Author's response to reviews

Title: Climate for Evidence Informed Health System Policymaking in Cameroon and Uganda before and after the Introduction of Knowledge Translation Platforms: a Structured Review of Governmental Policy Documents

Authors:

Pierre Ongolo-Zogo (pc.ongolo@gmail.com)
John N Lavis (lavisj@mcmaster.ca)
Goran Tomson (goran.tomson@ki.se)
Nelson K Sewankambo (sewankam@infocom.co.ug)

Version: 2 Date: 9 November 2014

Author's response to reviews: see over
Email: pc.ongolo@gmail.com

9 November 2014

To the editors,

Please find attached the revised version of the manuscript entitled “Climate for Evidence Informed Health Systems Policymaking in Cameroon and Uganda before and after the Introduction of Knowledge Translation Platforms”, which we hope is now suitable for publication in the *Health Research Policy and Systems* as a research paper. We have revised the manuscript to incorporate the reviewers’ comments and suggestions. Our responses are inserted in italic bold in the text below.

Reviewer: Kathryn Oliver

Minor Essential Revisions:

1. Some more details about the policy science analytical framework would be welcome. I see there is a reference under “Design” on p7, but some description of what it is, why you chose it and how you’ve used it would be good.

We have elaborated more on the framework by providing examples of institutions, interests, ideas and external factors

Acknowledging that the EIHSP infrastructure is vulnerable to the prevailing institutions, interests, ideas and external factors, ability to use evidence and personal experience and intuition, we adapted the 3I+E framework – Institutions, Interests, Ideas and External factors as the policy sciences analytical framework [13, 30] to guide our interpretive assessment of changes of the national research–health policy interfaces.

Qualitative interpretation of changes and explanatory factors

We used the constant comparison approach to identify changes in the institutions, interests, ideas and external factors within each country across the two periods 2001-2006 and 2007-2012 before and after the introduction of both KTPs in 2006. Inspired by scholarly work on determinants of change in health systems and public policy [13, 30], we iteratively searched for narrative changes in governmental policy documents across the two periods in terms of diagnosis and action proposals pertaining to governance and EIHSP. We focused on institutions (e.g. policy legacies, rules of the game for public management), interests (e.g. societal interests groups), and ideas (e.g. cultural beliefs, research evidence, views about what ‘ought to be’) and external factors (e.g. global development agenda, release of major reports).

2. Methods para 2, I would like here a bit more justification of your approach, e.g your statement starting “we posited that the appraisal of governance patterns....” could be added to explain how this is more than a proxy measure. Alternatively, this could be dealt with in the discussion.

Building on the collective knowledge of the authors gained from their implication (POZ, NKS) as leaders of KTP secretariats thus investigating from within in collaboration with colleagues with major global experience of evidence to policy processes (JNL, GT) involved as co-investigators in KTP research and evaluation, we posited that the appraisal of the governance patterns and the assessment of the commitments to take action on and budget allocations for research-related activities, the use of research-related words and constructs and the citations of research in governmental policy documents are suggestive of the country climate for EIHSP.
3. Design, para 1. I'm not sure what a prescriptive thematic analysis is – if there is a reference you could provide and a brief description that would be helpful. **We have replaced the prescriptive by deductive thematic analysis**

4. Coding procedures, para 1. Sentence starting “research was broadly defined to include…” - I am not sure I understand this, particularly the “system”. Please clarify. **We've made it clear that the system here is mostly the health sector**

5. Qualitative data analysis, (ii) (iii) (iv): Please explain why these keywords are not the same as in panel 1. **Explanations are now provided in the section**

6. Qualitative interpretation of changes and explanatory factors: “constantly” – perhaps “iteratively”? It would be good to expand here on this sentence – which strategies specifically. And perhaps a good place to explain how you are planning to use the Policy Sciences Analytical Framework. **We have provided further details on how we have used the policy Sciences Analytical Framework**

**Qualitative interpretation of changes and explanatory factors**

We used the constant comparison approach to identify changes in the institutions, interests, ideas and external factors within each country across the two periods 2001-2006 and 2007-2012 before and after the introduction of both KTPs in 2006. Inspired by scholarly work on determinants of change in health systems and public policy [13, 30], we iteratively searched for narrative changes in governmental policy documents across the two periods in terms of diagnosis and action proposals pertaining to governance and EIHSP. We focused on institutions (e.g. policy legacies, rules of the game for public management), interests (e.g. societal interests groups), and ideas (e.g. cultural beliefs, research evidence, views about what ‘ought to be’) and external factors (e.g. global development agenda, release of major reports).

