



THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION'S STATEMENT TO MARK THE GLOBAL HANDWASHING DAY

15 October 2021

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter referred to as "the Commission"), established by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and commenced operations on 29 May 2021,

Bearing in mind the UN General Assembly Resolution 64/292, which recognises the human rights to water and sanitation,

Considering that Global Handwashing Day, founded by the Global Handwashing Partnership, is an annual global day dedicated to advocating for handwashing with soap and water as a simple, effective and affordable way to prevent disease and save lives.¹

Recalling that the purpose of this day is to raise awareness and understanding of the importance of handwashing in disease prevention,

Welcoming the theme of this year's celebration, Our Future is at Hand - Let's Move Forward Together, which calls on all of society to work towards improving hand hygiene and reminds us that we must work together to achieve universal access to safe water and the establishment of a handwashing culture,

Bearing in mind the Sustainable Development Goals of which Goal 6 aims at universal and equitable access to safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation by 2030, especially for vulnerable populations,

Bearing in mind the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines on handwashing which aim to provide health workers, hospital administrations and health authorities with a thorough review of the evidence on hand washing in health care, specific recommendations to improve practices and reduce the transmission of pathogenic micro-organisms to patients and caregivers,

¹ About Global Handwashing Day at www.globalhandwashing.org consulted on 2/10/2021

Considering the African Guidelines for Sanitation Policy Development launched on 10 June 2021 in Lagos, which constitute the minimum standard for sanitation policy development to achieve access to sustainable sanitation and hygiene,

Recalling that on 27 June 1984, Cameroon ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted on 16 December 1966 by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 2200 A (XXI), article 1 of which provides that: "*the States Parties to the present Covenant recognise the right of all peoples to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health*",

Bearing in mind that hands can be contaminated with bacteria, viruses and other disease-causing micro-organisms, especially after using the toilet, coughing, sneezing or shaking hands,

Noting that according to WHO, 50 per cent of child malnutrition cases are due to diarrhoea and repeated intestinal infections, 80 per cent of viral conjunctivitis² cases and more than 50 per cent of cholera cases in Africa³ are caused by poor sanitation and hygiene or lack of clean water,

Noting that handwashing with soap is a particularly effective hygiene practice as it:

- reduces diarrhoeal diseases, such as cholera, by 30 per cent to 48 per cent
- reduces acute respiratory infections by up to 20 per cent
- reduces the transmission of pathogens such as cholera, Ebola, shigellosis, hepatitis E and now Corona Virus
- protects against hospital-acquired infections and reduce the spread of antimicrobial resistance
- contributes to the reduction of neglected tropical diseases such as Bilharzia, Onchocerosis and Trachoma⁴,

Noting that 1.7 million children die each year from diseases such as diarrhoea and pneumonia worldwide, yet one of the 'cures' is known and simple to implement: *washing hands after using the toilet or before eating*⁵,

Whereas the Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the need for people to wash their hands frequently and has required investment in hand sanitisation kits with hydro-alcoholic gels and in the provision of safe drinking water,

The Commission is aware that many people do not have access to soap and that in some parts of Cameroon, the lack of running water means that women and children have to walk long distances to get water to wash their hands,

² https://www.wikidoc.org/index.php/Conjunctivitis_epidemiology-and-demographics, accessed on 13 / 10 / 2021.

³ <https://www.pasteur.fr/fr/centre-medical/fiches-maladies/cholera>, accessed on 20 / 9 / 2021

⁴ <https://www.oc-cooperation.org/actualite/supports-de-sensibilisation-journee-mondiale-du-lavage-des-mains/>, Consulté le 20 / 9 / 2021.

⁵ <https://www.afdb.org/fr/event/journee-mondiale-du-lavage-des-mains>, accessed on 20 / 9 / 2021

The Commission notes that in towns, 65.55 per cent of households (493 out of 752) use borehole water, while 53.69 per cent walk between 1 and 5 km and 49.25 per cent walk more than 15 minutes to get water⁶,

The Commission commends the repeated appeals of the President of the Republic, Head of State, as well as the actions of the Government and various social actors to promote handwashing through, among other measures:

- raising awareness of the need and manner of handwashing⁷ and providing sanitary materials such as taps, buckets and hydro-alcoholic gels as a barrier against Covid-19
- the provision of water and soap in all public buildings for all users, to facilitate and encourage hand washing
- the donation by the President of the Republic of nearly two billion CFA francs in sanitary equipment to reinforce measures aimed at containing the spread of Covid-19 in April 2020, including 50,000 cartons of soap and 40,000 cans of hydro-alcoholic gel
- the creation of the "Clean Schools" concept by the Ministry of Secondary Education to ensure a clean school environment and students
- the signing of a memorandum of understanding for 3.6 billion CFA francs on 1 July 2021 in Yaoundé between the Government of Cameroon and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (Koica), for the supply of drinking water to rural areas
- the supply of drinking water to hospitals in 35 health districts in the Far North, North, Adamaoua, East and Central Regions, under a project (2018-2021) funded by the Islamic Development Bank⁸
- the supply of drinking water to the sites that will host the African Cup of Nations (CAN Total Energies) from 9 January 2022, including sports, hospital, hotel and leisure facilities and sports centres, by the Cameroon Water Utilities (CAMWATER) company.

The Commission appreciates the initiatives of development partners, civil society and citizens to ensure that people, especially those in rural areas, have access to safe drinking water and sanitary facilities for hand washing or hand sanitisation,

The Commission however regrets the abandonment or absence of hand-washing facilities and water points in some public places such as markets and leisure areas,

The Commission recommends that parents and supervisors remind children, pupils and students to wash their hands regularly with soap and water both at school and at home,

The Commission recommends that the Government, public and private institutions and individuals continue to invest in the provision of handwashing devices and equipment to reduce the risk of disease and health care costs,

The Commission recommends that the local authorities ensure the installation of hand-washing points in public spaces and raise awareness among the public on the merits and vitality of this gesture, especially in the era of Covid-19;

⁶ Tekam et al. (2019) Access to drinking water and sanitation: the case of the Douala V district, Cameroon on <https://repository.up.ac.za/handle> accessed on 2 / 10 / 2021

⁷ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) endorses 20-second handwashing recommendation

⁸ Article by Kimeng Hilton in Cameroon Tribune published 24 / 8 / 2021

The Commission recommends the protection of waterways against pollution by waste, particularly from industrial and household waste, to reduce the risk of contamination of populations by diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, amoebic dysentery, Hepatitis A, typhoid and poliomyelitis,

The Commission recommends that awareness of regular handwashing be increased within the Covid-19 context so that the practice of handwashing becomes a sustainable habit in our society,

On the 13th Global Handwashing Day, **the Commission stresses** the need to raise awareness through creative approaches on the importance of this seemingly trivial, but the life-saving gesture,

The Commission, for its part, will spare no effort to continue promoting and protecting the right to health through training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, fact-finding missions, and handling complaints and self-initiated investigations.

Yaounde, on 14 OCT 2021



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