Reviewer's report

Title: State-building and human resources for health in fragile and conflict-affected states: exploring the linkages

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Reviewer: Giuliano Russo

Reviewer's report:

Peer review of “State-building and human resources for health in fragile and conflict-affected states: exploring the linkages”.

This paper explores the state-building role played by health staff and health systems in post conflict fragile states by examining case studies as well as multiple bodies of literature. I recommend the paper for publication, as I believe it makes an important contribution to an under researched theme by drawing from different disciplines such as public health, economics, sociology, public administration etc, which is how I believe such complex area should really be approached. To my eyes however the paper is still affected by a few weaknesses in its presentation of the evidence, methodology and consistency of the writing that I feel at times undermine the arguments put forward. Perhaps I can offer my view on how to address such limitations.

Methodology. The paper was written by several authors reviewing different bodies of literature and compiling 3 case studies. I find the relevance of these latter for the paper’s economy however rather limited, as (a) the case-studies are mostly based on secondary sources and authors’ own experience – the same sources of the main literature review, and; (b) throughout the text I rarely saw crucial evidence from them presented to illuminate the arguments. As a result, the contribution from the case-studies is undistinguishable, and they rather appear a poorly integrated add-on to the main text, with no context/introduction/special section or case-study methodology given for them, and their evidence oddly sitting in 3 boxes at the end of the paper. I would probably suggest getting rid of the case studies altogether, and present the evidence from Afghanistan, Burundi and Timor as coming from the (grey) literature – which is its true source, anyway.

I am not sure I understand why it was decided not to carry out a systematic literature review; to my eyes your review is already fairly comprehensive, and had you specified the boundaries of your search, inclusion criteria, steps and number of papers retrieved and selected probably you would be able to rest your paper on a much reputable methodology. Perhaps you should consider putting a research assistant to complete it, tidy it up, and present it as a full systematic literature review on the subject.

Consistency of writing. It clearly shows that the paper was written by several
authors working on different parts of the paper with limited face-to-face interaction; what I find missing here is a thorough final editing of the text aimed at streamlining the arguments, ensure the consistency tone and style throughout the text and avoiding repetitions (see for example the argument on the role of NGOs in service delivery repeated in the “Institutional capacity for health worker governance” and “Enablers and challenges” sections, pg.7-8 and 10-11). The same literature is often referred to in different parts of the paper to support very similar arguments (see Bertone et al, 2014 repeated with different reference numbers 45&59, or Pavignani and Colombo, 2001, with refs 58&66 – was a reference manager even used?). I also found it rather difficult to distinguish between the Findings and Discussion sections, as they both mostly present evidence from the literature and comment on it, as if separate authors had written them.

As a result of the above, the paper ends up being rather lengthy (6,274 wds), at times disjointed, and with a few repetitions making it difficult for the reader to follow the arguments. As I wrote before, I believe the paper does make an original contribution to an under researched area, but it would probably benefit from some tough editing to make it more reader-friendly for the Human Resources for Health audience.

Hope this helps,
 Giuliano

**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 that I have no competing interests.