7. The description of the data collection and analysis procedures are well-documented. During the results there are frequent referrals to comparisons across countries and over time/ between time periods. I would like to see (a) why you have chosen 2001-2006 and 2007-2012 as units of analysis (b) a description of the time frame of the study and how it is used in the analysis. Sometimes developments are charted by the year and at other times in the blocks described above. In Background, para 2, at the end of this paragraph you ask “are the KTPs established since 2006…etc”. This is a good research question, and as such probably belongs at the end of the introduction where you could use it to explain the two time-period design. **We have justified the time frames. The sentence has been moved according to the suggestion.**

"Are the KTPs established since 2006 in Cameroon and Uganda yielding any influence on the country climate for EIHSP? Our purpose was to assess whether and how changes have occurred in the country climate for EIHSP during the periods 2001-06 and 2007-12 in order to investigate two six-year periods before and after the launching of both initiatives housed in government-owned institutions in Cameroon and Uganda through a structured review of governmental policy documents merging content analysis techniques with policy sciences analytical framework."

Are the data sound and well controlled? Yes, I think so. A few points:

8. Results, The context in which the governmental policy documents were developed: I like the ‘formulation’ and ‘preparatory phases’ as analytical concepts but I’m not sure precisely what they
9. Institutions featuring the climate for EIHSP: not “featuring” but “creating” or “playing a role in” or similar? (ditto the next few section headings). Also in this section: “tensions were described” – this sounds like you’re reporting a qualitative interview. Described by whom? “Inappropriate access” – bit of a value judgment. “New Public Management: - this needs referencing and a proper explanation.

These are elements from the diagnosis section of government documents and the text was revised for clarity. The New Public Management was referred to in government documents.

10. Ideas featuring the climate of EIHSP: “Manifestations and determinants of poverty were richly described by populations” - not sure this is what you mean. Ditto, ”In Uganda, traditions and cultural mindsets were underscored” – not clear to me.

Just as in the comment above, the elements are from the governmental documents. Tables provide now excerpts from governmental documents.

11. Interpretive synthesis: I would like to see some more details here to back up some of your statements. E.g. para 4: “Business rankings had shed light on poor performance…” How? How were linkages made explicit? What mechanisms were established? Etc.

It was clearly stated in the governmental documents and we have tried to rephrase more clearly. The Transparency International ranking of perceptions of corruption and the Doing Business ranking in both countries were instrumentally used to establish the explicit linkages between poor governance and poverty and to justify the institution of mechanisms to improve public management performance, to fight corruption and to strengthen the decentralization process as a means of improving public accountability.

Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

12. I would like to see more discussion about your findings in the context of other work, much of which you cited. E.g. a comparison with Simon Innvaer’s 2009 paper in which he conducts a documentary analysis of official Norwegian reports would be illuminating in terms of methodological strengths and weaknesses, but also the meaning of your own findings. In the section “Findings in relation to other studies” I think you show the additional contribution of your study in terms of scope, but I would be interested in your comments especially on two topics: 1. The relationship between the number of citations in policy documents and the attitude of policymakers to evidence (you are assuming a positive correlation, but I’m not sure you’ve shown this in the study) and 2. The lack of systematic reviews and evidence syntheses (which you attribute to lack of access, but I don’t see why this would apply to syntheses and not other types of research). In the thorough limitations section, I’d like to see if you made any attempt to address the first point. The second point, not sure I understand it. I would also be interested in your thoughts on the meaning of your results with respect to the wider effectiveness of knowledge translation programmes and initiatives, as this could be seen as an attempt to evaluate K* more widely!

