Author’s response to reviews

Title: Strengthening Capacity to Use Research Evidence in Health Sector Policy-Making: Experience from Kenya and Malawi

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Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer 1

1. Under the introduction, on page 6 - 9 a lot of information is presented about the EIPM landscape in Kenya and Malawi. It looks to me like this information was from data collected as part of this effort. It is explicitly stated in line 118 page 6 that capacity needs assessment was conducted at the start of the project. However we are not told how the data was collected and analysed to enable an opinion as to the "quality" of the information as empirical data. The whole section therefore has to be treated as "opinion" rather than fact/empirical data. If these information and the methods by which they were obtained are published already then a reference must be provided to the publication. If they are not published then I think they should be presented as part of this study's findings and the methodology by which the findings were generated should be described as part of methodology. Some of the information looks like it is perhaps coming from a desk review, but there are no references.

Authors response: We indicated that the information contained in this section was gathered through a needs assessment before the start of the intervention. We have integrated this information in the “Results” section as recommended by the reviewer. We have also revised the “Methods” section to provide detailed information on how the data used in the paper was collected and analysed.
2. The description of the intervention (page 8 onwards) is very long. It can be made more crisp, focused and concise. Was the intervention developed out of the baseline, refined based on the baseline or was it already in existence. Not very clear. Again explicitly surfacing your theoretical framework may help you do this. Also it is not clear if part of the research was the development and refining/improvement of the intervention or the intervention was developed and then evaluated. My sense is that this was an evaluation of an intervention to strengthen individual and institutional capacity in MOH to use research evidence in health policy.

Authors response: The section on the intervention has now been greatly trimmed down, we have presented the intervention in table as opposed to prose. We have added information to clarify how the intervention was designed, pages 8-13.

3. Some of the definitions of key concepts are not provided or vague. For example what competencies of civil servants were improved.

Authors response: Table 4 outlines the competencies of civil servants and the levels of improvement in each competency area.

4. The whole long section on EIPM landscape in Kenya and Malawi (page 6 onwards) looks to me like some of the findings of your study rather than part of the introduction.

Authors response: This has been addressed as explained above - the section has been integrated in the “Results” section of the paper.

5. Section 2.3 (page 14 onwards) looks to me like this is the actual description of the evaluation methodology. It is sketchy. Exactly what data was collected by the needs assessment. What methodology was used. Since you draw on that data you need to provide an understanding of the methods to enable a reader to make a judgement about the quality of your data and the validity of your conclusions.

Authors response: This information has now been provided in more detail in the “Methods” section pages 6-7.
6. It seems to me the section you have labelled challenges faced during project implementation is actually related to contextual issues in capacity building. These to me are all part of findings and a very important part of trying to understand how and why the intervention worked (or not).

Authors response: The “challenges” section has now been moved to the “Results” section of the paper as suggested by the Reviewer. The reason we had them here was that we thought they helped the reader to understand the “Results”, but we agree that they are part of the “Results”, and have moved them to “Results” section as necessary.

7. Page 21 Effect of interventions on individual capacity "as shown in table 3, the average ratings for research use skills among Kenya…." What do these ratings mean? How were they defined and measured?

Authors response: This has been addressed on page 17, lines 350-354.

8. The discussion is weak. It will be greatly improved by stronger conceptual thinking.

Authors response: The discussion has been revised to focus on the synthesis conceptual framework that informed the design of the intervention. This revision discusses the implications of the results to the conceptual framework and also to the design of future interventions.

9. Page 25 "Even though the assessment done before the intervention did not take a comprehensive political economy analysis…". Why did you not do this since you recognize it was important? The information you provided earlier on about challenges actually moves towards this kind of analysis. However it seems to me that instead of seeing this information as some of your research data, they are simply seen as "challenges".

