

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Participatory action research as a driver for change on health and wellbeing in a deprived neighbourhood in The Hague: a quest towards regaining trust, sustainable citizen participation and co-creation

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Introduction

In Moerwijk, one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in The Hague, the Netherlands, the majority of the citizens struggle with a low income, social and psychological problems, long-term illnesses and disorders. Over the past ten years health- and social services, municipality and insurers in vain tried to change these outcomes. These stakeholders started a new program Healthy and Happy the Hague. To gain insight into the perspectives of citizens on health and happiness and on desired initiatives in the neighbourhood participatory action research was conducted in Moerwijk to show another way to work together with citizens and street level professionals.

Method

Participatory action research aims to create positive change, and allows the citizens voice not only to be heard, but to be involved as well. Data were gathered through 30 semi-structured interviews with 30 citizens and professionals, observations during meals, meetings, church activities and transect walks. Participants were invited to share their views, dreams and solutions. Findings and solutions were visualised and discussed in two focus groups with citizens and professionals and with the members of boards of Healthy and Happy the Hague. Based on learning from each other's perspectives several initiatives to improve health and happiness were started in co-creation.

Results

The current situation shows that citizens are struggling to make ends meet and are far more concerned about their neighbourhood, poor housing and mold, safety and nuisance from neighbours than about their own health. The low rents attract an abundance of citizens with complex problems. For many citizens poverty and debts create feelings of hopelessness, fear and stress, resulting in risk of addictions and physical and mental health problems and crime. Because of the complex problems helping each other and trusting professionals is challenging. There is a huge migration in the neighbourhood, resulting in a continuous new influx of citizens with complex problems. Volunteers as well as street level professionals experience signs of burnout and compassion fatigue. Although these problems could be visualized as perpetual circles the citizens and professionals appeared very resilient and came up with over 50 ideas to improve their neighbourhood, especially for families with young children. Based on these ideas a choice was made to develop initiatives such as a vitality club for elderly, cooking lessons for children, meeting

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places for mothers, a youth center. The community is going to be trained in participatory action research.

Discussion and conclusion

To end the perpetual circles in Moerwijk and other deprived neighbourhoods a total system approach is required with citizens as active (research) partners. Findings show a lack of trust and collaboration can be addressed and overcome by the approach of participatory action research. Although all stakeholders applaud this approach still a paradigm shift is needed in this process of perceiving and empowering citizens as equal partners.

Lessons and future research

This approach can provide sustainable solutions and addresses health inequities, also in other neighbourhoods. Further participatory action research can build on the dialogue and the first 'community up' initiatives started in the neighbourhood.