Liberian Civil Society Advances the Battle to End Ebola

By Kelly Ann Krawczyk

The Ebola outbreak has now penetrated beyond the borders of West Africa, becoming a full-fledged global health crisis. But while Ebola is most certainly a public health crisis of epic proportions, it also underscores a serious crisis of governance. Liberia, the country in West Africa hit hardest by the outbreak, has recorded over 6,500 cases of Ebola, with 2,400 deaths from the disease. Two issues have contributed to the rampant spread of Ebola in Liberia. First, the Liberian government grapples with a severe lack of institutional capacity, making it difficult to deliver basic health services. Second, because of a legacy of mismanagement and corruption, Liberian citizens do not trust the government to respond to Ebola in an effective and transparent way. Yet there are glimmers of progress in the fight to end this outbreak, as Liberian civil society organizations step up to strengthen the Ebola response.

Tenuous Progress in a Fragile State

While Liberia has made tangible development progress since the end of the civil war in 2003, serious work remains. In many parts of the country, access to basic service delivery remains nonexistent, and the tenuous progress made in the health sector is being seriously threatened by the Ebola crisis. And Liberians’ deep lack of trust in government means they are often failing to cooperate with government mandates intended to help stop the spread of disease.

The Liberian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW) has had moderate success in ramping up delivery of basic health care. They have increased the number of medical facilities and trained staff, and delivered targeted programs in the areas of maternal health care, childhood immunizations, and diagnoses and treatment of life-threatening diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. The 2012 Liberia
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Ministry of Health and Social Welfare Annual Report reveals tangible results: the number of trained medical staff increased to over 9,500 in 2012, versus 8,000 in 2011. The MOHSW also reports a nearly 50 percent increase in the number of patients tested and treated for HIV/AIDS between 2011 and 2012.

But the MOHSW also acknowledges the health care system in Liberia remains weak, and suffers from a low level of overall utilization of health services. This can be attributed in part to the long distances citizens must travel on a poor road network to receive medical treatment – an estimated 28 percent of the population lives more than a one hour walk from the nearest health facility. Upon arrival, citizens are faced with long waiting times and shortages of drugs. And the tenuous progress in basic health care delivery has been disrupted by the current Ebola outbreak. The epidemic has revealed a severe shortage of health infrastructure including medical clinics and ambulances; a lack of protective gear, sanitation supplies, and medical equipment; and the absence of trained health workers. In short, the Ebola crisis has strained the Liberian health system to the breaking point.

Citizens’ lack of trust in government has also exacerbated the Ebola crisis. Because of a long legacy of governmental failure and mismanagement, Liberians’ trust in governmental institutions is low, and they perceive corruption as a widespread phenomenon. This has played out in a dangerous manner during the Ebola outbreak, as Liberians ignore governmental directives relative to disease reporting, quarantine of sick patients, and burial of the dead.

A key question in the fight to end Ebola therefore remains unanswered: If the government of Liberia does not have the institutional capacity to effectively respond to Ebola, and the citizens of Liberia do not trust the government to battle the crisis in a transparent and accountable way, then who will step in? This article suggests the answer lies, in part, with Liberian civil society.

The Role of Civil Society in Liberia

During Liberia’s 14-year period of civil war, associational groups were mostly reduced to familial and kin-based ties that helped people survive in an environment of total state collapse. Post-war, Liberian civil society is experiencing regrowth, with over 800 civil society organizations (CSOs) formally registered as of 2010. While the sector is still
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relatively small by traditional standards, and it faces acute shortages of human, technical, and financial resources, Liberian civil society continues to flourish despite the severe challenges it faces.

Academic literature debates the role of civil society as a “gap filler,” stepping in to do what government cannot, versus working in partnership with government. In the wake of the Ebola crisis, there is evidence that some Liberian civil society organizations are in fact stepping in to fill the gaps left by the government, and even more promising, instances in which civil society is collaborating with the Liberian government in order to strengthen the Ebola response. This article highlights three organizations with common characteristics that enable them to successfully support the Liberian government’s response to the Ebola crisis. They have well-established connections with local communities, resulting in relationships of trust and deep knowledge of community needs, and they focus on empowering Liberians to be part of community-driven solutions. All three organizations exemplify innovation, resourcefulness, and flexibility during a time of crisis in Liberia.

More Than Me Academy, West Point, Monrovia, Liberia

More Than Me (MTM) Academy works to get girls off the street and into school in West Point, one of the poorest slums in Monrovia. Utilizing a holistic approach that provides education, health and social services, MTM transforms the trajectory of the girls’ lives, creating a pathway out of exploitation and poverty.

Since Ebola was confirmed in West Point in August 2014, MTM’s mission has evolved. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf shut down all schools in Liberia in an effort to contain the spread of disease, so MTM has turned to supporting the Liberian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MOHSW) in its Ebola response. After meeting with residents and leaders in West Point during the quarantine and assessing needs that were not being met by existing services, More Than Me spearheaded the formation of the Community Based Ebola-Free Coalition to fill these gaps. The Coalition is a group of government, community, and NGO partners working together in West Point to stop the spread of the Ebola virus. Members include medical facilities such as the Star of the Sea Community Clinic and the MOHSW Ebola Testing Center, international development organizations such as Medicins Sans Frontieres, Samaritan’s Purse and UNICEF, and local NGOs such as Street Child and the Liberian Red Cross.
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More Than Me Academy serves as the headquarters for the coalition, and organizes over 240 outreach volunteers who work alongside the Ministry of Health in the community of West Point. The coalition works relentlessly to educate the community about Ebola through door-to-door outreach and community training events. In addition, they provide ambulance transportation to Ebola Treatment Units (ETUs). The coalition is also involved in the difficult work of cremating the dead and helping to reintegrate survivors.

Since the coalition was formed, results indicate their model for fighting Ebola is working. During the week of September 19, 2014, there were 30 suspected Ebola cases out of 49 ill West Point residents, and 12 residents resisted treatment. Four weeks later, suspected cases fell to 14, and no patients declined treatment. In fact, because of the coalition’s success, they have been asked by the MOHSW to expand their work to five other nearby Ebola hot zones.

Civil Society-Government Collaboration

The efforts of MTM, and the Community-Based Ebola Free Coalition, are hopeful examples of civil society-government collaboration. As Emily Bell, Marketing and Communications Manager for MTM, explains,

“The government of Liberia lacks the human capacity to effectively run an Ebola response team. Because MTM is small and grassroots, we can get funds and materials quickly to those who need it most. In addition, we understand the pulse of the local population, have the flexibility to respond rapidly to urgent needs, and can select efforts that have the highest return. This allows us to support the Liberian government in efforts to stop the spread of Ebola.”

More Than Me is able to take advantage of organizational flexibility in a way the Liberian government cannot. The Ebola crisis has necessitated civil society-government partnerships, and the crisis has also strengthened collaboration between CSOs. Bell says,
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“I think there has been a lot of collaboration...because many CSOs are all working toward the same thing: getting Ebola out of Liberia. Because we have the same objective, we can more easily collaborate and work together.”

More Than Me is capitalizing on its’ knowledge of the local community, and the network of relationships it has built, in order to bring together a group of key players working to support the Liberian government’s Ebola response.

Citizens Organized for the Promotion of Transparency and Accountability, Monrovia, Liberia

Citizens Organized for the Promotion of Transparency and Accountability (COPTA) is a new civil society organization whose members include young, educated professionals from both the public and private sectors. The organization is currently focused on raising community awareness about Ebola prevention, and COPTA has interacted with more than 3,000 people in Montserrado and Bomi Counties. COPTA volunteers go door to door to speak with community members, and also work with local leaders to plan and implement larger community meetings. They stress to citizens the importance of adhering to Liberia’s hand washing campaign, and emphasize community responsibility for quarantining the ill. COPTA also supplies essential items to Ebola Treatment Centers (ETUs), such as juice and coconut water for oral rehydration and extra clothing. COPTA helps mitigate the residual fear endemic to this disease through survivor reintegration support. They are developing a “survivor kit” for those who have beaten the disease, but have lost everything when their homes and belongings were sprayed with disinfectant or even incinerated in order to keep the disease from spreading.

COPTA’s work is an example of civil society stepping in to do what government cannot. Moriah Yeakula, a municipal government employee at Monrovia City Corporation, and also a member of COPTA, explains,

“Government is clearly overwhelmed. We cannot sit and wait for the international community. We don’t know when they will arrive, and at the end of the day, this is
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our problem. There is a proliferation of CSOs that are helping in any way they can.”

And Yeakula argues that in some ways, civil society is better-positioned than government to step in:

“Civil society can step in and do what government cannot because…people trust civil society more. People…trust (those) they know and live with, and (those) they believe understand them. Grassroots organizations have better insight into the wants and needs of communities.”

Civil society organizations like COPTA are able to gain the trust of the community and earn legitimacy and buy-in through use of existing community institutions. Yeakula emphasizes, “We don’t just say, ‘We are here to do community awareness.’ We go through local leadership structures. We ask if they are interested and if so, let us know when and where and we will show up.”

Perhaps most importantly, COPTA has no plans to quiet its voice or abandon its relationship with government after the outbreak is contained. In fact, COPTA hopes to stake a claim in the governance process, participating in decision-making and acting as a mechanism for eliciting accountability from the Liberian government. “For COPTA, we cannot just establish ourselves to fight against Ebola,” explains Moriah. “We still need to be a part of the government process after the Ebola outbreak, to keep government on its toes…we were not just established because Ebola happened; Ebola simply precipitated the need for our existence.”

Accountability Lab, Monrovia, Liberia

The Accountability Lab empowers youth in creative ways to build their own sense of personal responsibility, and provides them with the tools to build a more accountable and transparent society. As Accountability Lab founder Blair Glencorse explains, “We meet (people) in way they can understand, and that reflects where they are rather than where we want them to be. We use methods that build community relationships
and trust.” In Liberia, one of Accountability Lab’s two pilot countries, this has resulted in several innovative initiatives.

Some of Accountability Lab’s projects use cultural outlets such as music, film, and art. Accountability Lab works with Liberian hipco rappers to write and perform songs with messages about accountability, and also promotes film as a tool for social change. The Accountability Art Project teaches young Liberians artistic skills, and produces artwork focused around the theme of accountability. Students created murals throughout Monrovia with civic education messages.

Another of Accountability Lab’s core initiatives is Daily Talk, which uses chalk billboards at urban intersections to provide information to citizens related to government performance and integrity. In an environment where newspapers are often too expensive, and Internet access is limited, Daily Talk presents information in simple Liberian English, accompanied by pictures and photos, generating discussion and debate among thousands of passersby every day. Young Liberian journalists are trained to manage and update the boards.

Accountability Lab’s Community Justice Team trained eight volunteer mediators in the West Point community, and ten in Logan Town, to resolve civil conflicts peacefully and equitably. Accountability Lab supports the formal justice system by coordinating with the police and courts to feed cases that can be dealt with at the community level back down, leading to more sustainable outcomes and unclogging the formal system.

Crisis of Governance

Because Ebola is a crisis of governance as much as a crisis of health, Accountability Lab has shifted some of its resources to Ebola-related activities. For example, the Daily Talk is posting information on Ebola: where ETUs are located, how citizens can find them, and who to call to get help. Students in the film school are making short films that teach people how to stay disease-free, and how to ask the right questions of government
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about the Ebola response. Accountability Art Project murals now feature Ebola-related information and awareness messages. And with the support of the Accountability Lab, 50 leading Liberian musicians have just produced and released a song about Ebola awareness. Community Justice Team mediators have been ideally placed to deal with the plethora of disputes that have arisen as a result of the Ebola crisis. They have successfully mediated over 150 cases, saving Liberians well over $1 million Liberian dollars.

Echoing the observations of More Than Me and COPTA, Accountability Lab founder Blair Glencorse also feels the Liberian government has struggled to respond effectively to the Ebola outbreak:

“Any government would struggle to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. And in Liberia, although the government recognizes the seriousness of the situation, and is attempting to stabilize it with the efforts of a lot of very good people working within the government, there are still serious gaps and holes in governmental capacity and accountability.”

Despite these gaps, Blair does not necessarily see Accountability Lab as stepping in to do what government cannot. He maintains the role of Accountability Lab, and of civil society more broadly, is to hold government accountable for its actions. He envisions Accountability Lab working with the Liberian government to build its systems for integrity and accountability, in order to achieve a more equitable society. Blair also notes that while the Ebola crisis has exacerbated the “legacy of distrust” between civil society and government, it also offers an important opportunity to improve and strengthen the relationship between civil society and government “in a way that is more productive.” This can be accomplished using a cadre of youth leaders who understand the communities in which they work, and have the networks to build trust. And to some extent, Glencorse sees this happening:

“The youth, the future of Liberia, they have stepped up. They are the ones getting out there doing awareness-building, working in the ETUs. This is the crisis of their generation, and they are coming together in a truly impressive way in a very difficult context.”

Conclusion

While the three civil society organizations profiled here work in radically different sectors, there are commonalities in the conclusions they reach about the role of civil society during the Ebola crisis, as well as the broader role of civil society in Liberia. All three organizations see the possibility of a more collaborative relationship between civil society and the government of Liberia. Even when civil society acts as a mechanism to
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hold government to account, the relationship should be one of cooperation and authentic participation in the governance process. As Blair Glencorse of Accountability Lab emphasizes, “Understanding the voices of civil society and integrating them into the decision-making process is a critical part of building civil society in Liberia. The Liberian government should understand part of the role of civil society is to help hold government accountable.”

These three CSOs are successful because they are implementing small-scale, innovative, community-based interventions, and are remaining flexible in a rapidly changing environment. While the government of Liberia is highly centralized, these CSOs are already established at the community level. This makes them well-positioned to effectively implement Ebola prevention and relief programs, working in conjunction with the Liberian government and on behalf of its citizens. More broadly, this also supports the idea that Liberian civil society is well-positioned to act as a “civic intermediary” between citizens and government.

These three CSOs have specific knowledge of local communities, and have built relationships of trust that allow them to accomplish in some cases what government has been unable to do. They are listening to the needs and desires of these local communities, and are empowering citizens to be part of the solution. They are using their knowledge and network of relationships to develop innovative solutions that work within the existing structure and culture of Liberian society. This bodes well for a successful outcome to the Ebola crisis, as well as for the future role of civil society in democratic governance in Liberia.

References

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Kelly Ann Krawczyk is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Auburn University. Her work centers around the relationship between civil society and democratic governance in West Africa. She can be reached via email at kak0037@auburn.edu.