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Title: AIDS: The Good News from Furu-Awa

Most of us will certainly be unable to locate Furu-Awa on a map. But of late, the subdivision is in the limelight and has become a pacesetter in the fight against AIDS in enclaved rural areas. Cut-off in all aspects from the rest of Cameroon, a chartered helicopter left Bamenda last Monday for the 35 minutes flight to Furu-Awa with an AIDS sensitization team on board, (including two people living with the virus).

We should doff our hats to the organizers (the German Technical Co-operation and a local NGO, the IDF) for initiating this first experience in Cameroon

where the population in a division (Menchum) and Furu-Awa in particular, is being sensitized on AIDS prevention village after village with HIV carriers gi-

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ving testimonies.

Apart from this unique laudable initiative, strategies to fight AIDS emanating from most international donor agencies and NGOs have, unfortunately, dangerously failed to target a large segment of Cameroon's most productive force: the rural population. Despite the billions of CFA francs injected into anti-AIDS campaigns, most people in rural areas (like in Furu-Awa or Akwaya) can hardly tell what AIDS is all about. Or what condoms are meant for. Moreover, the minority in Furu-Awa who believe that AIDS exist, say it's transmitted by dogs brought into the country by tourists. It's also disheartening to learn that despite the astronomical amount of money spent in fighting AIDS, there is paucity of accurate data both on AIDS itself

and how the pandemic actually affects different economic activities in rural areas.

Some argue that AIDS is unlikely to inflict severe damage on the national economy if people in rural areas are infected because "they are poor, unskilled and contribute little in pure economic terms." As such, no need to 'waste' money sensitizing them. This view ignores not only the human dimension, but also the broader social and economic aspects of development. The macroeconomic impact of AIDS in the rural sector is easy to discern: deaths due to HIV/AIDS will lead to reduced food production and declining food security; as well as a reallocation of labour and time from work to non-agricultural care activities.

Besides the human suffering, agricultural households may revert to subsistence rather than cash crop farming. According to a study by the Zimbabwe Farmers Union, the AIDS-related reduction of maize has reached 61 percent, vegetables 49 percent and groundnuts 37 percent. These figures are scary! And few in Cameroon will want our agricultural sector, one of the largest contributors to the economy, to succumb to the pangs of AIDS as in Zimbabwe.

This is why the need to act now is more urgent than ever before. But without serious action plans and determined efforts (as the current campaign in Furu-Awa), the war on AIDS in rural areas stands little or no chance of making meaningful progress nation wide. Instead of spending so much time, money and human resources organizing time-consuming AIDS seminars in urban areas like Yaounde, Douala, Kribi... (where the population is already AIDS conscious); why can't the rural areas have their own share of the sensitization campaign? That's why what's going on now in Furu-Awa needs to be emulated. It is, without mincing words, a stitch in time that saves nine!

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