Reviewer’s report

Title: What can global health institutions do to help strengthen health systems in low income countries?

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Reviewer: Eduardo Gomez

Reviewer’s report:

I recommend publication with Discretionary Revisions. Please see here my specific comments to the authors.

What can global health institutions do to help strengthen health systems in low-income countries?

Reviewer response:

In general, I found this to be a very important contribution to the literature. This paper address key issues in health systems governance and institutions that the literature to date has inadequately addressed. New questions and insights into the historical, institutional, financial and leadership constraints to health systems change are introduced, which also provides insight into future research. Please see below some minor suggestions to improving the paper, which I believe should be published immediately.

In the introduction, it would be helpful to clearly define what the authors mean by “strengthening health systems.” What is the ‘strengthening’ component the author(s) are referring? E.g., institutional strengthening, and if so, what aspects of institutions?

Ok, in the second section, “Health Systems Diagnosis,” the authors explain what aspects of health systems strengthening they are talking about. They include financing, provision, resource generation and priority setting, stewardship, etc. I suggest that you put this in the introduction.

With regards to the pooling of funds: I agree with the authors that a lack of fiscal capacity to generate sufficient funds forces nations to become more dependent on foreign aid and/or out of pocket expenses. One issue that we haven’t looked at is the mismatch between fiscal regimes, i.e., administration and its legacies, and how this conflicts with new needs for health systems financing. The authors want to insert a sentence here on this issue – not necessary, just a suggestion. Also, and just as a minor side note, what do the authors think of those nations where there is a high capacity to collect revenue yet at the same time show a high level of private out-of-pocket payments and donor aid assistance? Arguably one can say that China exhibits such as system?

With regards to resource generation and priority setting, I very much enjoyed the authors’ point about absorptive resource capacity and human resources. In my
current research, I also highlight this problem and explain how institutional legacies generate obstacles for changing human resource practices, such as hiring, for greater effectiveness. To what extent do the authors think that legacies matter? Essentially what I’m asking is the following: what are the reasons for why HR systems cannot change, and why is reforming the bureaucracy so difficult for increasing absorptive capacity? One or two sentence suggesting why this is a problem may be helpful.

With regards to stewardship, again an excellent point. However, you may want to clarify what aspects of stewardship you are talking about? Are you considering presidential/executive leadership, the bureaucracy?

In the section titled Current Efforts, I think you raise a critical issue: differences in power and objectives between international agencies, which, in turn, hamper harmonization. You may want to insert a sentence or two explaining what you mean by differences in power relations. Is it that some nations and/or international institutions posses more resources than others and, realizing this, consequently seek to periodically pursue their own interests? This is certainly food for thought and the authors may want to consider this.

On page 8, sentence beginning with “This highlights the importance of paying attention…” This is an excellent point. You are essentially addressing the need to better understand why HR systems cannot be changed, a need for better understanding context, history, and legacy. You also mention the need to address belief and motivation. I wholeheartedly agree. In a paper I am currently writing, I explain how path dependency and institutional change theory provides frameworks for us to better assess this process. You may want to mention how we as a policy community need to consider new social science frameworks that take into account these normative, ideological and historical institutional challenges.

On page 9, my request has been answered! You do mention Path Dependency. Excellent work.

In the conclusion, several key issues are raised. I agree with the authors’ point that greater clarity is needed in understanding which international health organizations will take the lead on addressing health systems capacity and reform. As I understand it, the WHO has been very clear in seeing itself as taking such a leadership approach. Would you agree?

I also agree that there is a greater need for synergy between health sectors, and a focus on long term relationships with patients. Yet this requires both an infrastructural and especially political transformation, where AIDS sector officials are willing to share resources and attention with other sectors. You may want to mention – in a brief sentence – that this is a power struggle and requires a change in leadership mindset that will be difficult to achieve.

In closing, this paper is very strong and draws attention to issues that have been ignored in the health systems literature. The point about the need to focus on
transforming health institutions and better understanding the beliefs and motivates of actors is vital for our understanding of the capacity to change health systems. This is the only paper where I have seen an explicit attempt to address the need for such an approach to health systems change. The issue of international donor and domestic government alignments is also important, and I learned lot from it.

That said, I recommend publication of this paper. It is a very important contribution and needless to say, very timely.

**Level of interest:** An exceptional article

**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.