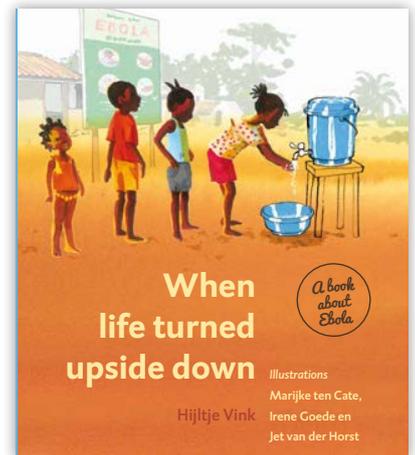


“When Life Turned Upside Down”

Sekou’s Story:

The Power of a Children’s Book
in the Wake of Ebola



There are often limited psychosocial support resources available during a disaster, and children need resources tailored to their own stages of cognitive development. The Ebola Crisis Fund supported an innovative project to design, print, and distribute an illustrated children’s book in Liberia to assist in their recovery. The project was a collaboration between the fund’s Liberia program manager Adrienne Blomberg; author Hiltje Vink; illustrators Marijke ten Cate, Irene Goede, and Jet van der Horst; Dutch publishing firm Royal Jongbloed; and the fund’s implementing partners in Liberia.

For most children in Liberia, Ebola is the most traumatic thing they have experienced, next to their memories of the civil war. Few agencies and volunteers are able to provide more than kind words and a listening ear to help them through the trauma, despite the great need for counseling resources and materials for the recovery process.

The Ebola Crisis Fund’s program manager in Liberia recognized the immediate need for a tool for parents, family guardians, church leaders, and other adults to help Liberian children process and understand the immense tragedy of Ebola. She contacted colleagues in Holland with expertise in writing children’s books for post-trauma recovery contexts. A group of writers, illustrators, and publishers volunteered time, expertise, and resources to support production of a book developed specifically for Liberian children. The Ebola Crisis Fund allocated grant funds to support the printing, shipping, training sessions, and distribution of the first-ever children’s book on Ebola along with an exercise book for children in Liberia to work through psychological trauma with guided supervision.

Leaders from across Liberia learned how to use the book and counseling workbook to help children deal with trauma. When initial demand outpaced our supplies, the Ebola Crisis Fund allocated support for an additional 20,000 books to be printed and distributed.

Within six months, the project team co-edited, published, and printed 20,000 books, which were shipped from Holland to Liberia for distribution. The fund’s Liberia program manager coordinated distribution activities, including a launch attended by Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Leaders from across Liberia learned how to use the book and counseling workbook to help children deal with trauma. When initial demand outpaced our supplies, the Ebola Crisis Fund allocated support for an additional 20,000 books to be printed and distributed.

One of the children who received the book is Sekou, a 15-year-old boy who was raised solely by his mother. When Ebola struck, Sekou and his mother were both infected. Sekou remembers his mother telling him one night, "Be strong, fight the sickness, do well in school, and grow up into a good person." When he woke up the next morning, he found his mother had died next to him. He was taken to a treatment unit, and he ultimately survived the disease. When he was discharged, his uncle contacted Church Aid Liberia—a grantee who received \$35,000 from the Ebola Crisis Fund. Church Aid Liberia's counselor regularly visited Sekou and helped him to deal with the grief, stigma, and isolation he endured. As an Ebola survivor, Sekou was also experiencing severe physical after-effects, including pain in his joints and extreme abdominal pains.

During this difficult time, Sekou received an Ebola storybook through Church Aid Liberia. According to his counselor, Sekou has read the book every day and completed the workbook activities many times. When asked why he reads it so often, he answered, "It is my story too. I live it and understand what Joshua [the main character] goes through." Certain passages bring tears to his eyes, while others prompt him to sit in deep thought. Sometimes he can smile when he recalls fond memories. The book has helped Sekou validate his feelings, and he can now manage his trauma and grief.

Through the process of his recovery, Sekou formed a close bond with his counselor from Church Aid Liberia. The counselor has grown to love Sekou as one of her own sons, and she has been working with his uncle to arrange for Sekou to live with her family. According to the counselor, "Sekou is one brave young boy."

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