Authors response: This has been addressed by moving the “challenges” to the “Results” section and ensuring the challenges are discussed in the “Discussion” section.
10. General - This paper generally suffers from a difficulty in separating descriptive project implementation report approaches from analytical evaluation research approaches. Paper is currently too descriptive and not critically analytic enough. I am missing an explicit presentation of the theoretical constructs/concepts/frameworks related to how you conceptualized and therefore researched and described and analyzed capacity. It is implicit in the document, but your thinking needs to be clearly and explicitly surfaced. This will help you to make the paper more critically analytical.

Authors response: We have now included the synthesis conceptual framework that informed the design of the intervention that was implemented. We have also strengthened the analytical commentary in the “Discussion” on the conceptual framing of the intervention. The discussion also provides lessons for future interventions in this area.

11. The paper has potential to contribute to the literature. However as it is currently written, I am not sure what the background of the authors are and their Health Policy and Systems theoretical and analytical skills. They may either need to draw better on those skills if they have them or seeks support from a senior researcher with those skills who can support them. Having such an outsider who was not part of the project team may also strengthen the ability to stand back and look at the data as research.

Authors response: We have revised the paper to address the Reviewer’s comments as seen above. We believe the revisions made greatly improve the paper, and therefore we appreciate the Reviewer’s comments. We do not see the need to bring in an outsider to join the paper’s authorship as we have the health policy and systems background and capacity to address the issues raised.
Reviewer 2

1. This paper presents a detailed account of a project implemented to support the strengthening of capacity in ministries of health in Kenya and Malawi to use evidence in policy and programmatic decision-making. The authors recount and reflect in detail, and with a critical lens, on project successes and challenges drawing on their own internal project evaluation as well as an external evaluation commissioned by the funder. As such it contributes to a growing body of knowledge not just on challenges in strengthening capacity, but how such efforts play out in practice. It is recommended that the paper be published subject to minor revisions and considerations outlined below.

Authors response: Thank you, this is noted.

Minor revisions/considerations:

2. Key messages p. 2 line 42. Considering expanding the sentence to explain why capacity remains weak.

Authors response: Done

3. P. 6 line 118. Please elaborate by adding a sentence explaining how the needs assessment was conducted, e.g. through a desk review and interviews.

Authors response: Done – the section was moved to the “Methods” section and more detail included on how the capacity needs assessments were conducted.

4. P. 8 It would be useful to the reader if a summary sentence is included under the table that highlights similarities and differences between the needs identified in the two countries.
Authors response: Done – Since the similarities were more than the differences, we decided to remove the table and just list the common barriers to evidence use in both countries, as well as not, the differences.

5. P. 16 line 337. The authors mention staff inertia here when attempting to obtain greater access to evidence, but on p.24 line 524 say that access to evidence was identified as a barrier to greater evidence use. It would be useful if the authors could add a sentence reflecting on this apparent contradiction. For example, are those who expressed the need for access to evidence different from those who, through the project, are tasked with accessing evidence?

Authors response: Done - we have addressed this on page 21 lines 427-431.

6. P. 20 line 434. Mention is made of Malawi operating on an austerity budget. Could the authors reflect on whether the reliance of the Malawi government on external funding for a substantial part of their budget has any bearing on how those in government might view the use of evidence in decision-making, if this is something that they picked up on in project implementation. For example, does this in anyway encourage the use of evidence?

Authors response: Done – we have addressed this on page 26 lines 563-568.

Spellings/grammatical errors

7. Policy-making vs. policymaking. Check for consistency throughout.

Authors response: Done – consistently “policy-making” used in manuscript

8. P. 2 line 45. But these to be. Consider revising.

Authors response: Done
9. P. 4 line 77. LMIC. Provide explanation for acronym.

Authors response: Done


Authors response: Done

11. P. 8 column 2, second bullet. The ; should be replaced by a .

Authors response: Done

12. P. 12 line 250. Should be him/her to discuss.

Authors response: Done

13. P. 18 line 381. The word evidence is repeated.

Authors response: Done