

The Benefits Of Community Involvement To Stimulate Physical Activities In The City Of Groningen

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Introduction

Growing concern over having healthy lifestyle in many countries as well as the link between insufficient physical activities and chronic diseases is stimulating interest in embedding physical activity in daily routines. Recently, the provision of outdoor fitness in neighborhoods is recognized as one of the effective ways to increase physical activity level, especially in disadvantaged areas (Borgers, Thibaut, Van der Meerschen, Van Reusel, Vos, & Scheerder, 2013; Humpel, Owen & Leslie, 2002; Sallis, Owen & Fisher, 2008; Thiesen-Raaphorst, 2015). An ecological framework indicates that behavior changes are affected by individual factors (e.g. demographics), as well as, interaction with the social capital and built environment in which individuals live (Bors, Dessauer, Bell, Wilkerson, Lee, & Strunk, 2009; Sallis et al., 2016). As such, many countries have aimed to shift from being focused on individuals, to those approaches that attempts to make changes in social and physical environments and have sustainable impact on population level. Community involvement seems as an essential ingredients to achieve this goal, however, providing meaningful community engagement can be a challenging task for policy makers, and researchers. The municipality of Groningen developed a unique approach using socio-ecological framework and public involvement theory by involving residents in decision-making process of the project to stimulate physical activity in open spaces. The process is meant to empower residents to improve their neighborhoods by creating an active physical environment and social safety for children and their families. This study describes how involving community in decision making process of the project in three neighborhoods in Groningen may impact its social environments, physical activity levels and the quality of urban life, which will lead to improve individual and community health. Evaluating the approach from policy makers and residents' perspective (both park users and non-users) presents to enhancing future involvement to have more sustainable impact.

Method

This study is drawing on semi-structured interviews data with policy makers, pre and post renovation surveys with residents about their level of satisfaction with the design, and conducting two weeks of observations (pre and post renovation) using SOPARC to identify the park utilization. The renovations involved replacing old playground equipment, adding new equipment and floor surfacing. Outdoor spaces/parks were selected in January 2016, using specific criteria: 1) Low-income neighborhoods with social/safety problems 2) Communities that submitted a formal request to the municipality to renovate their old/worn-out out door fitness/playground or lack of facilities. We conducted three interactive workshops with residents in each neighborhood to understand their needs and get their ideas to renovate the park/open spaces. Residents were invited via different ways: using social media (e.g. Facebook), neighborhood web site, neighborhood newsletter, and direct mailing/putting invitation letter in their post box.

Results

Those individuals, who got more involved in the workshops, felt more valued while seeing their ideas were taken into account. They created stronger relationship amongst themselves through the process that led to a greater level of trust and social capital. Policy makers got benefits from the insights and knowledge brought by residents during those three workshops in each neighborhood. Also they indicated that by opening up the process of decision-making to a wider range of people and at the same time looking for creating an environment that everyone can contribute equally, they inevitably move away from the simple conception of success/failure that associated with more closed system. However, obviously the whole process was more complicated and unpredictable, and unfortunately only few people attended the workshops (15–30, varied amongst different neighborhoods) who are mostly athletics or parents of young children. Although the community involvement had a positive impact on increasing social capital in the neighborhoods but it did not have influence on physical activity level of inactive people. One possible explanation is inactive people are mostly from low-income groups and elderlies who were not interested to be involved in the decision-making process, and it is confirmed by other studies (Burton, Goodlad, & Croft, 2006).

Conclusion

City governments increasingly recognize that changing behavior must include changing the social and physical environments, in which people live. Community involvement can have a significant impact on the

level of residents' satisfactions about changes in built environment, subsequently the level of park utilization and increasing social capital. However, this approach needs to be tailored in disadvantaged areas; because there are some correlations between certain demographics (e.g. household income, employability) and being confident to get involved in decision-making process.

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