REPORT OF THE
WORLD OF WORK
DIALOGUE
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The World of Work Dialogue and this report were possible due to the expertise and input of many individuals and organizations. The EPI-WIN team would like to thank everyone who contributed to this endeavour. Special thanks go to the generous time and contributions of dialogue participants. The partnership between WHO departments, including Global Infectious Hazards Preparedness, Health & Multilateral Partnerships and Environment, Climate Change and Health played an important role in identifying the themes for the World of Work Dialogue; designing and delivering the Dialogue and identifying participants. We are very grateful for the collaboration with the International Labour Organization, World Economic Forum, International Trade Union Confederation, international Organization of Employers, Global Humanitarian Action Executive Alliance and the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, which nominated participants and presented at the plenary event.
ABBREVIATIONS

EPI-WIN  WHO Information Network for Epidemics
FENSA  WHO Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors
GHAEA  Global Humanitarian Action Executive Alliance
ILO  International Labour Organization
IOE  International Organization of Employers
ITUC  International Trade Union Confederation
MBA  Master of Business Administration
NGOs  non-governmental organizations
OSH  Occupational Safety and Health
SME  small and medium-sized enterprises
UN  United Nations
UNSG  United Nations Secretary-General
WEF  World Economic Forum
WHO  World Health Organization
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Stakeholders from the ‘World of Work’ have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and have had to make huge efforts to adapt to the ‘new normal’, ensuring that businesses survive and that the health and wellbeing of workers is protected. Against this backdrop, the World Health Organization (WHO) convened a series of virtual dialogues in December 2020 to consolidate the experiences of diverse representatives across the World of Work in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and in planning for adaptation and sustainability. The aim of the dialogues was to gather and distil insights and lessons learned in responding to COVID-19 across a diversity of business sizes, models, sectors and geographic locations. This report summarizes the findings from the four thematic dialogues:

- Theme 1 – Collaborating for results: Public-private collaboration in health emergencies
- Theme 2 – Communicating in crisis: Information sharing and leadership during health emergencies
- Theme 3 – Changing the future today: Sustainability at the core of business, contributing to a healthy society, economy and world
- Theme 4 – Custodians of health: Employers as health protectors/providers/enablers

Participants in the dialogues were selected to promote geographic and cross-sector diversity, expertise regarding the thematic topic and representation from large organizations, small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), employee organizations and labour unions. Discussion surrounded the common challenges faced, the collaborations and corresponding enablers that were most effective in response to COVID-19 and proposals for concrete actions in 2021.

The resulting proposed actions developed by session participants ‘put health at the centre’ for stakeholders across the World of Work. This report and proposed actions are intended for workers, employers, trade unions, governments and supranational bodies as they plan and implement strategies to protect health and further health crisis preparedness, sustainability and social responsibility. In follow-up, the WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) intends to continue the discussion with World of Work stakeholders through regular sessions that focus on specific actions, themes or work sectors.

1 The World of Work is a generic term used widely by the International Labour Organization and its constituents to reflect the diversity of work stakeholders, sectors and related subjects.
INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 global pandemic has disrupted every aspect of life across the world, and nowhere has the impact been felt more keenly than in the ‘World of Work’. Employers and workers alike have experienced enormous upheaval, with forced shutdowns, disintegration of customer bases and a switch to an entirely new way of working, all whilst trying to safeguard health and play their part in the fight against the pandemic. World of Work stakeholders have made huge efforts to adapt to the ‘new normal’, ensure that businesses survive and that the health and wellbeing of workers is protected. Beyond this, more still needs to be done to ensure that the world ‘builds back better’, creating a more sustainable, fairer World of Work, in which everyone’s interests are looked after, especially workers with the lowest income or who are disenfranchised.

Against this backdrop, the World Health Organization (WHO) Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) team has sought to consolidate the experiences of diverse representatives across the World of Work in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and in planning for adaptation and sustainability. These experiences represent an invaluable resource that can be distilled and shared throughout the World of Work community. In sharing insights, lessons learned and best practices, employers, workers and others in the World of Work community can contribute towards a repository of resources for others to use and adapt. To this end, in December 2020, the WHO convened a series of four virtual dialogue sessions with representatives from the World of Work for the purpose of soliciting proposals for future actions that can be taken by workers, employers, trade unions, governments and supranational bodies to better protect health and further health crisis preparedness, sustainability and social responsibility.
Each dialogue session dealt with one of the following four themes:

