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Negotiating policy-ideas: analysing 15 participatory action projects across 5 European Countries

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Abstract

In this article we are concerned with the increasing participation of youth in policy design and especially the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the EU project CO-CREATE. Using a comparative micro-sociological lens across 15 PAR projects in 5 EU countries, we aimed to to find out if and how our project 1) included diverse youth; 2) enhanced engagement, 3) generated policy proposals and involved 4) changes in problem perception. To answer these questions, we gathered and collaborative and comparatively triangulated observational and contextual data. We are moderately confident that our approach contributed positively to the above-stated aims. Adaptative participation and sustained micro-interactions support the development of refined policy proposals while empowering young citizens. More importantly, this article shows that outcomes in these areas crucially depend on the way structural difference and local contexts are negotiated in interaction. Even within one multi-sited project, outcomes clearly vary partly because of dynamic adaptations. Our analysis furthermore shows that inequality can at times be renegotiated if we approach it in specific interactionally relevant terms, rather than as mere categorical properties. We thus add to extant literature by shifting the focus away from generic approaches. Participatory action is strongly embedded in local and structural contexts which can and must be renegotiated for participation to have an effect. We also caution against an output-oriented way of looking at participatory action and embrace a process perspective. Lastly, the article suggests that efforts to enhance participation of diverse groups for their specific experiences might be a too generic assumption. The research does identify conditions that enabled adolescents and staff to interact and learn, which is valuable even if these results are hard to plan or replicate.

Participation in policy: the case of CO-CREATE

In modern liberal democracies, the extension of democratic rights and increasing levels of education and wealth have fuelled demands by citizens for individual freedom and autonomy. At the same time, the growing complexity of modern problems such as global warming, persistent poverty, malnutrition and overweight, call for solutions on a system or even planetary level (Beck et al. 1994, Beck 2007), involving a growing number of diverse stakeholders. The classical political institutions of modernity seem incapable of solving this paradox and new forms of politics have developed under the heading of participatory democracy or network governance (Fung and Wright 2001). Citizens are also called upon to participate in research and policy design like in our case, the EU wide project CO-CREATE (Confronting Obesity: Co-creating policy with adolescents).

Between 2018 and 2022, the EU wide project CO-CREATE, working from a system-dynamics perspective (Byrne 2005; Gortmaker e.a., 2011; Johnston e.a., 2014; Rutter et al 2017), has among several activities also involved 199 Europeans aged 15-19 in 15 participatory action research (PAR) projects, called Alliances. CO-CREATE was meant to engage youth from diverse backgrounds, to empower them and to combine their knowledge with that of scientists and stakeholders in the joint development of policy ideas for system directed overweight prevention.

Our approach is described in detail elsewhere (insert link to D5.5). In brief it is based on participatory action research (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006) and youth-led participatory action research (Ozer and Piatt 2017). PAR is “a cooperative, iterative process of research and action in which non-professional community members are trained as researchers and change agents, and power over decisions are shared among the partners in the collaboration” (Ozer and Douglas 2013, p. 66). Participatory action is achieved through a reflective cycle, whereby participants collect and analyse data, then determine what action should follow” (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006, p. 854). An essential element of PAR is the transfer of […] knowledge, particularly the technical skills transferred from researcher to community partners”

(CalFresh 2012, p. 5). PAR thus includes a phase of empowerment in which participants are provided with capacity building through training or facilitation to further enable them to understand their own lived situation and make use of their situated knowledge. Increasingly, PAR is involving young people (CalFresh 2012, Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner 2013; Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009, Cargo 2003, Ozer and Douglas 2013). According to Kohfeldt and colleagues (2011:29), Y-PAR projects are likely to be conducive to alterations in power through shifts of knowledge; knowledge production and voice. More broadly we assume that empowerment (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995) involves sharing of power and collaboration between more and less powerful actors. This is congruent with youth participation (Arnstein 1969) as "partnership" (Zeldin et al 2013) and shared control (Wong et al 2010, Hart 2008).

Based on the above, CO-CREATE staff, including a Youth Organization, has developed a process of activities (plus budget), made available in a handbook and supported by a collaboration structure between all consortium partners and local partner organization. The handbook (insert link) and support could flexibly be used. The activities we offered included group-building, system-mapping, interview and photovoice-training, a budget to develop ideas, a policy-design form, reflection sessions and testing of ideas with stakeholders (forthcoming article WP6). This range of activities was connected to other activities in CO-CREATE and supported both by local and consortium wide staff. The Alliances were meant to offer young people conditions to consider issues related obesity-related policies and to encourage and empower them to act towards the change of the obesogenic system.

Looking at these activities in 15 Alliances in Norway, Portugal, Poland, the UK and the Netherlands we want to find out if and how the Alliances 1) included diverse youth; 2) enhanced engagement, 3) generated policy proposals and involved 4) changes in problem perception. To our knowledge, CO-CREATE is unique because most PAR projects involve one or a few groups. We comparatively and collaboratively analyse Alliances as processes leading to outcomes of activities from a micro-sociological point of view.

Negotiating order

Our approach to Participatory Action Research is only one among many approaches (eg Church et al 2002; Wong et al 2010; Fung 2015; Walther et al 2021). Typologies and reviews have understandably aimed to sort out general characteristics of approaches that enhance the chance to achieve desired result. This has often been done based on (set of) single cases. In this

article we acknowledge that (youth) participation in policymaking is desirable. However, we move away from typologies and from identifying general characteristics for effectivity. Instead, we follow a micro-sociological approach and point to the importance of local dynamics to understand outcomes.

