

Mobilising youth for Ebola education: Sierra Leone and Liberia

Key considerations

This brief summarises some key considerations about mobilising youth and youth groups in the Ebola response in Sierra Leone and Liberia. The details have been collated from suggestions and insights provided by networks of anthropologists in the UK and US who work in Sierra Leone and Liberia (both in-country and remotely). These are general considerations that are broadly relevant to mobilising youth in the response, but further investigation into local specificities is required.

Positive drivers:

- It is accepted that the effective mobilisation of youth is crucial to the response.
- Youth provide a ready network of labour and are highly mobile.
- There is a generally willingness to be recruited for social mobilisation campaigns and activities because of the high unemployment rate and because employment by the international community is seen to lead to the acquisition of valuable skills and to economic and political connections with NGOs and the international community.
- They can facilitate information flow: providing key messages and reporting on community-level practices.
- Youth groups have established access to communities, can influence behavior change at the local level and add to the sense of local ownership in the response.

Negative risks:

- The voices of youth do not carry the authority of elders, especially chiefs and society elders, and particularly in rural areas.
- There is a risk that the mobilisation of youth groups may resonate with ways in which civil defense units and militias were viewed and talked about during the wars (by both participants and the wider community).
- Mass youth recruitment may be met by suspicion by the older generation, if youth are seen to threaten traditional authority and power structures (particularly in rural areas) and to be adopting new habits and the language of public health (just as youth did with the habits and language of reconciliation during reintegration in Sierra Leone).
- In Freetown, there are reports that former commanders (CDF) are trying to organise 'veterans' groups to volunteer for burial teams and manning check points (as a more 'organised' alternative to police and the military).
- On the Sierra Leone / Liberia border, mining activities have dramatically slowed, and this has potentially left a large population of highly mobile young men in a precarious position and in a region with a history of volatility.
- The linkage of youth with outsiders and outside their immediate communities and networks can make them appear unaccountable to parents and elders.

Recommendations

- Youth groups have been active in effected countries prior to the outbreak, and the response should build on their positive platforms and previous engagement activities as part of the social mobilisation effort.
- It is recommended that youth groups report on trends and perceptions in their community, not only provide information.
- The response should be support the desire of young people to be involved with the response as a way of helping their communities and their country – but it needs to harness this energy in a positive and strategic fashion.
- Positive engagement with supportive supervision is essential to structure youth activities and mitigate the risks associated with disenfranchised youth. Providing transferable skills (with potential certification after training) will build capacity for the future and may help address the inevitable vacuum that will be left when Ebola crises is under control.
- Many young male interlocutors emphasise that youth need to present themselves and their involvement in a way that is respectful and enables them to be 'taken seriously' by the older generation.
- It is recommended that mobilised youth groups have a single spokesperson who works directly with the elders in their catchment area. The youth can transform the elders into experts – youth are the conduits for information and the elders are socially appropriate purveyors of such information. In this way, youth who possess 'good training' will be seen as an investment by their elders.