**Theme 1**
Collaborating for results: Public-private collaboration in health emergencies

**Theme 2**
Communicating in crisis: Information sharing and leadership during health emergencies

**Theme 3**
Changing the future today: Sustainability at the core of business, contributing to a healthy society, economy and world

**Theme 4**
Custodians of health: Employers as health protectors/providers/enablers

This report summarizes the findings from these sessions and presents a series of actions that ‘put health at the centre’ for stakeholders across the World of Work. The report audience includes stakeholders from the World of Work, all of whom have a role to play in promoting a healthy society and who therefore might find the outcomes of the Dialogue discussions of interest. In follow-up to the World of Work Dialogue, EPI-WIN proposes to continue the discussions with World of Work stakeholders through monthly sessions that focus on specific actions, themes or work sectors. In providing a platform for sharing accurate scientific knowledge, experiences, resources and opportunities for collaboration, WHO seeks to promote health and safety as priorities during the pandemic response and in future outbreak preparedness.

The WHO recognizes that although this process has yielded a great deal of useful information, it is not exhaustive, and this report represents just an initial snapshot of a complex and fluid subject.
World of Work Dialogue Planning and Delivery

The EPI-WIN team led this initiative as part of a larger mandate to engage virtual communities to combat the infodemic and develop relationships with partners responding to COVID-19. WHO collaborating departments included Global Infectious Hazards Preparedness and Health & Multilateral Partnerships.

The virtual dialogue took place over four days, with each day focused on a different theme. These themes were determined by a WHO secretariat composed of experts across relevant departments based on feedback received from World of Work stakeholders throughout the first half of 2020. These themes were considered cross-cutting and pertinent across the breadth of the World of Work. The closed, invitation-only sessions were 90-minute-long facilitated discussions led by a WHO moderator and with an International Labour Organization (ILO) observer. The aim of the sessions was to gather and distil experiences in responding to COVID-19 across a diversity of business sizes, models, sectors and geographic locations. Participants were selected in an effort to have geographic and cross-sector diversity, expertise regarding the thematic topic and representation from large organizations, SMEs, employee organizations and labour unions, all in accordance with the WHO Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors (FENSA).

Each participant completed the WHO Declaration of Interest form. Potential conflicts of interest were assessed using the criteria of employment or other work for the tobacco or arms sector. No significant conflicts were identified. Participants for the working groups were nominated through WHO’s World of Work network, including from the Global Humanitarian Action Executive Alliance (GHAEA), International Organization of Employers (IOE), World Economic Forum (WEF) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Participants included senior managers, leaders of SMEs, labour representatives, communication leads and human resource focal points. The composition of the working groups was acknowledged as not being fully representative of the World of Work for geography, settings or work sectors. This is a limitation to the outputs of the dialogue.

Each working group was invited to complete a pre-session survey to inform the semi-structured discussion, which focused on the common challenges faced, the collaborations and corresponding enablers that were most effective in response to COVID-19 and recommendations for concrete actions in 2021.

Sessions were conducted under Chatham House Rules, meaning that participants were encouraged to speak freely and use the information shared. However neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s) can be attributed. Where reference has been made to certain entities, permission was sought.
The closed sessions were in the format of a facilitated discussion. Participants were invited to share examples of interventions or projects implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic related to the theme of the session. In the discussion, participants were invited to reflect on the challenges addressed; the factors that contributed to the success of the interventions; feasibility of implementing the intervention in different settings; acceptability of the intervention to stakeholders; and the impact of the intervention on protecting health. A facilitator guided the groups to consensus on a summary of proposed actions that were agreed to have the greatest impact on health, were feasible to implement and would contribute towards preparedness for future health events.

The discussions were summarized by a rapporteur, and a slide deck with a summary of findings was circulated to all participants for input and finalization before being presented at the public plenary the week following. The public plenary served to share the key findings and suggested actions with commentary from Representatives of agencies including WHO, ILO, WEF, ITUC, IOE and the office of the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG).

The report was compiled from the sessions, plenary outputs, and additional inputs shared by participants during the draft review. To ensure that participants’ views and experiences were appropriately addressed, all participants were invited to provide comments and suggested edits. The EPI-WIN team ensured that any additional edits included in the final report are reflective of the original session dialogues.

The EPI-WIN team proposes to continue the Dialogue with World of Work stakeholders in 2021 through regular meetings. Potential changes to the actions proposed in this report will be reflected in an end of year update.

