Reviewer’s report

Title: Are our 'UHC systems' learning systems? Piloting an assessment tool and process in six African countries

Version: 0 Date: 01 May 2018

Reviewer: Joshua Rubin

Reviewer's report:

This manuscript merits significant commendation. The authors have identified an important issue affecting the health of millions of people (as well as fiscal health) in low-and-middle-income countries (LMICs), have illuminated the importance of the aspiration to achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC), have demonstrated the integral relationship between implementing learning organization (LO) principles and delivering on the promise of this aspiration, and have rigorously studied it across six African countries. Background research on the LO concept anchored, among other places, in the pioneering work of MIT’s Peter Senge since the 1990s, and its application to the health systems studied, is thorough and thoughtful. The methodology for developing the assessment tool appears to be both collaborative and comprehensive; it covers people, policy, process, and technology components of LOs. Analysis of results, including comparison/contrast between outcomes across the six countries studied, as well as reflections on methodological limitations, all also seem well thought out and articulately explained.

Key overarching suggestions for improvement are two-fold:

1.) First, although the authors' background research on LOs (largely from social science type of literature) is impressive, the manuscript could be improved by adding additional supplemental background from research and thought leadership already conducted on application of this idea to healthcare and health, often falling under the vision of Learning Health Systems (LHSs). The term "Learning Health" does not appear in the manuscript draft. The LHS concept has strong roots in the work of the Institute of Medicine / National Academy of Medicine (IOM/NAM) in the United States (originally as a "Learning Healthcare System", and then recognizing its focus on health transcending just care as a "Learning Health System") dating back over a decade. Efforts to realize LHSs are being implemented across the United States and around the world. There is a "Swiss Learning Health System", for instance. As a resource, The Learning Healthcare Project, based in the United Kingdom, lists examples of LHS initiatives in North America, Europe, and Asia (it also includes interviews with LHS thought leaders and do-ers). Though there are differences between the countries and regions where these LHS examples are underway and the African countries studied by the manuscripts’ authors, nonetheless, much can
be gained by further researching LHS principles, continuous and rapid learning cycles, sociotechnical infrastructure components, and collaborative implantation efforts. The authors are strongly urged to explore further and consider applicability to their own research.

2.) Second, the concluding portions of the manuscript could be augmented by embracing and applying principles of continuous learning to the processes described in the paper themselves. While the authors do hint at limitations, next steps, and opportunities for additional study, their own methodologies engender opportunities for them to potentially venture even further. They could elaborate on what leadership and other key stakeholders across the six countries studied can learn from the authors' findings and from one another, and how all of this could be applied to enhance learning (and its application to health improvement) in these countries; the authors could address how these countries' systems can "learn how to learn better" as a consequence of lessons learned from the authors' research. Complementarily, the manuscript would benefit from an expanded discussion of actionable intelligence gained vis-à-vis how to improve the assessment tool and its utilization from the piloting process; viewed through a lens of continuous improvement and continuous learning cycles, the authors should discuss further how they could enhance their work in the next cycle in light of lessons learned.

With that said, this manuscript presents an article of unique importance. It is a valuable and significant contribution to the field. As the authors state at the close of the manuscript draft, "there is space for more innovation in developing and leading knowledge agendas at the global, regional, sub-regional and country levels." The work presented in this manuscript promises to underpin and enhance such urgently-needed innovation to ultimately drive better health.

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