Performance of community health workers – Optimizing the benefits of their unique position between communities and the health sector

Community health workers (CHWs) form an essential part of the health system in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), connecting communities with the health sector. The continuing shortage of human resources for health combined with evidence that CHWs effectively bring health care closer to communities has led to a renewed interest in CHW programmes. We conducted research to gain insight into how performance of CHWs in LMICs can be improved. All factors that could possibly influence CHW performance were explored in a systematic review of the international literature, two single case studies and a qualitative comparative multiple case study. The CHW programmes of Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique were researched in-depth. It was found that a complex mix of factors, which are highly context dependent, continuously shape and change CHW performance. Despite the contextual differences, we found that trust, relationships and expectations between different actors in the health system are important drivers of CHW performance in all settings. These “software” elements interact with the programme “hardware”, such as the supervision system and communication structure. Both software and hardware elements are necessary to yield optimal CHW performance. The insights gained are relevant for policy makers, programme managers and researchers in the field of human resources for health and CHW programmes. They give directions on how to optimize CHW performance in resource-constrained settings, so that the benefit of CHWs’ unique position between communities and the health sector and their role in achieving universal health coverage can be enhanced.