We approach the CO-CREATE Alliances from the perspective of symbolic interaction. This means we treat adolescents and adults in the Alliances as knowledgeable actors who construct regularities in social life through joint **meaning** making (see Trinidad 2022). Rather than being driven by motivations, the developments in the Alliance originate in the meaning actors attach to activities and objects and each-other. Meaning emerges out of the act of implying meaning in relation to (generalised) others, reading meaning in social responses and next consolidating it (Blumer, 1969). Alliance membners (re)create meaning with reference to expected **social situation** (see for example: Bredewold et al 2016). In our case this could mean that in a school setting, adolescents might expect just another school activity, which would then set them up for certain (less engaged with the subject matter) interaction. Part of (expected) social situation in which Alliance participants are co-present is a shared focus of attention. In the Alliances, this could be the planning of a research activity for example. Moments of shared attention can become patterns of interaction if the interactions are repeated or rhythmic and actors are entrained or feel emersed (Collins 2014) in the situation. Patterns are stabilised by symbols and material resources, actors orientation to past and present (Tavory 2018).

Alliances emerge in the wider context of the organisations they are embedded in, which we study as '**negotiated order'** (Strauss 1963). The concept of negotiated explains patterns in differences between organisational rules and observable practice. In the Alliances this might help us to see how concrete activities deviated from the original plan and the setting. Negotiations mediate between assumed structures, material resources and pragmatic tasks. Negotiations offer room for change while at the same time reproducing (parts of) existing structures. (Fine, 1984: 241). Attending to negotiations is also necessary to understand social process from a **complexity** perspective, (Callaghan 2008). In relation to policy evaluations, Callaghan proposes:

> "Complexity theory helps us to understand what to look for. Negotiated order theory suggests ways of investigating these issues and identifying the processes and negotiations that shape policy. Rather than discounting local variation, it acknowledges that systems are characterised by local action and that such action forms a sedimentation of practices that gives the system history. The crucial thing then is to understand it". (p.406-407)

With regard to the structural context of negotiations, we are aware - and actually try to address in CO-CREATE –different and unequal positions. Youth and staff bring to interactions a life in which constraints and abilities, based on for example poverty, stigma, sexism or privilege, acquire a distinct or personal form. Based on prior experience and the organisational context of the Alliances, actors are likely to assume that a certain interaction order (Goffman 1983) is present. For example, marginalized youth could frame school as a coercive institution not serving them. Particularly interactions in schools can be seen as "people processing encounters" (Goffman 1961) in which structural position and personal traits are weighed and re-assessed.

With the aim to understand emerging outcomes of the Alliances we are thus also looking for **endogenous** processes. This means outcomes of Alliance activities depend on how they shape up *from within* the Alliances, how activities are imbued with positive meaning through joint focus, repetition and shared symbols and in which ways Alliance members are able to negotiate the order they are part of. We interpret endogenous processes considering structural differences between actors and general characteristics of an Alliance like the number of participants, the organisational context, the length or duration of activities or involvement of staff.

A Constant Collaborative Comparison Methodology

When studying if and how youth-led participatory action in CO-CREATE leads to empowerment and voice through meaning-making processes in Alliances with diverse youth, strong local knowledge is necessary. This research ask for a multi-sited comparative fieldwork in an ethnographic sense (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009; Clerke and Hopwood 2014). As one would expect, youth Alliances from these 5 countries, based in different European regions, differ in individuals, cultural background, educational systems but also in group specific forms of interaction. We could only delve into this local interaction by co-creation in the construction of the data; collaboration with the local staff, using their local and interactional knowledge and the trained ethnographers in our team. Collaboratively, we came up with thick descriptions of the issues the youth encountered in their participatory action research. While the participatory research described above has been a collaboration between youth and staff, the analysis of this process has mainly been a collaboration between staff, while youth has been able to comment on intermediate interpretations.

Within the 5 countries, we had considerable leeway to decide where and how to start the Alliances. As a first step to obtain variation as well as comparability, we decided to focus in all counties on an urban centre and on peri-urban or rural areas around the capital. Before deciding on exact locations and recruitment, we surveyed what inequality, diversity, under-representation, youth participation and overweight means in different national and regional contexts. Wanting to enhance diversity, all partners reflected on which youth were likely to be underrepresented and needed dedicated recruitment. All partners identified young people stemming from low socio-economic background as likely to be underrepresented in the Youth Alliances. In addition, some partners identified young people living in rural areas (Norway and Poland) or from certain educational (Netherlands) or migratory backgrounds as relevant (UK, Netherlands). Recruitment efforts were tailored to these differences.

Before the start of the different groups the local staff was trained in general ideas and goals of YPAR, but also in qualitative methodology, to sensitise them to the relevance of context and

details necessary for the fieldnotes. Besides the data collection training, the local staff was instructed in the writing of the different types of documentations: A log-file, Fieldnotes of Alliance meetings, Alliance proposals and Feedback documents. Due to the pandemic, none of the planned collaborative field visits could take place. This led to very intense back and forth communication between the central researchers and local staff to discuss the different documents, the level of detail, the contextual information, possible blind spots, but also posing and answering additional questions and member checking interpretations. One important issue in the triangulation of different data sources is that certain data seemed to contradict each other (Flick, 2017; Hammersley, 2008). Therefore, seemingly relevant instances of data tension were discussed with the staff working with the youth.

