

Supporting community health workers in fragile settings: evidence from Sierra Leone, Liberia and Democratic Republic of Congo

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Introduction

- Community health workers (CHWs) are essential to achieving Universal Health Coverage. They make particular contributions to health systems in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where human resource shortages are acute.
- Research on CHWs in fragile contexts is lacking, so evidence is needed to inform programmes.
- In Sierra Leone and Liberia, the recent Ebola outbreak emphasised the importance of CHWs' understanding of their communities in managing the outbreak. In both countries, new CHW programmes have recently been introduced.
- In Democratic Republic of Congo, CHWs play an important role in providing health services to communities and in insecure areas, often the only health care workers who stay.
- Yet health planners do not make best use of what CHWs have to offer. This requires better integration into the wider health system and supporting CHWs to both stay in the job and carry out their work effectively.

Methods

We developed 3 case studies: Sierra Leone, Liberia and Democratic Republic of Congo. Using multiple methods (document review, in depth interviews with supervisors and decision makers, life histories with CHWs, photovoice and community mapping – see figures 1-4) we have explored how CHWs are supported and managed, how they interact with their communities and health systems, the challenges that they face and how they solve these. Data were analysed using the framework approach and synthesised across the three contexts.



Figure 1: CHWs draw maps to show how they work in their communities

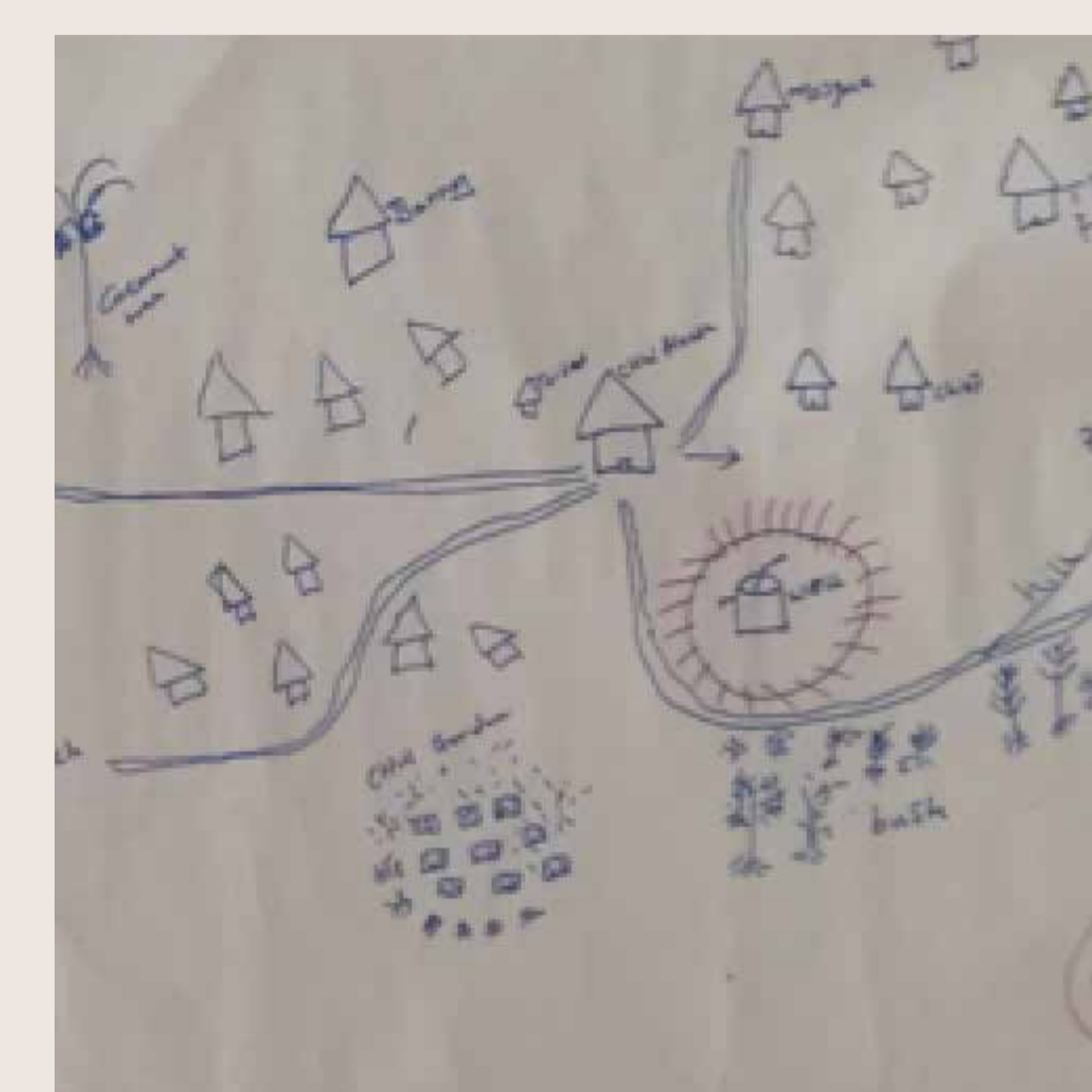


Figure 2: Community map

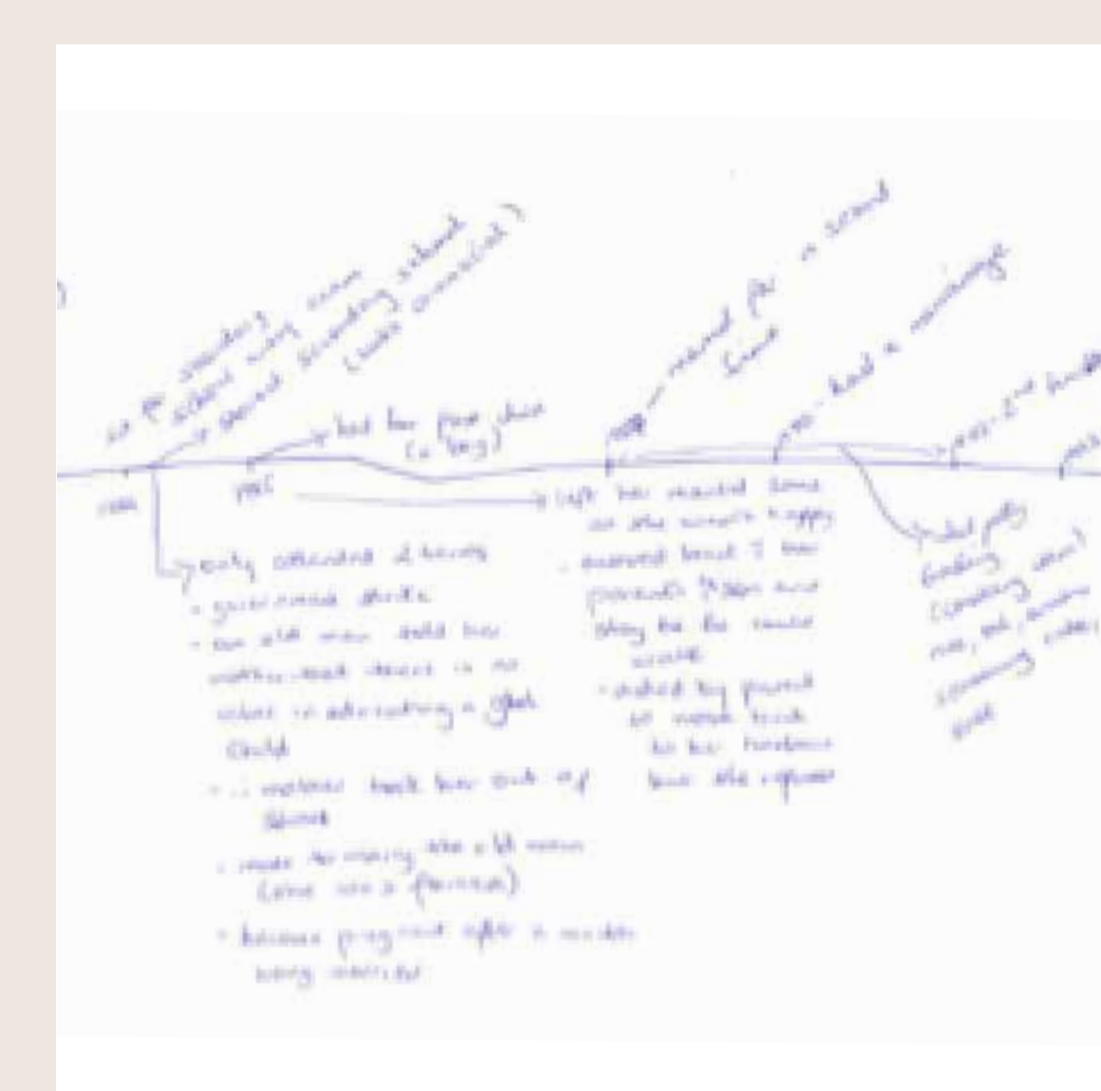


Figure 3: CHW lifeline developed during a life history interview



Figure 4: CHWs discussing photographs that they had taken in their community

Results

Seven themes emerged from the data about health systems support for CHWs to do their work (Table 1).

Theme	Key findings
Selection	
Training	
Supervision	
Incentives	
Supplies	
Career pathway	
Sustainability	

Table 1: Key findings

Conclusions

Integration into the wider health systems and effective management and support is vital to ensure that CHWs make the critical contribution needed, especially in fragile settings.

Continued political will and sustained national investment in the programmes are needed.

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