Reviewer's report

Title: Action research and health system strengthening: the case of the health sector support program in Mauritania, West Africa

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Reviewer: Olushayo Oluo

Reviewer's report:

General

The manuscript describes a universal public health issue (health system strengthening) using qualitative research method. While the research seem to be well conducted using a recognized qualitative research methodology (action research), the manuscript could be presented in a more succinct and structured manner based on the specific comments below.

Specific

Abstract

This section is well written and can be easily understood as a standalone but could be further improved based on the comments below.

Background

This section has most of the elements but it is too long and would require reorganization for clarity and better understanding by readers. The authors have focused a lot on describing the importance and usefulness of action research without presenting the background information and justification for the main subject of the study which I believe is health system strengthening and the health sector support programme in Mauritania. Answering the following questions would guide the authors to reorganize this section:

* Paragraph 1: What knowledge is available about the subject of the manuscript?
What is the health system situation and challenges in Mauritania? Why the need for the health sector support programme?

What is the Mauritanian health sector support programme (its rationale, components, objectives etc)?

Paragraph 2: What is the justification for this study?

What knowledge gap in health system strengthening and the health sector support programme does this study aim to address? Is it part of the mechanism for evaluation of the programme?

What is action research and why is it the best methods for this study? (please see line 57 of page 3 to line 70 of page 4)

Paragraph 3: What are the goals, objectives and research question/hypothesis for this study? (please refer to line 105 to 113 of pages 5 and 6 and line 123 to 126 of page 6).

Methods

This section should be rearranged under the following sub-sections:

- Study design
- Study setting
- Data collection and analyses
- Ethical consideration

Furthermore, please move the study objectives (line 105 to 113 of pages 5 and 6) to last paragraph of the background section. Line 123 to 126 of page 6 should also be moved to the last paragraph of the background section

Line 115 to 118 of page 6 is not relevant to this section and should be deleted

Please include the study period and exact location in Mauritania in the study design
Results

I find this section rather long and difficult to understand. The authors have focused on describing how the research was conducted rather than presenting what were the outcomes of the study (tangible results). They only started to present some results starting from line 284 of page 15 albeit in an unstructured and scanty manner. I would suggest a significant review of this section to tease out the results and present them in a systematic and concise manner under the following sub-headings: 1) findings from the document review, 2) results of the semi-structured interviews and 3) findings of the participatory observation.

Discussion

This section could also be abridged for better understanding. The authors should focus on rationalizing their findings rather than repeating the findings. Restructuring of the results section as proposed above would assist in this regard.

Level of interest

Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English

Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

Declaration of competing interests

Please complete a declaration of competing interests, considering the following questions:

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