The different documents were sequentially structured following the themes of the research questions. This sequential structure was then used to automatically code the different themes using ATLAS.ti. These predefined codes were the most used codes in the analysis, since simple queries could be run to retrieve information on specific themes, such as group dynamics and systemic ideas on obesity[1]. In order not to only focus on these predefined themes, local staff could *hashtag* relevant and important information in the fieldnotes. Most hashtags were predefined, but the local teams could propose new hashtags[2]. This obviously led to differences between coders, because in the different teams different suggestions were made, but the Fieldnote and Hashtags codes were mostly used to open up the data, to search for specific aspects and as heuristic device, not as the only analytical tool.

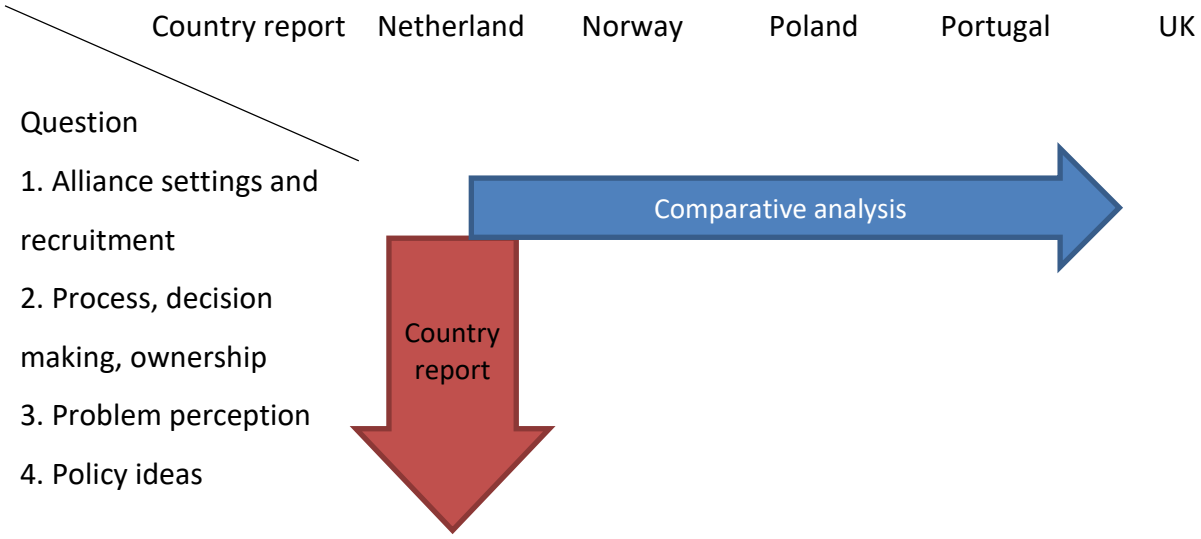
In the analysis, the complexity of the very different local situations, did not ask for a coding based, variable or reductionist oriented research. Rather we employed a complexity informed case-comparative framework (Verweij & Gerrits, 2013) which tries to take into account a wide range of situational and locally specific reciprocal relations. We did not try to oversimplify the differences between countries and alliances to fit in with a QCA or Process tracing-like approach (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), just in order to make the analysis more formalised.

[1] In Appendix 1 the list of all predefined Fieldnotes codes is shown.
[2] Appendix 2 provides a table of the hashtags and the frequency of use per country.

However, we did use the same forms of causal reasoning, that is based on the tracing of processes in longitudinal qualitative data in collaboration with the local project staff as a heuristic, partly to find out that, in line with complexity models, causal reasoning could not always be supported by data.

The hashtags codes for instance were part of the discussion of in the different writing meetings between the University of Amsterdam researchers and the local staff. Due to this intense collaboration, the researchers gained in-depth knowledge of the local situation. Based on triangulation of the documents and the different interactions with the local staff, the UvA researchers wrote highly detailed country reports, concluding with answers to the research questions per country (column in the table below). The reports were member checked by local staff, shared with youth and adjusted when necessary. These country reports are therefore our main method for interpreting the data.

The methodology is thus based on collaborative participant observation, semi structured fieldnotes, collaborative documentation, semi-automated text coding, triangulation of data sources, followed by collaborative interpretation on Alliances and between Alliances within countries. The country reports have been compared based on the different research questions, to establish whether processes that were traced or findings and explanations in one country were comparable to others. We did this by comparatively analysing, describing and collaboratively interpretating the data, while going back and forth between the data and our meetings.


Country report
Netherland
Norway
Poland
Portugal
UK
Question
1. Alliance settings and recruitment
2. Process, decision making, ownership
3. Problem perception
4. Policy ideas
Comparative analysis
Country report

Locally diverse alliances

Alliances were meant to be established in response to local needs and opportunities, which happened between summer 2019 and 2020: in Portugal, they were building on an existing collaboration with Scouts, which was known to enrol youth from diverse backgrounds. In Poland, the Netherlands and the UK (Alliance 2 and 3), Alliances were part of (voluntary) school curriculums. These Alliances attracted a relatively large number of participants across a whole school term. In Norway, Alliances were not tied to any specific organisation in two out of the three Alliances although the meetings were held in the school buildings. The third Alliance was nested in a youth organisation belonging to the CO-CREATE consortium. In the UK, a collaboration with municipal (youth) organisations resulted in one youth Alliance, which also did not last when COVID-19 restrictions started.

