

FRONTLINE AND FEARLESS • A LOOK INTO THE LESSONS THAT TWO HEALTH CRISES HAVE TAUGHT CIVIL SOCIETY IN SIERRA LEONE

Written by:

Alhassan Bunani Jusu,
Restless Development
Sierra Leone

Report Overview

During the health crises of Ebola and COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, youth civil society organisations (CSO) were engaged in effective social mobilisation and community sensitisation on preventive measures. To better understand how their organisations addressed the COVID-19 and Ebola pandemics, ten representatives from ten youth civil society organisations were interviewed. This report showcases their experiences, including if and how they were able to utilise lessons learnt from Ebola to better respond to COVID-19.

Impact of the pandemics on young people in Sierra Leone

The outbreaks of Ebola and COVID-19 have had negative effects on the lives and wellbeing of young people in Sierra Leone, including disruptions in education and economic opportunities, family stress, social isolation, risk of domestic abuse, uncertainty about the future, and reduced wellbeing. COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted young people in business, especially those working in the services and sales sector, as well as the informal economy. This was the same during the Ebola crisis. Thus, young people in Sierra Leone faced compounded hardships from back-to-back crises of Ebola and then COVID-19.



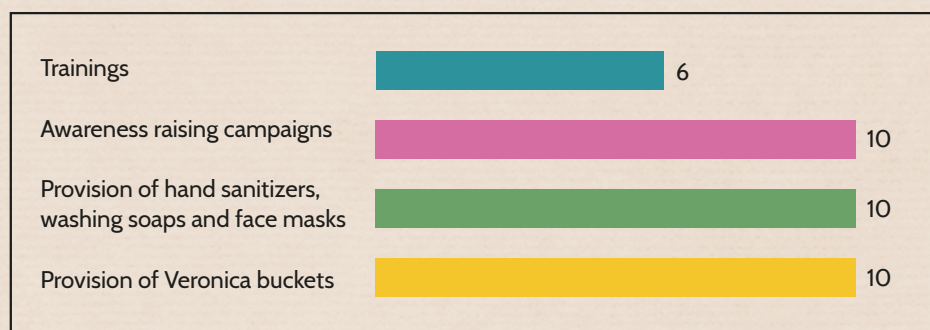
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How youth CSOs have participated in the efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 and Ebola

“My organisation was able to organise awareness-raising campaigns, provision of Veronica buckets¹ in communities, schools, hospitals etc. and the distribution of face masks in order to help curtail the spread of these diseases. All this was done from our little contributions we made and with other stakeholders’ support.” - respondent from Youth in Action Sierra Leone

Youth civil society engaged in the pandemic responses through three primary ways: providing trainings on public health, delivering awareness raising campaigns, and providing public health and/or sanitary equipment. All ten of the youth civil society organisations in Sierra Leone interviewed said that their involvement and participation for both Ebola and COVID-19 was mainly in ensuring that infection prevention control materials and messages reached all communities (see graph below).

Figure 1. Contribution made by civil society organisations



Government representatives shared that youth-led or youth-focused organisations have been given the opportunity to be fully involved in strategic COVID-19 response meetings to discuss how to mitigate the spread of the virus across the country. These government officials felt that their engagements have been instrumental in ensuring that social mobilisation and nationwide awareness-raising and sensitisation are happening at the community level.

Youth CSOs’ work complemented government efforts in eradicating these crises. Their continuous support in providing public sensitisation on preventive measures and how to uphold government policies on COVID-19 has helped to curtail the spread and death of citizens. As one representative described, *“During these crises, we did campaigns to raise awareness to youth and other community members to believe that Ebola and corona are real and to observe the preventive measures.”*

Key lessons learnt about containing Ebola and COVID-19

During the Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics, youth CSOs adapted their activities and approaches. They worked together to mobilise and involve communities to take leadership or ownership in increasing their awareness. This was done through community engagement and one-on-one discussions with young people to learn about the issues affecting them. They also supported communities in formulating action points to help mitigate the spread of the virus. These approaches and activities helped to improve the understanding of important precautionary measures such as maintaining social distance, wearing of face masks, sneezing or coughing into the elbow, frequent hand washing, and getting vaccinated.

Youth CSOs also learnt to work remotely. The ban on social gathering exposed them to new ways of working and introduced them to different online virtual platforms. They organised training, meetings, and project activities through the use of Skype, Zoom, and online video teaching to foster effective and efficient project implementation in their operational communities. They found that remote working is more time and cost efficient than their previous ways of working.

