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# TRADE UNION RESPONSES TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## Regional Impact of COVID-19: Report of the BWI Africa-MENA Region

### A. INTRODUCTION

The SARS COV2 virus was recorded arriving in most parts of the region somewhat later than Asia and Europe and as the case numbers rose in the MENA sub-region and South Africa, many African countries with poor public health infrastructure and limited capacity to test for the virus were forced to institute extreme precautionary lockdown measures. The state of public health care systems in most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and non-oil exporting countries in the MENA meant that even the capacity to test for the infection was either non-existent or severely limited through the critical month of March; and for many governments, testing remains a challenge. The late arrival and immediate containment measures taken in many countries in the region have succeeded in slowing the



spread. Africa still accounts for only about 1% of deaths and infections. Most health care systems have not yet been put to the test in any significant way. Countries south of the Equator are entering the winter season now. The worst may therefore be yet to come - and it will come as movement restrictions have been largely lifted and people are back at work.

Several factors pose challenges to the effectiveness of containment and mitigation measures against the spread of COVID-19 in SSA, namely, large and densely populated urban informal settlements, poor access to safe water and sanitation facilities, and fragile health systems. Lockdown provisions are particularly hard on people living in informal high density housing and for informal traders and casual workers. Underlying health issues such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and diarrhoea are all leading killers in SSA.

Amongst unions there is a real concern for the over 20.6 million people, over half of the world's HIV positive population, who live in East and Southern Africa. Many affiliated unions and gender structures in the region and within unions have campaigned around awareness and stigma issues relating to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in past years. Whilst it is currently thought that those with an HIV infection which is well managed with antiretrovirals (ARVs) diet and exercise are not at considerably greater risk of a severe COVID-19 infection certainly those people who have a currently compromised immune system and are not on ARVs and the large numbers of people who have simultaneous HIV and Tuberculosis infections are at significantly higher risk. In East and Southern Africa alone, there were 800,000 new HIV infections and 310 000 Aids related deaths in 2018. In the middle of May that was roughly the same number of global COVID-19 related deaths. With that as a perspective it is more important than ever for workers to know their status and where necessary be on treatment and administer treatments correctly, but also to limit exposure to the SARS\_COV2 virus of immune-compromised people in the workplace, as a precaution.



Know more about BWI and Affiliates' COVID-19 Responses at:  
<https://odoo.bwint.org/cms/covid-19-union-response-1689>



As the pandemic accelerates in the region into June and beyond, occupational health and safety (OHS) monitoring and safety protocols will be very important. The economic and social effects will have had more time to take root in the region which will mean greater vulnerability levels as infections spike. For unions and civil society partners, policy engagement needs to focus on ensuring that people receive food; groups do not fall

outside the welfare net, for example daily waged workers, migrants and informal sector workers; and companies do not take the opportunity to lay workers off where this is not absolutely necessary for company survival. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to open a much needed social dialogue as to the real value of work and the dangers to society of the casualisation of work and poor investment in social infrastructure.

## B. REGIONAL PANDEMIC SITUATIONER: IMPACT ON BWI INDUSTRIES

### 1. BWI industries and its organisational coverage in Africa-MENA region

The construction sector is estimated to employ approximately 11.7 million workers in SSA and 15.8 million workers in the MENA sub-region, whilst the forestry and wood related industries employ approximately 2.3 million workers in these regions. Parts of the MENA sub-region, in particular the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States employ mostly migrant workers from Asia and Africa. Approximately 75% of all private sector workers in the GCC States are migrants. For example, migrants make up 95% of Qatar's labour force and of these migrants, 52.9% are engaged in construction work. It is estimated that close to 8 million migrant construction workers from as far afield as Ghana are employed in the MENA sub-region. Migrant employment patterns in the Middle East are highly volatile. For example the number of migrant construction workers in Saudi Arabia dropped by 700,000 between 2017 and 2018 and it is estimated that the numbers continued to decline through 2019 by more than a million prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Unlike the construction sector, forestry is more concentrated in West, Central, East and Southern Africa. Wood and related industries are wider spread but still relatively small-scale compared to other manufacturing industries. On the other hand, construction materials are widespread and include multinational employers such as Lafarge Holcim and other cement manufacturers, particularly in the larger economies in the region.

Based on BWI records and a rapid response database created to track impacts and measures relating to the pandemic, in Sub-Saharan Africa, BWI has 39 affiliates in 20 countries out of the 44 countries, with approximately 537,000 members from a workforce of approximately 3,921,000 workers in the construction, building and forestry related industries in those countries. In the MENA sub-region, BWI has 12 affiliates in 10 out of 21 countries, with approximately 836,000 members with a workforce of approximately 4,042,000 workers. BWI thus has representation in just under half of the countries in the region as a whole.

### BWI sectors and union membership

	Male Workforce	Female Workforce	Total Workforce	Male Membership	Female Membership	Total Membership
Construction and Building	6,824,860	395,987	7,238,847	1,141,135	105,486	1,246,621
Wood and Forestry	620,120	103,101	723,221	114,734	11,342	126,076
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,444,980</b>	<b>499,088</b>	<b>7,962,068</b>	<b>1,255,869</b>	<b>116,828</b>	<b>1,372,697</b>
Africa Construction and Building	2,942,320	254,480	3,196,800	371,745	39,202	410,947
Africa Forestry	620,120	103,101	723,221	114,734	11,342	126,076
MENA - Construction and Building	3,882,540	141,507	4,042,047	769,390	66,284	835,674
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,444,980</b>	<b>499,088</b>	<b>7,962,068</b>	<b>1,255,869</b>	<b>116,828</b>	<b>1,372,697</b>

Whilst there is a legal right to freedom of association in most of the region there are often real difficulties for unions operating on the ground either because of state resistance or conflicts. Examples of conflicts include Yemen, Syria, Somalia, South Sudan, Libya and areas of the DRC, Nigeria, the Central African Republic and others. Southern Africa has remained stable in the recent past. With the exception of Bahrain and Oman, across the Gulf States, migrant workers are excluded from trade union representation by law. In Qatar, BWI has been able to organise networks of labour committees amongst migrant workers.



The COVID-19 pandemic has created a global economic recession although the roots of this recession were visible long before the outbreak. The reality for developed economies and even mature emerging economies has been stagnating growth rates in recent years. Even in growth conditions, the African Development Bank reported in 2019 that only a third of African countries achieved inclusive growth reducing poverty and inequality. An analysis of debt in the region shows that debt levels have risen consistently after the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession with increasing budget deficits. A global triple crisis of inequality, economic stagnation and rising costs of mitigation and adaptation to climate change can be likened to the firewood to which the virus has simply acted as the match - and the containment measures that followed were the accelerant for economic impacts.

It seems almost prophetic that in mid-January 2020 this was reported. “The head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned that the global economy risks a return of the Great Depression, driven by inequality and financial sector instability. Kristalina Georgieva said new IMF research, which compares the current economy to the “roaring 1920s” that culminated in the great market crash of 1929, revealed that a similar trend was already under way. She warned that fresh issues such as the climate emergency and increased trade protectionism meant the next 10 years were likely to be characterised by social unrest and financial market volatility<sup>1</sup>.”

