Reviewer’s report

Title: Paris on the Mekong: using the aid effectiveness agenda to support human resources for health in Lao PDR

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Reviewer: Elisabeth Sandor

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General comments:
I found the focus of the article quite new and well defined. It contributes to bring the aid effectiveness agenda down to the sector and even sub-sector level which is where one can assess opportunities and limitations.

Mixed research approaches such as the ones described by the authors seem appropriate to me. However, I feel that two things are missing:

- the listing of the persons or institutions interviewed: the article only mentions few institutions, mainly UN institutions, but other major donors in Lao PDR such as the GFATM are key in understanding what is happening in the country and what could change. It is not clear how much their input through their LFA or other counterparts was included in the review.

- I would have expected more data, particularly on donor’s funding in health: how much is coming from the various donors, change overtime, sectoral and sub-sectoral priorities (AIDS, HSS, health information system, HR or HR-related activities...). Looking at sub-sector priorities might be useful as we know that donors sometimes focus on specific activities which have important implications on HR policies (recruitment and retention, salary, incentives...).

The article provides useful information about the current situation and challenges regarding the HR issues in Lao PDR. It highlights some of the critical dimensions of the problem, initiatives and actions taken by the donors, some progress and the limitations for moving forward (aid effectiveness seems to remain essentially about coordination and PFM with limited ownership). Having more details or at least analysis and reflection about future development, timeline, information about how Lao PDR intends to translate the AAA with potential future linkages with the HR policy would bring even more substance to the article and reflect its title and abstract more fully.

The approach on budget support should be more nuanced and the reference to OECD DAC guidelines and reference series on harmonizing Donor practices for effective aid delivery needs to be corrected. Certainly, one can’t assume from chapter 2 on budget support that OECD sees budget support “as one of the more effective forms of aid”.

On the basis of the above comments,

1) Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a
decision on publication can be reached)

Please bring more nuance in the paragraph related to budget support on page 10, at least for the part which is associated with OECD DAC Guidelines. The guidelines the article refers to provide a full, detailed and nuanced picture on budget support, including the conditions for using it and potential disadvantages of this approach.

2) Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

It would help the reader to know a bit more about the Sector Working Group
Replace “workforce profile” with “workforce planning” as the title of the paragraph 1 of the results and discussion chapter: this would bring more consistency with the introduction of the results and discussion chapter and would better reflect what this part of chapter 1 is about.

3) Discretionary Revisions (which are recommendations for improvement but which the author can choose to ignore)

Bring more detailed data about donor’s funding in health and HRH or HR-related policies (if available). In particular, it would be interesting to get more data about the respective financial weight of donors in Lao PDR (GFATM is a major donor for the 3 diseases) and more detailed data, information or specific comment about the impact of these major donors on HR recruitment/retention/salary and incentives policies.

Provide a listing of the persons/institutions interviewed

Add comments or information about future potential developments/opportunities for pushing the HR agenda further using the aid effectiveness framework. Has there been/is there any possibility to look at the translation of the AAA in health? Can donors advocate for this?

One question: is the word “driven” on page 11 second para related to the new budget law, the appropriate word? is there ownership in this reform? This would be critical for pushing successfully a reform which is presented by the authors as one key element for change.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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' below.

Elisabeth Sandor