

Crisis overview

This week the total number of Ebola cases has passed 20,000. Although overall the epidemic seems to have stabilised, the large number of new cases in Sierra Leone is a major concern. Transmission remains high, especially in Freetown and the Western Area, where a government led surge in searching for Ebola cases has been in place over the Christmas and New Year period along with a lock down on public gatherings and travel. Oxfam has supported the surge through our community health committees and construction of two new Ebola community care centres which are soon to be opened.

Key figures:

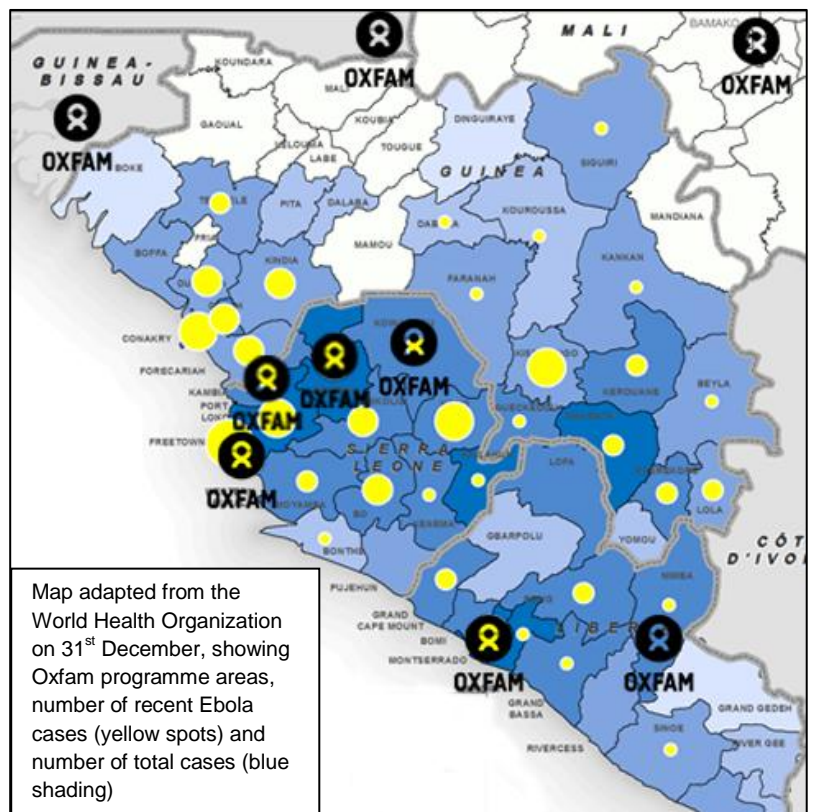
- Oxfam has directly **reached over 1.1 million people**, through making house to house visits to raise awareness about Ebola and other activities.
- We've distributed **14,525 hygiene kits to individual households**
- **We've supported 35 health facilities**, providing water and sanitation facilities in 9 health facilities in Sierra Leone and 4 in Liberia, as well as providing clinical hygiene equipment for 18 health units.

Sierra Leone

- There have been 9,633 Ebola cases reported and 2,877 deaths. The epidemic is most concentrated in three districts where Oxfam is working, Bombali, Port Loko and the Western Area, which includes the capital Freetown.
- We've opened Masiaka community care centre in Port Loko the first open of four centres Oxfam is constructing. The centre is being managed by the International Rescue Committee.

Liberia

- There have been 8,018 Ebola cases reported and 3,423 deaths. Case numbers have been decreasing but a surge in new cases has been reported from Grand Cape Mount in Western Liberia. The other remaining hotspot areas are in and around the capital Monrovia.
- Oxfam's active case finding is identifying up to a third of all new Ebola cases in the country and up to half of all Ebola cases identified around Monrovia. 30 suspected Ebola patients were referred by Oxfam in three weeks of December.
- The engineering team is focussing on drilling boreholes in Monrovia to provide clean water for communities and health facilities. This will help in the safe treatment of Ebola patients and provide for the long term.
- Schools are scheduled to re-open in March. Oxfam is working to improve water and sanitation facilities in selected schools to make for a safer environment, before they reopen.



