

## Sierra Leone's Community-Centered Approach to COVID-19

By Eunice Naffie Mustapha, LL.B Hons., B.L., & LL.M.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of October 18, 2023, [7,766](#) confirmed cases of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) and 125 deaths have been reported in Sierra Leone. While the pandemic appears to no longer be [a global health emergency](#), health advocates remain concerned about vulnerable populations and nations with [limited resources](#). As the Member States of WHO are putting on their diplomacy hats in the development of a [pandemic treaty](#), I keep thinking of how low and middle-income countries (LMICs) like Sierra Leone have been fighting public health concerns.

### **COVID-19 Memory Lane**

From [rumors to rage](#), COVID-19 first crept into the world and then soared! On January 9, 2020, WHO reported that Chinese authorities had discovered a novel coronavirus, and on [January 13, 2020](#), Thailand became the second country to report a COVID-19 case. The disease rapidly spread from China to various countries in the world, evolving into a [pandemic](#). In the African continent, Egypt was the country with the [first confirmed case](#) on February 14, 2020. And on March 31, 2020, Sierra Leone reported its [first COVID-19 case](#).

### **Communicating Public Health**

‘An [influencer](#) is someone who inspires and guides the actions of others.’ African societies are rooted in [community power](#). In communicating public health, Sierra Leone leveraged its communal structured society, relying on the influence individuals have within their networks. The country had to be strategic in maximizing the [whole-of-society](#) public health intervention approach by using existing resources in its society to respond to COVID-19. One of the initiatives implemented was the ‘[Share4Mama Salone Initiative](#),’ an intergenerational campaign led by Sierra Leoneans from all walks of life including market women, journalists, activists, and artists, among others.

[The National Corona Virus Emergency Response Center \(NaCOVERC\)](#), the focal public health response mechanism, partnered with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in identifying and recruiting ‘[Corona Fet Ambassadors](#).’

As one of the [youth influencers](#) appointed, I had the opportunity to experience firsthand the embracing of patriotism through volunteerism aimed at combatting COVID-19 misinformation and disinformation. The ‘Corona Fet Ambassadors’ were [provided with regular updates](#) about the state of COVID-19 in the country, and they, in turn, were deployed to update their communities. Like the other ambassadors, I also shared [updates](#) on the [state](#) of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone with my network. What was also interesting about the campaign was the intersection between health equity and gender equity, with the inclusion of female leaders in advocacy for the [appropriate use of masks, hand washing, and physical distancing](#).

[During public health crises, influencers are instrumental in advancing strategic public health communication goals to impact social norms](#). Community-centered approaches to health involve [mobilizing assets within the communities](#) including social networks. Establishing trust is a process and it happens over time. [Trust](#) is the added benefit community voices bring with their involvement in promoting the culture of sharing accurate information.

### **What Next for Mama Salone?**

In 2022, the Ministry of Health and Sanitation of Sierra Leone [took over the responsibilities](#) of NaCOVERC. As the world is thinking of ways to better prevent, prepare for, and respond to pandemics, I keep thinking of Sierra Leone. How is Sierra Leone participating in the dialogue on drafting and negotiating an equity-focused pandemic treaty? What influence will the Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness, and Response Accord have on Sierra Leone? What is next for Salone after leveraging influencers by employing a community-centered response to COVID-19? Did the influencers create positive, negative, or no impacts?

“A [new accord](#) could promote political commitment at the highest level, through ensuring an all-of-government and whole-of-society approach within countries...” Sierra Leone has demonstrated her resilience and vibrancy, now it is time to build on those valuable lessons and

deepen the engagement. A community-centered approach strengthens our community and our nation.

### **About Author**

Eunice Naffie Mustapha Esq. is a Public Health Lawyer from Sierra Leone, who has an LL.M in National and Global Health Law and a Certificate in International Human Rights Law from Georgetown University Law Center. She is also an alumna of Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone Law School. She wrote this blog post in support of the work of the Center for Global Africa's Health Equity Network. The Center for Global Africa is an academic think tank that engages in research, consultancy, advocacy and enterprising practices for global African development. The Center offers unique functional frameworks for joint Africa-Diaspora engagement and productivity in partnership with the [African Union](#) and [African Peer Review Mechanism \(APRM\)](#). The Center played an integral role in reviewing this blog post. You can reach Eunice via [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#).