The economic fallout through the months of February and March were rapid and dramatic. As a result Sub-Saharan Africa is entering its first recession in 25 years, with growth forecast down by 5.1% in 2020 by the World Bank. The IMF predicts -3.3% growth for the MENA region, down by 5.9% from the projected growth of 2.2% in January. Africa as a whole is currently projected to lose up to \$200 billion in revenues in 2020<sup>2</sup> and an African Union study concludes that some 20 million jobs in Africa are at risk. There is growing concern about food security in the region and indeed globally for net importers of food. Agricultural production is expected to contract between 2.6% and 7% along with rising global prices for food. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has modelled the current trajectory of economic impact in terms of its implications for food security concluding that the best case scenario is an increase of 14.4 million people in the 100 net food importing countries facing hunger and a worst case scenario of 83 million people.<sup>3</sup> Food constitutes between 40%-60% of low-income households’ consumption, and rising prices will serve to further deepen inequality.

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## 2. Lockdowns and affected workers

By 1 April, 13 countries in SSA were under full national lockdowns<sup>4</sup> and an additional 19 under localised lockdowns<sup>5</sup> (normally in large urban centres)<sup>6</sup>. A few countries such as Ethiopia have implemented less severe measures, such as banning sporting events and gatherings, whilst Sierra Leone and Tanzania had introduced no or very few specific restrictions and no economic and social tools or set aside any budget. By mid-April some 31 of the 45 SSA countries had imposed curfews or full lockdowns with only essential services work remaining. 37 of these countries also incorporated a partial (15 countries) or full ban (22 countries) on public gatherings. These along with other executive orders have been incorporated in 18 states of emergency, 3 national

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/17/head-of-imf-says-global-economy-risks-return-of-great-depression>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank, IMF and ECA projections.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fao.org/3/ca8800en/ca8800en.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda, Congo, Mauritius, Djibouti, Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Eritrea, Lesotho prior to 1 April and Mozambique on 1 April.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747> and [africa@icnl.org](mailto:africa@icnl.org)

<sup>6</sup> Such countries as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal DR Congo Tanzania and Mali. By 1 April a few countries such as Cameroon, Zambia and Equatorial Guinea had issued national recommendations including closing schools for example. In the case of Zambia, the Government announced that Kafue District would be placed on complete lockdown from 15 April to allow for mass screening and disinfection.





states of disaster and 10 declarations of health emergencies. Declarations and measures enabled by them have been from periods of 2-3 weeks to indefinite declarations. A number of confinement measures of between 14 and 30 days have already been extended, for example in South Africa, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea and Senegal. Towards late April and early May, a number of countries began to lift or phase out more extreme lockdown measures. This is based on the realisation and concern that to extend much beyond this time frame will mean a real risk of starvation for many in the informal sector along with a more general economic collapse. Based on total and partial lockdown regulations, it is estimated that approximately 10 million construction and forestry workers have been directly affected in the 30 countries in the Africa - MENA region where BWI has affiliates present.

The mobilisation of military and police to enforce population movement control mechanisms have resulted in a number of deaths, beatings and other human rights violations.<sup>7</sup> BWI affiliates such as the Uganda Building Construction, Civil Engineering, Cement and Allied Workers Union (UBCCEAWU) have publicly called for restraint to be

exercised by security forces. This East African nation, with only 30 cases and no deaths, has implemented one of Africa's strictest lockdowns. Many countries under lockdown have also recorded an increase in gender-based violence. The 2020 guidelines of the Africa Center for Disease Control (CDC), part of the African Union warn against "measures...that cause severe negative impact on the social wellbeing and economic progress of countries" and note that "this will ensure sustainability of the response... and avoid intervention fatigue and community revolt."

The pattern is similar in the MENA sub-region where several countries declared a state of national emergency and imposed strict containment measures, including mandatory self-isolation and curfews. Large countries such as Egypt have however only introduced partial lockdown measures. Some countries such as Lebanon have already extended the lockdown further potentially to include the period of Ramadan, to ensure social distancing during this period. Many construction sites have been closed in the region but some large infrastructure projects have continued although with reduced workforce arrangements.

The impact of the virus itself and measures to contain the virus, together with the associated deepening economic recession, will take place in the context of the deep fault lines of pre-existing poverty and labour market insecurity in the Africa-MENA region. Whilst technical unemployment is low in Africa, the majority of working-age people is forced into the informal sector with low pay and insecure work, own-account work and survival-level activities, accounting for an estimated 86% of total employment in Africa. Only 28% of the employed are salaried workers. The share of salaried workers is higher in North Africa with 64% while in SSA, it is around 23%. In contrast, salaried work accounts for 81% of employment in the Arab states although much of this work is vulnerable by virtue of its migrant status. Working poverty is estimated to be experienced by 265.6 million workers across the region and it is these workers who are particularly vulnerable. In the construction sector, it is estimated that approximately one third of workers are in casual and vulnerable employment in Africa. This would translate to approximately 6.7 million workers who are living close to or even below the poverty line and are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. The result for many families will have been the onset of hunger within a few days to one or two weeks after strict containment measures were introduced.

### 3. Migrant hotspots

With some 20 million migrant workers in the GCC States alone, and upwards of 30% of these workers employed in construction, the MENA sub-region is a hotspot for migrant labour. It is estimated that there are approximately 8 million migrant construction workers in the MENA sub-region. On average 70% of the employed population in these countries is migrant reaching as high as 93% in some countries. After the United States, remittances from Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the second and third highest globally. In 2018, \$128 billion was sent home by migrant workers in the Arab states.

<sup>7</sup> For example In South Africa, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate had registered six cases of "death as a result of police action" during the first week of the national Covid-19 lockdown exceeding the number of COVID 19 deaths. In Kenya, President Uhuru Kenyatta apologised to the public for police brutality.

Migrant workers in the GCC States appear to be the epicentre of the pandemic. In Kuwait, the UAE and Bahrain, official figures suggest nearly all cases have been among foreigners, many of whom live in labour camps. In early April, Saudi Arabia announced about half of its recorded cases were amongst migrant workers and initial concern in Qatar's labour camps was raised by the BWI when hundreds of workers tested positive leading to the quarantining of some of these places. Migrant workers generally live in labour camps often in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions, ideally suited for the transmission of the virus. Some of the GCC governments have announced free COVID-19 testing and treatment but many undocumented workers or workers whose papers have expired are reportedly avoiding such services for fear of arrest and deportation.



