Reviewer's report

Title: Health systems research as a tool for policy change: lessons from the implementation of Rapid Assessment Protocols for diabetes in low- and middle-income settings

Version: 1
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Reviewer: Dina Balabanova

Reviewer's report:

The paper addresses a very important and topical issue: how to ensure the uptake of health systems research and what factors can facilitate this process. The authors report the results of multi-country analytical studies, their usefulness and dissemination. This paper will undoubtedly be of interest to a broader audience.

I believe a number of revisions will be beneficial and improve the paper. The key messages and findings do not come across very clearly. I suggest another overall edit ensuring that these themes are very clearly described and presented. Some suggestions for (minor) revision are given below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Title. The title has to be changed to better reflect the focus of the paper. Thus the first part of the title does not link to the finding of this analysis – which does not explore whether the RAPIA tool promoted policy change. The second part can be retained and expanded.

Abstract
- The ‘Methods’ section needs to be much clearer, it should summarise how many people were interviewed and in which countries, e.g. ‘with one partner from the 6 countries’ – is this an organisation or individual in each country?
- The sentence ‘The documentary review led to the identification of a variety of sources’ should be under the Methods and it be made specific, noting a few examples of sources.
- You need to mention what type of topics were discussed during the interview.
- The paper needs to be edited for language. E.g. ‘From the interviews formalized methods and close collaboration between the international team and local partners were strengths.’ This should be rephrased.
- The ‘Conclusion’ needs to be revised, it is not explicit what the main points are, possibly due to unclear language.

Introduction
- There are sentences which are either unclear or not supported by evidence.
E.g. ‘The data collected by the different RAPIAs led to larger visibility of the issue of diabetes as a health concern… carried out.’ Visibility for whom, and what is the evidence for this? Similarly, the rest of the paragraph is questionable probably due to the lack of detail – e.g. Kyrgyzstan collects life expectancy data, you need to note briefly what was added by the RAPIA study.

- I suggest inserting a box describing the key features of the RAPIA method so that the readers can see what information is typically generated through it.

- P.3, para 4. This is an important paragraph framing the study. However, it focuses on health policy rather than health systems (in line with the title). There is a lot of literature on HSR uptake – maybe if the paper focuses on diabetes, its contribution will be clearer.

Methods

- This demonstrates some inherent bias. (‘In order to assess the elements that allowed the RAPIA to inform and influence policy…….the results of the RAPIA’). It is presumed that the RAPIA has had an impact and the documentary analysis focuses on sources quoting the RAPIA findings. The documentary method cannot establish whether these are significant levels when compared to other relevant publications that may have had an impact on particular policies. Perhaps you can revisit the wording, recognising that this strategy measures the dissemination of results but cannot indicate impact.

- p.4. ‘Stage 2 used the results from the above search to develop a list of individuals who had used or referred to results from the different RAPIAs.’ Does this mean authors of papers quoting RAPIA? You need to specify who the individuals are.

- Could you say a bit more about the IIF list? The initial targeting of respondents can potentially bias the results. What other strategies were used or considered to increase the number of respondents able to respond to the online questionnaire?

- p.4 ‘Building on the information collected from the document review, as well as the online questionnaire…. Stage 3’ It is unclear to the reader how stage 1 and 2 led to stage 3. It seems like the interviews were with partners who conducted the RAPIA and not the ones who use it (with some exceptions). Perhaps you can comment a bit more on the respondents’ selection process?

- p.5. The results from the Google search are missing (error on the page). This needs to be reinserted as it is integral to the analysis.

- Table 3 should include not only who quoted RAPIA findings but which paper was quoted.

- p.5. ‘85 individuals being international partners’ International to whom, to what country? Or does it mean international agencies?

- p.6 The findings from the interviews are very interesting and informative. It seems the interviews followed a deductive approach with structured questionnaire and results presented using these heading. This is fine but the approach should be made explicit. Could you please add a comment on how spontaneously expressed ideas and unexpected points were captured?
- p. 7 Some of the findings are vague, e.g. ‘The partner in Zambia also stated that…. then went on to...’ It may be better to include a more informative quote.

- p. 7 The point about the legitimacy of IIF for the credibility of the research is extremely important – this should be further discussed in the discussion.

- p. 9 ‘Methods for policy analysis and impact are not standardized [31]’. Replace with ‘Methods are for policy analysis and impact are increasingly diverse.

Conclusion p.9
- I believe the authors could improve the discussion: not only provide a succinct summary of the key findings, but identify the key strands emerging from this analysis that can inform the policy and research related to diabetes. It can be structured along some of the key learnings from the study: what made the RAPIA useful/ who was the audience / local vs internationally focus of studies/ legitimacy issues...and not just repeat the same points from the findings. The discussion can critically appraise tensions between the role of the insider vs outsider in applying RAPIA etc.

Minor Essential Revisions
- The key points in Box 1 can be fine-tuned to make them specific and thus more useful. E.g. instead of need for a strong and comprehensive dissemination strategy, ‘need for a strong and comprehensive dissemination strategy linked to local champion’s roles...etc.’

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

Yes. (possible non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper)

I work in the same area of the authors (NCD and health systems), know them personally and we are involved in some of the same international initiatives. It is possible that we are applying for the same funding sources, although I am not aware of such a case recently.

I declare that I sought to provide an objective review of this paper.