

# INDUSTRY RESPONSE TO COVID-19

By the time the WHO had declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, the Minerals Council and the CEOs of member companies were already alert to this threat and were adopting a risk-based approach in response.

In early February 2020, the Minerals Council developed and issued its first advisories to members on COVID-19, combined with communications material for employees.

## 10-point plan

Just a week after the WHO declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the Minerals Council adopted its COVID-19 Preparedness Plan, which later became known as the 10-Point Action Plan. These steps included:

- Employee education and health promotion
- Health worker readiness
- Ensuring access to consumables (masks, sanitisers, testing kits) and hardware (such as temperature monitors)
- Proactive influenza vaccination, which the industry undertakes and promotes every year
- Understanding the potential impact on employees who may be immunocompromised
- Case definition and management of suspected cases or contacts of cases
- Isolation of employees, should the need arise
- Travel advice

- Reporting and communication in the industry in the event of a case
- Monitoring

## Standard Operating Procedure

By the end of March, the Minerals Council had published a *Standard Operating Procedure* (SOP) that provided for processes before employees arrive at work, after they arrive at work, isolation areas and follow up, continuous measures to deal with COVID-19 and reporting. The Minerals Council's SOP later became the basis for the *Guidelines for a Mandatory Code of Practice to Mitigate and Manage the Outbreak of COVID-19* published by the Chief Inspector of Mines in May 2020.

## Recovery from the lockdown

The release of the SOP coincided with the announcement by President Ramaphosa of a national lockdown that resulted in the significant scaling down of mining activities. Only operations supplying Eskom and the synfuels industry continued to operate to ensure energy security. Value-adding mining infrastructure, especially refineries and smelters that could not easily be switched on and off, also continued to operate, while ensuring that due care was taken with preventative and monitoring measures to protect the staff involved. Further, activities that continued involved internal essential services, including security, ventilation, cooling and pumping, refrigeration, tailings facilities, specialised maintenance, the provision of water and other supplies to communities as well as services to staff residences, where required.

The partial and increasing resumption of mining activities began following an announcement by the President on 23 April and was made possible through the effective measures put in place by the industry to

prevent the spread of COVID-19, and the collaboration between the DMRE, unions and companies in implementing and observing strict protocols and restrictions.

## Protection of vulnerable employees

Even when the industry was allowed to ramp up to full capacity, vulnerable employees continued to be assessed under the Minerals Council's *Guidance on COVID-19 and Vulnerable Populations*, encouraging companies to take informed decisions in managing employees who were vulnerable to COVID-19.

## Collating and using information

From the beginning of the outbreak of the pandemic, the Minerals Council developed tools for collating information on cases, screening and testing, and deaths, and has reported these transparently and regularly on its website. More than that, data and data analysis has been used as a fundamental tool in understanding the impact of the pandemic, its patterns and for early warning signs of potential outbreaks.

## Increasing testing

By September 2020, it had become clear that the existing testing resources, both public and private, were severely constrained. As a result, the Minerals Council, together with its members, sought to increase its COVID-19 testing capacity, both for companies and in support of the country's overall testing imperative.

The driver behind the industry's high testing rates that have been sustained throughout the pandemic is the belief that testing is a fundamental part of any country's response, in the knowledge that those countries that have been able to test more comprehensively have had greater success in flattening the COVID-19

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curve. Any individual who tests positive can be isolated until he or she recovers, and his or her contacts may be traced and similarly tested and isolated, effectively reducing the rate of transmission. Further, appropriate testing will mean that individuals, especially those who are potentially vulnerable, may receive the medical treatment they need as soon as possible.

The industry has been guided by the criteria stipulated by the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, and this guidance is the minimum standard with which the industry complies. But, given the exigencies that exist within the mining operations themselves, and the fact that the nature of the pandemic has been a high level of asymptomatic cases, the mining industry should modify its protocols. Several mining companies procured and established their own testing capacity (machines, testing kits and reagents, and qualified staff), or entered into arrangements with private facilities to secure access to increased testing capacity.



### Leadership

A hallmark of the industry's response to COVID-19 has been the intensity of leadership focus and the range of disciplines involved. COVID-19 has been considered and discussed at every Board meeting since March 2020 and has been the subject of several dedicated Board meetings. The CEO Zero Harm Forum has taken a very active role in addressing COVID-19, with an increased intensity of meetings and focus on addressing the pandemic, with the aim of saving lives and livelihoods with empathy and care. In line with the forum's compact that health and safety start with CEOs, they shared and challenged each other in-depth on all aspects of managing this new risk, thus accelerating the learning curve at executive level throughout the industry.

