Reviewer’s report

Title: Obligations of low income countries in ensuring equity in global health financing

Version: 2 Date: 14 June 2015

Reviewer: Daniel Kim

Reviewer's report:

The authors of “Obligations of Low Income Countries in Ensuring Equity in Global Health Financing" propose a thought-provoking thesis: all LIC governments should be required to allocate a certain percentage of their domestic budgets to ensure the minimum health opportunities of their citizens. The article is about the obligations of LICs to their citizens in light of what amounts to the supplementary nature of international resources. LIC obligations are not frequently discussed in concrete terms in the global health literature, so this article is a valuable contribution. However, further clarifications or justifications are required to support any potential viability of the article’s proposal.

Major Compulsory Revisions:

More discussion, I think, is needed concerning the US$ 60 per capita global minimum health expenditure being used in the two tables. For one, the origin of the number is unclear. Even if the amount is an example (since the number will be variable over time), it requires justification. Earlier in the paper, WHO’s US$ 44 is cited (p.7). Is the US$ 60 of a kind with that WHO number? My worry is that the WHO number is a global average based on the pooled resources of LICs divided by their cumulative population. To apply such a number across all LICs strikes me as potentially too crude—it seems to lose sight of relevant differences between countries. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that US$ 44 of US$ 60 will buy more healthcare goods in Uganda than in Kenya. I wonder if a better universal standard might be the healthcare goods required to ensure minimal health opportunities within particular countries, which in turn might dictate the absolute monetary amount required for each country. Regardless of how the authors choose to proceed, the absolute number here should be further clarified and justified.

The authors cite the Abuja Declaration’s estimate to support their suggestion that African governments can devote 15% of their domestically generated annual budget resources to health care. Given how significant this figure is for the authors’ proposal, some background justification of the reasoning leading to it seems warranted. This is especially true for the general readership of this journal, which may not be very familiar with the Abuja Declaration. What, for example, are the key factors that need to be considered in determining such a figure? If the figure is so reasonable, are any of the reasons for most LICs’ inability to meet the 15% threshold morally relevant? This is a matter of no small
consequence, for the authors are suggesting that the international community intervene in the budget allocations of sovereign governments. A brief elaboration on the politics of the Abuja Declaration and the challenges LICs may face in meeting its demand might help assuage some of those concerns, strengthening the viability of the authors’ proposed model.

On one hand, the authors write that the financing of health care is just the “start” toward global health equity. In a footnote, they also make clear that financing is just one of many spheres of relevance for global health equity. Yet, it seems to me that the justice of financing itself depends on other morally relevant factors, not just finances. For example, the capacity of Uganda to actually spend US$ 60 per capita seems relevant to whether it in fact should achieve that amount in a given year. Without that capacity, would it really be unjust for the international community to help guarantee US$ 50 per capita instead of US$ 60? I do not mean to muddy an argument that is intentionally focused on the question of financing. However, I wonder if my question here at least warrants some calibration of certain claims of injustice in the article. For example, the term “unjust” on page 13, line 17, perhaps ought to be qualified. The question of finances, it seems to me, cannot by itself render something unqualifiedly just or unjust. There are many non-financial factors that go into determining a just level of funding.

Minor Essential Revisions:
On page 7, line 12-13, please specify US$ 44 per capita per year.

There were a couple of spelling errors in the manuscript.

Discretionary Revisions:
I think it is important to remain consistent with the conception of justice being relied on in this article, that is, the question of fair opportunity that Daniels defends. On page 19, line 25, through page 20, line 1, the notion of wellbeing/justice might be more clearly framed as a matter of opportunity.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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.