Reviewer’s report

Title: Participatory action research to pilot a model of mental health service user involvement in an Ethiopian rural primary healthcare setting: Study protocol

Version: 0 Date: 30 Oct 2019

Reviewer: Kristin Liabo

Reviewer's report:

This is an article that will be of interest to the readership of Research Involvement and Engagement. The authors are able to handle the complexity of the topics (theory of change, involvement, PAR) really well. With some changes, this will be a really good article and I hope they are given the chance to make changes and resubmit.

My reason for requesting major changes is not related to the writing or importance of this work - both of which are high quality. However, as currently written, this isn't a study protocol. It seems, currently, to be a mixture of a protocol and a report of the work leading up to the protocol. For example, there is some description of what will be done in the forthcoming study, but there is also description of 'findings' from previous work leading up to the PAR study as well as 'discussion' and 'conclusion' sections, the latter seem like odd additions to a study protocol. For this to work as a protocol I suggest the following:

Incorporate much of the information in the supplementary files into the body of the text (if there is word space), take out much of the text relating to the previous work (pages 17 - 24). Some of this works ok in a protocol, for example the explanation of the theory of change, but the 'findings' from the training development seems less important. I think it is relevant to include that there will be training, and the purpose of the training, and content of the training, but I do not understand why it is relevant to include the findings from the training evaluation in this protocol. Similarly I do not understand why there is so much information about the systematic review. This fits in the background section of the protocol, not in the body of text. I found it relevant to read about the previous community stakeholder meeting, but again it seemed more relevant to have this earlier in the protocol, within the context section perhaps. The information provided to STAGE 1 should be about what you intend to do in stage 1, not work done previously. As I say, I do understand why you want to include some of the information from the previous work, but I think this should come in the context/setting or as an appendix/supplement, rather than in the main body of the protocol.
It would be helpful to describe the JLA and priority setting process, including the nominal group technique, a bit clearer. Moving supplement 4 into the main text might help with this.

There is very little information about stage 2 in the main body of the protocol - again including supplement 1 into the main body of text will help guide the reader into this process.

In a protocol I expect there to be more detailed information about the data collection and analysis processes.

The abstract and plain English summary confused me a bit since the word ‘stakeholder’ is not used there. It says in the plain English summary that the research advisory group will identify priority problems, but in the main body of text it seems like priority problems will be identified from a list of the previous work, and that a larger group of stakeholders will do this using the JLA/NGT methods.

**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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