Policy Briefing:

Responding to Public Health Emergencies in Africa: Lessons for Cameroon

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on 14 January 2023, focusing on the theme "Responding to Public Health Emergencies of International Concern in Africa," presented by Dr. Nkengafac Villyen Motaze, a Cameroonian medical epidemiologist who led the field response to South Africa's first COVID-19 case.

Context:

The first session of 2023 took place as Uganda declared the end of its Ebola outbreak and as COVID-19, cholera, measles and mpox continued to circulate. Senior Cameroonian experts in vaccines, laboratory systems, clinical research and infectious diseases joined the discussion.

Key Issues:

1. **Surveillance must work every day:** Outbreaks are detected only where surveillance is running and funded before a crisis, with regular evaluation.
2. **No independent technical agency:** South Africa's NICD shows the value of a largely independent public health institute that can deploy within hours and give evidence-based advice.
3. **Supply chains and local production:** Laboratories had machines but lacked imported consumables during lockdowns.
4. **Inequity in countermeasures:** Vaccine hoarding by high-income countries cost lives; a fair allocation would have averted far more deaths.
5. **Misinformation:** Health professionals rarely explain their work to the public, leaving space for false claims.

Discussion Highlights:

- Simulation exercises and routine training in South Africa enabled a team to reach the first COVID-19 case within hours.
- Border closures should rest on evidence about variants, not politics.

- Africa CDC's regional centres and national public health institutes offer a continental model for preparedness.
- Clinical research capacity, private sector involvement and university to industry links need strengthening.

Recommendations:

- **Strengthen a national public health institute:** MINSANTE should give a technical public health institute a clear mandate, budget and staff to lead outbreak detection, rapid deployment and evidence-based advice. First step: review the NICD model with Africa CDC support.
- **Fund routine surveillance and evaluate it:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should maintain year-round surveillance budgets and commission FETP-led evaluations of priority surveillance systems about every three years, starting with cholera, measles and influenza-like illness.
- **Run simulation exercises:** MINSANTE, with WHO and airport authorities, should hold regular case importation drills at Douala and Yaounde-Nsimalen airports and at district level.
- **Secure laboratory supply chains:** MINSANTE and partners should pool procurement of reagents and consumables through Africa CDC mechanisms, support local manufacturing, and expand portable genomic sequencing linked to regional centres.
- **Invest in risk communication:** MINSANTE should staff trained risk communication specialists, and professional bodies and diaspora professionals should share plain-language, sourced information on social media between outbreaks as well as during them.
- **Build clinical research capacity:** Universities, teaching hospitals and research groups should pair clinicians with methodologists and link with African contract research organisations and industry, so that trials can start quickly in the next emergency.

Next Steps: Next session in two weeks (about 28 January 2023). A future session on clinical trial infrastructure in Africa was proposed.

Conclusion: The session showed that preparedness depends on systems that run before a crisis: surveillance, trained teams, supply chains, communication and research. Cameroon can build on its COVID-19 response by giving a technical public health body a clear mandate and by working through continental structures led by Africa CDC.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of January 14, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kp5eKivYDHY