

TECHNICAL BRIEF



Building Capacity within the Sierra Leone Association of Ebola Survivors

BACKGROUND

The Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak that hit Sierra Leone and its neighboring countries between 2014 and early 2016 was the most devastating outbreak of EVD in history, with almost 9,000 people infected and almost 3,500 survivors in Sierra Leone alone. The scale and magnitude of the epidemic shattered Sierra Leone's economy and health system, and left EVD survivors and their families to face stigma, health problems, and loss of livelihoods.

Sierra Leone was declared Ebola free in March 2016, yet the challenges faced by EVD survivors have continued as medical complications from EVD and stigmatization affect the health, well-being, and reintegration of EVD survivors. In response to the difficult situation of EVD survivors, the Sierra Leone Association for Ebola Survivors (SLAES) was established in January 2015 by a group of EVD survivors as a civil society organization committed to providing long-term assistance to EVD survivors and their families.

In the beginning, SLAES had no formal structure and one of the emerging needs for the organization were to strengthen its capacities to adequately represent and serve the entire survivor population. To help the organization develop, the USAID-funded Advancing Partners & Communities (Advancing Partners) project, through the Strengthening Health Systems Post-Ebola (SHSPE) program, started working with SLAES to support its organizational capacity building.



Beneficiaries of the SLAES Adult Literacy project in Western Area Rural district.



The SLAES national executive team.





EVD survivors actively engaged in the Adult Literacy classes.

INTERVENTION

The program's objective was to help SLAES become an effective, autonomous institution that can serve EVD survivors and advocate for their needs. This has included supporting SLAES to build the capacity, systems, and knowledge needed to be a functional grassroots organization. Three key components were identified as helping to accomplish this objective:

1. Organizational capacity building
2. Support for key advocacy priorities and activities
3. Technical support to implement SLAES-led projects

Advancing Partners focused on building capacity within the SLAES national executive team, based in Freetown, with additional support to their district leadership teams in Kailahun, Kenema, Bo, Moyamba, Bombali, Kono, and Port Loko districts.

Organizational Capacity Building and Operational Support

Based on a needs and capacity assessment conducted by the program, Advancing Partners identified six priority areas for organizational capacity building: 1) finalizing the organization's mission and vision; 2) writing a five-year organizational strategic plan; 3) developing a board of directors; 4) defining a resource mobilization plan; 5) developing operational policies and procedures; and 6) establishing functional financial and procurement systems.

During the program's implementation, Advancing Partners provided training and technical assistance to advance these six organizational development priority areas that will help SLAES move toward the objective of becoming a self-sufficient organization that can better serve the EVD survivor population.



Survivors in Western Area Urban district take part in the Survivor to Survivor Group Meeting.

Advocacy for Survivor Rights and Responsibilities

An important goal for SLAES is to advocate for and protect the rights of EVD survivors. Therefore, Advancing Partners has supported the development of the association's advocacy capacity by providing advocacy training to the SLAES executive leadership. The program has also provided SLAES with the tools and the needed support to develop a strategic and evidence-based advocacy and communication strategy. These interventions were identified as paramount to enable SLAES to continue to develop as an organization and implement advocacy activities as part of their overall mission to support EVD survivors.

"[The Adult Literacy class] has helped me in doing my business properly; for example, I can count out money very well and give out change to buyers."

—Student, Mabela Community, WAU

Technical Project Implementation

The ability to carry out projects is essential to building the capacity of an organization. Through a number of community-based projects, SLAES national and district leadership has been mentored in all components of the project management cycle, including designing, implementing, and monitoring projects. Advancing Partners has provided support to SLAES for the implementation of two priority technical projects: an Adult Literacy project in the Western Area Urban (WAU) and Western Area Rural (WAR) districts to strengthen literacy among EVD survivors; and a Survivor to Survivor (S2S) project to provide community-based support that focuses on resilience and reintegration. The S2S project can also guide EVD survivors groups that want to start up income-generating activities in their communities. Advancing Partners' support has strengthened the ability of SLAES staff to develop, execute, and monitor activities in line with their strategic plan.

RESULTS

Advancing Partners completed the capacity building activities for organizational development at SLAES' national level, with senior leadership, and in the six priority districts, focusing on resource mobilization, development of operational policies and procedures, and the establishment of financial systems. These areas were essential to enabling successful growth and sustainability of SLAES as a grassroots organization beyond the close of the project. With support from Advancing Partners, SLAES developed key documents valuable for the organization's operations, such as the constitution, and the finance and operational manual.

Advancing Partners also worked through a mentorship approach to build additional skills in management—such as time management, communications, tasks division, and project management, which are critical to making SLAES a functioning organization with effective leadership to support EVD survivors in their ongoing needs. At the end of the program, the association's executive team members demonstrated an average improvement of 10 percent in skills related to administrative management, project management, financial management, and computer literacy.

"The project has helped us learn new skills, gain confidence, and reduce stigma."

—S2S member, Kenema district

With the Adult Literacy program in WAR and WAU completed, 189 EVD survivors had participated in the Adult Literacy project, through two cycles, with 169 of them completing the course.

The S2S groups project, held in Bo, Bombali, Kenema, WAR, and WAU districts targeted a total of 150 participants (divided into 10 groups), including EVD survivors, EVD-affected people, and widows, for a total of 14 weeks. The project consisted of an initial 10-week period where the groups focused on identifying challenges and discussing concerns in areas like psychosocial issues and reintegration, and a final phase of four weeks with training on income generating activities. During the final phase, EVD survivors were provided with a start-up package to initiate the activities identified. As a result, four groups engaged in soap making, two in rice selling, two in palm oil selling, one in groundnut planting, and another one in Gari production.

"[...] participating in the group helped me gain the respect of my community."

—S2S member, WAU district

HIGHLIGHTS

- ✓ Board of Directors functional
- ✓ Constitution developed and approved
- ✓ Vision and mission approved
- ✓ Five-year strategic plan (2017–2022) developed
- ✓ Finance and procurement systems established
- ✓ 169 EVD survivors completed an Adult Literacy class
- ✓ 10 groups of EVD-affected people engaged in income-generating activities

The development of both the Adult Literacy and the S2S projects was accomplished through a collaborative effort between Advancing Partners and SLAES in order to mentor SLAES in the project design process, budgeting, work-planning, implementation, and monitoring of the activities. This mentorship approach has enabled SLAES leaders to carry on the work autonomously, and the organization has already started applying these skills to the development of future projects, which will contribute to making the organization sustainable.

The Strengthening Health Services Post-Ebola program in Sierra Leone is part of the regional Ebola Transmission Prevention & Survivor Services (ETP&SS) program, funded by USAID and implemented by JSI's Advancing Partners & Communities, which supports the recovery of EVD survivors and health systems from the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. The ETP&SS program mitigates the risk of Ebola resurgence and improves access to specialized health care services for Ebola survivors and other vulnerable population groups.

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