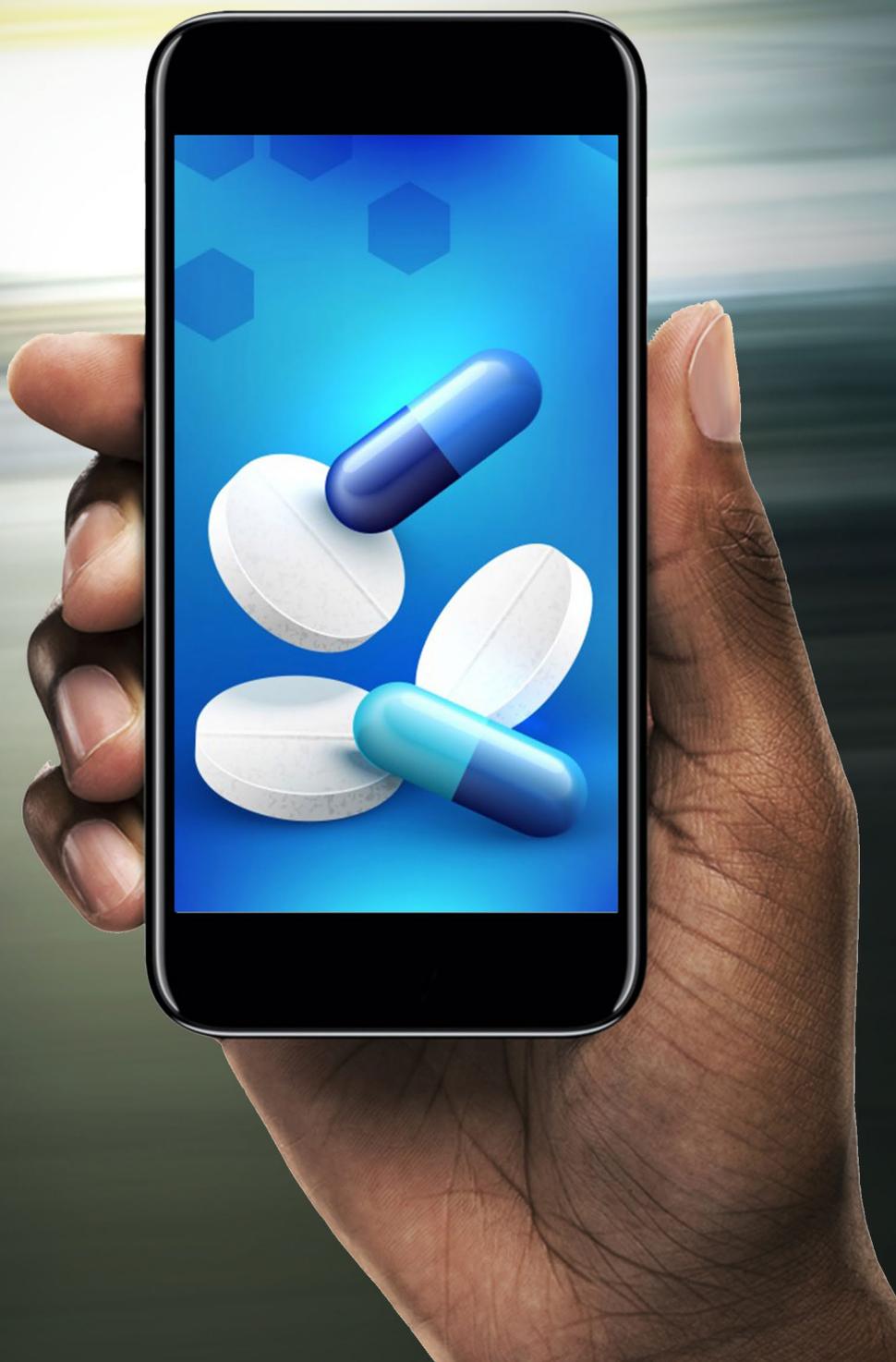


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## Unlocking the Potential of **ehealth** to Improve Cameroon's Health System

By Odette Kibu



## INTRODUCTION

ehealth is an important revolution since its creation and is accompanied by so many advantages to better the healthcare sector around the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines ehealth as 'the combined use of electronic communication and information technology in the health sector. It is estimated that about 95% of the world's population now lives within areas that are well served by mobile networks and that there are more than [seven billion](#) mobile subscriptions globally (an average of one per person). However, at [74%](#) and [21.8%](#) respectively, mobile phone and internet penetration in Africa is lower than the [global average](#) but sufficient for scale-up of Digital Health on the continent.

ehealth has a lot of potential for improving the health care sector and some projects in Cameroon have been oriented towards ehealth to better health care delivery such as the *Happy Mother, gifted mom, Cardiopad* including upcoming projects such as *Mediquick*. Despite the efforts made by some startups to introduce ehealth in the health system in Cameroon, the slow adoption of ehealth remains a challenge. The Cameroonian health system like in other developing countries has its ehealth sector still at a neophyte stage. For this system to rapidly progress, there is a need to bridge the gap between the digital economy and health care services.

