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Numéro Vert.- 1523



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Toll-Free Number. - 1523

STATEMENT BY THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION  
TO MARK THE GLOBAL HANDWASHING DAY

15 October 2024

Theme. – Why are clean hands still important?

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter: “the Commission” or “the CHRC”), established by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and rendered operational on 29 April 2021, following the swearing-in of its members before the Supreme Court sitting in Joint Benches,

*Bearing in mind* that in May 1847, Ignace Philippe Semmelweis, a Hungarian obstetrician discovered during the autopsy of his friend Jakob Kolletschka, a Professor in Anatomy, that he had died of an infection caused by a wound he had received when he accidentally cut his finger with a scalpel while performing an autopsy on a woman who had died of puerperal fever (fever due following childbirth or abortion). This condition had also claimed the lives of many women whom Jakob Kolletschka treated in two obstetric clinics where he practised<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> See Isabelle Godin, « *Le lavage des mains, Histoire(s) de virus* », <https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=historique%20de%20la%20journée%20mondiale%20de%20lavage%20des%20mains&mid=6476E6B59874A936AB886476E6B59874A936AB88&ajaxhist=0>, accessed on 10 octobre 2024.



**Bearing in mind** that based on a study of mortality cases caused by a puerperal fever, Dr Ignace Semmelweis, a pioneer of hand hygiene, advocated for *hand washing with chlorinated lime solution* as a means of reducing the alarmingly high mortality rates in maternity wards, based on a study of deaths caused by puerperal fever<sup>2</sup> In this book, he not only *links puerperal fever to the lack of hand hygiene among obstetricians*<sup>3</sup> but also reports the *effectiveness of hand washing in reducing hospital mortality rates*<sup>4</sup>, which fell from 12 per cent to 2.4 per cent in the two clinics where the experiment was carried out, and to 1.3 per cent when the practice was extended to all examinations involving contact with decomposing organic matter<sup>5</sup>,

**Recognising** that, over time, it has become clear that “*hand hygiene helps prevent a range of respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases, and [is thus a crucial tool] in fighting bacterial infections in healthcare facilities.*”<sup>6</sup> This justifies the recognition of hand hygiene as an essential public health intervention, a trend that gained general momentum in the early 2000s. The involvement of social and behavioural science experts, specialised UN agencies, and civil society organisations in policy development and awareness-raising campaigns have been instrumental in driving this trend,

**Recalling** that in 2001, a Global Partnership for Handwashing with Soap was formed between the public and private sectors. This initiative was led by the World Bank, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Johns Hopkins University, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Unilever, Procter and Gamble, and Colgate-Palmolive<sup>7</sup>,

**Noting also** that the *Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing (PPPHW)* adopted a resolution to establish Global Handwashing Day (GHD) during World Water Week held in Stockholm, Sweden from 13 to 17 August 2008. Observed every year on 15 October each year, GHD aims to raise public awareness of the importance of handwashing with soap as an effective and affordable way to reduce child mortality and prevent

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter M. Dunn, « *Perinatal lessons from the past: Ignac Semmelweis (1818–1865) of Budapest and the prevention of puerperal fever* », *Archives of Disease in Childhood – Fetal and Neonatal Edition*, 2005, vol. 90, pp. 345-348.

<sup>3</sup> See United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Health Organisation, *State of the world’s hand hygiene: A global to action to make hand hygiene a priority in policy and practice.*, New York, 2021 87 pp., esp., p. 17, [https://www.unicef.org/media/118481/file/State20of%20the%20World\\_s%20Hand%20Hygiene\\_UNICEF\\_EN.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/118481/file/State20of%20the%20World_s%20Hand%20Hygiene_UNICEF_EN.pdf), accessed on 10 October 2024.