A COVID-19 industry working group was convened from May 2020 to February 2021, followed by the establishment of eight regional working groups covering mining operations in Gauteng, Northern Cape, Western Cape, Free State, North West, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and KwaZulu-Natal. The meetings were convened to share company testing strategies, provide medical updates on COVID-19, facilitate greater cooperation for isolation and quarantine facilities, and convey current information on COVID-19 treatment and management. In the national and regional working groups, updates on testing strategies and protocols, testing kits, global vaccines under development, review of the testing undertaken in the mining sector, positive COVID-19 cases disaggregated across mining commodities, provinces, occupations, gender, and age has been provided to companies. The advantage of the regional cluster approach was demonstrated in joint support for isolation, quarantine and hospital facilities, and partnerships to facilitate additional testing capacity to the industry. In specific instances the cooperation at district level enabled the sharing of quarantine and isolation facilities in collaboration with the Department of Health. Over and above the updates on the status of COVID-19 in the mining sector, additional information has been disseminated on new testing protocols in respect of antibody testing, antigen testing and rapid point of care testing kits, effects of long term COVID-19, emerging updates on vaccine development, and global research on COVID-19.

Regular meetings of the industry's communications executives also shared knowledge and material on communications strategies. Other Minerals Council disciplines involved in COVID-19-related activities were Employment Relations, Legal and Skills Development.



### Fundamental research

Very early on in the pandemic, the CEO Zero Harm Forum took the decision to re-allocate research funding to focus on three COVID-19-related initiatives in order to support the mining industry and others in dealing with the impact of COVID-19.

Three research streams were approved:

1. To understand the nature of COVID-19
2. How to change behaviours to stop the spread of the virus
3. A geographic information system (GIS) mapping system to enhance decision-making

- Several discrete research projects were undertaken under this stream. First, the Aurum Institute was contracted to conduct an analysis of the cases and deaths very early in the pandemic to improve and accelerate learnings. Arising from the analysis, a further in-depth study was commissioned on what was thought to be a higher mortality rate in the gold sector. Specifically, the research was set to determine levels in mortality among COVID-19 patients at two selected gold mining companies, and to describe COVID-19 treatment outcomes and factors related to mortality among COVID-19 patients. Findings from these analyses suggest that being elderly, having a history of TB or compromised respiratory capacity, or having one or more comorbidities may increase the risk of death. As a result, risk mitigation strategies, including vaccinations should be prioritised for these groups.

Next, the Minerals Council also commissioned the University of South Africa to conduct a study on the effectiveness of all the control measures in place across the mining industry and whether these were achieving the intended objectives and what improvements were required.

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Another significant body of research was the COVID-19 seroprevalence survey that was undertaken at two mines in different provinces. The study aimed to determine the prevalence of COVID-19 infection among key groups, measured by serology; understand the range of clinical presentation (symptoms, duration of symptoms, requirement for hospitalisations), and risk factors for COVID-19 infection (age, occupation, gender, past medical conditions among miners aims to characterise COVID-19 infection in South Africa); and to evaluate the effectiveness of infection prevention and control measures. The first phase of the three-phase study revealed that the first wave of COVID-19 infected approximately 21% of the workforce at the studied mines. One of the key outcomes of the study to date was that obesity can be a major risk for contracting COVID-19, and wellness programmes to reduce obesity among workers can help reduce this risk.

- Work was undertaken with mining companies and behaviour change experts focused on sharing and understanding leading practices and lessons to change behaviour among employees and in communities. The aim was for a collective effort on researching healthy and safe behaviours to prevent and control COVID-19; identifying and assessing leading practices across the mining industry; and developing practical field guides to share the findings and improve the industry's efforts. Two field guides were published: the first, *Within the Mine Gate*, is for use on mines, while the *Beyond the Mine Gate Field Guide* looks at empowering employees as agents of change and promoting and supporting healthy and safe behaviours within communities.

- The Minerals Council sponsored the development and implementation of a GIS system to inform decisions and mitigate the risks associated with transmission. The system outlines the prevalence of transmissions in communities and provides an overview of the coping mechanisms in place in different areas, such as hospitals and clinics, thus enabling improved decision-making for companies.



### Coordinated, phased return of foreign mineworkers

Following the national lockdown and the subsequent prohibition of non-South Africans from entering the country, the Minerals Council approached government for a special dispensation to allow the facilitated return of foreign mineworkers to South Africa. The agreement reached meant that an integrated and coordinated approach was needed, and that the Minerals Council would take responsibility for such facilitation and coordination; that an agent be appointed to facilitate the coordination, screening, testing, border logistics and transportation of employees to quarantine sites in mining areas; that mines would assume full responsibility for the quarantining of returning employees; and that all costs would be for the account of the mining companies concerned.

The Minerals Council developed an integrated and coordinated approach and appointed Teba as an implementing agent. Critical actions included:

- Screening of employees in their home countries (with those not passing the test provided with medical care at home)
- Travellers being provided with PPE, including masks and hand sanitiser; as well as travel packs containing all the necessary documentation

- Teba transporting workers to ports of entry, and then to quarantine facilities in mining areas
- Employee onboarding at quarantine facilities according to the individual mining company's onboarding protocols

Around 20,000 of the approximately 45,000 foreign mineworkers employed in the sector returned home when Disaster Management Regulations were promulgated in March 2020. By 15 December 2020, another 15,500 employees had returned to work.

