Policy Briefing:

Reaching Cameroon's Last-Mile Communities with Community Oriented Primary Care

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on 12 February 2022, focusing on the theme "Healthcare Access in Underserved Communities: A Community Oriented Primary Care Approach," presented by Dr. Sangwe Clovis Nchinjoh, founder of Rural Doctors and CHAI Associate Routine Immunization Officer for missed communities.

Context:

Some Cameroonian communities, such as the 47 islands of Manoka Health District near Douala, have no health centres, no electricity at the district hospital, one boat a day and very low immunisation coverage. Their number has never been measured. Vertical programmes struggle there, and outbreaks such as cholera spread easily.

Key Issues:

1. **Physical inaccessibility:** Island and enclaved communities depend on rare, costly or unsafe transport, and night travel is often impossible, making emergency obstetric care and referral unreachable.
2. **Basic facility gaps:** A district hospital without electricity, blood transfusion or general anaesthesia forced a caesarean section under local anaesthesia and torchlight.
3. **Programmes that ignore local priorities:** Vaccination and hygiene campaigns fail when they arrive alone in communities facing hunger, cholera and maternal deaths, and when community structures are not involved.
4. **Workforce distribution:** Doctors posted to rural areas often do not go, and experienced general practitioners leave rural posts to specialise. Community health workers in remote areas are unpaid.
5. **No data on underserved communities:** Only quantitative coverage figures exist; no study maps these communities or explains why services fail.

Discussion Highlights:

- The community health framework already exists on paper; the gap is implementation of health area and district committees.
- Projects must link to district health services and DHIS2 and join regional NGO coordination to last.
- Debate on whether community health workers should be paid in remote areas or kept part-time with other livelihoods.
- Trusted, familiar health workers made cholera vaccination succeed in Manoka.

Recommendations:

- **Map underserved communities:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should identify and list hard-to-reach communities (islands, enclaves, arid zones) and run qualitative studies on barriers to care. First step: a census of island communities in Douala VI and Bakassi with zero-dose children.
- **Enforce the community health framework:** District medical officers should ensure health area (COSA) and district (COSADI) committees meet and that community health worker data reach health centres and DHIS2.
- **Pay and support remote community health workers:** MINSANTE and partners should provide stipends and job aids to community health workers in communities with no health facility, linked to the nearest health centre.
- **Create a remote and rural medicine pathway:** MINSANTE and training schools should consider a remote and rural medicine specialty and better pay, housing and connectivity for remote postings.
- **Use COPC to integrate programmes:** Immunisation and other vertical programmes, with partners such as CHAI, should be delivered within a community oriented primary care plan built on needs the community ranks first.
- **Mobilise diaspora support for training:** Diaspora professionals should fund and mentor the Rural Doctors COPC training with field projects; the Chair offered to sponsor the first sessions.

Next Steps: Follow-up session in two weeks (about 26 February 2022), with details to be confirmed. The Chair and the speaker were to discuss support for the training programme in the parking lot and in private.

Conclusion: Geography should not decide who gets care. Cameroon's last-mile communities need the community health system already designed on paper to work in practice, with paid community health workers, supported remote postings and programmes planned with the community.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of February 12, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu-vwKRsAn8