<sup>4</sup> See *Best hygiène*, “*Le lavage des mains : tout savoir pour une hygiène optimale*”, <https://www.best-hygiene.com/blog/le-lavage-des-mains-tout-savoir-pour-une-hygiene-optimale#:~:text=C%E2%80%99est%20gr%C3%A2ce%20%C3%A0%20des%20pionniers%20comme%20Ignace%20Semmelweis,avant%20d%E2%80%99effectuer%20des%20soins%20r%C3%A9duisait%20consid%C3%A9rablement%20les%20infections>, accessed on 17 September 2024.

<sup>5</sup> See Isabelle Godin, “*Le lavage des mains, Histoire(s) de virus*”, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> See UNICEF/WHO, *State of the world’s hand hygiene: A global action to make hand hygiene a priority in policy and practice.*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases<sup>8</sup>. It also helps to stop “*the transmission of outbreak-related pathogens such as cholera, Ebola virus, shigellosis, hepatitis E, COVID-19 and monkeypox*”<sup>9</sup>

**Welcoming** the theme of this year's GHD celebrations, “*Why are clean hands still important?*”,<sup>10</sup> which encourages individuals to adhere to hand hygiene practices, emphasising the “*collective responsibility to safeguard public health, prevent infection, enhance dignity and promote well-being*”<sup>11</sup>

**Highlighting** that improving hand hygiene behaviour is essential beyond public health emergencies, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, because, as the Global Handwashing Partnership has clearly recognised, “*clean hands remain a fundamental defence against the spread of infections, diseases and harmful germs [,] whether in hospitals, schools, or in everyday interactions, [especially as] practising handwashing with soap contributes to better health outcomes and a safer world for everyone*”<sup>12</sup>,

**Highlighting also** that hand hygiene can only be practised if there is a supply of potable water and if sanitary facilities and soap are available. Hand-washing facilities can be “*fixed or mobile, and include a sink with tap water, buckets with taps, tippy-taps, (inclined containers), and jugs or basins, [while the term] soap includes bar soap, liquid soap, powder, detergents and soapy water*”<sup>13</sup>,

**Considering** that the call by the Minister of Public Health (MINSANTÉ) for multi-sectoral and inter-sectoral cooperation in the fight against Mpox and other health emergencies, reflects the determination of the Government of Cameroon to unite the efforts of all people everywhere to address the health emergencies that are emerging in the world and particularly in Cameroon<sup>14</sup>,

**Taking into account** the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 (NDS 30) to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2035, one of the objectives of which is to encourage people to adopt healthy behaviours conducive to their health, by working with municipalities to ensure compliance with minimum standards of hygiene and sanitation in residential areas and health facilities (acronym in French: FOSA), and by providing patients with quality health care<sup>15</sup>,

**Considering** that the national, African and universal legal instruments contained in the Statement issued to mark the 2023 GHD, which recognise the right of everyone to the

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<sup>8</sup> See *Best hygiene, "Le lavage des mains : tout savoir pour une hygiène optimale", op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> See Global Handwashing Partnership, "Global Handwashing Day 2024 Fact Sheet", [https://www.pseau.org/outils/ouvrages/ghp\\_journee\\_mondiale\\_du\\_lavage\\_des\\_mains\\_note\\_information\\_2024.pdf](https://www.pseau.org/outils/ouvrages/ghp_journee_mondiale_du_lavage_des_mains_note_information_2024.pdf), accessed on 9 October 2024.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> UNICEF/WHO, *State of the world's hand...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> See. Ministry of Public Health, "Santé publique : Mpox, le COVID-19 et les autres maladies dites épidémiologiques, le point du MINSANTÉ", <https://www.facebook.com/MINSANTE.PageOfficielle/postes/sante-publique-mpox-le-covid-19-et-les-autres-maladies-dits-%C3%A9pid%C3%A9miques-le-point/918224727004534/>, accessed on 3 October 2024.

<sup>15</sup> See. National Development Strategy 2020-2030, For structural transformation and inclusive development, 2020, pp.225, esp. p.90.



enjoyment of a better state of health and the right to access to drinking water, defined as a sufficient, physically accessible and affordable supply for personal and domestic use<sup>16</sup>,

*Considering that*, the Article 14 (letter j) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which states that “[S]tates Parties undertake [to] support, through technical and financial means, the mobilisation of local community resources in the development of primary health care for children”,

*Considering also* the World Health Organization (WHO) 2021 Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care for Hospital Administrators and Health Authorities, which provides a detailed review of the evidence on hand hygiene in health care and specific recommendations to improve practice and reduce the transmission of pathogenic micro-organisms to patients,

*Noting* that, following the joint WHO/UNICEF report published in 2021, the second target of the sixth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calls on all relevant actors to ensure by 2030 “adequate and equitable access to sanitation and hygiene for all [...], paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations, [hand hygiene being] one of the most important elements of hygiene”<sup>17</sup>,

*Noting* that targets 3 and 6 of the SDGs call on all actors concerned, including States, to provide people with the means to lead healthy lives and to promote the well-being of all people at all ages, to ensure access to water supply and sanitation for all and ensure sustainable management of water resources, while similar targets are set for African actors and those from abroad working in Africa to achieve target 3 of Goal 1 of Agenda 2063, which aims for a “prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development [with] healthy [...] citizens”,

*Recalling* that:

hand hygiene, whether through handwashing with soap or alcohol-based hand rub, [...]:

- can reduce diarrheal diseases by 30 per cent
- can reduce acute respiratory infections by up to 20 per cent
- [can] play an important role in reducing the transmission of outbreak-related pathogens such as Cholera, Ebola, Shigellosis, SARS, hepatitis E, COVID-19 and monkeypox
- [can] protect against healthcare-associated infections and contribute to reducing the spread of antimicrobial resistance
- may [also] contribute to the reduction of neglected tropical diseases<sup>18</sup>,

*The Commission commends* the efforts of public authorities and their partners to reduce the spread of disease and improve public health by promoting simple, but effective hygiene practices, including:

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<sup>16</sup> See Statement by the CHRC to mark the Global Handwashing Day, 15 October 2024, 6 pp., esp. p. 2, [https://cdhc.cm/admin/fichiers/Declarations 2023-10-1312-15-17.pdf](https://cdhc.cm/admin/fichiers/Declarations%2023-10-1312-15-17.pdf), accessed on 25 September 2024.

<sup>17</sup> See. UNICEF/WHO, *State of the world's hand hygiene: A global action to make hand hygiene a priority in policy and practice.*, op. cit., op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> See. Information sheet on the Global Handwashing Day 2024., op. cit.



- the alert on the resurgence of the conjunctivitis epidemic in the country issued by MINSANTE on 30 October 2024, advising the population to observe primary hygiene measures, in this case regular washing of hands with water and soap or the use of hydro-alcoholic solution
- the alert issued by MINSANTE on 16 August 2024, on the monkeypox epidemic (MPOX), which has been declared as a public health emergency of continental security by the Africa Centre for Disease Control and the WHO. In this press release, MINSANTE urges people to observe hygiene measures such as regular handwashing with running water and soap
- the establishment of health care units in resettlement sites in the Yagoua health districts, Mayo-Danay Division, following floods that have been occurring in the Far North Region since August 2024, as well as the introduction of daily health visits in the various sites sheltering disaster victims in particular classrooms and the CPDM party house of Yagoua, used for this purpose
- the revision of the technical communication materials translated into *Pidgin* and *Ffulde*, prior to the *National Immunisation Campaign associated with the National Health Week*, during a workshop organised in Mbankomo from 19 to 21 November by MINSANTE with the technical support of the non-governmental organisation *Hellen Keller International*, in the Mefou-and-Akono Division, Centre Region<sup>19</sup>
- the organisation by the National Programme for the Control of Emerging and Re-emerging Zoonoses (PNPLZER), together with the French in vitro diagnostics company Bio Mérieux, of a consultative meeting to explore ways of collaborating and strengthening national efforts to combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in Yaoundé on 13 March 2024<sup>20</sup>
- the promulgation of Law No. 2023/019 of 19 December 2023, to lay down the Finance Law of the Republic of Cameroon for the financial year 2024, Section 4(1) of which states that: “*Equipment and materials intended for drinking water, [...] production shall be exempted from import duties and taxes for a period of 24 (twenty-four) months, from 1 January 2024*”
- the organisation by MINSANTE of a workshop from 30 October to 3 November 2023 in Mfou, Mefou-and-Afamba Division, Centre Region, to draw up a plan for the elimination of cholera by 2030, with a view to bringing together the expertise of all the sectors concerned,