#### 4. Mobilising government responses and debt

The rapid spread of the virus has meant countries have needed to rapidly mobilise finances for mitigation and containment measures, and to counter the social and economic consequences of these measures. African governments have undertaken the most significant expansion of social-welfare programmes and worker protection since the early post-independence period. The World Bank and UNICEF have tracked immediate state responses of support during the initial phase of pandemic as at 8 May, dividing these into 12 categories. 42 SSA countries and 12 MENA countries are included in the analysis showing the most popular social support measures are cash-based transfers (50) and utility and tax payment deferments (49). These measures are followed by in-kind support such as food parcels (21). However, only 15 of the 115 recorded responses are directly related to wage and employment protection, the majority of which are in the MENA sub-region. In SSA, only Botswana, Cabo Verde and South Africa reported wage subsidies and only South Africa and Ethiopia additional or specific paid leave or COVID-19 related unemployment insurance allocations. A number of countries and particularly those where unions provided representation were able to secure employer contributions to a full wage or a portion of a wage for a limited time. Protection measures are stronger in the MENA sub-region. The spending is not equal across the region. In Africa, 85% of the \$38.7 billion allocated to initial measures is accounted for by South Africa and Egypt alone. In comparison to measures budgeted amongst developed countries, these amounts are an absolute minimum.

Most countries, particularly in SSA and parts of the MENA sub-regions, simply cannot afford to adopt fiscal stimulus measures or significant extensions of social security protection. They faced decreases in revenue as a result of oil and commodity price drops and declines in receipts from trade and income taxes. Instead, national budgets were revised so as to move spending between items, for instance decreasing capital expenditure on infrastructure which will negatively impact construction.

Many countries in the region already spend a disproportionate amount of their budgets on debt, more so for the poorest GDP per capita countries. The DRC spends six times the amount on debt payments compared to health, Zambia four times and Cameroon six times. But this is certainly not limited to very poor or small economies. In 2019 Ghana, a middle-income country, spent four times the amount on debt compared to healthcare, Egypt three times, Lebanon<sup>8</sup> twice the amount and Kenya twice the amount. Angola<sup>9</sup> spent six times more on debt than health and debt payments accounted for 42% of revenues.

The African Union and UN agencies, together with unions and civil society groups, have all called for debt relief to help countries find the fiscal space to respond to the crisis. The World Bank Group and the IMF have also called for a "bilateral debt standstill" for the poorest nations in the world and the IMF has approved a 6 months standstill on debt repayments for 25<sup>10</sup> poor countries. In response, the G20 has agreed to suspend principle repayments and interest payments on bilateral debts to the end of the year for 76<sup>11</sup> countries which the group estimates should free up about \$14 billion to help with the response to COVID-19. Private banks have been called upon to carry out similar actions on a voluntary basis securing a commitment to refinance about \$8 billion

<sup>8</sup> In 2019 Lebanon spent 41% of revenue servicing debt but also spent a significant 19,1% of revenue on healthcare.

<sup>9</sup> Angola was an upper middle income but moved to the lower middle income group as classified by the world bank in 2018. Jordan also made the same downward move that year. Angola is included as one of the International Development Association countries because of high levels of debt

<sup>10</sup> 18 of these countries are poor African countries

<sup>11</sup> This is to the International Development Association countries and Angola. 35 of these countries are from Africa. The measure is for countries that seek support.





of this debt. Other than voluntary commercial debt suspension, these initiatives exclude multilateral and commercial debt and also exclude many middle-income countries entirely. The Chairperson of the African Union, Cyril Ramphosa, has argued that Africa needs at a minimum a 2-year suspension on repayments. Where budgets have increased, this has been done through taking on new debt. By May, the IMF had received over 100 requests to access the rapid response funds for immediate COVID-19 related mitigation measures. 26 countries from the Africa-MENA region have been granted funds to the amount of US\$12.8 billion. Egypt, Ghana and Nigeria account for US\$7.1 billion as the largest borrowers.

## 5. Impact on BWI Industries

Pre-pandemic growth predictions have been significantly revised although it is notable that a number of large economies were already registering faltering growth in the construction industry. In East Africa, the largest domestic company, Spencon, went bankrupt in 2019 largely because of debt issues and three of the biggest South African companies were either closing down or undergoing business rescue plans. As domestic capacity recedes it is likely that Chinese companies will fill this gap.

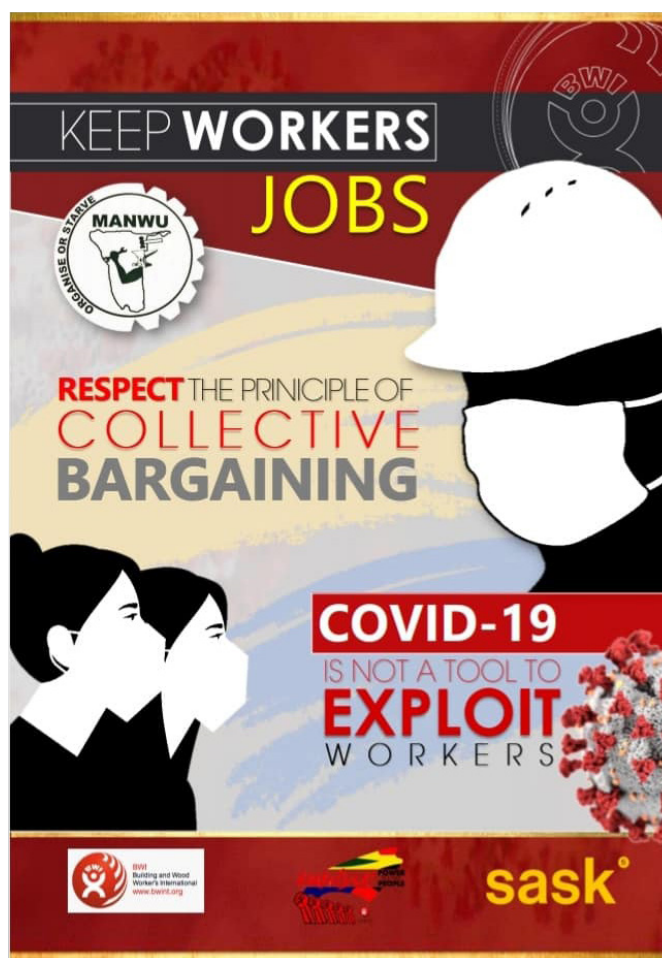
Chinese companies are building 62% of transport infrastructure across Africa currently<sup>12</sup> and 40 of the 54 countries in Africa signed up for the belt and road initiative. Currently, African governments fund around 22% of infrastructure but this is closely followed by China at 20%. Therefore, an economic slowdown in China will have significant impact on construction in the region. This reality was already demonstrated in February, long before national lockdowns, when interruptions to the supply of materials and machinery from China led to early disruptions on construction sites with workers facing short time and layoffs. This had a knock on effect in the general building sector. Many construction workers faced reduced hours and lay-offs, because of supply chain turbulence even before significant national lockdowns closed many construction sites in the region. Construction materials such as cement have either stayed in production with limited staff or halted production. They have also been amongst the earliest industries to reopen as lockdown restrictions began to be eased in early May in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. Where work has continued such as some essential projects in Nigeria, the National Union of Civil Engineering Construction, Furniture and Wood Works (NUCECFWW) reports having to force employers to adhere to safety measures where these are often either vague and subject to interpretation or particularly complicated.

