Policy Briefing:

Building Implementation Science in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on March 25, 2023, focusing on the theme "Challenges and Opportunities in the Practice of Implementation Science in Cameroon", presented by Dr. Ferdinand C. Mukumbang of the University of Washington.

Context:

Implementation science studies how proven interventions are taken up into practice and policy. A scoping review found no implementation science studies from Cameroon, while Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya led in Africa. Participants pointed to low government research funding, slow ethics review and weak links between researchers and policymakers, while noting Cameroon's own contributions, such as the NAMSAL HIV trial.

Key Issues:

1. **Evidence not reaching practice:** Proven interventions, from COVID-19 vaccines to bed nets, see poor uptake when acceptability and context are not studied.
2. **Gap between researchers and policymakers:** Policymakers in Cameroon reported evidence as unavailable, inaccessible or not applicable, and evidence-informed decision making was less understood than in South Africa.
3. **Unfriendly research environment:** Slow ethics clearance, little public research funding and low health spending (under 5 percent of the budget, as stated) push partners toward other countries.
4. **Research quality and integrity:** Weak thesis supervision, unpublished findings and concerns about management of grant funds undermine trust.
5. **Low visibility of Cameroonian research:** Work done in Cameroon is not communicated, so the country is absent from regional networks and funders' priorities.

Discussion Highlights:

- Hybrid type 3 studies were recommended to test interventions proven elsewhere in Cameroonian settings.

- Kenya and South Africa attract research through policy, not wealth.
- Cameroon-generated evidence (the NAMSAL trial, intermittent preventive treatment for malaria) shows what is possible.
- Digital ethics review and a free protocol review service were being introduced.

Recommendations:

- **Speed up and digitise ethics review:** MINSANTE and the National Ethics Committee should complete the planned online submission and review portal and publish target turnaround times, starting with the pilot already funded.
- **Link research to policy needs:** MINSANTE, through its operational research directorate, should publish an annual list of priority implementation questions for universities and partners, and invite researchers to present findings in plain-language briefs to policy teams.
- **Fund national priority research:** Government should allocate a dedicated research budget within disease programmes such as malaria and HIV, and require implementation and sustainability evaluation of donor-funded interventions.
- **Strengthen research training:** Medical faculties should require proposal review before thesis work, train supervisors, and teach implementation science and research methods from early years.
- **Make Cameroon attractive to research partners:** MINSANTE and universities should set clear rules for research collaboration, data sharing and transparent management of grant funds, including fair pay for students and field staff.
- **Use the diaspora to raise visibility:** Diaspora researchers should co-lead studies with Cameroonian teams, and the town hall should showcase Cameroonian research and send a summary of priorities to the Minister of Public Health.

Next Steps: The moderators planned to summarise key challenges for the Minister of Public Health, who had asked to return to the town hall. The DAC-Africa protocol review service was to be launched in Cameroon on May 2, 2023, and the speaker planned to begin research in Cameroon.

Conclusion: Cameroon produces evidence and has researchers at home and abroad, but too little of it moves into practice. A research-friendly environment, closer ties between researchers and policymakers, and contextual studies of what works locally would help close that gap.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of March 25, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QjUz82BHdEI