

Citizen Science in the Public Health field – win some, lose some

Author(s)

den Broeder, Lea

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

EuroHealthNet Magazine

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

den Broeder, L. (2017). Citizen Science in the Public Health field – win some, lose some. *EuroHealthNet Magazine*, 2017(10).
<http://www.eurohealthnet-magazine.eu/ehn-magazine-10/citizen-science-in-the-public-health-field-win-some-lose-some/>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please contact the library: <https://www.amsterdamuas.com/library/contact/questions>, or send a letter to: University Library (Library of the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Citizen Science in the Public Health field – win some, lose some

Can lay people do public health research? And if so, what would be the challenges and benefits? These questions were at the heart of a project carried out in the Strategic Research Programme of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM).

By Lea den Broeder

The challenges posed by ‘wicked’ problems like the obesity epidemic and persistent health inequalities can only be addressed properly by a ‘Whole of Society’ approach – including not only organisations and institutes but also citizens. This requires a shared knowledge base, developed through dialogue with all societal stakeholders – including citizens. Although public health knowledge has long been the exclusive domain of experts, with their own subcultures and jargon, this is rapidly changing. Citizen Science, or active participation in research by citizens, is becoming a focus of interest in the public health field; the notion that interventions are more effective when the target group is engaged implies a recognition of the need to engage citizens. New technological developments have opened up new opportunities to gather, analyse, store, and share large amounts of data. This also opens up new ways to collaborate.



RIVM developed and tested a model to describe and analyse the benefits of Citizen Science in public health, both for science as well as for the citizen scientists themselves. An important test case was a project with 35 lay neighbourhood health researchers in a ‘priority neighbourhood’ in Amsterdam, with high unemployment and poverty rates. These citizen

scientists gathered information that could serve to develop more responsive health policies by interviewing more than 350 fellow residents. For example, some light was shed on the reasons why residents underutilised the local green environment. Importantly, the project served as a health promoting intervention; the lay health researchers increased their health literacy and changed their own health behaviour. Moreover, they developed their own health activism, putting health issues deemed important by residents they interviewed, for example indoor air quality, on the local policy agenda.



Specific tools for integrated approaches in public health, like neighbourhood auditing and Health Impact Assessments, can also be carried out in cooperation with citizens. Indeed, in a Health Impact Assessment, which is a prospective estimation of expected health impacts of a proposed policy, citizen participation is even considered a core element. In neighbourhood auditing, or the systematic inspection of health relevant aspects of a neighbourhood, resident engagement is less common. Despite this difference, two literature reviews showed that both (participative) HIA and neighbourhood auditing lack a robust evidence base regarding the participation of residents, as well as theory-informed instruments, methods and procedures that can be applied in practice.



The engagement of citizens in public health research certainly holds a promise, both for knowledge development and as a contribution to health promotion. It may enable access to new or hard to collect data while empowering local communities. However, there is still much to be done to realise this potential. Communities need support and education to be able to contribute while scientists need to learn how to work with community groups in their research projects. New tools and procedures, experimenting and evaluating are required, and Citizen Science projects need to be embedded in broader health promotion strategies. But most of all, Citizen Science is a matter of give and take. Experts need to accept having less control over the research project in order to create better and more socially robust knowledge.

Read more about Citizen Science for public health in: Den Broeder L (2017). Citizen Science for Health in All Policies. Engaging communities in knowledge development (PhD thesis, VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands).

About the author

Lea den Broeder (PhD) is a senior adviser for Health in all Policies at the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) in the Netherlands. In addition she works as a professor for Environment and Health at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences.



SHARE →

EuroHealthNet magazine #10

Making the shift to prevention and promotion

Digital Marketing to Children: a New Public Health Challenge

The new food and activity triangles

Can social investment help the public sector become outcomes focused?

Health Diplomacy – past, present and future

Citizen Science in the Public Health field –win some, lose some

CHAIN – a new centre for the international study of socioeconomic inequalities in health

Improving the health of people in isolated and vulnerable situations.

Linking International Health Cooperation and Migration: The Global Health Center of Tuscany Region

80 Ways to a more sustainable future

Addressing Health Inequalities faced by LGBTI people

**EuroHealthNet
Magazine**

Pages

[Home](#)
[Editions](#)
[About](#)

The Latest

The “lifestyle drift” of health promotion
Caroline Costongs, EuroHealthNet
Director Public Health organisations and
health authorities are key in [...]

More

Thanks for dropping by! Feel free to
join the discussion by leaving
comments, and stay updated by
subscribing to the RSS feed.

© 2013 Health Promotion

