Reviewer's report

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

Version: Date: 20 January 2006

Reviewer: Margaret Whitehead

Reviewer's report:

General
This paper deals with a highly relevant issue for public health policy: the growing interest in structura factors as determinants of population health outcomes.

Two major conclusions of the paper seem sound: a) that “the interrelationship between structure and health is not straightforward” ….and therefore that “the focus on “governance” as a structural solution to population health would appear inadequate” (p. 8) and b) that “Structural measures are likely to show weaker associations with single diseases [such as HIV/AIDS] than they are with broad measures of population health” (p.8). They rightly urge caution on both issues.

There are defects in the materials they use and with their analytic framework, however, which make the results presented in the paper problematic (a problem that must also have been present in the paper to which the authors are responding – see below.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Major compulsory revisions
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.

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!)

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?

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Minor essential revisions
1. The numbering of figures in the text does not match the numbering on the figures – need to check
and correct where necessary.
2. A table should be added explaining how each of the measures of governance is defined.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests.