



Why look so far ahead?

Climbing the participation ladder in Public Health Foresight

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Background

PHF requires an iterative approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data and stakeholder input. However, up to now this process is usually expert-based and citizen engagement, beyond consultation, is yet to be common practice. In the Dutch PHF-2024, we piloted a citizen council and panel, as well as focus groups, to strengthen this engagement.

Methods

We engage citizens both as advisors (5 x citizen council, N=30 and 4 x panel, N=500) and as target group (6 focus groups N= 40). Intentionally the scope is diffuse, allowing for unexpected input.

Citizen council and panel are recruited ensuring variety in terms of gender (identity), age, educational level, profession, region, and sociocultural background. Focus groups were composed of youth 18-25 years old. Similar recruitment rules were applied; however, the average educational level was still relatively high.



Citizen council (5 meetings)	Citizen panel (4 surveys)	Focus groups (6 sessions)
Meeting 1 acquaintance, general information, first collection of ideas	Survey 1 general ideas about future health developments	Session 1 & 2 discussions about vision of future healthy lifestyles
Meeting 2 discussing value/based perspectives on health	Survey 2 values/perspectives on health	Session 3 & 4 discussion about vision of future healthy environment
Meeting 3 discussion of first outcomes of PHF	Survey 3 prioritising future health challenges	Session 5 & 6 discussion about vision of future health care
Meeting 4 work visit to RIVM (social event) and interviews		
Meeting 5 discussing possible directions for improving population health in future	Survey 4 prioritising possible directions for good population health in future	



Results

Citizens of all backgrounds are able to discuss health (determinants), data and indicators. They can discuss complex issues and help identify solutions for future health challenges. By doing so, they engage easily across different backgrounds and perspectives. Citizen's input enriches scientific knowledge and helps to communicate results more effectively. For example, citizens raised fundamental questions about foresight time frames ("Why look so far ahead as the world is in crisis right now!"), showing that the relevance and useability of PHF are not self-evident for a broader public. Including the citizens' voices is a challenging learning process for experts requiring rethinking knowledge paradigms.

Conclusions

Citizen engagement holds a promise for societally robust PHF, but we are still at the lower steps on the ladder of participation. In particular, early engagement in the PHF process will enable firm inclusion of citizen views and foster joint development of core questions and issues to be addressed. The approach needs further piloting to improve applicability in various contexts.

Main messages

- Citizen engagement can and should be strengthened to include citizen voices in the PHF process, informing policies that impact on their lives;
- Citizens of all backgrounds, with their experiential knowledge, can be valuable partners in PHF that provide essential input.