Alliance members also developed varying modalities of engagement based: from a small number (6-8) of long sessions (Poland, Portugal) to a large number of short sessions (20+, The Netherlands). Due to Covid-19 outbreak related restrictions starting in March 2020, all Alliances had to switch from in-person meetings to online interaction temporarily. At that point, many Alliances went through decreasing attendance and two alliances were not able to proceed online, while in some Alliances online attendance increased.

In total, 199 young (aged 15-19) Europeans participated in the Alliances. They came from diverse backgrounds in terms of socio-economic position, rural-urban context and migration background, depending on the countries (for more details see: D5.5 LINK and forthcoming D7.X). Recruiting among adolescents from lower socio-economic position was possible in the Netherlands and Poland, where collaboration was secured with schools known to have pupils with that background. Overall, girls were overrepresented in all Alliances except for one Portuguese Alliance which was mostly attended by male adolescents. In some cases, girls' overrepresentation was due to the composition of the organisation in which Alliances were set up and partly due to personal interest in the topic among youth approached in the recruitment phase. Alliances did attract boys though, and boys and girls did collaborate. Most Alliances consisted of youth with no experience in voluntary participation in organisational work, while other Alliances attracted youth already acquainted with voluntary participation.

The overall picture painted above gets blurred when we zoom in and compare across Alliances in more detail. We see a lot of difference: short lived and erratic participation of small numbers of youth from seemingly more privileged background and prolonged engagement in more diverse groups, for example. At first glance it seems that Alliances under the umbrella of an existing organisation seemed to muster more participation (see appendix 3). On closer inspection we found the largest and most stable participation when an Alliance was not only hosted *by* but also actively *embedded in* an organisation. Continuous collaboration between the organisation and the Alliances allowed to instantly adapt to hick-ups and negotiate the boundaries of the newly forming Alliances.

Creating Alliances within school-programs or other organisations which already include youth from underrepresented groups worked well because it enabled repeated contact in a reserved time-space. It was much more challenging to achieve and sustain youth engagement in unstructured time. The stability of an existing organisation also meant that temporary drops in motivation or attendance had a smaller impact. Existing organisations also provided access to networks and resources. In existing organizations, members know each-other at least to some degree which eases the start. Existing organization also provide a reference point for (dis)identification.

Setting Youth Alliances in schools or other organizations also entailed challenges. First, if activities were scheduled within school hours, the schools objectives for students needed to be considered. Second, it turned out to be tricky in some cases to guarantee the students' freedom to opt out of research if students remained bound to attending school and completing the project as a part of their curriculum. This has been negotiated by allowing for freedom of non-participation within the Alliance. Third, school seasons and school exams provided a clear break in prolonged collaboration. Almost all participation ended with a schoolyear.

We thus see clearly how the organisational setting was important while other exogenous factors as such (e.g number or length of meetings, kind of organization) were less so. Crucially all of this worked through endogenous processes (negotiating attendance, using openings and potentials for concrete steps repeatedly) in shaping participation. Given the importance of endogenous factors and particularly negotiations, we cannot conclude that a particular design

works better to include diverse youth, although an organization including them is a good starting point.

Policy ideas

One of the core activities across all Alliance activities was to facilitate youth to come up with policy ideas and develop those into concrete policy proposals for a healthier lifeworld preventing overweight and obesity. Alliance members and staff came up with 100 policy ideas of which 29 were developed into proposals. Below we reconstruct the conditions of this process.

Negotiating the conditions to come up with policy ideas

When staff introduced participants to the task of coming up with policy ideas the first thing that had to be negotiated was the task itself. In several of the Alliances, young people raised questions about what policy is and means. Adolescents asked for advocacy and presentation training or expert interviews to get a better grip on their task and be taken seriously by others. Some young people questioned who was authorized to change the environment and influence individuals' behaviour, thereby taking over people's responsibility. It was also negotiated what health means and who gets to define this, as a local staff reports:

> "[Name young person] questioned why they needed to propose an idea that is healthy and promote a healthy environment. […] What is health and according to whom? […] He mentioned that he did not want to force or influence other people" [Fieldnotes NL_B2_06].

The meaning of obesity was also more often negotiated. While there was ample room to approach health and overweight in various ways across the process, we also found that the specific (obesity prevention) frame of CO-CREATE was sometimes experienced as restricting. Several of the participants were inclined to take their own path related to the wider theme of

health and healthy environments, while in other cases we witnessed attrition. A small number of young people who were not engaged in the topic of obesity or concerned about the stigma related to the topic withdrew from the project but were later found to have continued working on their action idea outside of the project with their teacher(s). This became clear in NL Almere in the case of a few young people working on free sport for women wearing a niqab and youth having a leading/ collaborative role in the sport lessons at school. The teacher and staff confirmed in the feedback session that the topic was not appealing to everyone and made participation difficult for some of the young people [Feedback session team NL October 2021]. Likewise, recruitment in a lower SES area in Norway (Oslo) failed and the young people did not seem to perceive obesity prevention as a relevant topic (e.g. as compared to the case of severe violence in their school) [Log Norway; Feedback session team Norway October 2021].

Alliance members repeatedly established what 'the problem' was to them, and what types of actions they would see as suitable outcomes of their Alliance work. These negotiations were rather unique for each Alliance, influenced by the set-up, as exogenous mechanisms, and interactive dynamics, as endogenous mechanisms. The Alliance set-ups were for instance influential through the staff's backgrounds: in the Portuguese alliances, they had had stronger nutritionist backgrounds and we found that in these Alliances, overweight and obesity was more explicitly and extensively discussed as the problem to tackle, while in other Alliances the focus was more on healthy and unhealthy environments in the wider sense.

