Reviewer's report

Title: Descending the Sanitation Ladder in urban Uganda: Evidence from Kampala Slums

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Reviewer: Leanne E Unicomb

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This manuscript contains a large amount of qualitative data on barriers to latrine use in low income communities in urban Uganda. The type of problems experienced by residents for these communities is similar to other countries and therefore findings are relevant for an international audience. However, the authors have endeavored to include all of the data of interest which results in a lack of focus on the key findings.

Specific comments on the manuscript are provided below;

Major Compulsory Revisions

Abstract

Methods; It is not necessary to describe content thematic analysis in the abstract

Results; very light. This description is not reflected in the title. There is insufficient detail. There are several pages of results and discussion under various themes and this is not reflected in the abstract

Conclusion; in the absence of quantitative findings, concluding that poor maintenance leads to open defecation is a big call. There seems to be no reference to the sanitation ladder as such. This would be useful to incorporate in the abstract. Was it used to guide selection of participants? For data analysis?

Introduction;

First para of introduction. This is very lengthy and not highly relevant history of slums and importance. The main point to convey is the reason for choosing this setting for the study. The sentence commencing with 'In Uganda, there has been failure......' seems to get better to the point.

I would break the paragraph for discussion of Latrine categories and the sanitation ladder. The authors need to frame their study that examines those from the 'shared facilities' category as a means to re think JMP definitions on improved sanitation.

It seems that the objective of the study is to determine the barrier of shared facilities on regular latrine use

The sentence in the last para of the introduction commencing 'Therefore, once the role of ......' seems to be results of the study and is therefore out of place. The
end of the introduction should describe the research gap

Methods
Second para; first sentence should be included in the prior paragraph. The second sentence should be omitted.

There is a sentence that describes ‘homogeneously composed focus groups’. I do not know what the authors mean by this? This section should describe selection of participants (inclusion/exclusion criteria, how households were selected), not the final composition, which should be part of the results.

The Ethical Considerations section is too detailed. The important information to describe is approval from an institutional review board and the type of consent taken (verbal in this case). I am not sure whether verbal consent is considered adequate by BMC Public Health

Results and discussion
This is way too long and lacks focus. The authors have attempted to include all of their interesting findings but I suggest developing a strong focus. The title suggests that sharing latrines, the impact on cleanliness and subsequent open defecation is the most important finding. Other issues such as substandard materials, security issues should be part of a separate report.

Results and discussion section on sanitation ladder. The sanitation ladder is not a concept but a definition of latrine categories. There is unnecessary text here that fits better in the introduction. The entire section lacks results and just includes context that fits better in the introduction. I have made a comment on the diagram.

Second paragraph. I don't find any data on 'data showed that open defecation was mostly practiced by those with no latrine access'. Are these quantitative data? Then there is discussion about overt and covert open defecation but no references to support these definitions. The authors do not mention whether these findings come from their data. The text does not allude to whether these data come from FGDs, among whom. These need to be more clearly spelt out so the reader can discern what the informants are telling us. There seems to be a mixture of opinion (discussion) and results but it is difficult to determine which is which.

Third paragraph; again this commences with findings from previous studies and not that of the current study. It is not clear what are results and discussion.

Fourth paragraph; this seems to contain the range of latrine issues described by informants. This should likely go at the start of the results section. Then I suggest that they are used as the basis for focus on the issue of cleanliness and maintenance and provide justification on why this is an important focus (eg most commonly mentioned barrier to latrine use or motivator for open defecation). A discussion on the validity of FGDs is not warranted and should be omitted

5th paragaph; use of the word 'ladder' is inappropriate. The latrine type should be
described instead. The quotes are a mixture which again goes to the issue of the focus of the manuscript
first quote is about access and security
second quote is about access and cleanliness
third quote is about cleaning habits
fourth quote is about importance of latrine cleanliness

Latrine disuse section; there are a variety of issues described here; lack of access (locked), latrine filling rates, cleanliness, latrine emptying, demand for latrine facilities (when considering rent).
quote 1; pit filling and landlords
quote 2; tenant's perceptions of landlords attitude to latrine use
quote 3; payment for latrine facilities
the next paragraph describes space constraints and cleanliness. I am not sure what 'flying toilets' are

Smell, heat and poor maintenance; this section is about cleanliness and impact on latrine use. It is better organized commencing with a summary of respondent findings and then a quote.
In the subsequent paragraph the quotes seem disparate; the first links in well with the text on female needs in a latrine, the second is about latrine filling, the third is the impact of flooding on latrine cleanliness, then one on inappropriate waste disposal into the latrine. The final quotation does not seem appropriate to include.

Safety: as mentioned previously, the focus of the paper should be stronger and to this end, safety would likely comprise a separate publication. The same goes for the ‘indiscipline’ section

Photographs; I am not sure that the journal supports as many as 8 photos. Some are not clear Reviewing these to include two that show major points and incorporate the use of arrows or circles to draw attention to the salient points should be considered

Conclusion
It is not clear whether the authors are claiming that they have debunked the notion that facility provision alone is adequate. This has been shown by other studies. What is new in this study? The authors provide some contextual barriers to practicing safe feces disposal and this is useful for Uganda and other low income countries. However, this needs to be better summarized. There are no limitations described anywhere and I suggest that these are included.
The aim of conducting a study like this should not only be to describe a problem but also, based on data, propose some potential steps towards a solution, keeping in mind problems, that are found in other low income slum settings, of limited space, high cost of building latrines, and the subsequent need to share
individual latrines are not feasible in these settings).

Figure 1. I am not familiar with this diagram. Unless it is a standard diagram, I would omit it and just quote the JMP definitions in the text.

I don't find that figure II adds anything.

Table 1 should be omitted and a brief summary included in the methods. There should be a table that provides some information on the participants; age, gender, role (household member, landlord etc), income (if available).

Discretionary Revisions

It is helpful to have page numbers and line numbers to help description of comments.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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