Reviewer's report

Title: Analysis of the Research for Health Governance and Management structures within the Ministries of Health of the Economy Community of West African States. Is there an enabling environment to support the conduct of health research in ECOWAS?

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Reviewer: Rhona Mijumbi

Reviewer's report:

I congratulate the authors on getting this piece of work together and sharing their work with us. What they are addressing is an important topic that will help to align research efforts on a national and regional level. It will also provide lessons for many other countries and organizations even outside their region.

Their use of headings and subheadings and clear writing with a good flow, makes the paper an easy read for any audience. I congratulate them on this. I have some suggestions that the authors could consider as they continue to prepare their work for publication.

Major compulsory revisions

1. Although the title reports that this is an ‘Analysis of…..’ there was hardly any analysis done, I found the study to be more descriptive than analytical. It read like a description of the situation without any analysis of what it means for research or research products and their use.

2. I also found missing, a concept, theory or framework guiding the analysis. This would have given a systematic way of assessing factors and their relationships with each other or with the situation. So the authors chose some aspects of research that we all agree are vital but how they link with each other or how some subsidize others and therefore if one is not being achieved but the other is, what that means....is missing. There are several theories, or frameworks that can do a good job in this analysis. I encourage the authors to get familiar with the literature around their topic. This would also help to do the in-depth analysis that is lacking and looks like a description as earlier mentioned.

3. It is not clear to me why the authors chose to look at Ministry of Health structures only. In many countries, a big proportion of research is in fact run outside Ministries of Health; for example in autonomous or semi-autonomous government bodies even under different ministries, that may make their own rules but align themselves with the health sector governed overall by the Ministry of Health. Many of these are vital but were not included in this situation. What is the justification and how were their activities divorced from those referred to here, keeping a valid and objective outlook on the research environment? Would there have been a benefit or harm in looking at the research environment as a whole?

Furthermore, the sub-question under the title asked about an enabling
environment, is this only created by and in the MOH? Later the authors say that in most of the countries, research for health is under the Ministry of Health – what does this mean? Is this in terms of implementation, or governance, something else? And what proportion is in fact outside the MOH? My feeling is that in fact a bigger proportion of research is outside the MOH, in all terms but especially implementation. The authors need to show the proportions and the links. And again in what context are the authors referring this to, most of which countries? In West Africa, in the world, what are these "most of the countries"?

4. What is the basis for the definition of enabling environment as presented by the authors? Can this be referenced? Or if it is the authors own definition, can they present a theory or anything else on which they based to come up with this definition. This is because the research environment may in fact contain other aspects not included here. A justification for considering the given facets would be valuable.

Methods

5. Reading the manuscript and at the end of the introduction, this feels like there was no apriori protocol but that this came up after the results of the meeting. If this was the case it needs to be made clear. Furthermore, the last paragraph reads that the paper was to focus on the results of the meeting of heads of research in the Ministry of health called by West African Health Organization. Considering these two facts, what then were the methods presented referring to? Were they in fact the methods the West African Health Organization used and therefore not necessarily put together for a study? If so the authors need to make this clear. If they indeed were methods for a study prepared despite WAHO putting together the meeting, then more information needs to be given about how the given participants were chosen; was everyone at the meetings interviewed or was there some sort of sampling, and if so what kind and why? Was there ethical clearance to interview these people? Were they under the impression that they were part of a study or that they were answering questions for WAHO’s meeting? Were they explained to the purpose of the study, et cetera.

6. The authors report that they used ‘mixed methods’ for this study. Reading through the methods section, I am left wondering whether they in fact are clear with the research methodology of mixed methods. ‘Mixed methods’ is not the mere use of more than one method to collect data; I do encourage the authors to familiarize themselves with the methodology and use the concept more appropriately. What is described here is not mixed methods.

7. The authors report the questionnaires were supposed to be self-administered, and yet went ahead to assist each participant in filling them, to ensure that they were fully filled and that participants understood et cetera. One, my reading in to this is of lots of bias in the answers with influence from the researchers. The authors need to prove that this is absent. And two, that means as a tool that was supposed to be self-administered these questionnaires did not pass the pre-testing if even after that participants did not understand the questions being asked. A look at these tools is in fact desirable to see if they had face, content and construct validity.
Results

8. There is a need to validate amounts; for example in the last paragraph on page 5, 'A few countries had.....', what is a few is that 2, 5, or 10? In the same paragraph but on page 6, in most countries.......would that be 14 out of the 15 or 10, or 8?

