Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Adam Koon

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Overview
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.

Broad questions/comments
It is important to note, that I do not think these amount to "major" comments as nothing appears to need to be significantly rewritten or conceptually altered. Rather, much of this feedback concerns clarification and further articulation of key assumptions. These fall into three broad categories. First, it seems to me that the methods section could use some further justification, in selecting the policy triangle as an analytical framework, for example. Second, there appears to be an assumption that all domestic stakeholders agreed on a common problem definition (that decisions are not informed by evidence) but that process is not convincingly portrayed at the outset. Third, the emerging themes of "interests and ideas" seems underexplored and after reading, I was still left wondering why certain decisions were taken and why the knowledge translation platform is being developed as it seems to be. This suggests that perhaps readers could benefit from more analytical explanation in the discussion section.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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. Furthermore, the research is presented as elite policy formulation, which seems to be germane to the study of bureaucracy. If so, maybe this could be flagged earlier in the article by citing similar research and more directly positioning this in the public admin literature. 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. Also, was the Indian experience informed more directly by other successful country-level knowledge translation platforms? What is different about this experience from those?
Minor comments

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?

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?

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

Was member checking pursued? How/why not?

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

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).

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

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

Pg 14, ln 44: now that you have defined and used the acronym HPSR, you can use it here instead of the long form.

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

Pg 25, ln 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).

Pg 30, ln 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?

Pg 31, ln 46: 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.
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