Reviewer's report

Title: Indicators of sustainable capacity building for health research: analysis of four African case studies

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Reviewer: Donald Cole

Reviewer's report:

Below, none are major compulsory. Most are minor essential revisions with some discretionary revisions, the latter probably best decided by the editor(s).

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
   >> Not a question per se, but an aim [first sentence of copied section below] which is well defined
   >> Needs more clarity on health capacity in general and health research capacity in particular. Unlike many development projects, all cases started from research studies and training in research methods was part of CSs except for CS2. The title sets up for health research. The Intro leaves it broader, but needs to be more honed, perhaps by making the link between the two but say this paper focuses on the nested health research capacity.
   >> Similarly, capacity and capabilities seem to be used somewhat interchangeably – do you subscribe to Morgan and Baser's distinction? If yes, can you reflect it in the article? If not, why not?

2. Are the methods appropriate
   >> in general yes.
   Selection criteria seem purposive rather than wrt set up to reduce 'bias'. Good ones. Perhaps a supplemental file on all eleven, so know what choosing from Analysis used a prior framework – might other relevant indicators have been missed?
   and well described,
   >> Yes, explicit. Good to have various authors extract, with dialogue.
   and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?
   >> Hard in short space, as usual. E.g. nature of dialogue around each case, how carried out (teleconference, in person….advantages of each?)

3. Are the data sound
   >> Likely, given joint process…though independent assessment might have been helpful to bring out other indicators e.g. currently the lead author also led the development of the analytic framework earlier. Might some of the co-authors
brought in other elements? Or adapted the framework upon reading through the cases.

>> More detail in the narrative would help with examples, though recognize that word count limitations may exist.
and well controlled? – Not applicable

>> Should indicate that Box 1 material derived from earlier model i.e. part of analysis approach, while Box 2 comes from analyzing cases i.e. part of results

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

>> latter not relevant but former yes. Some queries, requests:

>> why call figures instead of tables?

>> Wrts presentation of indicators in Figure 2 and Box 3 (both seem to be tables to me!), I was unclear on the need for the two tables – might they be consolidated into one long one? Should there be more explicit statement of the nature or options for indicators, particular the quantitative e.g. what would one extract from training records and student assessments?

>> Could you clarify better “unique” vs “transferrable or generic” indicators.

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

>> In general, yes. I struggled some between the nature of evidence presented wrt new capacity and the identification of indicators, somewhat emeshed, including with

>> To what extent do your indicators reflect the complex capabilities (organizational as per Baser and Morgan?) cited i.e. resilience, innovation, credibility, motivation…..could you elaborate on this?

>> Agree around resources…. Could you also extract the proportion of funds devoted to M&E, from the material of the case studies available? If not, why not, and how might this be remedied, given both your recommendation and your citing the strong role that M&E development, transferring research skills, played in some of the case studies.

>> Alienation of project teams wrt inflexible monitoring tools. Though I understand the problem, to base this on case studies, it would be good to draw out some of this from your case studies, or include a counter- example in which this occurred.

Conclusions

>> Not sure your paper speaks to 1) scarcity of evidence – more like the Bates et al earlier paper or our in process systematic review.

>>3) some greater evidence of the changes in sophistication of indicators would be good in the results and linked to the discussion.

>> if the evidence for the indicators is different or changes across projects, what mechanisms need to be in place to promote comparability of the evidence.
derived from them?

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

>> note my feedback about health capacity vs health research capacity in the intro above. Same duality is in the title (health research) and the abstract (health)
>> factors are used in the methods section of the abstract, vs activities and evidence in the narrative (body) of the article. Using terms consistently would help.

Given your assessment of the manuscript, what do you advise should be the next step?

Level of interest
- An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field (of the kind that might be found in the leading specialist journal in the field) – if their were a field of health research capacity development evaluation, this would be, given the scarcity of evidence-based work.
- An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests – Absolutely!

Quality of written English

7. Is the writing acceptable?

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:
- Needs some language corrections before being published

>> A number of changes would be helpful, some words missing but could not easily indicate them, given lack of line numbers on manuscript and pdf format (or provide your reviewers with Adobe software to provide such detailed feedback!)

Declaration of competing interests

>> the authors should be explicit about their involvement in several of the case studies

**Level of interest:** An article of importance 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 am a co-investigator with one of the authors, Imelda Bates, on a review of health research capacity development evaluation literature.