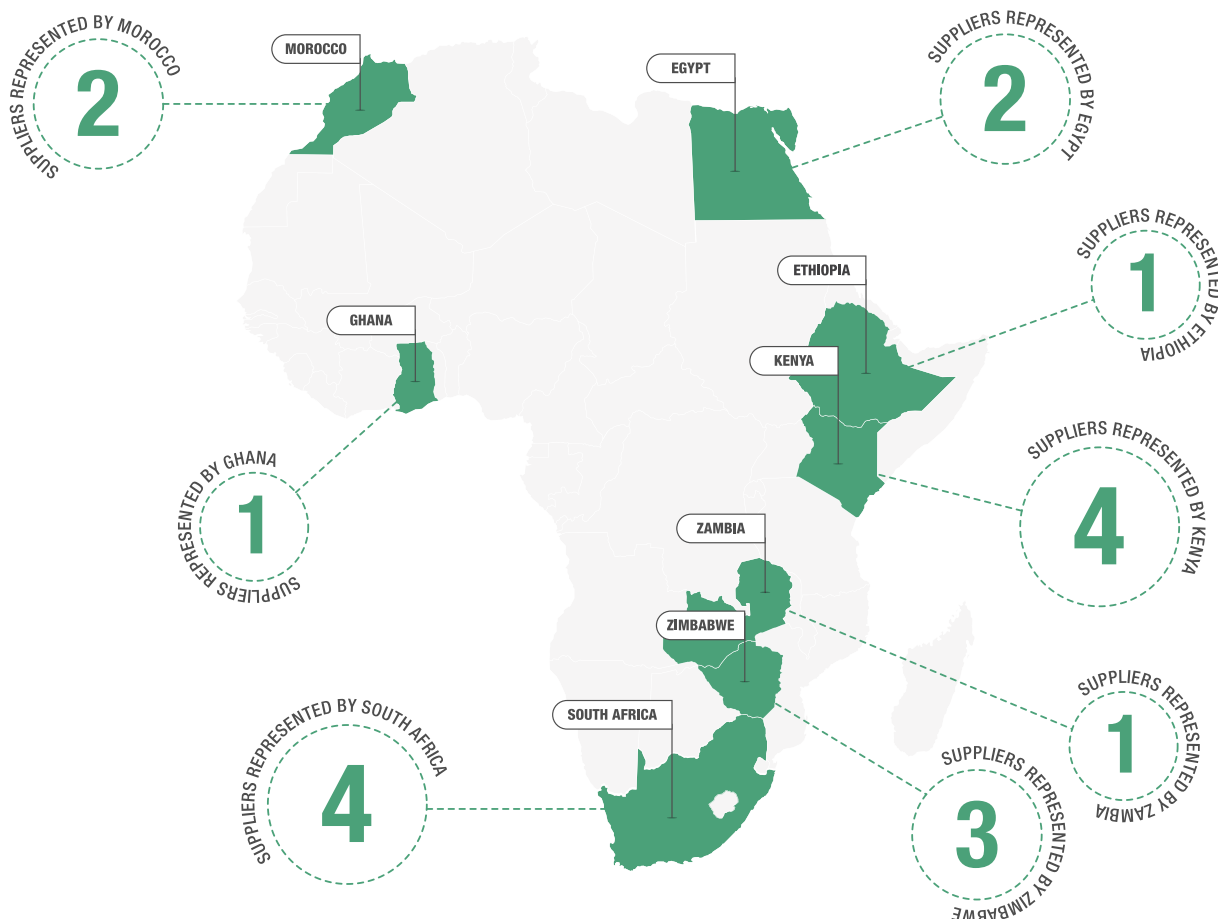
FLORICULTURE



TEXTILES



WASTE MANAGEMENT



This report outlines the findings from this study, which took place between June and December 2020, and contributes to the body of research developing around the impact of Covid-19 on supply chains and human rights on the African continent. It aims to provide insight for retailers and buyers on the challenges faced by their suppliers in mitigating human rights risks and ensuring the livelihood of their workers at a time of increased operational challenges. The report highlights evidence of good practice found during the course of the study, and also makes recommendations as to how, within the parameters of the ever-changing new normal, businesses can put in place policies and processes to monitor and mitigate human rights risks.



The Good Practice Icon

Areas of good practice will be signposted throughout the report by this icon.

Key areas of focus include:

The impact of health & safety challenges on businesses and what has been done to protect the wellbeing of their workforce and avoid closures due to Covid-19 outbreaks.

The impact of business challenges as a result of Covid-19 on workers, and the range of decisions taken to balance remaining operational in the short to medium term with protecting workers and their families' livelihoods.

The importance of further integrating communication and feedback mechanisms into both internal operations and relationships with stakeholders at this time.

The extent to which Covid-19 has brought about rapid change in business operations, and in some cases accelerated pre-Covid-19 trend forecasts, and the importance of embedding from the onset human rights due diligence frameworks within these new ways of working.

Based on the study's key findings, recommended actions for monitoring human rights and worker wellbeing, and working towards best practice.



Key Findings

This section outlines key findings in relation to challenges faced by businesses across value chains, and their impact on workers and human rights. Reaching 18 suppliers, including over 5000 workers (cumulative workforce covered) and their managers, the call cycles provide a broad picture of what is happening on the ground and how the target groups have been impacted by various changes. It should be noted that given the different nature of their work, recycling workers and managers were provided with call cycles that used different

questions than those posed to the other participants within this project. Their results are therefore not included in the tables within this section, but addressed separately.

