Reviewer's report

Title: Improving the implementation of health workforce policies through governance: a literature review

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Reviewer: Carl-Ardy Dubois

Reviewer's report:

1. Assessing the problem. The article builds on the premise that poor governance is one of the main causes of poor human resource policy formulation and implementation. While all the argumentation developed in this article draws heavily on this assertion, it would be expected that the authors develop more this aspect in the introduction of the article and bring stronger evidence on this linkage between governance and human resource policies.

2. Article’s objective. As indicated by the authors, the objective of the article is to describe how governance issues have influenced HRH policy development and what strategies can be used to improve national governance in HRH in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). I cannot see how such objectives have been achieved in the article. At best, the authors may have shown the extent to which several themes related to governance are reflected in the selected literature. But I can’t see any real demonstration of how governance has influenced HRH policies.

3. Theoretical basis. As presented in the article, the framework used to examine the governance issues does not reflect a strong theoretical basis and fails to take advantage of the vast literature on governance. Governance is operationalised into four dimensions: performance, equity, partnership, oversight. Each dimension is translated into several subdimensions. Many questions may be raised. It is not clear for instance if equity is treated as a component of the governance concept or a consequence of governance. The term performance is used to integrate many disparate concepts that go from decision making process to efficiency. I cannot understand how decentralization is a subdimension or component of performance. The authors really fail to demonstrate how the four dimensions used really capture distinct and circumscribed aspects of governance.

4. Methodology. The methods used by the authors show several and major
limitations that raise questions about the validity of the conclusions. The techniques used to collect the material do not reflect a systematic and sufficiently exhaustive process. The authors should defend why they restricted their search only to published case studies and did not extend it to other kinds of theoretical and empirical works examining the issue of governance in HRH. The authors should also defend their choice to restrict their search to only 3 databases. There is no information on the screening process, nor on the analysis of the materials. In summary the authors fail to demonstrate that the 16 papers retained for the analysis are really representative of advancements in this field of research and that the processes used to track, screen and analyse the relevant material reflect the best state-of-art.

5. Results. As indicated above, there is a gap between the results that are presented in the article and the objective exposed in the introduction of the article. At best, the results reflect some kind of content analysis that examine the extent to which and how various themes related to governance are reflected and used in the HRH for health literature. The analysis process should go further and demonstrate how gaps in governance impact in HRH policy implementation and formulation. In the current state of the article, it is very hard to see what can be learned from this review. I would also highlight that the presentation of the results do not systematically reflect the governance related themes presented in page 15.

In summary, the article that has been submitted could have a strong potential to fill an important literature gap but fails to deliver its promises due to major deficiencies in theories, methods and analyses. Major revisions would be needed to merit publishing

The author must respond to these before a decision on publication can be reached.

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 that I have no competing interests'