



Media Statement by Bench Marks Foundation

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GLOBAL RECESSION COULD SEE A HUGE INCREASE IN BOTSWANA'S HIV/AIDS PANDEMIC

The current global economic downturn could lead to an increase in HIV/AIDS infection rates across Southern Africa's mining communities, particularly in Botswana which has been hard hit by the global economic meltdown, the Bench Marks Foundation has warned.

In a report released today in Johannesburg, the Foundation notes that Botswana, which is heavily dependent on diamond mining for its revenue, will suffer if the current global economic trend continues much longer since it may not be able to sustain its HIV/AIDS treatment programme.

Debswana, the country's biggest mining company, provides free Anti Retroviral Treatment (ART) to HIV-infected employees and their spouses or life partners. Debswana became the first company in Africa to offer free ART to its employees in 1998.

A joint venture between De Beers and the Botswana government, Debswana's ART programmes are extremely effective in the treatment of their own employees and their spouses. They are far less effective, however, in communities immediately surrounding the mines.

According to the report, entitled *De Beers, Botswana and the control of a country*, the economic downturn is most worrying: "Government revenue, required to sustain its HIV/AIDS treatment programmes, will come under serious stress due to Debswana cutting production."

In August 2004, 3800 Debswana workers at both the Orapa/Lethlakane and Jwaneng mines embarked on strike action for a fair increase in payments and bonuses, rejecting what they regarded as 'slave wages'. The aftermath of the strike saw Debswana management and the government declare the strike illegal and laying off 461 workers. Consequently it seems, the workers lost their access to ART, education and housing facilities.

"Any retrenchments at Debswana operations will force employees and their spouses currently on Debswana's treatment programme to seek treatment from the government's programmes that will be already under stress from reduced revenue and therefore spending on the programme. The HIV/AIDS treatment programme in Botswana might suddenly no longer be sustainable," the report adds.

The effects of the downturn in the commodity prices of diamonds are already being felt in Botswana. In April Debswana announced that it would reduce its output by more than half this year as a result of plummeting diamond prices.

“Mine workers on treatment experience an improving CD4 count, they believe that they are getting well, they become sexually active again involving multiple partners in surrounding communities thus sustaining high levels of prevalence in those communities,” according to the report.

Botswana has one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in Sub Saharan Africa. The Bench Marks Foundation recommends that welfare legislation must take into account that community members are burdened with obligations to support other community members suffering from HIV/AIDS and TB.

This Foundation’s research on the diamond industry in Botswana is a continuation of the broader SADC research initiative into the extractive industry. The main focus is CSR practice of mining companies regarding the three basic dimensions of sustainable development – economical, social and environmental – in the areas in which they operate.

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Bench Marks Foundation is an independent organisation monitoring corporate performance in the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) with the focus on social sustainability and economic empowerment. The organisation encourages CSR that goes beyond reporting mechanisms and focuses on the gap between policy and practice, thereby assisting civil society groups and corporations to move beyond philanthropy to more strategic interventions that benefit both the corporations and society. Central to Bench Marks’ agenda is how CSR is integrated into companies’ operations and ensuring that it is at the core of every decision making process.

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