Policy Briefing:

Getting Donated Medical Supplies and Equipment into Use in Cameroon

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesises key insights from the Cameroon Town Hall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on 17 December 2022 (65th edition), focusing on the theme "Donation of Medical Supplies and Equipment to Cameroon: How to Navigate the Process and Build Partnerships," presented by Roger Mforneh, International Programs Manager at MedShare International.

Context:

The session followed the town hall's special session with the Minister of Public Health, where diaspora members repeatedly asked how to send donations home. Many donations are delayed at the port, incur charges, or arrive unsuited to local needs, voltage or skills.

Key Issues:

1. **Process is poorly understood:** Donors often ship without regulatory pre-approval for medicines or an exoneration letter, leaving containers at the port.
2. **Single signatory and informal payments:** Exoneration depends on one signature at the Ministry of Finance, and rushed donors sometimes pay to speed things up, which entrenches corruption.
3. **Mismatch with needs:** Equipment is sent without a needs assessment and may be unused, unsuited to 220 volts, or beyond local skills.
4. **Maintenance gap:** Few biomedical technicians are available, so donated equipment breaks down and Africa risks becoming a 'graveyard' for it.
5. **Unequal distribution:** Donations follow diaspora home areas, while CHAI assessments found many hospitals without basic blood pressure machines or pulse oximeters.

Discussion Highlights:

- Government and faith-based hospitals can usually obtain full exoneration when shipments are consigned to them.
- Regional assemblies and councils can budget for supplies under decentralisation.

- Corporate social responsibility funding is available but needs ministry backing.
- A national needs-based assessment was proposed with CHAI and the ministry.

Recommendations:

- **Publish a single donation guide:** MINSANTE, with the Ministry of Finance and the national regulatory authority, should publish a step-by-step guide to importing donated medicines, supplies and equipment, including required documents and timelines, and share it with diaspora associations through the town hall.
- **Streamline exoneration:** The Ministry of Finance should allow delegated signature or an online tracking system for exoneration requests for government and faith-based facilities, so that shipments are not held at the port when the signatory is absent.
- **Run a national needs assessment:** MINSANTE, with CHAI and partners, should map equipment and technician needs in district and regional hospitals across all ten regions in 2023 and share a priority list to steer donations toward underserved areas.
- **Require needs-based, maintainable donations:** Hospitals and regional delegations should accept equipment only against a stated need, at 220 volts, with installation, user training and a maintenance contact. Training schools should expand biomedical technician training.
- **Coordinate diaspora and decentralised funding:** Diaspora associations, alumni and village groups should pool funds with regional assemblies and councils for the same hospitals, and seek corporate social responsibility funding with a ministry letter of support.

Next Steps: CHAI was to present on device financing at a future session, and MedShare's Ghana training centre plans were to be shared once approved. Participants were invited to contact the speaker directly.

Conclusion: The session showed that donations work when they follow the official process, respond to stated needs, and come with training and maintenance. Clear guidance from MINSANTE and the Ministry of Finance, and a national needs map, would help diaspora generosity reach the facilities that need it most.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of December 17, 2022. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bSNKJNL0FE