Author's response to reviews

Title: Structure, (governance) and health: an unsolicited response

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editors

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the comments of Profs Khan and Whitehead.

We were delighted that both reviewers regarded the article to be of importance to the field, and thought the contribution was useful and relevant.

Prof Khan sought only one typographical correction, which has been made. Prof Whitehead had more substantive concerns with the paper, which we discuss in detail below.

**Comment 1.** Caution should be applied to the quality and comparability of the health data across the 176 countries studied. Reliable data for calculating healthy life expectancy and infant mortality will not be available for a substantial proportion of the countries in the analysis. For many countries the values will be estimated or imputed – sometimes based on actual data from surprisingly few countries in the neighbouring region. This raises all sorts of problems in interpreting the findings from within regions and across regions.

This matter has now been addressed in the text of the paper at a number of points. In the third paragraph of the **Introduction**, in the first paragraph of the **Methods**, and in the penultimate paragraph of the **Discussion** we note the limitations of working with these forms of harmonized data collected by multilateral agencies. Shortcomings notwithstanding, these types of data provide initial ways of examining novel questions in global health policy.

**Comment 2.** The measurement of “Governance” is also slippery. The authors seem to adopt uncritically the World Bank’s definition and its six measures of the construct. Highly subjective assumptions are built into each one of the six measures, not least in judging “voice and accountability”, “Government effectiveness” and “control of corruption”. The authors should question what this means for their analysis and interpretation. (An added complication is that all the countries listed in the “low governance” categories are suffering armed conflict or outright war – hardly surprising that their health is poor!)

We have included in the **Methods** section, and again in the **Discussion**, a statement noting the difficulties in the interpretation of the measure of governance. We had avoided some of Prof Whitehead’s concerns through the use of the principal components analysis, reducing the notional six dimensions into a single composite measure (see **Method** section).

It should be noted that the measure of governance does enjoy some level of support within the World Bank, which provides legitimacy for its use, if not interpretive clarity. The fact that low governance scores are associated with areas of armed conflict (as previously noted on paragraph 3 under the subheading of “structural factors.”) provides some commonsense evidence for the measure’s validity.
Comment 3. As the authors point out, all three structural factors – GDP per capita, “governance” and access to improved water – are highly correlated with each other. In this situation, an alternative analytic strategy might have been to compare countries which have similar levels of economic development (as measured by GDP per capita) but which vary in their degree of good “governance”. What is the relationship with health then?

The analytic strategy proposed by the reviewer is indeed a valid one. However the nature of the original data does not, unfortunately, support this. This is now noted in the last paragraph of the Results section.

Minor Revisions

Numbering of the figures
Done.

Table explaining measure of governance
The six dimensions of governance are used by way of background explanation, and form no part of the analysis, because of the data reduction strategy (i.e., PCA) (see Methods – paragraph above “insert table 1”). Providing a table of the meanings of the measures would therefore be redundant since nothing is made of them.

We hope this now addresses the concerns of the reviewers and the editorial board.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel D Reidpath