



GROUND TRUTH  
SOLUTIONS

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# **Monitoring citizen voices during the Ebola crisis**

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SIERRA LEONE

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November 2014 - June 2015

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*Putting people first in humanitarian operations.*



## Introduction

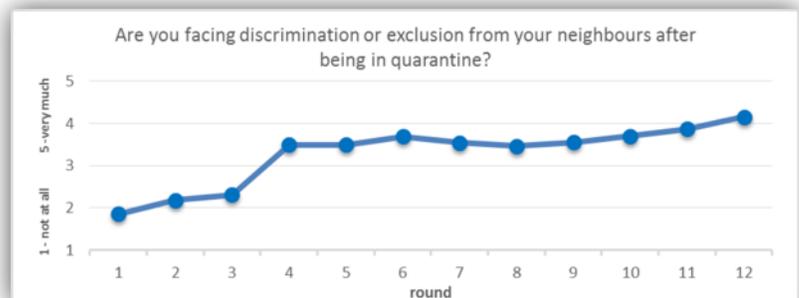
It seems self-evident that the opinions of beneficiaries of humanitarian aid matter. Yet, means of practically integrating the voices of affected people into the design and implementation of aid programs on a continuous basis are relatively underdeveloped. Ground Truth Solutions facilitates the collection and use of this feedback through a sequence of activities that includes data collection, learning and course correcting. Survey instruments are designed based on agencies' specific program goals. These short surveys consist of both closed and open-ended questions and are regularly administered to large groups of participants. Such real-time monitoring of beneficiaries' perceptions can inform aid programs and ultimately improve the efficiency and efficacy of aid distribution.



During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa that claimed over 11,000 lives, Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) sought to listen to the voices of those most affected by the epidemic. At DFID's request, GTS submitted a proposal for funding, partnering with Plan International who were looking at the broader accountability agenda. The GTS team undertook a scoping visit in early November 2014 and within a week of touching down in Freetown had started collecting data.

For eight months, from November 2014 to June 2015, GTS administered regular surveys to provide decision-makers with regular, real-time feedback. The surveys targeted the general population in affected regions of the country, frontline aid workers, people in quarantine, and individuals whose homes had been decontaminated. GTS collected data – at first weekly and later fortnightly – and distilled the findings into succinct reports and recommendations. The reports were sent by email directly to managers at the National Ebola Response Centre (NERC) and to individual agencies involved in the Ebola response. They were also published on the Ground Truth website.

Findings from the surveys directly influenced the way agencies working in Sierra Leone implemented their programmes. For example, when the quarantine survey revealed that people were receiving ample quantities of food but their water needs were not adequately met, agencies responded by ensuring the provision of additional water for washing and cooking to quarantined households. The high frequency of the surveys made it possible to track perceptions over time. For example, when the survey data pointed to increasing levels of discrimination after people came out of the 21-day



quarantine period, a question was added about respondents’ primary sources of social support. The feedback encouraged agencies to work with local religious and spiritual leaders to help combat the sense of increasing discrimination. A question asked of both the general public and people in quarantine sought to find out why not everyone was respecting quarantine restrictions. The answers that emerged were useful in framing messages about the importance of quarantine in the fight against the disease, emphasizing community solidarity. Responses also pointed to some of the reasons that led people to ignore the restrictions - for example, packages provided by relief workers lacked food for children and for people with special dietary needs. The feedback helped aid managers understand better both the psychology of people in quarantine and how best to meet their needs while ensuring more effective quarantine restrictions. Including beneficiary perceptions in the way aid was provided contributed to a more effective response. The utility of the feedback is discussed further under “Results”.

### **Methodology and approach**

Ground Truth conducted regular surveys across the whole of Sierra Leone over a period of eight months. Citizens were contacted by SMS text by GeoPoll, frontline workers by phone. The topics covered in the surveys are summarized in the chart below (Chart 1).

*Chart 1. Ground Truth Surveys, Sierra Leone, 2014-15*

<b>Survey</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>Issues currently covered include...</b>
<b>Citizen survey</b>	Conducted bi-weekly using SMS. Random sample with 350 responses per round.	Trust in information, stigma, harassment and protection, treatment of non-Ebola illnesses, impact on livelihoods
<b>Frontline worker survey</b>	Conducted bi-weekly using enumerated phone calls. Contacts provided by agencies with 300+ responses per round.	Incidences in GBV, complacency, safety at work, emotional impact, access to medical care, burial, surveillance, effectiveness of 117 hotlines
<b>Quarantine survey</b>	Conducted bi-weekly using enumerated phone calls. Contacts provided by service agencies with 100+ responses per round.	Extent to which food, water and NFI needs are met, stigma, enforcement of quarantine, dignity/respect, and provision of emotional support
<b>Decontamination survey</b>	Conducted bi-weekly using enumerated phone calls. Contacts provided by agency with 300+ responses per round.	Extent to which replaced items meet needs, trust and awareness of procedures, if they were treated with respect, and if the latrine was decontaminated

GTS worked with Accountability Alert, a local NGO that collected the data using a team of volunteers – mostly teachers whose schools had been shut down during the crisis. GTS analyzed the data and drafted reports on the main findings. It worked in collaboration with agencies responding to the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone: ChildFund, PLAN International, Save the Children, Wellbody Alliance, and Welthungerhilfe. These agencies furnished respondent contact lists and helped feed into the recommendations. Findings were distributed in simple visual reports, by email, directly to managers of the agencies and to the

National Ebola Response Centre (NERC). Findings were presented at NERC coordination meetings, where national and international agencies involved in the response met regularly.

