

Talking liver cancer with farming communities in Sierra Leone

Overview and Context

Gibril Kallon, a researcher in UCL Medical Physics and Biomedical Engineering, travelled to Sierra Leone to engage with farming communities about liver cancer and potential tools for detecting some of the most common causes.

Gibril successfully pitched for funding through Focus on the Positive, an event led by the UCL Public Engagement team that enables a public audience to pick and fund its favourite research impact activities.

When he reached Sierra Leone, Gibril found that priorities were quite different to his own, so he adapted his plan to work with breast cancer charities in London and Freetown, supporting their work to raise the profile of breast cancer, overcome taboos and encourage discussion about the disease.



Concord Times, 23 August, 2013

Project need, aims, and what happened next:

Aflatoxins in spoilt staple foods like peanuts, maize and rice are connected to a high rate of liver cancer in Sierra Leone.

Gibril's plan was to talk sensitively with farming communities about the possibilities of UV detection of aflatoxins, and about how to combat cancer through changes to food storage methods.

Having worked from London to build relevant contacts in Sierra Leone, Gibril arrived in July 2013 to find some relationships were more fruitful than others: the organisations he had contacted had their own priorities. Despite facing brick walls and dead ends, Gibril didn't give up on his plan: instead he adjusted it. Gibril made contact with breast cancer organisation [Thinking Pink](#).

At a screening day performed at a farmer's market in Waterloo, outside Freetown, with 190 girls and women from local villages (particularly high rates of breast cancer affect 14-15 year old girls in Sierra Leone), he talked to people, answering questions about cancer, raising awareness of symptoms and informing people about support available.

He made contact with a local paper and prompted two articles about cancer. Gibril was a guest on a national radio talk show in Sierra Leone where he raised awareness of cancer and answered listeners' questions. One of the outcomes from Gibril's radio appearance was that Thinking Pink have met the President former First Lady of Sierra Leone to develop an action plan for educating communities about cancer.

Facts and Figures

190 girls and women from local villages attending Waterloo screening day

Two newspaper articles covering Gibril's visit and discussing cancer

One national radio broadcast

£2000 budget, covering:

- Charitable donations
- Equipment purchase for Sierra Leone Cancer Registry
- Contribution towards travel

In conclusion, Gibril writes:

“I found that the some contacts I made all had their own priorities, and the project was rather messy because of this. The first week of being in Sierra Leone was rather stressful, as things were not going as I planned, but then things started to come together, they started to coagulate. To date, my role has mainly been making contacts linked to the subject of cancer in Sierra Leone, and enabling brokerage and networking with those contacts.

I think this is just Phase 1 of the project, and this phase is completed... it has been completely different to what I pitched and planned. This resulting project has been the step I needed to do before going into the original planned project. I have found that there is a real need to create links between people and organisations working in this field in Sierra Leone, and how there is a real need for information on the topic of cancer.

The story, so far, is a bit of a cautionary tale; I would say it is important to manage disappointment, and that you have to plan to be flexible and accept that things change. I would also say it was a motivating story as there has been some good that has come out of it, partly by sticking to my initial goals.

The moral of the story is to be flexible when working with people. You need to be flexible to allow for input, allow for change.

I think my FotP story describes a problem. I thought I had a solution to the problem but what I have done with the Focus on the Positive funding is go to Sierra Leone and understand the problem.”

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Learning from the Process

What worked well?

Reaching a large audience to break down taboos around cancer and share information.

Creating networks and brokering relationships between key players in cancer in Sierra Leone.

Gibril responding flexibly to the reality of the project and developing new activities that met his broad aims.

Key learning

Flexibility is central to public engagement. Projects must be allowed to change.

It's crucial to learn to listen to people talking about a problem that you think you already understand.

It's important to speak different languages at different levels, and gauge what people understand and need to hear: whether talking with people in a market or with the Minister of Agriculture.

Making one's own contacts overseas is vital.