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

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The manuscript in its present form shows some development compared to the previous version, however the quality of the paper still needs to be increased. From the perspective of content of different chapters, some editions and more logical structure is needed.

The background indicates important points but remains fragmented. The first paragraph clarifies the definition of licensing, but as reading the manuscript, there is a clear difference between being licensed and registered when considering practice. It would be more exact to see the meaning of licensing and registration, since they cover slightly different concepts, and whether the professional is allowed to practise or not. At the end of the paragraph, a linking sentence is missing. For example: Not only the professionals' competences and knowledge should be regulated but also the quality and safety of care needs to be ensured. The second paragraph quotes WHO but does not refer to WHO Global Strategy on HRH, which is an essential document when developing national level policies. This document also calls the attention to the development of HRH data (objective 4). Also several international documents contribute to realizing more systematic actions regarding HRH policies, HRH data and registries, see the findings of the Joint Action on Health Workforce Planning and Forecasting programme. The third paragraph focuses on Laos, that is, brings the attention to the national environment. Line 45-46 states "having only 5.4 and 1.3 health workers per 1000 population" does not help the reader to understand the context. It would be nice to see what this indicated "only" means and what kind of professionals "health workers" we talk about hereby, namely some comparison in the average numbers of the same profession in Southeast Asian region. The end of this line "As a result,..." stays vague, what results are we catching here? Another remark, the authors put some examples of the US, Cambodia and Japan to the discussion part, but they have better place in the background part.

A reader would appreciate to see among background information 1) what is meant by National Licensing and Registration System, 2) Global trends and recommendations, 3) context of Southeast Asia with examples, 4) country situation. I agree to insert these country examples and I confirm they are very detailed, but some basic or general feature could be added to exploring/identifying the context.
Methods: This part became clearer, but the qualitative document analysis needs more details. The category "laws, regulations and policies related to health that were issued from 1995 to 2016" is very broad indeed, and later we read that the first law on healthcare was codified in 2005. This raises the question what were the previous ones focussed on? What does "related to health" mean? In terms of the present focus of the manuscript, laws on healthcare and HRH-related policies should have been analyzed. How did the authors conduct the analysis itself? Were there thematic coding used or what was summarized from the different regulations? My other comment on methodology - also previously asked - the role and the status of the key informants and their selection criteria. The authors did not write about what expertise do key informants represent. Were there people from solely government administration or others also involved e.g. statisticians, academics, professional chambers etc.? The composition of the sample could support the clarification of the validity and reliability of the results.

Results: Chronology of the most significant regulations and event are listed among results. The starting point 2005 is clearly set. Main paths, ideas - lets say goals - in equal distribution of workforce, recruitment and retention, access to care and UHC appeared in the text, but some listing or systematic approach could make it more easily understandable. The biggest concerns are that "comprehensive developmental strategy" and the licensing and registration System is quoted many times but we only read about closely HRH strategy on page 10, section G. If Im not mistaken that is the strategy and the core result of the country in this field. Authors suggest that the line of actions - or rather the regulations - was built carefully, but no strategic planning (setting goals, determining actions, mobilizing resources, environment analysis, preparing action plan etc.) appears. The elements of the comprehensive strategy cannot be captured. If key events would mean the key elements of the strategy, they rather summarize 1) education, certification and training strategy, and 2) establishing the responsible body (or bodies since one office and two councils are listed). The most informative part is G, where we can get familiar with the strategy, promised from the beginning of the manuscript. Figures have improved a lot and they serve getting deeper insight to the current national situation.

In summary, a clear line of global, regional and national background of HRH numbers and relations is still missing from the text. The key events in topics of education, compulsory practice and establishing responsible bodies do not necessarily equal with national licensure and registration system and strategy in my view. The question still remains what is the system of licensure and registration in Laos? What system did the events and regulations between 2005-2015 result in? I do think that the achievements of the country are not described appropriately.

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