Reviewer's report

Title: Measuring the health systems impact of disease control programs: Critical assessment of the WHO Building Blocks Framework

Version: 3
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Reviewer: David Bishai

Reviewer's report:

Building Blocks Paper

I really enjoyed this paper. I thoroughly agreed with the opinion of the authors. After I finished the paper I wondered about whether I actually learned something. It is difficult to judge how much analysis actually went on in this paper. The paper might just be a commentary with some pretense that the comments are findings of some systematic study. The systematic study, if there was one, was that the three different health systems impact studies referred to the building blocks as their conceptual framework. Subsequently the authors gathered to reflect on the shortcomings of the framework in guiding their study. If the authors undertook systematic process to identify shortcomings, the paper does not describe that process. Instead the paper just presents “results”. What sort of results is unclear. Are these discoveries or opinions or both?

The authors like that the building blocks model gives one common reference on what the focal items in a health system are and that it is simple. They don’t like that the WHO model fails to describe the complexity of systems. Maybe these are discoveries too. It is unclear.

Discretionary revision:

1) Either make it obviously commentary or say more about the analytical procedure used to produce findings.

The idea that “We tried it out and it didn’t work.” is underdeveloped. We do not have criteria that were applied to assess conceptual framework failure or success. Table 1 just lists three study designs and Table 2 lists the way each study implemented the building blocks. Section 2 is too short and does not say how the findings were developed.

How was the inadequacy of the WHO building blocks approach made manifest? What criteria were used?

2) It is great to see the candor of the authors in admitting the limitations of work they have done. We all learn from this candor. Can the three authors be even more candid so as to describe why they couldn’t anticipate that this approach would be inadequate before they committed to it? Was it imposed from outside designers or donors who didn’t know any better? Isn’t the omission of concern for complexity, household behavior, and intersectoral linkages obvious? If not obvious, then that would strengthen the paper. If very smart people are picking
up the WHO model thinking it is a complete toolkit, then the paper’s warning is actually made more necessary and valuable.

**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.