Regional food insecurity, work migration and roadblocks

Key considerations

This brief summarises some key considerations about food insecurity, the migration of men and youth for work and the implication these movements may have for the Ebola response. The details have been collated from suggestions and insights provided by networks of anthropologists* who work Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea (both in-country and remotely). These are general considerations that are broadly relevant to the movement of people during the dry season, but further investigation into local specificities is required.

* Anthropologists from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Senegal, UK, US, Canada, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Food insecurity

- The region is now entering the dry season and approaching the harvest phase of the agricultural cycle.

- Due to Ebola, it is likely that labour shortages will impact farmers' ability to mobilise the large harvest teams required, and much of the annual rice yield will be left unharvested. As a result, FAO projects serious rice shortages in the months to come.

- This means that the 'hungry season' will likely start in March or April 2015 (rather than June-October) and people will experience food insecurities well in advance of the next harvest and planting cycle. As a result, people are likely to eat their 'seed rice' (rice that has been set aside for planting in 2015), which will further strain the agricultural cycle in 2015-16.

- Labor shortages caused by Ebola are likely to lead to region-wide, large-scale food insecurity for the next 24 months. Food insecurity has an impact on immunity, and food access has a direct impact on compliance with Ebola diagnosis and management.

- Food insecurity is likely to lead to an increase in food-seeking mobility (from urban to rural areas, from rural to urban areas, across regions and across national borders) especially in the context of rising food prices and labour shortages. This poses a direct risk for the spread of Ebola into previously unaffected areas.

Male mobility

- Both younger and older men use the dry season to migrate for wage labour (for example, in the mines, timber logging in the deep forest, diamond digging and working on the cocoa plantations in Côte d'Ivoire).

- The standard practice of seeking waged labour leads to great male mobility, and this will accelerate rapidly when the dry season starts in the last week of October/first week of November.

- Movement will be regional as men cross the boarders between Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

- Such labor migration is a critical part of the economy and cash culture of local communities and avoiding travel during the dry season is not a viable economic strategy for most people. Whilst it heightens the risk of Ebola spreading into previously unaffected areas, it is likely that attempts to prevent such migration and the flow of work and wages will be bypassed or resisted.

- In addition, travel during the dry season is a customary practice with close linkages to annual rituals, seasonal practices and socio-cultural engagements including weddings. As the roads dry out and movement becomes easier, local and regional travel will increase overall. For many communities, it is normal to defer funerals until the dry season to enable large numbers of people to attend.

Check points to monitor peoples' movement

- Communities are invested in controlling the flow of people in and out of their communities, and in controlling the spread of Ebola.

- There are reports of locals mounting checkpoints and roadblocks in out of their communities, a highly visible tactic. Although this is re-activating practices adopted during the wars, use of roadblocks and checkpoints pre-exist the recent conflicts and are a respected strategy for preventing the arrival of unwanted strangers (including aid workers and burial teams).

- Young men often man checkpoints and roadblocks. There is a risk that their mobilisation and the use of checkpoints may resonate with ways in which civil defense units and militias were viewed and talked about during the wars (by both participants and the wider community), including the loss of authority and control by local elders.

Recommendations

- There must be clear differentiation made between a) mobility for income and food security and b) mobility due to sickness and treatment seeking. To prevent people from moving to find treatment, care should be provided as close to the community as possible (through CCCs or similar interventions). There may be quarantine or isolation ramifications for mobility due to sickness, but not for income or food-seeking mobility.

- Caution must be taken when imposing limitations on mobility as this may cause socio-economic difficulties, frustration and resentment. There are different reasons underlying people's movement and these should be directly addressed to defuse the risk of confrontation: if people are moving to secure food, measures should be taken for the local provision of food across the region for the next 24 months; if people are moving for labour migration purposes, it is important to understand and compensate the economic impact of limiting movement. These kinds of movement should only be discouraged if and when mechanisms that offer viable local alternatives have been established.

- Rather than seeing checkpoints and roadblocks as negative or socially disruptive, they should be considered important sites of engagement with local communities where issues of the flow of people, materials, information and knowledge can be directly addressed. For example, checkpoints and roadblocks can be effectively used as sites for disease surveillance, triage and referral to treatment units (particularly in previously unaffected areas such as the rural hinterlands or Western Côte d'Ivoire).

- Whilst state- or military-led attempts to restrict travel may be met with avoidance or resistance, checkpoints and roadblocks that have local legitimacy may be accepted and welcomed. When engaging with checkpoints, it would be preferable to deploy locally respected individuals who can act as representatives of the state, such as nurses, community health workers and local leaders, rather than the police or military.

- It is recommended that local governance structures be supported to issue guidance on safe conduct for local roadblocks and checkpoints. Such local community-led 'laws of the roadblock' should seek to mitigate economic or physical abuse, support community leadership to control roadblocks and checkpoints, and enable community leaders to use non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms when negative issues emerge.

- Positive engagement with supportive supervision is essential to structure youth activities and mitigate the risks associated with disenfranchised youth. Many young male interlocutors emphasised that youth need to present themselves and their involvement in a way that is respectful and enables them to be 'taken seriously' by the older generation.

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