



CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Impact on health

James Achanyi Fontem



James Achanyi Fontem is currently the Executive Director of Cameroon Link, an NGO based in Douala that promotes health and agricultural initiatives in rural areas through community radio stations in Cameroon. He undertook a Professional Fellowship with the Sickle Cell Society, UK in 2008. In addition to his work with Cameroon Link, James chairs a number of different networks including the Federation of Cameroon Breastfeeding Promotion Associations (FECABPA), the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) Men's Initiative, and Youth Action for Environmental Protection. He is also the national coordinator for the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN Cameroon). Since 2011, he has acted as the health district coordinator for Scaling Up Malaria Control for Impact (SUFU) in Bonassama, located in the Littoral region of Cameroon, all of which are cumulative functions within his role at Cameroon Link.

James' work and activity

Before undertaking the Fellowship, James had a number of different jobs. One such role was with Farm Radio International (FRI), a Canadian NGO, which uses community radio stations as a means of capacitating small scale farmers to enhance quality of crop production and improve livelihoods, for which James still remains the main Cameroonian contact. Through FRI, James established a partnership between the Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) and Cameroon Link, where he is currently the health Community Learning Programme (CLP) Liaison in Cameroon. Based in Vancouver, Canada, the CoL is an intergovernmental organisation that aims to encourage the development and sharing of knowledge through open learning/distance education, resources, and technologies. In conjunction with the CoL, Cameroon Link organises "story design programming" workshops on mother and child healthcare through community radio stations in the southwest, Littoral and western regions of Cameroon.

James notes, "I organise capacity building training for media professionals working for the development of community radio stations in Cameroon. I coordinate research work on infant and young child feeding with some 30 health district civil society organisations. I supervise, monitor and evaluate the work of community radio stations in the western, Littoral and southwest regions of Cameroon involved in the design of community learning programmes on mother and child healthcare. 12 community radio

stations are involved in activity and 110 community-based organisations are involved in the promotion of malaria prevention in the health District of Bonassama."

Employer support and promotion

At the time of James' Commonwealth award, he was a programmes manager with Cameroon Link. James stated that his employer was very supportive of undertaking the Commonwealth Fellowship as it was seen as a valuable opportunity to learn new skills which would improve performance in the workplace and could subsequently be shared with other colleagues.

Upon returning from the Fellowship, James received a promotion for which he credits the Commonwealth award: "When I returned to my job, my position started to change with greater responsibility as my course in the UK focused on programme management." James revealed that his salary increased by more than 25% upon his return home from the Fellowship. He attributed this to his enhanced performance in the workplace to which he felt the Commonwealth award largely contributed. James' new position led to the creation of gender equity training modules promoting primary education for young girls, employment of youth in the non-agricultural sector, and the promotion of reproductive and sexual health activities in Cameroon.

Skills and knowledge

Whilst undertaking the Fellowship in the UK, James was able to develop many skills in information and communications technology including building websites and creating blogs, which he was able to use in his work upon returning home. James stated, "I have been able to develop internet blogs, YouTube and online radio channels for sharing information on our work, and have been able to train Cameroonians through open distance learning initiatives."

James' Fellowship with Sickle Cell Society UK was structured in a way that he was able to attend university lectures and modules on managerial skills as well as attend site visits to see how managing skills are used within community outreach. "The programme management skills I learned while in the UK taught me how to design specific programmes, how to execute said programmes, and how to monitor and evaluate them." At the end of his Fellowship, James developed a project on the prevention of sickle cell anaemia which is currently being used by the Cameroonian government. As a result of James' project, the government has acknowledged sickle cell disease as a public health problem and appointed a national coordinator of the programme. Furthermore, the government has allocated health workers the appropriate resources to carry out activities within rural communities.

Other key skills that James was able to learn from his Fellowship in the UK were fundraising and networking strategies. James asserted, "We were given the opportunity to visit [whilst in the UK] other associations and other networks to see how they operate and how they fundraise. Because of this, we are now able to raise funds for our projects today as we learned the necessary computing skills, and learnt about meeting funding needs and requirements." James has been able to share his newfound expertise since returning to Cameroon. He has reported being able to train between 41-50 people in technical, analytical and managerial skills as well as share general information as a direct result of undertaking the Commonwealth Fellowship.

