Reviewer’s report

Title: How can we improve priority setting for investments in health research? A case study of tuberculosis

Version: 1 Date: 13 May 2019

Reviewer: Robert Borst

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to read and review this very interesting research paper. Overall I feel that this paper as an insightful and important contribution to the field's understanding of priority-setting for health research and development. I have some comments that may further strengthen the manuscript, but please feel free to disregard where irrelevant.

Title:

The title suggests that this study explores the link between prioritisation of investment in health research and global public health needs. I am not sure whether this title actually reflects the study that seems to have been conducted.

Most of the manuscript focusses on the 'health R&D prioritisation process' - which implies prioritisation of particular health research/development topics and not necessarily funding that goes into these topics. The title also mentions 'global public health needs', yet the study builds quite strongly on TB as case and is grounded in data attuned to only a specific part of the 'global'. Besides, quite some studies on priority-setting have shown that these processes are inherently local and situated - see for example M.O. Kok et al. (2016, 2017, this Journal). My suggestion would be to be a bit careful with this inference throughout and to change the title.

Abstract:

p.1, line 24. 'in' missing between "Although enhanced priority setting for investments" and "health research and development (...)".

p.2, line 6. The conclusion states that there is a need to "deprioritise some research areas". I find this a very interesting and relevant remark, please explain further.

Background:

p. 3, line 1/2. You state that "billions of dollars are invested", which is quite normative, especially considering that no clear reference is made. Consider rewording or adding a reference that clearly supports this claim.
p.3, line 45-55. I am not sure what your are trying to confer here. Are you suggesting that these criteria are not considered for stakeholders coming from e.g. for-profit organisations? Please explain yourself further.

p.4, line 18/19. The way this is written seems to suggest that objective and standardised prioritisation processes are inherently 'better', please explain why this is the case or choose different wording.

Methods:

p.5, line 5-10. Please explain how you defined what it meant for components to be inherently subjective, and what does 'normative guidance' involve?

p.5, line 38/39. Consider mentioning the specific countries rather than 'Asia' and 'Africa' as coarse descriptor.

Results:

Please consider the readability of some of the quotes. There is a trade-off between sticking with the exact wording of the interviewees and the extent to which a quote is able to carry a message. Especially the quote on p.12 (line 5-19) is quite hard to read.

Throughout the results section, the label 'funder' is used to describe an interviewee working at a funding agency. The label suggests that this actor is representative for the entire funding agency, consider using a different label.

Figure 2. provides very interesting findings on who is involved in the various priority-setting processes. I think it would be very relevant to further reflect on these differences, including what which needs the different actors represent. You currently call this 'biases', but you may consider approaches this issue in terms of 'representation'.

Discussion:

The issue discussed on p. 18 (line 31-56) is very interesting and I think that this requires further elaboration. To what extent do these findings reflect a conflict between global agendas for health R&D and local needs (see also Kok et al., 2017 or our earlier perspective in Hasnida et al., 2016)? Also, these findings seem to reflect a more generic issue with stakeholder engagement where there is a constant tightrope or tradeoff between productivity (arriving at feasible priorities) and inclusion (including all voices and perspectives). Our commentary in this Journal may be of your interest, though there is absolutely no need to include it in this paper (see Boaz et al, 2018).
I am not sure whether I understand the remark on assessing "their impact". Do you mean to say that these prioritisation exercises are less successful than initially believed? Please clarify.

Conclusions:

I think the remark on deprioritisation is very interesting, but I do not directly see how this observation is grounded in your data. Please clarify how this conclusion was arrived at and make this more explicit throughout the manuscript.

Level of interest

Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English

Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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