Policy Briefing:

Towards HIV Epidemic Control in Cameroon

Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held in July 2023, at which Dr. Rogers Ajeh, Deputy Permanent Secretary of the National AIDS Control Committee, reviewed the history, current status and future of Cameroon's HIV response.

Context:

Cameroon has over half a million people living with HIV and is close to the 95-95-95 targets for adults, but children and adolescents lag behind, viral load coverage is low, and the response depends mainly on the Global Fund and PEPFAR.

Key Issues:

1. **Children and adolescents left behind:** About 45% of children with HIV are diagnosed, and mortality in children and adolescents is not falling; mother-to-child transmission persists.
2. **Low viral load coverage:** Only 62% of people on treatment had a viral load test in 2022.
3. **Key populations and PrEP:** Legal barriers, weak size estimates and poor PrEP uptake limit prevention where incidence is highest.
4. **Donor dependence:** About 80% of 2024 to 2026 funding comes from the Global Fund and PEPFAR, and health receives less than 5% of the national budget.
5. **Data and safety gaps:** No unique patient identifiers, weak mortality data, few gender data, and no pharmacovigilance sentinel sites, while concerns were raised about weight gain and hypertension on dolutegravir.

Discussion Highlights:

- Treat all, provider-initiated testing and a stable supply chain were credited for adult progress.
- Injectable PrEP for key populations was seen as the expected first use of long-acting drugs.
- Participants called for health worker sensitisation on PrEP and prioritising pregnant women.

- Pediatric HIV was named the top priority by both the speaker and Dr. Titanji.
- Dual HIV and syphilis testing in antenatal care supports triple elimination.

Recommendations:

- **Close the pediatric gap:** MINSANTE, the NACC and partners should scale early infant diagnosis, antenatal testing and mentor mother programmes, especially in the Far North and crisis-affected regions. First step: a pediatric and adolescent cascade review by region to target the lowest-performing districts.
- **Raise viral load coverage:** The NACC and regional delegations should expand sample transport and laboratory capacity so every patient on treatment gets an annual viral load test, starting with children, adolescents and pregnant women.
- **Expand prevention for those at highest risk:** The NACC should use the PrEP evaluation and the key population survey to extend PrEP eligibility, train health workers and community-based organisations on PrEP, and prepare an evidence-based case for injectable PrEP.
- **Prepare for transition:** MINSANTE and the Ministry of Finance should raise domestic HIV and health funding, use the public-private partnership and universal health coverage, and build local organisations' capacity to manage grants. First step: a costed transition plan agreed with PEPFAR and the Global Fund.
- **Monitor drug safety and long-term outcomes:** The NACC should set up pharmacovigilance sentinel sites to track weight gain, hypertension and other effects on dolutegravir and integrate screening for non-communicable diseases and cervical cancer into HIV care, as the revised guidelines propose.
- **Improve data:** Use universal health coverage to assign unique patient identifiers, link HIV systems to DHIS2, and work with civil registration on mortality data. Diaspora researchers can support analysis.

Next Steps: The 2024 to 2030 national strategic plan and revised treatment guidelines were due for validation. The Chair invited Dr. Titanji to work with the NACC and to return on HIV cure and aging.

Conclusion: Cameroon has turned HIV from a death sentence into a manageable condition for most adults. Participants agreed that the next gains depend on reaching children, adolescents and key populations, measuring viral suppression for everyone, and making the response less dependent on external funding.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of July 2023. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puSUY1A5pjM