**Target audience of the report**

The following themes summaries and accompanying proposed actions are intended for workers, employers, trade unions, governments and supranational bodies as they plan and implement strategies to protect health and further health crisis preparedness, sustainability and social responsibility. It is not the intent of this report to allocate roles and responsibilities to the proposed actions but rather to provide a ‘menu’ of actions that are differentially applicable to a diversity of stakeholders.
The complexity, scale and diversity of the challenges generated by the pandemic call for responses that are integrated and collaborative, involving actors from across the World of Work. As WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said, “Global solidarity and collaboration are essential to overcoming COVID-19.” Public-private partnerships are perhaps the most obvious mechanism to facilitate collaboration, but it is vital that a wider set of stakeholders be involved, beyond just governments and private companies. As with efforts to tackle other complex issues, such as achieving the United Nation’s (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, “multi-stakeholder partnerships in particular and the resources, knowledge and ingenuity of all relevant stakeholders will be important in mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, complementing the efforts of Governments.” The World of Work dialogue sessions consistently underlined the importance of ‘tripartite social dialogue and solutions’ including the active involvement of governments, employers and workers themselves, in decision-making about the health of both workers and wider society. Representatives from all these groups identified key challenges that must be overcome to allow parties to work together effectively and suggested several potential solutions to facilitate collaboration both in the current crisis and beyond.

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Challenges and solutions

Establishing effective collaboration takes time. Collaboration between actors across the World of Work since the beginning of the pandemic has frequently suffered due to an absence of established structures and mechanisms to facilitate coordination. It is not easy to share information between entities that are unused to doing so, and it has proved difficult from a standing start to set up partnerships and appropriate fora whilst in the midst of a fast-evolving crisis. Those partnerships that have functioned best are those that were set up before the onset of the pandemic and were consequently able to establish effective ways of working and build trust between parties over time.

Someone needs to take the initiative. To bring together multiple stakeholders and focus them on a specific challenge it is necessary to have a convenor who can take the initiative and drive action forward. In most cases, either a supranational body or a government must take on this role, since private sector organizations rarely have the requisite position of neutrality, credibility and relationships to convene disparate stakeholders. However, it can be possible for private organizations to act as convenors, particularly if they already represent existing coalitions.

Commitment issues. For private companies, it can be hard to justify the expense of partnerships to shareholders; for governments, particularly in democracies, long-term crisis preparation can become subordinate to policies more likely to attract voters over short electoral cycles. To ensure that stakeholders do remain committed to public-private partnerships it is important to show the tangible benefits of being involved. We must convince leaders not only of the clear moral imperative to put ‘health before wealth’ but also demonstrate that prioritizing health also supports commercial success – ‘health means wealth’. This is discussed in further detail under Theme 3 of this report.

It is clear that successful partnerships and collaborative bodies must continue to function beyond the current pandemic, ensuring that we are better prepared for future crises. There may, however, be a challenge in maintaining the motivation and commitment of partners when the need for continued coordination seems less urgent. All stakeholders should bear in mind the experiences of the current pandemic to incentivise continued engagement and collaboration in the future.

“It is clear that successful partnerships and collaborative bodies must continue to function beyond the current pandemic, ensuring that we are better prepared for future crises.”
**Competing agendas.** Successful partnerships are built when the objectives of stakeholders are aligned, even though their motivations may differ. However, it is important to recognise that whilst many private companies show very high levels of social responsibility, commercial imperatives can put them under pressure to act principally in their own self-interest. Consequently, it is important that governments and supranational bodies, such as WHO or the ILO, establish good governance mechanisms for public private partnerships that promote equity and public interests. Legislation is one tool that can promote the implementation of socially responsible policies. It is equally important, however, to properly engage governments, employers and workers/unions in social dialogue, reiterating shared objectives and encouraging voluntary efforts to better reconcile the primacy of health with the need for profitability. By the same token, national governments are frequently driven to put the interests of their own citizens ahead of the global public good. For example, wealthier states have laid claim to quantities of vaccines beyond what is needed to vaccinate their own populations. Governments and companies must act responsibly to ensure equity across the world, and WHO is well positioned to act as a convening body to initiate dialogue on how best to achieve this.

**Information-sharing.** To work together effectively it is crucial that stakeholders are able to share information. However, legal barriers or commercial sensitivities frequently prevent information being exchanged freely. Mechanisms to overcome these challenges require the involvement of an independent body, which may be a government or a supranational body such as the UN. ‘Safe spaces’ for information sharing allow close collaboration without compromising any of the partners.

