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“Filling gaps and removing traps
for sustainable resource management”

Ebola and Trust... (How Do Those Two Get into the Same Headline)?

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Abstract

The Ebola virus disease (EVD) epidemic in West Africa (2013–2016) has been the largest known outbreak in history that severely affected Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. The unprecedented size of the epidemic with more than 28,000 confirmed cases of EVD and more than 11,000 deaths caused disastrous economic and humanitarian consequences for the local population.

Interventions during and after the epidemic, in particular by international partners, trying to assist affected communities in the control as well as to increase the knowledge on potential virus reservoirs afterwards have encountered a major challenge beyond science – the lack of trust.

The “Ebola Foresight” project as a collaboration project between the Friedrich-Loeffler-Institut (FLI), the Institut Pasteur in Guinea, the Sierra Leone Agricultural Research Institute, and the Njala University in Sierra Leone aimed to study the role of livestock, domestic animals and wildlife in ebolavirus infection. Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture, the aim was also to build capacities by training of local PhD students and laboratory staff in laboratory methods and blood collection from livestock and domestic animals. In the initial phase, the reservation towards the scientific activities in the target communities was underestimated and required a change in tactics. To overcome this obstacle, long-standing contacts of local partners to the villagers and the establishment of animal health clubs with ongoing community engagement prior to sampling activities were put in the centre of activities to implement a scientific project in a sustainable manner. In-country workshops teaching hands-on experiences in different laboratory methods in order to allow testing of the collected serum samples in the African laboratories could subsequently assure that local people performed the diagnostics locally.

The involvement of local communities is key for success in field-based projects, and sustainable support can only be achieved if trust is there first and action comes second. That is not a new finding in the field of international development yet scientists in the field of infectious diseases tend to miss out the fact that they might be dealing with communities that have a very different understanding of diseases.

Keywords: Animal sampling, community engagement, health interventions, local partnerships