

Strengthening Risk Communication and Community Engagement to Improve One Health in Liberia

A Technical Brief

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Acronyms

EPA	Environmental Protection Agency (of Liberia)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDA	Forestry Department Agency (of Liberia)
JEE	Joint External Evaluation
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture
MOH	Ministry of Health
NPHIL	National Public Health Institute of Liberia
PZD	Priority zoonotic disease
RCCE	Risk communication and community engagement
SBC	Social and behavior change
TWG	Technical working group

Introduction

One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach which recognizes the interconnection between the health of humans, animals, plants, and their shared environment.¹ Using a multisectoral framework, it aims to achieve optimal health outcomes.

A well-coordinated multisectoral approach draws on many stakeholders with diverse backgrounds before, during, and after public health emergencies to assist a country in preventing, preparing for, detecting, and responding to emerging public health threats. A One Health approach also leverages the tools and resources of each member of its network for a shared, sustainable outcome.

The **Liberia One Health Platform** is a collaborative framework that integrates expertise from various sectors like human health, animal health, and environmental health. It aims to address health challenges by recognizing the interconnections between human, animal, and environmental health, promoting cooperation among these sectors to improve health outcomes and prevent diseases that can affect both humans and animals.

Liberia established the One Health Platform in 2017. At first, within Liberia's One Health Platform technical areas, the first edition (2017) of the One Health Coordination Platform Governance Manual embedded risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities into the Emergency Preparedness and Response Technical Working Group (TWG). Liberia established the National One Health Coordination Platform in 2017 and the County One Health Coordination Platform in 2019. During Liberia's first Joint External Evaluation (JEE) in 2016, the JEE team identified Liberia's lack of RCCE coordination and competency as a major gap in the country's capacities to respond to international health regulations.

Since project inception in 2020, Breakthrough ACTION's role has been to establish, strengthen and support risk communication and community engagement systems in Liberia to contribute to improved One Health activities and reductions in zoonotic disease.

Since 2021, with support from Breakthrough ACTION Liberia, the country has made tremendous strides in carving a defined role for RCCE within One Health structures² at the national and subnational levels. Once undeveloped and underutilized, RCCE since has emerged as a strong technical area within the Liberia One Health Platform.

¹ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *One Health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/index.html>

² The Liberia One Health structure involves collaboration between multiple sectors like human health, animal health, and the environment to address health challenges. The structure typically includes government bodies, health organizations, veterinary services, and environmental agencies working together to promote health and prevent diseases across humans, animals, and ecosystems.

Objective

This technical brief aims to identify key achievements while also highlighting insights and best practices adopted by government stakeholders supporting interventions using One Health in Liberia. This brief also documents significant contributions to establishing and strengthening Liberia’s RCCE efforts at the national and subnational levels. Specifically, the brief outlines the following accomplishments:



- **2021: Operationalizing the RCCE TWG to Leverage Expertise and**

Resources: Liberia updated the National One Health Governance Manual to include RCCE. As a result, Breakthrough ACTION Liberia established and trained the national RCCE TWG before an inaugural meeting in November 2021. Later that year, Breakthrough ACTION and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) jointly conducted a training of trainers for representatives from 15 counties.

- **2022: Establishing subnational One Health RCCE TWGs across all counties of Liberia:** RCCE trainings cascaded across 12 Breakthrough ACTION-supported counties to establish RCCE at the subnational level. As a result, 15 RCCE TWGs (one for each of the 15 counties) form in 2022.
- **2023: Harmonizing One Health Messages through official national guidelines:** Liberia’s Ministry of Health official signs a multisectoral National One Health Message Guide. RCCE stakeholders have already started using the guide during response efforts for Lassa fever, rabies, and anthrax.

This technical brief will also explore remaining challenges and barriers to the function of the One Health approach at both national and subnational levels and propose recommendations to improve emergency preparedness, county coordination, and priority zoonotic disease (PZD) prevention in Liberia.