The results of the call cycles is followed by analysis of some of the key trends; by collating highlights from longer interviews with suppliers and providing an opportunity to explore how the current challenges can be met in order to mitigate rather than negatively impact on human rights.

Call Cycle Findings

Covid-19 has impacted on suppliers' ability to operate as normal:

Based on the management call cycles to 18 suppliers, managers were clear about the challenges and measures taken since the start of Covid-19. A large proportion of the businesses reported new strains on business practices and cash flow. Suppliers suffered price hikes from their raw material suppliers, and also reported purchasing practices that generate further strain: late payments, fewer purchase orders, as well as cancelled purchase orders. The increased cost of transport and airfreight was highlighted by suppliers, along with the need to hire more transportation for workers to meet social distancing requirements when travelling to work.



Which has had an impact on their workforce:

The call cycles showed clearly that these challenges have filtered down to the workforce. A large proportion of respondents reported having changed terms of employment for some employees (payment, holidays or working hours). There was also a relatively high frequency of businesses who reported that they had laid off workers as a direct result of Covid-19. These findings provide some context for workers reporting widespread reduction in family incomes (outlined below). In addition to financial strains on businesses and consequently workers, difficulties in the businesses' own supply chains - lower stocks and higher prices were reported - which helps to explain why over half of participating businesses reported lower production levels. This again contextualises the reporting of job losses, as highlighted above.

Greatest impacts identified by site management

PRIORITY	NUMBER OF SITES REPORTING THESE PRIORITIES	PERCENTAGE OF SITES REPORTING THESE PRIORITIES (OUT OF 17)*
USING MORE VEHICLES TO TRANSPORT WORKERS	14	82.35%
CHANGED TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT DUE TO COVID-19	12	70.59%
SUPPLIERS CHARGING MORE FOR MATERIALS	12	70.59%
MATERIAL SUPPLIERS HAVE LESS STOCK?	10	58.82%
STAFF LAYOFF DUE TO IMPACT OF COVID-19	9	52.94%
DIFFICULTY IN TRANSPORTING PRODUCT DURING COVID-19	9	52.94%
SITE PRODUCING LESS DUE TO COVID-19	8	47.06%
MORE LATE PAYMENTS THAN USUAL	7	41.18%
BUSINESS CANNOT APPLY FOR GOVERNMENT LOAN OR FUNDING	7	41.18%
CUSTOMERS CANCELLED PURCHASE ORDERS	7	41.18%
LESS PURCHASE ORDERS THAN USUAL	6	35.29%

*These results tables exclude the findings from one supplier which focused on workers in the informal sector and therefore were provided with a slightly different survey, these results are summarised on page 8 of the report.

Suppliers have adapted well to new hygiene requirements:

On a positive note, businesses reported relative ease in affording and securing personal protective equipment (PPE) for their workers, and most were not forced to close their businesses due to outbreaks of Covid-19, and hadn't suffered extensive absenteeism across their workforces. It should be noted that across all participating sites, workers did report being told by the business to stay home if they had symptoms, and that in all cases workers apparently felt safe to report symptoms without fear of losing their jobs. So it is unlikely that these sites reported no increase in absenteeism due to repressive practices or worker fear of ramifications.

Indicators where status is positive (indicators that are not prioritised as needing attention by 50%+ of the managers participating)

WHAT'S REPORTEDLY WORKING WELL?	NUMBER OF SITES (OUT OF TOTAL OF 17)
ABLE TO GET PROTECTIVE GEAR FOR EVERYONE ON SITE	13
NOT TEMPORARILY CLOSED SITE DUE TO COVID-19	13
ENOUGH BUDGET FOR PROTECTIVE GEAR ON SITE	15
NO INCREASE IN ABSENTEEISM DUE TO ILLNESS	13
WORKERS NOT ABSENT DUE TO CARING FOR ILL FAMILY MEMBERS*	13

*Survey did not measure which workplaces encouraged or permitted workers to apply for leave when they needed to care for the sick at home, due to limitations on mobile survey length.

*This provides a snapshot of the prevalence of Covid-19 in workplaces at the time of the call cycles, and does not take into account any subsequent change in prevalence of the disease in the countries of participating businesses.

Key findings reported by workers

Health & Safety measures are less of a concern than anticipated:

Direct worker reporting data gathered from workers shows that new workplace measures introduced to protect workers and prevent transmission of Covid-19 are being widely practised. None of the measures included in the survey were flagged as priority areas requiring improvement. This finding was unanticipated and signals that according to workers, the effort invested by participating businesses in these measures has been significant. The degree to which such measures have affected contagion figures in these workforces was not measured, due to the sensitive nature of gathering data on personal infection rates, even using an anonymous channel like direct worker reporting.

Measures being effectively practised by workers

*These indicators not raised as priorities or concerns in any of the 18 sites.