With the move to Level 1, new regulations required valid negative COVID-19 test results from any persons entering the country. The Minerals Council sought, and was granted, further exemption owing to the logistics of getting valid COVID-19 testing in some neighbouring countries. The Minerals Council was granted a further exemption to allow the facilitated and phased return of foreign mineworkers to their home countries in December, and a facilitated, phased return afterwards. In total, 17,110 foreign employees went to their home countries for the festive period break and 16,700 returned after the shutdown.



### Community initiative and the 'Oxygen is life' project in the Eastern Cape

In late 2020, just prior to the second wave in South Africa, the Minerals Council announced that several mining company members – African Rainbow Minerals, Anglo American (representing De Beers, Kumba Iron Ore, Anglo American Coal and Anglo American Platinum), AngloGold Ashanti, Exxaro, Fraser Alexander, Glencore Alloys, Gold Fields, Harmony, Impala Platinum, Northam Platinum, Royal Bafokeng Platinum, Seriti and Sibanye-Stillwater – together contributed R4.7 million

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towards oxygen and oxygen-related products for the Eastern Cape.

During the year, the industry undertook intensive efforts in addressing COVID-19 at their operations, in communities, in their province of operation and nationally. Some of these initiatives included: sensitisation and awareness programmes with communities; assistance with community screening and testing campaigns; provision of testing kits for community use; provision of training to healthcare workers at community clinics; company occupational health practitioners provision of services at community clinics; provision of accommodation for frontline healthcare workers and nursing staff; provision of PPE for healthcare workers; provision of PPE and sanitisers for communities; and provision of food parcels and water and sanitation infrastructure to meet the basic social and physical needs of these communities in distress during the crisis. Mining companies also made substantial contributions to the national Solidarity Fund and other funds.

But the Eastern Cape stands out as a mining-affected province, without mines. Historically, the industry has drawn many thousands of employees from the Eastern Cape and, even currently, around 61,000 mining employees (around 15% of members' current workforce) originate from the Eastern Cape. At the same time, this is a province in dire need – it is the poorest province in the country, it suffers from a lack of infrastructure, and is known to be under-resourced in terms of healthcare facilities, supplies, and personnel.

The project delivered oxygen support equipment: oxygen flow meters, oxygen concentrators, oxygen regulators, nasal cannula, desktop pulse oximeters and fingertip pulse oximeters, non-rebreather masks,

and ventilation full-circuit face masks. The latter item was in support of the efforts made by the national ventilator programme, which had already supplied ventilators to the region; an initiative also supported by the Minerals Council via its support of the prototype developed by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). These oxygen support items were distributed to clinics and hospitals in the OR Tambo and Chris Hani Districts.



### Support for government-led vaccination initiative

There is no doubt that access to an effective vaccine and the significant rollout of a vaccination programme is crucial in the fight against COVID-19; to help re-open the economy in order to save lives and save livelihoods. The Minerals Council and its members have voiced their strong support for the expeditious rollout of an effective vaccine programme.

Minerals Council members have developed plans to assist in the vaccine rollout using the sector's significant healthcare infrastructure and delivery capability.

The Minerals Council and its members have decided to play an active role, in partnership with our social partners, to help with the vaccine rollout. While government is primarily responsible for funding the vaccine rollout and is the single buyer; the industry can play a material role in accelerating the vaccination programme on mines and in mining communities. The Minerals Council has estimated that, if vaccines are available, its members would be able to get between 60,000 and 80,000 people vaccinated per day – employees, family members, and community members. In total, the industry would be able to vaccinate up to 3 million people and has allocated around R300 million to deliver this programme.

In February 2021, the project also included support for the vaccine rollout programme in the mining industry in respect of coordination with the private sector initiatives run by the BUSA initiative that is driving private sector support to the national government to deal with COVID-19, but in particular the vaccine rollout programme for South Africa. This included the coordination and communication to the mining companies in respect of registration of vaccine sites, registration of vaccinators and curators, training requirements, and communicating suggested workflow processes to be administered at vaccine sites to ensure proper governance and controls of the vaccination rollout.



### Collaboration

Together, the Minerals Council and labour unions - AMCU, NUM, Solidarity and UASA – have convened a working group to discuss the prevention of the spread of COVID-19, and to combat its impact on the mining industry, its employees and mining communities. All parties have committed to collaborate to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are secured and efficiently rolled out to employees and host communities, where possible, and to address misinformation to ensure voluntary and informed decision-making and participation to enable as many people as possible to take up the opportunity to be vaccinated.



### Overcoming vaccine hesitancy

The Minerals Council has convened a working group of members and a task team with unions to develop messaging and tools to understand and deal with vaccine hesitancy, and to provide employees and community members with sound, fact-based information to enable and encourage the acceptance of vaccines.