

WhatsApp and local media (Grand Nord) – 9-18 September 2018

Reluctance, refusal, resistance and the politicisation of the Ebola response

This note provides an overview of a selection of key messages related to the Ebola outbreak and response that are circulating on WhatsApp and the local media (radio, print and video) in North Kivu, DRC, between 9-18 September 2018. A series of videos and sound recordings accompany this document. The note was prepared by Dr Rachel Sweet (Harvard University) and Juliet Bedford (Anthrologica). Dr Sweet is a leading expert on North Kivu and is collaborating with the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform to support the response.

Controlling the narrative

At the local level, multiple narratives are circulating about the outbreak of Ebola and the response. In the context of the *Grand Nord* (Beni and Lubero territories) of North Kivu, several important trends intersect:

- High levels of distrust amongst some sectors of the population has led to skepticism about both the virus and the response. Skepticism and distrust contribute to on-going practices that heighten the risk of transmission, issues around vaccination, widespread community dissatisfaction, and incidents of escalating violence against response teams.
- The politicisation of the outbreak and the response must not be underestimated. The chronic insecurity, episodes of violence and the political backdrop influence how communities construct and interpret different narratives. “*First the kidnappings [2010-2014], then the massacres [2014-present], now Ebola*” is a commonly expressed sentiment. Ebola is viewed as the latest “weapon of war” that is being used to target the population of Beni and Lubero territories (see example 2 below). There is a widespread perception that the same actors who were thought to be behind the kidnappings and killings, are now behind the current Ebola outbreak. This perception is not without foundation, given that it has been demonstrated that a number of the mass killings of civilians in Beni were organised by certain members of the national army, who were seen to be close to the national government. This increases levels of skepticism and distrust and the risk that response teams will be viewed as perpetuating insecurities.
- Certain political and influential local authorities could potentially benefit from prolonging the outbreak, and there is some evidence that misinformation is being deliberately circulated for political gain. As a community leader in Beni confirmed, ‘*Because this is ‘political season’, politicians will manipulate the information about Ebola*’ (WhatsApp exchange, 11 September 2018). Promoting misinformation for political and violent ends is commonplace in the *Grand Nord*. Communities in North Kivu are vulnerable to misinformation and political manipulation of Ebola and the response.

Political agendas

1. Mixing narratives of virus and violence (Audio no.1, circulating on radio stations in Butembo and on WhatsApp)

Crispin Mbindule Mitondo, National Deputy representing Butembo, gathered supporters in a meeting in Butembo in late August to publicise his doubts about the Ebola outbreak. He accused the government of ‘keeping a secret’ about the outbreak and linked the Ebola virus to previous kidnappings and mass killings. Audio of this message was broadcast across various radios in Butembo. It is currently circulating via WhatsApp and is being widely referenced throughout the area (Translated from Swahili).

“When we hear about Ebola, we know that it’s a disease from Equateur. In Equateur, we’re told that various animals are at the root of the disease. When this was explained to us, we understood. But when Ebola arrived in Beni territory, that we didn’t understand. Did these monkeys leave Equateur to come all the way here? It is a very long way. We want the Minister of Health to tell us the real origins of [this] Ebola [outbreak]...”

As long as we’re not told its real origin, we’ll [have no choice but to] believe that it was manufactured in a laboratory in order to exterminate the population of Beni.

What have we done [to deserve this]? We’re killed everyday. Here in Beni, we’re killed everyday. Beni, every day we die. [Referencing the mass killings, 2014-present]. Now, we have a very deadly disease in Beni. The disease breaks out in the same place where people were being slaughtered... Where people were kidnapped and killed... When we asked the Minister of Defense about this, he said, “oh, it’s a secret of the defense ministry! Oh, it’s a secret of defense”.

If you ask me, I can’t be sure how this outbreak actually started. I think that this disease is another [killing force] that has been sent again. And this is why I challenge the Minister [of Health or of Defense] to prove me wrong. Show me, where did this outbreak really come from? Scientifically, I don’t believe that it’s possible to first have the killings of people in Beni, and now this disease without them being related. Study the course of events for yourself! I don’t believe that they can be unrelated.

