

## Defeating Ebola: unleashing the power of churches and mosques

Ebola killed thousands of people across Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Many hundreds of children died, tens of thousands were orphaned, need care, or have had to abandon their schooling. Livelihoods have collapsed as the region grapples with the fear of contagion, the quarantine of red zone hot spots and the disruption of a vibrant and communal social and business life.

State and private health systems that were already extremely weak were brought to the brink of collapse by the deaths of health workers infected by Ebola and the overwhelming demand for medical care. Many others who have felt sick have not even dared to set foot in the limited number of health centres or hospitals for fear of either being quarantined away from loved ones or becoming infected by others seeking treatment.



Though the international aid response took time to gear up, new treatment centres opened. Behaviour change messages helped people to understand how to stay safe. Children were educated at home via radio lessons. Much remains to be done to help affected nations rebuild their economies and strengthen their health and education systems.

Key to the prevention, relief and recovery phases are the churches and mosques across West

Africa which are so central to community life.

Faith-based organisations and networks have the potential to be key players in the proper education of communities, reducing the spread of confusion, rumours, ignorance and fear that drives the spread of the virus and stigmatise survivors and the affected.

They also have a massive potential role in caring for those who have been left behind, especially children who were orphaned. Aid agencies are reporting abandonment of these children by neighbours for fear of catching the disease.

World Vision is already engaging churches and faith groups and is working in coalition with other faith-based aid agencies but there is opportunity to do more across the region.

## Faith leaders and communities are vital to defeating Ebola

While the specific religious breakdown varies across West Africa, faith is central to life and faith leaders are respected and listened to in all the countries impacted by Ebola. Recent coups, political instability and brutal civil war have meant that religious leaders are often more trusted than political leaders.

Faith groups may also be sharing potentially harmful messages due to misinformation, much as was the case with HIV and AIDS. Views that Ebola is God's punishment or a plague sent on individuals or nations due to sin, is caused by a witch doctor's curse; or that Ebola can be cured through the laying on of hands, all result in spreading fear, or in responses that spread the virus.

Evidence suggests very high levels of discrimination faced by Ebola survivors. There have even been rumours that health workers are helping to spread the disease. Correcting such messages is key to creating the environment required to keep Ebola under control. Faith leaders are potentially the gatekeepers to proper life-affirming messages.



The organisational infrastructure, and worship, teaching and preaching schedules of the various faith networks also provide huge opportunities to not only get proper messaging out on a regular basis via Sunday sermons, small religious group meetings and Friday Prayers, but to unleash the power of faith communities to care and support.

Within these faith-based organisations influential women's groups, pastors, laity and Islamic leaders also have a key role to play. Many faith groups also use radio to preach and communicate with their communities. Finally, there is also strong inter-religious collaboration.

World Vision already has experience in engaging the faith community via the **Channels of Hope** for HIV initiative. Channels of Hope has been used to reach tens of thousands of faith leaders and faith community members globally and to mobilise believers to care for those with HIV and AIDS and the orphans left behind. It addressed harmful ideas and practices that promoted stigma, by highlighting what the Bible or Koran said about caring for "the other", providing accurate information about the disease and connecting people with opportunities for tangible responses

to care for those around them. These proved powerful motivators when properly understood by faith leaders, believers and the massive volunteer faith networks.

World Vision has developed a special **Channels of Hope** for **Ebola** programme that focuses on sharing accurate information about Ebola, helping people understand how to serve people who are hurting and in despair, and how to respond in ways that protect themselves, their families and those impacted around them. The curriculum is now ready to be rolled out.

### **The three things faith-based organisations can do to confront Ebola:**

1. Educate communities of believers about Ebola, how it spreads, and how to engage with those who have been affected by it. Proper education and sensitization improves the proper referral of potential cases, reduces fear and stigma, and strengthens communities with knowledge to promote practices like safe and dignified burials and religious rites in the context of Ebola.
2. Promote the care of those with potential symptoms of Ebola, the survivors and those affected by the loss of loved ones, especially children.
3. Support one another as communities face increased impoverishment due to the collapse of livelihoods, increased food prices, the breakdown of markets and the closure of the school system.

### **World Vision's response to Ebola:**

#### **Channels of Hope:**

World Vision has adapted the effective CoH model for Ebola in an emergency response situation. This has led to a catalysing programme aimed at training Christian, Muslim and other leaders as facilitators to share information at the community level about Ebola.



These local leaders have the tools and knowledge they need to give informed sermons and to talk to communities in ways that are not only rooted in faith principles but that also reduce fear, promote care, and tackle stigma.

The aim of Channels of Hope is to cut through the existing fear and misinformation and in the process reduce infection rates. Done right, Channels of Hope can scale education, prevention and care nationwide very quickly.

