



EngAyde

Reflections on
'OurVillageOurChildren'
Symposium



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As the media focus on Ebola in the UK dies down, less attention is being paid to the terrible aftermath of the disease: one that has taken beloved parents; destroyed any semblance of normal family life and threatened the prospects of thousands of orphaned children across Sierra Leone. The future for these orphans (although estimates vary, it is thought around 12,000 children have been left without one or both parents or guardians) cannot be fixed overnight. **The long-term challenge of providing care and support in the right places should not be underestimated.**

EngAyde's OVOC 2015 (Our Village Our Children) symposium, held in collaboration with Bond UK, sought to create meaningful dialogue between the Sierra Leonean diaspora and key governmental and non-governmental actors on just how and what can be done.

The inaugural symposium, which was a first in bringing together around 60 delegates from UK INGOs and UK based Sierra Leonean community, began by hearing from a range of speakers working right at the heart of the crisis in Sierra Leone. This included, , Oliver Behn (Director of Save the Children's Kerry Town Treatment Centre); Anuradha Chandran (Senior Programme Specialist at UNICEF); John Pryor (Street Child UK – who has just authored an in-depth report on Ebola orphans), and, Alberta Stevens (EngAyde's Director).



All the speakers provided their own accounts of the crisis and spoke about the range of challenges ahead. It was very clear that all the organisations represented were doing their utmost to help address the situation, but far more needed to be done – and urgently. Street Child UK’s detailed research into the situation on the ground and UNICEF’s work threw up interesting questions about how we tackle the unique and diverse circumstances of many orphans and address their differing needs: while Street Child UK identified the average age of an Ebola orphan as 9 years old, UNICEF found that 1million are under 5 years old. In Port Loko alone, 57 per cent of orphans are based in rural settings, opening up challenges of how to access and identify the thousands more undoubtedly out there. Financial support for families who’ve agreed to take on orphans was also a common concern of some of the speakers, but there is no easy way to make this happen.

Anuradha Chandran from UNICEF spoke of Ebola not just as a challenge but an opportunity to build on areas previously put on the backburner by governments: e.g. tackling public health provision and improving education standards. John Pryor from Street Child UK also echoed the theme of building on and scaling up existing structures. On the converse, Oliver Behn, of Save the Children was less optimistic about the potential for opportunity, explaining that we can’t be complacent and depend on existing structures to address this new crisis- Ebola is a transient force, changing all the time and giving way to many challenges.

There was no doubt in the room that the situation for Ebola orphans in Sierra Leone was anything short of a crisis. Heart breaking accounts were given by the speakers on young girls who, newly orphaned and coming to terms with their own trauma, were forced into giving up their bodies to neighbours in exchange for food for their fractured families. The urgency of the situation was clearly underlined.



