Reviewer’s report

Title: Success of a South-South Collaboration on Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) in Health: Case of Kenya and Zambia HRIS Collaboration

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Reviewer: Erin Fraher

Reviewer's report:

This article is a case study of the lessons learned and challenges encountered in using a South-South collaboration between Kenya and Zambia to develop an HRIS system.

Overarching Comments

Many readers may not be familiar with the South-South approach. Consider moving the description of the South-South framework currently in the discussion (pages 13-15, lines 231-280) to the background section. This would also frame the paper better than some of the current text currently in the introduction which jumps right into the South-South framework without any explanation. The authors could delete the text from lines 39-59.

The paper would be strengthened by:

A much stronger and detailed description of why HRIS is important to informing policies regarding the production, deployment and regulation of the health workforce. Expand on the text in lines 68-74 to discuss more specifically how HRIS helps identify workforce needs by profession and region and informs the education, regulation and practice of the workforce. Provide more information about what HRIS systems do to inform "scale-up of the health workforce" beyond the brief sentence in lines 83-84 that the development and impact of the HRIS system in Kenya has been documented elsewhere.

Consider revising the abstract and aims of the paper to be clearer that the authors aren't really providing "evidence-based practices". They are outlining a case study to illustrate the steps and resources needed to undertake a south-south implementation of an HRIS system and identifying the successes and challenges in undertaking such a collaboration. The paper is a road map for other countries who might want to use such an approach to develop their own HRIS.

One of the things I found most confusing about this paper is who the "client" or "customer" was for the HRIS. In various parts of the paper, the client seems to be the Health Professionals Council of Zambia and the General Nursing Council of Zambia (and maybe the MOH?). If this
is the case, more detail on how/why and HRIS is important to inform regulation would be useful. The authors note in lines 94-98 that the needs assessment sought to identify "existing gaps" but more detail on what these gaps are (data, information systems etc.) and how they hinder regulatory functions would be useful. It would also set up the later findings on lines 178-181 that the HRIS improved regulatory compliance etc.

No real mention is made of how the HRIS would benefit training institutions although this is clearly one of the audiences for the HRIS output and they are stakeholders who were part of the "sensitization" step.

Under the "Establishing the Project Team" more detail on the skills needed to establish the HRIS such as data programming skills, analytic skills, IT skills, project management, rather than position titles would make it clearer what the gaps were in Zambia and how the South-South partnership with Kenya addressed these gaps. A discussion of skill gaps would be useful to other countries considering a South-South collaboration to develop an HRIS.

On page 9, line 151, the authors introduce a project structure that includes the Joint Regulatory Collaborative which makes it even more confusing about whether the HRIS was developed for the JRC, the General Nursing Council, the MOH, other regulatory agencies or some other group? An organizational chart that shows the relationships between the various countries' agencies engaged in developing the HRIS might improve clarity.

Pg 10, line 170-173, this sounds like a formative evaluation process?

Lines 178-181 are very strong in terms of demonstrating the impact of the HRIS and are another reason that: 1. an explicit discussion of the regulatory clients' needs; and 2. a discussion of evidence of how HRIS improve regulatory functions are needed in the introduction to frame the importance of this work.

Minor comments

While generally well written, there are places where the manuscript is a little choppy and could be grammatically improved. Some examples:

Drop multiple uses of "on the other hand"

Page 7, line 123, do the authors mean "hasten" and not "fasten"?
The tense changes in different sections of the paper. It should all be written in the past tense since the project was already implemented (example line 197, change "is" to "was")

Lines 201-229: the tone of the text changes suggesting it was written by another author. Fix grammar/punctuation in this section. There is also repetition in this section from other sections (the information about the point of contact and the weekly conference calls)

Line 276-Who is the "Task Team on South-South's cooperation's report"?

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