

“Stopping Dog Bites” Campaign Changes Behaviors Around Rabies Prevention in Sierra Leone

Summary

Breakthrough ACTION, the flagship social and behavior change project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (FY 2017–2022), supports the people of Sierra Leone in a variety of technical areas. This includes helping the government to prevent dog bites and rabies through increased awareness of these risks, how to prevent them, and what to do if bitten by a dog. This support also consists of strengthening reporting channels within and between sectors for improved surveillance and response to dog bites. There is an Animal Welfare and Protection model Bill that includes responsible dog ownership and management, however few community members have access to rabies vaccines and limited information about the disease, make it challenging to work towards the global and national goal of eliminating rabies by 2030. . To address these challenges, the Breakthrough ACTION Project worked with the Government of Sierra Leone to develop a national campaign to prevent dog bites and rabies and to spur action among communities. This campaign also created an opportunity for Breakthrough ACTION to strengthen the One Health partners’ capacity to better coordinate with one another and anticipate, communicate about, and manage dog bites and rabies.

Context

Studies on dog populations and their human relationships in Sierra Leone show that rabies has always existed in Sierra Leone, but the 1991–2002 civil war contributed to increased migration of dogs to major



*Rabies campaign poster in Sierra Leone.
Source: Breakthrough ACTION*





Red Cross volunteers carrying out community engagement in Bombali district. Source: Breakthrough ACTION

cities and towns in search of food and shelter. This unexpected migration drastically added to increase the number of dogs which already existed in major cities and towns. Irresponsible dog ownership and non-compliance with dog vaccination (sometimes due to lack of knowledge) also contribute to the increase in dog population, especially that of free roaming dogs. Moreover, due to misperceptions, many community members attribute death associated with rabies to witchcraft. Other factors, such as a lack of policies on dog ownership and management, lack of information on rabies, and lack of trained veterinarians and wildlife specialists, prevent the country from eradicating the disease completely.

Social and Behavior Change Approach

Both to address the issues around awareness and knowledge of risks to health from animal-human interactions and to improve reporting in the country, Breakthrough ACTION partnered with the Government of Sierra Leone to develop a national communication campaign to prevent dog bites and rabies. Taking advantage of the existing One Health platform, the project developed the campaign and implemented it in close collaboration with Sierra Leone's One Health Risk Communication Technical Working Group (OHRCTWG) to ensure that the response was implemented through a multisectoral and interdisciplinary approach. As a result, Breakthrough ACTION and the government of Sierra Leone launched the "Stopping Dog Bites Helps Stop Rabies" campaign in November 2019. To achieve campaign objectives, the project used a blended advocacy, community engagement, and mass media campaign to leverage the strengths of each approach. While the mass media activities had national reach, the campaign also included the implementation of community-level activities in 16 communities in the Bombali district. To ensure local buy-in and to initiate the community engagement process, OHRCTWG held a series of meetings at the beginning of the campaign to orient local chiefs from the target

communities and build rapport and collaborative relationships with them. These orientation sessions created an opportunity for the working group to learn from the local chiefs and community stakeholders about their knowledge, concerns, challenges, and successes related to dog bites and rabies in their communities. The campaign also included community mobilization and interpersonal communication, which were carried out by the Red Cross volunteers from the 16 communities. To encourage individuals to remember the messages and take action, campaign implementers produced print materials and distributed them to the general public, community-level reporting points, and health workers in all districts and government facilities.

Key activities

The campaign launched in November 2019 and ran for eleven months. To maintain the visibility of the campaign on a daily basis and to ensure maximum reach and exposure, all activities—including mass media and community engagement activities at the district and community levels—ran simultaneously. Overall, the campaign reached an estimated 2.5 million people with lifesaving messages.



Orientation in the Rapolon community. Source: Breakthrough ACTION

Radio programs

Breakthrough ACTION and its partners developed one campaign song, three radio spots, and two Q&A radio spots, which were aired two to three times per day through 20 stations across the country for 11 months. This intervention was specifically targeted at the general public with an interactive, engaging, and educational program in three local languages: Krio, Mende, and Temne.

Print materials

The project produced posters for the general public, reminder cards for the community and job aids for health workers and these were distributed in all districts and government health facilities.