WORKERS HAVE BEEN TOLD HOW TO AVOID CATCHING OR SPREADING COVID-19



WORKERS HAVE ACCESS TO SOAP & CLEAN WATER TO WASH HANDS REGULARLY



INCREASED HAND WASHING BY WORKERS SINCE COVID-19



WORKERS FEEL SAFE TO REPORT TO MANAGERS THAT THEY FEEL UNWELL WITHOUT FEAR OF LOSING THEIR JOB



WORKERS HAVE PPE TO HELP PREVENT COVID-19 SPREAD



MANAGERS ENCOURAGE WORKERS TO STAY AT HOME IF THEY FEEL UNWELL



WORKERS ARE ABLE TO SOCIAL DISTANCE BY 1M



THE COMPANY HAS TOLD WORKERS TO STAY AT HOME IF THEY HAVE COVID-19 SYMPTOMS



CLEANING & DISINFECTING WORK SURFACES HAS INCREASED SINCE COVID-19

Working hours & family income are the key issues highlighted:

However, workers remain most concerned about the swift reduction in family income (within the last month), and the perception that there are currently “too few workers to do what needs to be done”. Both issues were consistently prioritised across both sets of results generated by workers in a clear majority of the sites where these issues were flagged.

Both these findings signal impacts that generate a significant strain on workers, whether in terms of financial and food security, or in terms of workplace pressures and workload. In short, a large cohort of workers reported working harder while household income declined. The extent to which both findings over-shadowed all other priorities raised, suggests that shrinking wages in the household, and labour shortages in the 18 sites surveyed and arguably in other sites sharing the same sectors and geographies as those covered, deserve thorough investigation. Given that employers have reduced staff numbers to mitigate a decline in income, monitoring

should take place to ensure that increased workload for remaining workers does not become the new-normal, and that employee numbers are increased once suppliers are more financially stable. Workers also identified, albeit in a smaller proportion (20%) of the participating sites, that they could not freely choose whether or not to accept after-hours work, and in the same proportion (in 20%, i.e. three of the participating sites) workers reported that since the onset of Covid-19 wages were not paid on time. Both indicators again reiterate the clear picture workers are painting in these results: heavier workloads and heavier workplace pressures, combined with greater financial pressure on the household. As late payment of wages has been closely tied to increasing the debt burden placed on households in economic downturns, this finding warrants close attention.



Greatest impacts identified by workers

PRIORITY	NUMBER OF SITES ON WHICH PRIORITY WAS RAISED DURING CALL CYCLE 1	% SITES (OUT OF 17)	NUMBER OF SITES ON WHICH PRIORITY WAS RAISED DURING CALL CYCLE 2	% SITES (OUT OF 15*)	NUMBER OF SITES ON WHICH PRIORITY WAS RAISED DURING BOTH CALL CYCLE 1 AND 2	% SITES (OUT OF 15)
CURRENTLY TOO FEW WORKERS TO DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE	15	88.24%	11	73.33%	11	73.33%
IN LAST MONTH, FAMILY INCOME GONE DOWN	13	76.47%	11	73.33%	11	73.33%
HAVE WORKERS BEEN PAID ON TIME DURING COVID-19?	2	11.76%	1	6.67%	0	0.00%
ARE WORKERS FREE TO CHOOSE WHEN TO DO OVERTIME WORK?	3	17.65%		0.00%	0	0.00%

*Two sites were unable to be called a second time, accounting for the different total of sites between call cycles 1 and 2



The impact of Covid-19 on different types of workers



On Workers in the Informal Sector:

In this study we were able to survey a recycling operation in Zambia. This included 802 recycling workers, and 11 recycling aggregators whose role it is to consolidate the waste collected by the recycling workers and re-sell.

These workers were provided with a separate call survey to match the realities of their working practices, and as such are excluded from the results represented in the study's tables throughout this report. However, the informal sector call surveys show that a significant proportion of participating workers (over 75%) reported the following impacts on their working lives, namely:

- 1 That since the Covid-19 outbreak, it has become more difficult to earn enough to pay for monthly necessities (remained a significant concern for this large proportion of workers across both sets of results).
- 2 A reduction in family income over the past month (although this seemed to improve moderately for some of the recycling workers reporting in the second set of results).

Over 75% of recycling aggregators, also operating informally, also echoed the above concerns and added that they were currently worried about losing their livelihoods because of the way Covid-19 has affected the company that buys their waste.



On Gender:

The number and nature of priorities for male and female workers was unexpectedly similar. Nonetheless modest differences were apparent, with the exception of sick leave. Across five sites female workers reported the concern that if they were to stay home because of catching Covid-19, that they would not get sick pay. This was in contrast to only two sites where men cited this as a priority concern.



On Permanent vs Seasonal Workers:

When comparing the experiences of permanent vs seasonal workers, it is unsurprising that the most significant difference related to permanent workers reporting as a priority that there is currently too much work to do and too few workers to do it (permanent workers across 13 out of 18 sites), when compared with their seasonal or temporary co-workers (9 sites out of 18). Nonetheless both findings demonstrate the importance of this workload issue to workers on these sites at the times the data was gathered.

Contextualising survey findings through interviews with supplier management & key stakeholders

To contextualise the insights gathered via mobile surveys from workers and managers, Partner Africa has undertaken semi-structured interviews with the suppliers participating in the research project, as well as other key stakeholders. From this qualitative research, some key themes, challenges and areas of good practice have been highlighted.



Demand impacted produce differently

Disruption to operations and turnover was found to be directly linked to the type of product a supplier specialised in. The steep drop in demand for flowers, as well as a reduction in air freight capacity, led to farms having to dump stock that was unable to reach markets outside of Africa. Whilst demand for food items on the whole remained relatively stable within this research's sample group, citrus growers saw an increase in demand, maybe as a result of increased interest in the impact of vitamin C on the immune system^{iv}, as did fresh products such as green beans. Those farms awarded essential services status encountered less negative impact on their operations, with the level of disruption also dependent on what part of a crop's growing cycle the lockdown impacted on. This affected farms' ability to plant and harvest during lockdown, as well as access farming inputs that needed to be imported, and the ability of workers and migrant labourers to be transported to work sites.



