Reviewer’s report

Title: What, why and how do health systems learn from one another? Insights from eight low and middle income country case studies

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Reviewer: Daniela Rodriguez

Reviewer's report:

This paper presents findings synthesized across eight case studies of health policies in low-income countries. Cross-country comparative work is always a welcome inclusion in the field, however the paper feels unfocused by trying to cover policy transfer as well as specifics on evidence use.

Overall comments:

I commend the authors for synthesizing the findings from 8, quite different, health policies in such varied contexts. This is a considerable task and one with huge potential for furthering discussions in our field regarding how policies are developed, and how countries learn about and adapt policies. The descriptions that center policy development in the local context—be it post-conflict, limited resources, historical, etc—are not only very informative but allow for overarching lessons to be drawn from context-specific processes in different places.

However, the paper's components focused on evidence use contribute less. This is partly because the paper splits its focus between policy transfer and evidence use. Specifically, the background is does not address theories on evidence use, which would help ground the results. Further, while the Discussion contextualizes the results around other available literature on evidence use, it also reiterates assertions which the field has recognized for some time, such as the fact that politics affects when and how evidence are used.

My recommendation is that the paper focus solely on policy transfer and discussions about evidence use around this, and eliminate (or significantly reduce) the sections around facilitators and barriers to evidence use. The latter two sections reflect findings already highlighted in many studies on evidence in LMICs and elsewhere over the years, and thus contribute less than the section on policy transfer.

Specific comments:

Abstract:
The Abstract introduction explicitly states the paper is about evidence use when I think it is much more about policy transfer and the role of evidence in those dynamics. In fact, the results presented in the Abstract barely mention evidence use.

Introduction:

- The Introduction addresses the theoretical groundings for policy transfer but not for evidence use in policy. It presents examples of the processes by which evidence may be influence policy processes but no direct links to theories in this space. Even a discussion of instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic use would be helpful.

Methods:

- Please explain better how the tracer policies were selected for each case study country. Implementing a SWAp is very different than introducing IMCI, not only in conceptualizing it but in terms of adaptation to local contexts. Where there selection criteria? How were these applied?

- The description of the Rwandan policy under study is insufficiently detailed.

Results:

- I found the organization of the findings by Conceptualization, Uptake and Further policy development very useful.

- As noted above, the Facilitators and Barriers section reflect issues that have been raised around demand and use of evidence for some time. These sections do not add enough value conceptually unless they are better grounded to theory and discussed critically in the Discussion.

Discussion:

- Would be interesting for authors to reflect on the relative merits of the different learning mechanisms and the implications for how a transfer mechanism plays a role in policy development. Activities brokered by outsides, like international study tours, international meetings, technical assistance, likely play out differently than those are more locally rooted, such as local governance structures or capacity building.
Authors should be careful to conflate open-access publications and demand and use of evidence. First, operational guidance for health policies—usually an important need—is often available through gray literature publications. Second, there are many platforms for accessing gated peer-reviewed literature, like HINARI. Third, open-access matters less if you can get your friend at UNICEF to download the paper you want from the Lancet. The point is: it's more than access that gets in the way so the authors should reflect on how development partners' role as knowledge brokers is also fulfilling an explicit demand from policymakers for synthesized and accessible evidence. It can be a mutually beneficial interaction.

Editorial comments:

* The 3rd sentence in the Intro paragraph (lines 20-27) is contracting itself.
* Table 1 should be reformatted for readability.
* Verbs after the word "data" should be pluralized. See line 33 on pg. 8 and elsewhere.
* Spell out ILO at first use on pg. 15 and PNG on pg. 19.

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I have professional connections to Sophie Witter and Barbara McPake but we are not research collaborators. Otherwise I have no conflict of interest.

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