Reviewer’s report

Title: Optimizing decentralization for the health sector by exploring the synergy of decision space, capacity, and accountability: Insights from the Philippines

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Reviewer: Thomas J. Bossert

Reviewer's report:

This professionally accomplished manuscript does a fine job of reviewing the basic arguments and literature about decentralization and explains the author's choice to use Bossert's "decision space" approach. It reviews the cases that have used the approach and focuses on the Pakistan cases that combined "decision space" with capacity and accountability. It then reviews relevant literature on capacity and accountability. In an innovative contribution, the authors present a dynamic model of the three dimensions to enhance the synergy and show mutually reinforcing interactions among the dimensions. However, unfortunately, this contribution does not seem to have been effectively applied in their study.

The manuscript then applies the decision space approach to the health sector in the Philippines, a case normally described as very decentralized and therefore a good case for their purposes. They use a well-designed qualitative methodology of interviews of 27 key informants using accepted methods of collecting and analyzing interview data. The choice of informants included national and local officials with considerable experience in the Philippines health system. Although I find this a limited method compared to actual surveys of national and local decision makers (the methods used by Bossert and others using the decision space approach which may challenge received wisdom of experienced experts), in the absence of sufficient funds for surveys, this method is acceptable and can provide interesting and credible results.

The interviews resulted in 6 decentralized functions - many of which are compatible with the functions of other studies of decision space. For each function they were able to gather information from informants about likely required capacities and accountability.

The reporting on each function however does not inspire confidence in the finding. The authors need to explain more about how they determined the "narrow", "moderate", or "wide" decision space - just an assertion without explanation is not enough. It would be good to establish a criteria for each type of decision space and explain how it was applied (see the chart in Bossert 1998).

Furthermore, the assertions about capacity and accountability for each function appear to be summaries of the author's judgement about the interviews and are only supported with single quotations from officials only for three of the functions. It is not clear why they did this for only
half of the functions. Even in these functions, it is not clear how representative those views are among the interviewees (something that I think is important and often ignored in qualitative studies). Some of the observations should also be supported by references to other literature about the Philippines system (the lack of references in this section contrasts greatly with the excellent use of references in the rest of the manuscript).

The section on findings drifts too quickly from reporting about decision space, capacity and accountability to making recommendations, which in part seems due to collapsing the interview responses from questions about what is the current situation to what the interviewees think produce better performance. It would be good to have the interview guide in an annex to see if it allowed the interviewees to make this kind of distinction and to explain more about how they judge the need for more capacity and better accountability.

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