



Reacting to the Covid-19 emergency: the experience from DRLI companies and potential impacts in maintaining best practice

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Since the emergence of Covid-19 in early March 2020 as a serious threat to the global population, businesses have had to adapt to different ways of working and operating, and the oil palm sector has not been spared.

The Covid-19 pandemic has identified several issues relating to worker well-being, which are currently being addressed in various ways by the DRLI member companies¹²³⁴⁵. These issues, and the various interventions put in place, have highlighted the potential improvements that can continue post-emergency into general good practice. This has been summarized in Table 1.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted a few outcomes:

- Generally it is noted that the spread of Covid-19 virus has been less intense in the oil palm plantation operations compared to other labour intensive industries, notably those in urban areas. The DRLI companies have not recorded high incidents of positive Covid-19 cases, though this data is not necessarily representative of the entire industry. This could be linked to inherent set up of oil palm plantation operations in general:
 - o the availability of more open space in estates, with majority of work being carried out in the outdoors
 - o the provision of estate housing per employee and their nucleus family unit, that is generally in individual housing units per family
 - o the provision of free basic health care or clinics in very close proximity to estate housing
 - o the ability to control traffic through estates, thereby minimizing external spread of the virus
- That the local communities in the vicinity of an oil palm plantation company are critical stakeholders and should be part of any plantation company's business strategy. In the case of Covid-19, it is clear that the biggest risk of infection to employees of a plantation estate is from the local community living close by. For the Covid-19 emergency, it was necessary to ensure that the local community are also being included as part of interventions. Notably:
 - o Provided with PPE (like masks, sanitizers, and disinfectants), and equipment required for hand washing
 - o Included in health-related communication and information on the dangers of Covid-19, ways to prevent transmission, and what to do if there is suspicion of Covid-19 infection
 - o Provided with access to estate health facilities
 - o Provided with access to food, whether through donations, contributions, or access to land for small scale vegetable/fruit planting
- Interaction with local government is critical to the effectiveness of the DRLI companies' Covid-19 coping strategies. A well-resourced and resilient local government is better equipped to alleviate



the spread of Covid-19 and maintain measures for overall protection of the local population. The interaction and assistance provided by DRLI companies include:

- Contributions to local government Covid-19 task force or programmes. These local task force or programmes often are the first response team for a local area or district, and enabling them to continue providing medications, carry out testing, and giving aid to the local population also helps to mitigate breakouts in the area
- Assistance carrying out localized disinfections. In certain areas in Indonesia some of the DRLI members have co-opted their tankers and spraying equipment to help disinfect specific areas identified by local government or local communities. These include schools, access roads, police stations, clinics, hospitals, amongst others. This helps to reduce further spreading of the virus in the local vicinity

It is clear there are some lessons from this current epidemic that have changed the way we operate. Where these interventions continue to be applied as best practice, it can have lasting impacts to the oil palm operating landscape, for employees as well as the local communities we work in.

Table 1: Issues and interventions related to Covid-19 response in DRLI member companies, and the linked best practice and potential future impacts if maintained

Issue	Covid-19 interventions	Potential best practice that can be maintained & impacts	
		Best practice	Impact
Maintaining employee health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular screening of employees for symptoms especially fever - Encouraging employees with symptoms to stay home on paid medical leave - Requiring declaration of health from each employee - Focus on good hygiene, and use of PPE - Regular disinfection of places of work and estate housing - Ensuring availability of water and hand-washing facilities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Maintenance of regular employee health screening, and not just limited to chemical workers can help to identify where employee health can be improved (2) Continuing to encourage workers to utilize sick leave when they are ill (3) Continuation of “normalizing” PPE use (4) Continuation of promotion of personal hygiene and hand washing 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Increase in healthier employees, and reduction in lifestyle illnesses such as diabetes, and high blood pressure which are prevalent in estate workers (2) The destigmatization of paid sick leave by estate management will ensure normalization, and clearer understanding from employees on the terms of its use (3) PPE becomes “part of the uniform” of working on estates, lowering risks to workers from work related hazards (4) Reduction in issues linked to hygiene related illnesses, and availability of clean water for washing will improve overall health of workers
Medical response & preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having clinic response plans for when there is identification of positive cases of Covid-19 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Maintaining or creating clinic response plans or first response teams for other types of illnesses or medical issues, eg in 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Reduce occurrences of fatalities linked to certain conditions when a doctor is not on site



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having clear process for containment & isolation, including specified containment centres - Ensuring clinics are well stocked and equipped - Ability to service local community members who are unwell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> prenatal / neonatal emergencies, heart attacks/ failure, allergic reactions, etc (2) Ensuring access for health care for local communities (3) Maintaining containment centres for other communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (2) Overall health improvement for the local population (3) Limiting spread of contagious diseases
Ensuring food security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensuring estate shops are well stocked, and negotiating prices with wholesalers to keep prices affordable during the Covid-19 emergency - Provision of food basics, notably rice, sugar, cooking oil, flour, noodles, etc to workers - Allocation of land for planting vegetables and fruits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Maintaining affordable prices of goods for employees through longer term agreements with wholesalers (2) While land for growing of food is not allowed to be calculated under DLW methodologies, maintaining some form of vegetable / fruit farming programme is recommended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Increase spending power by workers, and providing them with fairer access to goods (2) Vegetable / fruit farming programmes helps to introduce more nutrition in food, and ensure availability of a more varied diet. These programmes also can increase entrepreneurship amongst workers/communities, and has potential to increase livelihoods
Transparency & information distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased information provided to employees about the virus and how it spreads - Health information also being shared with children and schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Maintaining regular and frequent communications with workers and local communities (2) Creating specific health education programmes with schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Increased understanding of important issues and fosters better relationships (2) Creating awareness of key health and safety issues with children is an effective way



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being upfront about changes being put in place (e.g. government imposed travel restrictions), and discussing options directly with workers - Using technology for improved communications and as alternative means to face-to-face meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (3) Establishing more consultative discussions with workers on key issues (4) Maintaining the use of technology where feasible for more regular communications with workers and the local communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> to help increase awareness with parents and adults (3) Creates more mature industrial relations, and improves worker-company negotiations (4) Increased ability for 2-way communication without needing to wait for face to face meetings/ town-hall sessions
Responding to shortages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diverting certain functions to produce necessities like hand sanitizers, and face masks - Agreements with local governments to maintain production of food supply 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Potential for incorporating more specific welfare and community impact KPIs into more estate level functions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Better able to expand community impact interventions beyond regular community relations functions

¹ https://www.cargill.co.id/id/2020/cargill-donates-assistance-for-covid-19_id

² <https://goldenagri.com.sg/newsroom/summary-of-covid-19-measures-in-gars-indonesian-operations/> ; <https://goldenagri.com.sg/food-security-and-support-for-communities-in-times-of-a-global-pandemic/>; <https://goldenagri.com.sg/covid-19/>

³ <https://www.musimmas.com/news/covid-19-response>

⁴ <http://www.simedarbyplantation.com/sites/default/files/COVID-19%20Sustainability%20Practices.pdf>

⁵ https://www.wilmar-international.com/docs/default-source/default-document-library/sustainability/resource/sustainability-brief---plantation-life-in-the-time-of-covid-19---final.pdf?sfvrsn=68b93912_6