Author’s response to reviews

Title: Developing the National Knowledge Platform in India: A policy and institutional analysis

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Author’s response to reviews:
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The Editors,
Health Research Policy and Systems

Dear Editors,

Thank you for sharing the reviewers’ comments on our paper, ‘Developing the National Knowledge Platform in India: A Policy and Institutional Analysis’ (HRPS-D-17-00175). We thank the reviewers for their detailed and excellent feedback, and have sought to incorporate
their suggestions in the accompanying manuscript. The following are the key revisions that have been made:

1. Clarifying key concepts used in the analysis: We have clarified and refined our use of various terms in the manuscript, particularly around the nature of institutions, institutional arrangements, interests and context. These concepts are now defined and/or explained in the section titled ‘Conceptual Framework and Definitions’, and we have also ensured that they are used appropriately throughout the manuscript.

2. Discussion section: The first paragraph of the Discussion section has been revised to better capture overarching themes from the study. We have also elaborated on the Limitations sub-section, particularly around the nature of the participants sampled for the study.

3. Sub-section on ‘Stakeholder Roles and Interests’: We have clarified that our research question on stakeholders focuses on examining stakeholder roles and interests (rather than on interests and ideas), and have also made revisions to the accompanying sub-section under Results in order to clarify or expand on certain points.

We have provided detailed responses on these and other comments made by the reviewers in an accompanying document. We would also be happy to provide any further information that is helpful to the reviewers and editors as you review the revised manuscript.

We look forward to hearing your feedback and thank you once again for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Veena Sriram (On Behalf of Co-Authors)
‘Developing the National Knowledge Platform in India: A Policy and Institutional Analysis’ (HRPS-D-17-00175)

Response to Reviewer Comments

Reviewer #1

1. This article provides an interesting example of attempts to structure a knowledge translation platform in India. It provides insight into the political dynamics surrounding the formation of this platform and suggests potential considerations for actors in other countries who seek to pursue similar programs. The study design is conceptually sound and elegantly presented. The research uses well-established qualitative methods and articulates data collection, analysis, and interpretation clearly. The conclusions appear to be supported by the data, are coherent, logically presented, and should prove useful to both practitioners and researchers in low- and middle-income countries. Below I have several broader questions/comments and minor suggestions. All in all, the authors should be commended on sharing a piece of research that pertains to a relatively poorly understood (or at least documented) policy process.

Response: We thank the reviewer for this positive assessment of the paper, and are grateful for the excellent comments and suggestions provided. We have sought to address each of these points in our revision.

2. As stated above the introduction and methods sections are written clearly and set up the narrative of the article nicely. It could benefit, however, from clearer definition of concepts central to the analysis. For example, in the research questions, terms like "contextual factors", "institutional arrangements", "interests and ideas" are presented but not defined. A lot can fall under the umbrella of contextual factors, what parameters did you place on this term when starting about the research process? To me, that would include systems of governance, electoral systems, civil society, etc., but the study seems to operate within the world of centralized public administration and the influence of international actors.

Response: The reviewer raises an important point regarding the need for more clarity and definition regarding concepts used in the analysis. We have therefore sought to incorporate these
changes into the Methods section by retitling the section ‘Conceptual Frameworks and Definitions’ (page 6, line 12 – page 7 line 12), and including further details on our definition for contextual factors, institutions, institutional arrangements and interests.

3. Institutional arrangements should be defined and at points in the manuscript, the authors seem to use the term "institutions" interchangeably with organizations. A clearer distinction between the two might be helpful as a lot of the work seems to refer to organization development. Dick Scott's book (multiple editions) called Institutions and Organizations, might help, especially as there is a whole section on institutionalization and institutional construction.

Response: We thank the reviewer for making this critical point, and fully agree that further conceptual clarity and distinction between the terms is required throughout the manuscript. We have included our working definition of institutional arrangement in the revised section on ‘Conceptual Frameworks and Definition’ (page 7, lines 4 – 6). We have also ensured that we have appropriately used the terms institutions and organizations throughout the manuscript.

We also thank the reviewer for sharing the helpful reference for book by Scott, Institutions and Organizations. We have reviewed and drawn upon key chapters of the fourth edition of this book while preparing our revision.

4. Interests can be material, strategic, and can change over time. Ideas can be causal beliefs or deeper value orientations. Clarification might help in providing a more persuasive account of how these are operating later in the manuscript.

Response: We thank the reviewer for making this distinction, and agree with their assessment that the terms have been used differently in this paper. We have therefore clarified that our focus is primarily on roles and interests, rather than on underlying ideas.

5. Finally, the policy triangle is incredibly parsimonious, but it is now over twenty years old. The authors (Walt and Gilson) themselves have evaluated the Shiffman and Smith (2007) framework in a 2014 HPP article and found it to be particularly useful. Further justification of the policy triangle would help in explaining why the authors structured their study in this way and why they didn’t choose alternative frameworks.
Response: The use of the policy triangle in this study was motivated by the need to provide depth to certain categories to suit the objectives of the study, particularly content and context. We do agree that the Shiffman and Smith framework is very useful for studies of this nature, but felt that it did not give us adequate flexibility in this particular case. We have provided a more detailed justification for the use of the policy triangle on page 6, lines 18 – 20.

6. After the chronological table 2, it is explained that stakeholders described the utilization of evidence as unsystematic, unpredictable, etc. Was this indeed a problem defined nationally as the table would suggest or was it actually defined by the work of AHPSR and other entities. This is addressed somewhat later, but the justification for a national desire to strengthen decisionmaking isn't clear to me based on the NRHM. In fact, in research we conducted (and the authors cited) around the same time in India, we found that some Indian decisionmakers took issue with the evidence-based policy movement...claiming that evidence is used for all kinds of purposes and takes all kinds of forms, not all of them good. At times the authors seem close to a potentially dangerous assumption that more evidence is better and should inform decisions over societal values or sociopolitical circumstance. The authors seem to be aware that evidence can inform, but not determine, policy, but care should be taken not to overstate the character of evidence as unbiased or value-neutral.

Response: The reviewer raises an important point about needing to ensure that we are cautious in our assumptions regarding evidence and evidence use. In our study, some participants raised similar points to those noted by the reviewer, but that we were unable to include for space constraints. We have however included them in this revision to ensure that we are appropriately capturing this nuance. Please find these revisions on page 13, line 21 – page 14 line 2.

7. I was left wondering more about the National Health Research Policy and why the knowledge translation platform was not established as an integrated part of the MoHFW. Particularly upon reading the paragraph that ends at the top of page 14. Why, for example, was the platform not implemented? What happened? Was this addressed in the discussion and I just missed it? It seems like there might be some deeper and perhaps more personal politics at play that are not identified here.

Response: We agree with the reviewer that the evolution of the National Health Research Policy is a particularly interesting aspect of this story. From our available data, we have included a brief mention of possible reasons why the platform was not implemented, on page 15, lines 1 – 2.
8. The section on stakeholder interests and ideas was not all that clear to me. Perhaps this was because I was operating from a different definition or understanding of each. I think Table 3 is meant to illustrate these, but to me they just represent actors actions. I couldn't tell how they understood their roles, what their interests were or what ideas they were advocating for. I think what is clear is their positions on the issues, but this is somewhat different to me.

Response: We thank the reviewer for bringing these points to our attention. Upon further reflection, we agree that the paper does not engage fully with a discussion of stakeholder ideas or underlying beliefs. Our focus has primarily been on motivations and interests of the key actors involved, which as the reviewer rightly notes, can be material and shift over time. While a discussion on ideas would have been interesting, we currently do not have the scope within this paper to fully engage with that concept. Therefore, we have repositioned this section to focus primarily on roles and interests, and have also briefly noted some of these points in the first paragraph of the Discussion (page 26, lines 8 – 23).

9. A persistent question I was asking when reading this was “why is all this happening?”. Were these organization developments linked to broader health systems trends or were domestic actors particularly sympathetic to the growing UHC movement sponsored by AHPSR? And, if so, why? The actions are fascinating on their own but there seems to be adequate room for the interpretation of the authors to help pull it together more clearly in the discussion section.

Response: We fully agree with the reviewer’s comment, and have revised the beginning of the Discussion section (page 26, line 8 – 23) to reflect on this question.

10. Also, was the Indian experience informed more directly by other successful country-level knowledge translation platforms? What is different about this experience from those?

Response: The experience of knowledge translation platforms in other countries certainly influenced the focus of AHPSR and permeated discussions taking place in wider forums, for example, the Health Systems Research symposium in Beijing. In turn, these international experiences might have influenced stakeholder interest in building a platform in India. Additionally, some participants noted that the experience of Thailand, with mechanisms such as the International Health Policy Programme, were informative for India (but participants did not mention the IHPP model directly influencing the institutional arrangement or functions of the
NKP). We have therefore made reference to the Thailand example on page 22, lines 10 – 14, but kept this brief in order to not inadvertently suggest that this was a major factor in the design of the NKP.

11. Were field notes taken after the interview to further situate data collection (features of the interview process that weren’t present in the manuscript)? If so, were these coded and analyzed?

