

**Ebola: how a people's science helped end an epidemic, by Paul Richards. London: Zed Books, 2016. xii + 180 pp. £20 (paperback). ISBN 978 1 78360 858 4**

Many who worked or closely observed events in West Africa during the Ebola epidemic of 2013-16 were perplexed by the uneven response of both international and national authorities but have now had many of their misgivings thoroughly discussed. Other questions, however, concerning the responses of ordinary Sierra Leoneans, Liberians and Guineans at the sharp end of the epidemic – ranging from violent resistance to self-sufficiency and innovation – have not been as satisfactorily answered. Paul Richards' timely book shifts the emphasis to the experiences of communities, particularly in Sierra Leone, whose opinions were largely ignored during much of the outbreak by Western agencies or who were seen as ignorant and as barriers to success.

One of the key advantages of the book is that it is a readable and balanced account. Richards identifies the very real challenges involved in the fight against Ebola—including the ways in which local burial practices contributed to the fast spread of the virus and how widely-advertised (but often contradictory) Western medical advice did not have the compliance rates that were envisaged. In the face of these challenges, the book tells a remarkable story of how some communities began organising their own effective and safe burial teams, quarantines, by-laws, and protective clothing. In the latter stages of the epidemic, Richards argues that communities and responders' approaches converged, as both sides began 'thinking like an epidemiologist and like a villager' (p.114).

The book was written during the epidemic, when anthropologists like Richards were at the forefront of an important, but difficult, battle to humanise the response and to include communities' knowledge in the design of disease containment strategies. In the context of emergency, the book makes a passionate and empathetic argument for recognising the role of a 'people's science' in bending the epidemic's curve. The inner narrative, of how communities adapt and learn either independently of or in reaction to disease control efforts, is incredibly valuable. The book offers an alternative way to think about how culture works from the way it was conceptualised as a barrier by international responders. The author's argument against the notion that culture is a *cause* of anything is extremely useful and offers a different framework for considering international-community interaction in future epidemics. As such it should be read by those who are in a position to influence these courses of events.

However, now that the dust has settled, if this is to be a (much-needed) resource for future epidemics, then international and African elite viewpoints are rather absent. This is not the focus of the book, but while there are no perspectives from international responders - beyond some official messages and a brief description of Community Learning for Ebola Action - or national elites as to whether lessons might be learned from their angle, an opportunity to push home the conclusions is missed.

Second, the data is considerable but confined to the South and East of Sierra Leone and three villages from the furthest south of the Northern Province: is the story then missing a significant picture from the North? Places like Kambia and Port Loko, for example, experienced the end of the epidemic through Operation Northern Push and popular contestations up to the last positive swab in January 2016 in Magburaka, followed by riots associated with the last quarantine and the closing of the Bamoi market. The book was written during the epidemic and so cannot capture everything, but a note of caution and a critical and historically-grounded analysis of regional diversity are probably necessary.

Finally, the book has something very important to say about Sierra Leonean governance structures but broadly and perplexingly shies away. When it comes to the potential 'co-production of material and social solutions' (p.145), it is the community in general that is to provide the latter element. However, this seems to rely on a fairly homogenous and harmonious understanding of 'community'. Who were and who might in the future be the drivers of learning and behavioural change? Secret society heads are identified as having played a key role and as having a place in the post-epidemic setting, while the institution of chieftaincy, despite being lauded in the analysis, is not considered for the future. The debate over the role of chiefs in Sierra Leone – from war-villains to war-heroes; from anachronism to legitimate institution; from part of the post-war problem to part of the solution – is longstanding. Thus, taking a step further, a critical question is as follows: if (some) chiefs were trusted above central state and international institutions and played such an important role in mobilising communities, what does this mean for post-Ebola governance structures?

The importance of this work for fighting future epidemics cannot be overstated. Extending its remit would however have pushed home the overarching points and made valuable commentary on the extremely thorny issue of governance in Sierra Leone.

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