Reviewer’s report

Title: The evolution of the National Licensing System of Health Care Professionals: A qualitative descriptive case study in Laos

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Reviewer: Eszter Kovacs

Reviewer's report:

The manuscript summarizes a very important set of actions regarding human resources for health development. The reviewer is not completely sure about the appearance of the explicit content "registration and licensure" and the "National Licensing and Registration System for Healthcare Professionals in Laos" along the text. The title indicated an overview of the registration system, but no description of the registration system could be found in the text.

The Background of the review is satisfactory; however the Methods section lacks some basic information. The authors conducted a document analysis, but we do not know how many laws, regulations and relevant reports were taken into consideration. There is no information about the timeframe, what does the "past few decades" cover, which documents were paid attention to. The authors state that interviews were carried out with key informants. More details are required about the number of interviews and the role or status of the key informants, and the selection criteria.

The Results are summarized in a mixed way. The reader could follow the findings easier, if there would be 1) a chronological order or 2) presentation of important topics. The current logic of the result description is not clear or structured enough. Table 1 is missing from the text. The first law was introduced in 2005 but the question remains, whether there was any action or initiative beforehand. The law in 2005 includes 16 categories of health professionals but no listing is provided about these categories. What healthcare professions/professionals are registered in Laos? There is no information about how this issue became important, no specific information is given about the problems the lack of regulation had caused.

The authors state the "introduction of a systematic framework for licensing is a crucial step" and "systematic development" was carried out by the MOH, however in their line of actions it is not confirmed that systematic or strategic approach was followed. Many significant topics are presented in the text, but the structure or the systematic logic is lacking. For example, we can read about the migration of health professionals, which is doubtlessly an essential theme in the field, but no data or evidence is shown about the volume or trends of mobility. Therefore the reader cannot guess the relevance of the phenomenon. The authors state on page 7 that "In addition to facilitating the cross-border movement of professionals" but little evidence or information is provided about the reasons for facilitating the cross-border movements in the
country context. Of course free international movement is beneficial for many reasons but we do not get informed why it is important for Laos. Does the domestic health workforce rely on foreign professionals in different health professions or do they need to calculate foreign professionals in order to sustain the operation of their health system?

Another important issue is the education: Professional competencies were established for 3 professions but little we know about the selection of these professions, since the law regulated 16 professions (as stated on page 5). National examination was brought into focus, however no information is known what that really means and how it is constructed in the country context.

The reader can suppose that geographical distribution causes difficulties but no data is presented. Page 8 attempts to start dealing with the numbers, but some basic information is missing. We read about the numbers of professionals between 1988-2009. The numbers are important but no information is available about the regulations before 2005. The consistency of the information provided could increase the quality of the paper, namely, number of different professionals in different years, territorial distribution and belonging regulations. Now we see only "the total number of health workers" in the text that might cover all 16 professions? Figure 2 shows clearly what should be written in the text (the quote for the table is misused).

The Discussion brings the example of Cambodia and the US, which were not even mentioned before. In this case study review, it is not needed to refer to other countries' practices if there was no utilization of their practices of actions. No link or connection could be understood from them and no detailed information could be seen.

Additional remarks: Reference style was not followed precisely, some important citations are missing from registration and licensing literature, Table 1 is completely missing.

In summary, the manuscript concentrates on a highly important issue regarding health workforce development. Every little step can bring a huge impact for health workforce management and planning in the long time run, and it is a challenging task. Systematic and strategic approach would be needed to elaborate the goals-actions-results in health workforce development. The systematic development and implementation of policies was not verified in the text in case of Laos. A more comprehensive overview regarding the numbers of different health professionals is required in order to understand precisely the context of the country situation. A detailed description of the registration system for healthcare professionals itself is required.

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