Reviewer's report

Title: Establishing a Monitoring and Evaluation Health Workforce: Innovation for Low and Middle Income Countries

Version: 1 Date: 15 June 2013

Reviewer: Dykki Settle

Reviewer's report:

I have no Major Compulsory or Minor Essential revisions.

Discretionary Revisions:

1. Summary - Overall this document is substantive, well written, and effectively communicates its key messages. The mixed methodology provides a well-rounded approach that clearly conveys the complexity and value of its topic. The presence of a strong health information workforce is critical to increasing country understanding, ownership and effective implementation of health systems strengthening and service delivery improvement interventions. My only concern is the timeliness of this piece - coming up for publication nearly four years after the end of the activity according to the training dates given in Table 2. All of my comments pertain to this delay in publication and subsequent developments since that time.

2. Title-a - Please consider whether this should paper should emphasize the innovative nature of this work. At the time the work began in 2007, it was quite innovative, representing a practice that was only just emerging along with stronger national health information systems. Six years later, a non-clinical health information workforce is growing substantially in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa actively strengthening their health information systems. Elements of the training and mentorship remain innovative and strong recommendations, however, as capacity-building of these competencies remains insufficient in many countries, and may warrant the title.

3. Terminology - Also, referring to the workforce as a Monitoring & Evaluation Workforce, while accurate, does not reflect common usage at this time - one more commonly hears 'health information workforce', 'health statistics' or even 'biostatistics' - M&E is more commonly applied to program, project or research activities, not to the roles described in the paper. This is a generalization, however, not universal, please revise or ignore at your discretion.

4. p.3 - "Health information systems are critical for decision making, however, analyses of human resource requirements within the health sector rarely acknowledge the need for staff with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) skills" - This statement was accurate in 2005 when the source this was derived was written, but it is much less true today after 9-10 years of PEPFAR investment in health information systems. Human capacity is now an essential part of any HIS
strengthening activity, and HRH needs assessments are reflecting this emerging, if under-recognized cadre.

5. pp 7-8 "While multiple studies have shown that task shifting can be an effective strategy for strengthening the provision of health services, this is the first report in the literature documenting the shift of M&E responsibilities from clinicians to a non-clinical professional cadre as an approach to improve health information systems." This statement cannot be verified without a full literature review - a task beyond the scope of this review. While this reviewer has not seen an article on the topic, it is difficult to imagine that this is the first in the literature. It is now common and expected practice for non-clinicians to take on M&E responsibilities at the district level in SSA countries. If a confirming literature review has been conducted recently, please ignore (and congratulations! - this article is now even more important) - otherwise, please consider revision.

6. p.8 "This exemplifies the importance of country ownership, which is being recommended internationally as an approach to donor assistance" - this bears more emphasis as an important and innovative approach at the time - the source recommending the approach is from 2012 - 5 years later.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests