Reviewer’s report

Title: A Scoping Review of the Uses and Institutionalization of Knowledge for Health Policy in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Version: 0 Date: 27 Nov 2019

Reviewer: Rob Anderson

Reviewer's report:

This is a well-structured and clearly written paper reporting a comprehensive scoping review on how knowledge (in particular, research-based knowledge) is used in the health systems strengthening and service planning in LMICs.

As a reviewer and potential audience for this paper, I am an experienced systematic reviewer (including scoping reviews) and implementation scientist based in a high income country (UK). I accepted the invitation to review this paper because I increasingly want to understand, and apply my skills and knowledge in the domain of HPSR, and with a view to improving health policies, systems, services and the health of populations in LMICs. So some of my comments below (all minor) may reflect my relative lack of familiarity with the accepted terminology of HPSR.

In brief:

The review addresses important aims, of potential relevance to both policy and future research.

It uses the most appropriate and rigorous methods, and these are justified and reported well. I really liked the section in the middle of p.9 which explicitly acknowledges the interpretive, discursive (i.e. social) process of evidence synthesis in such reviews - i.e. collective sense-making - which is sometimes suppressed in accounts of such reviews. Relatedly, I really like the 'objectivity disclaimer' on p.10 (lines 36-40) too.

The findings are reported clearly; with both a coherent and engaging and concise narrative, useful tables, and with a good grounding in the examples and studies found. I know how challenging this aspect can be, so really well done!

The conclusions and recommendations are proportionate and based on the evidence presented, while acknowledging relevant weaknesses in their methods or the nature of the evidence found.

The 3-level model of Institutionalisation (adapted from Scott) provides the main structuring of the findings, and I think this is introduced clearly and works well. The typology of types of knowledge is also pragmatic and clear.

My main comment and suggestion is this: One aspect of each study which was not reported, but seems salient, is whether each included study was conducted in the context of a specific initiative to increase or improve knowledge or research utilization or not. Reading between the lines, it seems that some studies were simply observational - just examining the role of research or other health systems data/surveys in policy making in a given LMIC or group of LMICs. But others were in the context of
specific processes introduced to improve research utilisation (e.g. policy dialogues). I think this should be described, both in the narrative and ideally also in table 3.

As a relative newcomer to HPSR, a few terms tripped me up and may need either fuller initial elaboration/explanation, or the use of more accessible alternatives please:

Health system STEWARDS: I can see that in the context of a wider project on Governance Contributions why this term may be used. But it is only used on p.1 and the rest of the article changes to the language of policy makers (more accessible - more or less the same?)

REGIONAL studies: I can see in HPSR refers to the major global regions, and therefore multi-country studies. But to me, regional means subnational.

POLICY DIALOGUES: While I am aware (from knowledge of WHO's EVIPNet initiative) that Policy Dialogues are a particular form of research-stakeholder engagement process/meetings, other readers may not be aware that it is a specific model for enhancing research use in policy-making. may need briefly describing.

In the latter half of the paper, the word 'institutionalisation' is used on its own a lot. It would have enhanced readability (for me) if occasional uses reminded that, in this paper, we are talking about 'institutionalisation of knowledge and/or research use'.

I hope that these thoughts and suggestions are useful.

I spotted a few typos/mis-spelling:

p.3 line 59. rogue = sign at end of line.
p.6 line 6. phenomenon ...
p.7 line 27. known and unknown ...
p.11 lines 11-18 - some discrepancies between the percentages in the text and those in the table.
p.17 line 58. Would attribute be a better word than separate in this sentence?
p.19 line 51. LMIC.

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