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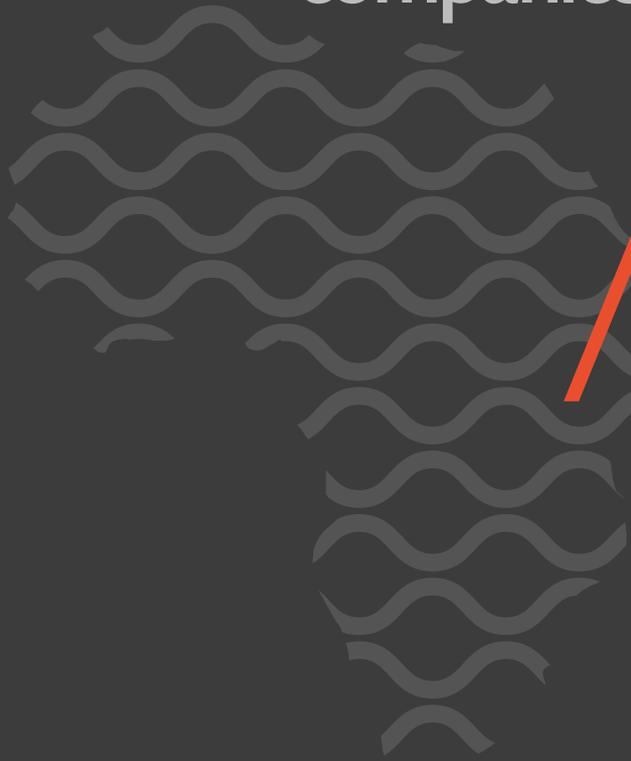
  
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# HOW

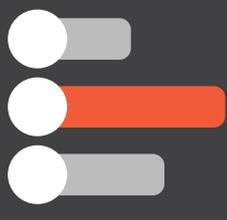
companies in **AFRICA**

are tackling  
the ongoing  
**challenges**  
of **COVID-19**



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies across Africa to adapt in new ways to protect worker health and safety and to maintain economic activity and functioning supply chains. The responses to the pandemic also impact relationships with workers, local communities, civil society and government. This publication is intended to contribute to the growing body of knowledge and practical information about the evolving responses of companies to COVID-19 in the commodity production sectors of Africa, and help provide companies with a useful resource as they continue to refine their response to COVID-19 and prepare for future crises.

This brief provides a snapshot of the experience of companies in the region and guidance from African experts in the field for addressing several dimensions of the risks presented by the pandemic. It includes:



Results summary of a rapid survey on the experience with COVID-19 of 18 companies operating in 14 African countries



Recommendations from four experts in the region who participated in an August 2020 webinar organized by Earthworm Foundation on COVID-19 and the African agricultural sector



Key resources and links for companies that wish to dive deeper into the issues

## Africa's agricultural sector and the underlying vulnerability of workers

**COVID-19 has hit the agriculture sector in Africa particularly hard, affecting thousands of businesses and millions of workers and their families.** Agricultural production accounts for almost half of all employment in Africa, and the pandemic has exposed and heightened the risks that African agricultural workers and communities were already facing due to limited social protections, poor working and living conditions, deficient labor inspection and compliance, and ineffective regulatory enforcement.

### Why was the agricultural sector so vulnerable to COVID-19 impacts?

The seasonal nature of agricultural production and the significant role of casual workers in agricultural production has made agricultural workers particularly vulnerable to the health impacts and economic shocks brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- ◀ In many African countries, agricultural workers have traditionally been excluded from national labor protection laws, such as those specifying minimum wages, maximum hours of work, paid sick leave and social security.
- ▶ In remote rural areas, the conditions of agricultural workers are often characterized by insecure and unhygienic accommodations, limited access to clear water, and poor or inexistent public health service.
- ◀ In general, the seasonality of agriculture and forestry operations complicates extending



social protection coverage to agriculture workers. Furthermore, their seasonal activity makes organization and collective bargaining or social dialogue to secure improvements even more difficult.

▶ Casual workers are among those most at risk of losing their jobs and incomes in a health crisis like that unleashed by COVID-19. By definition, they do not have secure employment contracts, and therefore usually do not enjoy workers' benefits, social protection, workers' representation, or access to remedy. Their status also makes it more difficult to take drastic measures to reduce exposure to the coronavirus without creating other risks related to food security and poverty. Lacking social safety nets and adequate income support, these workers have hardly any choice but to continue working despite restrictions on movement and social interaction meant to reduce exposure to the virus.

