
Tackling Obesity

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Case Study

University of Amsterdam Summer School, Thinking City Case Study: Some Reflections

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In what follows I shall attempt to interpret the project work and findings of the "Growing Green" team, one of six from the University of Amsterdam's Summer School Program "Thinking City". I will seek to identify both the strengths and limitations of the approach we adopted¹.

The subject for inquiry was childhood obesity in Amsterdam, part of a larger and growing problem throughout the nation generally. Our project report was prepared on the basis of neighbourhood investigations, individual inputs from participants (some observational and some from literature search), lectures delivered as part of the obesity project and the Thinking City Program, and advice from our tutor and mentors. The individual outlooks of the participants (some more "theory" focussed, some more "practice" focussed; some more "structure" focussed and some more "process" focussed; and some more Information Communication Technology (ICT) competent and some less so) as well as the different intellectual disciplines they represented all played a role in creating the final product.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) obesity is "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health". They go on: "Childhood obesity is associated with a higher chance of premature death and disability in adulthood. Overweight and obese children are more likely to stay obese into adulthood and to develop non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases at a younger age"². In explaining the increasing rates of childhood obesity two factors have been identified as important:

1. Bad Diet - shifts towards greater intakes of "energy-dense" foods that are high in fats and sugars.
2. Physical inactivity - a trend towards less physical activity and a more sedentary life-style generally.

It's clearly a major health issue; but is it just that and, more to the point, is it just a matter of personal responsibility? In respect of these questions our group answered in the following way: "Yes it is a health issue but one that can only be tackled by going beyond the formal systems of health-care and yes there is a personal element but also important economic, social and environmental issues at play." In other words it is a classic case study in a "wicked" problem³. This makes it not just a "whole of government" issue but also a "whole of community" issue.

Indeed, as Dr Arnaud Verhoeff pointed out in his lecture to the group, even governments inclined to a "personal responsibility" view of the world acknowledge that children represent a different case and government initiatives aimed at influencing early childhood health from above through

¹ The final report is entitled Amsterdam;s Youth Obesity: An Atlas of Food culture (Amsterdam, July 2014)

² See

³ See

law, regulation and facilitation are justified and necessary⁴. It's a case of ensuring the "the best start on life" for all and not just some.

Let me now summarise the approach we took.

Ideally speaking we would need to fully understand the eating and exercise habits of the children of Amsterdam. That would entail knowing what happens at home, going to and from school, at school itself and after school in the community, firstly, in Amsterdam generally so comparisons could be drawn with other parts of the Netherlands (and overseas) and, secondly, in the city's many districts (or neighbourhoods).

With this knowledge task in mind two routes could be taken. We could either survey and critically examine existing research-based literature (and see what it tells us about the dynamics at play) or we could undertake new research based on new (or indeed existing) theories relevant to the issue.

We didn't ignore the former but our focus was on the latter with our research question being: "What is the nature of the urban environment in and around the city's primary schools and how does it impact on good or bad habits in respect of food or exercise?"

In effect this was to be our work for the first week; for the second we went to one district - Osdorp - and dug deeper into the problem as it manifests itself locally. We were able to go beyond the urban environment considered narrowly and take up matters social, political and cultural.

Osdorp - part of the Borough of Nieuw-West was chosen because of its higher rates of obesity⁵:

Nieuw-West	27%
Noord	25%
West	23%
Oost	19%
Zuid	15%
Centrum	14%

Taking up this study was particularly important for the project group because it allowed us to see that it wasn't just "a problem" but better described as "a problem for which there was (varying) degrees of local understanding and pro-active initiative". Those wishing to change the world did have "on-the-ground" support.

The sorts of issues seen as important by the Group and described by way of diagram in Appendix One of this essay included:

- (1) families and their attitudes and practices.
- (2) the urban environment whether

⁴ "Public Health Policy in Amsterdam: Background and Focus on Health Weight", Lecture, 7 July 2014.

⁵ Official statistics 2010/11 quoted in Amsterdam's Youth Obesity, pp. 16-17.

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- (a) built and planned or
 - (b) social and cultural.

Clearly there was one aspect of the issue we didn't examine - the city's primary, community and hospital systems and what role they do and can play.

With these thoughts in mind it is worth listing the range factors we did investigate in our research and discuss in our deliberations:

- School lunch boxes and their content
- School food policies and practices
- School playgrounds and sports facilities generally - quantity and quality
- Open and green spaces, including community gardens
- Food retailing and advertising locally
- Family pocket money policies
- Food and eating habits at home
- Transport options and opportunities.

Where possible local residents (young and old), shop owners and community workers were consulted on the issue - but the capacity to do this in the first week at least was limited.

