

A Game Changer: The Importance of Anthropology in Public Health Interventions

The Ebola Response Anthropology Platform: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

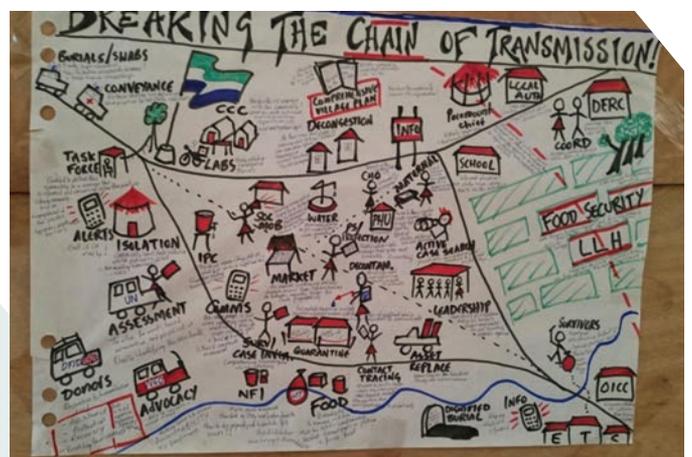
“It really has been a game changer. In the past Anthropology has been given a minor role in public health interventions. This time, from the outset, senior officials from the WHO, DFID, the UK Ministry of Defence and Ministers within Sierra Leone were pushing for Anthropological input to help identify the social, historical, political and economic issues that might influence the effectiveness of interventions seeking to prevent the transmission of Ebola”

DR MELISSA PARKER, LSHTM

The Steering Committee of the Ebola Anthropology Platform very quickly drew together researchers who were already experts in West Africa and public health in the region. The Platform encouraged anthropologists and other social scientists to provide advice on socio-cultural and political dimensions of the Ebola outbreak. The primary aim of The Platform was to support locally-appropriate interventions, to support more effective humanitarian responses.

During the early months of the project, The Platform drew on a large body of existing ethnographic knowledge and summarised it so that it could be used by health workers to inform their practice in the fight against Ebola. The Anthropology Platform provided large numbers of briefings on best practices for issues such as safe and dignified burials; undertaking effective contact tracing and the social issues facing Ebola survivors. They also made a significant contribution to messaging; raising issues and concerns and encouraging caution with messaging, rather than just ‘jumping in’.

Members of The Platform participated in discussions at the WHO’s headquarters in Geneva about the ethical issues surrounding clinical trials; and contributed to the Anthropology and Social Science working group which reported to the UK Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. They also provide training for British National Health Staff travelling to Sierra Leone on the socio-cultural issues that needed to be considered when providing care for people infected with Ebola.



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Responding to a request from the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone, the Anthropology Platform is currently planning research to assess the extent to which external interventions shaped the Ebola epidemic. This work will be undertaken with another ELRHA Funded data modeling project at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

“Anthropological research is essential - there is a tendency in the humanitarian world to have top down interventions which too hastily set aside the social, political and cultural context and mistakenly encourage a one size fits all approach. Anthropologists need to reverse this trend and to have a central role in global health policy and practice. This seems to be happening in the Ebola crisis in West Africa.”

Dr Melissa Parker, LSHTM



Programme Name:

Ebola Response Anthropology Platform

Key information

Grant awarded: £297,160

Lead organisation:

London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Partnering organisation(s):

University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, University of Exeter.

Project length: Nov-14 to Nov-15

Health sector: Anthropology

Study location: UK & Sierra Leone

Principal Investigator(s)

Dr Melissa Parker

Purpose

The Anthropology Platform enabled a co-ordinated, adaptive and iterative response to the Ebola outbreak. By drawing upon existing anthropological expertise, and undertaking targeted fieldwork, efforts to contain the epidemic were enhanced by providing clear, practical, real-time advice about how to engage with crucial socio-cultural and political dimensions of the outbreak and build locally-appropriate interventions.

Expected outcomes

The project developed an online shared resource portal for the socio-cultural, historical, economic and political dimensions of Ebola; to provide a platform for interaction with clinical, scientific and outbreak control teams; to support relief teams and in-country clinical and social scientific capacity through training, guidelines and rapid responses to operational questions; and to inform global health policy by drawing lessons from the Ebola response in West Africa in 2014 - 2015.

Progress and outcomes achieved

November to December 2014 was a very reactive time, with an unprecedented strong request for Anthropological input to the response, creating a huge demand for The 'Platform' and its services. As the epidemic subsides the project is working on a data mining exercise with LSHTM project 'modeling Ebola in West Africa' (please refer to separate project data sheet).

Uptake has been on-going since November 2014 via the platform and its network of anthropologists at:

<http://www.ebola-anthropology.net/>

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