## Impact of COVID-19 outbreak

**COVID-19 added pressures to workforce already battered by a large informal sector, eroded earnings, high unemployment, casualization of labour, and gender inequalities.**

The restrictive measures imposed by governments to combat the spread of the pandemic led to the closure of many businesses and the suspension of industrial activity, especially in large parts of the forestry and agro-industrial sectors in West and Central Africa. The resulting economic hardships include large-scale job losses and damaged livelihoods, as working from home has not been an option for the millions who live from manual labor in these

sectors. In remote rural areas where access to relevant information and medical treatment is very limited, the consequences for lives and livelihoods can be catastrophic for families and communities.

### **Agriculture is a major source of employment for women in Africa.**

Women make up 42% of the agricultural workforce in the developing world



(Photo: Annie Spratt)

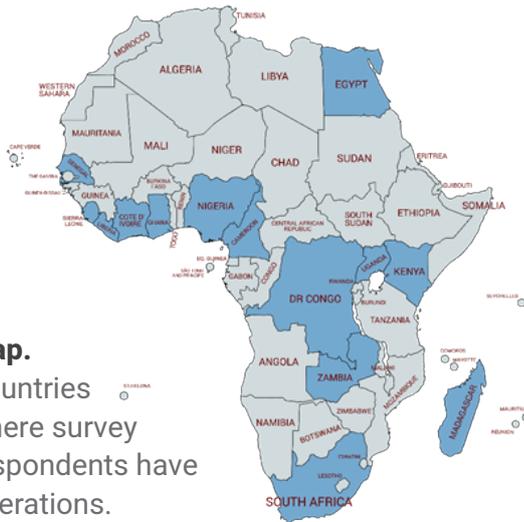
## **A survey of companies on their response to COVID-19 in Africa**

Approximately five months after the first cases of COVID-19 were registered in Africa, Earthworm Foundation carried out a rapid survey of companies involved in agro-industrial and forestry sectors.

**We wanted to know how companies were addressing COVID-19, what were their main challenges, how had they adapted, and what lessons could be shared?**



Eighteen companies with operations in 14 countries responded to the survey<sup>1</sup>. Fourteen of the companies manage a total of over 1 million hectares of concession lands in six countries: Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria. They included companies involved in producing, refining, or using palm oil, rubber, cocoa, timber, vanilla, coffee, and pepper.



**Map.** Countries where survey respondents have operations.

**Survey respondents by country and commodity type produced/used**

<b>28%</b>	<b>Cameroon</b>
Palm oil, rubber, chocolate, timber, sugar	
<b>11%</b>	<b>Ivory Coast</b> Palm oil
<b>5.5%</b>	<b>Ghana</b> Cocoa
<b>11%</b>	<b>Liberia</b> Rubber, palm oil
<b>5.5%</b>	<b>Madagascar</b>
Cocoa, vanilla, coffee, and pepper	
<b>5.5%</b>	<b>Multiple locations</b> product undefined
Egypt, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, South Africa	
<b>22%</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>
Palm oil, Food and beverages	
<b>5.5%</b>	<b>Democratic Republic of Congo</b> Palm oil
<b>5.5%</b>	<b>Sierra Leone</b> Palm oil

<sup>1</sup>Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia.

**Over 90% of the companies reported that they were implementing the following measures:**

- Installing handwashing stations
- Distributing masks to workers
- Providing hand sanitizer
- Systematic monitoring of workers' temperature
- Campaigns to improve awareness of COVID-19
- Reinforcing hygiene measures in health centres

**IMPACTS OF COVID-19 CITED BY RESPONDENTS**

- Reduced cash flow, sales and overall financial health
- Reduced operating hours due to government restrictions
- Restrictions on plantation and factory work

**CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY COVID-19 TO THE COMPANIES**

- Lack of training for medical personnel
- Improving hygiene practices by workers and management
- Monitoring and enforcing social distancing and other compliance measures
- Maintaining morale
- Funding communications and other unforeseen protection equipment costs
- Testing of workers

**TESTING FOR COVID-19**

- Only **11%** of the companies systematically tested workers
- **28%** of the companies reported having one or more worker test positive

**LIMITED EXTERNAL SUPPORT TO COMPANIES**

- **5.5%** received external financial support
- **16.5%** received medical support
- **16.5%** received logistical support



### KEY LESSONS LEARNED BY COMPANIES

- Effective communication
- Prioritization of the health of workers
- Prompt response to cases in the company and rapid contact tracing
  - Ensuring proper hygiene before infectious illnesses develop
  - Increasing awareness and consciousness of all stakeholders is key

## Occupational Health & Safety - One Company's Experience

### Integration of a risk approach in a company's management system

Companies in Africa's agricultural sector are interconnected with their internal and external stakeholders, including workers, local communities and farmers, and service providers. The COVID-19 crisis has shown that these interconnections bring both risks and opportunities that companies should proactively assess and be prepared to manage. A key aspect of effective risk management is the consideration of the needs and expectations of stakeholders in relation to both normal operations and abnormal situations like the current pandemic.

