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**The global, continental, and national legitimation processes of performance-based financing: exploring policymaking in Mali**

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Background: Over the past decade, several donors have promoted performance-based financing (PBF) in Africa, in view of increasing the quantity and quality of health services. PBF is based on the transfer of financial resources conditional to health providers’ performance. In Mali, after co-organising a pilot PBF program, the Ministry of Health included PBF in the national policy, and undertook a regional rollout in 2015 with World Bank funding. We investigate PBF expansion in Mali through an analysis of the multifaceted legitimation processes occurring at the global, continental, and national levels. Our hypothesis is that the production of PBF knowledge and evidence-based resources, their ensuing dissemination through country visits and trainings, and the construction of a nationally-relevant narrative of PBF are instrumental in shaping policymaking.

Methods: We analyse, at multiple levels, the ways in which PBF emerged as a legitimate policy in Mali. We adopt a mixed methods approach with a sequential explanatory design followed by a triangulation design. PBF legitimation at global and continental levels is investigated quantitatively through a discourse analysis of online resources from major PBF platforms, and qualitatively with interviews of key PBF promoters. PBF legitimation at national level is examined through another round of interviews with stakeholders involved in PBF discussions in Mali: donors’ representatives, national PBF experts, and government officials. The power of these stakeholders is investigated through a network analysis: both its results and the qualitative findings explain the outcome of the policymaking negotiations in favour of PBF.

Preliminary findings: Following a preliminary discourse analysis, and an exploratory study in Bamako, three main findings emerge: i) there is a very active PBF “policy community” at the global and continental levels: it gravitates around a more restricted PBF “policy elite” made up of consultants and donors’ staff producing and disseminating PBF knowledge; ii) in Mali, a few former government officials and technical officers showed strong commitment to PBF after visiting Rwanda and training in Benin; iii) these “national promoters” frame PBF as the logical continuation of pre-existing decentralization policies.

Discussion: These preliminary findings prompt further investigations, which will inform policymaking processes through an original approach. This is the first research focusing on the multifaceted and multi-level legitimating forces of both stakeholders and knowledge resources (e.g., evidence-based toolkits) towards the diffusion of an innovation (PBF) in Africa, and in a particular setting (Mali). This research is relevant to policymakers and policy analysis researchers.