We found it was helpful if a joint and positive definition of the situation was connected to tangible symbols. We have identified a range of those: system maps (repeatedly used as a point of reference,) policy forms or a budget. The policy forms – which were meant to help developing policy proposals – for example have often been experienced as "difficult" and at the same time, repeatedly returning to them also served as a reference point. Moreover, working with a difficult form on a difficult topic might have been beneficial since it indicated to young collaborators that they were taken seriously and that something valuable was at stake. It was important though that local staff negotiated with youth how to deal with the forms. While in some cases, youth directly filled in and revised the forms, in other cases they were more

inclined to leave the actual writing to staff. We could also see that in some cases, the policy ideas themselves became a symbol of the group, for example when a sub-group was named after a proposal (e.g. the Restaurant Group). We found that the policy ideas became particularly important if they were validated by higher status outsiders (local policy makers, professionals, scientists).

Negotiating policy ideas

The policy ideas that young participants developed across the different Alliances reflected similar themes (see table 1) which are also common in dominant policy discourse across Europe (see also Moving and Nourishing; an overview of existing policies), especially in relation to theme 1, 2 and 3. However, ideas in theme 4 and 5, cooking lessons and societal pressure/ mental health/ social media, seem to rely somewhat more on experiences of young participants not yet reflected so much in existing policies (see also Savona et al. 2021).

Table 1. Overview action ideas and policy proposals

	Total number Ideas	Number of Alliances with these ideas	Number of Countries with these ideas	Number of Policy Proposals with these ideas
1. Environment supporting physical activity	31	10	5	7
2. Environment supporting healthy food	27	11	4	6
3. Environment supporting knowledge about health	18	12	5	8
4. Environment supporting learning how to cook	9	8	3	5
5. Environment reducing societal pressure and stress and improving mental health and social media use	15	8	4	3

At closer inspection, ideas and proposals which seem to resemble existing policies do show relevant differences. For instance, young people in all 5 countries came up with numerous action ideas focused on creating an environment where physical activity is more accessible and attractive for adolescents. However, in Alliances located in more deprived areas, there was a stronger emphasis on action ideas to provide free access to sport (equipment) for themselves, and more youth-friendly environments to avoid shame. Based on young people's experiences, a picture came to the fore of barriers to attend sport and feeling uncomfortable to sport in front of others. In one of the NL Alliances this resulted into action ideas about free sport and swimming time slots for youth, free sport equipment by the municipality to sport at home and outdoors especially during lockdowns, and women-only time slots at gyms and swimming pools, where young women could follow their own possibilities and take off their hijab. For young collaborators from more affluent areas, access to physical activity seemed less of a focus, resulting into fewer action ideas about physical activity in total. The ideas that did came to the fore focused more on having a choice in different sports, on reward systems to provide incentives to be physically active and enabling financial access for all groups of youth, often for others and not necessarily in direct relation to themselves.

The Alliance members selected action ideas to develop further into policy proposals within a smaller group or in a couple. The idea selection processes were often organised by voting, using the Nominal Group Technique (Fink et al. 1984; Van de Ven & Helbecq 1972) Our data indicates that especially when voting for ideas, the Alliance members seemed to take societal, stakeholder and staff' expectations as well as existing policies into account. Young people in one of the Norway Alliances for instance, were very engaged in discussing stigma around overweight and how social norms and influencers have a role in this. [Fieldnotes NO_A1_03]. Choosing to further develop some of their ideas, they opted for more commonly addressed themes, namely 1) food prices, 2) access to sport activities and 3) health education [Fieldnotes NO_A1_05].

Decision-making, ownership, and engagement

Youth and staff were provided with a handbook (LINK) from which they could deviate and in fact which was not once followed as planned. Across all Alliances, actual activities were repeatedly (re)negotiated. This is relevant for empowerment as defined above in terms of "voice" or ability to speak up, having a say and being heard in the Alliances. In this paragraph we suggest positive experiences with decision-making, ownership and engagement are not established at once and need meaning making, repetition, continuous efforts, and symbolisation in the context of organisations. Our analysis did not show any single intervention or breakthrough moment to achieve joint decision-making, ownership and engagement. In all cases, engagement bloomed through a combination of exogenous and endogenous factors, mainly the concrete interactions and meaning arising out of them.

Broadly, the Alliance design (INSERT LINK) allowed for a cocreated and continuously revised set of activities.

Broadly, the Alliance design (INSERT LINK) allowed for a cocreated set of activities. While we know from existing research that "negotiation" is part of all organization activities, the Alliance design capitalized on this. We witnessed that decisions on how to move forward were often influenced by youth, for example when it came to the kind of activities, the organisational form or the policy focus. Across most Alliances, youth raised concerns and opinions, which suggests that the Alliance have been a safe enough context, which might have been aided by the familiar organizational context and at least some degree of familiarity with other Alliance members in most cases. The general set-up of the Alliances enabled flexibility across the process. However, when we traced the origins of decision-making and engagement, the picture became more complex. Across 15 Alliances, decision making, ownership and engagement varied a lot between and within Alliances even within one day or session. While in one meeting, young participants were for instance actively engaged, the next meeting could easily be lifeless. This can be shown by the differences between Almere 1 and 2 in the Netherlands: within the same school, led by the same staff members, a similar group of youth engaged much more in one

Alliance than in the other. We also found that the number of meetings was not decisive: intense engagement developed in Poland, with a limited number of long meetings, as much as in Almere with many short meetings. It did not seem to matter much if the design of the Alliances was followed more (Poland) or less (Norway) closely. In both cases initially engagement did occur, not because of the general design but through the way it was implemented and negotiated.

We might think that engagement of youth flourished when CO-CREATE staff mostly supported their ideas and activities. However, we saw that that a more solid steering by staff did not prevent youth from active participation. Hence, engaging youth and staff did not appear to be a zero-sum game in which either party wins or loses (see Wong et al 2010).

In our data, we found that getting a task and feeling empowered to bring forward own ideas often worked in tandem. Across Alliances, letting youth take the lead more often did not lead to more frequent engagement or more elaborate policy proposals. Rather, it depended on the quality of the interactions relative to the position of youth in Alliances if engagement occurred or if a task was seen as just another task.

Our data did not indicate an ideal group size for participatory action with youth. Looking at groups from 3 to 20+ participants, it did not seem to matter much how big a group was or if students knew each other already. What did matter was what the size meant in a particular context. For example, in one case, splitting up a larger group in smaller projects in response to suggestions by participants was a sign of being listened too, and being able to tailor interests to a particular idea. In another case, a small number of participants was interpreted as lack of interest. We did however find that in larger groups, some of the youth said they felt hampered by unmotivated peers (Feedback NL_B2_FF_05). In very small groups on the other hand, staff noted that groups were vulnerable to attrition [Fieldnotes NO_A1_05]. Group size in general was influenced by exogenous factors: school/scout-based groups were larger than groups which needed to recruit every single participant.

We thus found that the group size, influenced by exogenous factors, gets meaning in interaction; when it becomes a sign of being listened too or having a joint focus it can have a positive effect in engagement. Yet even in that situation, a newly formed sub-group can fall still. A positive dynamic depends on interactions in consecutive situations and therefore needs repetition. For example, when a newly formed group convenes and starts working on a policy idea, joint decision-making and engagement need to be re-affirmed.

Interaction and negotiations also mattered for the way inequality and difference were addressed in the Alliances. For example, external validation through encounters with policy makers and professionals motivated most of the youth. They had never had this experience before, nor did they envision themselves to be heard. Validation thus counters difference and inequality in terms of age. The effect over validation seemed even stronger for youth from more deprived contexts.

For example, the young Alliance members from more deprived contexts in the Netherlands were impressed and motivated when they received a budget to improve access to fresh food through joint activities [Fieldnotes NL_B1_03]. In the Portuguese Alliances on the other hand, where youth came from more advantaged contexts, the introduction of a budget did not lead to strong response [Fieldnotes P_A1_07]. We suggest that it was not the sheer lack of financial resources which motivated members, but that granting a budget also signalled recognition and trust.

Changes in problem perception

CO-CREATE was built on the premise that childhood obesity is a system-dynamic issue, in which processes ranging from global food-chains to a body's metabolism interact in complex ways and should be tackled as such. Supported by scientific evidence, this premise is not necessarily an easy one to endorse, given the persisting strength of the individual choice narrative in our societies. Hence, while all young people signing up for the Alliances were initially interested in

the topic of obesity, some were nonetheless likely to regard childhood obesity as mostly a matter of individual choice (see also Savona et al 2021). Yet, in all Alliances, many adolescents endorsed the systems perspective, either when they were already quite keen on the systems perspective from the beginning (some Alliances in Norway and some in Portugal) or gradually became so (in most cases). Some resistance to the systems perspective was still observed. For example, in two Dutch Alliances it resurfaced, either because reflecting on what may have an influence on the rise of overweight among youth was experienced as difficult (NL Almere 1) or because system thinking appeared to be at odd with adolescents own views on individual responsibility (NL Almere 2). Thinking in terms of a vast system often was difficult for youth. Interestingly, those with experiences of stress, poverty and (welfare) state intervention could relate to this easier it seemed.

Some adolescents adopted the system perspective rather quickly, for example after learning about and discussing systems maps. In the Portuguese Cascais Alliance, just learning the word 'Obesogenic environment' led to a shift in discourse [Fieldnotes_P_A1_01]. More often the shift in perspective entailed a range of activities. Repeatedly focussing and working on the policy proposal and system-maps seemed to work as shared focus of attention around which the meaning of overweight and obesity could be reworked. Nevertheless, the process of grasping a systems perspective through the maps was not always easy [Fieldnotes UK_A1_01].

We also found that what is commonly called a problem perception entails a rather intricate mix of assumptions. Young Alliance members used arguments about individual choice or single factors in conjunctions with arguments about complex dynamics and societal causes. Working on policy ideas assisted youth in bringing this up. That said, the Norwegian and Portuguese Alliances put forward more explicit ideas for society wide interventions also affecting local and individual action.

In all countries young collaborators reported a new way of thinking and an increased awareness of societal issues and the role young people could play through the feedback forms and open

questions in the questionnaire While fully attending to complex system dynamics was rare, young people repeatedly reported to be more aware of the wider social and political context:

> "I have become more aware of what is happening around me. I notice things (i.e., prices and influences on the food) which I mostly would not have cared about. I have also started to be interested in other societal problems" [Feedback Forms Norway A1].