### Steps for integrating a Risk Approach into a company's management system

- 1 Identification of internal and external stakeholders
- 2 Identification of stakeholder needs and expectations
- 3 Identification, analysis and assessment of risks and/or opportunities associated with stakeholders
- 4 Implementation of risk control measures
- 5 Periodic monitoring of the risk control plan

### How can the specific risks associated with COVID-19 be integrated into the management system?

The COVID-19 pandemic led many companies in the agricultural sector to review and adapt their existing Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) risk assessments and plans. Such a highly contagious virus requires a reexamination of all the company's processes and activities with each and every related stakeholder in mind.

### Tips for reviewing Occupational Health & Safety risk assessments and COVID-19

- 1 Consider the probability of workers coming into contact with infected people and contaminated surfaces.
- 2 Take into account the risks and/or opportunities related to the stakeholders other than employees, with the goal of making each stakeholder a factor of success of the company through coherent strategic choices to avoid the spread of the disease.

### Occupational Health & Safety measures taken by SOSUCAM to prevent the spread of COVID-19

SOSUCAM (Société Sucrière du Cameroun), Cameroon's largest sugar producer and the country's largest employer developed a specific strategy for COVID-19 based on three pillars: **Protect, Communicate, and Accompany.**

### SOSUCAM'S OHS Strategy for COVID-19

#### PROTECT

- On site - daily temperature measurement. Installation of hand washing points. Distribution of hand sanitizer and personal protective equipment;
- Disinfection - Regular disinfection of transport and production units;
- Storage - A team is dedicated to the handling of disinfection equipment.

#### COMMUNICATE

- Poster campaigns throughout the site to raise awareness;

- A charter adapted to the new health measures and training of workers;
- Control plan set up and managed daily by a specialized team.

**ACCOMPANY**

- Provision of kits;
- Supporting the national effort.

## Implementing best practices to protect agricultural workers

All agricultural and forestry workers, whether temporary or seasonal, and irrespective of their legal status or gender, have the right to work in safe and healthy conditions.

### Agricultural workers in Africa (and elsewhere) have the following rights established by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention of 2001<sup>2</sup>:

- To be informed and consulted on safety and health matters including risks from new technologies;
- To participate in the application and review of safety and health measures and, in accordance with national law and practice, to select safety and health representatives and representatives in safety and health committees;
- To remove themselves from danger resulting from their work activity when they have reasonable justification to believe there is an imminent and serious risk to their safety and health and so inform their supervisor immediately. They shall not be placed at any disadvantage as a result of these actions.

<sup>2</sup>Article 8. (No. 184)



(Photo: SOCAPALM)

SOCAPALM's field teams with personal protection equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the continent, the reality is that agricultural workers often lack access to appropriate personal protective equipment, clean water, and sanitary facilities. These shortcomings, in addition to commonly overcrowded production sites, make workers in the sector particularly vulnerable to transmission of a highly contagious virus. By developing and enforcing Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) management systems in accordance with ILO's Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention – the sector should be able to weather serious health and safety risks like COVID-19. With these rights and this goal in mind, let's look at what can be done to protect worker health and safety.

### Ensuring adequate living conditions during COVID-19

Agricultural workers who live in close proximity to each other at farms and mills may face increased risk of exposure to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. Where workers live in company housing, it is important for accommodations to comply with applicable standards requiring sufficient space, per person or per family, access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitary and washing facilities.





### Strengthening labour inspection

The COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to the important role that ongoing labour inspections have in maintaining compliance with health and safety standards. Ensuring that inspections continue in many remote rural sites in the context of COVID-19 may require reviewing and updating inspection, and the harnessing of advances in information and communication technologies.

### Finding solutions for COVID-19 through social dialogue with workers

Agricultural workers should be fully involved in the assessment and management of COVID-19 risks and impacts. Companies will be more successful in developing and deploying appropriate responses to the crisis if workers' organizations participate in developing solutions. This includes the active involvement of workers' organizations in dialogues on matters related to the current crisis and its effects on workers as well as rural communities and development.

## Social dialogue between workers and company representatives can build a climate of trust that is essential for effectively tackling COVID-19 and its impacts.

