Reviewer's report

Title: What impact do Global Health Initiatives (GHIs) have on human resources for anti-retroviral treatment (ART) roll-out: evidence from Zambia

Version: 1 Date: 31 October 2008

Reviewer: Caesar Cheelo

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In summary, the comments labeled 1-7 below can be categorized as follows:

• Major Compulsory Revisions: the author should provide the requested detail on methods of data collection, data management and data analysis.
• Minor Essential Revisions: the author should consider providing the requested definitions such as that of “province” as well as presenting more detail in the findings.
• Discretionary Revisions: all other comments are discretionary or are commendations that do not need any changing.

Specific Comments:

1. Question posed by the authors and definition:
The author poses a relatively new and very interesting question, which is also very policy relevant and topical in the Zambian and African contexts. Although other authors (cited in the paper) have tried to address the issue of impacts of donor funding on health human resources, this paper definitely provides a lot of value-addition in terms of the detail it offers in defining a focused approach, i.e., attempting to understand the impact of specific GHIs on specifically human resources for ART roll-out and at specific levels (national, province and districts) in Zambia.

2. Appropriateness and description of methods, sufficiency of details for replicating the work
The methods are appropriate for the topic, but two limitations of the paper should be noted: a) the paper does not provide sufficient detail in the methodology of the types of key informant it interviewed, e.g., the study reportedly consulted policymakers at national, provincial and district levels, but it is not clear – until much later in the discussion – that it also consulted implementers and programme managers, who have critical perceptions about impacts, especially at lower (provincial and district) levels. A quick exposition of this could help to set the boundaries of what the read should and should not expect from the paper.

The paper could also benefit from a clearer definition or at least description of the “province” level since in the Zambian context it is clear what goes on a national and district levels, but not so clear what goes on a province level. In this regard it will also be important to clarify what sorts key informants were spoken to at this
level and what sorts of questions were posed to them.

b) Inherently, largely qualitative methods bear a limitation in the extent of generalizations than can be made, e.g., in this case the study is done at national level and in two districts in one province. While the paper makes a good attempt, it has natural limitations in terms of applying some of the local level finding in two districts to the whole countries.

The manuscript is most likely an abridged version of a fuller report and the abridging has lost some critical information in the methodology section. The methods (specifics about research questions, data collection, data management and data analysis) are somewhat glossed over and it would be difficult to use the manuscript as a basis to replicate the work.

3. Data soundness and control

The data are reportedly from over ninety key informants as well as from valid secondary sources. The data seem to be very sound. As said above, the paper seems to be an abridged version of a full report; the abridged version could have benefited from a bit more insight into how data were collected (e.g., what instruments were used, structured tools, semi-structures guides or non at all?).

Given this is qualitative work there wasn’t a strong need to have “control” data in the quantitative sense of the term. The paper does not provide any insights on data management, but this is not a significant issue in and of itself, and the exposition on findings suggests that the data were managed well (though as noted above, the work cannot be replicated based on the manuscript).

4. Adherence to reporting standards and data deposition

The manuscript adheres to standard practices for reporting and data deposition. As above touched on, it could benefit from more details in the methodology, around issues of data collection, data management, and methods of analysis.

5. Presentation of findings, discussion and conclusions: balanced and supported by data?

Findings are well presented. The section is concise, capturing most of the relevant issues one would expect from such a study. Some of the findings need to be qualified or balanced a bit more. For instance, the study finds that GHIs such as PEPFAR support HR through “salary top-up” overtime payments, etc, but it does not highly the health system distortionary effects that such incentive structures potentially have. This has been severally expressed by MOH as a significant policy concern and it would be surprising if the study did not uncover this as a finding. Similarly, the quality of in-service training support by GHI partners has been flagged as a concern. It is often argued that inappropriate and skewed trainings are offered, e.g., there have been reports of partners providing training for HIV/AIDS doctors when no such cadre exists on the MOH authorized establishment. The paper could therefore benefit from providing more findings since, for instance the ensuing discussion and conclusion clearly show that there
were many more findings that what the manuscript presents.

On the other hand, the discussion and conclusion sections are very, very strong, providing the right amount of detail. The only weakness is that some of the discussions and conclusions are seemingly not supported by the data; however this is simply because the findings section did not present the relevant findings that the discussion and conclusions pick up. Once the comment in the preceding paragraph is taken care of there will be no need to adjust anything in the discussion and conclusion sections. These have been done very well indeed and there is clear evidence that the author invested a lot of time and effort here as well (not just in data collection).

I would recommend an emphasis of the fact that not enough (in fact very little) is being done (by both govt and GHIs) to augment HR by training and recruiting additional health workers. The arguments are already very well presented, but from a policy point of view need to be brought out more strongly for the paper to have a “policy voice” as well.

6. Title and abstract reflecting study findings?
The title and abstract both convey very well what the study is actually about and are closely in consonance with the recorded findings. These aspects are very well done and require no further changes.

7. Acceptability of writing
The writing is more than acceptable; it is very good indeed! The manuscript flows very well and has a very sensible sequence, with topics being nicely linked to each other. The writing style is both easy reading and professional. At the same time the manuscript is very concise. The author also manages very well to remain ethically correct and does not give away the provinces, districts or persons interviewed, but still maintains the scientific content and essence of their messages. The writing aspect is very well handled and the author should be highly commended.

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

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