The initiative is modeled on the World Vision Channels of Hope initiative that was rolled out across Africa, including Sierra Leone, in response to the fear, stigma and

orphan abandonment brought about by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Since its 2004 launch more than 380,000 participants (including 85,000 senior faith leaders) have attended 17,300 workshops worldwide.

In each case facilitators are trained to run workshops within their communities. Topics include:

- Deepening medical knowledge: What is Ebola and the Ebola virus; how is it spread; what happens when someone falls ill; how to refer those with potential medical symptoms; what is the psycho-social and emotional impact of those impacted or affected by Ebola



- How to prevent the spread of Ebola: safe personal hygiene, food and sexual practices; why fear and stigmatisation helps spread Ebola; how to bury the dead safely and with dignity
  - What the scriptures say about caring for the sick; harmful and helpful attitudes and responses
    - The role of faith-based organisations: how to care for those impacted by Ebola, especially children
    - Strategising for the

future: Empowering faith groups to build their own responses to Ebola focused on sharing proper health messages, advocating for those affected by Ebola and building care networks that look after the most vulnerable

World Vision has already begun working with Christian and Muslim leaders to get the message out via sermons<sup>1</sup> but the Channels of Hope programme is a much deeper experience designed to change attitudes and promote action.

**Safe burials:** The burial of infected victims of Ebola is especially important<sup>2</sup>. Dead bodies are highly contagious and traditional burial practices that involve kissing, touching and washing bodies are known to be super-spreader events. Educating faith communities about safe burials is especially important.

World Vision is now leading burial efforts in Sierra Leone. Funded by UK government donor agency DFID, World Vision is overseeing a coalition of faith-based agencies, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and the burial of 20,000 bodies across Sierra Leone (apart from Freetown). This involves training burial teams kitted out in

<sup>1</sup> [www.wvi.org/sierra-leone/video/faith-leaders-create-awareness-about-ebola](http://www.wvi.org/sierra-leone/video/faith-leaders-create-awareness-about-ebola)

<sup>2</sup> [www.wvi.org/ebola-crisis/article/blog-32-graves](http://www.wvi.org/ebola-crisis/article/blog-32-graves)



personal protection equipment to intern people in ways that allow the bereaved to safely and ceremonially say goodbye to loves ones.

**Equipment provision:** World Vision is shipping in large quantities of vital equipment including the protection suits<sup>3</sup> and chemicals vital for health worker and burial team safety.

**Children's education:** Schools have been shut down in response to Ebola. Word Vision has been supporting efforts to educate children at home via national and radio broadcasts.<sup>4</sup>

### How to get involved:

#### Support with funding:

Increased private and institutional funding for the Ebola Channels of Hope initiative is needed for full Channels of Hope roll out in partnership with other agencies, faith-based organisations and networks across West Africa.



#### Recognise the key role faith-based organisations play:

The role of faith in development is often overlooked, but in places like West Africa faith is central to much of life and faith leaders are listened to and respected. World Vision has a high degree of trust among church and Islamic leaders and is used to engaging faith-based organisations in ways they understand. It is worth noting that the world's most inspirational leaders have been inspired by faith including Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. Unicef recognises the key role faith organisations play<sup>5</sup>.

#### Partner:

World Vision is looking to engage with other humanitarian and development agencies and faith-based organisations to scale up its Ebola Channels of Hope initiative.

<sup>3</sup> [www.wvi.org/sierra-leone/video/responding-ebola-sierra-leone](http://www.wvi.org/sierra-leone/video/responding-ebola-sierra-leone)

<sup>4</sup> [www.wvi.org/emergencies/article/im-still-learning-despite-ebola](http://www.wvi.org/emergencies/article/im-still-learning-despite-ebola)

<sup>5</sup> [www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering\\_with\\_Religious\\_Communities\\_for\\_Children\\_\(UNICEF\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_(UNICEF).pdf)

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World Vision's Ebola Response: [www.wvi.org/ebola-crisis](http://www.wvi.org/ebola-crisis)

For information on the Channels of Hope initiative on which the Ebola initiative is modeled: [www.wvi.org/health/publication/channels-hope-transforming-lives-positively](http://www.wvi.org/health/publication/channels-hope-transforming-lives-positively)

Visit the following links, for a pdf version of the [CoH-Ebola Facilitator's Manual](#), [Personal Workbook](#) and [Flip file](#) used in community mobilization.

*World Vision began working in Sierra Leone in 1996 in response to the civil war and now has 24 sponsorship programmes that impact the lives of over 40,000 children.*

*Our efforts are keeping them safe from Ebola. World Vision aims to gear up prevention efforts in Niger, Mali, Ghana and Senegal<sup>6</sup>.*



<sup>6</sup> [www.wvi.org/senegal/article/world-vision-senegal-trains-religious-leaders-ebola-virus](http://www.wvi.org/senegal/article/world-vision-senegal-trains-religious-leaders-ebola-virus)