

## Guiding Principles and Operational Standards for the Issara Strategic Partners Program

Issara Institute is a non-profit organization, with clear human rights fundamentals underpinning our work. These Guiding Principles and Operational Standards are a public document of the guidelines for our partnerships with business through the Strategic Partners Program.

Issara's Inclusive Labour Monitoring (ILM) system is at the center of the Strategic Partners Program, where worker validation of labour recruitment and working conditions informs and drives remediation and iterative systems strengthening on the part of global brands and retailers, suppliers, and recruiters. The Strategic Partners Program aims to provide a framework for collaboration to eliminate labour exploitation across global supply chains, including forced labour and human trafficking, that reaffirms the need for worker voice as a central part of the solution.

The Guiding Principles outline the ethos of Issara's worker voice-centered approach, the primacy of ethics, and the international labour standards underpinning all work, while the Operational Standards highlight the expectations of Issara's Strategic Partners and our own organization.

### FIVE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

#### **EMPOWERED WORKER VOICE.**

Data to verify labour conditions must include empowered worker voice linking safeguarded worker feedback to management response, systems change, and remediation. Remediation and improvements must be verified by workers. Any suppression of workers' ability to voice their concerns throughout recruitment and employment, through whatever channel they trust, is considered a serious violation of the spirit of Issara Inclusive Labour Monitoring (ILM).

#### **SHARED RESPONSIBILITY.**

Management response, systems change, and remediation are shared responsibilities across the supply chain. Downstream buyers benefit from these and so, as responsible, ethical buyers, should actively promote and incentivize worker voice and improvements

#### **RIGHT TO REMEDIATION.**

Workers whose rights are violated have the right to access remedy and justice. Business mechanisms for addressing violations and increasing human rights accountability may not be responsive enough within a reasonable timeframe to stop harm, and workers have the right to collectively or individually access alternative channels for remediation. Workers should not be deterred in any way from accessing alternative channels for remediation by any party to ILM.

#### **RIGHT TO PROTECTION.**

Workers whose rights are violated have the right to protection. NGOs and individuals may also be subject to retaliation, for which protection may be required as well. All parties of ILM are expected to support safeguards for workers and human rights defenders as needed.

#### **ETHICS AND HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE FOREFRONT.**

All activities are conducted with professionalism, ethics, and support for universal human rights and labour rights principles. **The fundamental ethical principle of Do No Harm will be followed and prioritized in every instance and situation, with no exception.**

## OPERATIONAL STANDARDS

### AREA 1. WORKER VOICE, SAFEGUARDS, AND VALIDATION

**Worker Voice:** Worker voice is critical to Issara’s mission, approach, and programmatic activities. Worker voice connected to remediation and with clear safeguards must be supported by the Strategic Partner and the businesses (such as suppliers and recruitment agencies) that Issara is engaging. If worker voice is not supported, there is heightened risk to Issara, workers, and the Strategic Partner. The Strategic Partner must therefore clearly communicate its requirements on support for independent worker voice channels and Issara’s role throughout their supply chain.

**Worker Safeguards:** Safeguards may be needed to protect workers communicating grievances against reprisals, power imbalances, and threats from supervisors, interpreters, and others. The Strategic Partner must clearly communicate its requirements for worker safeguards and protection (and not suppression) of worker voice to suppliers and recruitment agencies, so that all parties are clear on their shared responsibilities to protect workers raising grievances. Issara places worker safety at the forefront, and a “do no harm” philosophy must be prioritized within the Strategic Partners Program.

**Worker Validation:** Verification of practices and changes that suppliers or recruitment agencies undertake must be verified with workers and job seekers. Issara does not close out reported labour issues until workers have validated the nature and quality of actions that businesses claim to have made. Worker validation not only provides greater confidence in business’ handling of labour issues, but also helps ensure that those actions have indeed been effective.

**Worker Voice Integration:** True worker voice-driven initiatives, such as Issara Inclusive Labour Monitoring, are very different from traditional audit compliance approaches or many worker feedback tools, and may be new to many global brands, retailers, and importers. Businesses participating in the Strategic Partners Program must therefore be open to discussing with Issara how worker voice findings and data are being integrated and elevated into their business’ responsible sourcing and commercial buying decision making, supplier evaluations, and risk protocols.