Other supporting and reinforcing community activities

Working with OHRCTWG and 133 local Red Cross volunteers, Breakthrough ACTION designed and implemented community engagement activities in 16 communities for five months. Breakthrough ACTION trained Red Cross volunteers across three themes: (1) the risks of dog bites and rabies, (2) how to prevent dog bites, and (3) what to do if bitten. Red Cross volunteer team leads also received orientation through monthly stakeholder meetings, which was a winning strategy because they were able to establish relationships with the community animal health workers and community health workers in their communities. In addition, 130 community stakeholders and 1,300 government health facilities across the districts received orientation on dog bites and rabies.

Social media activities

As a complement to mass media and community activities, Breakthrough ACTION developed a WhatsApp group to extend the reach of the campaign. Throughout the campaign period, the WhatsApp group had over 342 active members. The content of the WhatsApp group exchanges included sharing of updates, materials, and encouragement.



Campaign mobilizers engage in outreach onboard the Freetown-Lungi ferry. Source: Breakthrough ACTION

Monitoring and Impact

Before the campaign started, Breakthrough ACTION carried out a baseline outcomes assessment related to zoonotic diseases, including rabies, in the Bombali district (June 2018). After less than two years of implementation, the 2021 endline outcome assessment showed that the “Stopping Dog Bites Helps Stop Rabies” campaign not only increased awareness around dog bites and rabies but also prompted actions by community leaders and contributed to behavior change among dog owners particularly and community members in general. In addition, Breakthrough ACTION and partners’ actions at the community level brought community leaders from three communities in Bombali district (Kapethe, Manjro, and Masongbo Loko) together, which enabled them to put in place bylaws to ensure proper care of dogs. The project’s relentless work with communities fueled an increase in dog registration in a number of districts. Data from the endline outcome assessment revealed that knowledge of rabies risk increased from 86% in 2018 to 97% in 2021. Knowledge of when to report actual/suspected illness from animals increased from 67% in 2018 to 88% in 2021. Due to high exposure to the campaign, knowledge of rabies prevention rose from 69% in 2018 to 84% in 2021. The same endline assessment results reported that people were more likely to take action to prevent dog bites if they were exposed to campaign messages, as compared to those unexposed, 87.7% versus 51.1%.

Lessons Learned

The desired impact for this project was increased awareness of risks of dog bites and rabies, how to prevent dog bites, and what to do if bitten. In addition, the project aimed to strengthen reporting channels within and between sectors for improved surveillance and response to dog bites.

Tailored messages can address lack of awareness and knowledge of risks to health from animal-human interaction, thereby improving knowledge of rabies prevention strategies

Breakthrough ACTION’s endline outcome assessment illustrated that the campaign’s messaging is significantly associated with behavior change around dog bites and rabies.

Campaigns like this work best by employing a media-mixed strategy.

Breakthrough ACTION's multi-channel campaign created measurable change in behaviors among exposed audience members. Audience members exposed to the campaign were significantly more likely to have improved knowledge of rabies risk, rabies transmission, and prevention, and they were more likely to report actual/suspected illness from animals.

Ownership and management of rabies prevention activities need to shift to community members.

Breakthrough ACTION's community engagement activities helped strengthen relationships and collaboration between community leaders, the Red Cross team, community animal health workers, and community health workers at the community level. This collaboration will likely have a greater chance of lasting if ownership and management of rabies prevention shifts to community members.

Communication campaign for rabies needs to continue and scale up.

While the community developed an increased awareness and knowledge of risks to health from animal-to-human interactions and their knowledge of rabies prevention strategies improved, most of the activities conducted during this campaign focused on one district of Sierra Leone. Expanding the program to other districts may complement other ongoing rabies prevention activities.

Collaboration across sectors and technical areas will improve success of the One Health approach.

Experience from implementing the campaign demonstrates that collaboration among animal and human health sectors in data sharing as well as advocacy across the relevant sectors and community members, are key to successfully implementing the One Health approach.

For additional information and to review Breakthrough ACTION's other behavior change activities and materials about dog bites and rabies in Sierra Leone, contact James Fofanah at jfofanah1@jhu.edu.

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