Reviewer's report

Title: Addressing fragility through community-based health programmes: insights from two qualitative case study evaluations in South Sudan and Haiti

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Reviewer: Mit Philips

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The topic of fragile contexts and the potential of adding transformative objectives such as state building to health interventions is taking an important place in policy discussions. However, there is much rhetoric and wishful projection in the current policy debate, reflecting donor and other political agenda's. The very narrow evidence base therefor needs strengthening, by bringing evidence and field reality to balance and compensate for opinions, discourse and projections of possible benefits.

Unfortunately the submitted article does not bring rigorous evidence and due to important bias and gaps in methodology, instead risks to induct more confusion.

The first problem is that two very different contexts are grouped together. The wide range of contexts within the OECD category of FCAS doesn't really allow for generalisations. The differences between Haiti and South Sudan in terms of underlying crisis (natural disaster versus conflict), pre-existing health and community systems, time elapsed since acute stage of crisis, etc make it difficult to lump together any outcomes and draw overarching conclusions for FCAS.

The greatest limitation and introduction of potential bias - nowhere explicitly mentioned - resides in the fact that the overwhelming majority of people interviewed are part of the organisation or direct partners. Both implementers and donors are likely to hold a positive bias towards interventions they conduct and want to continue to receive support for. In that sense, the qualitative research is mainly giving information on how they perceive the interventions and not on what really these interventions brought as change. It would have been interesting to bring out some dissident voices instead of showing mainly the common perceptions.

Throughout the study there is no clear indication what measures are used to gauge if contribution to state building occurred. There is no real clarity to which findings from interviews and focus group discussions will be counted as such. It would have been useful eg to bring forward what expected results were checked for or even proposed in the project documents.
It is an important question how one could measure in an objective way if results are obtained-but the article doesn't create any clarity on what could be useful indicators to monitor. Maybe as a consequence, the language used in the article is cautious (eg suggest, were able to, seems important) which is correct, but still suggests findings without real measured basis.

Regularly the article states 'besides reaching health objectives' but there are no indications given on actual impact on equity and/or service utilisation. Even if the article focuses on the effects beyond the health effects, this is an important question, as one of the risks of combined health and other objectives beyond health would be that such state building objectives might push out most effective health interventions, amongst others by choosing approaches favouring transformative goals but less effective for health progress.

The situation in South Sudan, with the government part of the warring parties in the conflict, would be interesting to explore in terms of the statebuilding objectives itself; would this be a disqualifying factor and/or what limitations in close collaborations with State representatives would this imply? Would this also limit the possibilities to intervene in certain geographic areas or ethnic groups? How to interpret the acute conflict resumption and what consequences this has for the project in the previous set-up and ambitions? Did the state building approach cause any difficulties in returning to humanitarian aid (eg in perception of impartiality)? Could any mitigation be observed in violence in the communities where the project was located?

Negative findings or fundamental questions raised by the interviewees/focus group participants get very little attention and are not reflected in discussion. One area seems the 'non-understanding' of the importance and interpretation given to 'sustainability' by the project. From some interviews, it seems the approach might have created more confusion in the community on what the project contributed in benefits for the community; possibly this lack of clarity might also induce loss of accountability.

Within the discussion part, the recommendations on flexibility etc make perfect sense but have little linkage with the reported outcomes of research.

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