Respect for, and reliance on mechanisms of social dialogue can build resilience and help secure the commitment of employers and workers to painful but necessary prevention and mitigation measures. Trust through dialogue is particularly key during the times of heightened social tension that COVID-19 has brought.



### Measures to mitigate COVID-19 safety and health risks may include:

- Provide access to adequate personal protective equipment;
- Re-organize work to ensure a safe physical distance between workers, especially by reviewing processes that normally require close interaction;
- Ensure permanent access to health checks and medical facilities;
- Ensure access to clean water and adequate sanitation facilities with soap and alcohol-based hand sanitizer;
- Disinfect workplace amenities and equipment;
- Increase the frequency of cleaning, and Ensure that workers have access to all relevant information on COVID-19, personal protection, and hygiene in their own language.

## Stress management in agro-industrial & forestry companies during COVID-19

Stress and mental health have emerged as issues for agricultural workers and rural communities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has caused an increase in stress among workers and local communities surrounding concessions in Africa. Stress is a serious concern for the sector given that it can affect the overall health of workers and their families.

**MENTAL HEALTH** is a state of well-being that allows every individual to fulfil themselves, to cope with the stresses of daily life and to make a contribution to the community.

**STRESS** is defined as the body's physiological response to an exhausting, dangerous or distressing situation.

In the company setting, stress occurs when



there is an imbalance between a person's perception of pressures or constraints in their environment and the resources they have to deal with them. We essentially suffer from a type of adjustment disorder when demands in the workplace overcome our ability to adapt to our environment. The body is pre-programmed with automatic reactions that allow it to cope with stress. Being under stress for long periods of time activates this system but can't always shut it down. The main consequence of COVID-19 related stress in the company setting are decline in skills and productivity, which in turn can affect output and finances.

### **COVID-19 related stress symptoms noted in agro-industrial and forestry companies in Africa**

**Physical:** Fatigue, body pain, muscle tension, headache, heart palpitations, difficulty sleeping, and digestion problems.

**Emotional:** Desire to be alone, prolonged sadness, and loss of libido.

**Behavioral:** Irritability, anger, feeling out of control, difficulty sleeping, social withdrawal, and consumption of alcohol or other psychoactive substances.

**Cognitive:** Feeling that you are thinking more, feeling that you don't understand anything, and limited thinking capacity.

**Interpersonal:** Feeling of not understanding each other or not understanding what is happening to us etc.); **Spiritual** (withdrawal from spiritual activities, lack of motivation towards what is spiritual etc.).

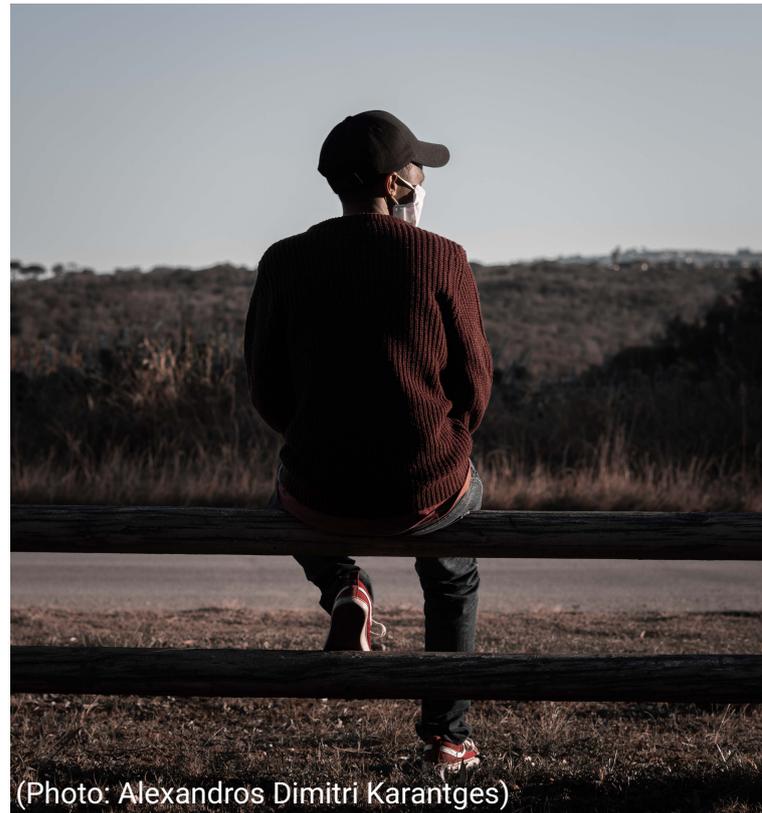
### **Individual strategies to manage COVID-19 related stress**

An important element of managing stress is receiving credible information about COVID-19 from reliable sources. Agricultural workers can also make concerted efforts to relax, be calm, think positively, and keep active through sports or taking walks. A healthy diet, especially one rich in antioxidants and vitamin C is recommended. Workers need to take breaks and where possible do something that is comforting, fun or relaxing and unrelated to work.

