Reviewer's report

Title: Advancing the application of systems thinking in health: Sustainability Evaluation as Learning and Sense-Making in a Complex Urban Health System in Northern Bangladesh

Version: 1  Date: 10 February 2014

Reviewer: Anne LaFond

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this interesting article. It addresses a very salient topic: how to improve the long-term effectiveness of investments in health in developing countries. Its practical step by step process for engaging local stakeholders into transformative and effective forces for change in the health sector should be relevant to funders, program designers, and health program managers alike. The authors document in detail the experience of applying a Sustainability Framework tool to shape, inform, and evaluate a preventive health project in urban Bangladesh. As interest continues to grow in how and why health systems change, we will need such tools to unravel the complexity inherent in making short term gains last into the future. The authors’ provide evidence of the benefits of paying explicit attention to sustainability strategies and engaging external and internal stakeholders in regular assessment to ensure accountability.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. For greater clarity, the paper would benefit from a chronology of events. The reader requires a clear understanding of the distinct stages and data points: the implementation period, the extension, the mid-term evaluation, the endline evaluation, and the 3- and 5-year post implementation evaluations. Making those data points clear at the outset and then referring to them in the text by the same name and year throughout if preferred. It might be useful to have a graphic timeline of all events discussed from 1995 to 2009.

2. Figure: 1

The iterative steps listed in the abstract and on page 6 should use the same language as the steps outlined in Figure 1. For example, for steps 1 and 2, the text speaks of “mapping the system” and “defining a vision and plausible scenario” and the figure speaks of “defining the local system” and “defining the sustainability scenario”. Making the language consistent will enhance understanding of the process.

3. Some of the citations in Text Box 1 are missing from the list of references at the end.

4. Methods: First describe the framework. Then describe when and how it was used. Then describe its value.
5. The paper requires some clarification of concepts and editing to address missing words and use of language. Some suggestions follow:

P3. Over the same decade and a half, a group [add: OF] practitioners

P4. This paper presents how Concern adapted and used a systems approach to place sustainability at [add: THE] front end…..

P 5. Two years into the project, the [add: RESULTS] of the mid-term evaluation WERE very promising, but pointed [add:TO] the lack of measurable….

P 8: please explain the term “viability aspects” and to what they refer. This concept has not been introduced prior to page 8.

p. 9 Concern development a tool similar in structure to the HICAP [add: WHICH WAS] used by the 24…..

P. 9 SF (please introduce acronym above or spell out)

p. 10 Please clarify the meaning of the following: “This was of course negotiated with the level of the technical expertise required to carry out population surveys.”

p. 10. Please clarify: “…but municipalities identified critical gaps in the governance and strategic guidance of the model……” Which model is this referring to?

p.10. ….”A final evaluation in 2004 …. Please clarify these three sentences. Also please see note above referring to naming each data point.

P10. “by the time of the sustainability assessment….. Please specify which assessment (year).

p. 11 “…..nine were maintained or improved upon [omit: results] five years after……..”

p. 12 “Concern worked with …… “ This is a critical paragraph and would benefit from some clarity in language.

p. 13. Para beginning: “The approach of Concern, …… two years before.” For clarity, please number the four intervention design steps. The last line of the paragraph requires some clarification.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**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.