Reviewer’s report

Title: Are we asking too much? Addressing community health worker productivity

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Reviewer: Uta Lehmann

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Review of manuscript “Are we asking too much? Addressing community health worker productivity.”

I was really excited when receiving this manuscript to review, because I believe the question asked in the title to be of great importance, and indeed, as pointed out by the authors, not sufficiently addressed. So I do believe that the question posed is, if not new, then certainly important, relevant and not asked enough. Unfortunately the article does not deliver what it promises.

1) This is a review article, engaging “published and unpublished articles and reports on CHW programmes in developing countries” However, the reader does not get any sense of the search strategies, search terms and engines used, mix of published and unpublished literature engaged, and assessment of quality of articles used. The methodology section of the manuscript would need quite substantial elaboration to be able to place the work done in relation to other review conducted in this field in recent years.

2) On page 5 the paper’s aim is reframed as providing “policy makers with guidance on the key considerations for improving CHW productivity” which addresses a slightly different question than the one asked in the title. And on page 6 the focus of the paper is narrowed further to “describing the category of organizational support for provision of an enabling working environment which is conducive to high levels of productivity”. This latter focus, while undoubtedly needing attention, is actually addressed in many papers and reviews and thus not as new as the original question would be.

3) the results sections speaks to the frequently ill-defined roles, tasks and scopes of practice of CHWs, leading to work overload and a selective performance of tasks, the organization of tasks, and the importance of the size of catchment area. Figures 3 and 4 introduce productivity curves talking to the relationship between service quality and quantity, and quantity and catchment area respectively, but while the curves illustrate a relationship, the shape and form of the curve is in no way located in evidence. And this points to the most fundamental flaw in the review: while it draws on diverse literature to highlight some of the challenges to be considered when planning and implementing CHW programmes, it does not do so in any systematic way, and does not move beyond what previous reviews and empirical studies have found regarding the importance of paying attention to working environments, work loads, support and supervision.
4) The recommendations on page 17 and 18 are then not located in the findings at all and thus appear haphazard and unsystematic, certainly not evidence-based.

So in conclusion, while the question asked in the title is an important one and certainly deserves attention, I believe engagement with this question requires very careful assessments of the context-specificity of CHW programmes. It would be an excellent and very worthwhile project to review the relevant literature to systematically ascertain the links between types, quantity and mix of tasks and roles, quality and quantity of training, supervision and support, and quality and productivity of CHWs. This is a difficult undertaking, precisely because the literature, like the programmes discussed, is so diverse, and CHW programmes are particularly context specific. The present manuscript does not deliver this, and it would need a reconceptualisation of the paper and new work to address the question asked.

While I applaud the effort and would encourage the authors to continue working on this question, I unfortunately do not think that this paper is publishable.

**Level of interest:** An article of limited interest

**Quality of written English:** Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests