Author's response to reviews

Title: District health managers’ perceptions of supervision in Malawi and Tanzania

Authors:

Susan Bradley (susan.bradley@tcd.ie)
Francis Kamwendo (fwkamwendo@hotmail.com)
Honorati Masanja (hmasanja@ihi.or.tz)
Helen de Pinho (hd2122@mail.cumc.columbia.edu)
Rachel Waxman (racheljwaxman320@gmail.com)
Camille Boostrom (camille.boostrom@gmail.com)
Eilish McAuliffe (eilish.mcauliffe@tcd.ie)

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Reviewer’s comments are in italics and responses are in normal font.

Reviewer 1:
Some aspects of the Methods need improvement. The last paragraph of the section named "sample" should mention how many districts were excluded from the analysis because it was not possible to secure at least 2 interviews in a district. And how many resulted from substitution of this excluded districts.
Response: This was a purposive sample, with targets set in advance of data collection. The Sample section (p.5, paragraph 2) now details the process by which researchers set about obtaining interviews and also shows how many were excluded from the analysis. Paragraph 3 details the total number of eligible districts and the number in which data were gathered.

In the discussion the resulting biases are not addressed.
Response: A section on ‘Limitations’ has been added on p.13, after the conclusion.

In "data collection" please specify that the interviews were taped.
Response: this has been added to Data Collection (p5, paragraph 2)

Reviewers 2 and 4:
No comments to address.

Reviewer 3:
Also the analysis of qualitative data seems to be an afterthought and it is unclear how this is linked to the original quantitative study. As this quantitative study (ref 37, which misses the year of publication) has already demonstrated the impact of supervision, it is unclear what the justification for further analysis of the qualitative data actually is; and it seems that the qualitative data was collected separate from the main survey.
Response: This qualitative work was one component of the original, larger HSSE study – it was not a separate study. Qualitative and quantitative data collection took place at the same time, with teams travelling together through the districts. This has been clarified in the final paragraph of the Background (p.4) and the first paragraph of the Sample section (p.4). The final paragraph of the Background (p.4) also includes some additional detail about the findings of the quantitative part of the study (ref 37, year of publication has been added) and shows how the qualitative data links to the findings of the quantitative results. This should address the reviewer’s concerns about the logic of the study and how is this actually linked with the previous survey. A clearer justification for the analysis of the qualitative data is given in paragraph 2 of the Data analysis section (p.6).
Further clarifications are required for the sampling section: first para in this section mentions 25 districts in Malawi and 47 districts in Tanzania, while the last para of this section says only 10 districts in Malawi and 16 districts in Tanzania were included.

Response: To remove confusion about the number of districts the paragraph about the full HSSE sample has been deleted from paragraph 1 of the Sample section (p.4). The Sample section now only contains information on the qualitative sampling process.

The methods section needs to be strengthened
Response: more detail has been included, particularly in the Methods section, to address the reviewer’s questions. The start of the Methods section (p4) contains added information on what kind of questions, how many, open-ended or not etc, and the first sentence of the Results section has been deleted (Respondents were asked to describe the supervision of maternal health staff in their district). Further detail has been added to the Data analysis section, paragraph 2 (p.6) to address the comment “Five thematic areas emerged...”How did these areas emerged, what kind of analysis was done and on what data?”

The final paragraph of the Background section clarifies that this paper only reports on the HSSE study findings in Malawi and Tanzania.

Possible policy implications of their findings for the policy makers. Why the perspective of supervisors and the different supervision paradigm matter in each country?

Response: The HSSE study showed variability in the types and frequency of supervision, and differing attitudes to the purpose and role of supervision. The policy implications of this and the importance of the perspectives of supervisors have been further elaborated in the final paragraph of the Background (p.4), line 9 of the Discussion, and the final Conclusion section.