It's clear that ideally speaking we should have learnt more about family life and culture in Amsterdam and its geographical, socio-economic and ethnic communities. However, we could find out some things on this topic - even if limited - from existing research and local consultations. For example, evidence was provided on the challenges facing authorities wishing to influence parents when preparing lunch-boxes for their children⁶.

The first challenge is to know - and with some precision - what is going to be measured. Whilst it is easy to find out whether or not a primary school has a playground or not it's not so easy to measure the quality of those playgrounds. Similarly measures are available on proximity to fast food outlets and green space (including community gardens) but it's not so easy to measure the relative "quality" and "pulling-power" of either. Add to this the different perspectives of group participants - some with eyes trained to understand space (and its use), some to understand culture (and its impact) and some to understand children (and how they think).

This all being said the Group made a "best-effort" attempt to create useful knowledge, some of which had a necessity to involve a degree of judgement about what the state of affairs were in the localities centred on 133 of the city's 209 primary schools. The maps developed showed the Primary School Location and locations of (1) playgrounds, (2) Shops/Supermarkets and (3) Bus stop/transport hub. Existing city-wide maps displaying the locations of (1) city farms, (2) farmers' markets (3) sports clubs and (4) sports facilities were also utilised.

⁶ Jaap Seidell, "Healthy Weight in Urban Context, the Role of the Environment", Lecture, 9 July.

What we sought to identify were the following characteristics of a primary school environment.

1. Playgrounds - open, closed, maintained, rundown, busy, quiet, litter, art, colours.
2. Transport - bus and tram stops, parking spaces, bike racks.
3. Food outlets - snack bars, supermarkets, healthy options, shopping centres.
4. Advertising - colours, characters, language and position.

The personal, intellectual and technical effort put into producing these maps - and seeking useful information from what they display - was enormous. I think the creation of the Final Report does teach us just how lengthy the process of mapping can be, how difficult it is to produce "measurables" and how provisional some of the findings will be unless situated into the broader context of power and community culture.

What the maps do is help us visualise the spatial and environmental elements of the problem and encourage us to re-imagine and re-visualise on the basis of the principles of healthy eating and exercise. Inevitably the Group made some judgement calls on how to best describe the state of affairs in different districts but that is, I would suggest, going to be inevitable no matter how comprehensive the information from the maps⁷.

In collecting this information we were also informed by the multi-disciplinary efforts to develop an intellectual framework for considering food policy, be it local, regional or national. Such efforts focus on all aspects of the food business - production, preparation or processing, distribution, retailing, consumption and waste treatment and disposal.

Although we have come into the picture via consumption and its link to retailing and advertising, it's clear that there is a lot more to the story that is food in an urban setting today. As Dr Han Wiskerke⁸ pointed out in his lecture to the group there is a "system" at work today ("Agro-Industrial") that we can compare to a more localised and health-oriented alternative ("Agro Ecological"). A common theme amongst policy makers today is to find a proper mix between the two that recognises the importance of economics but is capable of dealing with health and the environment at the same time.

All of this means producing and distributing food in a more environmentally friendly manner, encouraging food production in the city, and educating people around the issues of diet and health. To this end governments can create space for urban agriculture, ensure green principles are at work when procuring food, ensure outlet diversity and look at policies generally through the lens of food including education policies for the young⁹. Such an approach would have implications not just for health but also for employment in the city, greenhouse gas emissions, quality of life generally and - potentially - for equality and inequality. All of these considerations assisted in our deliberations.

⁷ See Amsterdam's Youth Obesity, pp. 72-409.

⁸ "Food Supply in an Age of Urbanisation", Lecture, 7 July 2014

⁹ See Han Wiskerke, "Food: a stranger to urban policy", Lecture, 16 July 2014

In many ways Osdorp was the icing on the cake for our project¹⁰ - it allowed us to investigate a locality in more detail and it provided an opportunity for advocacy. The first and most important factor we uncovered was that Osdorp had the potential to play a role in the government's desire to combat obesity - there was urban space available for alternatives and there were community activists keen to push along the campaign.

In respect of the urban space, five particular sites were recognised as having potential for local food production and garden maintenance; which could then be linked to education and physical activity, what has been called a "green gym".

In respect of the community there are already local initiatives to promote entrepreneurship and link it to healthy initiatives; such as Lucas Community and the Beach. The government-funded community centre was also playing a role in this context.

What was needed was for these initiatives to be drawn together and a local campaign team established, for such a team to have a professional marketing program backing up its work and for schools and the community to be more fully involved in educating around and practising good food and exercise principles. We proposed a shifting scale of intervention that went from experimental play, a communication strategy, social entrepreneurship, spatial speculation and an overall food vision and policy for the district.