The forestry sector and related industries have suffered less than construction although experiences are mixed. In the DRC, there were initially no specific measures. However, a ban on the export of precious materials including wood means that most companies are inoperative. Lockdown measures in Cameroon has meant saw mills have not been able to operate. A number of countries have opted for a partial lockdown in densely populated urban centres such as Nigeria, Ghana, Gabon, Ivory Coast and others, which has less directly affected forestry workers, although none of these countries have operated at capacity in the sector. Wood workers in urban factory environments have been more affected by the initial lockdown measures. In some countries, such as South Africa, forestry has seen an early return to work and some industries were allowed to continue as they supply essential services. South Africa reports forestry has operated at around 60%-70% of capacity. In Gabon for instance only forest operators (logging and wood-processing) were allowed to continue. There the industry has laid off about 20% of local staff and 5% of foreign workers. Workers received 50% of basic salary from the companies in the lockdown period.

In Kenya, affiliates report most workers have been temporarily laid off or are having to take annual leave with only partial work ongoing. Most BWI affiliates have reported a range of experiences with employers, from bilateral engagements resulting in workers' wages and jobs being secured through the lockdown periods, to partial arrangements with workers receiving some level of support through employer and state contributions. However, reports also highlight many experiences of workers enduring no pay conditions, unilateral layoffs and company closures.

<sup>12</sup> According to Berlin-based European International Contractors (EIC)

GlobalData has revised its construction output growth forecast for SSA in 2020 to 3.6%, down from the previous projection of 6% (Q4 2019 update). This may drop still further. Growth is not evenly spread. The South African forecast for construction output is now -4.1% and the industry has predicted between 150-200,000 job losses depending on how long the lockdown in that country continues. Nigeria's forecast for construction is down to 1% with a 40%-45% drop in revenue for the country at current oil prices. Resource dependent and oil exporting countries in particular will face large drops in revenue which will force the government to review spending, and that will have a direct impact on construction with many projects expected to be delayed or cancelled. The GlobalData construction output growth forecast for the MENA sub-region for 2020 is down to -0.8%, from the 4.6% predicted in its Q4 2019 update. In the MENA sub-region, there is the additional concern that disruption to work will continue through Ramadan deepening the impact of wage losses. The Iraqi Government announced that COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a force majeure for all projects and contracts, creating uncertainty in Iraq's construction sector. Another significant driver for the construction industry is tourism which as a market has been devastated by COVID-19. In Egypt for example tourism is worth \$12.5 billion and 12% of GDP. The pandemic is likely to have a severe impact on commercial building projects, as investment plans in the hospitality sector are expected to be postponed or cancelled. Most countries in the GCC States are revising down their construction plans. Saudi Arabia intends to maintain energy investments but has seen a decline in the construction workforce since 2017. Construction employment in Qatar will contract sharply as infrastructure preparation for the World Cup nears completion. Other media reports indicate for instance that Dubai's Department of Finance ordered a 50% cut in capital spending and called for a freeze on new public construction schemes.



## 6. Pathways and Engagements for COVID-19 Policies/Agreements

There was a range of measures for population and worker support during the initial response period and emerging measures to attempt to re-stimulate the economies in the region. Worker protection measures are generally targeted through the employer and include measures to pay a proportion of wages or full wages for a specific period. As a trend it seems union consultation has been increasing, as measures unfold from initial emergency declarations. From a sample of BWI affiliate reports, countries including Bahrain, Egypt, Ghana, Jordan, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal and Tunisia, have tripartite agreements that protect full or a portion of workers income from 2 weeks to 2 months and in some instances prevent immediate layoffs. Other measures such as a one-off payment to workers who have lost their jobs have also been used, such as in Namibia.

Other countries such as Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Qatar along with other GCC States have announced unilateral measures, including wage subsidy payments, minimum wage support, or partial and full wage protection for specific periods of time. In addition, a number of measures, such as tax and social security contribution relief, utility fee discounts and wage subsidies have been used to support firms in the hope of avoiding closures. Non-labour related measures, including expedited social security payments, mobile payment methods, one-off or time-limited social security fund cash transfers and food parcels have also been mobilised for the most vulnerable in many countries. However, migrant, casual and informal sector workers are frequently not eligible for such benefits and non-compliant employers mean that workers are sometimes not able to access relief.





Tripartite and direct engagement with governments has been used by many unions to expand eligibility and access for vulnerable workers. Multilateral lending institutions have made funds available to governments for immediate COVID-19 responses and for temporary relief through social security mechanisms. At the level of the African Union, there is increasing advocacy for debt relief measures.

## BWI AND ITS AFFILIATES IN ACTION

### Protecting jobs and incomes

According to many BWI affiliates the construction sector in particular has so many layers of subcontracting and multiple small employers it has been impossible to engage in bilateral negotiation across all these employers. Unions have focused negotiating with the main contractors to attempt to get compliance through the subcontracting chain and have engaged other employers when approached for assistance by workers. Another strategy to secure jobs and wages is to engage in centralised bargaining mechanisms and tripartite dialogue. Most unions have used a combination. Whilst some employers have acted appropriately in supporting workers in lockdowns in the region, there have also been many reports from affiliates of closures, retrenchments, workers being forced to use annual leave and no work no pay rules.

In Southern Africa, the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MANWU) in Namibia used national television to call for further tripartite dialogue to extend social security to all workers in the construction sector. Previous tripartite dialogue led to a government employment directive ensuring precautionary health and safety measures, condemning the termination of employment during the lockdown and calling on employers to pay workers fully for March and April. MANWU also negotiated an agreement with the Chinese company, Shanxi Construction Investment, regarding strict compliance to occupational, health and safety standards and wage laws. Previously, PPE equipment was not being provided and workers were being paid less than half the minimum wage. South African affiliates, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) have engaged in sector bilateral discussions within bargaining councils to ensure workers are able to access unemployment insurance benefits specifically designated for COVID-19 income losses. The NUM has also discussed the construction sector crisis with the Minister of Public Works and is engaged in a COVID-19 Construction Rapid Response Task Team to look at the recovery of the industry post-lockdown. The industry currently estimates a sector contraction of 5.4% with a good case estimate of up to 140,000 job losses. The Construction Workers' Union of Mauritius (CMWEU), together with its partner unions from the CTSP national centre, held a dialogue with the Ministry of Labour and secured the commitment that there will be no job losses and compensation for workers' loss of income of up to 50% if companies are unable to pay their full salaries. CMWEU continues to demand that all workers whether migrant or casual should also benefit from this approach. In Mozambique, the construction union, SINTICIM, has engaged in tripartite dialogue through the national centre. Agreement was reached whereby in 435 companies where operations had been suspended, wages would be paid at a rate of 75% in the first month, 50% in the second month and 25% in the third month of lockdown measures. Mozambique is now in the second month. 8 companies in the sector have closed with the loss of 832 jobs but bilateral employer engagements have achieved 100% pay in 15 companies and an additional 42 companies with full pay on a shift rotation basis and 28 companies take a reduced number of workers at a time.

