Reviewer's report

Title: Institutional strengthening in health systems research: Experiences with a capacity assessment tool in seven East and Central African schools of public health

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Reviewer: Alan Boyd

Reviewer's report:

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

The aims of the paper could be more clearly expressed (whether in the form of questions or not). The main aims appear to be:

1) To describe how the self-assessment tool was implemented (the tool itself is also described, but this is not a major aim of the paper).
2) To assess the utility of the self-assessment tool for the organisations that undertook the self-assessment
3) To identify factors affecting the assessment process, and hence the potential utility of the tool/process for other organisations.

The Findings section of the manuscript is structured in line with these aims, but the preceding sections and the abstract are not.

Fulfilling these aims would provide useful new knowledge.

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

The main method that is described is semi-structured interviews out with focal persons from each SPH. The remainder of the Methods section actually describes the methods for developing and implementing the tool, rather than the research methods used to describe and assess it. From the declaration of authors’ contributions, observation of the workshops and document reviews of the individual self-assessment reports may also possibly have contributed to the findings. If so, they should be covered in the Methods section; if not, then I think this is an opportunity lost, and the paper would be enhanced by adding analyses based on such observations and document reviews.

The evaluation of the tool could also potentially have been enhanced by further analyses, such as statistical analyses of the properties of the survey instrument (E.g. testing construct validity and reliability). In this way, insights might have been gained into parts of the tool were most important, and which might potentially be omitted, especially given the feedback that some respondents thought the survey questionnaire to be too long. It might also be possible to suggest target sample sizes/response rates.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
The paper does not discuss potential limitations of the research, such as the reliance on interviews with FPs alone, with no assessment of the process by other stakeholders, and the biases that FPs might have; and the impact that the relationships of the interviewers to the interviewees/projects might have had. There is no information about attempts that may have been made to consider the relative impact of the assessment tool compared to other methods. For example, there is no information about previous capacity assessments that the organisations or individuals involved in them may have undertaken, and how they compare with the self-assessment tool. Other aspects of the context for each SPH may also have been important, but are not described/reflected on.

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?
The discussion and conclusions in the main text are generally well balanced, but there is a question mark over whether they are adequately supported by the data (see 2. and 3. above).

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The title is accurate. I think that the statement in the abstract that “This institutional HSR capacity assessment tool can be valuable for any SPH” should be weakened, as there are lots of caveats, and the utility of this form of the tool has not been fully demonstrated – indeed various potential issues are raised, such as difficulties of understanding HSR, and difficulties in getting responses/participation. It may be for example that a more participative process than the survey element would be more useful.

7. Is the writing acceptable?
The writing is generally clear, concise and well-expressed.

Essential Revisions
Present the aims/questions more clearly and structure the whole paper accordingly.
Be clear and comprehensive regarding the research methods that were used, distinguishing these from the methods that were used to implement the tool.
Discuss the limitations of the research and reword the discussion and conclusions to reflect these limitations.

- Discretionary Revisions
Conduct/incorporate further analyses such as those suggested above.
Say more about what further or follow-on research might be useful.
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 that I have no competing interests'