Each in its way would play a role in the "whole of community"¹¹ effort - attracting children through interesting games¹², getting the message through to community¹³ by way of new and old media, making space for community gardens and local entrepreneurship¹⁴, presenting visualisations of how the district could look and involving schools more directly and with more purpose¹⁵. However, it was only when they were all put together as part of a campaign that significant results could be expected. This conclusion led us to the pro-active image of the community as an "organism" to fight obesity and ensure better environmental practices. The food component could be dealt with through a mixture of local production and local education and the exercise component through school policy and a much more vigorous conception of how space and time could be more effectively utilised. To make all of this work local leaders would be needed, individuals and groups brought onside, all ethnic and religious groups involved and children's needs and capacities taken into account at all times.

The interesting thing about Osdorp is that the green nature of the locality, the major sporting complex and the watersport friendly bodies of water available - Sloterplassen and Nieuwe Meer - make it an excellent environment for exercise¹⁶. Habits learnt early about such opportunities could be taken by children into their adulthood.

¹⁰ See Amsterdam's Youth Obesity, pp. 410-478.

¹¹ On this concept see Sarah Boseley, "Obesity involves every one of us. We should tackle it collectively", The Guardian, 2 July 2014.

¹² Fruit tasting, cooking lessons, races, food art, drawing, "playtime", pavement polls and protein relays for example.

¹³ From developing a lift-out for local paper to taking a Mr. Wheely bike throughout the district.

¹⁴ Mr Wheely, community garden and local food festivals being potential means of doing this.

¹⁵ Consideration should be given for every school to have a full-time physical education teacher.

¹⁶ Evidence is now available to the effect that "people living close to areas with more than 20 per cent green space are

What's different about how we dealt with this local health issue was that firstly, we saw it as requiring more than just top-down political initiative, as important as that is, secondly, the community initiatives we proposed would need to be "whole of community" and, thirdly, we proposed attention to spatial as well as sociological and economic factors¹⁷.

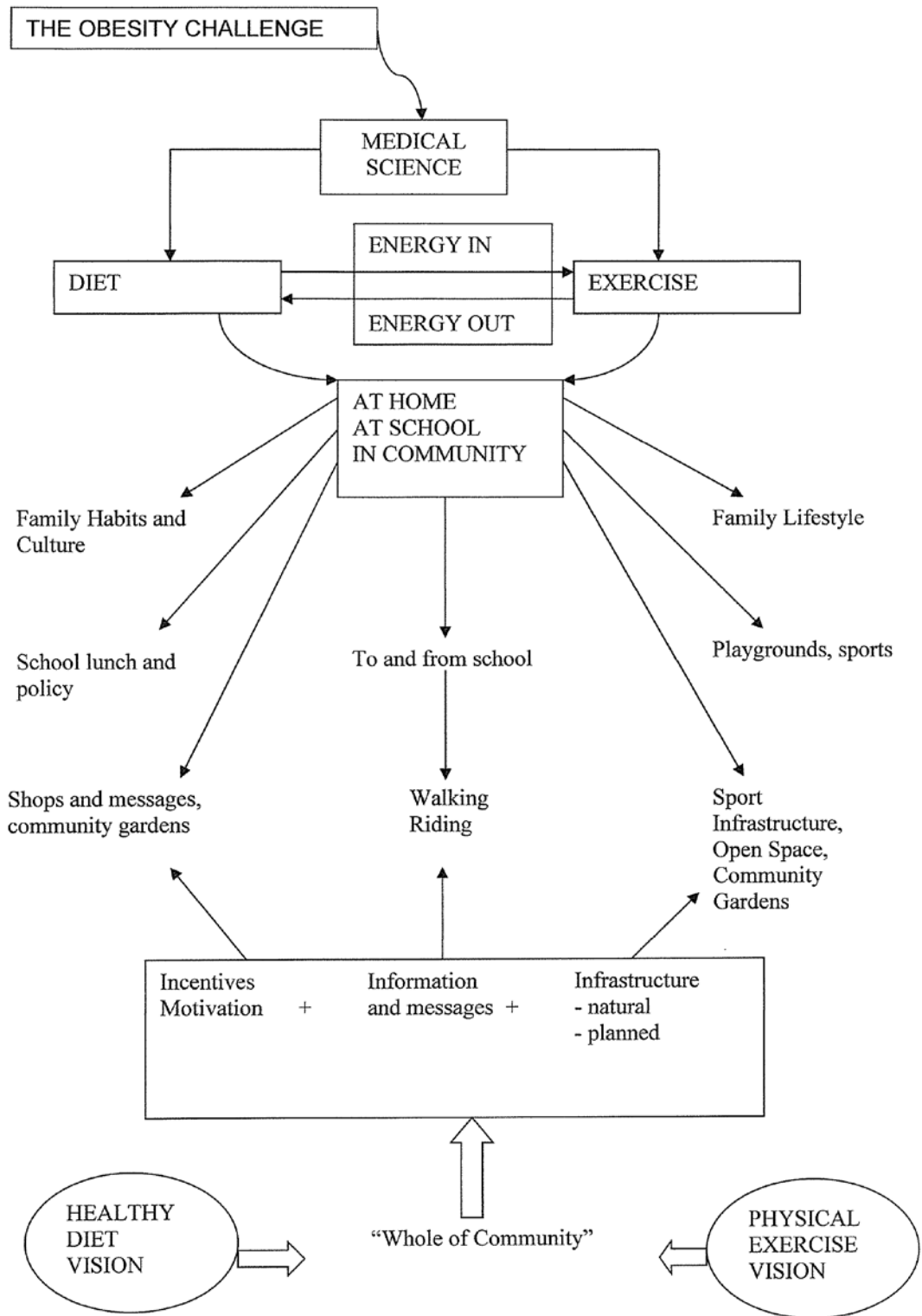
What we have proposed is certainly consistent with what the Cochrane Collaboration 2013 Review ("Interventions for preventing obesity in children")¹⁸ revealed were "promising policies and strategies". The researchers also make the point that evaluation designs need to be strengthened, a reminder that in the Osdorp case a process of monitoring and evaluation should be part of the program.

