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AFRICA

Ebola Funds Pledged for Recovery Are Slow to Come

Donors offered \$4.5 billion after deadly outbreak, but less than a third of that money is reported to have been disbursed, a new U.N. tracking initiative says

By *Betsy McKay*

Updated March 20, 2018 4:55 p.m. ET

Less than a third of the \$4.5 billion pledged in 2015 to help three countries in West Africa recover from a devastating Ebola epidemic is reported to have been disbursed, according to a new tracking initiative developed by the United Nations and their three governments.

The U.S., World Bank, African Development Bank and at least 17 other donors had committed funds to help Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone stabilize their economies and strengthen their health systems to prevent another epidemic. The three countries laid out recovery plans for 2015 through 2017.

As of late January, those donors had disbursed \$1.32 billion of the total amount pledged, according to the Ebola Recovery Tracking Initiative, formed by the office of Paul Farmer, the U.N. secretary-general's special adviser on Community-Based Medicine and Lessons from Haiti.

Dr. Farmer said the shortfall reflects a perpetual problem after humanitarian crises: People move on, and development funding to help prevent the next catastrophe is slow to come. U.S. funding to help countries build their defenses against epidemics may be scaled back substantially in fiscal 2019.

International donations for recovery and development are rarely tracked, according to Dr. Farmer's U.N. office, which also documented funding pledges made to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and cholera epidemic there. Three years after the earthquake, 56% of funds pledged for recovery had been disbursed, according to his office.

"We have an attention-deficit-disorder approach to disaster and mayhem," said Dr. Farmer, who is also chief strategist and co-founder of Partners in Health, a Boston-based charity that works in Sierra Leone, Liberia and several other countries. "If you don't have a strong health system, you can't detect epidemics, much less respond to them."

Jehane Sedky, senior adviser in Dr. Farmer's office, said that disbursement amounts are the most recent reported by each donor, and the tracking initiative will be refreshed as donors update their disbursements.

She requested updates from all donors in December and January, she said.

The World Bank said it has disbursed more than reported to the tracking initiative—about 80% of a \$1.62 billion contribution it announced in 2015. "We remain committed to the full recovery of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia from the devastation caused by Ebola and continue to work with them in areas such as regional disease surveillance, trade and investment for the long term," the bank said in a statement.

A U.S. Agency for International Development official said that as of six months ago, the agency had disbursed more than \$310 million for recovery and rebuilding, exceeding the pledged amount.

Two other large donors, the African Development Bank and Islamic Development Bank, didn't



A file photo of a health center in a remote Liberian village, from April 27, 2016. Small health centers like this one in Mendicorma, which sits along the border between Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, have been at the forefront of the fight against the Ebola epidemic. PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

respond to requests for comment.

More than 28,600 people contracted Ebola in an epidemic that started in a village in Guinea in late 2013 and erupted into a humanitarian crisis in 2014 across all three countries. At least 11,300 died, and it took hundreds of millions of dollars in international assistance to subdue its spread.

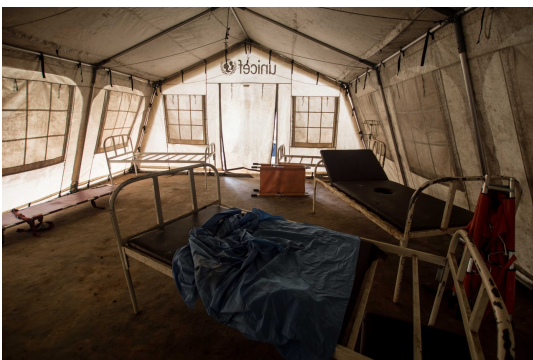
Many people lost multiple family members; survivors suffered lingering side effects, including vision problems, joint pain and depression. The crisis caused “significant contraction” in GDP in the three countries, according to the World Bank.

Dr. Farmer’s office said it was unable to obtain any disbursement data from six donors, which pledged a total of \$1.36 billion.

Tracking holds donors accountable and helps recipient governments keep on top of how much of the funding that was pledged is actually coming in, Bernice Dahn, who was Liberia’s health minister from 2015 until January, said in an interview. She called the Ebola recovery tracking initiative “helpful.”

“Collective effort is required to ensure accountability and transparency for all and effective and efficient use of donor resources,” she said.

Most of the funds for Ebola weren’t channeled through the Liberian government, she said, going directly instead to nonprofit or other aid groups.



An archive photo of an abandoned Ebola treatment center in Freetown, Sierra Leone, from Nov. 3, 2016. PHOTO: OLIVIA ACLAND/BARCROFT IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

The government still doesn’t have the funds it needs to rebuild adequately, according to Dr. Dahn. “The Ebola outbreak resulted in a sharp decline in Liberia’s economy that was growing steadily from 15 years of civil conflict,” she said. “The government’s effort to recover from the economic shock has been slow and characterized by budget shortfalls over the past three years.”

Of the \$1.32 billion that was disbursed to the three countries for post-Ebola recovery, \$581.6 million went to their government agencies rather than outside nonprofit groups or other

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nongovernmental organizations, said Ms. Sedky from Dr. Farmer's office. Funding governments directly allows them to enact their recovery plans and strengthens their institutions, she said.

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