Author's response to reviews

Title: Increased fairness in priority setting processes within the health sector: the case of Kapiri-Mposhi District in Zambia

Authors:

Joseph M Zulu (josemumba2000@yahoo.com)
Charles Michelo (ccmichelo@yahoo.com)
Carol Msoni (carolmsoni2003@yahoo.com)
Anna-Karin Hurtig (anna-karin.hurtig@epiph.umu.se)
Jens Byskov (jby@life.ku.dk)
Astrid Blystad (Astrid.Blystad@isf.uib.no)

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The Editor,
BMC Series

Dear Sir / Madam

Letter responding to reviewer’s comments

Kindly be informed that adjustments have been made in the manuscript to meet the inputs from the reviewer. For clarity in this letter each comment is quoted separately with our response immediately below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Comment 1.
“Triangulated” in the second line of the second paragraph on page 11 needs more detailed description of how this has actually been done.”

Response

Triangulation can take different forms as discussed by Patton [21]. The first approach involved methods triangulation, which meant assessing the consistency of findings by comparing data patterns across the material generated by different methods, i.e. between the FGD and the IDIs in the base line study and between the IDIs and the minutes from the AFR meetings during the evaluation study. The second type of triangulation involved searching for potential patterns in terms of continuity or change in the collected material by scrutinising the data collected with the same method but at different points in time during the data-collection period. Furthermore ‘analysis triangulation’, implying a process where multiple researchers are engaged in the analysis of the findings (i.e. all authors of the study), was also employed. The patterns and potential variations that in particular were searched for during the analysis phase were indications of the level of stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, the use of diverse communication and appeal processes, indications of the use of official guidelines for resource allocation and the emergence of local concepts of fairness (page 11, second paragraph, from line number 6 to 18).

Comments 2 and 3 are responded to jointly below.
Comment 2. “…involve rigorous identification of relevant codes” in the fourth line of the first paragraph on page 12 needs more detailed description of how this has actually been done” and
Comment 3. “All transcripts were carefully reviewed to judge the solidity of the emerging codes and categories” in the 9th line of the first paragraph on page 12 needs more detailed description of how this has actually been done.
Response

All interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed verbatim. Data was transcribed by the first and third paper authors. Analysis during both the baseline and the evaluation phases started while in the field, with a later thorough reading of all the interview transcripts in order to get to know the overall data set well. The study adopted a thematic structure analysis which involved rigorous identification of relevant codes pertaining to the content of each segment of the interviews, and the subsequent classification of the material according to emerging patterns of major topics or themes [22]. The focus was placed simultaneously on identifying recurring content or patterns in the material as well as identifying nuances or new emerging themes of relevance for priority setting and decision-making processes. During the coding process substantial emphasis was placed on retaining the original meaning of what was being communicated by the informants.

The analysis process took place in two separate processes. The first was carried out with the use of NVIVO version 7 (QSR Australia) by the first and third authors. The analysed material was later revised during a workshop which was attended by all members of the REACT team from the University of Zambia and the District Medical Officer for Kapriri Mposhi district. Both coding processes involved the matching of codes (i.e. one- or two-word statements summing up the content of particular sentences or paragraphs) with segments of text/informant statements selected as representative of the code. The workshop provided an opportunity to review and revise the initial codes, in a process that scrutinised the credibility of the codes by returning to the transcripts (some new codes were identified at this point).

A code manual was then developed based on the identified codes. The code manual was developed with the key questions and the theoretical underpinnings provided by the AFR framework in mind. This assisted the process of identifying the larger themes in the material. This part of the process included the coordinating of the codes along lines of common major themes/topics.

Codes with similar meanings were linked/matched in larger themes. This was an iterative process which involved the re-reading of codes (and sometimes transcripts and other raw data) and relating them to the themes. It included moving back and forth between the codes/topics/themes and the data sets multiple times as described by Fereday et al. [23]. For example, codes such as treating different people in the same manner and absence of segregation were eventually categorised under the theme equality/impartiality, and the code stakeholder participation was eventually placed under the theme legitimacy. The final stage consisted of corroborating and legitimating the themes which involved closely scrutinising the previous stages to ensure that the clustered themes were representative of the initial data analysis and assigned codes (page 12, from the second paragraph to the last paragraph on page 13).
Comment 4. “…even more emphasis was placed on fairness and inclusiveness.” In the 5th line of the second paragraph on page 14, “inclusiveness” should be defined.”

Response

During the evaluation phase of the study, there were indications of favourable changes that had taken place during the three years, changes in which even more emphasis was placed on fairness and inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is an expression of a representative stakeholder participation in decision making. Inclusiveness is one of the criteria for legitimacy of decisions. The relation to existing plans and the involvement of other providers and of the users ensures inclusiveness (page 15, second paragraph, from line number 5 to 8).

Minor Essential Revisions

Comments 1 and 2 are responded to jointly below.

Comment 1. “A bracket is missing at the end of the fourth line of the first paragraph on page 17” and
Comment 2. “The design of Table 1 is incomplete. The name of the column should be given on the top of each column”.

Response

These two issues have been addressed in the revised manuscript.

We have with these revisions tried to respond thoroughly to the important inputs made by the reviewers. We hope that with these amendments the manuscript will be favourably considered for publication.

Yours faithfully,

Joseph M Zulu.