Reviewer's report

Title: The emergence and current performance of a health research system: lessons from Guinea Bissau

Version: 1 Date: 31 August 2011

Reviewer: Helen Burchett

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Essential Revisions

1. Results, p9: is INASA the only organisation conducting research in Guinea Bissau? This is implied from the findings section. But given experiences in other LICs, have you considered research produced by universities, health professionals (e.g. conducting small-scale unfunded research alongside their clinical work) or foreign researchers? These should be considered and discussed. If INASA is the only organisation, this is surely rather unusual and should therefore be commented on and discussed. On a similar note, are all the research centres based in the capital? There are also implications associated with this point.

2. Results, p14: can you add a summary or overview of the current performance or state of the NHRS in Guinea Bissau? As it stands, I don’t feel I take away a clear, coherent picture of how it is now. A few sentences should suffice.

3. Methods: describe the NHRS framework in the methods section, as well as referencing table 1. This will set up the sub-headings used in the findings section. Also note that the findings headings do not match the table

4. Describe the Bandim Health Project – it is first mentioned in the methods (re: sample) without any explanation of what it is.

5. Methods: there methods of analysis are unclear. ‘relevant parts’ of the interviews were transcribed – but no mention is made of how these transcripts were used in the analysis. It says a detailed summary was prepared for each interview. This suggests that the transcripts weren’t used. The description of the analysis in the abstract was clearer.

6. Methods: it mentions that the focus of the first interviews was a general exploration – how many interviews were ‘first’? And what was the focus of the remaining interviews?

7. Methods: ten research projects were chosen to explore the NHRS functions in depth. How were these projects studied – were interviewees asked only about these projects? Did document analysis focus on them? Also, it states that articles published in scientific journals were used to structure interviews – were these articles about the ten project, or different articles? If different, how were they chosen?

8. Methods: clarify whether the two national workshops were organised and run
by the researchers or others. Did interviewees attend these workshops? How many people (and who) attended?

9. Methods: which three key informants reflected on the draft – and why were they selected? I assume by ‘minor textual changes’ you mean that they did not change the substance or meaning of the findings – but this could be made clearer.

10. Results: the results section reads as though it is statements of facts, rather than the findings from qualitative research. Rewording it (e.g. ‘interviewees reported that...’ or ‘it was generally felt that...’) may help. It is also not clear what findings came from the document analysis and what came from interviews. This could be clarified (for example by referencing documents)

11. Results, p6: ‘the introduction of measles vaccines’ – when was this? Was this for a study or was it a health policy? It is unclear as written.


13. Results, p6: it is not clear whether the routine vaccinations and vaccine outreach activities were research activities or health care activities

14. Results, p6, last line: ‘in these trials’ – which trials?

15. Results, p7, paragraph 2: ENRECA – what does this stand for?

16. Results, p9, last paragraph: this is vague but seems as though it may be particularly pertinent. Can you give more information about what the senior official initiated and how it developed? Also, describe what the National Institute of Public Health would encompass

17. Results, p9: is INASA the only organisation conducting research in Guinea Bissau? This is implied from the findings section. But given experiences in other LICs, have you considered research produced by universities, health professionals (e.g. conducting small-scale unfunded research alongside their clinical work) or foreign researchers? These should be considered and discussed. If INASA is the only organisation, this is surely rather unusual and should therefore be commented on and discussed. On a similar note, are all the research centres based in the capital? There are also implications associated with this point.

18. Results, p9, Stewardship: ‘health research has been integrated into the national plan’ – this sounds interesting and crucial for this study. Can you provide more information about this?

