Reviewer's report

Title: What makes advocacy work? Stakeholders’ voices and insights from prioritisation of Maternal and Child Health programme in Nigeria

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Under which authority/Ministry was Subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme for MCH (SURE-P/MCH) was established by the federal government?

"Therefore, despite the suspension of funding to SURE-P, the federal and some state governments continued to implement other free MCH interventions at PHC centres" - were these services that were already being provided prior to SURE-P? which states are some states? What role did NPHCDA play, if any?

"The third sector, including several NGOs..." appears with the first mention of the word 'sector', so one has no idea what the first 2 sectors are... also besides NGOs, what constitutes the 3rd sector? Often the process of registering as an NGO precludes direct political action - therefore what kind of advocacy are we talking about for them? It may also be important to distinguish between NGOs and CSOs.

Not sure what this means: "Health policy plays the role of influencing governments and international agencies in health-promoting ways and ensuring that the voices of health-promoting organizations are heard and noted." governments create policy whereas service providers and agencies are influenced by policy - e.g. implement policy.

"Although there were on-going advocacy initiatives by other bodies..." not just more examples of who has been involved but what they actually have been doing. Hopefully there are various reports by these groups that can be quoted.

Overall the background/introduction is strong on theory but weak on specifics and context as applies to the actual situation in Nigeria.

"Advocacy formed one of the eight PT which..." this sounds strange since advocacy is a process or an intervention, not a theory. there may be theories about the use, effect, purpose of advocacy, and if so the authors should share. Like much in the manuscript, the authors blithely present theoretical constructs by name and provide the reader with little explanation or application.

Much of the methods section would be better presented as the study's theoretical framework in the Background - Methods should tell the reader about the instruments and procedures developed from the framework and how those were applied to collect data. It is fine to tell us what an advocacy campaign might include, but we need to know how the authors actually tracked any real advocacy efforts and determined how they were constructed and what was the output, outcome and impact.
One area of theory that should be expanded is the concept of a stakeholder, especially as distinct from a policy/decision maker. Then in the methods, armed with a definition of stakeholder, explain how this was applied on the ground and used to identify people/groups in different categories who were to be interviewed.

These categories are important in terms of describing the 'population' of stakeholders and then the 'sample' of members of a category who would be interviewed. For example, the important category of "professional associations" - so which groups are in this category/population and which two were selected and why should the reader trust that these are the ideal 2 to represent their category? Similar questions arise for the other categories of stakeholders such as CSOs that represent concerned citizens and industries like pharma, etc.

Concerning "document review and tracking of advocacy events" - how was this done - what documents? anything from the press/media/online? Who did the search and extraction of data, who did the interviews. how was data quality ensured.

were questions to stakeholders similar or different from those for policy makers - it would seem the former might be more involved in conducting advocacy, while the latter could report on the receiving end of those efforts.

In addition to making the sampling process more clear, it would help to do the same description for both federal and state levels. we do not know how many states were included in the larger project and where they were located (zone) and why Anambra was chosen and whether it is in fact a good case study considering all the other states that may have been involved.

Is there any reason why the LGA level was not included?

I am not sure if "unpack" is a research method or just jargon.

Interesting that the authors chose to develop their semistructured interview guide around their own programme theory as opposed to letting a theory or theories emerge from the interview process. Any thoughts on why?

The data analysis section is weak. The authors would benefit from reviewing other mixed method and qualitative articles to see how authors handle the process of domains and coding etc.

The results state that "The nature of their engagement included organizing demonstrations, workshops, symposium, town hall meetings, individual meetings, press conferences and engagements with media." Also, "We found that key outcomes of advocacy included financial commitment, political involvement, policy enactment, and implementation." Much more in the way of specifics is needed to describe the examples, indicate who organized the event, what was the main content, and how it targeted policy makers among others - was it at national or state level? In terms of the outcomes mentioned, we would like to read about specifics. Hopefully this is where the document search and review can help.
Where is the evidence for "Advocacy has also led to an increase in funding for MCH at the sub-national level due to better awareness of value of social sector investments and possibly the ability to demonstrate visible political gains." And again LGAs are part of the sub-national level. Any news from them?

The mention of contextual factors is important but it may help if they are linked with specific advocacy efforts because there may be varying experiences depending on stakeholder, level, content and approach. If the authors prefer sharing context separately, it would still help to say for each factor which types of issues, levels, approaches, were most affected. One assumes not all factors have equal weight or effect in all situations.

it is also good that negative or no effect was noted, and thus clear lessons about what worked and why on which issues at which levels, etc. is needed.

It becomes more and more obvious these days across multiple countries that facts or evidence may not work as expected to support advocacy. at the same time advocacy should not devolve completely into emotional pursuasion. it might be more of an issue of how the facts and evidence are pressented - so any lessons on what does and doesn't work for advocacy and at which levels, would be a valuable contribution.

There is some mention of people coming together for advocacy - not sure if there were formal coalitions, but more needs to be presented in the results on any such joint/collaborative efforts.

Again there is much mention about the media, but little specifics on actual media advocacy efforts - what, who, which media, reach, response, etc., etc. For example, it is not enough to report that, "Misrepresentation and simplification of media messages can constrain advocacy efforts." there must be 'data' to back this in terms of specific interventions by whom, where and when and reporting what actually happened and respondents views on why it happened.

This statement is not really a finding: "The use of champions and influencers in advocacy process was considered by our participants as an enabler. Once an advocacy issue is identified, those that have the capacity, ability, and passion to drive those issues and their strengths are identified and are used to reach out to the MCH policymakers and implementers." We need specific examples of when such champions were used, what was their position, how did they function, what were specific outcomes of specific actions, not just a generalization. This is a general observation for much of the manuscript - too much generalization and less specifics of what happened and people's perspectives on why for each outcome.

I will reserve any thoughts on the Discussion until the results are strengthened. Without more specific findings, the discussion can only repeat the generalities.

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.

No

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
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No

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If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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