

WINNER FOR REMOTE RESILIENCE

REACHING OUT IN REMOTE AREAS

How a Mining Company Supported its People and Local Communities During COVID

Sierra Rutile, winner of the 2021 duty of Care award for Remote Resilience, used its previous experience in dealing with disease outbreaks to protect employees, families and local communities during COVID.

Sierra Rutile, a subsidiary of Iluka Resources, is a multi-mine operation located in the Bonthe and Moyamba districts, south west Sierra Leone. Sierra Rutile has the world's largest deposit of the natural mineral rutile and encompasses two operations at Lanti and Gangama, a mineral separation plant, and a dedicated port facility. Sierra Rutile's main product stream is natural rutile and the operation also produces smaller quantities of the minerals ilmenite and zircon (in concentrate).

Sierra Rutile is one of Sierra Leone's oldest and most prominent companies. It employs more than 2,700 people and its workforce is over 98% Sierra Leonean.

Jamie Bowden, Sierra Rutile's Health and Hygiene Specialist, sets the scene:

'As a major employer, the operation has a commitment to local content and procurement. The company occupies an important role in Sierra Leone's national economy, and the local economies of Bonthe and Moyamba in particular.'

'For these reasons, it was essential that Sierra Rutile maintained operations throughout the COVID period. In a country where disease threat is constantly high, the onset of COVID-19 provided yet another challenge to operations at Sierra Rutile.'

Meeting the Challenge

Applying learnings from previous disease outbreaks such as Ebola, the Sierra Rutile leadership team

prepared to confront the threat. Here are some of the steps it took:

- Due to restrictions on flights in and out of the country, and on travel between districts, the operation had to establish its own on-site quarantine and isolation facilities. This enabled personnel movement and the continuity of rostering, albeit for extended durations.
- The Clinic team progressed the installation of faster in-house polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing capabilities.
- Support was provided to the local community through COVID-19 safety educational messaging, improved sanitation, donations of medical supplies, and personal protective equipment.
- Sierra Rutile worked closely with the Government of Sierra Leone to deal with the challenge of COVID. Its response included providing vehicle support for contact tracing teams.



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In total, Sierra Rutile spent over \$2.7 million on COVID-related measures.

As a consequence of the rapid action and preparedness of both the Sierra Leonean Government and Sierra Rutile, COVID-19 infection rates at Sierra Rutile, and within Sierra Leone generally, remained relatively low.

Ongoing Support

Medical Support

Importantly, the Clinic at Sierra Rutile's operations continues to provide medical support to its employees, their families and members of the local community in times of emergency. The team of doctors, nurses, intensive care paramedics, laboratory specialists and support staff provide health care for a very wide range of medical conditions.

Medical Equipment

The purchase of additional equipment in late 2019 enabled the team to provide advanced diagnostics through improved laboratory equipment and improved patient care. In 2020, the Sierra Rutile clinical team treated 21,405 patients, 8,492 of whom were not employees.

Community Education

On diseases such as typhoid, malaria, polio, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases is undertaken by the staff of the Sierra Rutile Clinic to support efforts by the Sierra Leonean Government to reduce communicable diseases across the broader population.

These education sessions are generally held in public forums such as local markets, community groups or other gatherings. In addition, regular radio talkback sessions are held to ensure the broader community is able to access the information too. It was essential that such programmes were maintained as these health risks were not diminished during COVID.

Typhoid Vaccination

The employee and dependants' programme continued throughout 2020 and resulted in a significant reduction

in infection over an extended period for Sierra Rutile employees. However, typhoid infection rates still remain stubbornly high. As a result, the Clinic team, led by Sierra Rutile's Chief Medical Officer, has been collecting and analysing increasing amounts of data to inform a wider typhoid fever reduction strategy across employees, dependants and the wider community.

Jamie Bowden Concludes

'In a country where the disease threat is constantly high, the onset of COVID-19 provided yet another challenge to our operations at Sierra Rutile. By applying learnings from previous disease outbreaks such as Ebola, the team was prepared to confront the threat.'

Although COVID inevitably had a significant influence on the operation, the team maintained its focus on the broader aspects of disease management within a high-risk environment. As a result, operations were able to be maintained.'

Key Elements

- Apply learnings from previous events.
- Be prepared to treat a wide range of conditions, with the right equipment and sufficient staff.
- Extend education and other support to families and local communities.