Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Frank Feeley

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The article is very well written. The author’s methodology is clearly described, and the arguments are logical and easy to follow, with well chosen quotes from the interviews which adequately support the conclusions reached. However, I am not convinced that the article presents knowledge that goes beyond what is already in the literature or is generally understood by those working in the field. While the subjects interviewed here (Government officials) are perhaps under-represented in the literature on the problems of vertical programs and health systems strengthening, most of the points that they raise are not new. In particular, the failure of vertical programs to adequately build health systems, and the tendency to “over fund” the targeted programmatic interventions are well understood. I’m not sure the article adds new knowledge here. Nor are the problems of donor coordination new----this, after all, is the basis for the SWAp initiatives. It is instructive to see the comparison between SWAp funds and vertical program funds in Mozambique. It would be interesting to see this ratio for other African countries.

The authors make much of the “internal brain drain” with NGO’s hiring away Government health personnel. While this may not be as well documented as external brain drain, it is very widely recognized as an issue by those working in health and development, and has been specifically addressed in some countries by trying to top up Government salaries rather than hiring away from the Government. It would be interesting to know if the vertical programs offered to do this in Mozambique, rather than relying on NGO’s. The authors’ argument would be stronger if they had data documenting the extent of the “internal brain drain” from Government to health NGO’s supported by vertical programs.

In much of Africa, NGO’s have long been an extension of the public health system, or provided health services where the Government has failed to do so. What we do not learn in this article is the extent to which NGO’s were active in providing health care in Mozambique before the intervention of the large vertical programs. Did the vertical programs bring the NGO’s into the country, or did vertical program money pour through an NGO system that was already well established and better capable of rapid expansion of the programs supported with vertical funding? By relying on the perspective of Government officials, we don’t get much understanding of the comparative abilities of the Government and NGO’s to deliver targeted services when funding was greatly increased.

In short, the article focuses on government response to money funneled through
NGO’s, but in fact may be more of an indictment of the weaknesses in vertical programming. The NGO’s may have been the beneficiaries, but we do not get much understanding of the reasons why they (not the Government) were the recipients of the vertical funding. Without a better understanding of the pre-existing role of NGO’s and the reasons for channeling the money through them, we can’t judge if the response of the Government officials is sour grapes, or a fair indictment of the management of vertical programs.

A few text specific comments are included as “sticky notes” in the original manuscript file attached. I would view these all as suggested improvements.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare I have no competing interests.