

Request for Proposals

Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) is requesting for proposals to develop a research paper: 1) exploring how global brands, through the mechanism of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), have been responding to the plight that the working class experienced during the Covid-19 crisis, and 2) probing into what the working-class alliance (e.g., civil society organizations) has been doing to hold these brands accountable.

Background

The worldwide outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the working-class causing disruptions that have sent shocks throughout global supply chains. Due to the shortages of raw materials resulting from the disruption of transportation, factories in producing countries have decreased or halted their operations altogether. On the other hand, major brands and retailers have postponed or cancelled orders as the markets in developed countries have been shrinking due to different levels of lockdown and decreased demand on manufactured goods. Consequently, billions of workers along supply chains have had to suffer the consequences, being dismissed, or suspended, often in the absence of notice or severance pay mandated by laws. In the factories that still manage to operate, employers often fail to provide sufficient protective equipment to the workers, making workers and their families more vulnerable to infection.

The global brands, who sit at the top of supply chains, have made public commitments to protect workers during the pandemic through CSR a set of practices and approaches adopted by corporations to supposedly generate positive impacts on the world to bolster brand reputation and maximize profits¹. For instance, Apple has emphasized that the health, safety, and well-being of suppliers' employees remain their top priority². Whereas Amazon has stressed they would monitor their suppliers to ensure workers' rights and dignity are respected during the pandemic³. However, CSR is not without criticism. There is often a big contradiction between what is good for the brands and what is benefiting society. The reason for that is the profit-making motive of capital will never let the two coexist, and profit always outweighs principle.

Despite making an 84% increase in net profit, Amazon is short-changing its workers along the supply chain. Amazon suppliers in Cambodia suspended more than 1000 workers since the outbreak of the pandemic⁴. In Bangladesh, union members of Amazon supplier Global Garment were also being laid off as a means of the factory to suppress labour rights. On the other hand, workers in the electronics industry in different parts of Asia were dismissed, forced to take no-paid leave and wage cuts. In the midst of the pandemic, it is also more challenging for unions and workers to organize themselves and take collective action, making them more vulnerable to the exploitation of the factories and the brands.

It is clear that CSR initiatives are largely corporate-driven and rely on voluntary disclosure, which limits their efficacy in protecting the fundamental rights of workers along supply chains. In light of this, we

¹ Marom, S. (2020). Corporate Social Responsibility during the Coronavirus Pandemic: An Interim Overview. Macrothink Institute: Business and Economic Research, 10(2), 250–269.

² Apple. Social Responsibility. Retrieved September 3, 2021, from <https://www.apple.com/hk/en/supplier-responsibility/>

³ Amazon. Amazon Supply Chain Standards. Retrieved September 3, 2021, from https://sustainability.aboutamazon.com/amazon_supply_chain_standards_english.pdf.

⁴ Wilkins, Brett. "Workers Stage Global Day of Action to #MakeAmazonPay." Common Dreams, 27 May 2021, www.commondreams.org/news/2021/05/27/workers-stage-global-day-action-makeamazonpay. Accessed 3 Sept. 2021

have to question the significance of the existing corporate-led CSR initiatives while more efforts should be paid to explore alternative ways of ensuring labour rights and holding brands accountable.

Objectives: 1) To provide an overall picture of the implementation and limitations of brands initiatives on protecting workers rights during the Covid-19 pandemic, 2) to provide insight for AMRC and partners in future strategy and program planning, and 3) to empower workers and civil society groups in holding brands accountable.

Research questions

- 1) What have the brands promised on labour protection during the outbreak of the pandemic? What have the brands done in addressing the following issues? And what are the limitations with those actions?
 - a. Cut of orders
 - b. Lockdown/ Social distancing measures from the government
 - c. Workplace safety
- 2) What are the roles of and strategies adopted by workers, unions, community groups, as well as other national and international civil society organizations, in holding brands accountable during the pandemic?
- 3) What are the opportunities for building international solidarity?
- 4) What are some alternative ways of protecting the rights and livelihoods of workers in the supply chain?

Scope

In this research, the researcher will focus on the garment and electronics industries, which are among the most affected ones in terms of worker sufferings. With the aims of answering the research questions and attaining the objectives in mind, the prospective researcher will review and integrate the findings of the publications, statements and reports from brands and suppliers, and other sources. To highlight the importance of robust civil society groups in holding brands accountable, the researcher(s) are advised to look at different campaigns initiated by different civil society actors in Asia which successfully hold the brands accountable.

Tasks to be performed

The researcher will need to deliver for the following items:

- 1) Provide a research plan and work plan of the work included key informants
- 2) Conduct interviews and literature and documents review for the research
- 3) Analyze the data and write up an original report (20-25 pages) based on the findings of the research
- 4) Present the findings to AMRC's network of members

Deliverables

The successful applicant will be responsible for planning and conducting the research and writing up the research report. Close consultation with AMRC is required. The researcher will have the following deliverable but not limited to



- 1) A research plan and work plan
- 2) A research report

Timeline

The total duration of this project is proposed to be 6 months.

Method of Application

The applicant should complete a research proposal (2-5 pages) and a resume of the lead researcher(s) together submitted to amrc@amrc.org.hk by 05/10/2021 23:59 HKT. The total budget of this project is **HKD 55,000**.

Professional and related experiences

- Proven relevant experience on research, preferable prior experience working with labour related non-profit organizations
- Excellent time management skills and ability to produce outputs as per agreed deadlines
- Excellent written and analytical skills
- Familiarity with the subject matter regarding labour rights, labour movement, Corporate Social Responsibility, and capital mobility

The proposal and the report should be written in **English**. For inquiries please contact Karen Hui (karenhui@amrc.org.hk).