Policy Briefing:

One Year of the Cameroon Town Hall: Lessons and Next Steps for Diaspora Engagement in Health

---

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in May 2021, which marked the Town Hall's first anniversary and focused on its first year, vaccine hesitancy and the way forward.

Context:

The Town Hall began in 2020 as a COVID-19 forum linking Cameroonian health professionals abroad with colleagues at home. By May 2021 it counted 1,012 registered members from more than 30 countries and had held fortnightly sessions on a wide range of topics. Cameroon's COVID-19 vaccine coverage was about 0.1 percent.

Key Issues:

1. **Low vaccine uptake:** Coverage remained very low, and hesitancy among health workers was undermining community confidence.
2. **Weak surveillance and public health funding:** The pandemic showed gaps in disease surveillance and long-standing under-investment in public health.
3. **Knowledge without action:** Members asked that discussions lead to research, mentorship and practical projects.
4. **Staffing at referral hospitals:** At Bamenda Regional Hospital only 167 of 510 staff are government employed.
5. **Language:** Sessions had been mostly in English, limiting French-speaking participation.

Discussion Highlights:

- No single intervention reduces vaccine hesitancy; tailored, multi-component approaches work best.
- Health workers need training to communicate about vaccines.
- CME accreditation, mentorship matching and research collaborations were proposed.
- Hospital leaders welcomed diaspora support for specific projects.

- Plans were announced to invite the Minister of Public Health.

Recommendations:

- **Tailored vaccine confidence strategy:** MINSANTE and the Expanded Programme on Immunisation should identify hesitant groups by region, engage religious and traditional leaders, and use reminder messages, rather than relying on posters and radio alone.
- **Train health workers first:** Regional delegations should run vaccine communication training for health workers, so that they are confident to vaccinate and to counsel others.
- **Strengthen surveillance:** MINSANTE and partners should invest in laboratory and genomic surveillance, drawing on diaspora expertise in pooled testing and variant detection.
- **Structured diaspora partnerships:** Hospitals such as Bamenda Regional Hospital should publish priority projects (ICU, dialysis, training) so that diaspora professionals can support them in a coordinated way.
- **Recognised continuing education:** The Town Hall should seek CME or CPD accreditation for its sessions, with recordings and short assessments, and the Cameroon medical and nursing orders should recognise them.
- **Bilingual access:** The Town Hall should recruit French-speaking presenters and co-moderators and issue bilingual flyers.

Next Steps: The Town Hall planned to pursue research collaborations, mentorship, CME accreditation, French-language moderation, and an invitation to the Minister of Public Health. The next session was set for June 5, 2021.

Conclusion: In its first year the Town Hall built a respectful, wide professional network around COVID-19 and beyond. Members agreed that the next step is to turn that network into research, training and concrete support for health services in Cameroon.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of May 22, 2021. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZd2jh28tOg