Guinea

- 2, 730 cases of Ebola and 1,739 deaths. Case incidence is fluctuating, transmission persists in the capital Conakry.

Mali, Senegal, Gambia and Guinea Bissau

There have been no new cases of Ebola in Mali since 6th December. Oxfam is working with young people to raise awareness about Ebola in communities and schools. We have distributed hygiene kits to 109 schools. In the at risk countries of Senegal, Gambia and Guinea Bissau Oxfam and partners are disseminating messages about Ebola via radio stations, through posters, text messages, hygiene kit distribution and door-to-door outreach.

Challenges

Stronger leadership and coordination of the international response is needed to ensure there is no duplication of efforts and that actors are working together effectively. Quarantined communities we work with in Liberia and Sierra Leone have reported that they are not receiving food or not enough food. Access to non-Ebola healthcare services, water and hygiene are further major concerns. Oxfam is advocating on these issues; we have also distributed hygiene kits to quarantined communities and we are improving water supplies and sanitation in affected communities. The lack of bed capacity for Ebola patients in some locations, and the spread of the disease into hard-to-reach areas, raise further challenges. We are establishing rapid response teams to help control any new outbreaks anywhere in Liberia or Sierra Leone.

Community led mobilisation

Barriers to overcoming the epidemic include stigma around Ebola, misconceptions, denial and traditional burial practices. We're working with influential community representatives, youth, religious leaders, midwives, chiefs and others to help improve understanding. In Sierra Leone our community health committees are selected by their community to lead the efforts to combat Ebola, they develop action plans for the specific barriers to stopping the spread of Ebola in their neighbourhood. Around Freetown 120 committees are reaching out to 400 households each. The committees will also roll out an emergency interim care initiative to provide rapid rehydration for probable Ebola patients.

Oxfam Sierra Leone staff

The New Year provides an opportunity to reflect back and look forward. Here some of the Oxfam staff who are working hard to help bring the epidemic to an end share how their lives and the lives of people in Sierra Leone have changed because of Ebola, particularly in light of the restrictions in place over the Christmas and New Year period.

"I'm worried for my kids, they want to meet with friends, it's not easy to keep them safe... Things are more expensive since Ebola came, and you can't get everything in the market, I just go and get what I can"

Kadija Kargbo, Office Cleaner at Oxfam's Freetown office

"Sierra Leone is a country of affectionate friendly people and that affection is normally shared with physical gestures, all these things have been cut off. I've even promised not to see my barber until Ebola is over."

Alpha Kamara, Media and Communications Officer

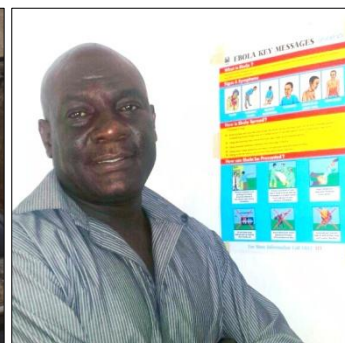
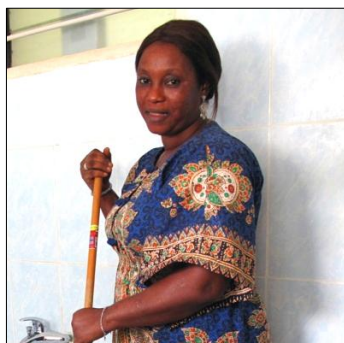
"This is the first Christmas has been this kind of way. People shouldn't mix we want to control this disease."

Ekou Frazer, Senior Driver

"It's sad to see the virus has restricted the happy go lucky attitude people have here, but we were getting worried that people are drifting back to normal life, the surge is positive and timely and reinforces the urgency of fighting Ebola."

Jim Nyandega, Freetown Programme Manager

Photos in order of quotes left to right, credit: Catherine Meredith/Oxfam



Read more about life in Sierra Leone: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/blogs/2014/12/experiencing-an-ebola-christmas>