### **Team strategies to manage COVID-19 related stress**

Companies have seen that COVID-19 can lead workers to isolate themselves in fear and anxiety. By staying in touch with colleagues, workers can support each other. The pandemic has

motivated the establishment of listening groups for workers and local communities within agro industrial and forestry companies in Africa. The pandemic requires team members need to speak up, listen to each other, and support the psychological and mental health of each person. To be effective team members, workers are encouraged to adopt and maintain a positive problem solving attitude.



(Photo: Alexandros Dimitri Karantges)

### **Some suggested measures that teams and team members can take for stress management:**

- Empathetically support colleagues' need to rest;
- Communicate constructively;
- Communicate clear and with optimism;
- Identify errors or gaps constructively and help correct them;
- Complement each other by sharing concerns and solutions;
- Attend (online) meetings to keep up to date with the situation, plans and events;
- Limit exposure to the media and alarming messages;
- Monitor your condition over time to detect any symptoms of depression or pathological stress;
- Talk to a peer, supervisor, or seek professional help if needed;
- Honor your service by reminding yourself that despite challenges, you are united, and
- Congratulate your colleagues formally or informally for their dedication



## Resources for companies looking to protect worker safety and production during COVID-19

### Health and resilience information:

- Findings around health shocks and health as a resilience capacity, from a series of 11 country studies

<http://www.chronicpovertynetwork.org/resources/2019/3/7/health-resilience-and-sustainable-poverty-escapes-a-synthesis>

### Information on workers' rights:

- International Labour Organization's Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001 (No. 184)  
[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C184](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C184)

### Health and safety guidance:

- Code of practice for safety and health in forestry work from the International Labour Organization (ILO)  
[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_protect/-protrav/-safework/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms\\_107793.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-protrav/-safework/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_107793.pdf)
- ILO guidance to governments and employers' and workers' organizations in addressing world-of-work issues in crisis situations  
[https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R205](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R205)

### Guidance for crisis management:

- Guidance for stakeholder engagement in crisis and recovery  
<https://www.iremos.fr/blog/comment-n-oublier-aucune-partie-prenante-lors-d-une-crise>
- COVID-19 and new approaches to crisis management  
<https://rendre-notre-monde-plus-sur.goron.fr/-covid-19-de-age-2-quand-les-gestionnaires-cript-de-crise-doivent-revenir-aux-fondamentaux/>

### Guidance for risk management

- A stakeholder approach to risk management  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-97256-5\\_4](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-97256-5_4)
- Risk management and integrating corporate social responsibility in organizational management

[http://documents.irevues.inist.fr/bitstream/handle/2042/61693/lm20\\_com\\_5A\\_2\\_151\\_Sperandio.pdf?sequence=1](http://documents.irevues.inist.fr/bitstream/handle/2042/61693/lm20_com_5A_2_151_Sperandio.pdf?sequence=1)

### Stress management and mental health

- Resources and guidance for managing stress  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/-daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>
- Perspective on COVID-19 and mental health from the World Health Organization  
<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/14-05-2020-substantial-investment-needed-to-avert-mental-health-crisis>
- Mental health ramifications of COVID-19 (the Australian context)  
[http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319\\_covid19-evidence-and-recommendations.pdf](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200319_covid19-evidence-and-recommendations.pdf)

### About the Centre of Social Excellence (CSE)

CSE is a strategic initiative of Earthworm Foundation. CSE's mission is to create an enabling environment for social harmony and realised human rights by equipping companies, civil society, and governments with well-trained social practitioners from the regions where they operate. We mobilise diverse social experts who have real-world experience addressing social issues to design and teach courses to participants on the front lines of company-community interactions in Africa, Asia and Latin America. CSE's Africa training centre is based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. For more on CSE please see: <https://www.earthworm.org/our-work/programmes/cse>

### About Earthworm Foundation:

Earthworm Foundation is a non-profit organization that currently has presence in 20 countries including Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, India, and several locations within Europe. We employ more than 200 people worldwide and work with big and small companies, communities and producers of raw materials to create compelling cases of social and environmental transformation. With an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit, we work on the ground with people to create inspiring transformation stories. We focus on creating value, engage without judging and carry hope and a positive vision of the future. Learn more at: <https://www.earthworm.org/>

