

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

Ebola has killed thousands of people across Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. Many hundreds of children have died, tens of thousands have been orphaned or 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 have been brought to the brink of collapse by the deaths of health workers infected by Ebola or by 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.



Only now is the international aid response sufficiently gearing up. New treatment centres are opening. Behaviour change messages are helping people to understand how to stay safe. Children are being educated at home via radio lessons. But there remains much to do to defeat the spread of Ebola and 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, and ignorance and fear that drive 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 orphaned by a disease that might have already killed their parents and siblings. Aid agencies are reporting the complete abandonment of such 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 a huge opportunity to do

more and to scale up in countries already struggling with Ebola as well as neighbouring nations that are at risk.

### **Why faith leaders and believers are so important to defeating Ebola:**

In Sierra Leone, 60% of the population is Muslim, 10% Christian and 30% have indigenous beliefs. Guinea has somewhat similar figures while Liberia is predominantly Christian. But in all countries faith is central to life and faith leaders are respected and listened to. This is especially important because all three countries have recently experienced coups and political instability. Both Sierra Leone and Liberia have gone through brutal civil wars. This means that religious leaders are often more trusted than political leaders.

It is also the case that faith groups may be sharing potentially harmful messages that with proper education can be corrected, 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, or is caused by a witch doctor's curse; or alternatively 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 get 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.

The Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, and Pentecostal Churches have extensive infrastructures in place just as Muslim's have their network of Islamic organisations, institutions and federations. 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 its HIV and AIDS **Channels of Hope** initiative. This initiative has been used to educate thousands of faith-based organisations across Africa and to mobilise believers to care for those with HIV and AIDS and the orphans left behind. It helped promote right responses and changed - at scale - harmful ideas and practices, by highlighting what the Bible or Koran said about caring for “the other”, the leper, the orphan, the widow and the poor. These proved powerful motivators when properly understood by faith leaders, believers and the massive volunteer faith networks.

World Vision has developed a special **Ebola Channels of Hope** programme that focuses on helping people understand how to be there when people are hurting and in despair, how to stand up on behalf of others and how to speak in ways that bring hope and educate. 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 died from it, who may have it as well as those who have recovered. Proper education and sensitization will improve the proper referral of potential cases, reduce fear and stigma, and strengthen communities.
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.

### **How World Vision is responding to Ebola:**

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

World Vision has developed a catalysing programme aimed at training Christian, Muslim and other leaders as facilitators to conduct workshops in their communities for local Pastors, Imams and other spiritual leaders about Ebola.

These local leaders will then be given 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.

The Ebola Channels of Hope programme has two curricula – one focused on those countries already dealing with Ebola outbreaks; the other on helping neighbouring nations seeking to prevent its spread.

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.

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<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)



**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 personal protection equipment to intern people in ways that allow the bereaved to safely and ceremonially say goodbye to loved 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. World 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 so a curriculum components can be developed and rolled out in partnership with other agencies, faith-based organisations and networks across West Africa.



The training of facilitators within Ebola-affected countries has to be done virtually due to travel restrictions and these facilitators then need to be equipped with videos, proper training materials and mobile technology to enable them to educate others.

### 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

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

<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)

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.

### **Contacts and information:**

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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)

*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>, where it also has a large-scale presence.*



<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)

<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)