Development impact

Through his positions as the Commonwealth of Learning health CLP and the Cameroon Link Partnership Liaison, James was able to lead community radio action to produce high quality radio programmes on agricultural issues as well as maternal and child health in English and local languages for greater outreach to rural communities. One such activity involved setting up a community radio station in a hard-to-reach rural village which is handicapped due to its remote location. The radio station was therefore an attempt to provide villagers access to information regarding agriculture and health that would have otherwise only been available in urban areas. The empowerment of women was also an important element of the project as James informed us that 65% of the community involved in farming are women.

Catalytic effects of James' work can be seen through the subsequent work he has done with community-based organisations in which James provided training on how to apply for grants and funding. James asserted that many applications for which he provided support have received

funding and now have enough money for their own activities which involves the creation of new jobs.

'The CSC Fellowship training led to my ability to impact local Cameroonian communities in the health sector through HIV/AIDS prevention, maternal & child health and reproductive and sexual health.'

Socioeconomic impact

James has worked on a number of development initiatives related to women and children's health rights including prevention of mother-to-child HIV/AIDS transmission. Through his projects he has been able to change behaviours in regard to better health outcomes. One notable project involves the development of mobile phone applications as a means of improving health outcomes for women. Project participants receive reminders regarding health consultation dates and immunisation appointments for themselves and their children. James noted that there has been a sharp increase in women accessing healthcare and hospitals, and has subsequently had an impact on child health since its inception. James has also been involved in family planning education. Through his work, he has endeavoured to promote childbirth spacing as a means of reducing child mortality rates and contributed to reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies.

Government policy

When James began his work in promoting breastfeeding, the Cameroonian government did not have any policy regarding the marketing of breastfeeding substitutes. Due to the lack of marketing regulations, the use of artificial milk was very common. Through research and participation in international conferences, James was able to lobby the government to implement a national code on the marketing of breast milk substitutes, demanding that corporations adhere to certain guidelines and regulations in December 2005. Although there are currently no punitive measures for breaking these statutes, James continues to advocate for corporations to be held legally accountable for any violations and abuse of child rights.

James' Commonwealth award

James asserted that the Commonwealth award made a significant contribution to his professional development in part because of the perceived prestige and status of undertaking the Fellowship. In addition to the skills and knowledge he gained, James felt that coming to the UK, participating in forums and establishing international links, played an important role in his career development, which would have been very difficult to accomplish without the award. He stated, "If I hadn't received the Commonwealth award, I would have not been able to learn all the skills surrounding information technology and programme management that I gained during the Fellowship."

Through the Fellowship, James designed a project based on the skills that he learnt whilst on award. Through this project, James stated that he was able to help 12 Cameroonian organisations set up offices, develop organisational strategies and execute programmes. He noted, "What I learned in the UK is still being replicated today through all the training that I've conducted. This training has been recycled in an innovative way that has led to the creation of new organisations and jobs."

Through connections established whilst on award, James has been able to secure funding for the Open Distance Learning programme for research on African rural radio stations. James notes that there are approximately 75 community radio stations that are implementing programmes which he has advised on. He has also recently secured funding from UNICEF in a cooperation agreement regarding infant and young child feeding during World Breastfeeding Week 2013 in which IBFAN Africa supported community radio stations to design programmes on breastfeeding.

Upon his return home, James has been able to share his experience of the Commonwealth Fellowship with others and has even helped other colleagues apply to the scheme. James asserted that his personal and professional expectations were met whilst on award and that he thought the Fellowship was successful in both ways.

'From undertaking the Fellowship, people gain knowledge and share ideas, create important contacts, meet funders and discover agencies, which all help support activities they want to carry back in Africa.'

James stated that he felt Professional Fellowships were advantageous in that they provide professionals with practical skills which are transferable and can be readily shared with others. In this way, Professional Fellowships are a scheme in which impact can be seen and felt almost immediately. James said, "Professional Fellowships are practical, not theoretical. Once this information is passed on, it can be shared in a way that helps others to develop their professional skills faster."

James concluded by stating that the Commonwealth Fellowship introduced him to new and innovative ways of thinking and managing people and projects. He affirmed, "The CSC Fellowship opened new avenues for creativity and innovation of my managerial skills."

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