Good practice: Businesses were able to shift production in response to the pandemic

Whilst the study has found that demand for garments has decreased overall, the textiles supplier participating in this study shifted operations to the making of internationally graded face masks. Alongside their existing commitments to international fashion brands, the extension of operations to manufacture face masks will actually see an increase in the factory's total workforce, from 350 workers in March 2020 to a projected target of 800 workers. The extent to which demand for products has been maintained during the pandemic has of course had an impact on business operations and worker livelihoods.



Health & Safety

The Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the fact that our societies' health and wellbeing is deeply interconnected, with businesses required to adapt quickly to meet emerging health and safety needs and ensure the safety of their workforce and that of their families. As identified by workers through the call cycles, health and safety measures were not prioritised as a concern, indicating that the suppliers covered by this study had put new hygiene and sanitation measures in place.

The qualitative research did however uncover interesting outcomes as a result of these new health and safety measures. Whilst some suppliers noted that PPE was initially difficult to access, the majority of respondents felt that they were able to procure the equipment needed to keep their workforce safe. Work sites such as farms and packhouses were found to have adapted to physical distancing by staggering shifts and distancing workers. One supplier explained how the need to distance workers has led to increased automation and plans in the long term to reduce the workforce. Whilst businesses must consider changes required to remain operational, and should ideally receive government support at this time, thought must nevertheless be given to their responsibility as employment providers at a time of reduced income for families in the communities in which they operate.

Multiple suppliers highlighted that they felt that the pandemic had provided a learning opportunity for businesses and workers to take sanitation more seriously; an imperative for businesses required to model best practice in food safety. Lastly, several interviews with suppliers showed an increased respect for the important role of cleaners within a workplace. Often deemed a 'low status' job, cleaners have over the past six months been required to take on more risk and responsibility for their own and their colleagues' health and safety. The issue of cleaning is now embedded in high level Covid-19 task teams within companies, and it marks an opportunity for greater consultation with the workforce on this issue, and an acknowledgement of the vital role of cleaning staff within an organisation, and that they should be remunerated accordingly.



Good practice: Going beyond basic workplace sanitation

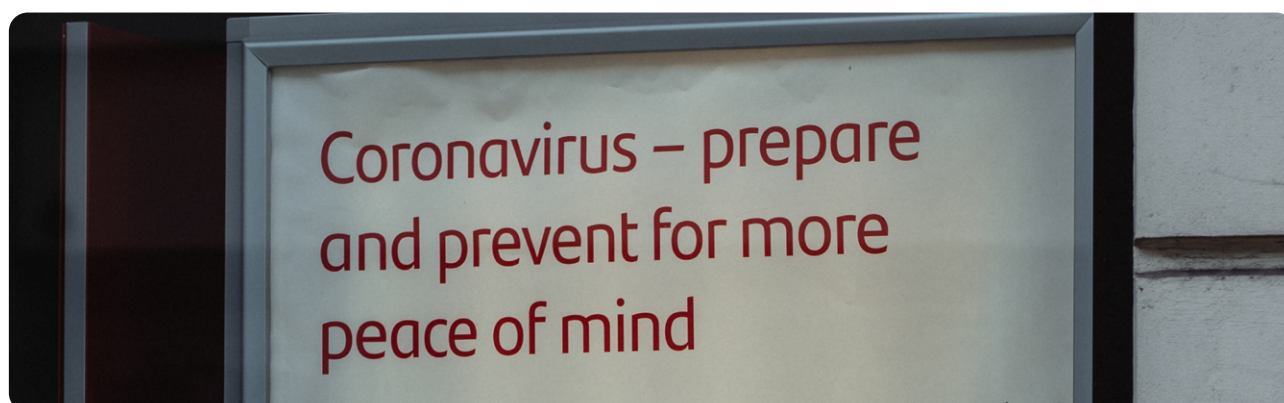
There was significant evidence of suppliers engaging with workers and other stakeholders beyond base line hygiene and sanitation initiatives.

INSTANCE 1

There was significant evidence of employers providing PPE and hand sanitiser to workers to take home, an acknowledgement that workplace safety is directly linked to workers' families' ability to remain safe in the home. A further area of good practice was the community role undertaken by several of the suppliers; providing donations to local organisations and authorities to fund community health and safety programmes. One supplier worked with the local community radio station to develop health and safety bulletins delivered by the on-site medic.

INSTANCE 2

One supplier interviewed noted that to date their entire on the ground workforce had been given the title of 'general worker'. For the first time, as a result of Covid-19, two workers have been given specific responsibility for cleaning and keeping the worksite sanitised. This is an important opportunity to recognise the dignity in these roles and opportunities for professionalisation and upskilling of the cleaning workforce; as well as an acknowledgement of the importance of health, safety and hygiene roles and representative structures within a business. These new roles should also come with an increase in remuneration, in acknowledgment of the risk undertaken by professional cleaners undertaking this vital role.



Worker Livelihoods

The worker call cycles clearly showed evidence of a negative impact on family income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Concomitantly, suppliers identified multiple strains on business cash flow, which led to the need for quick pay roll decision making. It is clear that suppliers were required to weigh up the impacts of reducing workers' salaries or making redundancies to keep remaining staff on their regular wage. The study also found various approaches to wage reduction. There was evidence of across the board pay cuts, regardless of workers' income level, for a lengthy period of time and without evidence of a timetable for review. This approach had a disproportionate impact on the workers at the bottom of the pyramid, with the wage cuts to these workers being described as 'the difference between eating and not eating'.

