

Making space for health in cities: a transdisciplinary research approach in South Limburg

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Background

Cities face a population with a diversity of adverse health conditions including non-communicable diseases (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression) and injuries. There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that the way in which our living environment is built and organized is important for health. Still, knowledge on how health (behavior) is influenced by the built environment is quite limited. Furthermore, scientific evidence does not always translate into policy and practice. In order to address these issues, a consortium called RuimteGIDS has been established within the urban South Limburg region.

Approach

Practically-oriented knowledge for urban practitioners (policy makers and professionals) can best be generated in the practical context, and by combining the expertise and perspectives of practitioners, citizens and scientists (Jansen, 2012). To achieve this, the consortium engages in four spatial planning projects currently being implemented in Maastricht and Kerkrade. This involves the formation of a 'joint learning community' around each spatial planning project. These learning communities will consist of municipal policy makers, professionals from the Public Health Service (GGD) South Limburg, housing corporations, advisory companies involved in the project, residents and scientific experts. Each learning community jointly identifies the knowledge questions to be addressed and the activities about which will be learned. Processes and outcomes will be evaluated and lessons learned will be communicated through an interactive guidebook (ruimteGIDS).

Objective

The objective of RuimteGIDS is to generate knowledge on achieving and maintaining a healthy living environment that supports urbanized municipalities in South Limburg and the GGD Zuid Limburg in integrating health in environmental planning.

Figure: overview of the "Green Carpet" area (Maastricht), Aron Nijs fotografie



Preliminary results

- Stakeholder analyses, participatory mapping and neighborhood walks led to practically-oriented and timely learning agendas
- Working effectively in learning communities requires ongoing communication in order to clarify goals, methods and roles
- The Urban Hotspotter bike proved to be a useful tool in engaging citizens in urban health research and practice.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed to monitor processes and assess the extent to which healthy meeting places are facilitated and opportunities for physical activity are created and the environment is considered socially safe. The learning project aims are shared but their weight varies per project, this allows for a research methodology that entails a mixed-methods approach.

Figure L: Urban Hotspotter bike as a measurement tool and tool to engage citizens in urban health research and practice

Figure R: RuimteGIDS researchers during field research



Conclusion

Contemporary urban health issues ask for a transdisciplinary research approach in order to understand underlying causes, consequences, and solutions to key problems.

More information and references

www.ruimteGIDS.eu

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