

Disaster Recovery – An Interview On How Ebola Has Changed Lives Across Borders

When the Ebola outbreak hit West Africa in March 2014, it affected tens of thousands of people. Families were torn apart, and any businesses that operated in the area had a real and complex situation on their hands. London Mining Plc was one such company. Operating the Marampa mine in Sierra Leone, it was not only a focal point of the local community but also added around 10% to the national GDP. Right in the middle of this crisis were the employees. I caught up with Rosh Bardien, Group Head of HR for London Mining Plc, to find out what effect this had on the company, the people and her.

How Did You First Get Involved In The Ebola Crisis?

In December 2013, the first case of Ebola was recorded in Guinea but no one really took it seriously until March 2014. It came across our desks, along with a thousand other things that come across one's desk, and no-one paid any serious attention to it, until the first confirmed case became known in Sierra Leone in May 2014. I happened to be in Sierra Leone at the time and decided to go to see Dr Sheik Umar Khan in Kenema. He was Sierra Leone's leading virologist and he was running the Ebola programme for the country. He was a very competent Doctor, very passionate about his people, and very passionate about Sierra Leone. He wanted to make a difference. During our discussion and my site visit of Kenema, I realised that in order to help him make a difference, we needed to do a few things, mainly involving funding.

Everybody was complacent about the situation in the beginning and didn't believe that it was going to spread as quickly as it did. There was also no belief that burial practices needed to change. This was the sense I got from the Ministry of Health, the Paramount Chiefs and some representatives from the community.

When most people visit Sierra Leone for the first time, one usually visits Freetown, but as you travel further into the country,

up north and to the east, close to Kaliahun and the surrounding districts, they are surrounded by forests. It is also important to note that Sierra Leone shares its borders with Liberia and Guinea.

Essentially, what we had was a gut feeling that came to fruition, and despite our best efforts to get them prepared, it fell on deaf ears. So we did what we thought we should do as corporate citizens, and that was to bring in disinfectant and personal protective equipment, and start education and awareness campaigns in the communities in the local areas surrounding the mine, and to train the frontline health workers in the local health centres. We brought in a medical specialist and asked him to go to the paramount chief to get his permission to go into the communities and do frontline training. At that point it was really just triage. It was as simple as regular temperature checks, washing hands and improving basic hygiene practices. It was a very simple basic process that we put into place. We did it for all of our employees. That was 3,500 people at the mine and we rolled it out to their family members as well. So if you work on the ratio of one employee having five dependants - that's close to 17,500 people that were reached through our efforts. What we didn't know was that the virus was spreading very quickly. What we also didn't know was that there were secret burials taking place in the Port Loko area, where we operated the mine. One of the hospitals in the area had patients with Ebola and had not declared it. Community members were not telling the authorities that they had family members that were ill, and communities were not letting people in. The viral load with EVD is highest when the person is dead. There are a lot of parallels between Ebola and HIV in the way it is transmitted. So as corporates, we handled it as we would an HIV campaign. We also formed the Ebola Private Sector Mobilisation Group, a group of eleven companies that started it originally. This informal network formed because we felt we could address the problem better, if we

worked together. We decided to combine efforts and learn from best practice, and put in place a risk management system that would work for all of us.

We put protocols in place to ensure that operations continued. At London Mining, we didn't have any isolation facilities initially. We had a hospital but it was only equipped for dealing with emergencies.

London Mining Was Instrumental In Setting Up One Of The First Ebola Hospitals In Sierra Leone, How Did That Come About?

That came about because, apart from the one in Kenema, there were no other Ebola treatment centres. So we had to set one up in Port Loko. We did a study of the hospitals in the area and how they would isolate cases of Ebola, and they weren't equipped to do it. There was a need for road grading and site preparation for an Ebola treatment centre in the iron-ore producing town of Lunsar, which would be operated by the International Medical Corps. Within hours, London Mining, with heavy equipment available, came to the rescue, cutting weeks or more from the construction process. Dawnus assisted with the providing of the equipment, so it was a joint effort. We needed to have something in Port Loko as the number of cases was increasing quite rapidly.

What Motivated You To Get So Personally Involved In The Crisis Effort?