## ADVANTAGES OF EHEALTH IN THE HEALTH SYSTEM.

The role of ehealth has been acknowledged as crucial in accomplishing supreme health priorities such as universal health coverage (UHC) and the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) due to its effectiveness in delivering health care services. Services are offered in a quicker and accessible way thus, reducing waiting time in the hospital, provides quick access to patient's records and information, reduces paperwork and duplication of costs. Most importantly ehealth reduces medical errors and better clinical decision making. ehealth showcases a lot of potentials that will benefit both the health system and the economy of Cameroon directly if implemented in full capacity.

## WHY HAS THE HEALTH SYSTEM NOT BEEN ABLE TO BENEFIT FROM EHEALTH?

Cameroon faces the challenge of advancing its implementation of a national health information system which will help its citizens to avail health care services in an effective and quick manner. This is due to the fact that there are a lot of ICT intellectuals/experts in

Cameroon with bright and innovative ideas that can establish the ehealth system through their projects but they lack the funds to implement these projects, scale it up or even create start-ups that can service the ehealth products. This issue can be solved but it is aggravated by the fact that the state allocates an insignificant portion of the budget to health care services which is not enough to fund innovative ehealth projects. In a time where the digital economy has gained its grounds in the world, it is devastating to know that purchasing data bundle for internet services is expensive in Cameroon. Thus, starting up a full-blown ehealth system is almost an impossible mission at this time.

The health information system is characterized by a multitude of non-integrated subsystems and non-harmonized data collection tools. However, there is no doubt that the Ministry of Public Health had created the Health Information Service (HIS) to ease the collection of data into their database. Though the District Health Information Software (DHIS 2) and the Cameroon Health Data Collaborative are being implemented to offer health care service, some rural areas are inaccessible with no availability of network services and there are left with no choice than use their traditional methods of papers, pens and the human brain. Thus, timely harmonization and accessibility of health data are problematic.

For consumers to consume the services of an ehealth system, they need internet services on a daily basis but given the poor standard of living of Cameroonians prevents them from purchasing data bundle. In late 2018 statistics shows that there are more than [4.89 million](#) subscribers yet access to internet services is limited in rural settings. It, therefore, implies that both the provision and consumption of ehealth services will be limited and thus, it will be difficult to maximize the benefits of ehealth.

The implementation of ehealth services in a hospital setting requires the expertise of health care providers in using ehealth tools to make services available to the consumers. Unfortunately, the resistance of health care providers to change from traditional tools into ehealth tools is a drawback in adopting ehealth. They prefer to revolve around the traditional tools of a pen, paper and human memory.

Although ehealth has a lot of potential for administering health care services in a quicker and effective way, the security and confidentiality of the health status of the consumer will be at stake. The fear of the breach in confidentiality of the medical record of a patient on an ehealth platform inhibits users from adopting this system of administering health care services.

## BUT HOW CAN THE GOVERNMENT UNLOCK, ADOPT AND MAXIMISE THE POTENTIAL OF EHEALTH FOR BETTER HEALTH CARE DELIVERY?

There should be a creation of a consortium between the Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, Ministry of Research and Scientific Innovation with a special focus on investing in ehealth not leaving out the Ministry of Small and Medium size enterprises to support the growth of ehealth start-ups. The health expenditure in general and ehealth in particular as a proportion of Cameroon's GDP needs to be increased significantly. Policymakers should integrate ehealth as a syllabus to the tertiary education sector with real-world practical application. Purchasing and accessing internet services should be at an affordable rate for all consumers.

## CONCLUSION

ehealth does indeed has great potentials, but harnessing these potential requires a continuous process of finding and negotiating a delicate balance between many interests and issues. To attain an efficient and cost-effective health system in Cameroon, it is imperative for the government to adopt and maximize the benefits of ehealth.

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