*The Commission warmly welcomes* the responses from some ministries to its previous Statement to mark the Global Handwashing Day, in particular those:

- of the Ministry of Basic Education (MINEDUB) which, in its letter No. B/N/MINEDUB/SG/DSSA/PPS/SDSS/SHP of 26 February 2024, informs the CHRC that it has integrated “*pedagogy in health education* [by including a]

<sup>19</sup> See. MINSANTÉ, ‘Second round SASNIM/GHD 2024, a workshop to review technical and communication tools for an innovative immunization campaign’, <https://www.minsante.cm/site/?q=fr/content/deuxi%C3%A8me-tour-de-la-sasnimjlv-2024-un-atelier-de-r%C3%A9vision-des-outils-techniques-et-de>, accessed on 4 October 2024.

<sup>20</sup> See *One Health newsletter*, “Antimicrobial resistance: a new partner alongside Cameroon”, published in June 2024, [https://www.onehealth.cm/web/images/ressources/documentations/Newsletter\\_N008\\_final.pdf](https://www.onehealth.cm/web/images/ressources/documentations/Newsletter_N008_final.pdf), accessed on 4 October 2024.



*course [on] hand hygiene in [post- and extra-curricular activities] activities in primary schools' lessons"*

- of the Minister of Energy and Water Resources (MINEE) who, in his letter No. 00000540/2024/MINEE/SG/DGRE/SDAL/SALMUPU/amao of 7 February 2024, reassured the CHRC of the “*effectiveness of collaboration with technical and financial partners in charge of the water and sanitation sector*” and the commitment to “*mobilise more public-private partnerships [in order to develop this sector]*”;

***The Commission is however still concerned about:***

- the climatic situation that has prevailed since August 2024, particularly in the Centre, Far North and West Regions, characterised by torrential rains that have caused several floods resulting in numerous human casualties. A peak was observed in Maroua, Far North Region, where at least eleven (11) deaths by drowning were recorded, including four (4)<sup>21</sup> children, as well as significant material damage. This placed the population in a situation of health insecurity
- the very poor implementation of the *water, sanitation and hygiene practices (WASH)*, encouraged the practice of open defecation by the population concerned in rural areas in the Far North Region (13 per cent), in spite of several improvements noted at the national level with regard to access to improved latrines (75%)<sup>22</sup>
- insufficient budgetary allocation to the relevant administrative bodies responsible for the implementation of WASH practices<sup>23</sup>
- the use in rural areas of rudimentary and sometimes inappropriate tools to provide healthcare services to patients in health facilities,

***Noting that*** one in three children worldwide—that is 739,000,000 children—lives in an area where water is scarce or very scarce and that climate change threatens to exacerbate this phenomenon known as “water vulnerability”, which threatens their health and well-being and is one of the leading causes of deaths from preventable water-related diseases in under-five children<sup>24</sup>,

***The Commission reiterates*** its recommendations made during the 2023 Global Handwashing Day, in particular:

- *that Regional and Local Authorities*
  - o increase the number of boreholes and sanitation facilities

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<sup>21</sup> See United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), "Note d'information sur les inondations - au 4 septembre 2024", <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/comeon/cameroun-extreme-nord-note-information-sur-les-inondations-au-04-septembre-2024> , consultée le 11 octobre 2024.