In West Africa, in Senegal, the National Union of Building and Construction Workers (SNTC-BTP) welcomed the government's announcement on 3 April to ban layoffs and guarantee the incomes of workers made redundant during the COVID-19 pandemic. The measure seeks to guarantee wages set at least 70% of the workers average wage over the past 3 months and companies that comply will be able to access stimulus measures such as tax relief to be implemented after the crisis. The union is assisting worker representatives because employers must now consult them prior to any layoffs and consider any proposals for alternative measures they present.

In the MENA region, in Tunisia, the FGBB / UGTT Federation of Building and Wood used a tripartite meeting to discuss an initial payment of 100% wages in April and further discussions are due to take place in May. The General Services Employees Trade Unions of Lebanon (GSTU) called on the Lebanese government to establish a response fund to aid workers who have lost their jobs and other means of livelihood because of the COVID-19



pandemic. The GSTU has also protected workers affected by measures to control the spread of the disease. The GTUCW in Jordan has agreed with companies to pay between 50%- 70% of wages. However unions report that many firms have not paid workers during the lockdown. Unions in Jordan and Lebanon also report many smaller companies closing.

### Health and safety at the workplace

Health and safety has been a key area of engagement by BWI affiliates in the Africa-MENA region. The speed with which the pandemic spread meant many people were unaware of basic information relating to the virus and the disease. This was critical in the early period of March when most countries were still operating as usual.



As part of the BWI campaign entitled “Stop COVID-19! Protect workers!” affiliates are carrying out awareness campaigns on occupational health and safety (OHS) at workplaces through OHS committees or unions’ safety representatives, in social media and through bipartite and tripartite engagements. From early on BWI prioritised the use of masks when in many countries it was initially said that masks would not prevent the spread and should be used by health care workers only. When lockdowns were imposed, unions continued to educate workers in those sites that were still operational. As restrictions on work and movement are eased, unions are working continuously to ensure regulations relating to social distancing and sanitary measures, workplace temperature screening and worker transport and accommodation meet health and safety requirements.

In East Africa, in Rwanda, the Trade Union of Workers Company in Construction and Carpentry (STECOMA) is using an SMS platform to reach its members and advise them on control and prevention measures in order to protect workers, their families and the community at large. The country is in a lockdown affecting some 324,000 construction workers and many in the forestry sector. The Tanzanian Union of Industrial and Commerce (TUICO) also carried out early preventive awareness work with its members even before the first case was reported in the country.

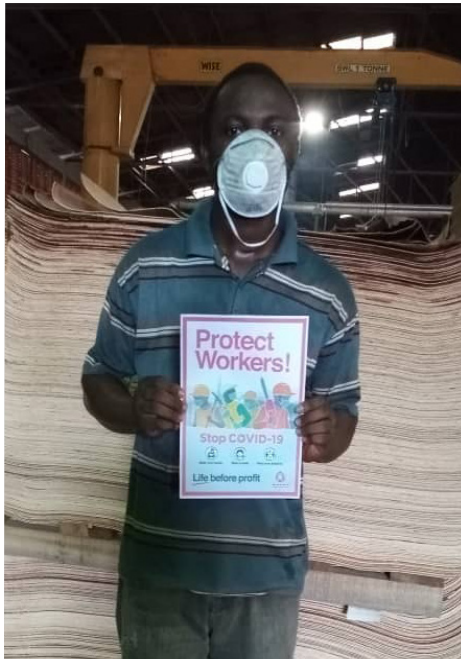
In Southern Africa, NUM, BCAWU and CEPPWAWU have all been engaged in discussions around protective measures and the monitoring of sites where workers are returning. As a measure to ensure the health and safety of workers and the public during COVID-19 pandemic, NUM and BCAWU signed the tripartite Construction Health and Safety Accord on 6 May 2020, which will establish a tripartite COVID-19 Health and Safety Committee to develop a risk mitigation strategy to protect workers. In Zimbabwe, both BWI affiliates, CLAWUZ and ZCATWU, managed to engage sectoral employers through the National Employment Council bipartite forum. ZCATWU is producing union-branded masks for workers. In Mauritius, CMWQU has conducted awareness raising, engaged government on safety measures for the sector and distributed donated personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers.

In the MENA sub-region, in Bahrain, GFBU partnered with employers in promoting workers’ health and safety, with the theme: “We will fight COVID-19 together.” They provided members with information posters and the latest publications on COVID-19 from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Bahraini Ministry of Health. Information materials on how to properly disinfect workplaces and face masks were also distributed to workers. GTUBWW in Egypt has also engaged in education and awareness campaigns along with ensuring sanitary precautions and social distancing is observed in operational work sites during the partial lockdown in the country. NUBWW from Palestine is monitoring companies’ hygiene procedures and has distributed BWI safety information materials.

In West Africa, in Nigeria, NUCECFWW engaged government and employers when hundreds of workers were continuing to work on the Dangote Refinery construction sites in violation of government directives. In Ghana, the Timber and Woodworkers Union has taken various measures to help its workers stay safe including awareness campaigns through social media platforms and SMS. In collaboration with the union, employers have produced information posters on how to avoid infection from COVID-19.

### International Framework Agreements and engaging multinational companies

In South Africa, the Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union (CEPPWAWU) engaged Staedtler SA after the lockdown forced workers home. The company planned to provide its workers with only



a small portion of their wages. When the company initially ignored the union's demand to pay wages, the union worked through the BWI and German affiliate, IG Metal, to engage Staedtler's headquarters in Germany about this violation of the International Framework Agreement (IFA). As a result, workers have received their full wages through the lockdown period in South Africa.

The experience in Lebanon with Lafarge Holcim, a cement manufacturer, further illustrates the importance of international framework agreements. Lafarge before merging with Holcim had an IFA with BWI but the new merged entity has thus far failed to institute the agreement. In Lebanon workers in lockdown were to receive no pay, and in particular, a quarry marked for closure continued efforts to lay off workers. The General Services Employees Trade Unions (GSTU) of Lebanon intervened and signed an initial agreement with Lafarge Holcim to pay its workers, including daily wage earners, their full wages up to the 29 March 2020. However, negotiations still continue as the company apparently proposes to pay some workers only 50% of their wage. Engagement is ongoing in terms of the quarry closure. Lafarge Holcim in Morocco, however, paid workers their full wage. An operative IFA would serve to protect workers so that international standards are met, and prevent such national-based opportunism by company divisions.

## Migrant workers

Because migrant workers are generally denied the right to form and join trade unions in the GCC States, BWI, together with a coalition of trade unions and civil society organisations, petitioned the Arab states of the Persian Gulf for their strong commitment to provide adequate protection and support to migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Included in the group's letters to the governments of Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are several policy proposals to ensure that the rights and welfare of migrant workers are protected. Some of these are: access to testing, medical treatment, protective equipment and basic provisions, stronger partnerships with national and sectoral unions, public information addressing discrimination against migrant workers, as well as job, income and healthcare security.

