Reviewer's report

Title: Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: South African examples of a leadership of sensemaking for PHC

Version: 1 Date: 28 January 2014

Reviewer: Bruno Marchal

Reviewer's report:

This paper addresses important and neglected dimensions of the key function of leadership at mid-level in facilities, districts or local health systems. It introduces innovative ways to understand and analyse leadership for change and illustrates how these principles have been introduced in actual practice. It usefully adopts a complexity perspective and does so in a meaningful way.

Minor discretionary revisions

Background section:
A short introduction to the PHC re-engineering policy and to the organizational set-up would help to frame the role of the middle managers.

Results section:
Some more details about the responsibilities of the 2 co-authors working as sub-district manager and as sub-structure manager and the level of the health system at which they operate would be helpful.

On p8., the authors write “Indeed, as predicted by CAS theory [41], the way they experience target-setting processes may only exacerbate their passivity, encouraging them to use their discretionary power to limit demands on them [27].” This would need some more explanation, as the link between CAS theory and the observed behavior is not clear.

Endnotes: The population for a typical (rural) district would rather be 150,000 people, not 500,000.

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 declare that I have no competing interests