Reviewer's report

Title: Systems change for the social determinants of health

Version: 2 Date: 5 April 2015

Reviewer: Kumanan Rasanathan

Reviewer's report:

Overall this is a useful and interesting paper, which makes a good contribution to the literature on how policies aiming to address social determinants of health might be successfully implemented to reduce disparities. The tables and charts are particularly useful. The main text could be revised to be less abstract, and include more concrete examples for the reader to illustrate the analytical method used.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The paper should state upfront its limitations that it is limited to a handful of reports on social determinants, mostly focusing on the UK and not extending beyond Europe. The authors should acknowledge that this is a skewed sample, particularly excluding the large body of work on social determinants from Latin America – which is where the most successful policy efforts to reduce health disparities have occurred.

2. The main text can be difficult to follow for the reader – the theoretical model used is a real strength of the paper, but the way this is described in the paper is quite abstract. The tables and charts are useful and could be augmented in the main text by more concrete examples. One suggestion is to include a table to supplement Table 3, using one sector or theme, and list examples of different policies and interventions according to the taxonomy used, and highlighting how acting at higher levels would be more effective, according to the paper’s thesis.

3. While the paper identifies the limitations of actions at lower levels, it is naïve as to contextual and practical challenges to action at higher levels. A discussion on why recommendations might not aim to or be able to “change the system rules”, paradigm or goals, would be helpful. It would be helpful to consider what it might take to shift rules and paradigms in terms of resources, changes in political economy etc.

4. Again, given the paper’s focus mainly on a single country, it would be helpful to acknowledge how differences in country context might affect the impact of action at different levels – or otherwise, to include a justification as to how the paper’s thesis is applicable beyond the UK. I.e. how generalizable are these findings?

Minor Essential Revisions

5. There is some inconsistency in use of “inequities” v “inequalities”. These are
not the same, so this should be corrected – perhaps even a short definition would be useful.

6. Similarly, there is some equivocation between inequities in health and inequities in social determinants of health, which again are linked but not the same.

Discretionary Revisions

None

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 I have no competing interests.