## OPERATIONAL STANDARDS

### AREA 2. RESPONSIVENESS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND REMEDIATION

**Progress- and Solutions-Oriented:** The Issara Strategic Partners Program is designed for businesses that not only seek increased transparency and accountability about labour issues in their supply chains, but also seek and actively work toward ongoing improvement and solutions by addressing root cause issues and systems strengthening. Strategic Partners can view Issara as a professional, independent, technical partner whose mission centers on improving labour conditions for workers, and helping to drive better business practices more generally. And while Issara may develop tools, research, data and technology to help drive solutions, it is the duty bearers (buyers, suppliers, recruitment agencies, and government) who are responsible for good working conditions, more ethical recruitment, and clean supply chains. Issara and Strategic Partners commit to measurable and continuous work toward targets and timelines across four work areas: Labour Recruitment, Working conditions, Employer-Employee Relations, and Living and Eating Conditions.

**Recognizing Engaged Businesses:** Suppliers and recruitment agencies that embrace worker voice and become more responsive to it will have greater transparency and visibility of risks than those that do not. Understandably, issues may surface that audits or other approaches had not previously identified. This should be recognized and understood by the Strategic Partner, with Strategic Partners giving additional “safe space” for the supplier and recruitment agencies to address issues raised by worker voice and demonstrate their openness to reform, quality of response, and timeliness of response.

**Supply Chain Response:** Issara’s general operational approach is to not “name and shame” or campaign against businesses, but rather to help businesses responsibly use worker voice, data, and technical support to improve workplace conditions and contribute to industry transformation. Buyer leverage is critical to support behaviour change and remediation, and to help change attitudes in the supply chain toward a greater appreciation of worker voice being a valuable tool to help improve business systems and national industry practices.

**Supplier Oversight:** Being solutions-oriented also includes encouraging and supporting well-functioning supplier grievance mechanisms and remedies for workers in the supply chain. Strategic Partners, as duty bearers, are expected to uphold their own supplier codes of conduct, human rights policies, and migrant worker policies at all times. There must be consequences for non-compliant suppliers, which are clearly communicated to and understood by suppliers even before issues arise.

**Remedy and Timeliness:** If labour violations are uncovered, remediation is expected to take place within a reasonable timeframe. Workers must be assured dignity, protection against retaliation, decent working conditions, and access to justice. If a business / supply chain response does not yield satisfactory resolutions, workers may pursue other channels to ensure their rights are upheld and should not be suppressed from doing so.

## OPERATIONAL STANDARDS

### AREA 3. TRANSFORMING THE ECOSYSTEM

**Multi-Stakeholder Participation and Collaboration:** Corporate responsibility efforts go from being transactional to truly transformational when values-aligned businesses apply their buying power and voice collectively to make ethical supply chains a sustainable reality. All Issara Strategic Partners are expected to actively participate and collaborate in multi-stakeholder conversations to help build shared values, commitments, and vision, and transform the ethical supply chains ecosystem. Issara will aim to make participation easy and more accessible through expanding free online webinars and collaborations, arranged at various times for the convenience of colleagues in the Americas, Asia, and Europe.

**Supporting Learning and Evidence-Based Advocacy:** The Issara Strategic Partners Program is underpinned by Issara’s worker voice-centered programming and research, which generates considerable learning and data. Strategic Partners should take all opportunities to embrace and promote this learning, to support more thought leadership and more responsible business practices globally.

**Transparency:** As a non-profit organization, Issara’s focus on tackling forced labour and improving labour conditions also means sharing information about what is happening on the ground and generating public goods that help practitioners and stakeholders. While details will not be made public about a Strategic Partner’s specific supply chain without consent, information may be anonymized and aggregated to promote public sharing of information, successes, challenges, and lessons learned toward the goal of broader industry and ecosystem transformation, and broader acceptance and integration of worker voice.

**Empowerment and Grassroots Support:** Issara works both at an international level through global supply chains, and at a grassroots and community level with workers and civil society partners. The support of Issara’s Strategic Partners broadly contributes to our worker voice channels, access to remediation and to industry change, allowing us to leverage these partnerships to effectuate improvements in the partner’s supply chain and also the broader industry.