Discussion

Between 2019 and 2021, 199 adolescents and adults collaborated in 15 Youth Alliance for obesity prevention across 5 EU countries. They did so based on our adaptation of participatory action research (Ozer and Piatt 2017; CalFresh 2012, Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner 2013). Using a comparative micro-sociological lens across the alliances we wanted to find out if and how the Alliances 1) included diverse youth; 2) enhanced engagement, 3) generated policy proposals and involved 4) changes in problem perception. To answer these questions, we gathered and collaborative and comparatively triangulated observational and contextual data. While overall, we might be positive about outcomes in these areas, a closer looked provide a picture which urges us to rethink an outcome and factor-based generic approach.

Alliances were provided with a general outline of activities (handbook), staff and support which they adapted to local conditions and opportunities and to the needs of youth and adults. Alliance initially shaped up as in-person meetings, at dedicated hours, for somewhere between 6 to 20+ times. Face-to-face activities were supported by online chats. During Covid-19 restriction periods, all activities went online for some time. The Alliances had between 5 and 23 members in total (see appendix 3), three-quarter of them female, with diverse backgrounds when it comes to socio-economic position and migration history (for more details see LINKD55). In the Alliance, young citizens brought up 100 different ideas for health prevention and 29 made it until the final rounds of refinement. While thinking about policy was not evident or

easy for young collaborators – nor for us – this challenge was often also experienced as rewarding and sign of relevance. In the process, adolescents and adults negotiated what health and obesity mean and how they want to address it, although staff in some instances negotiated the limits of activities. Based on these negotiations, 29 ideas were developed into policy proposals and some of the policy proposals have been taken up after the Alliances in Dialogue Forums (FORTHCOMING WP6).

The Alliances at large came to a halt after a school year or after a set number of activities. We were able to reach out to young people from diverse and partly underrepresented backgrounds who at first felt disenfranchised yet, through repeated interactions and validation, came to speak up and act, addressing their immediate and wider social context. Reaching out to young people through schools with a high number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds proved helpful for inclusion. At the same time, the half-open format allowed us to re-engage with youth more easily in case of temporary drop-out. There was however a trade-off: participation during school hours is not fully voluntary.

Our approach shows promising results, although we acknowledge that it was very hard to engage young people if participation fell outside school or scouting hours, for example. This might be an indication that this kind of adult initiated activities work better in a structured setting, although we did see that participation could be low in structured settings too. The content of the Alliance – overweight prevention - was limiting at times, while also providing a context for debate and renegotiation.

While we did witness a “partnership” (Zeldin et al 2013) between adolescents and adults and shared control (Wong et al 2010) or even empowerment (Kohfeldt 2013; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995) in some case, this was for sure not always the case. Therefore, we had been looking for conditions of success or failure like recruitment approach, number or length of meetings, organizational setting, number of participants or specific tools to be able to come up with general recommendations. However, we did not find a magic bullet looking at these

exogenous factors. Even within one organization and with the same staff, the results of different groups were markedly different. Locally, there was so much volatility that we turned to understanding exactly this: how exogenous factors (input into the Alliances) and endogenous processes (interactions within the Alliances) constituted outcomes over time. Following micro-sociology (Blumer 1969, Trinidad 2022) and complexity thinking (Callaghan 2008), we suggest that diverse groups, policy ideas, engagement and changes in perception emerge out of a combination of: repeated and sustained (face-to-face) interactions, the construction of joint symbols and constant negotiations of meaning and order (Strauss 1993) in response to the ever-changing engagement of youth and staff. Some exogenous conditions are supportive but not determining: a meeting place, dedicated time and a budget. Staff needs intimate knowledge of the local organization and specific social inequalities affecting participants and strong commitment to adapt constantly. Staff and youth need a framework and resources to work with which is clear enough as a starting point yet flexible enough to respond to challenges.

We thus plea for adaptive participatory action which focusses on process rather than outcomes. A process is sustained by tangible symbols which emerge out participation. We saw that "system-maps", "policy proposals" or "photo's" might contribute to that. It also helps if members are most of the time present in an Alliance, as is the case in schools or scout groups, even if this is not completely voluntary. From a voluntaristic perspective, existing organisations are coercive. From an interaction perspective, repeated presence in Alliances supports the growth of shared definitions, trust and engagement.

While we took inspiration from approaches to participation as shared control (Zeldin et al 2013; Wong et al 2010), the actual day-to-day work shows that while in one situation, it can be beneficial to leave a decision to youth, in another situation it worked well when staff took the lead. We thus argue that instead of designing a standard approach, participation needs constant adaptation. Our contribution is therefore neither a critique of nor an addition to a specific approach to youth participation. Instead, a micro-sociological approach brings to the fore that it is less the approach and more the situated interaction which matters (Bredewold et

al 2016, Trinidad 2022). Negotiating order means that structural inequalities or organizational setting become relevant in specific ways during participation. Through interaction, power-imbalances can be addressed, and new experiences can be taken in by adolescents and adults.

Within this adaptive participatory approach, we see adolescents engage with a complex issue and develop policy ideas into more refined policy proposals. Repeated engagement and a joint focus on shared ideas, together with PAR activities, led to proposals which are more precise and more attuned to threats and opportunities in a policy field. However, the number and content of policy proposals was influenced by a range of interactions and exogenous and endogenous factors: youth preferences, voting on ideas, staff preferences etc. While we might need further research on this, it also seems that sustained engagement with policy ideas and stakeholders does not always bring out the most innovative ideas. Not dissimilar to policy making at large, the input of stakeholders and the use of existing knowledge might favour a regression to piecemeal change.

