Reviewer's report

Title: Supervision of community health workers in Mozambique: a qualitative study of factors influencing motivation and performance

Version: 1 Date: 26 January 2015

Reviewer: Alison Hernandez

Reviewer's report:

Comments to Authors:

This manuscript presents a well-designed study of an important and timely topic which has strong relevance for health system policy and strengthening support for CHW performance. The level of writing is good and easy to read, though the organization and presentation of the findings need significant improvement. I recommend major revisions before acceptance for publication. I outline my recommendations for strengthening the quality of the manuscript’s contribution below.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. The introduction provides a good overview of the historical context of the APE figure and the structure of supervision. However, the organization would be clearer if more central focus was placed on the Revitalized Programme. It seems that the findings of this study are most directly relevant for recommendations specific to strengthening this government program, so it is worthwhile to highlight this as an example of national policy to expand access through CHWs. More focus on the current role of the APE should also be given before describing supervision, particularly regarding the nature of their work, do they work alone, and the terms of their “employment” (receiving subsidy, based on performance?).

2. Orientation to the literature to which this study contributes is limited to mention of CHW approaches in the first sentence, and definition of motivation and statement of its relationship to supervision in the fifth paragraph. Further orientation is needed to existing literature on the contribution of CHW programs and issues arising in the supervision of CHWs.

3. The introduction of the concepts of motivation, performance, and their relationship to supervision is somewhat superficial considering that these are named to be the core focus of the article in the title and objectives. The way of describing supervision is also done in two ways – “influence of the way in which supervision is conducted” and “factors related to supervision”. The authors’ conceptual understanding of supervision and the influence you expect to see in motivation and performance should be elaborated further. In the results, you have integrated description of systems factors that influence supervision, and you are considering community supervision as part of supervision. This consideration of “supervision” as more than the role of the supervisor should be
explained. The objective statement at the end of the introduction should be clarified.

4. In the methods section, it is not clear what kinds of questions were included in the interview guides, and how the focus of the interview guides differed for APEs, supervisors and community leaders. You should also state the rationale for including these groups. Also, the justification for using IDIs should include their pertinence for the study objectives, rather than only their convenience and the limitations of FGDs.

5. The table presenting study participants provides very little information. More of the demographic and other characteristics of participants mentioned in the first paragraph of the results should be represented in the table, and possibly the descriptive text could be reduced.

6. The development of the themes that organize the results needs to be improved in several ways. It doesn’t seem logical to combine structure and support, nor frequency and funding. There is overlap in the section on support and skills. I believe that a clearer articulation of the understanding of supervision in the introduction could provide a base for improving the structure of the results.

7. The description of the themes should more explicitly lift up some main points about how you characterize and interpret participants’ views and experiences. In the discussion you eloquently describe that due to delayed subsidies, supervisors feel caught and have their credibility undermined - this and more of this kind of interpretation of the data should be present in the results.

8. I also see some variations in the participants' views that are included as quotes but not described or interpreted (e.g. APE, 28 years old, regarding “supervision facilitates me”). Given the inclusion of APEs and supervisors, more attention should also be given to how these views complement or contrast with each other in different issues.

9. Community supervision seems to represent a different kind of influence on APE motivation – this difference should be interpreted in your results. It seems to be functioning better and more in line with the idea of how supervision should motivate health workers.

10. The summary of findings at the beginning of the discussion is well articulated. Likewise, the organization and content of the discussion provide a much clearer understanding of how the authors conceptualize supervision than the introduction or the results. This indicates that the introduction and findings have much potential to be improved. Further work is needed in the discussion sections Supportive supervision vs. fault finding and Supervisors need training and support themselves, to articulate more clearly what the findings of this study contribute to current knowledge.

11. Recommendations and conclusions should also lift up messages regarding community supervision.
Minor essential revisions:

12. There are also minor points for revision in the introduction. Firstly, I believe there could be a more relevant way to frame the importance of a manuscript to be published in 2015 than reference to meeting the MDGs.

13. In the second paragraph, it would be pertinent to mention how long is the training of the APE. The sentence stating “There were no appropriate monitoring” should read “There was no…”.

14. In the third paragraph, it would be clearer to say “Supervision of APEs is explicitly described…”

15. In the fourth paragraph, the sentence reading “A number of barriers were described…” should begin: “In available reports…” and include references. Then “in available reports can be removed from the following sentence.

16. In the fifth paragraph, it is not clear who are the “international stakeholders” and why their view is of interest.

17. In end of the second paragraph of the Methods section, the statement “Portuguese fluency being a criteria…” is not clear.

18. In the third paragraph of the Methods section, you do not mention translating the interviews from Portuguese. You should mention if all of the 4 researchers speak Portuguese.

19. There are a few points for grammar correction in Findings, but I will wait for the revised version.

Discretionary revisions:

20. I believe that it would be better to exclude performance from the title, as this the concept does not have an important place in the manuscript.

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.