**Tripartite solutions.** It is vital that collaborative responses to the pandemic do not rely purely on engagement between governments and the management of private companies; workers must be involved as well. Tripartite solutions ensure that workers’ buy-in is achieved and their expertise and knowledge is incorporated into planning. Tripartite solutions can often be facilitated through the involvement of trade unions and employers’ organizations, which can initiate and lead social dialogue between governments, employers and workers.

**Beyond the big players.** Most public-private partnerships and collaboration are conducted with large corporations. However, 80% of the global workforce is employed by small to medium enterprises and so failure to engage beyond the large multinationals limits planners’ understanding and the reach of responses. Often, however, SMEs lack the capacity to engage in large-scale collaborations. By twinning them with large corporations, it is possible to draw on SME knowledge and experience and also provide the resources to implement activity.
Proposed actions
The Dialogue sessions yielded the following key actions:

1 **Build a platform for coordination or link existing ones.**
   - Include coordinated mobilization of resources.
   - Enable global coordination to be mirrored at a national level.

2 **Build and maintain trusted partnerships outside of crises for quick activation during crises.**
   - Establish a platform/forum for private sector networks to ‘safely’ share information, insight, technology and experience.
   - Establish private sector relationships with national/government counterparts.
   - Identify opportunities to deliver value in partnerships during ‘peacetime’ to sustain engagement.

3 **National /government authorities should engage the private sector as a key partner in health emergency response planning.**
   - Develop a business case for public-private collaboration with supporting metrics for ongoing evaluation.
   - Identify opportunities to deliver value in partnerships during ‘peacetime’ to sustain engagement.

4 **Establish good governance mechanisms for public private partnerships to promote equity and public interests.**
   - Garner consensus on the ‘health before wealth’ principle and demonstrate the commercial value of health – ‘health means wealth’.

5 **Leverage cross-sector synergies and opportunities for greater impact.**
   - This should include but not be limited to industries; twinning of multinationals with SMEs; business supporting community initiatives.
The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a public health crisis, but the efforts to end it and to mitigate second and third order effects, such as economic disruption and rising inequality, all rely heavily on effective communication. Throughout the course of the pandemic, reaching audiences with accurate, timely and easily understood information has been one of the greatest challenges. Dubbed ‘the infodemic’, an overabundance of information, both factual and inaccurate, has shaped how people understand and respond to the pandemic across the world. This infodemic includes deliberate efforts to disseminate false and misleading information to undermine the public health response and advance harmful agendas of groups or individuals. But even when communicators’ motives are good, the sheer volume and fast-changing nature of information about the pandemic makes it difficult to verify what is accurate and produce coherent messages. Faced with information overload and often conflicting messages, the public has responded with sharply reduced levels of trust in information about the pandemic and in those who communicate. The result is often poor observance of public health measures, which reduces their effectiveness and endangers countries’ ability to end the pandemic.⁵

Supranational bodies, governments, employers, industry bodies, workers’ organizations and workers are all struggling to interpret and determine the accuracy of a massive amount of information and disseminate it to their partners and stakeholders. WHO has underlined the need to communicate “reliable and comprehensive information on COVID-19 and the measures taken by authorities in response to the pandemic, and to take measures to counter misinformation and disinformation.” Dialogue session participants identified potential solutions to achieving these goals and confronting broader challenges to effective communication, specific to the World of Work.

Challenges and solutions

An ever-shifting landscape, confusion and declining trust. The challenge that came across most strongly and consistently from almost all participants was how to understand and then communicate information that is frequently complex, difficult to access, contradictory and constantly changing COVID-19 is a new disease, and scientific understanding of the virus is evolving. At the same time, policymakers are continually adjusting their approach to combat the pandemic, balancing public health objectives with competing requirements to keep economies working and protect individual freedoms. This has meant that official government communications have frequently shifted their message, with policy announcements sometimes being reversed within days or even hours.

Because of difficulties accessing reliable information, dialogue participants reflected that employees and workers have at times become confused about what they are expected to do and have sometimes lost trust in official channels or in the media. It has become apparent, however, that employers are widely seen as an accessible, accurate and trusted source of information that is contextualized to the needs and concerns of their employees and workers and so have taken on a vital role as communicators about the pandemic.