One Health and RCCE in Liberia

Following the devastation of the 2014–2016 Ebola epidemic in Liberia, the Ministry of Health (MOH), in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), the Forestry Department Agency (FDA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) established the One Health Coordination Platform in 2017 to “effectively coordinate the One Health approach across the country ensuring multi-sector participation, resource mobilization, accountability, and transparency with acceptable values.”³

The Government of Liberia, in collaboration with partners and stakeholders, exerted considerable effort at national and subnational levels to strengthen preparedness and response mechanisms, as well as prevent and control the spread of zoonotic and non-zoonotic diseases. Following the revision of the governance manual in 2021, the One Health Platform expanded, strengthened, and institutionalized its use of the One Health approach. Rather than operating as discrete sectors, the MOH, MOA, and EPA, along with their partners, began to work as a cohesive unit. This especially strengthened the national and subnational RCCE efforts which, initially, focused more on the national level and did not include an intentional focus on RCCE within the governing framework.



Man reviews Lassa fever prevention poster. Credit: Breakthrough ACTION Liberia

³ Liberia One Health Platform. (2021). *One Health Coordination Platform governance manual (2nd ed.)*. Government of Liberia Ministry of Health. <https://onehealthliberia.org/download/one-health-coordination-platform-governance-manual-2nd-edition>

Achievements in One Health RCCE in Liberia

Since the inception of the One Health Platform in Liberia, the RCCE TWG has made tremendous strides. Key achievements follow.

Leveraging Expertise and Resources to Strengthen One Health

Following Liberia's first JEE and its recommendations to improve RCCE, Breakthrough ACTION engaged in several months of advocacy with influential stakeholders across One Health sectors. During this time, the project led a process of drafting and reviewing draft standard operating procedures (SOP) and key roles and responsibilities for RCCE TWGs. After validating the documents, the Government of Liberia, and the One Health Platform prioritized strengthening both national and subnational-level RCCE efforts and thus added to the second edition of the One Health Coordination Platform Governance Manual a mandate for new RCCE TWGs at both levels.

In November 2021, the national RCCE TWG held an inaugural meeting to formalize the national RCCE TWG. This inaugural meeting included a series of presentations, led by the One Health Platform and Breakthrough ACTION, focused on clarifying roles and responsibilities of the RCCE TWG. Meeting participants also formulated a primary objective and historical background for the One Health Platform. Following the meeting, Breakthrough ACTION also provided direct mentorship to RCCE TWG leadership to identify actions that support RCCE system strengthening, including TWG work planning, meeting management, and documentation.

In November and December 2021, Breakthrough ACTION also partnered with FAO to conduct a series of three-day trainings of trainers for representatives from 15 counties to further strengthen their ability to work with RCCE systems. During these sessions, facilitators official introduced the RCCE TWG structure to One Health stakeholders from all 15 counties. Due to this continued series of activities, Liberia started to shift from scattered RCCE efforts to having an active and coordinated TWG at the national level and in all 15 counties of Liberia.

Maximizing Coordination for Improved RCCE by Training RCCE Stakeholders at the National and Subnational Level

In 2021, the updated One Health Governance Manual called for the establishment of an active One Health RCCE TWG at the national level and in each county. In 2022, considering the roles and responsibilities outlined for the One Health Platform within the revised manual, Breakthrough ACTION provided technical support in training of 74 national and



Community engagement for rabies prevention. Credit: Breakthrough ACTION Liberia



One Health Message Guide Workshop in March 2022. Credit: Breakthrough ACTION Liberia

subnational level RCCE stakeholders through 13 One Health RCCE county-based step-down training sessions to reach 569 individuals.

Each RCCE TWG training included representatives from MOA, MOH, EPA, NPHIL, the Ministry of Commerce, FDA, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Training topics included an overview of a One Health Approach, RCCE TWG terms of reference, principles of RCCE, an introduction to social and behavior change (SBC), and practical exercises to apply new knowledge and skills. As part of each training activity, Breakthrough ACTION worked with County Health Teams to establish WhatsApp closed user groups to facilitate information sharing. Bringing together multiple national and county stakeholders enabled all sectors to understand key roles and responsibilities while also showcasing the diversity of the RCCE TWG developing new linkages between sectors to support streamlined action for future public health threats.

Across Liberia, One Health RCCE TWGs hold regular monthly coordination meetings that bring together stakeholders from key sectors and partners to discuss, plan, and jointly execute RCCE activities. National RCCE TWG members also joined county TWGs, as did other stakeholders such as the World Health Organization, GIZ, Partners in Health, UNICEF, International Rescue Committee, STOP Spillover, and the Africa One Health University Network. The WhatsApp groups reduce response time, especially during potential outbreaks. For example, during a recent cluster of deaths in cattle in Lofa County, the RCCE TWG shared key details via the WhatsApp group, including daily updates, meeting invites, and photos from the joint investigation happening in Lofa.

