Reviewer's report

Title: Setting the Global Research Agenda for Community Health Systems: Literature and Consultative Review

Version: 1 Date: 01 Mar 2019

Reviewer: Madeleine Ballard

Reviewer's report:

Thank you to the authors for their thoughtful responses to a wide-ranging set of comments. Their responses and adjustments to the paper are very well taken. Three final thoughts re: the authors' response:

<<...The more recently undertaken WHO guideline provides critical guidance on very specific key questions to strengthen community health worker programming.

Our consultative efforts take a much broader lens and engaged several of the experts who served as reviewers for the WHO guideline. Additionally, the paper presents the knowledge priorities of the Ministries of Health which are often not reflected in more traditional reviews.

As to the reviewer's comment on 'fit-for-purpose', the authors would gently re-emphasize that the stated purpose of this review, as given in the title, is to reflect on the global research agenda. The WHO Guideline and its recommendations have a much more direct and policy-relevant agenda to inform the implementation of CHW programs. Each in their own way are fit for their stated purpose.>>

The emphasis is noted. That said, as currently written, the purpose of this paper is to "propose a global research agenda to strengthen CHW programs...shift[ing] attention from whether CHW programs are effective to identifying which factors make CHW programs more effective."

The purpose of the Research Priorities section of the WHO Guidelines is "not [to identify]...the evidence base on the effectiveness of CHWs" but the "cross-cutting policy and system enablers to optimize design and performance of CHW programmes"

With sincere apologies, I fail to see how the proposed scope of one is broader than the other. Either way, if this is the contention of the authors it should be clearly indicated in the paper, not only in this response.

<<a)...Reviews published after 2000 were determined as appropriate for inclusion in the review, based on the extensive historic and current experience of the research team as well as discussions with external experts. ...>>
While I appreciate this perspective, I suspect others may also be confused as to why 20 year old systematic reviews are being used to identify the research gaps of today. Given this, I'd again suggest that a sentence related to the reasons for this choice is included in the paper itself, not just in this response.

The need for a different lens is very much well taken. If this is the motivation, it should be noted in the paper itself.

<<...Research, by design, is an iterative process and the presence of work in one area by a select group seldom precludes the need for a different lens, especially, one that is driven bottom-up in close partnership with Africa and Asia-based implementers and ministry officials...>>

Given the WHO's focus on cross-cutting policy and system levers, exhaustive systematic review of the literature, and inclusion of Ministry of Health officials from Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, Moldova, Fiji, Rwanda, and Bangladesh (+ numerous implementers) in the guideline development and review groups I--again with apologies--remain unconvinced that breadth or close work with Ministry officials are distinguishing aspects of this work. I would recommend against claiming so in the paper, given the risk of inadvertently mischaracterizing the breadth or methods of the Guideline.

With best wishes as we together take up the important task of answering these questions in service of better health for all.

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