In summary, CSOs learnt:

- Working remotely (online) has proven to be more efficient and cost effective
- Working together in consortium increased their coverage and brought sustainable, desired changes quicker
- Response is very effective when youth take the lead
- Social mobilisation is successful when there is mutual trust and respect between the leaders and their communities, which increases public participation and boosts their sense of ownership

Organisational adaptations in approaches, strategies, and ways of working to achieve a better impact

“Our procedures (like procuring, hiring, etc.) and community engagement (like community meetings, outreach sessions, etc.) changed as a result of the pandemic. The approach we use in engaging and organising campaigns on COVID-19 preventive measures now have less bureaucratic procedure and more preventive steps.” - respondent from Young Leaders Initiative Network



Peripheral Health Unit Handwashing demonstration.



Awareness-raising to community people on COVID-19 and EVD preventive messages in Pujehun districts.



Community Barray Hand Washing Station (Community response)

A key adaptation has been the funding flexibility afforded by donors to respond to the pandemic. One respondent said: *“Through our Disaster Preparedness and Response Fund, we are able to allocate targeted funding where it is needed most. For example, managed funding ensured that COVID-19 response activities were able to take place, including soap and Clorox distribution to communities and the provision of tap buckets and handwashing stations. Remote communities are being reached through existing relationships with local authorities. Local women leaders are responsible for community awareness raising, by sharing key messages via megaphone alongside the utilisation of radio broadcast, mobile hotspots, and social networks.”*

In addition, new donor-funded projects and innovative approaches have arisen. For example, Youth in Action for Change and ActionAid are implementing a four-year project that supports women and young people impacted by the Ebola epidemic. The women are part of Women Protection and Action Groups in these areas, so they are well placed to share accurate and rapid information about COVID-19 throughout their communities.

Impact from Ebola when facing new health crises

Many youth CSOs changed their strategies to be more health focused. Some other CSOs (especially those that came into being after the Ebola pandemic) had little or no changes to their existing model and approach because they were developed to respond to crises like COVID-19 already. They explained that during the Ebola outbreak, youth CSOs were engaged in sensitising community people about handwashing, which is not different from what they are currently doing for COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our current approach is not different from what we used during Ebola. Our focus has been supporting communities to beat Ebola, and now it's COVID-19 diseases. One thing we realise is that young people are very efficient and committed, especially when you get them involved in the activities that concern them for community survival, growth, and development.” - respondent from Sinava Women's Association

Youth CSOs also pointed out what has been learnt since Ebola when faced with the new health crisis of COVID-19. One respondent explained: *“The impact of the Ebola virus helped promote acceptance in community people. We had a lot of challenges during the Ebola crisis, especially getting community buy-in and acceptance of the disease, hence a lot of our brothers and young sisters lost their lives. Those memories are still fresh in the minds of community people. This time they were more welcoming and willing to contribute to ensure the spread of COVID-19 is curtailed.”*

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This spotlight chapter is part of the [State of Youth Civil Society global, youth-led publication.](#)

Youth CSOs worked toward sensitising people to believe and accept diseases or viruses that come and take the appropriate measures to keep them from spreading. They have worked against propagating fake news when faced with new health crises. Moreover, they emphasised there should be no political or tribal sentiments attached toward any virus that may invade and affect the lives of the people, and by extension the day-to-day operations of the country.

Lessons learnt by donors from Ebola and adaptations made in response to COVID-19

Sierra Leone received support from the international community for treatment centres and the training of frontline workers in infection prevention and control during the Ebola pandemic. Funding was also used for the revitalisation of the country’s disease surveillance system, the establishment of emergency operation centers (at both at national and district levels), and the development of strong networks to support community outreach and mobilisation. When COVID-19 hit, these structures and systems were already in place. That made it easier for Sierra Leone to form an effective response team.

CSOs already knew what their roles could be and how to execute them. They had an understanding of the areas that their contribution was most needed. As a result, the COVID-19 response was an improvement compared to the Ebola outbreak; the response was more organised and effective.

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However, some lessons remain to be learned. Numbers suggest that a total of \$778 million (£570 million) in aid was pledged for Ebola response but was never actually actioned. Given the humanitarian nature of this funding, donors should be aware of the implications of funding that does not actually reach the areas in acute need. The current COVID-19 pandemic is also following this trend. Sierra Leone has been seeing and hearing pledges that are yet to be realised. For example, Sierra Leone was promised 528,000 doses of the vaccine by the end of May 2021 but has only received 96,000 doses from COVAX so far.² Unfortunately, it is often youth civil society that steps in to fill these voids that are left by unfulfilled promises.

¹ A Veronica Bucket is a mechanism for hand washing originating in Ghana which consists of a bucket of water with a tap fixed at the bottom, mounted at hand height, and a bowl at the bottom to collect waste water.

² World Health Organisation Sierra Leone. (08 March 2021). *COVID-19 vaccines shipped by COVAX arrive in Sierra Leone*. Available at: <https://www.afro.who.int/news/covid-19-vaccines-shipped-covax-arrive-sierra-leone>