Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Per-Olof Östergren

Reviewer's report:

Comments to the authors:

The manuscript deals with a topic of very high current interest in its area; what predicts sustainability in programs intended to build capacity for health research in low-income (African) settings.

Since there is no given methodology in this area of research, the paper is an attempt to contribute to methodological developments as well as to provide empirical results guiding policy and implementation in the area.

The authors use three examples, all successful, for this combined exercise.

The results are very interesting, the authors arrive at suggesting both generic and specific indicators of sustainability and they present a four-stage model for the progress of successful programmes.

The paper is very convincing and could be expected to contribute to the current discussion both in the scientific community and among policy makers and implementers.

However, there are some issues which could merit some comments from the authors:

1. Since any hypothesis only could be tested if there is at least a theoretical chance that it could be refuted, why were only successful programmes selected? Could not the inclusion of programmes which failed to achieve sustainability (which should not be too hard to find…) have contributed with additional, maybe even essential information/support of the suggested theoretical framework?

2. What is the support of the sequence of the traits presented in the four-stage model? In this reviewer’s own (admittedly limited) experience there seem to be a possibility of an overlap of the mentioned traits. This does not necessarily invalidate the four stages, but it would be infesting if the authors commented on their view of this.

3. Is there a possibility that the mentioned indicators could be presented in a semi-quantitative way, eg. by means of a "spider-web" type op chart, which could also give a quick visual impression of the development of the suggested indicators, and maybe present a solution of the possible problem of varying
sequential patterns of the indicators?

**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.