Reviewer's report

Title: Removing financial barriers to access reproductive, maternal and newborn health services - the challenges and policy implications for human resources for health in Zimbabwe

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Reviewer: Germano Mwabu

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The article concerns an important policy issue: the connection between user fees, the health of mothers and that of their newborns; as well as the linkage between fees and availability of medical personnel that provide the services needed by mothers and newborn babies. The general approach (mixed methods of data collection and analysis) used to investigate this issue is appropriate and of general interest.

However, no analysis of the linkage between user fees and availability or distribution of human resources for the services in question is conducted. Further, only partial analysis (using only qualitative data) is done on effects of fees on demand for maternal and neonatal services.

There is an excellent analysis of the changes and distribution of the number of human resources for health since independence. The authors show that the human resources for health have been badly affected by negative economic shocks – underlying the importance of economic policies for health. A concentration curve is used to show that midwives and nurses are generally equitably distributed. Concentration curves for several time periods (e.g., 1980-1990; 1991-2000 and 2001-2010) could have revealed whether or not this staff distribution is sensitive to economic shocks. The distribution of doctors is highly inequitable, but it is not clear what can be made out of this result because there are too few doctors in the country: there is little to re-distribute.

The article can be much stronger if it were to concentrate on HRH workforce, with some discussion on how fees generally affect the performance of the force. A limited discussion can try to illuminate demand and supply-side effects of fees. Data do not exist to examine rigorously the linkages highlighted in the present paper. (The title is too long).

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

Quality of written English: Acceptable

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