

# COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION: ESSENTIAL FOR STOPPING THE SPREAD OF EBOLA

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## What is happening in Eastern DRC?

### How can community mobilization help?

The Ebola crisis in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is worsening, and it poses a serious threat to the ongoing humanitarian response on which nearly 13 million people depend for lifesaving aid. As of May 27, 2019, **over 1,832 confirmed cases of Ebola have been identified in eastern DRC, and there have been 1,193 confirmed deaths.** Despite the pace of the spread of new infections, substantial **community resistance** to the response remains a serious obstacle, as indicated by persistent reports of individuals refusing the vaccine and recurring attacks on treatment centers.

- The current Ebola outbreak in North Kivu and Ituri is different in that it coincides with **an active conflict zone** with nearly 120 different armed groups that are fighting with each other and with the government.
- The ongoing violence and contentious political environment have shaped community resistance by encouraging **a lack of trust between communities, the government, and responders.**
- Addressing the roots of community resistance will require community mobilization campaigns that **directly engage community members and trusted leaders in ongoing conversations** about the risks posed by the Ebola outbreak and **which support the implementation of locally-owned actions** to prevent the spread of the disease.
- Despite increasing emphasis on mobilization and communications in the Ebola response,

most **attention from donors, technical agencies, and the government has focused on medical treatment and care**, and not mobilization campaigns that are adapted to the unique aspects of the current outbreak.



“Without bolstering efforts to improve community engagement and create community ownership of the response, the situation may spiral out of control. In that case, we will need to prepare ourselves for a radical rise in the rate of infections and deaths.”

— Mercy Corps DRC Country Director Whitney Elmer

Photo Credit: Rudy Kimvuidi/Mercy Corps

## Lessons from Mobilization Against Ebola in West Africa

Mercy Corps implemented a US-funded community mobilization program called the Ebola

Community Action Platform (ECAP) in Liberia from December 2014- June 2015.

- Over **800 staff members** from partner organizations were trained in a mobilization methodology that emphasized listening to community concerns about Ebola and facilitating locally-driven learning. Partners then used this methodology **to train over 15,000 community communicators** who then mobilized and communicated with the members of their own villages and helped them to implement locally-owned initiatives such as hand-washing stations.

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- Monthly surveys indicate **substantial and rapid changes in intended behaviors and stigmas in a five-month period** from December 2014 to April 2015. The largest observed changes in attitudes over time were in acceptance of health workers who had been in clinics with confirmed cases—from 15% to 68% and acceptance of Ebola survivors—from 19% to 75%.
- The use of repeated, ongoing mobilization by community-based communicators set it apart from other behavior change communications that communities experienced. In the words of a community participant, “It helps us to understand the messaging because they sit with us to discuss and make us understand that Ebola is real.”

### **Lessons for Ebola Response**

**Organizations implementing community mobilization activities urgently need more direct, flexible and long-term support from global donors to fight this epidemic.** Direct funding in 24-month cycles should be targeted to agile partners who are already on the ground in conflict-hit areas and are now on the frontlines of the epidemic in eastern DRC and at-risk areas of neighboring countries.

**The lessons learned from the West Africa outbreak indicate that the current response needs to be proactive and coordinated – bringing both medical and community-focused efforts together.** There should be a senior community engagement lead appointed at the highest strategic level of the response to ensure effective community engagement is being implemented across the response.

**The same conflict dynamics that necessitate community mobilization also pose severe operational challenges to designing and implementing effective grassroots campaigns.** Fostering community ownership in a conflict setting will require the commitment of substantial resources and local partnerships that allow for flexible adaptation and ongoing learning about how community perceptions shape distrust.



Photo Credit: Rudy Kimvuidi/Mercy Corps

### **About Mercy Corps**

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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