Reviewer's report

Title: Whole-system change: case study of factors facilitating early implementation of a primary health care reform in a South African province

Version: 2 Date: 29 September 2014

Reviewer: Gill Walt

Reviewer's report:

The paper is exemplary in the clarity of its structure and writing, and provides a sound and simple theoretical framework for analysis and discussion. The analysis is based on individual and group interviews and secondary data, as well as research and field experience of the health system in the province under study. Its weakness is that the data is based on the early years of a new approach to PHC outreach, and therefore the intervention has not had much time to embed itself. While this is acknowledged by the authors who focus on the initial stages of implementation (eg planning) it means that the analysis raises unanswered questions (which in the end are what matters) as to sustainability of the approach over time. It would be good to see this acknowledged in the conclusions, with a recommendation of how to overcome this lacuna – eg by encouraging the task team/province to raise more funds from donors for implementation (lack of resources being identified as a problem), or to re-think priorities in the provincial health budget, etc. Surely the point of evaluating this initiative is to offer recommendations for adaptation and changes in priorities to ensure achievement of goals, at least for this particular province? A short paragraph in the discussion or conclusions could address this.

The other thing which would benefit the discussion is an additional paragraph on the lack of resources. For example, on page 20 the authors say that there was a lack of extra funding (and what it was needed for, such as additional nurses), but do not say where those resources should have come from – district/provincial budgets or whether they did or not. Were none of those needs met because there was no extra funding and what was the role of the donor funds? Some clarification of what resources were needed for implementation, who provided them or where they came from (or did not) and what the implications are for the longer term would be helpful.

Minor comments

Page 4, under background: SA ‘recently’ established – say the year.

Page 4: under background: … led and supported by a professional nurse based, will be responsible for a defined… presumably ‘based’ should be deleted?

Page 6 after list of simple rules – first sentence - should be are, not as?

Page 8 In the description of North West Province which talks about the training of CHWs and Team Leaders and which began in late 2011 with an initial set of 24 – could the authors clarify whether some of these CHWs were already working –
for NGOs or in other roles or were they newly trained?

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests