Dr Sizwe Phakathi's Panel discussion at AARF

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On Tuesday, 6 September 2016, three Australia Awards Alumni including myself, Dr Sizwe Phakathi (South Africa), Don Binyina (Uganda) and Sophia Shariff (Tanzania), participated in a panel at Australia Africa Research Forum (AARF) focusing on the theme of Capacity Building in Extractives and the Role of Education.

This saw us sharing our respective experiences of the meaningful contribution that Australia Awards Africa has made to our professional development as next generation of leaders in African mining. Following on from the remarks made by Don and Sophia, I shared my alumnus perspective on how the International Mining for Development Centre (IM4DC) (now called Minerals and Energy for Development Alliance) Emerging Leaders in African Mining (ELAM) empowered me to make a difference in my work as Head of Safety and Sustainable Development at the Chamber of Mines in South Africa.

ELAM is coordinated by Minerals and Energy for Development Alliance (MEfDA) at the University of Western Australia and University of Queensland, Australia - in partnership with Africa Minerals Development Centre (AMDC), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

I made the point that the development of the next generation of leaders such as the wider alumni network of Australia Awards is key to the realisation of the Africa Mining Vision (AMV). The other point I raised was the importance of occupational safety in African mining based on my experience in this area of work in South Africa and observation of how silent we tend to be when it comes to occupational safety in African mining operations.

The point is that if African mining does not safeguard the occupational health and safety of miners, the continent's mineral endowment will remain a "curse" rather than a "blessing" for the local communities given the devastating impact of mining fatalities and injuries on the loved ones of miners. I indicated that Australia is one of the international benchmarks for the South African mining industry regarding improvement of occupational health and safety. I made reference to one industry initiative (amongst others) that was introduced by industry tripartite stakeholders including Government, Organised Business and Organised Labour in 2003 which sought to reduce mine fatalities by 20% per year in order to reach levels of safety performance comparable to that of mining industries of Australia, Canada and the US by 2013.

The review of the South African mining industry's 2013 occupational health and safety (OHS) milestones which entailed analysing the country's OHS performance against international benchmarks revealed that the industry's level of safety performance was now comparable to international benchmarks.

The South African coal sector is now performing even better than the coal mines in the US. This initiative collaboratively taken by tripartite stakeholders is one of the OHS initiatives that have significantly contributed to the improvement of safety performance in the South African mining industry over the past 22 years from 615 fatalities to 77 fatalities in 2015 - 87% improvement. Whilst the collaborative work of the stakeholders from Government, Organised Business and Organised Labour has significantly contributed to the industry safety performance since the advent of democracy which saw a number of OHS initiatives being implemented to improve the industry's OHS performance, much more still needs to be done to realise the Industry Vision of Zero Harm. One fatality is one too many!

The Chamber of Mines of South Africa is committed to ensuring that every mineworker returns from work unharmed every day. In collaboration with stakeholders from Government and Organised Labour, the Chamber of Mines will ensure that the industry is on the front foot in accelerating the Zero Harm journey. The Chamber of Mines believes that Zero Harm is possible and achievable as shown by some of its member-companies that were recognised at the 2016 MineSafe Industry Awards Day held on 2 September 2016 for their outstanding performance in safety, health and environment.

Furthermore, I mentioned how the Chamber of Mines and Australia Awards Africa exposed me to a network of Australian experts and practitioners in occupational safety in mining including Professor Jim Joy whom I first met in Santiago, Chile during an international technical tour to a largest copper mine, Escondida copper mine operating in Antofagasta, Chile to learn about the design, implementation and management of OHS critical controls. I highlighted how the sharing of knowledge, leading practices and learnings at a global platform level has helped me facilitate the transformation of safety culture in the South African mining industry and implementation OHS risk management systems in mining such as critical control management of high-risk incidents and hazards.

I also made reference to a research project conducted through Australia Awards Africa and on which I mentored three university postgraduate research students. The project investigated the safety practices, risks and challenges of artisanal miners in the community of Blaauwbosch in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. I agreed with Sheila Khama's (from the African Development Bank) remark that this case study was on artisanal mining in a true sense of it not on illegal miners. There is definitely a need to provide a clear distinction of what artisanal mining and illegal mining are.

My concluding remarks emphasised the importance of partnerships/collaboration amongst practitioners working on small scale and artisanal mining in Africa. This is the gap that needs to be addressed. Even in the area of occupational safety there is no collation of safety data that could be used to compare how different African mining companies and regulators/inspectorates were managing and addressing challenges and successes associated with occupational safety.