Reviewer’s report

Title: Transversal analysis of public policies on user fees exemptions in six West African countries

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Reviewer: Guy Kegels

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Transversal analysis of public policies on user fees exemptions in six West African countries
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The paper presents a summary of the report of a multiple case study ‘transversal analysis’, after a process of knowledge aggregation involving highly interactive interpretation and exchange. The case-studies (country studies) appear to have been launched in 2009 and the knowledge aggregation process took place between October 2010 and May 2011 in the form of three regional workshops. The methodology is described in sufficient detail for the reader who has experience with this type of processes to imagine the inherent strengths and weaknesses.

The paper seems to cover rather comprehensively the implementation issues and problems encountered in the real world of nation-wide user fees exemption policies in this part of the globe.

Major compulsory revisions

Although not truly ‘major’, I would rather insist on the following revisions.

1. The authors state that “the transversal analysis was informed by concepts of realist evaluation”. Although I know that at least some of the authors have a keen interest in this approach (RE), it is far from clear to me how RE has ‘informed’ the transversal analysis in the presently submitted paper. My advice would be to drop any reference to RE altogether (both in the text and in the abstract), rather than to try and explain how it has contributed to the methodology.

2. Probably related to the first comment, I would strongly suggest not to use the term ‘cognitive mechanisms’ to lump together actors’ attitudes, perceptions, interpretations and actual ‘positionings’. For me most issues described under ‘actors’ attitudes’ (dubbed ‘cognitive mechanisms’) are not ‘mechanisms’ at all (in the RE sense of the word a mechanism is capable of explaining the change from one state to another), nor are they all ‘cognitive’. Thus my advice is to drop the term altogether (again, both in the text and in the abstract).

Also for semantic clarity I would strongly suggest not to use the term ‘implementation strategy’ for things like management, communication, etc. I would feel comfortable with the lumping term ‘implementation component’, which would nicely fit all the issues treated.
Minor essential revisions

1. On p.7, the middle paragraph introduces the term ‘the Sesame plan’. I happen to know what this means, but the less specifically informed reader will probably wonder whether this makes a reference to ‘Sesame street’ or to the story of Ali Baba and the 40 thieves.

2. On p.10, the last sentence of the methods section runs: ‘In Senegal the Director of the public health centre provided the ethical authorization.’ Given the preceding sentences in this paragraph, I suppose this requires some clarification. What is ‘the public health centre’? What was the authorization needed for?

On a more general note, I would propose to change the term ‘health centre’ throughout the text into ‘health facility’ (which would include also ‘hospitals’ throughout the region).

3. On p.12, top paragraph, ends with ‘... support the presidential decision’. This is the first time it is mentioned that this initiative (the Sesame plan, mentioned above) is a presidential decision. Again, clear enough for me, but not for readers not familiar with the Senegalese story.

4. On p.13, top paragraph, last sentence: “... in addition to the general debt of 12 million,...”. Shouldn’t this be billion?

5. On p.13, third paragraph, third line: “It was as if the decision to organize user fees,...”. Shouldn’t this be ‘abolish user fees’?

6. To put the information in the same paragraph in perspective, I suggest to add to table 2 an item “year of initiation” (under “services exempted”).

7. On p.14, top paragraph, about the middle: “For example, 2% of the subsidy were planned in Burkina Faso”. I do not understand the meaning of this sentence.

8. On p.16, last sentence, going over to p.17: “…the specificity of the policies in Togo (PLHIV) and Senegal (elderly) that were centred on categories of persons with high visibility or strong symbolic power led to greater participation.” Why do the authors think this is a correct ‘explanation’? Such a statement, I think, needs to be backed by some argument.

9. On p.19, first paragraph: “… as the weaknesses of the policies that generated such tension.” I suggest it is not so much the weaknesses of the policies as, rather, the weaknesses in implementation.

10. Same page, 3rd paragraph: “… problems related to the intake of pregnant women, which reinforced this negative feeling.” What is meant by ‘Intake of pregnant women’? What problems?

11. Same page, last paragraph. “Perception that while the financial barrier has been removed,...”. I suggest to change to “... while a financial barrier...”.

12. On p.20, last paragraph: “… because they were dealing with new types of patients that they had rarely encountered, in situations that were more sensitive than previously,...”. I cannot ‘place’ this information. Why ‘new types of patients’ (PLHIV)? What more sensitive situations?
13. On p. 23, second paragraph/ “… there was scant published knowledge on West Africa”. I suppose this should be “…scant published knowledge on this subject in West Africa”.

14. On p. 26, second paragraph. The issue of the “few health mutual” (to be strengthened and subsidised) looks somewhat like a non sequitur to me. Why should these community-based health insurance schemes be vehicles for a user fees abolition policy?

15. Same page, next paragraph. “… health workers’ calls for bonuses whenever an innovation is introduced into the system.” Why should innovations lead to bonuses?

16. On p.26-27: “Innovative features and avenues for research”. I have problems qualifying some of these features as ‘innovative’ or even ‘interesting’. Targeting the elderly in Senegal was indeed ‘new’ but not very surprising if decided by an 80 years old president… Task shifting in Togo is the kind of coping strategy deployed in many countries. Creating an independent agency (Benin) that does not seem to work, is hardly ‘interesting’ (p.28) if not much is to be learned from this initiative. I would suggest the authors to reconsider the wording of this section.

17. On p.28, Conclusions: “…policy stakeholders employed both tacit and scientific knowledge…”. Should this not rather be “… both tacit and explicit knowledge..”? 

18. On p.29, point 2: “In the current wave of social protests in Africa, the place and the role of civil society […] in these policies remain vague and circumscribed.” I was not aware of any particular peak in social protest in Africa, but I probably missed out on that. But what is meant by ‘circumscribed’? And if this is a ‘challenge’, why is this so and what do the authors suggest?

**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