Response: We thank the reviewer for raising this point. We took field notes during the interviews, and combined those field notes with interview transcripts for the purposes of analysis. We coded and analyzed these notes, and have now made mention of this on page 10, lines 2 – 3.

12. How were the different forms of data treated (documents, telephone interviews, in-person interviews, notes as opposed to transcripts, etc.)? Were they considered the same or different?

Response: We thank the reviewer for raising this clarification. All the interviews (in-person, telephone, Skype and interview field notes) and some documents were analyzed using the approach described in the Methods section (page 9, line 18 – page 10, line 15). Some documents were also included, such as key reports, meeting minutes and government orders. We have clarified this point on page 10, line 5 – 8.

13. Why the variation from 16 minutes to over 2 hour interviews (just seems really large)?

Response: We have now introduced the average time for the interviews (approximately one hour). The interview that lasted 16 minutes was due to a scheduling challenge with one of our participants.

14. Was member checking pursued? How/why not?
Response: We conducted member checking with one respondent on certain themes, and have noted this in our revision on page 10, lines 14 – 15.

15. The interview labeling system was not clear to me. Perhaps insert a sentence on page 10 before the results section.

Response: We thank the reviewer for bringing this to our attention. We have now clarified how we have labeled the interviews and documents on page 11, line 7 – 8.

16. Pg 4, ln 56: HPSR is mentioned, but I don't think it has been defined earlier (or at least not with the acronym behind it).

Response: We agree that the acronym/term was used inconsistently, and in this revision, have streamlined its use (largely using the acronym HPSR). We have also included it in the list of abbreviations on page 33.

17. Pg 9, ln 51-54: grammar is off, maybe remove "to" and fix the last part of the sentence.

Response: We thank the reviewer for bringing this to our attention and have made the change accordingly on page 9, lines 15 – 16.

18. Pg 11, ln 9-16: the table is chronological but the November 2, Beijing meeting is presented above the November 1 Beijing meeting

Response: We have made this change in the table, which can be found on page 11, line 16 onwards.

19. Pg 14, ln 44: now that you have defined and used the acronym HPSR, you can use it here instead of the long form.
Response: We have now revised our use of the acronym/term HPSR, referring to it primarily as the acronym in most places in the manuscript.

20. Pg 19, In 36: word "discussions" used twice in the same clause creates confusion.

Response: We agree, and have replaced the term discussions with process in the second instance (please see page 20, lines 14 – 16).

21. Pg 25, In 34 + 39: there is reference here and fleeting reference in the methods to phases of the policy cycle. Is this another framework or where does this come from? Scholars in policy studies frequently dispute that policy proceeds clearly (either linearly or cyclically).

Response: The reviewer makes an important point. We have more clearly noted our use of the policy cycle/stages heuristic in this revision (page 6, lines 12 – 20), and have noted that we have utilized this approach keeping in mind its limitations, such as those suggested by the reviewer around its presumed linearity/cyclical nature.

22. Pg 30, In 34: why were no participants recruited from the MoHFW? This seems critical as it remains unclear to me why the platform was destined to be a free-standing enterprise. Could the lack of this perspective have influenced your interpretations?

Response: We thank the reviewer for mentioning this, and we have sought to further address this issue in the limitations section. To summarize our point from that section, we were unable to interview current MoHFW officials due to their perception that the policy process was in a sensitive period; however, we did interview former officials, other current central government officials, and other researchers with close affiliations with MoHFW, which also helped in understanding actions taken by MoHFW (page 31, line 19 – page 32, line 2).

23. Pg 31, In46: I think the authors mentioned earlier the National Rural Health Mission but the acronym isn't in the list of abbreviations. Also, if HPSR is abbreviated earlier, it should also be included.
Response: We have now included NRHM in the list of acronyms on page 33.

Reviewer #2

1. I want to congratulate the authors for a very complete and enlightening account of the development of the NKP of India. This article will surely be of help for researchers and decision makers in other LMICs to promote research uptake and embedding processes.

Response: We thank the reviewer for this positive assessment of the paper, and appreciate the excellent comments and suggestions that have been provided. We have sought to address these points in our revision.

2. In the abstract a brief description of what is meant by "insider and outsider perspectives" will help the readership to better understand the roles of researchers and decision makers.

Response: We thank the reviewer for raising this point, and have clarified this point in the abstract (page 2, lines 20 – 22).

3. The proportion of researchers VS decision makers (11 out of 16) in the number of informants should be further discussed as it definitely is related to the difficulties we regularly find in obtaining a larger participation of the latter. This could even be considered as a limitation of the study and be presented as such.

Response: The reviewer raises an important point about the nature of participants involved with this study. We have included some further discussion of this issue in our limitations section (page 32, lines 2 – 6).