Despite evidence of commitments by several suppliers to maintain a base level of pay, workers' level of take home pay has nonetheless been impacted. Businesses experiencing a reduction in demand were not able to give workers' their regular hours and two of the study's suppliers were forced to close down due to suspected Covid-19 outbreaks, impacting on pay. There was also evidence of increased health and safety measures impacting on company defined worker productivity targets and subsequently the awarding of bonuses. One packhouse within the agri-business supply chain had not installed enough hand sanitising stations to avoid long queues; with workers required to queue and sanitise every 15 minutes. This impacted on their productivity and ability to meet packing targets, and in turn achieve the threshold for awarding of bonuses that top up their hourly base rate. It is clear that businesses must be adaptable in order to ensure that the cost of new hygiene requirements are not borne disproportionately by the workforce.



Good practice: Equitable approaches to wage changes

Those suppliers who initiated unilateral and across-the-board pay cuts were still operating within the law. However, several suppliers made the decision to move beyond compliance and undertake a more nuanced approach to worker pay. One supplier only cut the pay of management, allowing the majority of the workforce to maintain their existing level of income, and a second developed a sliding scale of income reductions, meaning that the lowest paid workers within the business received no or minimal wage cuts. There have been concerns since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that employers will adapt to business pressures by reverting to local labour laws over international best practice. Interestingly, one supplier highlighted that rather than adhere to an Ethiopian government directive allowing for suspension of pay-rises and bonuses during the Covid-19 pandemic*, and despite a decrease in demand, they decided to still award employees their yearly incremental pay increase.



Communication

Suppliers have been required to react quickly to the impact of the pandemic, and importantly keep workers updated and safe as they adapt business practices. Suppliers have reported varied levels of support and communication from the government, stating that where and when guidance and educational materials have been made available they have helped businesses both plan and impart important health information and resources to workers.

At a company level, changes to internal communication were also identified. One supplier, where there is a recognised trade union on-site, identified how worker representatives also sat on the company's Covid-19 task team, and worked with management to communicate changes to the workforce. Three other suppliers were able to show how worker committee structures had been engaged to some extent in helping to adapt and communicate, with one business increasing the number of worker committee meetings in order to further cascade information to the workforce and to gain worker feedback on changes. Committee suggestions taken on board include requests for each minibus transporting employees to work to have its own thermometer, and for the opening of more entrances to the facility to reduce crowds and allow for social distancing. There was no evidence however of workers and their representatives being consulted on changes to worker terms and conditions, and no evidence was found of worker committees and managers engaging in collective bargaining processes such as consultation and negotiation around contractual changes.



Good practice: Adapting of internal communication

Whilst several suppliers reported no change in the way that they communicate internally, for example between supervisors and workers, a large proportion reported developing Covid-19 'task teams' to bring together personnel from across their operations. This is an interesting development in light of the study results indicating that suppliers had swiftly implemented Covid-19 hygiene control measures and there may be a correlation here.

Other suppliers highlighted the importance of technology such as WhatsApp in contacting dispersed workforces across farms, providing information to workers at home and importantly ensuring that there was a deeper level of response and feedback from workers rather than the one way information bulletins that the company had previously relied on. Those suppliers who utilised worker committee structures, recognising the important role of trade union and worker representatives in engaging with their colleagues, also saw improved communication, especially around safety and hygiene measures.

Strong Working Relationships

When asked about resilience, suppliers consistently highlighted the importance of quality relationships to their ability to operate with minimal disruption during the pandemic. Multiple suppliers stressed that those buyers and brands with which they had the strongest relationship pre-Covid-19 allowed for flexible and mutually supportive joint working over the past six months. This includes the sharing of transport costs, honouring of orders, timely payment and adapting payment plans to alleviate cash flow shortages experienced by some suppliers. One supplier highlighted the support received by two retailers, who covered 50% and 100% of increased transport costs respectively, and how important this was to maintaining the business and pay roll at this time.

Actors within the South African wine industry, who have been largely unable to export their product throughout the country's lockdown period, stressed that they relied upon existing relationships with buyers to ensure that those markets remained viable after the country's wine export ban, when retailers had been required to source their wine from elsewhere. Other suppliers, especially within the logistics industry, were forced to develop new relationships in order to transport goods to markets outside of the continent, and multiple suppliers noted that they had sought and developed relationships with new buyers for their product. Suppliers also highlighted that they were able to utilise existing relationships with their communities and other local businesses to share expertise. These factors, helping to strengthen supplier resilience, play an important role in helping businesses to absorb shocks and protect the terms and conditions of their workforce.

Nodes of Connection

Similarly, the study highlighted the benefits of operating where possible in community, and within a networked system. Farms which are part of the Fairtrade network, including one of the suppliers in this study, were able to benefit from their membership of Fairtrade Africa. This included farmers' ability to access Fairtrade Premiums and make decisions to utilise this funding to meet the needs of workers and their families at this time. Other organisations, such as Wiego, who bring together workers in the informal economy, have been able to offer guidance and support to their network of waste-pickers across the African continent.