19. Results, p9, Stewardship: the quote does not match the comment above about expat/international agencies.

20. Results, p11, Financing: who funded the salaries of the few INASA researchers? How? Was there a MoH budget line?

21. Results, p11, Producing and Using, last line: clarify what you mean by ‘essential interventions’

22. Results, p12, paragraph 1: ‘Until 2004 research papers...’ – were these BHP
papers? What were they translated from/to? Who were they disseminated to?
23. Results, p12, paragraph 1: ‘until some years ago’ – this vague – can you be more precise? Also, why did they stop having dissemination meetings?
24. Results, p12, paragraph 1: how are current/recent studies disseminated?
25. Results, p12, last line: ‘International agencies and NGOs’ – is there dialogue between researchers and these organisations as well, or is it just with MoH?
26. Results, p13, paragraph 1: how were ‘locally commissioned studies’ used in the Guinean health system? Were they used by the international agencies/NGOs who commissioned them or by others?
27. Results, p13, paragraph 1: ‘failed to inform themselves’ – this is a very blame-laden statement. Can you really say that it is their fault? Without knowing the circumstances, it is difficult to say, but given that they may be constrained by international policy and directions from their HQ and that research findings might not be disseminated, I would consider rewording this e.g. ‘there were also cases where they did not make use of local research findings or pushed their own protocols...’
28. Results, p13, paragraph 1: add more information about what interference there was – how did they interfere? What impact did it have?
29. Discussion, paragraph 2: ‘at the same time, there has been much less attention...’ – what about the pay for healthcare workers? You state that research on this changed the national policy.
30. Discussion, p15, paragraph 2: this reads more like recommendations than discussion.
31. Discussion, p15, paragraph 2: add references to last line.
32. Discussion, p16, paragraph 2: you mention funding here. Yet there was no mention of local/national funding in the findings.

Discretionary Revisions
1. Background, consider adding a bit more detail about Guinea Bissau e.g. that there are 10 regions, is it disperse or compact etc – for those unfamiliar.
2. Background, paragraph 1, line 6 – change ‘on better sending and explaining’ to ‘on better dissemination and explaining’
3. Background, paragraph 1, lines 17-24: this is quite an unclear section – could it be re-worked (and maybe shortened? It seems quite verbose without actually saying too much)
4. Background, page 2, line 1: ‘Note the distinction between a prescriptive system approach...’ this was unclear to me.
5. Background, page 2, paragraph 2: ‘nearly 650 publications’ – add reference for this (or state how you found out, if you calculated this yourself)
6. Background, page 3, line 2: consider replacing ‘widely challenged’ – a vague and unclear term – with ‘weak’
7. Background, page 3, line 2-3: I am not convinced it is a unique case – there
are other countries with weak health systems and high quality research.

8. Background, page 3, line 6: ‘to deal with a’ – is unclear.


10. Methods, page 3, last line: consider ‘and/or’ instead of ‘or’ in ‘policy maker or practitioner’

11. Methods, Interviewing: ‘that were not previously related to research in’ – consider ‘that were not previously involved in’

12. Methods, Interviewing: unclear what is meant by ‘relevant parts transcribed verbatim’

13. Results, page 5: ‘analyses for medical care and for research’ – is unclear

14. Results, page 5: ‘as was assumed in the North’ – assumed by whom? If possible, reference.

15. Results, page 6, line 2: ‘dose of infection’ – unclear

16. Results, page 6, line 12: ‘local health provision activities’ should be ‘health care provision activities’

17. Results, page 6, ‘were reproducible elsewhere’ – this implies that there was intervention, yet you state ‘observations’. You may want to replace it with ‘were also found elsewhere’.

18. Results, page 6, last paragraph: ‘monitor the changes in childhood mortality’ – should be ‘monitor changes in’

19. Results, p6, last paragraph: check the accuracy of the use of terms ‘survey’ (implying one-off) and ‘surveillance’ (implying ongoing) and childhood and neonatal.

20. Results, p7, first paragraph: what happened in Guinea Bissau regarding HTMV – did they continue to offer it because of the international recommendation?

21. Results, p7, 2nd paragraph: ‘funded the training of Guinean researcher’ (should be researchers)

22. Results, p7, 2nd paragraph: ‘data collection of entry with’ should read ‘data collection or data entry for...’

23. Results, p7, paragraph 3: ‘in this period’ – do you mean the 1990s? Could be clarified.

24. Results, p7, paragraph 3: ‘new projects were started on amongst’ – should be ‘on, amongst’

25. Results, p7, paragraph 4: from mid-2000 – clarify – was this at the end of the war?

26. Results, p7, paragraph 4: ‘8 Guineans finished...’ – were these the same as listed above? Seems to be some repetition about the MSc/PhD students.