When we spoke to Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organisation, we were asked not to leave. This was in August of last year. When I spoke at the United Nations General Council Meeting in September 2014, we were asked not to leave. In order not to leave, we had to make it safe to stay, which it wasn't. We employed expatriate staff. My portfolio, as well as looking after national staff, included expatriate staff. I had to get involved personally because our business wasn't going to

survive if we couldn't move people in and out of the country and keep the roster system going. We needed the skills in the country to operate the mine. We had to bring people from South Africa, Canada, America, Australia and the UK safely into an affected country. There were also a lot of restrictions placed on us, not just London Mining, but all companies, such as increase in insurance costs and travel restrictions. A lot of flights were just unilaterally cancelled, without consultation. The personal involvement and passion was because people were dying and the trigger point of realisation for me was when I got a call from the former Minister of Health, that my friend, Dr Khan, had died. When we had learnt that Dr Khan tested positive for the EVD, I had offered to have him medically evacuated to Germany and we were involved in getting all of the approvals with the German government but it didn't work out. I was hurt, and it was also a moment of realisation that if we didn't do something differently, then we going to lose a lot of people.

How Well Do You Feel The International Community Responded?

The issue at first was that it felt like no one was listening. I was finding it difficult to get people to actually listen. It was only when we wrote a pledge and got sixty one CEO's to sign it that I felt we got the media attention away from focusing on just the deaths, to focusing on the fact that we needed help and quickly. The WHO claimed that they were working on a solution but we weren't seeing any action or results. All we were hearing about were flight restrictions, so people were getting very anxious. I had to pull out a lot of expatriates because those countries said that they would not allow their people to stay in Sierra Leone. We had to keep the mine running, but we also had to get people out because their countries had instructed us to do so. This meant dealing with the flight restrictions. We had no medical evacuation solutions so we had to innovate on a daily basis. One of those solutions were the charter flights. We had to negotiate with the Ghanaian Minister of Transport to allow us to put in the air bridge, which he did. I publicly thanked the President of Ghana at the House of Commons last year. This allowed us to charter planes in and out of Ghana. The contradiction was that we were asked to

stay, but not given any support. There will be another crisis coming along. It may not be Ebola, it may be something different, but let's not do those same things again.

How Do You Feel The Reaction Was From The Government In Sierra Leone?

The original reaction was that they just wanted money, mainly because the health system was in a very poor state. They had no equipment, logistical solutions or medical drugs. A very poor starting point. Any other illness such as Malaria, Flu or Cholera was not being treated because all hospitals suddenly had to become Ebola treatment centres. So the initial reaction was slow, but when the President got involved and appointed the presidential task team, lead by Professor Monty, things started moving. The President put in place a quarantine which seemed like a drastic measure, but needed for containment. It generally worked, although there are still cases and unsafe burial practices. It did allow us to reduce numbers quite quickly. The numbers peaked in December and then in January, they disappeared. The curfews imposed had a huge impact on morale and the economy of the community. We put in place psych-social support through the British Red Cross, as well as safe burial practices. The private sector was involved in providing all the gloves, disinfectants, soaps and expertise. The WHO provided teams of people under the leadership of the Special Envoy to the UN. We worked with the Global Ebola Response Coalition to look at contact tracing. The government replaced the health minister and appointed the deputy health minister in her place, and under his leadership a lot of things did change. So our focus then shifted from Ebola response to Ebola economic recovery. London Mining was one of the first companies, with GIZ to come up with an economic recovery plan, called Regrow. It would create 8,000 jobs, if it did go ahead. It did get the backing of the German government and funding from the African Development Bank. A lot of my time this year has been spent getting that project to implementation stage, as part of the EPSMG. It has been presented recently in New York at the United Nations Ebola Recovery Conference. It is my understanding that it did not get the necessary support quickly for it to have made an impact by now.

What Are Your Feelings About The Media Coverage That The Crisis Received?

Originally, the media coverage was scary. We put a huge amount of effort into talking to the media about how they should be messaging Ebola and they did come on board. Around September to October, the media changed their messaging to create less concern and panic with the family members. We pushed very hard to change that perception and put out just the facts. We also tried to get them to help with the rules around flight restrictions. That didn't work, but we did try. Ships wouldn't enter the country so even if you produced iron ore, as London Mining did, you couldn't get it out. That had to be one of the biggest impacts on businesses. Coupled with the fact that the iron ore price just crumbled. Once again, we had to manage the situation as it arose, and we provided clearly documented protocols to the shipping companies to provide the necessary comfort to get the ore onboard.

