

Prioritizing WASH in the fight against Covid-19, the Cameroon Experience

In March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Within 16 days after the first case was recorded in Africa, it took only 10 days to reach 1000 cases. As of May 31, 2020, all African countries had been at least one case. The ease of human-to-human transmission places frontline healthcare workers at risk and continued transmission will place a huge strain on the fragile health systems in most African countries. Cameroon has not been left out. As at June 1, 2020, Cameroon has recorded over 6,000 confirmed cases with over 190 deaths. Although, Yaoundé, Douala and Bafoussam are the most affected towns, every region has recorded at least one case. .

WASH stands for Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. WASH is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (number 6) and according to the World Health Organization; WASH is the foundation of quality health care and infection prevention and control (IPC). Poor WASH or lack of WASH services is the cause of major outbreaks in the world and we need to WASH to fight them.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), although Infection Prevention and Control/Water Hygiene and Sanitation (IPC/WASH) is the foundation of quality health care, unfortunately, 1 in 4 health care facilities worldwide lack basic water services, and about 856 million and 2 billion people, respectively, use health facilities without water and sanitation. Health facilities that do not have basic WASH services cannot be considered health facilities at all because they will simply be infecting patients. Antibiotic resistance, health care associated infections (HAIs) and maternal and neonatal mortalities are closely associated to lack of basic WASH services. The absence of basic WASH services negatively impacts the quality of care and patient safety. We need strong IPC/WASH systems to fight covid-19.

According to Andrew Akoln et al. (2010), in 2006, 70% of the Cameroonian population had access to safe drinking water and the coverage in urban centers is 88%, significantly better than the 47% in rural areas. However, rapid urbanization has rendered existing infrastructure inadequate with peri urban dwellers also lacking access to safe drinking water. Sanitation coverage is also poor. In urban areas only 58% of the population has access to improved sanitation facilities, and the rate in rural areas is 42%. Women and girls shoulder the largest burden in collecting water, and therefore cover long distances late in the evening or very early in the morning, thus exposing themselves to mosquito bites, infections and many other risks, including rape.

Anecdotal reports indicate that several health facilities in Cameroon lack water and basic WASH services. In a survey conducted in September 2019, this author found that of the 29 health facilities assessed, only 68.47% had water, and 52.82% had basic sanitation. These findings suggest that as much as 31.5% of the health facilities do not have water and over 48% do not have basic sanitation. It was found that some health facilities go for days or weeks without water. These findings suggest that there is a huge gap, and the outbreak of coronavirus may make a bad situation worse because water is required for hand hygiene as well as for other needs.

The World Health Organization and the Government of Cameroon have prescribed hand washing as one of the most important strategy to fight coronavirus. It is common today to find hand washing stations at some

streets, entrances to public buildings, markets and churches, but of what use are hand wash stations without water?.

The Cameroon government suspended schools in April and May as part of efforts to halt the spread of covid 19 and resumed in from June 2020. This move was questionable because other super spread sectors like drinking sports were not closed. However, as part of efforts to prepare for school resumption on June 1, 2020, the authorities multiplied hand washing facilities everywhere on school campuses. Paradoxically, as we know, water shortage had been a common and chronic phenomenon in many schools and communities in Cameroon with several neighborhoods especially in towns going for weeks or months or even years without water. In a recent outing one of the senators in Buea lamented the fact that water supply in Buea has been erratic or absent in many neighborhoods for many years and called the authorities of the water utility company to task.

Of what use will hand washing stations be if there is no water. How can a health facility function without water?. How will staff and patient wash their hands? How can we conduct a delivery in a delivery room without water? How can we achieve sustainable development goals 1, 3, & 6 without water? It should be noted that lack of water greatly affect women, girls and children education. , I hope the water utility and distribution companies will accompany Government to make sure water is regularly available in neighborhoods, schools, communities, and hospitals to facilitate hand washing, otherwise, the fight against Covid-19 will remain a slogan and the infections will continue to spread. We need strong WASH systems to fight infections in the community as well as in the health facilities. WASH is the foundation of quality health care.

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