

COMPENDIUM OF CASE STUDIES ON FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO ACHIEVE U.S. DEVELOPMENT GOALS



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

A LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR FAITH & OPPORTUNITY INITIATIVE

July 2019

Dear Partners,

Since its inception in 1961, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has worked closely with faith-based, faith-inspired and local community organizations to increase the impact of foreign assistance. Community groups and people of faith are indispensable partners in our efforts to lift communities out of poverty and help nations move toward self-reliance.

USAID's Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives (CFOI) has commissioned this compendium of case studies to illustrate the Agency's commitment to working with faith-based and community groups to end extreme poverty and promote democratic and resilient societies. These successful partnerships have yielded invaluable returns, such as reaching over 400,000 beneficiaries with food transfers in Ethiopia, preventing the spread of Ebola by providing safe and dignified burials for more than 2,000 people in Sierra Leone, and providing medical care, legal and socio-economic support to thousands of victims of gender-based violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Our faith-based and local community partners daily change lives by delivering social goods and services for others in need. They combat extreme hunger, provide life-saving healthcare, educate girls and boys, build resilient and democratic societies, and promote religious freedom. Our collaboration is vital as together we work to bring transformative services to communities around the world.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kirsten Evans". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending to the right from the end of the name.

Kirsten Evans
Director
Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiative

Changing the Course of the Ebola Epidemic: *World Hope International Preventing Ebola Through Faith and Cultural Leadership Project*

Location: Sierra Leone

Scale: 365,602 beneficiaries

Date: June 2014 - August 2015

Headline Result: Providing safe and culturally sensitive dignified burials for 2,193 individuals stemmed the tide of new Ebola infections, contributing to reaching “resilient zero”.

USAID Contribution: \$300,000

Local faith and community leaders supported the Ebola prevention campaign and burial practices to prevent the further spread of Ebola, while respecting their faith and cultural backgrounds.

Background

The project aimed to prevent the spread of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) and support safe, dignified burials of all persons who died in the 13 chiefdoms of Bombali District. World Hope International (WHI) chaired Bombali District Ebola Response Centre’s Social Mobilization activities to stop the spread of Ebola. The work involved leading a team of 188 social mobilizers to engage in mass media radio discussions; also designing and executing social mobilization Ebola prevention and response messages in line with government strategies.

The social mobilization work led to the design and implementation of the innovative Cultural Burial Liaison initiative. The initiative was co-designed by Paramount Chiefs, Sierra Leone’s traditional leaders and cultural societal heads to ensure the sacred (for many) practices of burying the dead honored all involved.

Cultural Burial Liaisons (CBLs) trained ceremonial burial teams to address the problem of unsafe burials and ensure religious and cultural traditions did not have to fall by the wayside to guarantee safe burials. WHI began with community sensitization throughout Bombali District in Sierra Leone, then selected and trained 130 CBLs (one team per chiefdom), to support the District’s Burial Management team at the grassroots level.

CBLs were identified by religious and traditional leaders as persons who would be able to assist with



Cultural Liaisons Presentation and Certification at Gbendembu Ngowahun Chiefdom.

education on carrying out safe burial practices. In addition to supporting safe, dignified, medical burials, and properly utilizing personal protective equipment when performing ceremonial traditions under Burial Management supervision, CBLs were trained to serve as social mobilizers, performing neighborhood watch and reporting any cases of sick persons, alerting the authorities of deaths, and ensuring no secret and/or unsafe burial took place.

Faith-Based and Community Initiatives

WHI spread Ebola prevention messages using person-to-person outreach at numerous events. The religious leaders/cultural liaisons were essential for the promotion of information. Faith leaders collaborated to present messages within

service times, recognizing the importance of ensuring that all members of their community knew how to keep themselves and their families as safe as possible.

The practice of burying loved ones is sacred in Sierra Leone. Many consider funerals/burials as farewell ceremonies where traditional heads and family members must be directly involved for the dead to gain eternal life in the afterlife. During the Ebola outbreak the act of touching corpses of persons containing the virus, done as a sign of respect, was a key contributor to the spread of the disease to family and community members. Through the involvement of traditional heads of cultural societies in the design of a safe burial practice in the era of Ebola, WHI ensured dignified medical burials, with adherence to the Infection Protection Control Standard Operating Procedures for burial, while performing cultural rites without risk of spreading the EVD infection. This approach enhanced confidence within the population that cultural traditions and safety precautions are not in conflict with each other.

Winning the trust and confidence of communities played a central role in the rapid control of an outbreak - it saved lives.

The CBLs interfaced with Islamic, Christian and Traditional faith practices, showing that the particular faith background was less central than the backing of each traditions faith leaders in disseminating life-saving behavior change information.

Results

Thirteen Paramount chiefs, 136 section and 958 cultural societal members were engaged in a consultative dialogue which raised their awareness of the importance for safe dignified medical burials

within the EVD period. In partnership with 130 CBLs to conduct 330 community engagement Ebola sensitization meetings in all 13 districts, each district was able to hear more about preventing Ebola. There were 403,004 (207,233 males; 195,771 females) attendees at Ebola prevention engagement activities, with some individuals participating more than once. In total, 2,193 people were given cultural and faith sensitive burials with help from the project.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the most important lessons learned through this project is that every member of society needs to be involved to support the eradication of Ebola. WHI found that voluntary behavior change came from: 1) providing Sierra Leoneans with the opportunity to understand the behaviors that contribute to the spread of Ebola while offering an alternative course of action; 2) giving them responsibilities to fight the disease in their own group and, most importantly; 3) acknowledging the positive impact traditions may have.

Behavior change also came more easily when prevention messages were brought to communities by their own people. Respecting local hierarchies and involving key personalities of every level of society in the project ensured the communication of Ebola safety messages in every local dialect. CBLs also had a direct link to the community for fast identification of the disease. During community engagement activities, CBLs made many referrals and alerts for those with symptoms of EVD.

Involving CBLs in this context was unique to the Ebola outbreak and had a resultant positive impact on safe burials which respected traditional beliefs. After seeing the positive effect of CBLs in Bombali District, this approach was utilized by partner agencies in other districts. One of the most important takeaways from the project is the critical role religious communities can play in supporting life-saving behaviors in emergency settings. In future emergencies, and in health and behavior change programming, mindful incorporation of religious and cultural practices can have life-saving implications.