Reviewer’s report

Title: Vertical Funding, NGOs, and Health System Strengthening: Perspectives of Public Sector Health Workers in Mozambique

Version: 1 Date: 26 August 2012

Reviewer: David McCoy

Reviewer’s report:

Thanks for asking me a chance to review this paper.

This is a very strong paper because of the stark set of findings it presents (provided these are recent data). The last few years has seen much rhetoric and various efforts to improve harmonisation and alignment. Mozambique is a signatory of the IHP. So in this sense, this paper is a strong indictment of both the government and of development partners.

However, I feel the paper can / should be strengthened in a number of ways. I have placed most of my suggestions as 'compulsory revisions'; but it will be up to you as to how much revising (mainly adding stuff) you do.

Major compulsory revisions

1. I think it would help if some more contextual information is included in the introduction in terms of the donor and NGO landscape. For example, who are the biggest donors; and how do they each compare in terms of the ration between vertical and no vertical funding? Similarly, is there any more information to describe the NGO sector? Is it very dominated by international NGOs; or by local NGOs; or a mix?

2. I would like to see the methods section improved:
   - It needs to state the dates when interviews were conducted.
   - the term ‘informational interviews’ needs to be explained.
   - the method of purposive sampling also needs to be explained. How was this conducted?
   - the methodology for analysis needs further elaboration. The term ‘thematic coding’ should be explained (for a reader who is not familiar with the technique) + there should be a brief description of how you went about doing this coding.

3. Very little data were presented given that there were 41 interviews conducted. Could more be presented? And could some of the qualitative data be quantified? (i.e. give a sense of how common views were etc; also it would to know if there were any differences noted between the different groups of informants)

4. It may be easier for the reader to avoid being told what the three cross cutting themes are (at the beginning of the results section). Rather, present the findings
from the interviews in terms of the set of four research topics; and then draw out the themes later. At present the headings and sub-headings feel like they are a bit all over the place; and with findings and conclusions sometimes mixed up together.

5. The paper does a good job of summarising the problems and the effects of vertical funding. However, what is missing is a discussion about the reasons why these problems remain. As these problems have been on the international health agenda for several years now (especially post IHP etc), the question of why these problems remain is important. I would like to know if this was brought up in any of the interviews, especially informants from national level?

6. What needs to be noted somewhere (in addition to the point already made about this being a one sided set of informants) is that the informants may be especially disgruntled precisely because of the internal brain issue. To what extent are the informants individuals who failed to leave the public sector for a better paid job elsewhere.; and who may be biased against vertical funding?

Discretionary revisions

1. The paper could be improved by incorporating into the introduction section, a clear description of the research aims and objectives. In other words, “explore the perspectives and experiences of key personnel with regards to …..” (the four topics mentioned on page 7)

2. In the introduction is states that “While the scale of new vertical HIV-specific funding is significantly larger than nearly all other health sector funding combined in many African countries, its impact on existing public sector systems and workforce has been understudied”. I think this is over-stated / too exaggerated. At the very least, it should be referenced.

Finally, this is a good and important paper - and deserves to be published and disseminated. I would really like to see it written up as well as possible. I hope my suggestions and critique are useful and constructive.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I have no competing interests.