Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Carmen Dolea

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Major compulsory revisions

The topic of supportive supervision is a critical one in health workforce development. Authors seem to be aware of previous work in the field. The article is well written and clear.

Having said that, one is left with a feeling of dissatisfaction as to what are the implications of these findings. 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. 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.

Lastly, the methods section needs to be strengthened as for now it is unclear what survey instrument was used: the first para of “Methods” states that in-depth interviews were conducted, and “the interview guide was based on a priori themes arising from the literature and was designed to elicit perceptions of these personnel on a range of human resources issues” which included “the autonomy of the district team, the current HR situation, job description and roles” etc, whereas the “Results” section starts off by saying only “respondents were asked to describe the supervision of maternal health staff in their district. Five thematic areas emerged…” How did these areas emerged, what kind of analysis was done and on what data? On the responses to the guide interview (important details missing, such as what kind of questions, how many, open-ended or not etc) or on the question of describing the supervision. The confusion grows when reading the para: “the emergence of the key role of supervision in job satisfaction and retention as a key finding in the quantitative data warranted further analysis of the original qualitative data to gain better understanding…” – does this mean that this study reports on the original data collected in the other survey? Did the authors conduct additional qualitative data collection using the interview guide mentioned in the current paper? The previous paper (ref 37) was conducted in 3 countries (Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique, and the sample seems to have been much larger. So it will be important to clarify these methodological issues.
before the paper is considered for publication.

The authors should clarify the logic of the study and how is this actually linked with the previous survey. Most importantly, they should provide an analysis of the possible policy implications of their findings for the policy makers. Why the perspective of supervisors and the different supervision paradigm matter in each country? How would these findings inform or support current or proposed policy decisions?

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

**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 that I have no competing interests'