



## Sierra Leone: Increasing community engagement for Ebola on-air

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**WHO's social mobilization team is using radio to reach communities with information about how to prevent the spread of Ebola in Sierra Leone.**



Zainab Akiwumi in the radio studio of Radio Maria talking about the need to suspend cultural and traditional practices in times of Ebola, Sierra Leone.

WHO/S. Saporito

### **Reaching communities not just physically, but psychologically and emotionally as well**

“My work as a social mobilizer is to pass on key messages to convince people to stop the cultural and traditional practices that are fuelling the spread of Ebola,” says Zainab Akiwumi, who leads the WHO social mobilization team in Sierra Leone.

One way to convey Ebola messages is using local radio stations to reach out to the community. “On radio I tell the listeners, you who are listening to me now, take this message and go outside to tell those who did not hear me what I said, as a way to spread it on,” she continues.

Zainab Akiwumi's voice is being broadcast via local radio station Radio Maria into homes and workplaces all over Sierra Leone. The use of radio is one tool to convey the message, but not the only one as not everybody within the community has access to radio.

To reach the people in the communities, especially in rural areas, social mobilization teams have to engage with them and use existing community structures not just to reach them physically, but psychologically and emotionally as well. Existing structures include traditional leaders and other community members who are trusted, respected and who can influence and encourage behaviour change.

## Community engagement as part of surge operation

The western part of Sierra Leone became a hotspot a few months into the Ebola

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outbreak, with intense transmission of the disease. In mid-December, the Government of Sierra Leone launched its first phase of the Western Area Surge operation.

Intensified social mobilization and community engagement activities combined with strengthened surveillance and contact tracing activities aims to remove all sick people from the community early and provide them with treatment as quickly as possible.

Since the beginning of surge efforts, the number of Ebola cases has dropped remarkably. The second phase of the surge operation, launched on 19 January, builds on the successes of the first phase, which recorded 944 sick people, including 263 people who were found to be Ebola positive. The surge campaign success means that the focus can now turn to tracking and finding every case.

At the beginning of the outbreak, social mobilization teams had their hands full to inform and educate communities on what Ebola is, how it can be prevented and what to do when someone presents Ebola symptoms. “Now we are moving beyond awareness and knowledge, building into deep community engagement and ownership, where the community is key. It is vital that everyone in the community knows their role in achieving this goal,” concludes Zainab.

[Read more about Western Area Surge in Sierra Leone](#)

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