9. There are vague concepts too, with no well-defined notion throughout the results section. For example, again in the last paragraph on page 5, 'All countries had some form of health policy document.............' what does that mean? Under the sub-heading 'Capacity building', the last sentence talks about 'lack of clearly defined career paths for researchers...........'? What are these, and who defines them?

10. Again some vague or implicit meanings in several sentences throughout the results section. For example:

- First line on page six which is continued from page 5: 'The research governance structure was not always headed by a physician'. So what? What does this mean? Do you imply that they in fact should be or are always headed by Physicians and anybody else is inappropriate?

- Same first paragraph on page 6: 'The heads of ...............had not benefitted from training in the area of health research governance and management'. What training is this? Was it assessed that they in fact were not competent because of lack of this training? Is it possible that as experienced researchers they might in fact be competent and that this is in fact not an issue?

- Same first paragraph on page 6: 'A major weakness was the absence of regulations and laws.......'. I do acknowledge that they are absent, but what is actually missing is how this becomes a weakness, a major one at that. Does absence directly translate into weakness and did this study in fact make the linkages? How?

11. Appropriate/inappropriate use of terms; some of what are presented here as weaknesses I would say are challenges. For example the absence of office space for ethical committees I would call a challenge not a weakness. But again it depends on what the guiding framework says; does it say that countries with ethical committees that do everything well but lack office space are in fact doomed?

12. Reference to facts not measured by this study: When the authors state that “there was little consideration of research priorities in the studies carried out sponsored from outside their borders”, did this study measure this? They also talk about poor utilization of research findings. They however measured this by publication and "non-implementation". Research findings are used in many different ways, that is, instrumental, conceptual and symbolic ways. One needs to show that these were assessed to conclude that indeed the findings of research carried out in the past were in fact not used.

These are a few examples but in fact the whole results section has several of these vague concepts and implicit meanings. The authors should validate the claims, otherwise the way they are presented right now, they are just that, claims.
13. I suggest that the results are presented once again in line with a guiding conceptual or theoretical framework for the evaluation so we can see the relationships and linkages in a systematic way, so that we can compare to expected levels et cetera. So that when we are told all countries attended symposia, we know whether this is important and if so, who should attend, how many symposia per year are appropriate to make a difference, what kind of symposia et cetera, not a mere sentence saying they did. So what, what does that mean?

Discussion

14. Some parts of the manuscript read like a report of the meetings. For example, in the last paragraph on page 6, 'the participants stated needs for strengthening the existing research structure.............'. There is a need to separate the manuscript from the ‘report’. I have given only one example but a read through the results and discussion section will give the authors more examples of this.

15. Again like mentioned earlier there is a lot of description and no in depth analysis in the discussion section. There is a lot of research and literature in this area and I would have loved to see the authors engage with this past work, in the discussion but also in the introduction but this is absent. Are there concepts that they could learn or build onto, how does their work sit in with the other body of literature out there? If it does not that would also be good to note that this in fact is the first of this kind as far as the authors are concerned (of course having looked at what is out there).

16. Apparently it is a strength of this study that the participants did the analysis of the results? Really? Was this in fact a scientific study?

17. A comparison is made with research structures in the Mediterranean countries - are these comparable? In what way? Apparently it is also said that to give prominence to research the structure should be at the level of a directorate? Is this evidence-based? Are the authors able to provide some information to back this? How about the suggestion to harmonize the different structures in charge of research throughout the region? Again is there evidence that this is the best way to do it? This also refers to many other claims of what should be done that are seen throughout the discussion but with no evidence to back them as best practices.

18. The second to last paragraph on page 10 reads like the meeting report and not manuscript.

19. The authors should have a look over the sentence construction throughout the manuscript. A few examples of this:

Introduction

i. "The importance of health research for socioeconomic and health development...........". I think it makes more sense if it is the other way round - health and socioeconomic development........

ii. The importance of........is considered an essential national investment. The
importance is considered an investment?

iii. The last sentence in paragraph one of the introduction has no subject.

20. It would be valuable for the authors to standardize their references to one of the common referencing systems recommended by this journal.

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

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**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