

# Sierra Leone

## *Breaking age barriers: generations working together on Ebola and COVID-19*

One of a series of ten case studies summarised in HelpAge's guide,  
*Bringing generations together for change* →

Restless Development is a non-profit global agency that supports the collective power of young leaders to create a better world. In Sierra Leone, it adopted an intergenerational approach to respond to the effects of Ebola and COVID-19.

Working with HelpAge and older people's associations established by the project, it mobilised communities to prevent and protect themselves from disease outbreaks, strengthen their business capacities and revamp their livelihoods.



In support of:



## What problem or issue did the programme address?

The Ebola virus outbreak in 2014 severely devastated Sierra Leone's healthcare system. Its effects were exacerbated by the sharp decline in public trust in the healthcare sector. Messaging from the Ministry of Health about how to avoid getting Ebola was typically top-down – via posters, radio broadcasts and megaphones. There was a clear need for two-way communication with the public through trusted sources. Restrictions on movements and quarantines affected people's everyday activities. Many people (especially older people) could not get to local markets and many were forced to stop working, having to sell assets or use savings to survive. All of this made it very difficult to restart livelihood activities when the crisis was over. Unable to earn an income, people of different generations were finding it difficult to access food and nutrition and health services, undermining their wellbeing. The hardships caused by Ebola were particularly significant for older women and men, because the challenges associated with ageing rendered them uniquely vulnerable – and invisible – both during and after the emergency.

## What did the programme aim to do?

Restless Development's Ebola outbreak response programme had two phases. The first phase (2014 to 2015) focused on responding to the outbreak in Sierra Leone through age-inclusive community-led action. The second phase (2016 to 2017) aimed to revive and strengthen people's livelihoods during the recovery period. During the second phase, Restless Development worked with HelpAge International to bring younger and older people together to share business skills, increase incomes, and improve wellbeing through emotional and practical support.

In 2020, using its experience of community engagement gained during the Ebola outbreak, Restless Development planned a national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This ongoing programme seeks to empower communities in 16 districts of Sierra Leone for COVID-19 prevention and preparedness. Though the programme was designed to target communities as a whole, it has prioritised the needs of vulnerable groups – including older people – throughout the response.

## How did the programme work?

When Restless Development and HelpAge worked together on the Ebola response, 30 young people volunteered as community mobilisers. They were trained in business and teaching skills – and used this knowledge to support older people (selected by the programme team working with community leaders) to start their own businesses. The community mobilisers helped set up 85 older people's associations across 60 communities in the Moyamba and Bonthe districts of south-west Sierra Leone. Each cluster of associations involved a broad range of older people, including Ebola survivors, caregivers, people living with disability, widows and widowers. These associations elected their executive members (a chairperson, secretary, savings treasurer and three other individuals who were given a key to the savings security box). They decided on their group rules, including the terms of loans and the interest rates to be levied.

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, these approaches to community mobilisation were adapted and used not just by Restless Development but also the National COVID-19 Emergency Response Centre and other NGOs working in Sierra Leone. Together, they produced a Community-Led Action Against COVID-19 manual (adapted from the 2014 Ebola action manual) and mobilised young people to engage communities, including older and vulnerable people, to share information on how to avoid and/or contain COVID-19.



Simon Rawles/Age International

Young people were central to Restless Development's response both to Ebola and COVID-19. As community mobilisers (unpaid volunteers, although they did receive a small monthly allowance), they went through a rigorous selection process, with successful applicants brought together for foundation training. This covered key topics related to the community-led action approach, as well as livelihood-related themes (covering inclusion, age sensitivity, interpersonal and facilitation skills), and how to prevent the spread of Ebola. After the training, community mobilisers were paired (either men or women working together), each then working with a cluster of communities near to where they live, for the duration of the programme.