Identifying accurate information and communicating it in a timely fashion. The first challenge employers face when acting as communicators is the same as that facing their workers – how to identify accurate information to communicate onward. Since the start of the pandemic, WHO has acted as a reliable source of factual information rooted in current evidence-based scientific understanding. Companies are able to access up-to-date information on the WHO website at https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019. National government websites often provide accurate information about the latest regulations and efforts to fight the pandemic in their particular country, but the quality of this information varies. Depending on the country in which an organization is operating, there may be more reliable ways to access information, including watching press conferences or liaising directly with government officials. Companies may also have access to medical professionals who are able to provide additional useful information and fact check messages.

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Although it is important that any information disseminated should be as accurate as possible, it is also important for communications to take place in a timely manner. In the absence of authoritative messages from trusted sources, the information vacuum is quickly filled by other less trustworthy material. A balance must be struck between communicating accurately and keeping audiences updated. There is a risk here of losing audience trust, but this may be mitigated by being transparent from the start, acknowledging to audiences that the situation is fluid, decisions may be reversed and that future messages may contradict what is being said today. If audiences believe that communicators are doing their best and that organizations are looking out for the best interests of their stakeholders, then mistakes and U-turns are more likely to be forgiven without loss of trust.

The function of accessing important health information and communicating it onward to workers puts additional demands on companies’ human resources. Personnel involved in this activity must have the critical skills to access and interpret data, and senior management must engage in the process to agree the messages that are being communicated.

**Developing clear messages and consulting with workers.** Employers are not only responsible for communicating wider public health messages, but also need to communicate to workers about company-specific issues, such as furlough schemes, the opening and closing of workplaces, the safety measures being put in place and the continued day-to-day business of the company. In the fast-changing current environment, companies face challenges in deciding on policies around all these issues and around how to operate generally. Companies, particularly larger corporations, may consider modifying their decision-making process to become more agile and allow them to develop policies quickly and craft associated messages to their workers. In all cases, employers should consult with their workers, engaging in two-way communication to ensure that decision-making reflects employees needs and rights.

"In the absence of authoritative messages from trusted sources, the information vacuum is quickly filled by other less trustworthy material. A balance must be struck between communicating accurately and keeping audiences updated."
Even where accurate information is available, organizations across the World of Work must still make decisions about how they use that information and the messages they choose to communicate.

Corporations operating across multiple countries faced additional challenges where national public health and social measures different dramatically between regions and countries. While adaptation to multiple national jurisdictions is not unusual for large corporation, the scale of the pandemic and the rate at which information emerged or changed made it difficult for management to design coherent policies and procedures. Acknowledging this complex environment in communications to workers can help to maintain their confidence in management when decisions might otherwise be perceived as inconsistent.

**Credible messengers and two-way communications.** Audience trust in communications has been a key challenge during the pandemic. Companies largely enjoy greater levels of trust among their own workers than many other communicators, and it appears that individual line managers can be the most effective messengers. Line managers have close relationships with individual workers and so are frequently the best people to communicate important information, particularly on sensitive topics such as job security, pay, or safety measures at work. As unions play a key role in ensuring health and safety in the workplace, they should also be incorporated in both decision-making processes and communications to workers (as per Article 19(e) of ILO Convention 155\(^7\)), reflecting their role in safeguarding employees' interests.

Using line managers and union representatives to communicate with workers also allows for effective two-way communication. Not only does this create a mutually supportive environment, where workers feel they have a voice, but it also enables management to understand what is going on at all levels of their organization – which is vital to ensure effective operations. Where they exist in organizations, Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) committees should also be incorporated in communications with workers.

**Communicating with compassion.** A great deal of communication in the World of Work around the pandemic is focused on imparting important information and on prompting specific behaviours in support of public health measures. Beyond this, there is a need for a more personal kind of communication to reach workers who may be feeling worried and isolated, particularly when they are working from home, or furloughed. Employers have a duty of care to their employees, particularly during this difficult time, to support their mental health. The simple act of communicating with an individual can help considerably. Beyond keeping workers updated on the latest situation, which can do much to prevent anxiety, it has been shown that regular contact from managers and colleagues, talking specifically about non-work topics makes workers feel they are in a supportive environment and mitigates mental health problems. Issues around mental health and how employers can help are discussed below under **Theme 4: Custodians of health: Employers as health protectors/providers/enablers.**

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Proposed actions
The Dialogue sessions yielded the following key actions:

1 Invest in communication capacities.
   - Provide a platform for timely sharing of accurate information and communication resources.
   - Develop and deliver communication that is proactive, accurate, timely, people-centred, simple and actionable and acknowledges uncertainty.
   - Utilize mechanisms and/or technology innovations to communicate with workers who are not digitally connected.

