NIHR | Global Health Research Centre for Non-communicable Diseases and Environmental Change

The George Institute for Global Health

Joining Hands for a Healthy Future: Insights for Integrating Community Participation in Intersectoral Collaboration for Planetary Health

Context

People all around the world are facing record-breaking threats to their wellbeing, health, and survival from the rapidly changing climate, underscoring the deeply intertwined relationship between the health of the planet and that of the global population[1].

Global heating and related environmental shifts are driving rising rates of illness and disease, and exacerbating deep-seated inequities, particularly in communities already experiencing marginalisation. Increasing air pollution, degradation of fertile land and fresh water, rising sea levels, and the loss of biodiversity are among the multitude of factors that are contributing to the regression of hard-fought public health gains. For instance, global heating is having a significant impact on the rates and severity of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including cardiovascular and kidney diseases, and mental health conditions that are responsible for 41 million deaths year, which is 74% of all deaths globally[2].

Increasingly, community participation in research design, implementation, and evaluation is recognised as essential in applied public health research[3]. However, there is a lack of research into *what* drives effective community participation in research and policy at the nexus of health and environmental change, *how* to embed community participation into planetary health programs, and *why* community participation in intersectoral collaboration for planetary health is fundamental to making progress in addressing the impacts of environmental change on population health.

Insights

This brief synthesises insights from a roundtable discussion involving 35 community leaders, health and environmental advocates, academics, and political champions from across the Asia Pacific. These stakeholders are committed to advancing climate action to protect population health for all by ensuring that community voices are at the heart of decision-making processes, including by influencing agenda-setting, shaping interventions, and allocating resources. The event, held online on 25th September 2024, was co-hosted by The George Institute for Global Health and the NIHR Global Health Research Centre for Non-Communicable Diseases and Environmental Change (NIHR GHRC NCDs & EC).

[1] The 2024 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: facing record-breaking threats from delayed action. *The Lancet*, Volume 404, Issue 10465, 1847 - 1896

[2] https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases -

[3] Tembo D et al (2021). Effective engagement and involvement with community stakeholders in the co-production of global health research. BMJ. PMID: 33593805

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Guiding Principles

During the roundtable, participants shared guiding principles for advancing participatory planetary health research, policy, and practice:

1. **Community-centred governance drives community-centred solutions:** embedding participatory methodologies, governance structures within both new and existing planetary health research programs can encourage and empower community voices, ensuring interventions developed align with community-articulated priorities. It is also important for holding teams accountable for staying true to those priorities.

2. **Equitable partnerships[4] should reflect a variety of perspectives:** Complex environmental problems, typically have multiple dimensions, and we must view this 'wicked problem' from a variety of perspectives, most importantly by listening to those most affected, if we are to build a more comprehensive and informed collective understanding of how to address it. Multidimensional problems require multidisciplinary teams that include representatives from a wide range of perspectives and expertise.

3. **Innovative design is required to 'think outside the box'**: Communities are not homogenous entities, and research methodologies must adapt accordingly. Beyond traditional research methodologies, research teams must identify novel, creative and culturally sensitive approaches when working with communities, fostering environments that allows individuals to share their experiences without fear of retribution and judgement.

4. **Capacity building is for *everyone* involved**: As the environment rapidly changes and we move closer to breaking planetary boundaries, there is a growing chasm of unknowns. Knowledge exchange between community members, academics, government bodies, professionals, and activists are imperative so that we learn from each-other and collectively build capacity across the evidence to policy ecosystem to tackle planetary health challenges together.

5. **Equity and Inclusivity are non-negotiable**: Planetary degradation amplifies inequity. Research teams must recognise and work towards addressing this by promoting the involvement of diverse populations, especially traditionally marginalised or high-risk groups, whose voices are too often unheard and not reflected in one-size-fits-all policy approaches. This includes First Nations and Tribal peoples, women and girls, and young people, older persons among others. Inequity will be reduced only when inclusivity takes centre stage in collective action.

6. **Put lived experience at the centre of evidence-based policy and advocacy**: Lived experience is an essential source of evidence for planetary health policy and advocacy strategies. Ensuring appropriate means are in place to collect lived experience that balance sensitivity with technical rigour is imperative. Translation of lived experience should be transparent, holding policymakers accountable for explaining how this form of knowledge and experience has been used to inform policy.

7. **Share successes (and failures)**: There is an urgent need to build a repository of what works (and what does not!) in participatory planetary health intervention and implementation. We must share examples of community-driven planetary health interventions that are effective, efficient, and sustainable to fast-track collective knowledge generation, evidence-based policies and practices around the world.

[4] Equitable partnerships are defined as partnerships that are mutually beneficial and balanced in power

Conclusions

It is hoped that these insights will increase awareness of, and provide support for enhancing participatory planetary health research, policy, and practice to deliver better health and well-being for all.

The NIHR GHRC NCDs & EC is network of institutions undertaking participatory planetary health research and aims to provide up-to-date information, resources, awareness-raising materials, and technical support in this area to interested parties across the globe.

To discuss further or for potential collaboration please contact Laura Downey ldowney@georgeinstitute.org (Academic lead) or Claudia Selin Batz cbatz@georgeinstitute.org.uk (Advocacy and engagement lead).

Authorship

Written by Laura Downey, Maarinke van der Meulen, Claudia Batz, Göran Tomson, & Amanda Shriwise

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Further Reading

- NIHR Global Health Research Centre for Non-Communicable Diseases and Environmental Change | The George Institute for Global Health and https://ghrcentre-ncdec.nihr.ac.uk
- The 2024 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Facing Record-breaking threats from delayed action. *Lancet*, 2024 Report - Lancet Countdown
- Tackling the politics of intersectoral action for the health of people and the planet. BMJ (2022) Jan 26;376(e068124):1–9. Buse K, Tomson G, Kuruvilla S, Mahmood J, Alden A, Van Der Meulen M, et al, http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2021-068124
- Implementing citizen engagement within evidence-informed policymaking, Evidence to policy & impact (ERP), EVIPNet, https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240061521
- Beyond building back better: imagining a future for human and planetary health. (2021) Nov, BMJ;5(11):e827-e839. doi: 10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00262-X. PMID: 34774123; PMCID: PMC8600369. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34774123/
- Recognising the Power of Multiple Perspectives in Advancing Collaborative Research for Health (Nov, 2024), *BMJ Global Health* https://gh.bmj.com/content/recognizing-power-multiple-perspectives-advancing-collaborative-research-health