Reviewer’s report

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

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Reviewer: Johan Hansen

Reviewer’s report:

The paper describes the capacity building lessons to be learned from a selection of projects in Africa, fitting into an important and growing field of research. I think the paper is worth publishing as its lessons are useful to others aiming to contribute to capacity building both in Africa and other regions of the world. For one, the paper clearly shows that achieving sustainability is a long-term process that strongly depends on the ongoing commitment of those involved.

The paper contains a number of issues that need clarifying and as such can be seen as major essential revisions. By addressing these issues the paper would gain a lot in terms of providing a stronger basis for the lessons that are clearly already present in the paper itself.

For the purpose of identifying key factors to monitor capacity building, main focus of the paper is on best practices that have already achieved sustainable capacity. While these projects indeed provide valuable lessons, the design followed does not allow to determine whether the factors identified are indeed strong predictors of achieving sustainable capacity or if some of them also occur in projects that were not able to achieve sustainable capacity? It is not necessary (and probably not feasible) to alter this design, but some extra words to clarify this would contribute to the transferability of the paper’s findings. Possibly, additional references to related studies in the region could support this further.

A related matter that would need extra words of clarification is in the selection of four out of seven case studies that best fit three different selection criteria. Of these criteria, especially the second criterion needs to be justified better, being the criterion that a case study should incorporate one of three key principles for effective capacity building (box 1). Why are there only these three principles and what is the empirical basis for this? E.g., why is it that projects need to begin with small projects designed to fill identified capacity gaps? And how does this particular principle relate to selection criterion one, namely that projects were selected that did not have capacity building as primary objective?

In addition, I would like to learn how the seven other non-selected studies fit these selection criteria: if they scored lower on criterion one and two than the four selected cases, I could understand their selection. But by also determining this selection on the second criterion it becomes difficult to determine whether the key indicators found are indeed indicators of achieving sustainability or whether
they relate mostly to the criterion itself.

When it comes to the empirical results some results are relatively clear, such as sources of project funding, while for other results it is difficult to distinguish findings from opinions. And in some cases findings appear very quantifiable, such as duration of various phases, but it is unclear based on which criteria this was determined. E.g., why is it that moment of achieving sustainable funding from the MoH is regarded as part of the expansion phase but not the consolidation phase? Would it be possible that expansion and consolidation occur simultaneously and does the framework allow for this? Some words could also be used to clarify why some studies had strongly overlapping phases, while in other cases it was possible to distinguish a clear divide between phases (see phase 3 and 4 for study 4), and again others included gaps between phases (in particular study 3): did this imply that the project stopped for some time?

Some of the unclarity is related to the manner in which the information was gathered and discussed, namely by authors themselves. Does this mean that the information was not verified by informants such as local project coordinators involved in the projects themselves? Judging from the author list, this at least does not appear to be the case in study 2 situated in Kenya.

A final matter is that it is difficult to see the overlaps and differences between the large set of indicators, listed in figure 2, and a listing of examples of sources of evidence in box 3. For one, the indicators on the right hand side of figure 2 do not always appear to match the stages distinguished on the left hand side of box 3. Additionally, it is difficult to determine which of these many factors are the ones to focus on the most. Is some ranking possible, based on the wide experience of the project team, to hint which of the factors per phase are most crucial to achieve sustainability?

**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