2 Empower trusted internal communicators.
   - Use existing trusted communicators to deliver relevant safety and health messaging - line managers, employer organizations, worker representatives and OSH focal points.
   - Shift communication from monologue to dialogue – listen and respond to needs/concerns.
   - Address misinformation and rumours proactively.

3 Adapt to changing communication needs by connecting biomedical science with social/behavioural science.
The pandemic has thrown into stark relief a number of social, economic and political problems that existed long before this novel coronavirus was first identified. The disease and our efforts to combat it have exacerbated these problems still further, widening the gaps between rich and poor, creating vast inequities, both within and between countries. Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, Achim Steiner, noted that, “For vast swathes of the globe, the pandemic will leave deep, deep scars. Without support from the international community, we risk a massive reversal of gains made over the last two decades, and an entire generation lost, if not in lives then in rights, opportunities and dignity.”

These inequities have become apparent across the World of Work, with those at the bottom of the ladder hit the hardest. As industries have pivoted to remote systems of working, it is those lowest paid workers who have been unable to adapt, either because their jobs cannot permit ‘working from home’ (e.g. factory or agricultural workers), or because they lack access to reliable internet

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connections. Where governments have made efforts to compensate workers through furlough schemes, the poorest have again missed out, as they often work in the informal sector or lack access to social protection. Because of this, poorer people have consistently been forced to take more risks with their health, exposing themselves to infection because they cannot afford to remain at home.

The UN Secretary General, António Guterres said, “COVID-19 is a human tragedy. But it has also created a generational opportunity. An opportunity to build back a more equal and sustainable world.” As the World of Work adjusts to a new paradigm, it is vital that all actors, across government and the private sector, heed this call. Instead of aiming to return the world to where it was pre-pandemic, we must seek to address inequities and build back better to create a fairer, more equal and sustainable world with health at its centre.

Throughout history, human development has been spurred onwards at times of crisis, responding to great need with ingenuity and invention. COVID-19 represents just such a moment, acting as a ‘Great Accelerator’, and we have already seen innovations across multiple fields, perhaps most notably in medicine, with vaccines and new treatments being developed, manufactured and distributed with unprecedented speed. Throughout the Dialogue Sessions, we heard how participants from across the World of Work are responding to challenges with just as much ingenuity, identifying new solutions that are transforming the future of work.

### Challenges and solutions

**Working from home is not a universal privilege.** Much has been made of the pivot to remote working that has taken place across the world, with advances in communications technology that have helped millions do their jobs from home. However, jobs that allow working from home remain in a small minority, while the vast majority of workers are required to attend a workplace to fulfil their role. In fact, the ILO estimates that the potential for home working stands at just 18% across the globe (percentage of jobs that could be done from home). This reflects, “economic and occupational structures of countries, but also environmental factors, such as access to broadband internet and likelihood of owning a personal computer, whether the housing situation allows working from home, or whether the person has the necessary social networks, such as having fixed clients, for other types of home-based work.”

Where workers are unable to work from home and are required to attend workplaces, they increase their potential exposure to COVID-19, or, due to lockdown restrictions, face being unable to work at all. Still worse, some workers have found themselves unable to leave their workplace and return home. For example, the International Federation of Transport Workers has identified 400,000 seafarers that have been unable to return to shore, trapped aboard ships that cannot dock, contributing to problems with their physical and mental wellbeing.

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Across all industries, it is clear that measures must be taken to ensure that workplaces are made safer, minimizing the risk to the majority of workers that must attend. As across the other themes discussed at the meetings and in this report, solutions must be tripartite, involving government, employers and workers to ensure that they meet the needs of all stakeholders and that they are taken up consistently across the World of Work. At the company-specific level, health and safety committees may be established that are made up of both workers and management to conduct risk mapping and co-design protocols that will keep workers safe, whilst allowing the company’s business to be conducted effectively.

Labour relations need reform, and efforts are needed to promote transition to formality. The pandemic has put labour relations across the world under the spotlight and it has become clear that many workers lack basic rights and protections. Millions of people have lost jobs and had no access to extra financial support from their governments, despite efforts to create furlough schemes and extend unemployment benefits. More needs to be done, both by governments and employers to address gaps in financial assistance schemes, to promote transitions to formality and develop sustainable social protection floors. Trade unions and employers’ organizations have an important part to play, representing the rights of workers and employers and facilitating social dialogue to arrive at tripartite solutions including governments, workers and employers.