In Qatar, BWI has been assisting networks of migrant workers and workers committees to organise during the large-scale construction projects ahead of the 2022 World Cup. Affiliates in migrant-sending countries also assist in establishing networks and linking people together. These networks enabled BWI to intervene and support migrant workers at the onset of the pandemic. The BWI has a cooperation agreement with Qatar's Supreme Committee on Delivery and Legacy (SDCL) and has jointly conducted occupational health and safety inspections. In late April, a 'virtual' delegation from BWI represented by General Secretary Ambet Yuson, along with union health and safety inspectors and experts from UK's UNITE, Australia's CMFEU and the Swedish Painters engaged with these structures in monitoring safety measures for workers still on site and in the workers' accommodation compounds, some of which had been in put in quarantine after workers were found to be infected with COVID-19 virus.

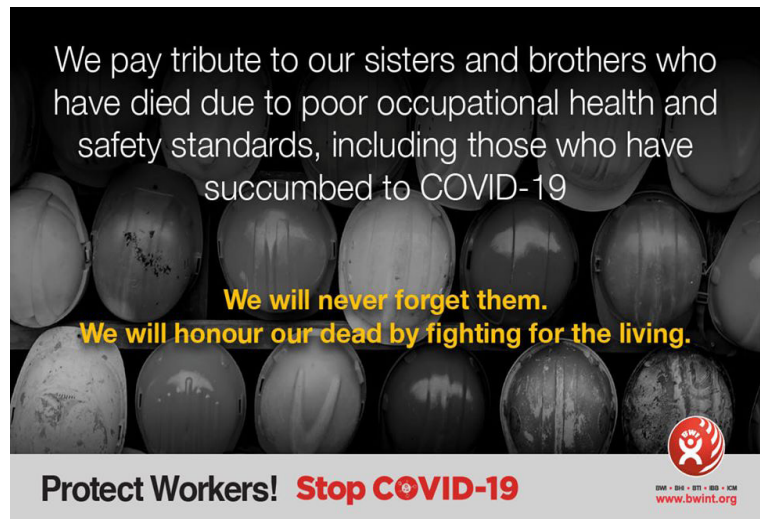
In other parts of the MENA sub-region, such as Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, there are also significant numbers of migrant workers. Syrian refugees are also often employed in MENA states such as Egypt. In Egypt the GTUBWW provided in-kind donations to Syrian refugee construction workers using contacts amongst these workers established through a previous BWI project to identify recipients. In Jordan, GTUCW also distributed food parcels to Syrian refugee and Egyptian migrant workers. In Lebanon, GSTU supports a committee of Syrian refugee workers which has assisted in relief and information work in this country.

Palestinians working Israel are not afforded all the same rights as Israeli workers The BWI-affiliated Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) made an urgent appeal to Israeli employers to ensure decent working conditions of Palestinian workers employed in their labour market and settlements. It also said that COVID-19 regulations should be fully implemented at the workplaces, including physical distancing and full PPEs for all workers. In order to ensure construction activities continue, Israel has now regulated that migrant workers in construction must stay for a minimum of 3 consecutive weeks but are entitled to health insurance at the employer's expense, so that they can receive medical treatment while in Israel. Regulations also require certain accommodation standards such as a maximum of 6 workers to a room with 4 square metres of space for each worker.

<sup>13</sup> For example, CBMWU of Ghana, NUCECFWW Nigeria, KBCFTA, Kenya and NUBEGW, Zambia have been particularly successful in organising members and signing CBAs in Chinese construction MNCs.

<sup>14</sup> For example in Gabon UTBTBSP successfully signed a recognition agreement with a Chinese MNC in the forestry sector in 2019 leading to the recognition of 349 workers as permanent employees.

There are also migrant and often undocumented workers in other middle-income countries, such as South Africa. They are employed in the construction and forestry industries and in the case of undocumented workers, will not be eligible for social security measures or food parcels during the extended lockdown in that country. Most migrant work is considered vulnerable, and more so in the case of undocumented workers, who suffer acute hardship during the lockdown. Affiliates in the MENA states, Mauritius and South Africa are carrying out awareness campaigns for migrant workers and calling for solidarity to support these workers. Some unions are monitoring the migration trends and providing assistance to migrant workers through BWI and international solidarity.



### Humanitarian actions

Many affiliates in West Africa, including NUCECFWW, CBMWU, SNTC, FTBB, SNTBB and FNTCS, work in coalitions with NGOs to carry out humanitarian actions for workers in difficult situations because of COVID-19 and because of climate change related migration.

In Southern Africa, an example of humanitarian engagements involves the CMWEU construction union and CTSP national centre in Mauritius, which came to the aid of 44 unpaid Indian migrant workers employed by Swadeshi Pvt Ltd, an Indian construction company in Mauritius. The unions have also supported workers by distributing PPE and food parcels. It has called on its members to continue relief work through the distribution of food parcels.

In the MENA sub-region, GTUBWW in Egypt donated 300,000 Egyptian Pounds to support informal sector workers through the Viva Egypt fund for those in need. The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions donated USD1 million to support workers in need during the pandemic. The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) and FGGB called on factories to revoke workers' termination notices issued during the crisis and decided to set up a "COVID-19 fighting fund" to help workers affected by the international health crisis. FGGB explained that the fund will be deducted from union members' day fee which represents TND 90 million. Food parcels were distributed to migrant workers. In Bahrain, the union created a fund to support migrant workers and has distributed food parcels. Unions in Jordan and Lebanon have distributed in-kind donations for workers in need.

### Organising and member retention

Over the past years, the Africa-MENA region has focused on organising members through education programmes and through its sectoral networks and women and youth structures. There has been considerable progress made, for instance, in organising Chinese construction companies<sup>13</sup> and forestry<sup>14</sup> MNCs, and as a result, unions were able to develop a rapid and effective response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Because of this focus on organising, unions could provide effective support in different areas of health and safety, and many successful interventions safeguarded jobs and income during the initial crisis response period. Previous programmes involving migrant workers in the MENA sub-region meant that BWI had access to information on workers' conditions and enabled a rapid mobilisation through pre-existing networks despite the lack of fundamental labour rights. Unions also used online campaigns, such as the International Workers Memorial Day, to mobilise and disseminate information in various languages to workers in the region. Different humanitarian interventions and the distribution of PPE to workers highlighted the real value and meaning of unionism: solidarity in action, at local, regional and global levels.

At the same time, unions across the region have reported various difficulties in organising. Travel restrictions have meant workers cannot be reached in many countries. For example, Zimbabwean affiliates had difficulty reaching workers when all public transport was suspended. Where workers have not been paid because of the lockdown, unions have been unable to collect subscriptions, straining organisational resources in a time of intense worker support activities.

Layoffs are also already reflecting in membership figures. For instance, the Kenya Building, Construction, Timber, Furniture and Industries Employees Union (KBCTFA) reported a 25% decline in membership over the past two months even though Kenya has not been subject to a total lockdown.



