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Ebola: more than a health challenge!

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Ebola: more than a health challenge!

Bonn, 24 September 2014. The Ebola crisis in West Africa has assumed catastrophic proportions. The number of sufferers is doubling every three weeks. On the basis of the current estimate of 2,600 sufferers, this figure is set to rise to at least 166,000 by early 2015 if the rate continues. And things could get worse. So far little is known about how the disease is spreading in rural areas. In Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea governments and aid organisations are struggling to deal with the crisis. Inadequate health facilities, poorly-trained personnel and delays in aid arriving from abroad are exacerbating the situation. Aid organisations such as the World Health Organization or *Médecins Sans Frontières* warn that standard protective measures are no longer sufficient.

Democracy as long-term medicine

Raising awareness of basic hygiene measures, such as washing hands, can save lives in the crisis. Programmes on local radio and internet-based media help to disseminate this important information. If the state has no means of protecting the population, civil society often fills the gap. Associations and religious organisations warn against the risks. For example, on the streets of the Senegalese capital Dakar the rap group "Y en a marre" (Eng.: We've had enough) could recently be heard again. The group released the song "Stop Ebola", which warns about Ebola and describes preventive measures to take. Social mobilisation such as this is only possible in crises when people in the societies affected are able to express themselves freely, organise and live without fear.

A lack of political freedom and mistrust of the state also explain why stemming the disease is proving so slow. In Liberia and Sierra Leone the civil war that raged until 2003 not only destroyed houses, state facilities and roads, but also social cohesion. In Guinea dictators ruled until recently. They not only smothered nascent social involvement but also destroyed the trust of the population in the state apparatus. As a consequence, there was also no trust in the aid workers in the scope of the Ebola campaigns. People often fled from them, regarding them as representatives of the state and therefore a threat. In contexts such as these it can scarcely be expected that social mobilisation can be employed systematically to combat the crisis.

Germany: act fast now and think in the long term

The international community of states has reacted too slowly to the Ebola outbreak, which has been known about since March 2014. This also applies to Germany. There are many reasons for this: the crisis team at the Foreign Office did not provide timely warning or obtain the co-operation of the relevant ministries to establish a coherent strategy. This may also be due to the fact that German capacities are severely stretched as a result of the massive crises in Syria and Ukraine. In addition, international health co-operation has not proved to be a German strength thus far. On the one hand, Germany possesses excellent, internationally-linked microbiological and medical research facilities such as the Robert Koch Institute and the Bernhard Nocht Institute. The German military, too, has expanded its medical service since 2013. However, this has come too late for the acute Ebola crisis.

If Germany intends to actually assume the mantle of global policy shaper, then the German government needs to raise its profile in the Ebola crisis. However, so far no strategy is apparent beyond that of reacting to the increasingly perilous situation in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. A comprehensive strategy of the German government needs to incorporate the capabilities of different ministries: in the short term the *Bundeswehr* is called upon to provide airlifts and medical services in the acute crisis. The Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and the Foreign Office could contribute in the scope of international co-operation and diplomacy. Because in these countries there is a need to establish functioning healthcare systems and support democracy.

Prevention is not only required in the crisis-hit states, but also countries that neighbour Guinea – Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal. The naive idea that the societies here are separated from one another by national borders scarcely tallies with reality. Large stretches of the borders cross rural areas, sometimes demarcating villages. Little is known of interaction between the populations in these cases. For this reason the people and states in the adjoining countries should be prepared for Ebola cases. With the network of political foundations and existing state co-operation with municipalities Germany can make a relevant contribution to raising awareness of the situation.