■ Panel Discussion

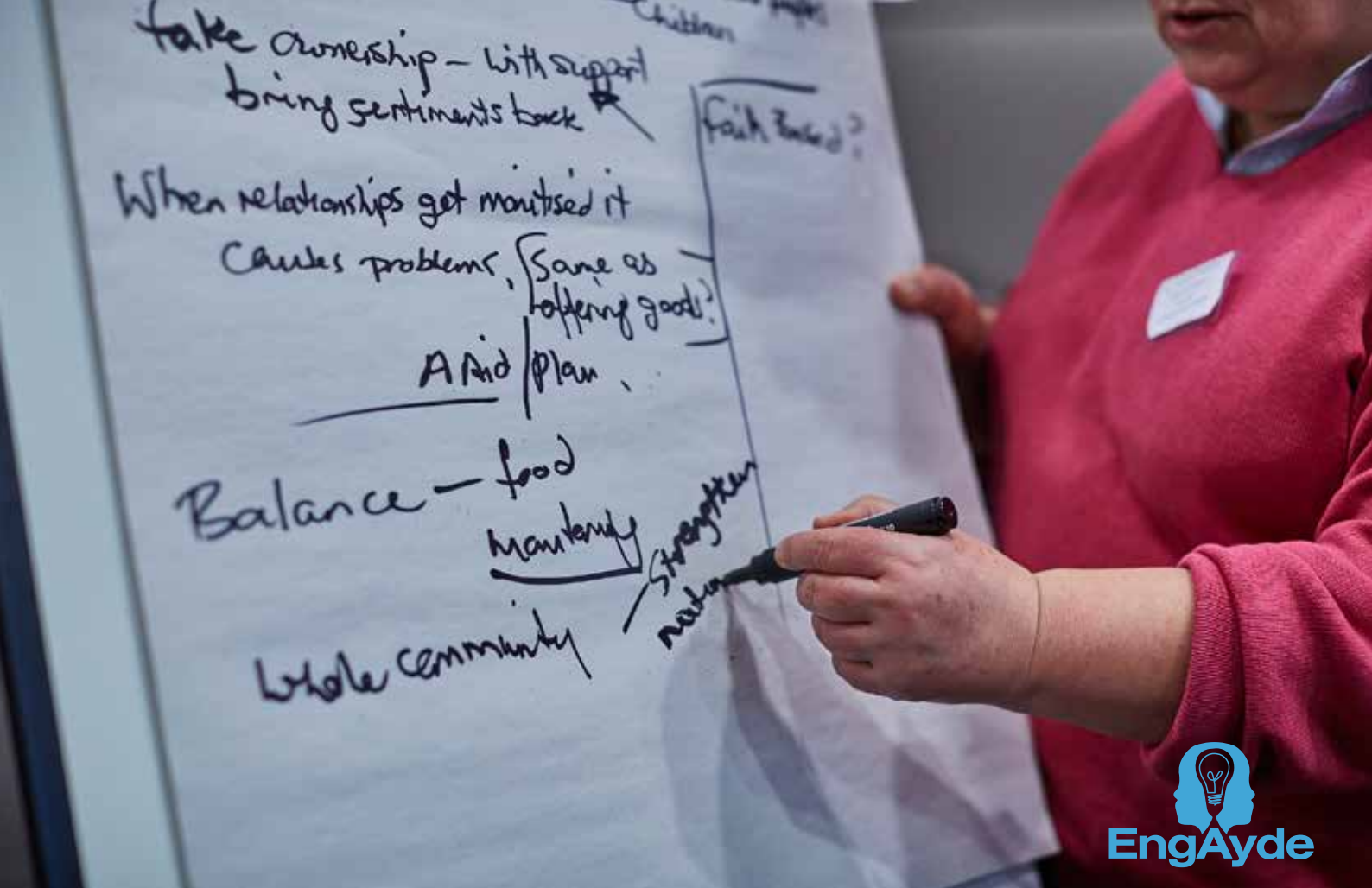
The second segment of the event featured a diaspora led panel discussion, facilitated by Alberta Stevens. The panel included, Ade Daramy (Sierra Leone UK Diaspora Ebola Response Taskforce Chair), PJ Cole (Director of Lifeline Nehemiah Projects), Memuna Janneh, (Director of Lunchbox Gift) and Robert Jones (Melqosh Mission's Trustee). The discussion took the symposium further into responses to the current crisis. The actions of these key influencers embodied the spirit of EngAyde as each panellist explained how they had taken initiative to respond to the Ebola crisis in their own way. The single most common factor amongst these individuals is that none of them waited to be asked or given aid to do so.

Ade Daramy began by describing SLUKDERT's work around promoting Education and facilitating HR recruitment of NHS staff travelling to Sierra Leone. He then went on to discuss his personal commitment to sponsor a child through an annual donation via his local Muslim Association. PJ Cole went on to reflect on the example his father set when he took in seven child soldiers in the aftermath of war and paid for their education – these very men who are now working with PJ to provide support to Ebola orphans. While Memuna Janneh's explained how her instincts to alleviate the suffering of poor people during the 3 day lockdown in

October 2014, by serving warm and freshly cooked meals led her to serve over 50,000 meals over the course of 6 months. She also explained how she will be working with Street Child UK to offer direct support to Ebola affected orphans. Her story embodies the power of the agency of individual action in responding to the Ebola crisis; an approach that EngAyde has been championing amongst the diaspora since the Crisis began. Robert Jones from Melqosh International talked about how his organisation has been responding to the needs of civil war amputees, educating some to university level. Robert explained, how Melqosh is now using the same structure to respond to the needs of Ebola orphans on the ground. These demonstrations of personal initiative are undoubtedly a source of inspiration to the rest of the diaspora: turning talk into action and engagement with like-minded individuals even in the most adverse of circumstances.

Several questions on two emerging issues related to the event themes were put to the panel. These included the reopening schools in March and the rising number of teenage pregnancies as a result of Ebola in Sierra Leone. . While all the panellists agreed that getting children back into education was essential, the death of many teachers was a worry. There were echoes of concern about whether schools were ready and sufficiently-resourced to restart lessons by the set time. Ade Daramy said that the crisis presented an opportunity to rebuild Sierra Leone's education system and ensure that qualified teachers were there. Memuna Jannah reminded us that education is nothing if a child can't eat and questioned why schools were reopening when the food situation has yet to improve.





■ Workshops

After more engagement and networking over tea, coffee, a spread of canapé's and indulgent cakes, the delegates divided to get to the real 'meat' of the session: interactive workshops. These workshops were designed to create a platform to discuss what long-term plans could be put in place to address the three key event themes of welfare, psychosocial support and child protection.

Within the workshop groups, rich and heated discussions were had between aid agencies, organisations and diaspora activists on what could be done.

In the area of Child Protection, facilitated by Amanda Weisbaum (BOND's Ebola Response Hub Manager), community sensitisation and engagement were identified as a key action to encourage and de-stigmatise the fostering of Ebola orphans, ensuring that all women and faith groups in the community are involved.

The need for social workers emerged as a core theme within the psychosocial support group, facilitated by Street Child UK: with no national effort to push for trained social workers in Sierra Leone, a UK based Sierra Leonean diaspora experienced mental health nurse, pushed for an open discussion in the plenary about whose responsibility it was to support traumatised children and what form this would take. It was agreed that a network of 'trusted adults' with a base of training in trauma counselling was one option, but collaboration and information sharing amongst any existing post-war networks was a vital first step.



In the welfare discussion group, oversight and the weakness of institutions were identified as two key challenges, but scaling up small-scale community projects in areas of education and livelihoods was considered as a way forward for promoting the welfare of children. Amidst evidence that teenage pregnancy rates are rising, the group also discussed how to safeguard the welfare of women and girls as a particularly vulnerable group, and ensuring their continued education was set out as a priority.

In acting as a ‘call to action’ – articulated so well by EngAyde’s Alberta Stevens in the final session: “Ebola orphans are our business, and these are our children” – OVOC 2015 laid the foundations for productive engagement to come. For children across Sierra Leone, the future may currently look bleak, but in the OVOC 2015 room earlier this month the will to do something was striking – let’s turn talk into action. The general energy around the room after the event was positive and determined. Delegates continued to exchange ideas and contacts.



Feedback following the event has remained largely exuberant:

“On the meeting itself, I have to say it was informative, engaging and positive and massive kudos to all involved, organisers, panellists and attendees. Excellent contributions from panellists and audience alike. A success on every level.”

Ade Daramy

“Many thanks for the invitation to the event last night - it was extremely inspiring and great food for thought for us at Save the Children”. **Leah Finnegan Save the Children**

“Multi-professional and multi-cultural people coming together in a not too formal environment to talk about something I have interest in. I enjoyed the workshops. Quite a good mix of professionals sharing their experiences”. **OVOC delegate.**



Next Steps

EngAyde will work with delegates of the symposium to facilitate the creation of expert ‘clusters’ based on the three themes of the OVOC symposium and its entire ‘OurVillageOurChildren’ advocacy campaign. The aim for these clusters of experts is to act as thought leaders and resource that can contribute to the work of stakeholders directly working to ensure the protection, welfare and psychosocial support of the thousands of children currently affected by Ebola in Sierra Leone.

EngAyde will be looking to partner with implementing organisations with to lobby and campaign for further funding and support to be ploughed into the long term support for Ebola affected children, especially orphans and teenage pregnant girls in Sierra Leone.

The joint organisers of this event will be looking to cultivate an ongoing relationship with delegates from both the Sierra Leonean diaspora in the UK and the INGOs, to take forward the ideas presented at the event.

Furthermore, EngAyde will be seeking to explore avenues for joint awareness and fundraising campaigns to further the cause of Ebola affected Children in Sierra Leone ■