

The Crucial Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response: Unrealised Potential?

February 2015

Faith leaders, as trusted and respected members of their community, have played a hugely significant, and often unsung, role in the Ebola crisis. In the midst of confusion, fear and panic, communities have often turned to them for guidance. They have assisted in preventing an Ebola outbreak spreading even further by disseminating key messages and mobilising their communities to do the same. **Many pastors, priests and imams have worked tirelessly to change unsafe burial practices and other previously deep rooted cultural practices and attitudes which contributed so much to the spread of the virus.**

A high proportion of the population of Sierra Leone and Liberia are believers and regular attenders at a place of worship. As experienced communicators, the regularity of religious gatherings such as weekly services at churches and mosques has provided faith leaders with a unique opportunity to speak to their congregations. The supportive teaching on love and inclusivity, found in religious texts, means **they have been ideally placed to speak out against the destructive stigma associated with Ebola.** Faith leaders have invited recovered Ebola patients to give testimony at religious services in order to address stigma and discrimination that recovered people have faced.

Many faith leaders have organised food assistance to families in 21 day quarantine and have set up programmes to care for orphans and help families rebuild their lives. They have often been a first point of call for those experiencing financial hardship. They have brought love and solace to people who are frightened, angry and bereaved, and to those who are sick and dying.

CAFOD, Christian Aid and Tearfund recommend the following:

- 1. There will be numerous reviews and evaluations of the Ebola outbreak and response. Policymakers should use these as opportunities to consider whether the role of faith leaders was fully utilised from the start of the outbreak and what lessons must be learned.**
- 2. In order to build a robust evidence base, independent in-depth research should be commissioned to investigate the role of faith leaders in catalysing behaviour change within the Ebola outbreak and response.**
- 3. Ebola prevention plans and programmes, such as those facilitated by the WHO, must ensure faith leaders are involved as a pivotal part of the focus.**
- 4. Ebola recovery plans currently being produced, such as the UN, EU and World Bank Ebola Recovery Plan, as well as national level plans must include clear strategies for working with faith leaders. Faith leaders must be fully involved and represented in these high-level decision making processes.**
- 5. Faith leaders and faith based organisations must be allocated dedicated funding for training and related material, and on-going mentoring, particularly in counselling.**

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Beyond the community level, the President of Sierra Leone acknowledged the role of faith leaders and encouraged different religious denominations to work together in the fight against Ebola. The Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone (IRCSL) founded the Religious Leaders Task Force on Ebola in order to address the Ebola crisis from a united interreligious perspective. At the international level, faith-based organisations such as Caritas Internationalis have been advising UN WHO experts on the revision of the Safe Burial Policy.

Ebola has caused huge disruption to people's well-being at an individual and a collective level. For many people their sense of security and well-being, built up slowly in the years since the terrible conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone ended, have been shaken to the core. As the Ebola response moves into the recovery phase it is essential that faith leaders are proactively supported with the right training and related materials, ongoing mentoring and other resources to help them fully utilise their role in the Ebola response. **Given their influence in communities and the potential harm of wrong messages, well trained faith leaders, who receive ongoing mentoring and support, can be a crucial part of the countries' recovery and healing.**

Independent, in-depth research should be prioritised by research institutions and donors to analyse the unique role of faith leaders in behaviour change including preventing the spread of Ebola, and also of mitigating the devastating impacts of stigmatisation during the recovery phase.

One particular challenge is that although faith leaders are well trained to provide spiritual care, **most have not been trained in counselling and therefore there is a strong need for skilled personnel in this area.** This skill shortage should also be considered in Ebola Recovery Plans going forward.

As Ebola Recovery Plans are developed it is of the utmost importance that faith leaders are fully involved and represented in high-level decision making processes which occur at an international, regional and country level. Faith leaders should be involved in the drafting process and the plans should recognise faith leaders as a key target group to work with. This includes the United Nations, European Union and World Bank 'Ebola Recovery Plan' which has '*Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion, Institutions and Core Government Functions*' as one of its 'four pillars' and the Health Recovery Plan from the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone has '*Community Engagement*' as a key input. This should also apply to country specific Ebola prevention plans such as those facilitated by the WHO.

The role of faith leaders has often been overlooked and in many cases their potential contribution to the Ebola crisis is still not being fully realised. There was a significant missed opportunity in not involving faith leaders further at the very start of the outbreak. Evaluations of the response to the current outbreak will need to consider whether the role of faith leaders has been fully utilised. They will need to consider what steps should have been taken to include them more in planning and to mobilise them from the very outset of the outbreak.

These lessons will need to be applied to help prevent future outbreaks occurring in the affected countries and should also be applied to countries that are currently unaffected. **Future programmes centred on Ebola prevention must ensure faith leaders are involved as a pivotal part of the focus.**

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