Human rights must be upheld throughout supply chains. As pressure has increased on companies (particularly those directly involved in pandemic response efforts) to increase the pace and outputs of production, they have passed this on to the companies in their supply chain. This has raised questions about how companies are able to respond effectively whilst also protecting the human rights of their workers. For example, increased activity on production lines may make it more difficult for physical distancing protocols to be enforced, thus putting workers at increased risk of infection, which is an unacceptable breach of workers’ rights.

To ensure that workers’ rights are upheld, procurement is of critical importance as a mechanism for establishing a level playing field between companies bidding for contracts. Contract conditions can include clauses that promote compliance with working conditions and health and safety laws and standards.

Health and wellness of workers leads to commercial success. The success of all organizations depends on the people who work there. If workers are treated well and their rights upheld, their performance will improve and with it the performance of their company. Research conducted by the London School of Economics compared data on the wellbeing and productivity of over 1.8 million workers with performance data from over 80 000 business units and drew the strong conclusion that, “higher employee wellbeing is associated with higher productivity and firm performance.” This in itself should be incentive enough for employers to look after the interests of their workers and by measuring the health and wellbeing of their workers and the associated impact on profitability, companies will become more likely to take action.

Proposed actions

The Dialogue sessions yielded the following key actions:

1. **Uphold workers as the most valuable asset of any business or organization**
   - Cultivate work environments that support mental health and wellbeing.
   - Create meaningful jobs with adequate social protection and upskilling/training opportunities.
   - Protect informal and migrant workers, including by promoting transitions to formal work arrangements.

2. **Ensure procurement of services and goods respects and protects human and labour rights.**

3. **Build tripartite partnerships and collaboration.**
   - Strengthen mechanisms to enable tripartite partnerships—government, employers and workers—for dialogue and collaboration.

4. **Leverage emerging opportunities - the pandemic has unblocked innovation, reinforced a focus on health and highlighted the importance of sustainability.**

5. **Adapt to the *next normal*, and enhance resilience for the future.**
   - Integrate the lessons learned from COVID-19 into preparedness planning.
   - Implement forward-facing risk mapping.
The COVID-19 pandemic poses a threat to the health of people everywhere, both through infection by the virus itself and also by multiple second and third order effects, including associated mental health issues and reduced access to medical treatment for other conditions. Employers have a duty of care to their workers to take reasonable steps to ensure their health, safety and wellbeing. Most countries have enshrined this duty in law, and the ILO has established conventions that call on employers “to prevent accidents and injury to health.” However, protecting workers’ health is not only a legal duty, but a moral one, and employers increasingly are ensuring adequate protections for all those working on their behalf and holding other organizations in their supply chains to account as well.

The pandemic has increased the burden on companies and other organizations to fulfil this duty. Providing a safe place to work has become increasingly difficult as requirements to allow for physical distancing, sanitization and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) have risen. At the same time, employees working remotely are not always able to work safely in their own homes and, over time, feelings of isolation have started to contribute to mental health problems. At the dialogue sessions, participants reported a range of risks to the wellbeing of their workers, but also identified a number of solutions that can help employers safeguard their workers’ health.

Challenges and solutions

Legislation to make workplaces safe from biological hazards. Creating a safe working environment, where the risk of infection from COVID-19 is mitigated, has been one of the first and most pressing concerns for employers. Depending on the nature and size of their business, this has presented significant challenges. ILO Conventions 155 and 187 on Occupational Safety and Health provide useful guidelines on what governments, employers and workers should be striving to achieve generally, but there has to date been insufficient detailed guidance on how to deal with a biological hazard such as a virus. This has created a situation where some employers have not been held accountable for failing to ensure basic COVID-19 protections. However, the ILO is now developing a convention around biological hazards and it will then be incumbent on national governments to create corresponding legislation that not only obliges employers to take action, but actually tells them what that action should be.

Business barriers to making workplaces safe. Companies are always under pressure to deliver at pace and, particularly for those involved in complex manufacturing processes, this has hindered their ability to adjust to new safe working practices. However, many organizations have demonstrated that these challenges can be overcome, provided the will is there.

Advance planning is required to safeguard health in the future. Across most industries planning for a potential pandemic was found to have been inadequate. Whilst it was included on many corporate risk registers before 2020, most companies were not prepared for the impact of COVID-19. This must now change, and risk assessments must be designed with closer attention to the possibility of similar events happening in the future.

