

Ebola response and community engagement: how to build a bridge?

As of Dec 3, 2019,¹ 3313 cases of Ebola virus disease (EVD), resulting in 2207 deaths, have been reported in northeastern DR Congo. Armed and interethnic conflicts, large population movements, political tensions, and community resistance have hampered the success of the response activities.^{2,3}

The lessons learned and the standard interventions seem almost to be inappropriate. Indeed, with the lack of community involvement identified as the main barrier, the strategic adjustments of response have mainly consisted of the transposition of achievements during the west African EVD epidemic to the current episode, regardless of local sociocultural sensibilities and practices. A mistrust of national and provincial governments, as well as security and humanitarian institutions, is strongly rooted in indigenous populations because of exactions that have lasted for more than two decades.⁴ Community reluctance has been fuelled by misinformation, scepticism about the disease's real existence, and speculations about the central government's involvement in the virus spreading to suppress an electorate favourable for opposition.⁵ In addition, the community perceives that international humanitarian organisations are behind the epidemic because of large amounts of money dedicated to assist efforts to control EVD, while conflict and other health concerns have received less attention before.⁵ Also, the militarised escorts of community intervention teams in insecure areas have pushed some communities to insulate themselves from external influence.² Finally, community resistance has resulted in numerous attacks on Ebola treatment centres and field response teams.⁵

A year later, the epidemic continues. In addition, there are still pockets of community resistance. However, several teams have succeeded in managing the response and have defended that they have made every effort to involve the community, but without much success. This raises the question of whether the community engagement is understood in the same way by all stakeholders, and how will the management of the epidemic in an active conflict zone be perceived by international, national, and local actors? International and national actors have never confronted such a complex crisis, and local actors have never confronted a disease with a transmission potential as high as Ebola. What does the community think about this notion of community involvement? Deciphering the discrepancies in perceptions of community involvement between different actors and the community will lead to short-term operational consequences on the dynamics of the current EVD outbreak.

Based on the new national multi-sectoral EVD response committee advocating a pragmatic multidisciplinary approach that is currently established, it is important to put in place an interactive consultation framework between the community, local leaders, and the other actors involved in the response. This action is to develop communication strategies and protocols focused on a community-centred approach and carried by local stakeholders. Promoting such an approach can build community confidence in the response required for social mobilisation and community engagement.

We declare no competing interests.

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- 4 Vinck P, Pham PN, Bindu KK, Bedford J, Nilles EJ. Institutional trust and misinformation in the response to the 2018–19 Ebola outbreak in North Kivu, DR Congo: a population-based survey. *Lancet Infect Dis* 2019; **19**: 529–36.
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Barnes A, Black M, Baxter S, et al. Understanding public health systems: a participatory systematic review and systems infographic. *Lancet* 2019; **394**: S22—In this Meeting Abstract the spelling of Andrew Furber's name was incorrect. This correction has been made to the online version as of Dec 19, 2019.