Reviewer's report

Title: Mapping global health research investments, time for new thinking - A Babel Fish for research data.

Version: 1 Date: 25 July 2012

Reviewer: Igor Rudan

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses an important issue of broad general interest: how to improve tracking of financial flows for research and development related to human health and disease globally. Succeeding in this goal would bring large benefits because it would enable closer alignment of the ongoing funding with the actual size of different global health problems; it would also prevent duplicate efforts across national borders and agencies, and improve accountability and transparency of finance flows. It would therefore help many stakeholders: donors, researchers, policy-makers and end-users of the research.

Several of the authors have been involved in attempts to either quantify those flows or to develop tools, methods, classifications and databases that could assist quantification of the flows. In this paper they propose that we should consider using the rapidly developing online tools and algorithms to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles related to differences in classification and documentation of the investments at the levels of national governments, donor agencies and private investors. They suggest that it is unrealistic to expect that most funders globally would adopt classification systems that could assist in this regard; therefore, they see the solution in robust mining the online data provided by donors to extract the main messages and produce more comprehensive estimates.

Their ideas should be welcomed and supported. This group comprises a rare set of experts with actual experience of assembling the information from the funders, and they have credibility to propose solutions to many of the problems that they have encountered. My main concerns are not related to the question whether the technology would eventually succeed in assisting us to track down most of the investments. I believe that this will become possible at some point, and therefore support publication of this paper as a worthy policy article that suggests a good idea.

I am more concerned about how to define the limits to “funding for research and development related to human health and disease”, how to say with any certainty that some development funding is not indirectly health related, how to separate research funding from development funding, and how to deal with the issue that many investments are both horizontal and vertical at the same time. However, if this group indeed manages to succeed in tracking the flows accurately using online tools, then perhaps some of these issues will also get their solutions that
will be mainly data-driven, and are not apparent at this stage.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Declaration of competing interests:**

No competing interests.