



Zimbabwe Environmental
Law Association (ZELA)

COVID-19: Mining Sector and Communities Situational Report

First Series

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Situation in Selected Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) Communities

A day before the declaration of a National Lockdown by the President of Zimbabwe, and with five officially confirmed COVID-19 cases, one casualty and counting, ZELA conducted a quick survey of the state of play in artisanal and small-scale mining communities. The idea was to assess how women miners, artisanal and small-scale miners and diggers, villagers and mining affected communities are coping and responding to the global threat, anxiety, fear and deaths brought about by COVID-19. Around the world, COVID-19 is gravely disrupting whole mining supply chains, economies, the social fabric, stretching service delivery capacities, and in the process raising profound state, private sector and political accountability questions. The pandemic has just started to do the same in Zimbabwe. Many rural families in Zimbabwe depend on mining and other natural resources for their livelihoods. Artisanal gold mining in particular, is a primary source of income for communities in mineral rich areas. As ZELA we work with community monitors, women groups and mine workers across the country and we want to keep our fingers on the pulse with regards to developments on the ground and the impacts of COVID-19 in communities that anchor our programming. With our project officers locked-down and working remotely, we have decided to design, compile and disseminate a *Weekly COVID-19 Mining Sector and Communities Situational Report*, starting with this First Series. The Situational Report will be compiled from simple, yet informative updates from a network of more than 200 community monitors based in different mining and natural resource rich areas in Zimbabwe. The monitors use their own local contacts and information gathering skills imparted to them over several years of ZELA programming in those areas. The Weekly Situational report will cover the impacts of COVID-19 and developments at community level including the following aspects; safety, health, environment, social distancing, availability of medical or preventive facilities, status of social service delivery, Government and private sector actions or interventions among other issues. For a start, in this issue we have managed to compile updates from Gwanda, Shurugwi, Zvishavane and Bubi.

Situational Update

- Before the announcement of the National Lockdown most artisanal and small-scale miners in Gwanda, Bubi, Shurugwi and Zvishavane were mining and not paying close attention to the threats posed by COVID-19. It was business as usual. No one was adhering to the social distancing advice.
- Most miners do not have Personal Protective Equipment such as face masks, gloves and hand sanitizers to protect themselves from contracting the virus (message from

Gwanda). However, a few people in Gwanda have started to take some preventive measures like wearing face masks, gloves and washing hands.

- In remote mining areas and underground pits artisanal miners, diggers and rural people there is little or no knowledge of the causes, transmission, symptoms and effects of COVID-19.
- Some mine owners in Gwanda, Bubi and Shurugwi are still operating after providing workers mutton cloths to cover their faces as they cannot find masks which have run out of stock. In Bubi, a few mine owners are providing workers with gloves, methylated spirit, dish washer for cleaning hands and encouraging them to minimize movements and to avoid alcohol and cigarette sharing.
- A few shops and buses in Gwanda are providing hand sanitizers at the door, while for some commuter omnibuses the behaviour of overloading people continues as usual
- Many people in the rural areas cannot afford medical services offered in the communities for treating some of the COVID-19 symptoms. Sadly, in many mining areas no COVID-19 isolation centres exist.
- Some Artisanal and small-scale miners in Gwanda and Bubi reduced manpower and the number of workers at the mine site. Those mine workers who can afford bus fare have gone to their rural homes, while those without are staying at the mine but not working. At one mine site in Gwanda, a miner with 18 workers had to send 14 of her workers home remaining with 4 of the critical staff.
- After the declaration of the Lockdown on 27th March 2020, most miners in Gwanda scaled down their operations and workforce leaving them only with skeletal staff that will provide security.
- A few women miners in Bubi decided to stop operations completely to protect the safety and health of their workers and clients.
- With little knowledge on the virus and prevention methods for the COVID-19, some mine owners in Gwanda have been seen conducting a series of lessons targeting their workers on World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended COVID-19 prevention guidelines circulated on social media groups such as WhatsApp.
- Some mine owners live in fear that if they stop mining operations and go on self-isolation, they might lose their claims to other miners who may invade or takeover during their absence.
- Some gold buyers were reportedly buying gold on the cheap from artisanal miners since the prices had started to go down. Gold is a store of value-they will resale when prices go up after the COVID-19 pandemic is over.
- The current low gold prices have affected profitability and income for miners in all areas and those community members earning their livelihoods along the gold supply chain at community level. The ripple effect is that miners are now forced to mine more to make up for the loss and be able to take something home (Gwanda).
- In Gwanda and Bubi artisanal miners and communities struggle to get clean and potable water for domestic use and for mining. Communities have to converge at the few water points. In areas where water is available the water rates charged by the Zimbabwe National Water Authority (ZINWA) are too high and unaffordable for many.

- There is fear that a combination of COVID-19 and the current economic challenges might give rise to another spike in criminality and violence in artisanal mining communities.
- Government and mining companies have so far not done enough to educate communities on COVID-19 although some miners and communities are getting information circulated on social media and via the radio. However, in Gwanda the Mayor organised an educational campaign with posters on COVID-19 while the Pretoria Portland Cement(PPC) issued hand sanitizers and masks to the miners , while in Shurugwi (Tongogara) an awareness session on COVID-19 was conducted at the local clinic involving the district nursing officer, district medical officer, district environmental health technician and the local Member of Parliament.
- In a statement on COVID-19 issued on the 21st of March by the Zimbabwe Miners Federation (ZMF), a representative body of artisanal and small-scale miners in Zimbabwe, miners were encouraged to adhere to WHO recommended safety and hygiene standards including effectively practicing social distancing. However, the association urged miners to continue mining operations while adhering to recommended health standards. This may explain why many artisanal and small-scale miners continued mining before the announcement of the Lockdown on the 27th of March 2020.

Stay Safe, Stop the Spread, Save Lives

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*“Environmental justice through sustainable and equitable utilisation of natural resources
and environmental protection”*