

Unrealised potential?

The crucial role of faith leaders in the Ebola response

Faith leaders, as trusted and respected members of their community, have played a significant – and often unsung – role in the Ebola crisis. In the midst of confusion, fear and panic, communities have often turned to faith leaders for guidance. Faith leaders have helped prevent the Ebola outbreak spreading even further by disseminating key messages and mobilising their communities to do the same.

Many pastors, priests and imams have worked tirelessly to change unsafe burial practices and other deep-rooted cultural practices and attitudes that contributed so much to the spread of the virus.

A high proportion of the population of Sierra Leone and Liberia are believers and regular attenders at a place of worship. Regular religious gatherings, such as weekly services at churches and mosques, have provided faith leaders with a unique opportunity to speak to their congregations. The supportive teaching on love and inclusivity found in religious texts means **they have been ideally placed to speak out against the destructive stigma associated with Ebola.** Faith leaders have invited recovered Ebola patients to give testimony at religious services in order to address the stigma and discrimination that recovered people have faced.

Many faith leaders have organised food assistance to families in quarantine and have set up programmes to care for orphans and help families rebuild their lives. They have often been a first point of call for those experiencing financial hardship. They have brought love and solace to people who are frightened, angry and bereaved, and to those who are sick and dying.

The President of Sierra Leone acknowledged the role of faith leaders and encouraged different religious denominations to work together in the fight against Ebola. The Inter-religious Council of Sierra Leone founded the Religious Leaders Task Force on Ebola in order to address the crisis from a united perspective. At the international level, faith-based organisations such as Caritas Internationalis have been advising World Health Organisation experts on the revision of the Safe Burial Policy.

Ebola has caused huge disruption to people's wellbeing, both at an individual and a collective level. For many people their sense of security and wellbeing, built up slowly in the years since the terrible conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone ended, have been shaken to the core.

CAFOD, Christian Aid and Tearfund recommend the following:

1. There will be numerous reviews and evaluations of the Ebola outbreak and response. Policy makers should use these as opportunities to consider whether the role of faith leaders was fully utilised from the start of the outbreak and what lessons must be learned.
2. In order to build a robust evidence base, independent in-depth research should be commissioned to investigate the role of faith leaders in catalysing behaviour change within the Ebola outbreak and response.
3. Ebola prevention plans and programmes, such as those facilitated by the World Health Organisation, must involve faith leaders as a pivotal part of the focus.
4. Ebola recovery plans, such as those currently being produced by the UN, EU and World Bank, as well as national-level plans, must include clear strategies for working with faith leaders. Faith leaders must be fully involved and represented in these high-level decision making processes.
5. Faith leaders and faith-based organisations must be allocated dedicated funding for training and related material, and ongoing mentoring, particularly in counselling.

One particular challenge is that although faith leaders are well trained to provide spiritual care, **most have not been trained in counselling and therefore there is a strong need for skilled personnel in this area.** This skill shortage should also be considered in Ebola Recovery Plans going forward.

As the Ebola response moves into the recovery phase, it is essential that faith leaders are proactively supported with the right training and materials, ongoing mentoring and other resources to help them make the best use of their role. Given their influence in communities and the potential harm of wrong messages, well-trained faith leaders, who receive ongoing mentoring and support, can be a crucial part of the countries' recovery and healing.

Research institutions and donors should also prioritise independent, in-depth research to analyse the unique role of faith leaders in behaviour change, including in preventing the spread of Ebola, and in mitigating the devastating impacts of stigmatisation during the recovery phase.

As Ebola Recovery Plans are developed it is of the utmost importance that faith leaders are fully involved and represented at international, regional and country levels. Faith leaders should be involved in the drafting process and the plans should recognise faith leaders as a key target group to work with. This includes UN and EU plans, the World Bank Ebola Recovery Plan, which has '*Peacebuilding, Social Cohesion, Institutions and Core Government Functions*' as one of its 'four pillars', and the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health's Health Recovery Plan, which has '*Community Engagement*' as a key element. It should also apply to country-specific Ebola prevention plans such as those facilitated by the World Health Organisation.

The role of faith leaders has often been overlooked and in many cases their potential contribution to the Ebola crisis is still not being fully realised. There was a significant missed opportunity in not involving faith leaders further at the very start of the outbreak. Evaluations of the response to the current outbreak will need to consider whether the role of faith leaders has been fully utilised. They will need to consider what steps should have been taken to include them more in planning and to mobilise them from the outset.

These lessons will need to be applied to prevent future outbreaks occurring, both in the affected countries and in countries that are currently unaffected. **Future programmes centred on Ebola prevention must ensure faith leaders are involved as a pivotal part.**

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