These community mobilisers conducted various outreach events to connect with their local community. This included action planning and follow-up sessions to encourage community members (including older women and men) to change their behaviour to reduce Ebola-related morbidity, mortality and stigma. They also organised training sessions on business practices, savings and loans, to support older people to develop or adapt their own livelihood initiatives and entrepreneurial skills. Part of their role was to share information about income-earning activities and trusted financial service providers to promote a culture of saving among older people.

The organisation used the same approach for its COVID-19 response as it had used for Ebola, with young community mobilisers teaming up with older women and men to learn how to protect themselves against COVID-19 and continue earning a living. This collaboration has increased their reach to older people, and older and younger people alike have been appointed as community champions to monitor COVID-19 action plans. The COVID-19 recovery programme also aims to improve financial inclusion for 5,500 women living in 37 informal settlements in the capital, Freetown. Older and younger women (aged 18–60 years) have formed savings and loan groups each comprising 30 people, with each group electing an executive committee constituting a chair, secretary and treasurer.



Simon Rawles/Age International

## What changes did the programme achieve?

In the first phase (the Ebola response), youth-led social mobilisation activities were key to ending the epidemic as they encouraged changes to health-seeking behaviours, as people moved away from traditional medicine towards regulated public health approaches for Ebola treatment. The activities also encouraged changes to community behaviour and cultural norms and practices about safe and dignified burials, avoiding body contact, screening, registering and isolating strangers, regular handwashing, and reporting to the nearest health facility if feeling sick.

In the second phase (also part of the Ebola response and undertaken with HelpAge), young volunteers supported older people's associations to create savings deposits, which led to an impressive 1,700 village savings loans being issued to members. Older people set up small businesses selling goods such as rice, soap and palm oil, and several communities began collective groundnut or rice farms. Once the loan recipients had made enough money, they repaid their loans to the community group with a small amount of interest, which was used to issue more loans to members.

The programme also created an opportunity for joint leadership by older and younger people, using their skills in complementary ways to mobilise communities for the COVID-19 response. This has helped to bridge the divide between the two generations. The younger volunteers supported older people's business development plans for nine months, then two mentors were selected in each community to provide ongoing advice to the older people's associations once the programme ended. These businesses gave older people their own source of income, to spend on what they need most as well as to support the rest of their household.

The direct financial benefits were not the only positive to come out of the programme. Setting up older people's associations improved older women's and men's

emotional and physical wellbeing, as other community members were encouraged to resolve their differences and support one another in times of need. Older participants also reported that they felt they were treated better within their community due to being more financially independent. When the programme team was selecting people to become members of an older people's association, they targeted some of the most vulnerable individuals, such as widowed women. The associations gave these women access to a social support network, and the opportunity to earn an income, thereby boosting their social status.

The programme also brought about positive changes in younger people's attitudes and behaviours – for example, improving their knowledge about savings, how to plan for older age, and how older people are treated. In one-third of the communities, young people formed their own savings groups, emulating the older people's association model and citing the need to plan for later life as their motivation. For some young people, their work in mobilising communities and the skills they gained inspired them to go on to a role in public life, where they were still trying to support and improve their local community. As one councillor in Bonthe district council (ward 329) said:

*“My role as a community mobiliser working with the older people's associations helped me build the necessary leadership skills and relationship with the older people... I developed excellent people skills, communication, decision-making and analytical skills. In 2018, I was elected as the councillor for Ward 329 and have continued my support to the associations in my constituency.”*

Many of the older participants really appreciated having young people to help them. As one participant said in a focus group discussion held in Foinda village in February 2022, five years after the Ebola programme was completed:

*“For us at Foinda, our relationship with young people is very cordial! Young people have been supporting older people to contribute to their savings. We often have young people visiting our meetings and would sometimes help to clarify issues, especially where we sometimes tend to go wrong in our dealings.”*

Simon Rawles/Age International



Another success was the change in attitudes cultivated by the programme. From older people’s doubts about whether they could learn anything from younger people, to younger people’s doubts about whether older people could learn how to run a business and save part of their earnings, it was clear that the programme was helping to challenge certain attitudes and prejudices. It gave younger people and older people alike the chance to dispel their misperceptions of each other.

