Community, provider and policymaker perceptions of community health policy in Kenya: implications for policy change

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Background: Global interest and investment in close-to-community health services is increasing and Kenya are presently revising their Community Health Strategy (CHS) alongside political devolution, which will result in re-visioning of responsibility for local services at County level. This paper aims to explore drivers of policy change from key informant perspectives and to study perceptions of current community health services from community and district level, highlighting implications to inform unfolding discussions for managing policy change.

Methods: We conducted forty in-depth interviews and ten focus group discussions with a range of participants to capture plural perspectives, including those who will influence or be influenced by CHS policy change in Kenya (policy makers, district health management teams, facility managers, Community Health Extension Worker (CHEW), Community Health Workers (CHW) and community members) in two purposively selected counties: Nairobi and Kitui. Data was digitally recorded, transcribed, translated, and coded prior to framework analysis.

Results: There is widespread community appreciation for the existing strategy. High attrition, lack of accountability for voluntary CHWs and lack of funds to pay CHW salaries, combined with high CHEW workload are seen as main drivers for strategy change. Areas for improvement identified include: lack of clear supervisory structure including provision of adequate travel resources, current uneven coverage of community health services, limited community knowledge about the strategy revision and demand for home based HIV testing and counselling (HBTC).

Conclusion: Recommendations are provided to raise awareness of strategy revision, strengthen supervisory systems, monitor and address equity concerns including coverage, pilot HBTC and build the engagement of communities with the revised strategy to increase social accountability. These recommendations seek to inform the process of policy management to contribute towards a more people-centred health system for improved equity, effectiveness and success of policy change through the roll-out of the revised strategy.