



## Documentary

### Surviving Ebola virus



#### Survivors

Directed by Arthur Pratt  
Produced by WeOwnTV  
Freetown  
Dec 8, 2018

For *The New York Times* editorial see <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/14/opinion/ebola-and-the-lost-children-of-sierra-leone.html>

"Ebola is not just a health emergency" wrote Chernor Bah, Deputy Speaker for the Sierra Leonean Government, in a 2014 editorial for *The New York Times*. "It is a tragedy that has swept away fragile roots for a new society, put down after the decade of civil war". The Sierra Leonean politician was referring to the Ebola virus outbreak that gripped west Africa between 2014 and 2016, causing the deaths of over 11 000 people. In his opinion piece, Bah describes the streets of Sierra Leone during this period, presenting a grave picture of "fear, suspicion and desperation". In the same year, WHO launched the Ebola Diaries, a series of first-person accounts describing the response to the unprecedented global health crisis. Each archived personal account is a snapshot of the Ebola virus crisis, creating a platform for understanding the social significance of a viral outbreak.

Offering colour to the individual stories of Ebola virus disease is *Survivors*, a feature-length documentary, produced by a west African film team, WeOwnTV Freetown, that covers the outbreak from initial cases to the dismantling of the white-tented emergency clinics. Following successful screenings in Freetown and Amsterdam, the film had its UK premier in front of global health scholars, part of the film crew, and members of the public as part of the Global Health Film Festival at the Wellcome Collection, London, on Dec 8, 2018.

Directed by Arthur Pratt, a pastor and filmmaker in Freetown, the documentary follows various individuals throughout the Ebola virus crisis and aims to capture the local perspectives that Pratt felt were neglected in the mainstream media. An ambulance driver, two nurses, a young boy living on the streets, and Arthur himself are followed by the crew between 2014 and 2017. The result is a powerful ethnography that explores the personal stories of Ebola virus disease and the fractured relationship between international NGOs and the communities they serve. The main protagonist is Mohamed, a well-respected ambulance driver who risks his own health daily transporting patients with Ebola virus disease to the nearest emergency clinic. Regarded as a local hero, Mohamed recalls the deaths of the health workers that have gone before him as another call related to Ebola virus disease comes in. Accompanied by his colleague, nurse Kadija Kanu, he drives quickly to a patient outside Freetown to find that they are unable to walk down the rocky terrain to the ambulance. Mohamed unearths the yellow Hazmat suit with protective mask and carries the patient down the slope to the ambulance. His reluctance to do this is clear; the fear of contracting Ebola virus runs deep, particularly among the health workers. At the tail-end of the outbreak, humanitarian groups crusade into Freetown bringing with them their own drivers, vehicles,

and sense of worth, unceremoniously leaving Mohamed without a job despite the protests of the local people. This, says lead cameraman Barmmy Boy, was the purpose of the film, to show "the perspectives that were not portrayed in the mainstream media channels" and to give a voice to the unsung heroes of this medical war.

The narrative continues to take viewers through the lives of different individuals impacted by Ebola virus. When the crew first meet 14-year-old Foday Koroma, he is living on the street with his friends, trawling through landfill sites for glass bottles to recycle. Defiant throughout, Foday does not share his neighbour's fears of the virus and shows no sign of weakness when describing the endless stream of burials taking place around him. Despite the title *Survivors*, Mohamed, Foday, and the other central characters to the film do not become infected, which leads to the question of whether the title refers to health status or to surviving the fear and the panic that swept across Sierra Leone during this time. Through a local lens, the film explores the turmoil of being banned from human contact, living within quarantines, and dealing with death on a daily basis. The documentary is interspersed with evocative scenes of faceless, protective suits carrying bagged corpses out of homes to the sound of anguished cries from family members. But for every scene of despair, there are moments of tranquillity—particularly in the Ebola clinics, where nurse Margaret Sesay often finds herself alone in the Red Zone praying with the isolated patients, surrounded by letters of encouragement left on the walls. These scenes of peace and faith juxtapose with the cries of inconsolable mothers, further emphasising the brutal realities of living in an outbreak.

Ultimately, the film portrays a side to the Ebola virus outbreak that is rarely seen by the western world, using tenacious realism to show how the virus seeped into the fabric of life of those affected. The dialogue this documentary creates offers a unique opportunity for humanitarian groups to reassess how they respond to public health emergencies in developing countries. The filmmakers hope that, by uploading all the hours of footage they captured online, a conversation to inspire change and to help survivors heal is created. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* readers will be aware of the shortcomings in the preparation for local customs that occurred during the Ebola virus disease response. As I watched *Survivors* I pondered whether filmmaking could be used as an intervention tool for outbreak readiness. I think this documentary says that it has its place.

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