How Much Of A Part Did That Have To Play In London Mining's Financial Situation And Difficulties?

Iron Ore was the main reason that London Mining wasn't able to sustain itself. Coupled with the fear around Ebola, we couldn't get investors into Sierra Leone. The timing was bad. We couldn't get people into the mine to invest. The iron ore price kept falling, and in order to produce we needed to increase costs, because we needed to get charter flights in to transport employees from Ghana into Lungi. We needed to get donations to the government for treatment centres so our operating costs were increasing and our selling price decreasing. We were losing money per tonne. That coupled with the fact that there was a takeover as well. We had a number of issues to deal with that at the same time and it took my focus away from Ebola to the contractual requirements through the transition. Timis, who took over the company, didn't believe in the safety protocols we had set up and so a lot of that got stripped away.

That Must Have Been Challenging To Go From A Mindset Shift Of Tackling The Crisis On The Ground To A

Corporate Takeover Situation, Without Buy In To Your Efforts, How Did You Cope With That?

We had meetings to explain why the safety protocols were essential to be maintained. In order to move expats from one country to another we had to maintain the charter flights. In a way logic prevailed in the end, and they retained what London Mining had started, but not for long. The new leadership were not entirely pleased with our Ebola protocols. Timis did away with the protocols by January 2015. Its view was that malaria was a bigger risk than Ebola. My concern was that Port Loko had a huge number of cases and bending the curve should have remained a priority. I chose not to work for Timis, but to continue on the journey that the EPSMG had created.

In What Ways Has This Experience Changed You As A Person?

I think it made me tougher, and able to stand up and fight for the little people. I think it has made me do that a lot more, with a stronger voice. I've been able to do it because I've been lucky enough to be able to talk to Justine Greening and Nick Clegg, and to work with OCHA, UNGC, Save the Children, DFID, MSE, GERC and the BRC. So it has given me the confidence to know that anything is possible if you try. To help Sierra Leone to get its country back to where it was, with a growth rate of 7%. The other parts are that it has been sad for me, to lose London Mining, having put a lot in. I left my home country to come here and build that business successfully, which we did. It's left a kind of a bitterness about the way it all ended. I'm a bit heartbroken about that. With my background in coal mining and the African, Australian and South American experience, to see the situation change so drastically in three years, was unfamiliar to me. It's been a myriad of experiences for me.

What Does The Future Hold For Rosh Bardian?

I want to continue with the economic recovery work we started for the three affected countries. Currently, I work for Alan Knight at ArcelorMital, and we continue to grow the international brand and legacy created by the Ebola Private Sector Mobilisation Group. It is a great

team and I am lucky to still be in mining - an industry that I love! The humanitarian work I do in my personal capacity also keeps me busy. I was involved in the relief efforts after the Nepal earthquake. In Sierra Leone, I am building a secondary school. Also in Sierra Leone, there are a lot of widows and orphans as a result of the Ebola crisis. I am working on putting in place homes and structures to get them educated and back to normal as quickly as possible. It would be great to get back into an Executive Human Resources role again soon!

The Legacy

This period in Sierra Leone's history has undoubtedly affected and will continue

to effect generations of people. Rosh Bardien continues her work to build on the legacy, which she has begun. To help the people of the region to regain stability and rebuild their lives. Perhaps, the good to come from this crisis is the ability for the people and medical professionals in the region, to be better equipped for another such outbreak, should it occur in the future. Whether the international communities response will be swifter, remains to be seen. One thing is for sure, which is that for Rosh and so many others, the journey that they have taken has lead them in a new direction and will continue to do so.

Rosh was interviewed by Trevor Ford, Team Relocations.



Rosh Bardien has almost two decades of experience as a Human Resources practitioner, of which the last 10 years have been spent holding the number one HR position in international junior mining companies. She has played an instrumental role in setting up the full spectrum of human resources functions in companies and has operated in multiple jurisdictions. In addition to her HR duties, Rosh has taken a personal interest in the Ebola early response efforts and economic recovery plans in the affected countries. The group, EPSMG, that she provides thought leadership for, in addition to managing the Secretariat, is a well-known internationally recognised network of private and public sector companies, who have been represented at forums such as United Nations General Council, World Economic Forum, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and United Nations Global Compact. In her spare time, she supports fund raising campaigns such as UnitedAgstEbola, Street Child, Gift of the Givers and the Red Cross.



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