Reviewer's report

Title: Identifying Priority Technical and Context-Specific Issues in Improving the Conduct, Reporting and Use of Health Economic Evaluation in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Reviewer: Sedona Sweeney

Reviewer's report:

The subject material of this paper is timely, and the premise of the paper is sound. There are substantial methodological issues associated with conducting health economics research in LMIC settings. It is important to highlight these issues, and initiate discussions on the best way to improve the quality and use of economic evaluation in decision making in LMIC.

The authors justify the research question by citing several systematic reviews which highlight lower quality methods used in low- and middle-income settings. This is indeed true in many settings, but it would be more revealing to highlight the fact that researchers working in LMIC face different methodological challenges, rather than simply being worse at their job (as is currently implied).

The authors should state in the introduction why they chose to explore the opinion of economic evaluation practitioners, and what this adds to the debate. For example, why is this approach better than a survey of users of economic evaluations, or a review of methods in existing economic evaluations?

The authors should have a look at the Health Economics Supplement on methods in low- and middle-income settings, which was published last year. This is a key reference in this field, and gives a very good overview of specific methodological issues faced by researchers in LMIC.

The methods section does not mention whether ethical approval was given for the study. Please can you also state whether the survey was conducted anonymously.

Table 1 Characteristics of respondents - this table should be moved to the results section

Table 2: Ranked technical issues - these issues as currently presented seem a large jumble of many different types of problems. Perhaps it would be helpful to split out the 'technical issues' under subheadings such as 'lack of data', 'inappropriate use of data', 'lack of commonly-accepted methods', 'inappropriate use of methods'.

It seems a lot of work was done to identify methodological issues in economic evaluation through review of methods in existing economic evaluations in low- and middle-income countries. It would strengthen this paper to add the results of that work, for example so that readers could compare the frequency of methodological issues in published data against the perceptions of practitioners as to which issues are the most prominent.
It would be helpful to include more in the discussion on the solutions that practitioners proposed for these issues - as this seems to be a real benefit of the survey which is not currently substantially addressed.

I believe the approach of suggesting a list of issues and asking respondents to rank them introduces substantial bias - as respondents will be less likely to consider methodological issues which are not in the list (even if given the chance to add them). The authors should consider including a discussion of this in their limitations section.

It would be helpful to ground the discussion section more within the context of existing methods for economic evaluation, policy, and the decision-making process. For example, researchers think that lack of high quality local clinical data is the biggest problem - can the authors give an idea of what data people tend to use instead, and how this impacts the quality of economic evaluations and therefore decision making? What actions are needed to address this - is it generation of local data, or better education of the applicability of global data, or something else entirely?

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