The South African wine industry has benefited from ethical trade organisations such as WIETA in highlighting industry risks and imperatives, as well as industry bodies who have undertaken a great deal of work to synthesise information and package it to be of use to their members on the ground. Within supply chains, logistics companies have been able to utilise their role as connectors in order to problem solve across the cohort of suppliers that they work with; engaging with multiple producers to develop and share best practice around adapting to the logistical challenges of the pandemic. Focusing on open source solutions, collaboration and sharing of information at this time should be seen as not just an opportunity to find business solutions, but also share best practice in minimising risks to human and worker rights.



Good practice: Developing local economies

It is clear that those suppliers who received financial support, for example in relation to freight costs, and clear communication regarding purchasing practices from their buyers, experienced greater resiliency during this time. This in turn enabled suppliers to maintain their workforce and minimise reductions in pay. However, several suppliers highlighted that the closure of borders to international services has led them to sourcing and developing new relationships with local businesses. One supplier, whose parent company is based in Europe, highlighted that the business no longer relies on technical services and expertise around engineering for pack house machinery being flown in from the European Head Quarters (HQ), but has shifted since Covid-19 to using local businesses and labour to undertake a large proportion of this work. These shifts have the potential to build community expertise and jobs through the development of more sustainable local economies.

Low priority plans became high priority actions

Research participants pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated changes to business models that had previously been planned but not actioned. This includes shifting more sales online, increasing automation, developing new markets and logistics relationships and strengthening communication structures within the workplace. Given the pace of change, reflection must also be undertaken around the human rights impacts of business decisions as companies balance staying afloat with honouring their responsibility to engage with their workforce ethically. Highlighted within the survey results, multiple suppliers also noted in the qualitative interviews the challenge of worker transportation; both navigating road blocks between residential areas and the worksite and ensuring that staff transportation provided by the employer was safe and socially distanced. Whilst several suppliers stressed the cost of these changes, rethinking how workers get to the worksite safely, on time and with minimal stress and costs to themselves is an opportunity to reimagine best practice in this area. One of the few suppliers not to transport the majority of its workforce privately outlined a top-up system whereby the majority of workers continued to use external private taxi services, with the supplier paying an extra cost directly to the transport company to compensate for a reduction in vehicle capacity due to social distancing rules. In fact, the private taxi service was maintaining vehicles at full capacity despite being paid by the supplier to run them with 50% capacity. Therefore, whilst the supplier took measures to minimise increased transport costs for workers, and immediately put an end to taxis operating without social distancing once it was brought to their attention, it is clear that those businesses operating their own worker transportation, in lieu of reliable public transport, were able to have greater oversight over both cost and safety.

The pandemic has forced many businesses to rethink how they contribute to getting their workers to site and take into account health and safety considerations. The farms in this study disproportionately provided transport to workers before the pandemic and have worked to ensure safety standards are maintained in the wake of Covid-19. This is an excellent model for industries that do not provide worker transport and rely upon workers using often unreliable, unsafe and costly modes of public and private transportation.

Recommendations

This report has focussed on the role of suppliers as actors in protecting workers from the worst impacts of Covid-19. Findings have shown that whilst suppliers have been under increasing pressure at this time, there are nonetheless opportunities for honouring workers' rights and strengthening mechanisms for their feedback and participation in order to strengthen the resilience of both businesses and their workforce. Based on the findings of this study, including

evidence of good practice, Partner Africa has outlined a series of recommendations to help suppliers embed best practice into their operations as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Alongside the development and embedding of due diligence processes and practices more generally, in order to meet the new and sometimes unique challenges posed by Covid-19, suppliers should work to develop responsible business practices in the following areas.



Freedom of association & the right to collective bargaining

- Whilst the study did find examples of worker committees and trade union representative structures being informed about changes within the workplace due to Covid-19, no examples of meaningful consultation and negotiation around contractual changes were identified. Suppliers should encourage and enable the creation of worker representative structures that can form an important base for meaningful communication, consultation and negotiation at this time. This is especially true given the changes to terms of employment and increased automation made as a result of Covid-19, and the need for meaningful consultation and negotiation with workers and their representatives on these issues.
- Employers, workers and where present their representatives should work together to ensure that workers have access to trade union officers and representation at this time, and that trade unions are able to organise. Farms should not use restricted access to work sites as a result of Covid-19 safety measures as an excuse to minimise on the ground trade union presence and activity, and provision should be made to allow trade unions access to worksites, whilst honouring the need for social distancing.



Health & Safety

- Employers should take every opportunity to honour the dignity and professionalism of their cleaning staff. This includes paying them a decent wage, providing training on new hygiene measures related to stopping the spread of Covid-19, as well as providing the PPE needed to keep all workers safe.
- Workers themselves are vital partners when developing health & safety practices that actually work, and health and safety committees should be either created or strengthened at this time.
- Employers must ensure that the burden of new hygiene requirements implemented as a result of Covid-19 are not borne by workers. PPE and sanitiser should be made free and available to workers, and the extra time these measures take should not be used as a means to reduce workers' pay or extend their working hours beyond legal limits.