significantly more likely to walk and participate in moderate to vigorous physical activity". See Hugh Arnold "How green space keeps you healthy and happy", Australian Financial Review.

¹⁷ One excellent reference on local initiatives to combat obesity in the UK is Local Government Association, Tackling Obesity: Local Government's new public health role (2012,) esp. pp 8-9: Case Studies, one of which is on Green Gyms mentioned in the text.

¹⁸ The study authors are: Waters E, deSilva-Sanigorski A, Burfod BJ, Campbell KJ, Gao Y, Armstrong R, Prosser C and Summberbell CD.

Appendix 1



Appendix 2: My script for the Group Presentation

Our project is about people, their communities and their neighbourhoods but most importantly about the children of Amsterdam and their health and well-being.

Our focus is on the epidemic of obesity and how it relates to food and exercise patterns and cultures amongst the young.

We note that the Netherlands has lower rates of obesity than the OECD average but also that it is a rapidly growing problem.

"Why is it", we ask, "that the Netherlands with its grand tradition of public health policy and practice is finding this such a hard nut to crack?"

To seek an answer we went into the neighbourhoods where people live and attempted to gain a sense of what young people see every day, what they do, what they eat and how and where they play.

Obesity is "abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health". It's a case of the gap between energy in and energy out, and it's linked to 60 chronic illnesses such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cancer.

In the last two decades the obesity rate in the Netherlands has doubled - and it represents a major challenge for the community and their politicians.

Our project involved two elements - mapping the city and advocating for change in the district of Osdorp.

Firstly our mapping.

To the city's primary schools we went, collecting information on playgrounds and exercise opportunities, green and open spaces, and food messages and outlets. We tried to see, feel, hear and smell as local children do. There were no formal consultations but where possible local residents were asked about their attitudes and perceptions.

The aim here was to line up our discoveries alongside other information that has been collected such as socio-economic background and see if patterns could be found.

Secondly our advocacy for a campaign in Osdorp, a district already identified as one with high rates of obesity.

To Osdorp we went collecting more detailed information on its history and features as a residential area, its social and ethnic make-up, its urban form, and its internal functioning as a community. Interviews were conducted with local residents, those engaged in key groups and local government officials.

It's multicultural and regarded as an area needing special help because of social and economic disadvantage.

Designing a strategy for action is not like writing on a blank sheet of paper. There are individuals and groups focused on obesity, such as Lucas Community and The Beach. There is a community garden, plenty of playgrounds and green spaces, a major sports complex and an annual food festival.

Our view was - let's not start anew but build on the assets that already exist. We proposed a "whole of community" approach that links the existing players, develops a communication plan based on a monthly lift out in a local free paper (Osdorp: Eat Better and Move More) , and creates interesting activities to get youngsters on board.

It's clear that policy makers can no longer afford to see obesity as just a health issue, whose consequences are managed by the health system. It is a social, an economic and an environmental issue requiring joined-up government and whole of community initiatives. Top down won't work without bottom up and bottom up won't work without local networks and empowerment.

Our conclusion - obesity prevention will need its politicians to set the agenda, its entrepreneurs to show there is another way to produce and live and its local activists to drive change. Our children deserve no less.