Reviewer's report

**Title:** Community Health Worker's Program in Luanda, Angola: An evaluation of the implementation process

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**Reviewer:** Paulo Frazao

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Review for HRH

**Title:** Community Health Worker’s Program in Luanda, Angola: An evaluation of the implementation Process

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The authors analyze the implementation process of a community health worker based program, outstanding medium and long term needs related to technical, political and financial support for its continuity and scaling up. The reporting documents an extremely relevant experience that merits to be published in HRH after the following considerations.

**Major Compulsory Revisions**

The objective of the reporting was to evaluate the implementation process of the Community Health Workers Program in six districts at Luanda. The program was launched in 2007 and the fieldwork took place between May 2008 and June 2009. In the Background, the authors describe the characteristics of Angola and its National Health System. They also highlight that the way programs are implemented depends on the context of each country, which includes not only the health situation of the population, but also complex political, social, economic and cultural factors. It seems that this aspect is the central point in the argument of the authors and it should be interesting if they could give additional information about similar areas in the world that could be benefitted by the knowledge produced by this kind of analysis.

The question posed by the authors can be defined as “to evaluate the implementation process” of a program. In general, evaluation implies a value judgment. The gathered data were used for describing the process and for analyzing some of its components. In this point, the major contribution of the reporting was to indicate that (1) the implementation process was irregular; (2) the CHW should not be a volunteer worker; (3) a competent institution could be identified to motivate and qualify the CHWs; (4) the overburden of the program coordinators was an obstacle to the smooth functioning of the Program. These contributions touched in highly relevant specific aspects associated to the
program planning and design, utilized tools, CHWs’ training and also to the activities’ monitoring. It should be fair for the reader if the authors could emphasize that the produced evaluation also indicated needs to rethink and even to reformulate some contents of these components.

Several data sources were used for analyzing the program including legal and technical documents, activity records from CHWs, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and direct observation. The authors used content analysis in which the categories emerged from the analysis axes previously assembled for the fieldwork. Provision indicators were used but process indicators like followed children and pregnant were not described. The utilized methods were appropriate but it is important to take into account their limitations in the data analysis.

The Results were well structured and divided in six topics: (1) PACS-Luanda implementation process, according to document analysis; (2) Evolution of the implementation of the program; (3) Profile of CHWs and coordinators; (4) Positive aspects of the work of CHWs; (5) Barriers identified; (6) Challenges and perspectives.

The objective was to analyze the implementation process but the activity records from CHWs showed severe inconsistencies. According to the authors, such inconsistencies could be due to low level of education of CHWs; however CHWs had to have at least eight years of schooling as a prerequisite. The flaws in supervision of CHWs that were also hypothesized seemed to be more plausible. It is underlined that the implementation occurred concomitantly with the training of the CHWs and that such strategy facilitated two important aspects: the on-the-job training based on practical tasks, and the process evaluation focused on results according to the objectives. In a further stretch, the authors stated that the monitoring process was relatively less irregular in only one district and no mention was due to planning and management of the program. It should be important for the reader that the authors could comment how the program monitoring was planned and undertaken.

For individual interviews and focus groups, the participants were selected by convenience, based on suggestions of the municipal coordinators. The authors could comment the extent to which this aspect could represent an important limitation of the methods for the analysis of the implementation process. For the authors, the option allowed them to investigate and understand different perspectives of the phenomenon being studied, however considering what would be a sociological approach, all the perspectives presented in the Results lead to the same direction and the option seemed not to have been directed to explore antagonisms and tensions among different interviewees’ perspectives from a sociological view’s point.

The explored tensions refer to distinctive aspects of the reported specifically implementation process and more directly related to the decision making for its continuity, expansion and sustainability. So, I recommend to reformulate the following sentence in the Abstract “Analysis of qualitative data demonstrated an
association of CHWs with improvements in maternal and child access to health care, as well as an increase in the demand for health services, generating further need to improve service capacity“. In fact, the interviews worked for capturing the perceptions of managers, coordinators and some CHWs. According to interviewees, maternal and child access to health care improved, however it important to consider that women and mothers living in study areas were not heard besides the findings related to the inconsistences of activity records from CHWs. It is understandable that there was no intention of making an entirely external or independent evaluation and that the participation of researchers occurred in conjunction with their involvement in the implementation process itself, through cooperation, however other research methods and other participants could offer valuable information on the process.

The Discussion section brings important reflections about the described difficulties and some contextual characteristics related to the studied case, such as the fragmentation of the health system, the fragility of social policies in general, centralization of management, shortage of skilled health workers, perceived conflict of interest between CHWs and health workers at the primary health care clinics, and urban agglomeration. Some aspects of the PACS-Luanda were compared with CHWs programs in other parts of the world.

A final consideration seems still necessary. The authors concluded that the PACS-Luanda was successfully introduced, reaching a large number of trained CHWs and households being followed-up. Considering the earlier pointed aspects, notably those related to study limitations and the need for a good balancing between findings and conclusions; I recommend revising the sentence.

**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.