# Policy Briefing:

## Policy Briefing: COVID-19 After the Emergency, Variants, Surveillance and Preparedness in Cameroon

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**Overview:**

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on September 9, 2023, focusing on the theme "Latest Updates on COVID-19: Emerging Variants," presented by Dr. Bryan Tegomoh.

**Context:**

WHO ended the COVID-19 emergency in May 2023, but new variants such as EG.5 and BA.2.86 were driving rises in cases. Testing and genomic sequencing have fallen worldwide, and Cameroon has reported little surveillance data since early 2022. Effective antivirals remain largely unavailable in Africa, and the pandemic exposed unfair vaccine pricing for African countries.

**Key Issues:**

1. **Weak surveillance:** Cameroon has little current data on COVID-19 cases or variants, and sequencing capacity is limited by bioinformatics skills.
2. **No basis for wastewater monitoring:** Few wastewater treatment plants and widespread pit latrines and open dumping limit wastewater surveillance.
3. **Access to treatment:** Paxlovid and newer therapeutics are expensive and largely unavailable, while dexamethasone is cheap and effective for severe disease.
4. **Unfair procurement:** African countries paid more for vaccines, partly through third-party procurement and weak negotiating positions.
5. **Long COVID:** Long-term effects are not well studied or tracked.

**Discussion Highlights:**

- Hospitalisations due to COVID-19, not case counts, are now the best measure of impact.
- Vaccination reduces the risk of long COVID.
- Existing rapid and PCR tests remain reliable.
- Pandemic investments in oxygen, ICU beds and PCR machines should be maintained.

- Africa needs its own research, manufacturing and field epidemiology capacity.

**Recommendations:**

- **Maintain sentinel surveillance:** MINSANTE and the national public health emergency operations system should keep sentinel testing and sequencing at selected hospitals and report hospitalisations due to COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses. First step: publish quarterly respiratory virus surveillance data.
- **Build bioinformatics and field epidemiology skills:** MINSANTE, universities and partners should train analysts to use existing sequencing machines, linking genomic data with clinical and epidemiological data, and enrol staff in the Africa CDC epidemic service and FETP programmes. First step: a national genomic data team for SARS-CoV-2, influenza and other priority pathogens.
- **Pilot environmental surveillance where feasible:** MINSANTE and city councils should assess sites in Yaoundé and Douala (hospitals, markets, treatment plants) for wastewater or environmental sampling, linked to sanitation investment. First step: a feasibility study using polio environmental surveillance sites already in place.
- **Protect access to treatment and oxygen:** MINSANTE should keep dexamethasone and oxygen in stock at all referral hospitals, maintain oxygen plants and ICU capacity, and negotiate access to oral antivirals through pooled procurement. First step: an inventory of oxygen plants and their maintenance status.
- **Procure directly and support local manufacturing:** MINSANTE and the Ministry of Finance should streamline payment rules for emergency purchases to reduce reliance on intermediaries, and join African Union pooled procurement and manufacturing initiatives. First step: review the costs of COVID-19 vaccine and test procurement.
- **Target boosters to those at highest risk:** MINSANTE should focus updated COVID-19 vaccination on people 65 and older and those with chronic conditions, alongside influenza vaccination where available.

**Next Steps:** The next session was announced for two weeks later.

**Conclusion:** COVID-19 is no longer an emergency but is not over. Cameroon needs working surveillance, trained analysts, steady access to oxygen and basic treatments, and a stronger regional position on procurement, so that the next variant or pandemic does not find it unprepared.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of September 9, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lyr92v39Ck4