Author's response to reviews

Title: The decentralisation-centralisation dilemma: recruitment and distribution of health workers in remote districts of Tanzania

Authors:

Michael A Munga (michaelmunga@yahoo.com)
Nils Gunnar Songstad (Nils.songstad@cih.uib.no)
Astrid Blystad (Astrid.Blystad@isf.uib.no)
Ottar Mæstad (Ottar.Maestad@cmi.no)

Version: 2 Date: 21 January 2009

Author's response to reviews:

To the Editor in Chief
BMC -International Health and Human Rights 21/01/09

Re: Resubmission of the revised manuscript titled: “The decentralisation-centralisation dilemma: recruitment and distribution of health workers in remote districts of Tanzania”

Dear Editor

This is to re-submit a revised version of our paper (Manuscript ID: 2122025959221373) with the underlined title above.

We feel really honoured for having our paper considered to reach this stage of the review process. We also are grateful to the two reviewers for their critical and very constructive comments. Below is our detailed response to the reviewers' comments on a point by point basis, as suggested.

Response to reviewers’ comments

Reviewer 1: Barbara Isobel McPake

Comment 1: There is no theoretical background. There was a need to define better the nature of decentralisation in Tanzania and develop hypotheses (need not be formalised) about how recruitment and distribution might be influenced by alternative models of decentralisation and the processes under alternative models of decentralisation affected by other contextually relevant factors. This helps locate the data in relation to what is specific to Tanzania and what might be generelisable beyond - and to where.

Response: We agree. In the revised version of the manuscript we have defined what decentralisation generally means by citing relevant classical and
contemporary literature. This discussion is incorporated in the introduction section. In the context section, we have added more substance to the discussion of how decentralisation was implemented in the Tanzanian context, in particular related to the process of staff recruitment at the district level.

We have also developed a new section where we present our research questions (hypotheses). We focus on the following hypothesized relationships between decentralisation and the recruitment processes: 1) decentralisation may allow districts to make more efficient use of available information about the need for health workers at district level and thus ensure that recruitment is more in line with actual needs, 2) decentralisation may bring changes in the rules of the game in the labour markets by creating new forms of competition to attract health workers to the districts, and 3) decentralisation may reduce delays in the recruitment process due to less bureaucracy.

Comment 2 The findings are reported as if everyone interviewed said exactly the same thing. While there might have been broad consensus in the points reported, the extent of divergence is important - even if only of relative emphases. Quotes would also help to present a more nuanced picture of the opinions of the interviewees. Different categories of interviewees were included - what does an analysis of differences in responses between the categories suggest? Was there more insight into some than other aspects of the process from different categories?

Response: In the revised version we have pointed out differences in views between informants on the issue of how decentralisation has affected the retention of health workers (see results and discussion sections). On other issues, there was a strong consensus among the interviewees, thus making it difficult to point at differences in views. We have indicated in the discussion section as one potential weakness of the study that the informants at the districts level were quite homogenous as they were all recruited from underserved remote districts.

Comment 3 The discussion in places represents the views of the interviewees as if facts. For example 'In some instances, the number of health workers required in a particular district have been changed' (p21). This statement appears to be based on a single report that may be rumour - although it is difficult to tell given the style of reporting of results.

Response: We agree with the suggestion and have removed this statement in the revised version.

Comment 4 A number of points are made that are not clearly relevant to the question of the paper - such as the importance of the strength of the local private sector for parallel income earning, or the importance of improving living and working conditions in remote districts. These points are well established from other work and are not relevant (or effectively made relevant) to a focus on the impact of decentralisation.
Response: We have removed these and other paragraphs dealing with issues that are not clearly relevant to the topic of the paper.

We have let the manuscript go through professional English editing.

Reviewer 2: Sarah Atkinson

Comment a) The addition of discussion and the identification of an implicit model(s) of what is expected from decentralisation in terms of impacts on HR. There is reference for example on p5 to potential impacts on internal labour market competition. More could be made of this to lift the study from a rather descriptive account into something more analytical that raises questions beyond the specifics of Tanzania. This is not a call for a simplistic cause and effect type of discussion. Quite the opposite. Discussion of the intended and likely impacts will indicate that these are contested; different studies may indicate conflicting implications etc. So an attempt that tries to tease out different possible pathways of effect will be useful for the subsequent research that tries to identify what the effects have indeed been under different organisational arrangements.

Response: This is essentially the same comment as Comment 1 from Reviewer 1. See response above.

Comment b) The results then can refer back to these theoretical debates, model(s) and contestations of how decentralisation/centralisation impact on HR issues. Again the results have a largely descriptive quality - more might be done with them if there is a set of issues and implicit model(s) to refer back to.

Response: The presentation of results and the discussion is now in line with the hypothesized causal relationships between decentralisation and recruitment processes.

In the course of responding to the comments from the two reviewers we were compelled to also make some few changes on the organisation of the manuscript. The changes were made to improve the presentation of the arguments. The main changes are as follows:

• We have added a new section - Research questions - before the methods section.

• In the methods section, the subheading ‘recruitment of informants’ has been deleted and the information previously under this heading was incorporated under the subheading ‘key informant interviews’.

• In the results section, the subheading ‘experiences with decentralisation reform policies on health services at the district level’ has been removed, and the information previously under it is let to flow from the paragraph that introduces the results section.
• We have added a subheading in the results section which reads ‘decentralisation and recruitment of health workers’. Under this subheading, there are other subheadings reading, planning according to need, the influence of local politics and patronage, complex and costly recruitment procedures, retention of health workers, responsibility without authority, and distribution of health workers.
• In the results section, the subheading ‘Remote district: a stepping stone to public service employment’ has been removed and the material that were under it are placed under the subheading ‘retention of health workers’
• Conclusion and policy implications have been merged into one section.

With Best Regards,
Michael A Munga (corresponding author)