They [national government / people accused of being behind both the mass killings and Ebola] are slaughtering us. We were told that they [national government] would send a delegation to Beni. Until today, none has been sent. Everyday [during the killings]

they said “operation, operation, operation” [e.g., a military operation would end the killings], but there was none. *Today they say, we will do a riposte, riposte, riposte [against Ebola]. But here, it keeps going. In Equateur, they stopped the disease in under a month. But in Beni it keeps going. What’s going on?”*

[Here, the National Deputy draws connections between the government’s previous unmet claims that an effective military force would end the mass killings, and the government’s more recent claims that the Ebola response is an effective force sent to end the outbreak, the purpose and validity of which he calls into question. Residents in the *Grand Nord* commonly accuse the national army operations that were deployed to the area of having organised the mass killings rather than bringing security].

According to a local human rights leader, this segment was aired on radio around the same time as certain attacks against humanitarian vehicles began. Whilst direct cause and effect cannot be attributed between the radio segment and the attacks, the timeframe may be indicative.

2. Ebola as a “Weapon of War” (Beni-Lubero Online, “Beni: Ebola as a Weapon of War!”, accessed 19 August 2018)

A popular Butembo-based newspaper reported “*there are some who see Ebola as having been imported into Beni from Equateur*” as a “*weapon of war*”.

“Indeed, when we note that the first case of Ebola in the Beni region can be traced back to May, we should also remember that this period corresponds to the time when organisations were working against Ebola in Equateur. It would have been during this process that this cruel disease was injected into Beni. Doctors, whose anonymity we keep for reasons of security, have demonstrated this to be the case scientifically...”

Ebola’s arrival in Beni comes in a specific context. This epidemic comes as the latest wave of insecurity. The Beni - Mangina road had been the only road around the urban centre of Beni that had still been functional [indicating that Ebola was specifically targeted at Mangina in order to cut Beni off from its last food supply route, on which all displaced people in Beni relied].

Ebola is the latest means of depopulation [also a common interpretation of the mass killings]. In the DRC, politicians will use any and all means to stay in power”. (Translated from French, <http://benilubero.com/beni-lebola-comme-arme-de-guerre/>)

3. “Medical Terrorism”

Jambo Magazine (“The Contours of the Popular Resistance against the Campaign Against Ebola”, published 9 September)

“The smoldering bomb is made even larger by some leaders who do not help the situation. In Butembo’s northern neighborhood of Furu, a national deputy [referencing Audio no.1, above] implicates the response work [in a politicised campaign] by saying that Ebola is a disease made in a laboratory in order to make money. For him [Mbindule Mitondo], Ebola is medical terrorism. Members of a political support group in the abutting neighborhood, Mutsanda, who support [Mbindule] in legislative elections promised to destroy the hand-washing stations installed in their neighborhood...”

The leaders who should be the ones to educate the populations are instead the first ones to be spreading the message against the Ebola campaign and pushing the population into suicidal acts by sowing psychosis.

The existence of biological weapons is not to be denied. They are created for many reasons but always for a profit motive. And even if there is a small possibility that the Ebola virus was made in a factory, as we see in science-fiction movies, this doesn’t change the fact that Ebola is still here. It’s a disease that has left nearly 90 people dead.

Just because the disease is manufactured, must we create a psychosis that pushes the population to fatalism? This would only help the makers of the virus to achieve their goal. If your computer is attacked by a virus, would you throw it in the trash? No, you’d buy an anti-virus to protect yourself. The virus exists, and it must be combated by all means possible”.

4. “The population is ‘instrumentalised’ by certain politicians” (Beni human rights leader, 17 September)

A human rights leader in Beni territory asserted that some of the ‘rumours’ that bodies are missing from graves (see example 10 below) may be a result of political attempts to manipulate the narrative around Ebola. “*The population gets instrumentalised by certain political figures, such as Mbindule [see example 1 above]. He held a political meeting, called the population, and accused ministers of Ebola. He said that the vaccine was to exterminate the population*”. (Personal interview).

5. Catholic Church anti-political stance (published 18 September 2018)

The Catholic Church’s clear support of the Ebola response in Lubero territory is a positive step, but comes amidst calls for a much broader engagement of response teams with local communities (see below). On 18 September, various local media sources and WhatsApp messages reported that, “*The bishop [Sikuli Melchisédech] asks the population not to vote politicians who speak against the epidemic [i.e. question the existence / origins of the outbreak]. If it were up to him, he would want the parliamentarian in question [i.e. Mbindule] to be put in prison*”. (Translated from French).

“The Bishop of the Butembo-Beni Catholic Church, Sikuli Melchisédech, said in an interview that the vaccine does not kill, like certain people think that it does. He also condemned the politicians that spread false information against the Ebola campaign. The church leader described this disinformation as a political tactic and he called on the population not to trust these people”.

