Author's response to reviews

Title: Performance of community health workers: situating their intermediary position within complex adaptive health systems

Authors:

Maryse Kok (maryse.kok@kit.nl)
Jacqueline Broerse (j.e.w.broerse@vu.nl)
Sally Theobald (Sally.Theobald@lstmed.ac.uk)
Hermen Ormel (h.ormel@kit.nl)
Marjolein Dieleman (m.dieleman@kit.nl)
Miriam Taegtmeyer (Miriam.Taegtmeyer@lstmed.ac.uk)

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Response to reviewers’ comments

Reviewer 1

• This is an interesting and well written article on community health workers (CHWs) and their performance. Below is the specific feedback for consideration:

Thank you very much and we appreciate your effort to review the manuscript.

• Very good background to CHWs and CHW programmes.

Thank you.

• Lines 101 - 105: The authors provide information regarding performance of health workers (and not CHWs). Given that the terms and conditions in which health professionals work is much different from CHWs, it may not be appropriate to directly relate the two.

Thanks for pointing this out. We believe that the general definition provided for performance of health workers also applies to CHWs. We have added this in the section. However, we also added that performance of CHWs is more profoundly influenced by what is going on in communities. This indeed is different from other - facility based - health workers, as pointed out by the reviewer.
• Line 119: The authors mention about a systematic review. Can they provide some more detail of this review such as what was the search strategy, which databases were sought, how many articles came up, how was analysis carried out, etc.

We have added the reference right after the sentence that summarizes the main findings of this review, to allow readers to find this open access source and the specific methodology used. We also added that the review included 140 studies on CHW programmes.

• It is not clear regarding the precise origin of the conceptual framework. Did it originate from literature review, the REACHOUT consortium research, both, or otherwise?

It originated from the review of the literature and the consortium research. This is stated in the abstract, and we have made it more explicit in the section where we introduce the framework. We also added the most important references in this regard.

• The authors on several occasions state that ‘...intermediary position of CHWs between the community and health sector .....’ This statement has its truth, however CHWs should be considered as an integral part of the health system (whether volunteers or not) and they indeed contribute to human resources for health as they are involved in health promotion and service delivery.

We very much agree with this point. We have deliberately chosen this wording. We would like to stress that the intermediary position of CHWs brings opportunities for the health system, but also challenges, which can influence CHW performance. To clarify what we mean by intermediary position (“in between what?”) we have chosen “community” and “health sector”. Many authors chose “community” and “health system”, but this, according to us, is less correct, as CHWs (and communities as a whole) are part of health systems. We feel that using the words “community” and “health sector” is therefore more appropriate. The health sector, community health workers and communities together are part of the health system. We also stress in the Background that in some countries, CHWs are salaried workers and an official part of the health sector, while in other countries they are volunteers at village level.

• Although the write up is generally impressive, it it not explicit in many instances whether some sections are from literature review or REACHOUT research. Can the authors be more explicit regarding which sections are from where for example by having concrete sections to that effect.

We recognize this lack of clarity and we have added some wording and references as to what we based different sections on. We have considered having concrete sections by source, but this did not fit well with the argument that we would like to build, nor did it contribute to the readability. We hope that adding references as to where evidence comes from will address the point raised by the reviewer.

• Availability of data: the authors state ‘ ...... no datasets were generated or analysed ......’. However, in the manuscript, several focus group discussions and interviews (lines 132 - 135) were held. This is therefore contradictory.
For this analytical assessment, we did not conduct any focus group discussions or interviews. However, we have referred to a comparative study involving four REACHOUT countries, presented in a previously published article which is an important piece of evidence for the framework presented in this paper. As such, the availability of data is already addressed in the article we refer to (reference 18).

Reviewer 2

• The article "Performance of community health workers: situating their intermediary position within complex adaptive health systems" discusses an extremely relevant issue concerning Public Health, especially in under-development countries or developing ones. The manuscript describes and analyzes the factors that influence on the performance of health community workers, lay workers who constitute the link between the community and health services.

Thanks a lot for pointing out the relevance of the subject and for taking the effort to review our manuscript.

• As a suggestion for the qualification of this article, the term "systematic literature review" should be substituted by "narrative literature review". Such suggestion is due to the fact that a systematic literature review demands strict requirements of selection and analysis of the manuscripts, considering that all steps of such methodology need to be described in detail in the article. In this article, it is not clearly observed and the review does not seem to be a systematic one, in fact, it seems to be a narrative one. A narrative review consists of a selection of studies whose subject is in the researchers’ interests, meeting the research aims, however, without presenting a strict and complex selection of the papers.

We agree with the reviewer on the difference between a systematic review and a narrative literature review. What we present in this paper is an “analytical assessment”, which could indeed be classified more as a narrative literature review (and definitely not a systematic one). To avoid confusion, we have removed the word “systematically” in the abstract. The framework presented in this paper is, however, based on evidence from various systematic reviews, of which one was conducted by the REACHOUT consortium. Also in response to reviewer 1, we have made this clearer in the text at several points.

• Besides the methodological issue, I suggest that an overview should be done about the results, as the factors "hardware" and "software"; "intrinsic" and "extrinsic (collective)" that influence on the work process of health community workers. It is also necessary to mention this overview in the abstract as well.

Thanks for this suggestion. We have added an overview of the hard- and software factors in both the abstract and the main text as these are the key factors presented in our framework and conceptualize the inter-face role played by CHWs. With regard to “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” factors: our argument and framework presented does not concentrate on this division. We only added that both hardware and software related factors can create an enabling environment for
performance, but do not always lead to improved performance, as intrinsic factors, such as people’s personalities, play a role. We have slightly adjusted this sentence.

• After considering these suggestions, I also recommend that this article should be published because of important information it points out about the health community workers, bringing about some reflection on the factors that interfere in their performance related to poor community care.

Thank you very much.