

DAY OF THE SEAFARER 2021

- Today is a special day, a day where we get to celebrate seafarers around the world.
- I am Silindokuhle Nyoka a Chief Officer with TNPA, dredging services. I have been in the maritime industry for 14 years, 10 of those years was spent sailing on foreign going vessels.
- Life for seafarers has been shifted and categorized into “life before covid-19” and “life during covid -19” The difference is vast I can assure you.
- Prior to covid-19 life of a seafarer was straight forward, you join a ship and serve your time. At the end of your contract you are repatriated to your homeport or home country, you go and spend time with your family and friends until your leave expires then you repeat the cycle again. There were not complications, yes now and again there would be a change in the schedule but there was never anything major.
- Fast forward to 2020, the world experienced a massive pandemic-covid 19. This pandemic caused panic world wide, many governments suspended flights, closed borders, closed airports closed ports and imposed travel restrictions to foreign nationals to limit the spread of covid.
- These restrictions came at a cost to seafarers, seafarers could not travel between their homes and their place of work (in this case it was the ships). Those that were on leave could not be deployed to their next assignments because of the restrictions. They were stuck at home with expired leaves and not able to join any vessel, ultimately they suffered financial loss.
- The crewmembers that were stuck onboard could not be relieved, crew changes had been severely impacted and they had no knowledge as to when they would be going home. Crew changes had and have become an extreme sport and seafarers have been collateral victims to this crisis
- According to IMO as of March 2021 it is estimated that around 200 000 seafarers remain on board commercial vessels with uncertainty as to when they will be relieved and they are past the expiry of their contracts. These conditions have affected seafarers mentally and physically, their wellbeing has been compromised.
- The Maritime Labour Convention (MLC) states that the maximum continuous period that a seafarer can serve onboard without leave is 11 months. This may be exceeded in situations of force majeure. Currently there are seafarers that have been at sea for 14 months, 13 months and so you. You get the general idea that I am painting.
- Crew members that are fortunate enough to be deployed need to be quarantined prior embarking on a craft. This quarantine comes at a financial loss to a seafarer because companies are unable to pay the crewmember full salary. Companies pay crew members 25% or 50% of their basic pay.
- Our government needs to do better to help our seafarers. You have listed us as front line workers but so far it is merely a title. Nothing has been done to ensure that seafarers are vaccinated. Calling seafarers frontline workers without issuing them with the vaccine defeats the point.
- Shipping carries more than 80% of global trade by volume. These ships require seafarers to navigate and run them, how will this happen if seafarers are sitting at home and unable to join due to the travel restrictions imposed by governments?

- Giving seafarers the vaccine will allow feel travel, less stress with regards to crew change and a major relief to the seafarers themselves.
- Another major problem that we are sitting with as a country is documentation. Covid came and the restrictions saw training institutions and SAMSA close. When these restrictions were lifted and seafarers could go back to doing courses they were met by a major hurdle. SAMSA had a massive backlog, revalidating certificates was and still is taking a long time. We are unable to join vessels with expired documentation; we are stuck at home with expired documents and patiently waiting to receive our submitted documents.
- All in all, there are problems that need to be addressed and solved. I am hoping that this will be not be a meaningless exercise. I hope that these conversations will continue until solutions are found. Let this day and all its conversations and inputs not go to waste but may we come back next year with more exciting stories and great experiences to share.