Reviewer's report

Title: Contribution of the Japan International Cooperation Agency health-related projects to health system strengthening

Version: 3 Date: 22 July 2013

Reviewer: Yiannis Kyratsis

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Overall the manuscript has improved substantially following the revision. There is more clarity in the revised manuscript, more explicit justification of the scope of the study and a better explanation of the methods used. The conclusions drawn from the study are also better articulated. The authors could have been more critical in their analysis of the findings and in the discussion of relevant theory so that the contribution of the study is better embedded in the current debate on health systems strengthening. The language requires some attention throughout the paper so that the arguments are succinctly presented. Below are few further points for consideration which I hope that the authors will find helpful in further strengthening the paper.

Minor Essential Revisions

Background

The WHO health system strengthening definition I would suggest to be moved down after the discussion on progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals ref [5] on page 3; the WHO definition needs to be accompanied by the relevant reference.

On page 4 when the authors start discussing the JICA I would suggest that they provide some context for the organisation to better justify the rationale for the study. Such information would also help people not familiar with JICA to get a better sense of its importance and role. For example, the authors can present at this point information such as that JICA has been in recent years one of the largest bilateral development organisations in the world with a network of xx overseas offices, projects in xx countries, and available financial resources of xx$; these information should be supported by appropriate references.

On page 4: “so far these projects have seldom been evaluated systematically from a HEALTH systems perspective”, the word health should be added to improve clarity.

On page 4: “In particular, we assessed the contribution of the JICA projects to health system strengthening by focusing on governance”. The ending of the sentence “by focusing on governance” needs to be deleted

Page 4: “We developed an analytical matrix of program activity and output in which the WHO’s framework and the PDM HAVE BEEN integrated” – words in capital should be added to improve clarity.
Top page 5: “Generally, JICA technical cooperation projects should be designed within a logical framework” this sentence would benefit from revision: JICA technical cooperation projects are designed following a logical framework…and then explain what a logical framework is using the example in the Figure

Methods
On page 6 – last paragraph of the ‘Data sources for JICA projects’ section: the 105 projects included in the study and the 42 discussed for exclusion add up to 147 - justification is needed for one more project currently missing from this discussion.

On page 7: “As the SD was a substantially final product to the other blocks, the SD was treated differently from the other blocks in the analysis”.

The point here is not very clearly stated; the authors need to revise the sentence to clarify. As it is written it doesn’t make sense. Do the authors mean that SD was found to be far more frequently the main output compared to the other blocks of the WHO framework according to their classification, and therefore, it was treated differently in the presentation of the findings?

Figures 1 and 2 can easily be merged. There is no good reason for adding an extra figure as the same information can be conveyed using just one figure. The authors can move the arrows from Fig 1 to Fig 2. Also the text that explains the logical process under Fig 1 should be included in the main text. The authors should give more specific information about the project example presented (which country it refers to, timeline involved etc.)

Figure 3 can be better explained in the main text – the text under Fig 3 should be included in the main text. It took me a couple of readings to understand how the classification of the example works. The authors could discuss in more detail about how the specific example was classified thus providing better guidance to the reader in understanding the classification process: i.e. output 1 of the project is classified as SD and therefore is grouped under SD (first column on the x axis of the matrix that describes outputs) etc

Results
Table 5 should be deleted as it does not add anything to the main findings or discussion of the manuscript, other than what is presented in the last paragraph on page 10. Also this point about governance needs to either be discussed in the following sections or be deleted.

Conclusions
On page 13: “This study may be the first to examine the type …” - this sentence would benefit from revision as follows: To authors’ knowledge this study is the first that examines…

Level of interest: An article of limited interest
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.