Reviewer's report

Title: Operational Research in Malawi: making a difference with cotrimoxazole preventive therapy in patients with tuberculosis and HIV

Version: 2 Date: 20 May 2011

Reviewer: Jeremiah Chakaya

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript is a superb description of the processes used to integrate operations research into the TB and HIV programmes in Malawi and how operations research impacted programme performance and ultimately improved the outcomes of persons with TB and HIV.

Faced with the problems of high deaths among HIV infected TB patients and early deaths of patients initiating ART the Malawi TB and HIV programmes “embraced“ operations to define critical programme constraints, develop research questions around the identified constraints, implement the research projects, widely disseminate the research results to stakeholders and to a broader audience through publications and rapidly translated the research results into policy and practice. Attempt is made to link the improved programme performance ( reduced death rates in HIV infected TB patients and reduced early mortality of HIV infected persons initiating ART) to the operations research activities though direct causality is not claimed. This is a great manuscript. Below are a few minor issues the authors may wish to address or discuss:

a) 1996 is given as the year when the NTP in Malawi embraced operations research. It may be good to provide further insight into this “change of environment”. What made this rate limiting step happen? Was it for example a change in the leadership of the NTP or the entry of a new NGO with research leanings?

b) It is highlighted that policy entrepreneurs played a critical role in not only getting the research done but also in ensuring that the results of the research were translated, rapidly, into policy and practise. It may also be a good thing to provide further information on the composition, characteristics and other attributes of this group of people. Who were these movers and shakers? Were they academicisians linked to the NTPs, programme based scientists, programme implementers such as local or international NGOs or funders of the health programmes? A general description (no specific names needed) of this critical group of people may be good to provide.

c) It would be desirable to try and repicate the Malawian experience elsewhere. To be able to do this, it may be useful to understand the Malawian context a little better. Did the country's size, population, political and governance systems, scientific and research culture, pre service training programmes for health care
workers, etc influence the ease with which research could be embedded into the TB and HIV programmes and the decision making processes for the translation of research into policy and practice?

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests