



Witnessing rays of hope in West Africa's Ebola fight

Share this story:

Insider (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/category/insider/>)

By **Geeta Rao Gupta**

(<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/author/geetaraogupta/>)

9 February 2015



© UNICEF/NYHQ2015-0105/Ryeng

In the West Point neighbourhood of Monrovia, Liberia I heard the stories of social mobilizers from the group A-LIFE (Adolescents Leading an Intensive Fight against Ebola).

In late January, Deputy Executive Director for UNICEF, Geeta Rao Gupta, travelled to Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea to support communities, partners and UNICEF staff as they continue to battle against Ebola. Here, she reflects on what she saw, who she met and the lessons she learned.

As a child, my favourite toy was a kaleidoscope. It mesmerised me. With every flick of the wrist, the glass shards reconfigured and, with light, magical patterns emerged.

I was reminded of this simple wonder as I travelled through Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea recently. Each conversation I had with children, each visit to a health centre, each story I heard and each health-worker I met was like another flick of the wrist, revealing new patterns. The light that illuminated these patterns was the ever-present resilience and resourcefulness of everyone I met.

A flick of the wrist and I was in West Point, the largest slum in Liberia and home to the world's worst outbreak of Ebola. Already marginalised and forgotten, last year, its 70,000 residents were quarantined from the rest of Monrovia prompting riots. Yet, here I met a vivacious group of adolescents who, of their

own volition, went door-to-door to educate their community about how to stop Ebola. Why? "We want the world to know that West Point is a good community, a community that doesn't spread Ebola."

A flick of the wrist, Liberia again, and I was in a tiny church with only five pews. The Pastor had invited two Imams and the UNICEF team. He preached about the dangers of Ebola, then invited the Imams to speak. From the same pulpit, they declared that we must fight Ebola together. When the Pastor asked me to speak, I told them how moved I was to see two religions coming together to keep their communities safe.

A flick of the wrist and I was in an Observational Interim Care Centre (OICC) in Sierra Leone. Here, children are cared for while their parents are treated for Ebola. Or, if their parents are dead, they're given counselling and care, while they wait for relatives to claim them. I watched children sing a song about ending Ebola. It's the only time in my life where I've seen children singing so sadly. There wasn't a single smile. One splinter of light, though, was a 17-year-old survivor who, despite his own tragedy, came to support the children and play with them.

A flick of the wrist and 21-year-old Guinean, Mamadou Diallo told me his story. He contracted Ebola while burying his uncle – a victim of the virus – and fell ill and was hospitalized while travelling in Senegal*. Declared Ebola-free, Mamadou returned to Guinea only to learn that his mother and sister had died of Ebola. Instead of supporting him, Mamadou's community ostracized him – a move that prompted him to drop out of university, start his own NGO to support survivors, and encourage his community to change their behaviour.



While in Guinea, UNICEF staff met with Mamadou Diallo, a 21-year-old Guinean, and his supporters. © UNICEF/NYHQ2015-0194/de Mun (<https://d2nprw56v9cc4.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/09161600/uni178715.jpg>)

These stories are more than disconnected snapshots of people struggling in isolation against poverty, tragedy, limited infrastructure and resources. More than single shards of coloured glass. Together they weave a pattern of hope that shows how people within communities can turn the Ebola crisis around.

The Ebola crisis is not over yet. And we must not lose the hard-won momentum achieved by so many. Their strength is our strength. It's up to all of us to lend our hands to turn the kaleidoscope again until the pattern reflects the hopes every parent and every child has for stronger, healthier and more resilient communities.

*An earlier version of this post stated that **Mamadou Diallo** (<http://isurvivedebola.org/story/mamadou-diallo>) contracted Ebola while in Senegal, which was not the case. Mr. Diallo was travelling in Senegal when he showed symptoms and sought treatment.

Tags:

[Ebola](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/ebola/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/ebola/>), [Guinea](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/guinea/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/guinea/>), [health](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/health/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/health/>), [Liberia](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/liberia/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/liberia/>), [Sierra Leone](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/sierra-leone/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/sierra-leone/>), [social mobilization](https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/social-mobilization/) (<https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/tag/social-mobilization/>).