27. Results, p8, paragraph 2: ‘that possibly some of the routine’ – consider ‘the
possibility that some routine vaccinations...

28. Results, p8, paragraph 2: ‘non-specific effects on child survival’ – may be confusing to readers not specialised in child health/immunisation

29. Results, p8, paragraph 2: ‘The findings that vaccines had...’ – change to ‘These findings were controversial’ (otherwise repetitive)

30. Results, p8, paragraph 2: ‘ignore these finding’ – should be ‘findings’

31. Results, p8, paragraph 2: ‘challenging the used methods’ – should be ‘methods used’

32. Results, p8, paragraph 3: ‘and cover all 10 regions’ – consider ‘and now covers all 10 regions’.

33. Results, p9, Stewardship: ‘Until recently the research topics’ – should be ‘Until recently research topics’

34. Results, p9, last line: move to paragraph below.

35. Results, p10, paragraph 1: sentences on ethics are unclear.

36. Results, p10, paragraph 2: who funded the KAP study on water and sanitation?

37. Results, p10, last sentence: revise to ‘which takes a long time to arrive’

38. Results, p11, line 2: revise to ‘HINARI (a programme that...)

39. Results, p11, Producing and Using, consider replacing ‘the largest part of health research’ with ‘most health research’

40. Results, p11, Producing and Using, consider replacing ‘maternal vulnerability’ with ‘maternal health’ – I’m not sure what the former means.

41. Results, p11, Producing and Using: ‘in the past, Swedish and Portuguese’ – when was this? When did it stop – and why?

42. Results, p11, Producing and Using: ‘the most significant contribution seems the’ – consider ‘contribution was the’

43. Results, p11, Producing and Using: ‘recently some researchers’ – were these working in isolation or in collaboration with Guinean researchers?

44. Results, p11, ‘Efforts to Enhance’: ‘there has been a special edition’ – consider ‘there was a special edition on health research in 2002...’

45. Results, p12: ‘asking illegal user fees to patients’ – consider revising to ‘demanding illegal user fees from patients’

46. Results, p12: ‘The country ’s health system’ [typo]

47. Results, p12: NGO’s should be NGOs (repeated elsewhere as well)

48. Results, p13, paragraph 2: consider changing ‘more difficult to contribute’ to ‘more difficult for research to contribute to local decision-making’

‘Since the beginning research findings’ to ‘Since the beginning their research findings’

‘Research showed that infectious...’ to ‘Their studies showed that infectious...’
‘...major cause for child mortality and that...’ to ‘...major cause of child mortality in Guinea Bissau and that...’
‘Studies on the effect of the WHO...’ to ‘Their studies on the effect of the WHO...’
49. Results, p13, paragraph 2: ‘to the withdrawal of the vaccine’ – at the international or national level?
50. Discussion, paragraph 2: ‘research practices and the systems’ – do you mean the research system, the health system, or both?
51. Discussion, paragraph 2: ‘they take place co-evolve’ consider ‘co-evolve over time’.
52. Discussion, p15, paragraph 1: ‘The challenge is to develop...’ – how will this be possible, if funding remains external to the country?
53. Discussion, p16, paragraph 3: ‘The examples of research use...more complex than often described...’ – as many other studies confirm – would be useful to note this and reference some.
54. Discussion, p16, last line: ‘ultimately depends on the end-user’ – I strongly question this. It suggests a naive view, from the perspective of researchers who lack any understanding of the complexity of the issues or the constraints that decision-makers must work within. I strongly suggest you reword it.
55. Discussion, p17, paragraph 2: This is quite abstract and would benefit from being made a bit less so.
56. Abstract: would benefit from inclusion of some of the points made about international HRS and how they link with NHRS as discussed in the discussion section.

**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 I have no competing interests.