Reviewer's report

Title: Indicators for tracking programmes to strengthen health research capacity in lower and middle income countries: a qualitative synthesis

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Reviewer: Samson Kinyanjui

Reviewer's report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

The question is well defined, nonetheless not completely new. Although there are few peer-reviewed publications on the indicators for evaluating capacity building, the question of what indicator to use for tracking capacity building is not new. This is an often-debated issue and often thought about before carrying out evaluation.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The methods are well defined and systematic. There is clear description of how internal consistency and validity was achieved between the various in extracting data from the reports used.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

In general yes the data is well presented and generally sound as per the extraction methods defined in the methodology section

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Yes

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

While there is quite a large amount of data presented both in the text and in the tables, I felt that the discussion did not do a sufficient synthesis of the data and in a sense continues to describe the data rather than discussing the implications of the finding. Although a few recommendations arise perhaps more would have emerged with a slightly more in depth synthesis

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

Yes

7. Is the writing acceptable?

yes
Reviewer’s report

1. Overall assessment

In general, this paper provides a fairly extensive description of the indicators used in tracking HRC strengthen. Many of the target readers for this paper will probably be familiar with the list and I feel would benefit more with a deeper discussion on the potential strengths and weaknesses and challenges of using those indicators.

By using a systematic approach to extracting the data, the authors have provided a reliable set of data. However, it is hard to tell which reports used what indicators as the authors tend to use words like “some”, “several”, and “most”. Am not suggesting that the authors provide a quantitative report – but perhaps it would be good to see on a matrix which reports tended to use particular indicators and how the indicators used were tied to aim and the design of the reports were. This might help the reader understand which indicators are most suited for a particular report.

3. Recommendations

The comments above, if taken on board, I feel would strengthen the paper for those of us with an interest in this topic. Nonetheless, they can be considered as Discretionary rather than Major compulsory

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I have in past and currently been a recipient or co-recipient of research funding from agencies that are members of ESSENCE. But in my opinion neither they nor I would lose nor gain financially from the publication or rejection of this paper.