<sup>22</sup> See. *Integrated food security Phase Classification (IPC)*, “Cameroon: IPC acute Malnutrition”, 23 pp., spéc. p. 4, [https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Cameroun\\_Acute\\_Malnutrition\\_Nov2023\\_Oct2024\\_Report\\_French.pdf#:~:text=L'analyse%20de%20la%20période%20courante%20coïncide%20avec%20la%20baisse%20de](https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Cameroun_Acute_Malnutrition_Nov2023_Oct2024_Report_French.pdf#:~:text=L'analyse%20de%20la%20période%20courante%20coïncide%20avec%20la%20baisse%20de), accessed on 25 September 2024.

<sup>23</sup> See Ministry of Basic Education, Correspondence No. B/N/MINEDUB/SG/DSSA/PPS/SDSS/SHP of 26 February 2024, addressed to the CHRC in response to the recommendations made during the 2023 Global Handwashing Day.

<sup>24</sup> See UNICEF, “1 in 3 children exposed to severe water scarcity – UNICEF”, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/1-3-children-exposed-severe-water-scarcity-unicef>, accessed on 25 September 2024.



- include monitoring and management of water points and sanitation facilities in their *Council Development Plans* (CDP)
- install new water points or protect existing ones, and make them as accessible as possible to the population, including the poorest
- *that the Cameroon Water Utilities* accelerate drinking water supply in homes, and ensure the systematic and effective maintenance of its distribution network,

**The Commission notes** that out of the 220 recommendations accepted by the State during the adoption of *the Report on Cameroon* on 26 March 2024, after undergoing *the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review* (UPR), 25 are in favour of health and two are on the theme of the 2024 Global Handwashing Day. The CHRC has distributed them to State structures and civil society organisations (CSOs), each as far as it is concerned, as follows:

- the recommendation to “*conduct large-scale public awareness campaigns on preventive healthcare, nutrition, hygiene and the prevention of diseases*” addressed to the Ministry of Social Affairs (MINAS), MINSANTÉ and CSOs
- the recommendation to “*continue strengthening measures to mitigate the effects of diseases such as HIV, malaria and cholera*” addressed to the Minister of Decentralisation and Local Development (MINDDEVEL) and MINSANTÉ,

**Conscious** of the repercussions of non-compliance with hand hygiene measures on human health, particularly among vulnerable groups (children, the sick, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples etc.),

**The Commission recommends** that the Government:

- improve budgetary resources to finance the construction of water points in rural areas, in health facilities, in schools and in the surroundings of chiefdoms
- accelerate the rehabilitation of obsolete facilities and the construction of new facilities in certain neighbourhoods to facilitate the distribution of drinking water at the end of the *Drinking Water Supply Project for the City of Yaoundé and its Surroundings from the Sanaga River* (acronym in French: *PAEPYS*), which began in 2016 and will be operational from 20 August 2024
- step up the monitoring and control of the implementation of sanitation projects in major cities,

**The Commission specifically recommends** that:

- *CSOs* raise awareness among the population about the risks associated with non-compliance with basic hygiene measures, in particular regular hand-washing with running water and soap
- *the population, especially parents*, adopt and encourage healthy behaviours through simple and less costly actions such as hand-washing, to protect the health of the whole family
- *children* wash their hands regularly before and after meals, after using latrines, after contact with animals and after any activity involving the use of hands,

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For its part, **the Commission will spare no effort** to further promote and protect human rights, and to work towards education on good hand hygiene practices, through

training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, the handling of complaints, and self-initiated investigations, including through its **toll-free number, 1523** (free calls, even without airtime).

**Useful address of CHRC.-**

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Yaoundé, 14 October 2024

~~James Mouangué Kobila~~  
