Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Christopher Whitty

Reviewer's report:

This is an interesting and well-written piece on the lessons learned from applying operational research in Malawi, using CT prophylaxis in HIV as an example. The authors, who are one of the best operational research teams around, are well placed to write this. In principle this should be of interest to a wider range of readers of BMC Public health.

The question is not whether lessons can be learned from this example, but how best to make them applicable and generalisable. Here I think the paper could be improved to maximise its utility to readers who do not know the context or want to apply lessons elsewhere.

Major.

1) At several points the authors assert that something (eg publishing operational research, involving policymakers) is essential. Their implicit syllogism is that they did this, that it worked, therefore what they did is essential. I suspect they are right in most cases, or all, and what they say sounds reasonable. They provide little by way of a counter-factual however- what would have happened if they had done everything apart from this component. It would be helpful if they could say which elements were most important- and maybe example where without that something has failed.

2) They several times mention ‘policy entrepreneurs’ as key, but the reader is left uncertain what constitutes one and how they would recognise one, or create one. Is this a post? If so how appointed, to do what, funded by whom? Or a description of a behaviour pattern of particular policymakers, like ‘early adopter’? More importantly, what are the steps to create / identify such a person?

3) The context of these researchers, and the way they were integrated into the policy structure (and had been for many years) is probably an important part of their success. Some more context would be helpful to readers wanting to know how to translate this into their own context. Also knowing some of the institutional barriers (which readers elsewhere will probably recognise).

Discretionary.

4) A bit about funders/donors might be helpful, and specifically were the donors responsible for the OR the same as those helping fund TB or policy work as this might have increased leverage. Again, this is useful context.
Level of interest: An article of importance 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 I have no competing interests.