Reviewer’s report

Title: Assessing the Operational Effectiveness of a Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Conditional Cash Transfer Pilot Programme in Nigeria

Version: 1 Date: 19 Nov 2018

Reviewer: Margaret McConnell

Reviewer's report:

This paper provides insight into the design and implementation of the SURE-P CCT program in Nigeria.

Understanding the implementation of cash transfer programs has important policy implications. This manuscript contains many useful implementation lessons that could inform the roll-out of CCTs in other settings, in particular the challenges around the delivery of cash payments. I enjoyed reading the manuscript.

I have some specific suggestions about how to improve the presentation and clarity of the manuscript.

* The description of enrollment in the study would be more transparent with a chart illustrating the number of women enrolled in the pilot program, the number listed with phone numbers and the % of those contacted who responded. This information is critical to understanding the representativeness of the sample.

* As this project was not designed to provide causal inference but instead to better understand design and implementation, I would stay aware from statements like 'Beneficiaries' fulfilment of the four set of pre-conditions by utilizing ante-natal care and facility delivery services show consistency with previous studies that reported CCT as a motivator for positive behavior change towards utilization of maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) services." It is not possible to tell from this study design whether participants utilized care in order to receive the CCT or if they would have utilized care even in the absence of the CCT.

* The manuscript is extremely long and is structured in an unusual way. For example, the limitations are reported prior to discussing the findings. I would suggest standardizing and streamlining the manuscript.

* The manuscript refers to a "successful six month proof of concept phase" but it would be useful to define what is meant by "successful."
* In general it would be easier to understand the findings if they were organized into tables and presented more systematically. For tables 4 and 5 it is not clear where some of the conclusions are drawn from - the results section is a series of conjectures but it would be useful to understand what support underlies these conjectures (i.e. reporting from the desk review or from interviews). If these insights are gleaned from interviews it would be good to provide some supporting quotations or source material.

* The paper very much needs a table providing the characteristics of the sample that is interviewed (i.e. basic demographics, utilization patterns, etc).

* It is hard to interpret the reports of receipt of payments without understanding whether these participants utilized care. Right now these statistics mix utilization patterns with implementation patterns.

* Self reported measures like considering the process easy and lacking complaints are unlikely to represent the full experience of patients as there is evidence that patients under-reporting poor experiences (Freedman et al 2018).

* The discussion section could be significantly strengthened. For example, this statement is made: "Despite demonstrating significant impact on the outcomes of interest and participants' satisfaction" but the statement implies that the manuscript is attempting to demonstrate impact of the program which does not seem to be the objective of this manuscript.

**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review?
If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

I am able to assess the statistics

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