In response to these challenges, BWI and its affiliates are developing innovative ways of organising members. Strategies include the use of new technology (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Zoom, Teams and Skype) and also the involvement of women and youth in recruitment processes through the BWI Youth Organising Academy. In Gabon, the Union of Construction Workers, Public Works, Sawmilling and Veneer (UTBTPBSP) has used social media to develop effective communication networks at leadership and shop steward level, and has been able to assess the impact of the pandemic, share information and discuss response strategies.

## 7. Matrix of actions relative to the 7 BWI convergences

BWI Convergence	Summary of Actions and Outputs Relative to COVID-19 Pandemic
	Unions have given inputs to national lockdown and similar measures along with engaging employers and government to ensure the suspension of terminations, ongoing pay and the protection of migrants and vulnerable workers' rights during the implementation of extraordinary measures. Unions have also advised workers of their rights regarding COVID-19 and health and safety in the workplace. In some instances, unions have engaged in advocacy on broader human and socio- economic rights.
	Unions leveraged the global and regional organisation to rapidly share and spread knowledge, information and practices between themselves and then into national and workplace engagement and education efforts at a time when there was great uncertainty. Unions have educated workers on safety measures and rights regarding COVID-19 in the workplace, participated in the development of general and industry specific health and safety protocols in the workplace, including transportation to and from the workplace, and for workers' accommodation, along with the monitoring of compliance with national regulations and protocols for work that continued during the lockdown and for when work resumes.
	Unions have used various media platforms to convey information on the nature of the pandemic and the need to protect all ages in society. National youth structures and BWI regional structures, such as the youth and women focused organising academy, have been mobilised in campaigning on health and economic support mechanisms for workers. Unions have also raised awareness of the economic and social implications of layoffs for the pre-existing youth unemployment crisis in the region and the critical role of BWI sectors for absorbing youth unemployment. Unions continue to highlight the high levels of youth unemployment in the region where 60% of the population is below the age of 25. Youth are usually more precariously employed and will be amongst the first to lose jobs in the post-COVID sectoral recession. Youth will require significant focus in the economic recovery phase.
	Unions have drawn attention to and shared information about the growing tendency of gender-based violence (GBV) during lockdowns and large scale layoffs. The Zimbabwe Construction and Allied Trades Workers' Union partnered with the Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe which reported that at least 764 cases of GBV occurred during the first 11 days of the COVID-19 national lockdown, well above the monthly average of 500 GBV cases. The importance of considering women in workplace protocols has also been raised by many unions and regional and union gender structures responded rapidly to distribute information during the crisis. Unions in the Southern and East Africa are also highlighting the potential vulnerability of HIV infected workers during the COVID 19 emergency.
	Unions have emphasised that the response to the pandemic needs to incorporate rebuilding industries to address both climate and employment sustainability. Renewable energy and green building have been discussed in a number of regional meetings but the implementation at industry level is slow, particularly in low-income countries. Forestry certification is still seen as key by unions for ensuring sustainability in this industry.
	In Qatar, BWI has been assisting networks of migrant workers and workers committees to organise in the large-scale construction projects for the 2022 World Cup. These networks enabled BWI to intervene and support migrant workers at the onset of the pandemic. The BWI has a cooperation agreement with Qatar's Supreme Committee on Delivery and Legacy (SDCL) and has jointly conducted OSH inspections. In April, a 'virtual' delegation from BWI represented by General Secretary Ambet Yuson, along with union health and safety inspectors and experts from UK's UNITE, Australia's CMFEU and the Swedish Painters engaged with these structures in order to assess safety measures for workers still on site as well as in workers' accommodation, some of which have been locked down after workers were tested positive with COVID-19.



The BWI region has convened several online meetings for different industry groupings such as the construction network to coordinate efforts. Cement and timber workers have also strengthened their global organisation through the supply value chains. This has been important for engaging in renewing organising strategies in different countries.

## D. PROSPECTS FOR THE BWI INDUSTRIES

### 1. Three phases of the impact on BWI industries

The impact of COVID-19 on economies that already had significant structural problems will likely be in three interrelated phases. The first crisis phase starting in March is likely to last approximately three months with initial severe disruptions, sudden demand slump and work stoppages with many temporary layoffs and some permanent layoffs. A second chronic phase lasting about 12 to 24 months could involve in some cases work resumption and some demand recovery, but also longer-term structural retrenchments. This will entail assessing the impact of permanent company closures and conceptualising industry response strategies, government plans for industry development and general economic policies along with reallocation and reprioritisation of government and private sector expenditure. This is a recovery phase aimed at regaining the lost jobs and development ground. The third phase of deep structural change and hopefully growth could see the implementation of strategies and projects emerging through phase two and continuing for a number of years. This is an optimistic scenario but useful as a goal for organised labour.

The magnitude of the disruptions to BWI industries, particularly construction, practically constitutes a restart in some countries. Whilst massively disruptive, this also provides a leapfrog opportunity for less-developed economies that already are structurally problematic and must face the disruptions of climate change and technological job displacement in the near future. Unions will need to find a fundamentally different conception of the future, in building back better.

The prospects for BWI industries through the three phases will hinge on two main issues: firstly the economic recovery in the rest of the world and the effect on oil and commodity prices; and secondly, on policies adopted to stimulate and prioritise certain industries, which in turn, is strongly dependent on government abilities to leverage funding for countercyclical spending. Forestry will be more dependent on the former whilst construction will require both. There is also a new tendency to question integrated global supply chains leading to increased possibility of import substitution policies and diversification of supply chains, which may have a positive impact on wood product manufacturing in the future.

In the first or crisis phase unions have focused on health and safety and education aspects of the immediate health crisis along with negotiating and campaigning for measures for income security and the preservation of jobs. This was a period of enormous economic and social disruption and unions have also provided humanitarian support, particularly the provision of food and PPE. Government policies have had some impact in supporting workers' incomes in the short term and employers have in a number of instances provided additional support with part payments, particularly where there is a union presence. The weakness of social security measures in many countries in the region has meant significant hardship for many. Where companies have been forced to stop operating altogether, cash flow for most small to medium companies will become critical in the second and third month, of this phase. Countries where governments were able to support wages of workers and business cash flow problems will generally fair better. Early responses to the virus do seem to have initially contained the spread in many African countries, but the likelihood is that many more infections will emerge over the next months to a year.

Moving from phase one into phase two, the overall number of infections is going to rise considerably and many countries do not have adequate sick leave provisions. With workplace measures in place to screen for the virus and test temperatures, many workers will be temporarily laid off for two weeks or longer. Unions will need to review national legislation in this regard and may need to advocate for better sick leave provisions or COVID-19 specific provisions in the future.