Protecting mental health. Awareness of mental health issues had been increasing across the world before the pandemic, but a significant stigma remained around the subject and there has often been reluctance to deal with it properly. The pandemic has since further increased the incidence and visibility of mental health issues. In the World of Work, the mental health of workers has suffered for a variety of reasons. The WHO reports that "bereavement, isolation, loss of income and fear are triggering mental health conditions or exacerbating existing ones. Many people may be facing increased levels of alcohol and drug use, insomnia, and anxiety. Meanwhile, COVID-19 itself can lead to neurological and mental complications, such as delirium, agitation, and stroke. People with pre-existing mental, neurological or substance use disorders are also more vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 infection – they may stand a higher risk of severe outcomes and even death."

Employers can help safeguard the mental health of their workers by acknowledging the risks of increased isolation experienced by those working remotely. Apart from feeling cut off from colleagues, remote workers can experience increased pressure to deliver whilst working from home. An ‘always on’ culture has emerged in many organizations, with workers being permanently contactable via email and corporate messaging applications. Coupled with a blurring of boundaries between the workspace and home space, many workers have reported working increasingly long hours and also feeling like they are expected to do so, leading to greater levels of stress.

These risks can be mitigated by training line managers to monitor the mental health of their employees and by ensuring that managers set healthy expectations around work-life balance. Many organizations have instituted policies that ensure line managers reach out to workers on a regular basis, setting time aside to talk about ‘non-work’ topics and check in on employees’ general wellbeing. More work needs to be done to develop occupational health and safety regulations and guidance around working from home, ensuring that workers have the required technology and access to a comfortable and safe environment, as well as setting out ‘digital etiquette’ that prevents workers from experiencing unnecessary additional stress.

To access more resources around mental health, companies may wish to engage with the wide range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that deal with the issue and can provide useful advice and toolkits for managers.

The value of health to employers. Whilst employers have a legal and moral duty to safeguard the health of their workers, they will also reap considerable commercial benefits by maintaining a healthy workforce. This point is discussed under Theme Three of this report. In addition, it is important to ensure that companies fully understand the advantages of acting as ‘custodians of health’, and this can be achieved by better educating business leaders. One potential way of doing this is by incorporating discussions around health into the curricula of Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses, which have become a near universal requirement for future private-sector leaders.

“The pandemic has since further increased the incidence and visibility of mental health issues. In the World of Work, the mental health of workers has suffered for a variety of reasons.”
Theme 4

Proposed actions

The Dialogue sessions yielded the following key actions:

1 **Implement international labour standards**
   - Promote ILO Convention 155, Convention 187, Convention 190 and recommendation 206.
   - Develop appropriate regulations, guidance, and policies to deal with OSH issues related to remote work (e.g. specific risks, conducting risk assessment process, investigation and compensation of accidents).
   - Extend OSH protection to those working in the informal economy while promoting formalization.
   - Advocate for adequate paid sick leave policies.

2 **Leverage existing conventions/protocols to further endorse universal access to occupational health**
   - Create dedicated working groups with private and public stakeholders to identify objectives and a roadmap for implementation (including UN, ILO, WHO, bilateral).

3 **Adapt risk assessments to include:**
   - A forward-facing approach - preparedness for future events
   - New risks associated with infectious disease pandemics (gender-based violence, cyberbullying, social protection etc.).
4 Increase access to mental health resources
   • Create partnerships with nongovernmental organizations and other providers and use innovative technologies.

5 Develop occupational health and safety guidance for digital/remote work
   • Define ‘digital etiquette’, and develop guidance that includes mental health, self-care, at-home worker needs and access to enabling technology.

6 Demonstrate the ‘mutual benefit’ to both health and economy
   • Leverage public-private partnerships
   • Reinforce health narrative (investment in Occupational Health and Safety, Universal Health Coverage) in the business world through business school curricula and training future private-sector leaders.
   • Develop a compelling narrative to accompany the rules and laws... “Occupational health is not only a right but an investment”. 
ANNEX: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

World Health Organization participants
Ibrahima Soce Fall / Sylvie Briand / Gaudenz Silberschmidt / Sarah Hess / Joel Schaeffer / Alexandra McPhedran / Judith Van Holten / Ivan Ivanov / Yonah Amster / Julietta Rodriguez-Guzman

Plenary participants

Working group participants