Wages and Remuneration

- Employers should think about the proportional impact of pay cuts across their workforce. Where wage reductions must be made, they should be in consultation with workers and their representatives, and include monitoring and a timetable for a return to previous pay levels. Employers should ensure that pay cuts do not hit the lowest paid workers the hardest and consider how they can be absorbed by the highest paid within a company first.
- Where businesses have made redundancies but plan to re-hire staff once demand increases, they should re-hire workers on previous or improved terms and conditions and pay.
- Employers are urged to balance weaker national legislation and specific government directives to ease the burden on businesses at this time with the actual resilience of their operations and the needs of workers. Where governments reduce employers' requirements around workers' rights and pay, businesses should where possible maintain best practice and develop a timetable for returning to previous levels of pay.
- Employers forced to instigate proportional wage cuts should research what statutory income support or grants may be available to mitigate the impact of these cuts on workers and their families. Late payment of wages should be avoided by employers, with any delays or reductions communicated in a timely manner to workers and their representatives, along with a concrete timetable for remedy. Suppliers should communicate to retailers' problems with cash flow, including joint problem solving around payment timetables for goods and services.



Working Hours

- As businesses make staff cuts as a result of reduced demand and income, they must make sure to monitor the impact on staff workload as demand increases, including and any changes to the level of sick leave, turnover and use of overtime. As demand increases, employers should re-hire as soon as possible workers made redundant as a result of Covid-19 pressures, on the same or improved terms of employment.



No discrimination is practiced

- Where there is evidence of women not utilising available leave and sick pay, employers should actively promote these rights and stress that workers who take time off of work will not be disadvantaged in any way.



Prioritising a due diligence approach

This study has highlighted the challenges faced by suppliers as they both manage the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses, at the same time as ensuring that they fulfil their role as responsible employers.

Suppliers are vital employment creators and sources of livelihoods; however the work opportunities they provide must be decent ones and protect workers from human rights risk. It is clear that suppliers have taken action in adapting to the new reality, as seen by the creation of Covid-19 response and 'task teams' by multiple businesses participating in this study. However, suppliers should make sure to take a more systematic approach to this work in order to identify, prevent, mitigate and remediate human rights risks and abuses within their operations.

Businesses should ensure that their Covid-19 response links up to existing due diligence policies and processes; including grievance mechanisms, whistle blowing channels and worker representative structures. Where these practices do not exist, suppliers should use the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to identify due diligence gaps and implement new systems and ways of working to meet both the needs of the present and embed good practice for the future. Suppliers should be transparent in this process; working with and tapping into the expertise available within civil society, best practice within their industry and, importantly, their own workforce. Using the UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights as a blueprint, suppliers have an opportunity to strengthen their due diligence frameworks and meet their duty to respect human rights at this challenging time.

The role of retailers and buyers in supporting suppliers

Global supply chains are inherently interconnected, meaning that responsible business practices must be integrated throughout. This study has shown that suppliers have been managing logistical challenges, uncertainty around purchasing practices and increased costs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to honour their human rights obligations under the UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights, retailers and buyers can support their suppliers in various ways.



PURCHASING PRACTICES

Ensure timely payment of previous and new purchases in order to maintain supplier cash flow. Where possible, retailers should provide suppliers with purchasing forecasts in order for them to make longer term business decisions.



TRANSPORT & LOGISTICS

As goods have become more difficult to transport to market as a result of international lockdowns, retailers should work with suppliers to identify efficient transportation options and absorb some or all of the cost where possible.



SUPPORT AROUND RESPONSIBLE SOURCING:

As larger operations, retailers and buyers have human rights and responsible sourcing policies and practices embedded into their operations. Buyers should communicate this expertise and provide advice, resources and training to suppliers across their supply chain, and also share examples of best practice. Using a framework of continuous improvement in relation to human rights due diligence, retailers should work with suppliers to identify and measure risks and work together to mitigate potential or actual areas of human rights abuse.

About this study

Partner Africa is a pioneer in the field of ethical, responsible business solutions. Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya with regional offices in Cape Town, South Africa and London, UK, Partner Africa works across 50 countries in Africa and the Near East to safeguard workers' rights and improve working conditions, whilst facilitating access to markets for African suppliers. We deliver impactful and innovative advisory and auditing solutions for a range of sectors across Africa, helping clients manage Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) risks in their supply chains and navigate global trade responsibly.

&Wider gathers anonymous insight direct from workers at regular intervals about their working lives, using automated calls to workers' mobiles. The results of these calls appear on simple to read traffic light dashboards that are accessible to

the employer, and those customers or brands and other third parties that have been granted access to the results. &Wider engages with brands, suppliers and collectives to generate data on working conditions and wellbeing, supporting these parties to identify needs, measure improvements and track changes in workers' lives over time. Focus is placed on generating insight that is practically useful to both suppliers and buyers in their efforts to drive continuous improvement of working conditions and worker wellbeing.

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ABInBev, Co-op, The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), Flamingo, Ethical Apparel Africa (EAA), Minor Weir and Willis (MWW), Tesco and WIETA

Methodology

With strict lockdowns of international and provincial borders, as well as an increase in road blocks and curfews across much of the continent, gaining a picture of the new reality within businesses and workplaces has proven increasingly difficult. In-person auditing stopped entirely for between one and two months, and six months later is only now beginning to reach pre-Covid-19 levels.

In response to this challenge, Partner Africa, &Wider and retailer and industry body partners came together to undertake targeted research in order to identify key areas of concern and opportunity within the field of business and human rights. Working with six multinational brands, 18 suppliers from across their agribusiness and apparel supply chains were identified, to undertake a more detailed analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on their operations and workforce. Using a desk based review of existing literature to inform areas of enquiry, the project has undertaken two rounds of mobile phone calls to workers and managers at the identified supplier sites. This was followed by semi-structured interviews of managers at each supplier to contextualise the call cycle findings, and importantly add more detail to our understanding of the pressures that businesses have faced and further uncover how this has impacted on the workforce. Several interviews of third party stakeholders were also undertaken to provide further context.