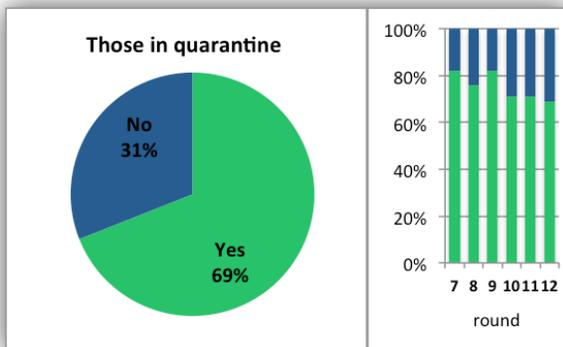
The GTS programme started with in-person meetings in Sierra Leone to understand the more clearly the focus of the response. Draft questions were then tested in focus groups with the local population. Six weeks into the program, another round of face-to-face meetings with agency staff took place, followed by additional feedback from focus groups to ensure the surveys were still covering pertinent issues. Two months later GTS again reviewed its approach. By regularly consulting and engaging with those consuming the data on the ground, we ensured the surveys remained relevant to successive phases of the response.



## Results

By tracking indicators of the success of the humanitarian response to the Ebola epidemic, GTS provided a regular stream of real-time data to people working on the coordination of the response and to agencies providing services on the ground. The feedback data complemented more extensive but less frequent surveys, such as Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice surveys (KAP surveys). Humanitarian teams in Sierra Leone used the surveys to track the progress of the response across a range of issues and to improve program services. It also allowed them to push certain topics up the collective agenda, such as gender-based violence, when the GTS surveys suggested this was on the increase.

Survey questions posed to quarantined individuals: "Are your food needs being met? If not, what is missing?"





The following table summarizes some of the key issues surfaced in the surveys, how the findings were acted upon, and evidence of such action (Chart 2).

*Chart 2. Issues Raised by Ground Truth Surveys, and Evidence of Agencies' Responses*

Survey question (simplified)	Survey results	Change and agency responsible	Evidence for action
<b>Citizen survey</b>			
Are families able to make a living now?	Serious concerns over financial situation	Raised issue at NERC level and was picked up ACAPS report	Reported by Plan representative at the NERC and in ACAPS study
<b>Frontline Worker survey</b>			
Was it too early to remove checkpoints?	Removing checkpoints makes it harder to fight Ebola	Complacency identified by DFID staff as a major concern warranting follow-up action	Reported by DFID
<b>Quarantine survey</b>			
Are water needs met?	Water, especially for washing is seriously lacking	Save the Children increased water provision	Reported by Save
Are you facing stigma after quarantine?	High levels of stigma post quarantine	Redoubled efforts on social mobilisation by Plan and Trocaire	Reported by Plan and Trocaire
Who provides you with emotional support?	Religious leaders and traditional healers are key supporters	NERC asked agencies to engage more with religious leaders and traditional healers	Reported by NERC CEO
<b>Decontamination survey</b>			
Do replaced items meet your needs?	Not everything that is removed is replaced	Plan compiling an inventory of what they remove with goal of replacing all items	Reported by Plan
Did the team decontaminate the latrine?	Latrines rarely decontaminated	Plan amending decontamination SoPs to ensure latrines are covered	Reported by Plan

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## Lessons Learnt

Our goal was to provide decision-makers with real-time data on the perceptions of those on the frontlines of the crisis. Our reports and recommendations helped illuminate what was and was not working. This enabled decision-makers to better direct their aid efforts. The fast changing context meant it was a challenge to keep the survey content relevant, and without a permanent local presence it was at times difficult to keep busy managers focused on the data. But with support from our partners at Accountability Alert and Plan International, GTS was able to ensure its data was taken into account by those managing the response.

This case study indicates not only that program managers value feedback data from affected people, but that affected people increasingly expect to be able to provide their point of view. It also indicates that robust perceptual data is affordable and can be collected in difficult and challenging circumstances.

More information on our work in Sierra Leone, as well as other projects in Pakistan, Haiti and Nepal, along with our public reports, are all available on our website: <http://groundtruthsolutions.org/>

*For more information on Ground Truth's work and in particular our work in Sierra Leone, please contact Nick van Praag ([nick@keystoneaccountability.org](mailto:nick@keystoneaccountability.org)) or Kai Hopkins ([kai@keystoneaccountability.org](mailto:kai@keystoneaccountability.org)).*

### Image sources:

1. cbsnews.com: "Sierra Leone concludes three-day Ebola lockdown" (Duff, 21 September 2014)
2. Graph from Ground Truth report following 12<sup>th</sup> round of quarantine survey
3. who.int: "How communities in Sierra Leone fought back Ebola" [accessed 06 July 2015]
4. tonyblairoffice.org: "Inside the National Ebola Response Centre" (blog, Simons, 10 December 2014)
5. tiki-toki.com: "Save the Children Ebola response" (8 August 2014)
- 6-7. Graphs from Ground Truth report following 12<sup>th</sup> round of quarantine survey