

Living with Ebola: Initiatives from Below

LSE's Kate Meagher highlights a local initiative which is providing support to areas devastated by the Ebola virus.

The massive, if somewhat belated, international response to the Ebola crisis has filled our television screens with eerie images of people in what look like lunar landing gear fanning out across the West African landscape. The Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) Appeal, Band-Aid 30, development and technical assistance from the major powers, the efforts of the World Food Programme and volunteers from the NHS are all joining forces to address the disease. More disturbing have been the news reports of helpless people dying in the road outside treatment centres because there were not enough beds, or spending their last days alone in the bush because no vehicle would come to take them to overflowing facilities in the major urban centres.

These scenes of crisis and misery sometime obscure the determined efforts of local people in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to confront the ravages of ebola in the places where international initiatives still cannot reach. There is the [inspiring YouTube clip of Fatu Kekula](#), the Liberian student nurse who successfully treated her parents and sister at home when hospitals turned them away, inventing her own protective equipment from locally available rubber gloves, garbage bags, surgical masks and a rain coat.

Local initiatives have also been behind the establishment of small community care units in various parts of Sierra Leone, manned by trained community volunteers and supported by a few professionals. These not only fill capacity gaps in the formal treatment centres, but further limit the movement of infected people, encouraging the UK to commit to supporting more of them. Along with preventing deaths, local initiatives are particularly sensitive to those who live with ebola — dazed and heartbroken families under quarantine. Many are left for days without food, and some end up foraging in the bush, undermining the effectiveness of the quarantine.

[UK philanthropist Mark Reading](#) describes below a day's work for the Sierra Leonean initiative called the '[Food Basket Appeal](#)' — a local response that he joined Khadija Alia Bah, a former consultant to the UN and [DfID](#), Khadija Alia Bah to start up. Food Basket Appeal distributes balanced food baskets to quarantined households in Makeni and surrounding villages in the interior of Sierra Leone, helping to address the country's stubborn rise in infection rates by enabling households to observe the vital quarantine period.

1 country

13 Districts

149 Chiefdoms

Today, all about one Chiefdom. Marampa Chiefdom. A two-hour, 120 kilometres drive northeast of Freetown. In the northern Province. We are in Lunsar. A dispiriting day. An uplifting day. Not quite in equal measure. We are in one of the worst Ebola-affected areas in the country.

In numbers;

Villages visited: 8

Households assisted: 31

Food baskets distributed: 35

Deaths encountered: 55

Under quarantine: 70

Survivors met: 8

I mention numbers. They cannot do it justice. They are just numbers. These are real people. Real stories. I served in the British Army 24 years. Never have I witnessed such devastation as seen in these small villages. Some of this post might be tough going for some. It is raw in parts. The photos speak for themselves. They capture the situation completely.

55 deaths in the houses and adjoining houses visited. Such human suffering. I have said it before. I'll say it again. Ebola is a disease that hits mostly the poor. The poor, and of course the medical staff in the front lines. Today brought this home like never before.

Where it really hit home was Labour Compound No. 10. Affected us all, me included.

This lady was sat crying and confused. Her name is Safiatu Fofanah. She is broken. Safiatu has lost her husband and all 4 children. Her grief, her suffering was tangible. Difficult to photograph. She is the only survivor from her family of 6 souls. Safiatu needs counseling. Such 'luxuries' do not exist in the hinterland of Sierra Leone. This village is a few desolate houses sprinkled either side of a sandy coloured dirt road. Hardest hit area we visited all day. In total the 7 households had lost 12 people. There were another 7 in quarantine.



Photo: Mark Reading

We delivered a basket to each household. Seven baskets.

I must mention the nurse in the photo above. Madam Isha Daramy Kabia. Nearly 40 years in the UK National Health Service as a midwife. Completed her lengthy service at Chelsea & Westminster Hospital in 2004. Lives both in London and Freetown, but moves back and forth. Isha is making a huge difference on the ground. A true hero.

Since the delivery last Friday, we have since met again where I was fortunate to dine with her for a couple of hours. She's up at 6am every day, takes a light breakfast, and often works from sunrise to beyond sunset. A light dinner in the evening is separated by six coconuts a day. She decants the coconut water and fills 2 water bottles. Isha has plenty of energy and keeps up with her younger assistants easily.

We've raised nearly \$9,000 so far. We've spent just over \$5,000. This includes another 27 baskets delivered to Makeni by KAB 2 days ago. I'm back to Conakry, Guinea for a few days.

Some of the remaining fund is still in the form of pledges. To those I say please send when you can. Details in the previous posts, or email me direct (markc.reading@gmail.com). Anyone else who would like to donate, no matter how small; please, you are most welcome. I'd like to keep going until Christmas at least.

[Read the full post](#)

Follow Mark Reading @roadrunnertns.

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