Afrique Info Magazine, <https://afriqueinfomagazine.net/beni-ebola-panique-observee-ecoles-due-a-rumeur-presence-vaccinateurs>
Radio Moto in Beni-Butembo,
<http://radiomotofm.info/lirearticle.php?billet=4724Social?Urgent%20EBOLA%20:%20Mgr%20SIKULI%20pour%20des%20sanctions%20exemplaires%20en%20l%E2%80%99endroit%20des%20politiciens%20%C2%AB%20manipulateurs%20%C2%BB>.

The need for local leadership and engagement

6. “The incivility of the response” and “the need for [community leaders] to accompany the response teams on the ground”

Congolese Journalist - *“The problem of Ebola had led to a popular resistance following different interventions of the response Team on the ground.... for certain residents, the resistance is due to the incivility [of the team] and the general populations’ lack of access to messages about Ebola. The resistance was observed last week in Kasangata, and this Sunday, in Rwangoma [Beni town], and this Monday another resistance occurred at Beningulu. Society Civil is calling on the Ebola response team to respond quickly to this challenge.”*

(Translated from French, Audio no.2, Congolese National Radio, circulating on WhatsApp, 11 September)

Kizito bin Hangi, Civil society leader - *“... If you are sick with Ebola, but you don’t speak English, you have no way of accessing the team! How will you get information? Residents have an attitude of running from the Ebola response teams [also a common interpretation of mass killings]. The Response Team has a problem about awareness. We were told that the response team wanted to hear the concerns of the population and to go to the ground. But if they go by themselves, they will have problems. We need to go with them. If they go by themselves, the population is suspicious like in Beningulu. Us local notables, us civil society leaders, we need to go with the team to the ground. But many times, the response team just go by themselves in their vehicles! So then the population throws stones at the vehicles! The team needs to listen to the population in order to stop this resistance.”*

(Translated from Swahili Audio no.2, Congolese National Radio, circulating on WhatsApp, 11 September).

Unidentified spokesperson in Mudundu - Discusses resistance due to the population’s lack of access to information and the “incivility” of the response.

(Translated from Swahili, Audio no.2, Congolese National Radio, circulating on WhatsApp, 11 September)

7. Other local leaders discussing the Ebola response teams

Community leader (anonymised): *“The teams of Ebola [the response teams] don’t understand anything that is happening here on the ground. How do they want to help the citizens? The largest challenge that causes all this is the lack of awareness.”*

(Translated from French, personal exchange on WhatsApp, 17 September).

Community leader (anonymised): *“It is still clear that the Ebola response team in charge of disseminating the message is in a deep, deep deficit! They are not involving the local leaders [“notaires”] of villages before they enter a particular village”.*

(Translated from French, personal exchange on WhatsApp, 11 September).

Kiro Tsongo Grégoire is the National Deputy and the Secretary General of the RCD/K-ML Opposition Party. The party has a political base in Beni, and Kiro is well respected with long-standing political influence in the area. (Translated from Swahili). *“Some residents are throwing stones at cars... the response teams needs to work with the doctors and the authorities who are from Beni, because it’s them who know how to speak well with the citizens of Beni”.* (Audio no.3, 11 September).

Radio Moto de Butembo-Beni: *“Need to intensify the awareness efforts throughout the whole territory of Beni [in order to stem the] hostility directed against the Ebola response teams”.* Segment includes an interview with the [Second Vice President of Civil Society in Beni Territory](#): *“Some residents of Beni territory have an attitude of resistance against the Ebola Response teams... According to [the civil society leader interviewed], some residents continue to be very hostile to the response team and government partners who have engaged in the Ebola response in the region. This behaviour is displayed during sensitisation or in the event of a death in the Ebola community”.*

(Translated from French, 17 September, <http://radiomotofm.info/lirearticle.php?billet=4714>)

8. “The critical threat facing the Ebola Response Team... is the need for better communications strategies”

Jambo Magazine

(Popular Resistance Against the Campaign Against Ebola” (published 9 September)

<http://www.jambomag.com/index.php/chronique/235-les-contours-de-la-resistance-populaire-face-a-la-campagne-contre-ebola>

<http://www.jambomag.com/index.php/chronique/237-ebola-business-qui-en-profit>

Attributes community resistance to a variety of factors including lack of information and the response team’s perceived limited community engagement. *“Even with the medicine and the latest technology in hand, the critical threat facing the Response Team is social. The doctors, in their scientific rationalism, won’t have anything to do with it [social norms/culture]. It’s imperative that they give a place to the sociologists/social scientists, the social communicators, and the ethnologists to develop better communication strategies. Because if rumour takes the place of information, the doors of an abyss will open”.*

Community interpretations

Interpretations 9 and 10 indicate that some of the messages circulating suggest that covertly viewing the dead, or digging up the graves of people who have died from Ebola is the only means to verify the “truth” behind Ebola.