We expect the completion of the third sub study of our doctoral research project will permit more in-depth analysis. The interviews with stakeholders are uncovering aspects of the wider effects of KT programmes and initiatives.

Minor Discretionary Revisions:

Is the writing acceptable?

13. In general the writing is of an acceptable standard. There are a few cases where the meaning is not 100% clear to me, due to slightly ambiguous terminology. For example, the term ‘featured’ is used
regularly, but sometimes means 'showed', or 'displayed', or "described" (e.g. background para 2, results para 3. Similarly, there are a few mentions of “poorly referenced” policy documents. This sounds like a value judgment, and would probably be better replaced by a neutral unambiguous term like 'sparsely'. There are a few cases like this – e.g. Abstract, "use of evidence ... has remained poor overtime" (should be over time); p21, "degrees of rationality" and "enduring undervalue of evidence" are both value-judgments which personally I would try and avoid, as it implies there is a right and wrong way of doing things.

14. A few instances in particular would bear revisiting:
15. Abstract: Global and national health stakeholders shall raise the profile (suggest 'should'?)
16. Background para 2. Quote starting “research evidence is not valued” – who is this from?
17. Background para 3. Sentence starting “on the contrary” – Not sure we disagree with Liverani et al, and this sentence is a bit unclear.
18. Background para 5: could you reference the policy sciences analytical framework here, and explain what it is? This would also be a good place to move your research question too.
19. Methods para 2: last sentence “bodes well” – perhaps "suggestive of"?
20. Results para 3: Sentence including “validated” – not sure what this means.
21. Results para 5: "poverty rate", perhaps "poverty level"?
22. Interpretive synthesis para 5: 'skewed', not "eschewed" I think?
23. “Findings in relation to other studies”, para 1: Sentence starting "our results elucidate the currency of calls" is not clear.
24. Implications for researchers, sentence starting "Integrating evidence" – word missing?
25. Acronyms should be spelt out in full the first time only – a few have slipped through the net.
26. Finally, hyphenating some phrases might make some aspects clearer, e.g. evidence-informed decision-making, problem-solving, F-test, but that is a personal preference!

We have incorporated almost all the suggestions pertaining to consistency in style and terminology, value judgment.

Reviewer: Godfrey Woek

Major compulsory revisions:
1. This analysis is interesting and important in that it focuses on knowledge translation platforms, particularly, the use of research synthesis in shaping policy, an underdeveloped area. However, my major concern is that only selected documents were analyzed, those of GAVI, GFATM, UNFPA, UNICEF, and WB-HNP. There was no attempt, or at the very least, no discussion of documents of bilateral organisations, specifically, PEPFAR/USAID/CDC etc, and even of for example DFID, DFATD (Canada) or of the European development support documents, Given that PEPFAR/USAID/CDC provide significant developmental support and impact on policy, this is a significant omission, and calls into questions the validity of the findings of the analysis. While the authors may have focused only on multilateral organisations, perhaps to limit the scope of the endeavor, at the very least they should discuss how this limitation may or may not have influenced their findings.

We've now made it clear that we didn’t consider grants from bilateral donors.

We have limited the scope of the analysis to grant documents from multinational donors. By doing so, we have probably overlooked the political dynamics pertaining to bilateral cooperation and the policy impact of agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Uganda or the Agence Française de Development (AFD) in Cameroon. However, the review of health strategic plans implicitly takes into consideration the role of these bilateral donors.

Minor essential revisions:
2. The authors make a statement that "Cameroon and Uganda feature similarities in terms of (i) stable presidential regimes strongly anchored in traditional ruling systems..." While both have stable presidential regimes, can the authors elaborate the "strong anchoring in traditional ruling systems", as it is unclear exactly what this means in the context of this manuscript.

We've now made it clearer that we referred to traditional chieftaincies.

“In addition, Cameroon and Uganda feature similarities in terms of (i) stable presidential regimes strongly anchored in traditional chieftaincies of 220 and 56 ethnic groups in which the same Head of State has been in office since the 1980’s”

We hope you agree that this revised version would be a good fit in and important contribution to a future edition of the Health Research Policy and Systems, and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Pierre Ongolo-Zogo, MD, MSc, PhD(c)