

# Research brief: A process evaluation of a complex health systems intervention to improve the payment and distribution of health workers: the need for systems thinking and an adaptive, politically informed approach

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## Background

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, only a minority of public sector health workers receive a government salary due to an outdated payroll system, and workers are inefficiently distributed in facilities. A complex intervention to update information on human resources for health has been piloted in the two Kasai provinces in order to address these two issues. This paper aims to investigate the implementation process, exploring the degree to which the planned intervention was adhered to, and any contextual factors which may have moderated implementation

## Study Methods and Design

The process evaluation took place between October 2014 and March 2018 and examined implementation fidelity of the complex intervention using an adapted conceptual framework. A theory of change was also developed for the intervention which informed data collection. Data were collected through document reviews and in-depth interviews with key informants at different periods during the intervention.

## Study Findings

Despite the challenges associated with working on an intervention of this nature and in a fragile state, full coverage of the intervention was achieved. Most of the planned interventions were carried out as described, although some were not executed as intended such as the fingerprinting of workers. Certain activities not anticipated at the beginning of the process, for example the political economy analysis, were also undertaken.

### *Moderating factors*

For public health prevention programmes, even if they are delivered as intended, limited participant responsiveness in terms of involvement and engagement in the programme will mean these programmes are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes. In this case, participant responsiveness was a strong moderator of the intervention, as gaining the support of certain government stakeholders was eventually key to ensuring the outcome of improving payments to workers was achieved.

Context also played a significant role in the interplay between the intervention and its effects; the introduction of concurrent interventions such as 'bancaisation' was timely and a strong motivator to

clean the payroll, as the government would have continued to lose money to the central bank if they did not take any action.

### *Suitability of the evaluation approach*

Rather than evaluating whether the intervention fixed a specific problem, it was more important to identify if and how the intervention would contribute to reshaping the system in a more favourable way. Many of the component interventions were significantly delayed because international health partners had not taken into account the wider public institutional system beyond the health sector, and the influence of certain key government stakeholders. The government did not dedicate any extra resources to the intervention but rather reallocated the existing budget to pay the correct workers. In the absence of any additional revenue to health, it is unlikely the government will be able to maintain the information system without any external financial and technical support, which could compromise the sustainability of the intervention.

## Limitations

The sensitivity of the topic and stakeholders involved may have made it difficult to evoke a truthful response from interviewees. In particular, government officials would have wished to present themselves in a positive light, and so there is a risk their responses were subject to social desirability bias. To establish reliability of the findings, several different perspectives were represented and similarities and differences across accounts compared. The lead author who conducted all of the interviews was also non-Congolese, and so their difference in background and beliefs would have further influenced both the information yielded by participants and how it may have been interpreted.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has highlighted the need to apply a politically informed systems thinking approach to evaluating complex health systems strengthening interventions. Such interventions necessitate an adaptive approach given the dynamic nature of the system within which they occur. Other approaches such as social network analysis may offer suitable alternatives to evaluating similar complex health systems interventions. There is also a need for more guidance for researchers on how best to assess and measure context for these types of interventions.



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