9. “What the Ebola team is saying is bullshit, bullshit, bullshit” (Audio no.4, circulating on WhatsApp, received 15 September)

A woman from Butembo whose relative died of Ebola explains that the hemorrhagic disease is not Ebola. She claims that the ‘Ebola people’ (i.e., the Ebola response team) are keeping a secret about the true origins of the disease. (Translated from Swahili).

“What the Ebola response team is saying about Ebola, is bull shit, bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. One of my relatives died of hemorrhagic fever. When he was sick, we brought him to the hospital. Then the Ebola team came to the hospital and said it was Ebola. When he died, the Ebola team came and wrapped up his body and brought him to the morgue before he was to be buried.

But, we, the family, we went to verify. We couldn’t just let them bury my relative like that [without us seeing him first or knowing what killed him]. We went to the morgue with the doctor, and when we saw the body, the doctor said broke the secret open. He said that no, that my relative did not die of Ebola. The people of Ebola / response team that that it was Ebola, but it wasn’t Ebola at all...

This is why I am in Butembo at a funeral today. I ask you [listeners] to talk with others and to talk in social media to spread awareness that this is not Ebola. It is the false Ebola that is in Butembo. It is lies, lies, lies.”

10. “I dug up a grave – there was no body!” (Audio no.5, circulating on WhatsApp, received 14 September)

A man claims to have dug up a grave of somebody who died from Ebola and found it to be empty, compounding fears and rumours about what happens to bodies of loved ones who have died. (Translated from Swahili).

“I want to tell you what is happening here in Beni, where people are dying of Ebola. There was a grave of a person who died of Ebola and was buried [by the response team]. He was buried and his family had buried. We opened the casket, but there was no one inside! Unfortunately the police came quickly so weren’t able to take a picture. The person wasn’t buried here. I tell you, the people who die are not usually being buried here in Beni! They [the Ebola response teams] are not telling us the truth”.

11. Residents throw rocks at response teams (Audio no.2, Radio Okapi, 9 and 11 September)

It was reported on Radio Okapi that groups of community members attacked humanitarian convoys (9 September) and that residents of Viskiki (less than 40km from Mangina, Mabalako health zone, Beni territory) threw stones at vehicles of response workers who had ‘arrived to spread awareness’. Interviews with civil society leaders (e.g., Audio 2) confirm a new trend for residents to throw rocks at humanitarian vehicles involved in the Ebola response.

<https://www.radiookapi.net/2018/09/12/actualite/sante/lutte-contre-ebola-menaces-de-sanctions-contre-les-auteurs-dattaques-des>

12. School children flee presumed vaccination teams (Video no.1, circulating on WhatsApp, 17 September)

The video footage shows children in school uniforms from EP Mabakanga School (Beni town) apparently ‘fleeing’ from an Ebola vaccination team that was rumored to visit the school to provide vaccinations on 17 September. The school is run by the Protestant denomination CECA 20. The fact that this footage comes from Beni town is important as it suggests the rapid circulation of negative information in area which is well accessible and where the population should be more amenable to the response.

A local news source (Afrique Info Magazine) also reported on this event. “*The situation [of panic and fleeing] was caused by a rumour about the presence of vaccinators against Ebola in the compound of different schools around Beni. As soon as the students were informed, they immediately emptied the classrooms to return to their parents, who still continue to oppose the vaccination of their children against Ebola.*”

(“Beni-Ebola: Panic throughout schools following a rumour about the presence of vaccination teams”, 18 September).

<https://afriqueinfomagazine.net/beni-ebola-panique-observee-ecoles-due-a-rumeur-presence-vaccinateurs/>

Contacts

If you have a direct request concerning the response to Ebola in the DRC, regarding a brief, tools, additional technical expertise or remote analysis, or should you like to be considered for the network of advisers, please contact the Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform by emailing Juliet Bedford (julietbedford@anthrologica.com) and Santiago Ripoll (s.ripoll@ids.ac.uk).

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