*“For us at Kenga 2, we regularly meet on Fridays and pay in our contributions. We operate a revolving loan scheme. Loans are granted to a set of interested members during the third week, with interest. After repayment, other sets of interested members are then granted the loan.”*

Participant at a focus group discussion held in Kenga 2 village, February 2022, 5 years after the programme ended

As a result of the programme’s intergenerational approach, older people took up prominent roles in monitoring community adherence to by-laws that had been formulated by the community themselves.

This included safe washing and burial of dead bodies, not hiding sick people in households (taking them to hospital instead), and maintaining social distancing, which helped avoid unsafe cultural practices. These activities contributed to safer practices within the community in response to Ebola and COVID-19.

Another success of this programme is evidenced by the way public trust in service providers’ response has been rebuilt through confidence-building measures. For example, before clinical outreach visits, mobilisers would sketch a map of the community that shows who lives where and what their special needs might be. During follow-up visits, they contact the household to ask if any older person or person with disabilities needs emergency or routine medical attention. Where necessary, this information is then passed on to local health service providers so that people can get the care they need.

### What could be done differently?

During the 2014 Ebola response, Restless Development’s social mobilisation approach relied on young people to support older people in their communities. However, some older people felt that they too could have contributed a great deal if they had been paired with a young person to raise awareness among their contemporaries. This intergenerational approach has since been applied to the COVID-19 response and has helped reach older people with prevention and preparedness messages.

The evaluation of the livelihoods recovery work in phase two, led by Restless Development and HelpAge, suggested that although older people felt more respected and included, not all older people may have experienced these benefits equally. Specifically, it was not clear whether older women, who are often the most vulnerable, benefited in the same way that men did. However, several communities attributed a reduction in witchcraft accusations – which overwhelmingly affect older women – to the programme.

The programme helped to reduce the vulnerability and isolation that older women in particular experience by providing a social support network, a means of engaging with younger people, and practical support through income-generating opportunities. However, a thorough gender analysis conducted at the design phase would have ensured that the project did not increase older women's work burden or reinforce unequal gender norms (such as men assuming control of household finances). There were some reports that male participants had taken out a loan and given the money to their wife to set up business, potentially adding to the woman's existing work burden. While this may have provided some practical assistance (cash income), it did not necessarily challenge men's control of household finances. There is a need for more detailed research to understand the gendered impacts of livelihood activities organised by older people's associations, and how programming can address issues of gender equality and inclusion right from the outset, from programme design through to implementation and evaluation.



Simon Rawles/Age International

## What can we learn from this programme?

- **Intergenerational approaches offer many advantages when dealing with health epidemics or pandemics.**
- **Community-led approaches work best when they engage people of all ages and communities.**
- **Meaningful youth engagement approaches very much complement intergenerational approaches, and by strengthening youth leadership in a community we can pave the way for effective intergenerational work.**
- **To deliver an age-sensitive programme effectively, young people need foundation training that emphasises inclusion and age-appropriate communication. In-depth training is essential to ensure that young volunteers are fully equipped with the skills they need to support older women and men.**
- **When setting up older people's associations, local leadership and ownership – and greater involvement of influential traditional authorities and individuals – significantly increases older people's inclusion and their say in community decision-making spaces.**
- **Engaging the right partners is essential. The Sierra Leone programme worked with the mayors of Bonthe and Moyamba districts, with financial services providers, and with focal persons at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, all of whom shared relevant information and provided ongoing support.**

This case study was developed by Restless Development in Sierra Leone. It is one in a series of ten case studies, produced in connection with HelpAge's guide, *Bringing generations together for change* →, published in collaboration with Restless Development and in support of the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism

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