Policy Briefing:

The Cameroon Town Hall at 100 Sessions: Turning Dialogue into Policy

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Overview:

This policy briefing synthesizes key insights from the Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals meeting held on May 4, 2024, the 100th edition, a reflection session on the town hall's history, impact and future direction.

Context:

Since early 2020 the town hall has met every two weeks, first to support the COVID-19 response and then on a wide range of health topics. It has hosted the Minister of Public Health twice and led to a ministerial working group on cooperation with the diaspora in health. Participants used the 100th session to ask how its discussions can produce change on the ground.

Key Issues:

1. **From discussion to implementation:** Policy briefs are now drafted for each session, but participants asked how they are delivered and whether they are acted on.
2. **A weak formal link with the Ministry:** The working group exists, but its channel for receiving diaspora proposals (a planned website) and its budget were still being finalised.
3. **Sustainability of the platform:** The town hall relies on a small group of unpaid volunteers; few of its members have come forward to help.
4. **Capacity gaps at home:** Speakers cited missing tests (sequencing, basic breast cancer markers), staff turnover and broken equipment, and unemployed graduates who could fill gaps.

Discussion Highlights:

- Broad support for a short participant survey to guide the format, frequency and topics of future sessions.
- Calls for a six month topic calendar, with topics drawn from needs raised in Cameroon.
- Proposals for a theory of change and for tracking what happens to each policy brief.

- Interest in a physical presence in Cameroon, balanced by the Chair's view that the town hall should stay focused and partner with others.
- Examples of impact: the diaspora working group, DAC-Africa coming to Cameroon, a regional tumour board, and facility authorisations.

Recommendations:

- **Open a formal channel for town hall policy briefs:** MINSANTE and the working group on cooperation with the diaspora should launch the planned website and name a focal point to receive each session's brief and reply on its status. First step: the town hall sends its backlog of briefs through the working group rapporteur and logs each one.
- **Fund and convene the working group:** MINSANTE should finalise the working group's budget and hold its plenary meeting so that technical proposals can be decided. First step: publish the group's annual programme of activities as its founding decision requires.
- **Set the agenda from needs in Cameroon:** Regional delegations, district medical officers and hospitals should be invited to submit the topics on which they want diaspora input, and the town hall should publish a six month calendar. First step: a short request sent to the ten regional delegations.
- **Make diaspora teaching count:** Training schools, medical and nursing student associations and the Give Back Project should set up regular courses (for example ECG interpretation) and seek CME recognition for participation. First step: one pilot course with a medical school in Buea or Yaoundé.
- **Track and report impact:** The town hall should run its participant survey, adopt a simple theory of change, and report each year which briefs were delivered and what followed. First step: deploy the survey and present results at a session.

Next Steps: The moderators committed to a participant survey (with a volunteer leading its design), to bringing results back to the town hall, and to continuing sessions every two weeks in the meantime.

Conclusion: Participants agreed that the town hall has built trust with the Ministry and real relationships across the diaspora. The next stage is to make that trust count: a formal route for its policy briefs, topics set by needs in Cameroon, and a sustainable base of volunteers.

Prepared by the Co-Moderators, Cameroon Townhall for Healthcare Professionals, from the session of May 4, 2024. Recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2Yh9vc9VKU