



The Voice of the **Off-Grid Solar Energy** Industry

Guidance to members during the COVID-19 pandemic

Off-grid solar products will prove crucial to users and communities as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds. These products help keep people well-informed about health advice and government updates by powering radios and TVs and charging mobile phones. Access to reliable information and guidance is essential to prevent and slow the spread of the virus. As 'stay-at-home' measures spread and the risk of ill-health increases, good quality lighting can improve comfort and quality of life. Productive use accessories and increased productive hours can build resilience in household income strategies to help weather the economic shock that is likely to accompany the pandemic. Off-grid solar products could literally be lifesaving for families and communities.

However, as an industry, we need to also recognise that off-grid solar distribution and service networks are potential channels for virus transmission - agents have high public exposure, travel frequently, sometimes by overcrowded public transport, and are part of a nationwide distribution network.

It is important to recognise that low-income consumers in off-grid communities are particularly vulnerable to the potential impact of COVID-19. Clearly, strategic planning and swift action is needed (i) to protect our consumers and communities, (ii) for the health and safety of our employees, and (iii) the long-term security of our companies and the industry as a whole.

As we look to the immediate future, with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic still at an early stage in many countries, off-grid solar companies need to act proactively in practical terms to protect consumers and staff. The following guidance aims to help companies approach the early stage of the pandemic. We plan to generate more detailed guidance and advice as the situation evolves and request you to share insights and lessons learned.

1. Keep informed, follow advice and raise awareness

The pandemic and global response is rapidly evolving, so it is important that companies stay up to date with the latest advice from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and national governments.

- WHO provides guidance on protection measures for individuals, workspaces and for travel; ensure that you embed the recommended practice wherever possible.
- Each country and region has a unique situation, and guidance and restrictions are changing daily. Follow government guidelines and regulations specific to the countries that you operate in.
- Public health officials are working to raise awareness and battle misinformation – the extensive consumer network and communication tools used by off-grid solar companies may be a useful channel to support such efforts. Companies may wish to reach out to

health officials, NREAs or your national World Bank programme to offer a coordinated public health campaign.

- Ensure that all staff and agents are well informed about measures to protect themselves and their customers from transmission, and endeavour to equip them with protective equipment and sanitiser.

2. Balance the delivery of essential services with the risks to consumers and staff

Each company and country context is different, with different business models, consumer segments and local COVID-19 situation. Each company is itself best placed to assess and act upon the local guidance and risks posed to staff, agents and consumers.

- Each distinct value chain has points of heightened risk to consumers and staff with regards to exposure to COVID-19, and such areas should be identified early.
- Companies may face the question of whether to ground their sales and technical agents. Any government mandated lockdown should be followed, but companies may also wish to be proactive with additional measures if they feel risks to their staff or consumers are too high. Each company will find its own balance between the benefits and value of increasing distribution with the risks posed by doing so.
- Some governments have mandated a lockdown (or restricted economic activity) and granted off-grid solar companies license to operate as an essential service provider. This classification is important for the industry, and entails companies act responsibly to ensure that their staff and communities that they serve are safe, and activities are well aligned with the government to prevent the spread of infection.
- Where operations can continue, consider the additional security risks to staff and agents. For example, from security forces that may take time to be fully conversant with the exemption of off-grid solar products, or from the general population that is under considerable economic strain.
- Social-distancing is always challenging, but particularly so in the context of sales and aftersales interactions in many African and Asian markets. Seek to keep your services up and running to retain an essential service but make interactions remote/virtual wherever possible and follow public health guidance for in-person interactions. Respect the wishes of consumers that do not wish to talk in-person.
- Staff and agents may require additional flexibility to enable safe travel and adherence to hygiene guidance (i.e. washing hands is often not a simple task in remote off-grid areas). Health and safety is paramount.
- Where operations are unable to continue, companies have to make a difficult choice between supporting staff, agents and customers and long-term business continuity. Speak to your investors to seek and ensure ways of support for your people; don't underestimate the importance of good-will and reputation for future success.
- Companies are advised to ensure agile operational teams with representation of Senior Management; the fluidity of the situation requires good information flows and rapid response.
- Ensure existing consumers are well-informed about any changes to the service and support provided by the company.

3. Identify consumer protection risks and start building resilience

Low-income consumers are vulnerable to economic shocks and will likely be disproportionately affected in both health and finance by the COVID-19 pandemic. A product lock-out for a PAYGo consumer at this time would be a double blow – the loss of radio, TV or mobile phone to stay informed, or the loss of light whilst ill could be devastating. Companies should acknowledge these risks and adjust operations to protect consumers and build resilience – both in the short and long term.

- Companies may find greater instances of consumers being unable to pay due to loss of income caused by health issues or restrictions on their usual source of income. Consumer surveys and feedback mechanisms can help companies understand impacts and guide an appropriate response.
- Whilst companies should seek to maintain aftersales services wherever it is safe and possible to do so, it is likely that consumer care and aftersales services will be interrupted. It is important to keep existing consumers up to date about service-related news and ensure mitigation is in place, such as increased telephone-based support.
- Mobile money payment platforms may be interrupted due to increased demand or reduced service capacity – companies should stay engaged with their service partners and consider the impact on consumers.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a dynamic and fast-moving crisis that represents a global threat, including to the off-grid solar industry. GOGLA is working to support our members by understanding your challenges and coordinating with investors and development partners to try and mobilise additional resources and technical assistance.

Companies are encouraged to share their needs with GOGLA and their National Renewable Energy Association to guide our response, help locate appropriate resources and ensure that action is taken on your behalf.

We wish you strength and resilience during these difficult times. GOGLA stands ready to support our members, consumers and the industry.

Links:

[GOGLA Market Survey](#) to assess impacts of COVID-19

[GOGLA COVID-19 Resources Page](#)

[WHO Guidance for companies and workplaces](#)

[WHO General COVID-19 advice and downloads](#)

[BFA blog: How the PAYGo solar sector can prepare for the coronavirus and keep the lights on](#)