Policy Briefing:

Health Beyond the Health Sector: Acting on the Determinants of Health in Cameroon

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in July 2023, focusing on the theme "The Intrinsic Link between Health and Development," presented by Dr. Yauba Saidu, Country Director of the Clinton Health Access Initiative in Cameroon.

Context:

Cameroon has expanded and equipped its health facilities, but access to water, sanitation, electricity, roads and income remains poor, and most health spending is out of pocket. These determinants sit with ministries other than Public Health, and the session opened a series on them.

Key Issues:

1. **Access and roads:** Facilities are concentrated in cities; poor roads delay emergencies and supplies, and 40 to 60% of births in the northern regions were said to occur at home.
2. **Water, sanitation and energy:** About 60% have access to water and about 40% to basic sanitation, and many facilities lack grid electricity for night care and the cold chain.
3. **Poverty and financing:** 60 to 70% of health spending is out of pocket and the health budget was said to be under 5% of the national budget.
4. **Plans without resources:** National plans reflect the SDGs but are not matched by funding or built on community needs, and programmes depend on donors.
5. **Ministries working in silos:** Health centres are built without roads, water or power, and training, employment and research of health workers sit with different ministries.

Discussion Highlights:

- Hygiene, sanitation and vaccination have done more for life expectancy than hospital care.

- Evidence, policy briefs and work with Parliament were proposed as the route to funded policy.
- Medical students were invited to research and advocate as civil society.
- Local taxes should fund visible services, and citizens should be able to read and question budgets.
- Participants proposed inviting other ministers to the town hall, one goal at a time.

Recommendations:

- **Plan new facilities with other ministries:** MINSANTE, with the ministries in charge of water, energy and public works, should require that every new health facility has a plan for road access, water and power before construction. First step: a joint checklist used by regional delegations when sites are approved.
- **Set up an intersectoral health committee:** The government should establish a standing committee of the ministries whose work most affects health (water and energy, public works, agriculture, education, higher education, public service, finance), with shared indicators drawn from the national development strategy 2020 to 2030.
- **Raise domestic health financing:** MINSANTE and the Ministry of Finance should set a path to raise the health budget toward the 15% Abuja target and expand universal health coverage, reducing out of pocket payments. First step: publish the health budget by region in a simple citizen version.
- **Use council resources for basic services:** Councils, under decentralisation, should allocate part of local revenue to water and sanitation at health facilities, with support to build council planning capacity.
- **Turn town hall sessions into policy briefs:** The town hall, diaspora professionals and partners such as CHAI should produce a bilingual brief after each session and send it to the relevant ministers, and train medical students in research to build local evidence. First step: a student-led paper on the determinants of health in Cameroon.
- **Bring other ministers to the dialogue:** The town hall should invite ministers responsible for water, energy and public works to present their plans and how they affect health.

Next Steps: Participants were to suggest which minister to invite first. Dr. Saidu proposed a session on a strategy for the town hall. An email on the new MINSANTE diaspora working group was to be sent, and the town hall was working toward CME credits by year end.

Conclusion: Better health in Cameroon depends on water, sanitation, energy, roads, education and incomes as much as on hospitals. Participants agreed that health needs a voice in every ministry, funded plans built on community needs, and evidence turned into policy.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of July 15, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2UUW9pSRFg