Reviewer's report

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

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Reviewer: Henry Perry

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General Comments
This article is a welcomed and important contribution to the rapidly growing literature on CHWs. It is well-written and addresses important issues. It provides important links to unpublished documents that are not readily available. It should be published. I hope my comments are helpful.

Major Compulsory Revisions
The authors need to bring in some cautionary comments and expressions of the limitations of their work. Included among there are:

• This is not a comprehensive literature review. Many other published and unpublished articles/reports could have been cited as well. As a result, the findings are not definitive statements but themes that run through the reports included in the review.

• The paper has not explored the critical links between productivity and performance (at the CHW level) or the link between productivity/performance and program impact on health improvement of populations served by CHWs.

• A clearer statement about what the authors consider productivity to be would be helpful. There is a big difference between “number of clients seen per day” or “time spent with clients” and “relationship between inputs and outputs” or “ratio of output to inputs.” Also, when the reports the authors refer to discuss productivity, it would be helpful to know what aspect of productivity these reports are referring to – if possible. Also, “time spent with clients” seems like an ambiguous measure of productivity in the sense that the more time spent with clients decreases the number of clients that can be seen (and therefore lowers productivity) while the more time spent with clients could also be seen as a positive contribution to productivity in the sense that clients are presumably receiving more benefit from the CHW program.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. Tables 3 and 4 are reversed in the manuscript.

2. Reference 18 is not sufficiently documented. Also, if any of the non-published documents are available on a website, this would be useful to know.

3. Figure 1 does not include other important contextual factors in Working Conditions that are mentioned in the text: distance to houses and terrain. Also,
acceptance and support from the community are critical as well.

4. Figure 4 and the discussion associated with it imply that high quality and a large quantity of services are inversely related. This may be true in many cases, but if good quality organizational inputs/supervision are present and the number of houses and terrain are reasonable, then it does seem possible for CHWs with a broad set of responsibilities to be productive and effective. The Shasthya Shebikas of BRAC seem to be a possible example of this, but more detailed studies of them are needed to draw a definitive conclusion.

5. The Conclusions section is more of a section devoted to implications of the findings and recommendations arising from the findings. I would suggest that the authors give a different title to this section and then write a single paragraph for the Conclusions section that wraps up the major themes in the paper.

Discretionary Revisions (suggested changes in wording are in CAPS)

1. It seems that one of the implications arising from the review is the need for more and better information – not only arising from operations research related to number of tasks and productivity (as called for on p. 17) but also arising from operations research on broader issues as well related to understanding what makes for effective CHW programs, good CHW performance, strong program impact on population health, and how the local context (in the communities served by CHWs) as well as how the health system and national policy context contribute.

2. On p. 6 in middle, “(resources, physical and social environment, working conditions, SUPERVISION, CONTINUING EDUCATION, PAY OR OTHER INCENTIVES, AND SO FORTH).

3. On p. 6 near the bottom “working environment, which is ESSENTIAL FOR ACHIEVING high levels of productivity.” Also, where the text says “from the institution employing CHWs” – this implies that all CHWs are paid, which is not the case.

4. On p. 17 near top: “Understand the broader policy, leadership and management, AND HEALTH SYSTEMS framework within which …”

5. Acceptance, support and respect from the community are essential for CHWs to be effective. The factors that lead to this are beyond the scope of the paper but are critical as well and important for program managers and policy makers to understand. CHWs earn this, and they arise in large part from the competence that the community members perceive CHWs to have, the respect given to CHWs by the health system (often as exhibited by the degree to which the health systems responds to referrals generated by CHWs), and CHW effectiveness in managing health problems in the community.

6. There is a lot of program experience with Care Group Volunteers, and there are many project evaluations using them. This experience might be reviewed and cited since they are highly effective and productive (in terms of achieving program impact) yet have a very light workload. More information can be obtained at: http://www.caregroupinfo.org/blog/ and http://www.coregroup.org/storage/documents/Diffusion_of_Innovation/Care_Manual.pdf.
7. There is also a lot of experience with a type of CHW that has a broad set of responsibilities and appears to be highly effective – Shasthya Shebikas of BRAC. There are described in the 2000 book by Perry entitled Health for All in Bangladesh: Lessons in Primary Health Care for the 21st Century and in a 2008 article by Standing and Chowdhury in Social Science and Medicine, “Producing effective knowledge agents in a pluralistic environment: What future for community health workers?”

8. There is no mention of the potential benefits of creating career pathways for enabling the best CHWs to become supervisors. So often, CHWs supervisors have never performed the duties of a CHW and come from another world that the CHWs live in.

9. Several times the authors raise the value of listening to CHWs and giving them input into decisions affecting their work. I think this is crucial and should perhaps be given a little more emphasis.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**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.