

Evaluation design for a community based physical activity program for socially disadvantaged groups – the case of communities on the move

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Background

In the Netherlands engagement of low SES (Socio Economic Status) groups in sports and physical activity remains lower compared to high SES groups. In particular, migrant groups and people with overweight are more often inactive (Hildebrandt, 2010);(WHO-Global Advocacy for Physical Activity (GAPA), 2012)

Triggered by this inequality in physical activity and sports the Netherlands Institute for Sports and Physical Activity (NISB) developed a multilevel community-based physical activity program from 2003 onwards. This so-called "Communities on the Move" program aims at enhancing physical activity in inactive low SES groups. The program is based on principles of participation, creating supportive environments and pleasure. Communities on the Move has been carried out in 37 municipalities, reaching over 100 low SES groups.

Preliminary results of the Communities on the Move program are promising. However, adequate scientific research is needed to scientifically demonstrate whether Communities on the Move is (cost-) effective or not. The aim of this paper is to provide the rationale for an evaluation design on different levels to identify underlying mechanisms which explain 'what works' in community-based action programs for physical activity promotion.

Research questions

The Communities on the Move program affects four impact levels: the *individual* health and physical activity behaviour, the *group* and *program* level including local and national organizations, and the wider *community*. In order to answer the question: what is it about this approach that works, for whom, in what context, and why? The following research questions are formulated:

- Which effects can be documented with respect to physical activity and habitual behaviour, health, quality of life and life satisfaction?
- Which mechanisms explain the successes and failures of Communities on the Move for different low SES groups and how can these be addressed to support nationwide implementation?

- What is the mutual relationship of Communities on the Move with community participation and social capital in general?
- How can results be interpreted in terms of costs and benefits and what combination of economic evaluation methods and tools is most appropriate to evaluate a community-program on cost-effectiveness?

Research design

The theoretical framework for analysis will be based on socio-ecological and system innovation theories to determine, describe and explain the interactions between the individual and his/her social and physical environments. People's own resources and capacities to generate/maintain health (salutogenesis) play a central role (Antonovsky, 1996).

The study will be based on a multiple case, multiple level cohort study, in combination with reflexive monitoring and action research (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Van Mierlo, 2010). Data are collected at four points in time at the four levels of impact at the start of local programs, six months later, 12 months and 18 months after the start respectively. Data will be collected through questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and focus groups. The data will be gathered for 16 local Communities on the Move programs and involve about 240 respondents. In analysing the qualitative data the Atlas program will be used, while the survey data will be analysed using appropriate cohort analysis techniques.

Anticipated results

It is a challenge to develop effective programs improving the health of low SES groups through physical activity promotion (Dugdill, 2009). This study should result in recommendations for improving health of low SES groups. Further research results are:

1. Assessment of (cost-) effectiveness at the individual, program and community level of Communities on the Move comprehensively
2. An elaborated monitoring and evaluation design for participatory community health and physical activity promotion
3. The facilitation of wider implementation of Communities on the Move on both the national and local level.

Ultimately, the research will result in a report about the (cost-)effectiveness of Communities in the Move, an improved manual for community programs addressing different low SES groups, guidelines for research and practice and a PhD thesis consisting of peer reviewed articles.

References – limited to 5

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