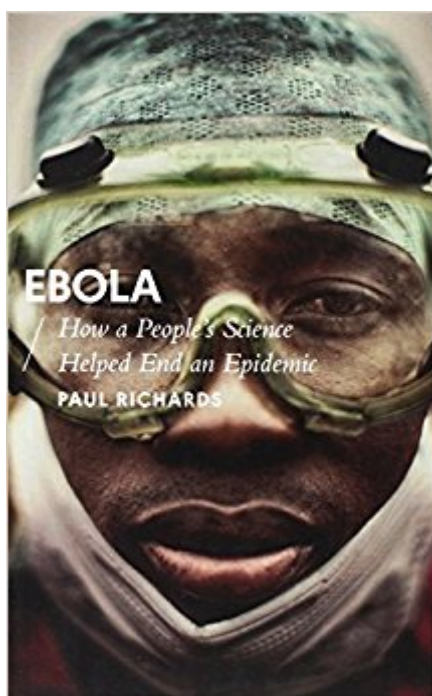


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Ebola: How A People's Science Helped End An Epidemic (African Arguments)



Synopsis

In 2013, the largest Ebola outbreak in history swept across West Africa, claiming thousands of lives in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea and sending the international community into panic. By 2014, experts were grimly predicting that millions would be infected within months, and a huge international control effort was mounted to contain the virus. Yet paradoxically, at this point the disease was already going into decline in Africa itself. Why did outside observers get it so wrong? Paul Richards draws on his extensive firsthand experience in Sierra Leone to argue that the international community's alarmed response failed to take account of local expertise and common sense. Crucially, Richards shows that the humanitarian response to the disease was most effective in those areas where it supported community initiatives already in place, such as giving local people agency in terms of disposing of bodies. In turn, the international response dangerously hampered recovery when it ignored or disregarded local knowledge. One of the first books to provide an in-depth analysis of the recent pandemic, *Ebola* offers a clear-eyed account of how and why the disease spread, and why the predictions of international commentators were so misguided. By learning from these mistakes and successes, we can better understand how to harness the power of local communities during future humanitarian health crises. [Â](#)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

[A](#) valuable reflection of the experiences of affected communities and aid workers in Sierra

Leone. This book is a must for all disease control professionals in Africa and beyond. The book is also exceptionally well written and easily accessible to interested novices. • (Ger J. Steenbergen, First Secretary of Health, Netherlands Embassy in Ghana) • Ebola's focus on the comparatively poorly documented role of local responses to the epidemic makes it a must-read for all involved in epidemics, epidemiology and public health. . . . Richards wisely nods to the key role of national and international epidemic control. But his central thesis is that rapid local adaptation and common sense led to the Ebola epidemic's downturn. He terms this community action a "people's science" of Ebola control. The book abounds with real-life examples from his long-term research in Sierra Leone. • (Nature) • Richards convincingly argues the broader lesson for containing future epidemics should always be a response embracing "common sense, improvisation, distributed practical knowledge, and collective action." • (Publishers Weekly) • Richards offers important insights, especially concerning the central issue of burial practices, one of the epidemic's main routes of infection. . . . Richards's argument is a surprisingly optimistic one. The Ebola epidemic pitted an underfunded and sluggish international public-health infrastructure against supposedly ignorant rural communities. Doomsday did not result. • (Economist) • In this provocative book, Richards argues that the international response may actually have extended the epidemic's duration, as it offered no medical solution (no cure or vaccine is yet available) and slowed the ability of the affected populations to develop the cultural and behavioral adaptations that were ultimately the key to defeating the virus "for example, changes to practices around care for the ill and burial of the dead. Too often, the well-intentioned international response was shaped by a top-down logic that sought to impose novel practices on people rather than work with them to adapt their existing customs to the new reality." • (Foreign Affairs) • Richards a lifelong aid worker and researcher, has penned a foundational text informed by his years of experience in Africa "specifically, Sierra Leone. . . . The work's key strength is that it provides a strong profile on local knowledge as it relates to community health and population health in times of epidemic. • (Choice) • [A] first-hand analysis of the complicated situation that arose from the outbreak, a fascinating story of the success and failures of experts, volunteers, and village people. . . . Eye-opening reading. • (Medicine, Conflict and Survival) • In this provocative book, Richards argues that the international response may actually have extended the epidemic's duration. • (Foreign Affairs) • Ebola is not, however, a story of the epidemic, even if much of the story is woven into it. It is rather a handbook and a message of instruction for handling future outbreaks. • (Times Literary Supplement) • Excellent and innovative. . . . Thoroughly researched. • (The Conversation)

Paul Richards is emeritus professor of technology and agrarian development at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. He is the author of *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, among other books. Â

Ebola is but one of many events threatening not just the human life but the social system that makes life possible today - and learning how a social response apart from the medical should be wielded is very much the part of this book and reviewed in full detail.

Very informative lots of good information in this book

Having worked in the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, I wanted to very much to learn from this book. Unfortunately, the pages are loaded with inaccuracies, and it is quite evident that the author, an anthropologist, did not work on the containment response. Whatever happened to participant observation? Instead, the book implicitly aggrandizes the role of anthropologists in bringing 'people's science' to the attention of international responders. [SPOILER]...public health officials could have learned much from local actors. Guess what? All of us were inept; there's no basis for triumphalism. The author downplays the role of underdevelopment and poverty in driving the epidemic and actually states, "having a better-funded treatment environment is not the answer." Why did the US have such a limited outbreak then? Why was mortality among health workers repatriated to the US less than 10% when it was 50-70% in West Africa. Richards supports his conclusions with data from a methodologically suspect, 'randomized' survey conducted by him and his research team during the peak of the epidemic. Why is this a single author work then? Probably because the anachronisms of the anthropological profession are hard to shake. That a white man lives thirty plus years in an African country does not make him expert on any event that occurs there. To take him at his word, if he is seriously reporting people's scientific findings, has he not committed plagiarism by leaving them off the author list? (Not an accusation...more like a *reductio ad absurdum* of the entire book.)

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