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

Version: 1

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Reviewer: Samson Kinyanjui

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Review Report

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

The authors address the use of tools to assess health systems capacity in Schools of Public Health, as far as I know this has not been done before. The paper clearly defines the question posed with regards to finding out the applicability of the assessment tool they designed.

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

Overall the methodology is well described and would allow for replication of the work if it was to be done elsewhere. One query is whether the FPs were paid a supplement to carry out this work. They were clearly very motivated despite the challenges outlined in the paper...if yes this needs to be stated as I think it would be key to take account of in trying to replicate this work elsewhere.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

In general yes, The data is quite rich but I wonder if in addition to the FPs the team had a chance to also interview the subjects of the assessment tools, in other word those who were used by the FP’s to provide data for the assessment? If yes that would enrich the data further.

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?

Yes, I think the discussions is succinct and to the point.

3. Recommendations
As with a number of papers on health research capacity assessment tools coming through in the last while this paper also adds to strengthen evidence for developing efficient tool for capacity assessment. It also highlights often unconsidered benefit if an assessment process itself –e.g., Highlighting a subject area that was previous less noticed- in this case HSR, or forcing institutions to think about the definition the subject area within their operation structure.

**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:**

No conflict of interest to declare