Data was gathered in three main ways:

- 1 Desk based literature review on the impact of Covid-19 on business and human rights on the African continent
- 2 Quantitative research: Worker & management call cycles with participating suppliers, using a mobile based technology referred to as Direct Worker Reporting.
- 3 Qualitative research: Semi-structured interviews with participating suppliers, with at least one manager interviewed from each supplier.



Desk Based Literature Review

A desk-based literature review was undertaken in order to identify the emerging realities of Covid-19 on businesses and their impacts on human rights and inform areas for further study through this project.

Key trends identified through this review included:

Impacts on the agri-business and textiles sector:

- Both fast growing sectors across the continent, the agri-business and textiles industries have been impacted by both changes in demand on the global market as well as logistical challenges across supply chains following the outbreak of Covid-19.
- Recognising the imperative of maintaining the security of the global food supply, the decision to designate agriculture and farming essential services by many African states has helped to ease the disruption on upstream agri-business supply chains. The continued demand for food, along with agriculture's essential services status, has gone a long way to protect the jobs and livelihoods of workers in this sector.
- The shift in lifestyle as a result of lockdowns across the globe has led to a huge shift in terms of types of products in demand, both in regard to textiles and food items.
- A lifeline for some garment factories, and an opportunity for expansion, has been the shift by some businesses to manufacturing personal protective equipment (PPE)^{vi}. There has also been renewed demand in some of the hardest hit sectors, with signs that even the hard hit African horticulture sector is experiencing recovery in demand^{vii}.

Impacts on human rights:

- The agriculture and textiles industries have seen particularly high profile cases of human and labour rights risks; from health & safety concerns and the closure of food and meat processing factories due to Covid-19 outbreaks, to the cancelling of garment orders by large brands and the impact of this on textile factories and the livelihood of their workers.
- There has been evidence of employers reverting to less robust local interpretations of human rights law, raising the risk of undoing important gains made within the field of social responsibility and adherence to international law made in recent years^{viii}.
- Workers have had their livelihoods impacted through mass layoffs, and those who have continued to work have seen disruption through reductions in wages and hours.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is becoming increasingly clear that the most vulnerable workers, especially migrants and women, have been particularly impacted by the pandemic, both in the workplace and at home though the reported increase of gender based violence.

Quantitative Research: Connecting to realities on the ground & the role of direct worker reporting

Direct worker reporting generates anonymous insight direct from workers using mobile technology. Calls remain short to protect response rates and data quality (5-6 minutes regardless of the language). The method gathers data anonymously and can therefore offer more sensitive insights into topics where interviewing workers can be more challenging. Moreover the method is useful for generating insights from larger populations of workers, due to the light user experience and low time commitment required. Direct worker reporting data was gathered twice from workers and once from management. Worker data was gathered from across a workforce without sampling. Meaning that all workers whose mobile phone numbers were submitted either by individual workers or by the supplier would be called. In total two call cycles were undertaken: Call cycle #1 was conducted across the sites in the period 11 June to 31 Aug; and call cycle #2 was conducted across the sites in the period 10 August to 14 September 2020. In December, 3 further sites were called. The workers on these sites were called in the period 7 to 15 December. Only the results from the first call cycle are included in this study.

Qualitative Research: Providing context and identifying root causes

Whilst the call cycles to management and workers highlighted key areas of risk, but also good practice, Partner Africa undertook a series of semi-structured interviews in order to contextualise these findings. Calls, via zoom or skype, were made to supplier management and focussed on how their operations had changed as a result of Covid-19 and why, and the impact this had on their workforce. Partner Africa also undertook a number of interviews with civil society stakeholders to identify more general themes and human rights risks identified beyond the scope of activities of the participating suppliers.

Breakdown of research sample

NUMBER OF SUPPLIERS	18
LOCATION OF SUPPLIERS	SOUTH AFRICA (4), KENYA (4), ZAMBIA (1), EGYPT (2), MOROCCO (2), GHANA (1), ETHIOPIA (1), ZIMBABWE (3)
SECTORS OF SUPPLIERS	AGRICULTURE, FLORICULTURE, TEXTILES AND WASTE MANAGEMENT
WORKERS CALLED	7425
MANAGERS CALLED	297
KEY STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED	31

Methodology Limitations

- The structured remote nature of direct worker reporting is inappropriate for gathering context and narrative accounts. Recognising this, the methodology included 31 semi-structured interviews with supplier staff members as well as third sector civil society stakeholders to contextualise of the results. However, the importance of in-person and on-site observation and data verification either through audits or other methods cannot be overstated and should be included in research studies when the operating environment is conducive to this.
- The businesses engaged in this study cannot be assumed to be representative of suppliers across the continent. Businesses are under new pressures and therefore those suppliers that were unwilling and unable to participate in this study may well represent businesses where detrimental impacts of COVID-19 are more pronounced, whether due to geography, sector or supply chain. Moreover all participating businesses were aware that the retailer partners would have access to the results, and so the final sample may also reflect those businesses that were most secure about the measures they had taken to protect their workforce from the impacts of Covid-19. Lastly, the suppliers identified to participate in this study, particularly within the agri-business sector, were limited to those businesses whose crops were in season, and therefore the farms operational, during the period covered by this project.

END

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