

## **WELCOMING SPEECH FOR HON. DR ZWELINI MKHIZE**

### **FIGHTING THE UNRECOGNISED PANDEMIC: Reprioritising TB, HIV and NCDs in the era of COVID-19**

**15<sup>TH</sup> October 2020**

- Programme directors, Dr Spo Kgalamono and Mr Simphiwe Mabhele
- Director General, Department of Mineral Resources ADV Thabo Mokoena
- Vice President of Minerals Council South Africa, Chairperson of Masoyise Health Programme, and our host, Ms Zanele Matlala,
- Executive Director, Stop TB Dr Lucica Ditiu
- Deputy Director, UNAIDS Dr Shannon Hader
- Director Sectoral Policies, International Labour Organisation Ms Alette van Leur
- The Chief of Staff of the Global Fund Dr Marijke Wijnroks,
- WHO Representative to South Africa, Dr Owen Kaluwa
- Senior Program Officer, SADC Dr Willy Amisi,
- Representing Mining Industry Association of Southern Africa Mr. Vusi Mabena
- Research and Information Officer for the Southern Africa Co-ordination Council Paliani Chinguwo
- All our fellow speakers at this webinar,
- Ladies and gentlemen.

It is my pleasure and honour to welcome you to this important webinar on ***“Fighting the unrecognised pandemic: reprioritising TB, HIV and NCDs in the era of COVID-19.”*** This is a very apt and relevant topic at this watershed period as we emerge from the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. I therefore thank the organisers of the webinar, Masoyise Health Programme, of which the Department is also a stakeholder.

Without a doubt, 2020 will go down in history as one of the greatest tests ever endured by humanity. In global solidarity, countries had put in place intricate and exhaustive plans towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, only for these noble aspirations to be turned upside down by the novel Coronavirus. As a country, we had to go into lockdown on 26<sup>th</sup> March this year. This was nearly 7 long months ago and, in that time, our economy has been devastated and people’s lives have been changed forever. We are now approaching 700 000 cases and have recorded over 18 000 deaths. Although this is the highest number of cases on our continent, it is heartening to see that we have steadily maintained a 90% recovery rate and that, at this stage, our testing positivity rate also holds steady below 10%.

The socio-economic carnage left by the pandemic is our greatest concern. Hogan and other scientists, writing for the Lancet in July, already modelled the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria in low-income and middle-income countries. The picture they paint is concerning and warrants special attention. They found that deaths due to HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria over the next 5 years could rise by up to 10%, 20%, and 36%, respectively as a direct consequence of the advent of the pandemic. We hope that this is a worst-case scenario and that with our concerted efforts, we can limit this scenario they have described.

Yesterday, as we launched the theme for this year's World AIDS Day at the Rotary Family Day Webinar, I outlined the impact of COVID-19 on the public health programmes for HIV, TB and non-communicable diseases. We are very concerned to see that HIV testing fell by nearly half and that TB testing and primary health care access by carers and children fell by between 9% and 25%. Last year we had begun to devise programmes whereby screening and testing of common NCD's such as hypertension and diabetes would be further decentralized from facilities into common areas of congregation such as churches, schools and community halls. These programmes were altogether disrupted by the necessary mitigation measures to combat COVID-19 and as a result we

saw a massive decrease in people presenting for screening and testing of these conditions and, more importantly, an alarming increase of people newly diagnosed with diabetes and hypertension.

I am however pleased to inform all of you that the Department of Health has devised an aggressive catch-up strategy to ensure that we recapture that spirit of health seeking behaviour and also capitalize on the infrastructure and public private partnership gains we made during the COVID-19 surge- we will be communicating on the details of these programmes as and when they are rolled out.

This webinar has a focus on reprioritising TB, HIV and NCDs in the mining sector. This is a very critical sector in our country which has a special history of respiratory diseases, particularly pneumoconiosis and tuberculosis. In later years HIV and NCDs have also been prevalent in the sector.

I congratulate the industry for its proactive adoption of the Masoyise iTB which was succeeded by Masoyise Health Programme. These programmes are designed to improve industry performance by targeting improvement of key indicators of these conditions. From the reports I

have received, it is evident that much progress was made since the initiation of the programme.

The industry now faces a unique challenge where there is possible interaction between lung damage caused by COVID-19 and the existing lung diseases in the industry. I would also assume that the industry TB, HIV and NCD programmes have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, similar to other programmes worldwide.

I believe that this webinar is therefore timeous. We have with us an array of eminent specialists that can contribute by advising countries and the mining industry on how best we can turn our attention back to the diseases that have been proven over time to cause the highest morbidity and mortality amongst community members who work in the mining industry.

I therefore welcome everyone to this webinar and wish you all the very best in your deliberations. As a department, we are very keen to study the recommendations emanating from this conference so we can integrate and align in a cohesive response to the public health

challenges that face us as a collective, striving towards the attainment of Universal Health Coverage.

The key message here is that of partnership with government, labour movements, civil society and the community so that we can conquer over the scourge of HIV, TB, non-communicable diseases and COVID-19.

Thank you very much.