In the second phase as lockdowns begin to lift, supply chain problems will probably continue for several more months and demand constraints may continue even longer, depending on the global recovery as well as other issues, such as ongoing US/China tensions. Construction contracts and the issue of force majeure and its

interpretation may be a critical factor on many sites. Unions will need to assess the relative impact on jobs with regard to the potential outcomes of such disputes and weigh in on the side that best secures work in the medium term. As a general principle, it will probably be useful for unions to engage with industry level forums to develop national and regional approaches to such matters. The NUM of South Africa has already engaged the Department of Public Enterprises and employers during the lockdown to begin to chart a way forward for the industry. Here it is critical to attach any concessions to contractors to strict conditionalities that include non-transference of hardship to subcontractors, as these are normally local firms; and guarantees for decent work opportunities throughout the subcontracting chain. The same kinds of conditionalities should be developed in new or restructured projects emerging out of countercyclical spending. It is an opportunity to develop a new normal.

In many ways the second phase is going to be the most critical for workers and unions in the BWI sectors. Various industry level discussions have already begun as reported by various affiliates including those in Rwanda, Nigeria, South Africa and Gabon. Shaping government responses will be critical. Both the forestry and construction sectors, including building materials especially cement, are dominated by foreign companies and contractors. It is thus very difficult to have a national dialogue on an industry without the significant national role players at the table. It will however still be important to engage regional, national and local governments to influence the direction and associated industry policies to favour employment creation, skills transfer, health and safety and prioritised social spending. Developing regional approaches and global agreements such as International Framework agreements along with increasing accountability through improved decent work standards from international lenders such as multilateral banks and bilateral and commercial lending standards will all be increasingly important for creating accountability in foreign MNC -dominated sectors.

Past recessions have demonstrated that it takes many years for jobs to recover whereas financial markets can bounce back in a few months. There is also a tendency for each recession to increase the level of employment flexibility and introduce more vulnerable forms of work, as well as the replacement of workers by automation and the concentration of companies through merger and acquisition processes. All of these tendencies will need to be addressed by unions. Already many BWI affiliates have reported companies using the pandemic to downscale and lay off workers. Unions will need to use or develop systems to track employer conduct and demand that any business relief measures or opportunities are only granted to employers that have shared the burden of the pandemic by protecting workers' jobs and incomes. Union networks should share and develop mechanisms for assessing company distress levels and target in particular the large multinationals seeking to lay off workers to increase profits rather than taking action to preventing the business closing. This is particularly relevant in the case of construction materials, forestry, wood, and pulp and paper industries.

Forests feed many people and the sustainable management of forests will be more critical than ever as food prices increase and agricultural production declines in the coming months and key in responding to the challenges posed by climate change going forward. Forestry unions have supported sustainable approaches but these will come under threat in tight economic conditions. Unions will need to support governments in insisting on sustainable approaches to forestry including decent work opportunities.

## **2. Post-COVID transition plans and union demands**

Unions and BWI can advocate for construction to lead the recovery. Construction and building have the capacity to absorb many workers rapidly. These industries will have shed many jobs very rapidly during the crisis. The first priority is to reabsorb these displaced workers. Unions could also consider collecting information on displaced workers to give them priority when rehiring.

In reprioritising activities in the sector, unions can argue that there should be an initial focus on the development of public healthcare infrastructure as an immediate need in the crisis. The vulnerability of poor populations to the pandemic has also been demonstrated, in particular where there is inadequate access to water and sanitation. Therefore, this type of infrastructure also needs high priority. Infrastructure maintenance and refitting existing structures for carbon neutrality and extending local renewables to poor households are all labour intensive. They can begin very quickly in terms of government approval processes and securing funding. Maintenance and upgrades should also be an immediate priority. Large projects take longer to plan and approve. Whilst these are important they should be balanced with smaller rural and social infrastructure investment, such as health care, waste management, water treatment and upgrading informal sector housing for de-densification. Smaller projects should aim to bolster domestic companies. In essence it requires reconceptualising demand along the lines of social need rather than infrastructure provision from which foreign investment can extract value and then transfer externalised costs of business back onto host populations. Centralised bargaining institutions that allow for the setting of sectoral minimum wages and conditions of work is critical for regulating conditions in sectors dominated by foreign contractors and defined by long sub-contracting chains.



Informal sector workers and people in low-income high density housing have faced disproportionate hardship as a consequence of the pandemic. Programmes to address the social infrastructure gap in the region must include plans to build acceptable accommodation for migrant workers along with the de-densification of low income urban housing, complemented by accessible and sustainable public transport infrastructure covering the greater distances that de-densification will inevitably involve.

In the medium term, renewable energy infrastructure can be targeted as a priority and in the case of North Africa also linked into European consumer markets. Unions acknowledge the fundamental challenge that climate change poses to countries and the region as a whole. Before the pandemic, it was argued that a 'Marshal Plan' like infrastructure drive is necessary to meet this challenge and to some extent such an initiative could absorb job losses emerging from other sectors that are more vulnerable to intelligent automation. This priority remains valid despite COVID-19 and economic recession. However, financing for this will come under increasing pressure particularly as funds are mobilised for stimulus packages among high-income countries. Indeed financial flows during the crisis phase have been moving away from emerging markets. It will therefore become harder and more expensive for developing countries to access private capital and therefore to begin to develop a strategic response to the pandemic. Multilateral lending institutions and multilateralism are therefore critical to charting a path forward, particularly for middle-income countries.

Debt relief for low- and middle-income countries will be central, if developing and emerging economies are to be able to champion income support, promote SDG-related spending and provide stimulus packages which are so vital to revival in BWI sectors. Multilateral finance will become increasingly important particularly for many middle-income countries already under strain because of their growing commercial debts. Debt relief initiatives across private, bilateral and multilateral lenders could provide significant stimulus going forward. Spending from the fiscal cash flow enabled through debt relief needs to be related to SDG goals, specifically social infrastructure, such as water and sanitation, public health and renewable energy. At the same time companies that have eroded quality jobs through the crisis period should be excluded from benefiting from such spending. International labour rights should be a minimum requirement across all public and private sector projects.

What phase three (a growth phase) will look like in the BWI sectors is very much dependent on the processes that unfold in phase two and the decisions that are taken there. Forestry planting and large-scale projects require a long-term planning process. Large infrastructure projects not already in the pipeline or new forestry areas are five years and more further down the line. Unions should be engaged in discussions at a tripartite level that plan for a gradual scaling up of investments in the sector. Funding modes will also change over the period but longer term the pandemic has demonstrated the need for a better and more accountable international financial architecture that is responsive to the SDGs and prioritises social infrastructure and sustainable use of natural resources such as forests. With this in place, workers in construction, wood and forestry are ready to build a new future in the Africa-MENA region.

BWI is the Global Union Federation grouping free and democratic unions with members in the Building, Building Materials, Wood, Forestry and Allied sectors.

BWI brings together around 334 trade unions representing around 12 million members in 130 countries. The Headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland while the Regional Offices are in Panama, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Our mission is to defend and advance workers' rights, and to improve working and living conditions in our sectors. The BWI, above all, has a rights-based approach. We believe that trade union rights are human rights and are based on equality, solidarity and democracy, and that trade unions are indispensable to good governance.

BWI goals include 1) to promote and defend human and trade union rights; 2) to increase trade union strength; 3) to promote a stable and high level of employment in our sectors; and 4) to influence policy and strengthen the capacity of institutions and tripartite structures in our sectors.

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