Harmonizing Messages using a One Health Message Guide for Priority Zoonotic Diseases

In 2022, the One Health Platform, including national and subnational RCCE TWG stakeholders and partners collaboratively worked to develop a National One Health Message Guide for Priority Zoonotic Diseases. In March 2022, Breakthrough ACTION conducted a message development workshop that

brought together national and county-level RCCE TWG members from all sectors and from across the country. The final guide provides standardized, validated, and adaptable communication messages about PZDs for multiple audiences that stakeholders can quickly leverage during a public health emergency. Previously, each sector developed messages independently, without a One Health perspective. This uncoordinated, muddled approach led to messages that were complex, confusing, and unresponsive to community concerns, and they negatively impacted efforts to contain outbreaks by amplifying fear and spurring mistrust, contributing to the spread of misinformation and rumors. Since its development, the guide has informed the design of activities and materials which raise awareness, promote healthy behaviors, and engage communities in the prevention and management of zoonotic diseases. Liberia’s Ministry of Health signed the guide in 2023.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite advances in RCCE within the Liberia One Health Platform, several gaps limit further progress.

A lack of direct financial support from the Government of Liberia to the One Health Platform affects the speed, methods, and sustainability of responses to disease outbreaks and other public health events. When public health threats emerge, the One Health Platform must first mobilize resources—as it heavily relies on donor support—to support mobilization, investigation, and subsequent response steps. The lack of resources delays response and undermines sustainability. This gap also impacts the RCCE TWGs, because some groups met infrequently due to a lack of logistical support. Sustainability will dramatically improve if the government takes ownership of and provides direct budgetary support to the One Health Platform.

Liberia also has no national One Health RCCE strategy. Developing one would be a major next step to align RCCE partners on a shared vision, maximize resources, build consensus on effective RCCE tactics in Liberia, and expand available national-level documentation to guide RCCE stakeholders in Liberia. Currently, when emergencies occur, RCCE stakeholders take a crisis approach, which places an outsized focus on response and a limited focus on proactive measures that RCCE stakeholders can take to prevent such emergencies. A results-oriented strategy would accelerate actions for continued coordination, collaboration, and communication between sectors at all levels and address the need for RCCE actions both before and after a crisis. An inclusive strategy would outline the roles of a broad spectrum of stakeholders and promote linkages between the national and subnational levels. A progressive strategy would identify opportunities (beyond refresher training) to elevate RCCE in Liberia through strengthening the capacity of RCCE stakeholders at the national level. These may include age-appropriate opportunities at primary, secondary, and tertiary degree-granting institutions to engage stakeholders on awareness and prevention efforts for PZDs, training in RCCE, training in SBC, building deeper understanding of health communication and emergency/disaster response, and learning reporting processes. Other pathways to advance the One Health approach include integration across various additional sectors and line ministries, seeking additional political will for operationalizing One

Health approaches, and developing and implementing national RCCE and SBC policies that promote One Health principles at subnational, national, and global levels and support and fund interdisciplinary research, data sharing, and community outreach activities.

Limited involvement of select line ministries and agencies in the One Health Platform negatively impacts the potential of the One Health Platform as it creates a gap in successfully operationalizing the One Health concept. Despite efforts throughout 2021, 2022, and 2023 to mobilize a broad range of partners, some line ministries demonstrate limited interest. For example, the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Authority is not attending One Health RCCE meetings and is not involved in RCCE activities, so capturing marine or fisheries-related activities in RCCE responses is difficult.

Looking Ahead

Moving forward, the One Health Platform in Liberia will continue to evolve. Improved availability of updated documentation (e.g., the National One Health Message Guide for Priority Zoonotic Diseases and the One Health Coordination Platform Governance Manual), capacity strengthening opportunities, and resources have led to current improvements. Additional funding to and focus on RCCE will result in operational effectiveness, effective communication, and reduced morbidity and mortality. Moving forward, sustainable funding, a clear vision, and the buy-in of additional lines ministries will help expand the footprint and effectiveness of RCCE in Liberia. The national level One Health RCCE TWG should focus on capacity strengthening at all levels to train TWG members, government officials, and community influential leaders (among other groups) on zoonotic disease prevention through SBC and effective RCCE design, implementation, and monitoring to contribute to policies and strategies to elevate national RCCE interventions to be on par with regional and international levels.



A woman holds a domesticated animal. Credit: Lindsey Leslie