

## **PRIVATE SECTOR RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND TB IN THE SADC REGION**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this session on behalf of MIASA

The Mining Industry Association of Southern Africa is an association of Chambers of Mines in the SADC whose purpose is to lobby and advocate for the private mining sector in the region. MIASA represents the following Chambers of Mines in the Region: Botswana; The DRC; Lesotho, Madagascar; Malawi; Namibia; South Africa; Tanzania; Zambia and Zimbabwe. We lobby for a conducive policy environment for the sector and further engage with other critical stakeholders to present the position of the mining sector in the region as well as demonstrate that mining matters for the economy of the region.

### **2. PRIVATE SECTOR RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

As a regional body members of MIASA regularly meet to share best practices and learn from each on how best to deal with challenges they are facing. TB is an occupational disease that affects employees across the region and now the COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the industry whilst it was still working hard to reduce the prevalence rate of TB per 100 000 people. Through various interventions on dealing with TB in the various countries the industry has been able to reduce the prevalence rate from an average of 800/100 000 to an average of 380/100 000 in the sector. This reduction is attributed to such initiative as employing healthcare professionals within the sector and building our own healthcare facilities for in-house treatment.

The mining industry is characterized by migrant workers who run the risk of lapsing from taking their treatment when they, either change employment or take leave to go home. This challenge is dealt with in different ways from one country to the next. Clearly strong partnership is necessary between the industry and the governments in the region that these employees are able to continue with their treatment when they have left their work places.

As a measure of dealing with this challenge through MIASA the industry is involved in the TB in the Mines project in the region that is currently funded by the Global Fund and another initiative funded by the World Bank. Industry is currently supporting a Cross Border Referral System (CBRS) that will assist in following a patient from one country to another in the region and make it easy for the health practitioners to know the history of the patient and continue the necessary treatment. MIASA is working at encouraging mining companies at country level to assist by loading their TB patients on the system.

A strong collaboration between public health and the healthcare provided by the mining sector will go a long way to improve the treatment and significantly reduce the burden rate in the region. The CBRS is still at its early stage of implementation and with stronger cooperation from key stakeholders it has a chance of improving the reduction of the prevalence rate in the region.

### **COVID-19**

COVID-19 has brought its own challenges and the lockdown restrictions by various governments in the region helped the industry to get ready by setting itself to be ready to implement prevention protocols that have led to minimal infections at work places.

In the DRC for example, the employees were restricted to a bio-bubble and were not allowed to go home to ensure that production does not stop at the same time ensuring that they do not contract the disease. This response resulted in unintended psycho-social challenges for workers and their families. This challenge was brought to the attention of MIASA and through partnership with the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry a psychological and/or mental wellness programme is currently running in the region. This programme helps employees to deal with the impact of being away from home for extended periods and it is implemented virtually across the region.

The industry also introduced such measures as stringent sanitizing systems before and after work shifts as well as relevant PPE for COVID-19. It must be noted that most of the employees who contracted COVID-19 did not get infection at their work places and management literally closed whole shafts when an employee was detected and tested all employees. The screening and testing rate at mines on average was higher than that conducted in the general public.

The industry also partnered with governments in the region to support efforts to combat the spread of the disease. In Zimbabwe for example, members of the Chamber of Mines created a COVID-19 fund and donated more than USD2million towards the purchase of PPE. The Minerals Council South Africa facilitated the donation of PPEs and other means of support needed by number municipalities and public health facilities. This was the case at other member states like Namibia, Tanzania and the DRC. COVID-19 has elevated inequality and poverty levels of communities in the region as well as mining communities. Many companies went beyond combating the spread of the disease amongst its employees but also donated significantly to the solidarity fund that was set up at each country and

further supported their surrounding communities with basic food necessities in collaboration with their local municipalities.

We are all aware that the vaccine is still far from being found especially with the current stop-start trials on vaccine tests. This call on all stakeholders to remain vigilant in adhering to strict protocol measures especially in the mining industry that is characterized by high labour intensity.

The mining industry in the region remains and committed to collaborate with all stakeholders to combat the spread of the disease amongst its employees and the surrounding communities.