

Hotspot Busters Initiative - Sierra Leone

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Background

An unprecedented Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic began in the Kailahun District of Sierra Leone in the spring of 2014 and reached its peak in November. The epidemic which has ravaged Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia has been characterized by WHO as “the largest, most complex and most severe we’ve ever seen”.

With cases surging, there was a need to identify “hotspots” of outbreak and coordinate efforts to conduct social mobilization activities immediately in order to reduce spread and educate the community members and empower them as partners in fighting the disease.

The “Hotspot Busters Initiative” was created to meet this need, aimed at reducing and eliminating the spread of EVD in hotspot areas as soon as cases appear. It has become a key element of UNICEF’s response to the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone. UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MOHS), in partnership with the Health for all Coalition (HFAC), a local community based organization with a network of social mobilizers in the field, implemented this intervention at the ward level across the country.

How does Hotspot Busting work?

A hotspot was defined by HFAC as ‘any two suspected cases from a community’.

The activities of this initiative aim to:

- **Sensitize** Paramount Chiefs and traditional leaders on the need for intensification of the EVD response in the hotspot communities, including dissemination of chiefdom by-laws on EVD;
- **Undertake** intense door to door community sensitization;
- **Provide** key messages via SBCC materials;
- **Facilitate** community referrals; and,
- **Report** on suspected cases.

The mobilizers. HFAC, with its 788 social mobilizers at the ward level, had the capacity to immediately roll out rapid and focused social mobilization activities.

Two hotspot busters from the community deployed rapidly to each hotspot area as soon as a potential outbreak was reported. They were tasked with increasing community engagement to stop the spread of EVD. These mobilizers were also enrolled into the UNICEF’s Rapid Pro SMS monitoring system to provide real time daily feedback on a set of indicators.

This allowed the team to track and guide social mobilization interventions as well as report on unsafe practices at the community level.

Identifying hotspots. To identify any potential hotspots, HFAC reviewed the weekly epidemiological data. Once identified, HFAC organized mobilization meetings at chiefdom levels under the Paramount Chiefs. Councilors, community elders, religious leaders, teachers, women and youth representatives were briefed on the emerging hotspot scenario in their chiefdom and developed a two week social mobilization intensification plan.

“The only way to ‘bust the hotspot’ is to make sure that community members are empowered, engaged and active. We ensure that the social mobilizers are from the community and know the context so that tailor-fit strategies are able to respond to what the particular community needs.”

Kshitij Joshi, UNICEF Sierra Leone Chief of Communication for Development

The mobilizers' job. The role of the mobilizers was to act as catalysts to conduct intensive social mobilization activities in the identified hotspots for 3 to 5 days, or until the hotspot was taken off the list, and to encourage other groups to mobilize as well.

The social mobilizers activated youth, women and volunteer networks in each community and reached approximately 9,000 households every week.

They performed active community surveillance and encouraged community members to call the Ebola hotline to refer sick loved ones to hospital. This intensive effort ensured that everyone had the knowledge and skills to prevent the further spread of the disease.

Results

As a result of the intensive social mobilization activities there was an increased utilization of the facilities, knowledge was higher, and fear and rumors were reduced.

Improved behaviors included more safe burials and early referral to treatment centers.



Lessons Learned

Some of the **key lessons learned** from this innovative and unique program are:

- **Rapid and intense** social mobilization is a highly useful approach;
- **Use mobilizers** from the community who understand the local culture;
- **Create an enabling environment** in the community;
- **Involve women** as mobilizers;
- **Use new tools** such as the RapidPro SMS system ; and,
- **Sensitize the Paramount Chiefs** at the outset to gain their buy in and support.

Innovation. This innovative effort at the community and household level, paired with the power of information technology to capture and act on real time data through the Rapid Pro SMS system, was unique and the first in the region.

The epidemic was slowed when hotspots were identified and actions were taken immediately. All of the interventions created and sustained an enabling environment supporting the desired behaviors.

Multi-level effects. This national level program was a driver of the interventions at the field level. At the district level the mobilization of the partners, based on real time information, was key to the effectiveness of the rapid response.

At the chiefdom/ward/village level the program operated efficiently with the facilitation of hotspot busters to sensitize and mobilize other partners to join in a united front, ultimately reducing the spread of EVD.

Works cited

“Social Mobilizers Empower ‘Hotspot’ Communities to Fight Ebola in Sierra Leone”, By Marge Francia, 28 January 2015, Freetown, Sierra Leone.

“Final Report, Hot Spot Buster and Monitoring of Social Mobilization Activities Through The Use of Civil Society Mobilizers/Monitors”, Health For All Coalition, Sierra Leone, March, 2015.

“More than a hundred per cent the social mobilizers have been helpful to us. They work around the clock as a member of the community, always with us and always involved.”

Councillor Alusine Conteh,
community member