Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Miguel Gonzalez-Block

Reviewer's report:

The paper presents a well structured, comprehensive international literature review on health Systems strengthening approaches and experiences in developing countries. The role of health systems research and of research systems to make use of findings is well developed throughout the paper and focused in the conclusions. The paper provides a useful guideline for discussion by actors interested in health systems strengthening at national and global levels and particularly by researchers interested in addressing and supporting health systems strengthening.

Minor essential revisions:

This paper presents mostly research evidence on health systems strengthening from derived from international journals and English language books. Further details on the compilation methods and on the strengths and limitations of this approach should be addressed.

Given the research-base review and the focus on health systems research, the health research system should be further discussed as an important component of the broader health system, possibly within the resource generation function. Its specific situation could be analyzed with respect to the dominance of developed country institutions, funding and research capacity strengthening. An effort could be made in the conclusions to go beyond a call for applied health systems research, to address how various disciplines and research approaches could be encouraged, at various levels. There is some evidence published in Health Systems Research and Policies that could be useful for the literature review of these aspects, some it co-authored by authors of this paper.

Discretionary Revisions

The definition of health system strength in terms of the system’s capacity to address diverse health determinants and desirable outcomes could be further addressed, particularly in relation to the social determinants of health and to the alignment of health system outcomes with equity and development needs. How can research contribute to assess health system strength indicators, and how can health system strengthening approaches and indicators be devised and evaluated on this basis? Answers to such questions could help determine the extent to which health ministries should invest on intersectoral leadership and in aligning the health sector to broader development policies.
Recent contributions by Rifat Atun and cols. as well as by de Savigny & Adams address systems thinking that could be useful to discuss the role of health systems strengthening. This approach has been useful to identify paths towards integration which could help nuance the author's recommendations for the integration of interventions and programs. See:


The paper’s references are incomplete, particularly those citing books. Some frases are not properly written i.e. “He we review the challenges…”

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'