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: Michelle Stiphout

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to review this article. This article highlights the evolution and key events and policies involved in developing a licensing and registration system for health care professionals in Laos. I found it to be an interesting article highlighting an important topic. I think this article should be published but that it requires some major revisions.

Overall major comments

The abstract results state that Laos is in the process of transitioning the focus of its HRH policy and that the six key events listed are key events in that transition. In the article text (p. 5) the key events are presented as key events of the overall evolution of the licensing system.

The three points in the results section were not introduced and therefore I found the results section to be informative (highlighting the key events, etc.) but I had a hard time following the flow and message of these points. I think that the results need a little more hand-holding for the reader.

(Page 9 - line 43) - I don't feel like this paper has shown the development of a regulatory framework so much as outline key events in this process and then talk about the plan to continue into the future (the 10 year plan).

(Page 11 - 14) - The first line of the conclusion "The process of policy evaluation…has been described", it doesn't feel like a licensing and registration system actually exists in Laos yet. What was described was the ongoing development towards this goal and this paper highlights the challenges and steps taken but not a lot was said about what licensing providers will actually look like in Laos moving forward.

Overall minor comments

The article needs to be revised for writing clarity and flow. There were many long and confusing sentences.
The acronym HRH is being used to refer to different things in the article, which is confusing. For example, p. 4 line 34 - …the development of an HRH system, p. 4 line 37 - …that enable the sustainable production, deployment, and retention of HRH.

Consistency in language: licensure, competency, health care professionals, HRH.

Title
The title says "the development of a national…” but the aim of the study is to examine the evolution of the HRH policies.

Abstract
p. 2
55 - although clear after reading the article - it was a little confusing prior to reading the article if "improving the quality of service provision" was referring to the service provision in remote areas or overall service provision.
56 - 2) the establishment "and of" responsible (typo?)

Background
Coming from a country with licensing and registration of healthcare professionals some additional background information as to how many countries are currently working to establish licensing and registration would be helpful. This would provide some context and show the relevancy of this topic.

p. 4
32 - Sentence starting with "According to the "House Model" is a long, confusing sentence. Revise.

p. 5
5 - "Over the past few decades" but it has only been one decade since 2005.
6 - "Few studies" are there any studies? Please cite to show what research has been done

Methods

Very short methods section. Would like some additional information about the data collection and analysis, e.g., where did they find the documents? How did they identify interviewees? How many people were interviewed? What interview guide did they use? How was the data analyzed?

Results

They are providing the chronology of the HRH (policies) and related issues in developing the licensing and registration system, but in the background it said that it was highlighting a framework. If the chronology is providing the context/baseline for the framework this should be clear.

The results have not been presented clearly. On page 5, line 54, it jumps into the list a little abruptly. It says that the chronology and related issues are being presented but does not introduce the three points and what these points contribute to our understanding of this chronology and evolution/development of the system. The introduction to the key events on line 57 is helpful; something like this for the three points would be helpful as well.

Table 1 - formatting needs to be fixed.

p. 6

2 - have dates clearly associated with these key events in the text - the table was helpful but I felt like reading this I couldn't really put things in order and understand the progression without seeing the relevant dates.

43 - it's a bit confusing that section A talks about strategies from 2011 when section B jumps back to 2007.

52 - not clear that is meant by "technical capacities" - elaborate why those limited the senior leaders from being able to implement the detailed work needed.
Paragraph C (line 7) - It would help if there was a clear distinction between the two issues around international qualifications: Laotians going abroad and having international practitioners in Laos. They are two separate thoughts but are not clearly delineated in the text.

31 - "current policies" - is this the new policies? Or ones that still need to be changed.

p. 8

Paragraph E (line 14) - some clarity is needed in this paragraph. A few issues are being raised and I'm not sure what is highlighted as the solution. It says that there are shortages of providers in rural areas, but that there are too many nursing graduates and not enough positions. Are these two separate issues? Also, it doesn't look like the 3 years are compulsory but instead provide an advantage to those who elect to do it?

29 - all "civil servants" or just those in health care? Also, this language is not consistent with the figure 1 "government servants".

45 - Can "official identity" be elaborated on? What does that mean? What does it give them? Why do they need it to work in private hospitals but not all practitioners need it?

45 - "The requirement to hold a professional certificate also affected the necessity for the urgent development of a licensing and registration system for health care professionals in Laos." - How?

51 - 2. Header - "policy shift from strengthening the deployment of health workers in rural health care to improving the quality of health care professionals" - it wasn't clear in paragraph E (p. 8 - line 14) that the deployment of providers to rural areas was deterring from the end goal of registration and licensing and that a shift away from it needed to be made.

p. 9

8 - The "health sector reform framework" and MDG targets came out of no-where as a priority in this section. Maybe they should have been introduced earlier to provide more context to the whole article? Did the key events from point 1 lead to those initiatives being created?

50 - the example of the licensure in the US does not contribute anything to this discussion - would recommend deleting.

p. 10
5 - this paragraph jumps from saying what motivated the change to what is still needed. To me the thoughts seem unrelated and shouldn't be connected with a "moreover". If they are connected this is not clear - consider revising the sentence.

19 - "to achieve MDGs" - you didn't really highlight what that includes, just its different phases.

Figure 3 is listed as Figure 1 in the text.

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An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

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