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: 8 June 2014

Reviewer: Karl Blanchet

Reviewer's report:

Dear authors,

I thank you very much for your paper. I think this is a very theme and not much has been written on sustainability in international health. The Sustainability Framework is also a very original and promising model that deserves attention.

I have a few comments, which I hope will help strengthen the paper.

General comments: the method chapter needs to clarified as you describe the method used to implement the framework but little information is provided on how you collected and analysed the data used to write your paper.

Major revisions:

1. Page 4: you refer to background data about Bangladesh. Your data could be updated with figures from the latest DHS 2011, even if I understand you want to describe the context at the time of the study.

2. Page 7: Please describe how the participants to the workshop were recruited and how many they were.

3. Page 7: Please describe which process you used to define the sustainability indicators. Explain which method you used to reach consensus.

4. Page 7: How do you justify that Concern and municipalities (do you mean mayor?) were the only ones who defined the components of the framework? what about the other participants?

5. Page 8: the HICAP tool sounds fascinating. Please describe how the ideal capacity was defined and again how consensus was reached. For all these participatory tools and methods, it would be interesting to highlight their limitations and the challenges met when applying them.

6. Page 10: in relation to people interviewed, it would be important to describe your sampling strategy, list the main characteristics (and number) of interviewees and provide your definition of "key informant".

7. Page 10: you state that "the findings of the assessments were totally intelligible to stakeholders". Please describe the evidence you have to demonstrate that. What kind of assessment did you carry out?

8. Page 10: your study was conducted between 2004 and 2009. Please justify
why your findings are still of relevance in 2014.

9. Page 12: your findings "The value of building within a national policy showed its value, even though the central government did not actively follow through on this" is very interesting and deserves more detail. Please expand on this matter.

10. Page 13: you use the word "organically". How is that defined and what kind of evidence you have?

Minor comment:

11. Please delete "Ref Type" at the end of your references.

I hope these comments will help you.

Best regards

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