Policy Briefing:

Breaking the Silence on Mental Health and Substance Use in Cameroon

---

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on October 7, 2023 (date estimated), focusing on the theme "Breaking the Silence: Overcoming Stigma and Fostering Resilience in Mental Health, Trauma, Substance Use and Grief in Cameroon," presented by Therese Shalo-Fuh, clinical therapist and founder of Be The Exception Counseling Foundation in Limbe.

Context:

Substance use in Cameroon now goes far beyond alcohol and tramadol to heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and local mixtures, and affects children as young as 8. Services are few, mostly detox without counselling, and stigma keeps people from care. The crisis in the North West and South West has added trauma and displacement.

Key Issues:

1. **Scale and new substances:** National figures cited: 21% have tried hard drugs and 12,000 children under 15 use narcotics; new mixtures such as 'Thailand' are spreading.
2. **Stigma:** Fear of being labelled 'mad' empties treatment centres and has harmed general clinics linked to mental health care.
3. **Gaps in services and workforce:** Few psychiatrists, psychiatric nurses and psychotherapists; detox is costly and rarely followed by counselling or rehabilitation.
4. **Weak data:** No surveillance or routine drug testing, and drug related deaths may be recorded as road accidents.
5. **Easy access and weak regulation:** Alcohol from age 18, sales near schools and by children, and trafficking that continues after arrests.

Discussion Highlights:

- Addiction and mental illness are chronic, manageable conditions, not moral failings.
- Schools and parents need agreed rules and early disclosure.
- Religious leaders and traditional healers are often the first contact and need training.
- Participants questioned criminalisation and called for treatment instead of jail.
- Raising the drinking age and tighter border controls were proposed.

Recommendations:

- **Integrate mental health into primary care:** MINSANTE should include screening for depression, anxiety and substance use in district hospitals and health centres, with referral pathways to specialised services. First step: train one nurse per district hospital in the South West and North West, where trauma is highest.
- **Expand treatment beyond detox:** MINSANTE and regional delegations should support centres that combine detox, medication, counselling and case management, and include them in universal health coverage. First step: an inventory of existing public and private centres and a referral directory.
- **Train the mental health workforce:** Training schools and universities should expand training of psychiatric nurses, psychologists and addiction counsellors, and add mental health and substance use to the curriculum of medical and nursing students, including support for students' own well-being.
- **Strengthen data and drug testing:** MINSANTE, with the national anti-drug committee, should set up surveillance of substance use and related deaths, using rapid urine drug screens in emergency units and accurate cause of death recording.
- **Tighten regulation and prevention:** The government should review the minimum drinking age, enforce bans on sales to and by minors and near schools, and strengthen customs and border controls on trafficking. Schools should adopt parent and teacher agreements on drug use.
- **Train religious leaders and community actors:** Regional delegations, with diaspora professionals, should add a mental health module to planned trainings for religious leaders, starting with the town hall's North West maternal health training.

Next Steps: A mental health module was proposed for the planned training of religious leaders in the North West. The moderators proposed advocacy with the Minister of

Public Health on mental health, the drinking age and trafficking. The Chair invited participants with links to funders to support mental health services.

Conclusion: Mental illness and substance use are a growing and largely hidden emergency among young Cameroonians. Participants agreed that breaking the silence means treating them as health conditions, building services beyond detox, and acting on prevention, data and stigma together.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of October 7, 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FKqu9e8_bI