We assumed that youth is underrepresented in politics and that this underrepresentation also means that their experience, knowledge and creativity is underrepresented in prevention policy (Baillergeau, 2016). Our analysis points to a more complex relation between youth positionality and experience. We see that the way young Europeans think of obesity prevention is often consonant with or similar to existing dominant policies (for the relation between policy and everyday experience see Bröer 2006; Bröer and Kroesen 2009). Underrepresented youth as a category is keeping conforming and nonconforming knowledge. We definitely hear dissonant voices (Luhtakallio & Thévenot 2018), for instance adolescents criticize the focus on obesity or demand attention for societal pressure on youth, mental health, and social media (see also Savona et al. 2021). However, future research could be more precise about where and how this knowledge emerges.

Addressing inequality through participation, likewise, cannot be achieved by following a script, for example of “listening” or of “providing”. What is needed, yet not sufficient, is sensitivity to how structural inequality translates into specific experiences and needs which are then never

stable or given but rather renegotiated in interactions. We do seem to see though that relatively more disadvantaged youth could profit more from participating in Alliances if across multiple sessions specific experiences of disenfranchisement were countered with recognition and trust.

The Alliances analysed here have been part of the EU Horizon 2020 project CO-CREATE. Within this funding scheme, we promised to deliver outputs and disseminate novel ideas. In hindsight, this linear and output oriented way of working might not fit completely well with the way we saw adolescents and staff interact in the Alliances. An open process, valuing and adapting to situated interactions might be an alternative. While having desired outcomes at the horizon, it is fair to say that the complexity of local interactions cautions against high hope and yet opens the possibility of exchange and learning. If we would have worked from this starting point early on, we would also have been closer to another assumption in CO-CREATE: that obesity prevention is part of a dynamic and complex system. Within this perspective, change is hard to predict and efforts to change the obesogenic systems are already always part of the same system. So rather than an output-based approach, we might have planned out an innovation or programmatic approach in which we would have organized activities in response to ongoing learnings.

Looking back, we also see that, although we have designed an approach which is flexible, user-friendly and allows adolescents to participate in various ways, the same cannot be said about the methodology with which we research our approach. Our methodology for researching PAR is largely adult and academics centred. This means for example that we have extensively worked with observations by staff and less with interviews for example. While there are good methodological reasons to this, it also means that the evaluations of adults are stronger represented than those of adolescents. However, the voice and experiences of adolescents are what staff was trained to observe and did indeed record.

Conclusion

The process of furthering citizens participation in policymaking across various countries has led to an enormous range of approaches and experiment. In this article we are concerned with participation of youth in policymaking and especially the use of Participatory Action Research to that end. In brief, we might say that our approach has meaningfully engaged adolescents and a lead to a partnership kind of participation (Arnstein, 1969, Hart 2008). Our approach was able to include diverse adolescents, to cocreate a range of policy proposals attuned to both their experience and the field of heath prevention, to support empowerment and to get adolescents engage in system-directed thinking and acting. However, rather than contributing to the discussion about types and outcomes of participation, we have adopted a micro-sociological lens to investigate how participation emerges. A focus on meaning-making and interaction helps to understand how participants negotiate participation in a wider (structural) context. One type of participation can have multiple and even contradictory outcomes depending on non-linear, emergent and contingent local effects.

We suggest that a typology of participatory approaches and sets of tools or handbooks (like our own) should be complemented by a more realistic picture: participatory action is strongly embedded in local and structural contexts which can and must be renegotiated for participation to have an effect. In this process, even slight variations can have massive effects on outcomes, and it needs constant adaption to keep participation going. We therefore caution against an output-oriented way of looking at participatory action and suggest to also move away from an instrumental approach at least if it is based on a linear model (generating evidence and then applying it in a different context). We rather acknowledge that research and intervention are interacting in a complex system (Callaghan 2008; Gortmaker e.a., 2011; Johnston e.a., 2014; Rutter et al 2017). Outcome of a process of participation are an emergent property of that process or a property of a case instead of a causal effect of isolated factors (Byrne and Ragin 2020; Gerrits and Verweij 2013). The Alliances enabled us to learn just this and enable two hundred young Europeans to learn about overweight, policy or advocacy.

Stories about empowerment and concrete activities of young citizens engaging their immediate and wider social context suggest that its worthwhile to embark on participatory action, while nuancing instrumental and output oriented thinking on the part of adults.

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Appendix 1 (Fieldnote codes FNcodes):

Table presenting the Number of Fieldnotes per country, The Total number coded quotations with FN codes and the Total number of coded quotations.

	Netherlands	Norway	Poland	Portugal	United Kingdom	Totals
Number of fieldnotes	48	16	21	21	23	**129**
Total number coded quotations with FN codes	2055	688	903	903	989	**5538**
Total number of coded quotations	2494	981	1518	1233	1114	**8257**

Since all FN codes occur exactly as often as the total number of Fieldnotes, due to the structured format of the Field note form.

FN01: Pseudonym of alliance	FN23: GROUP DYNAMICS: Your own impression
FN02: Number of meeting	FN24: GROUP DYNAMICS: Felt trusted
FN03: Date of meeting	FN25: CHALLENGES
FN04: Time of meeting	FN26: CHALLENGES: other
FN05: Name of facilitators	FN27: CHALLENGES: role (Co-)Facilitator
FN06: Name of co-facilitators	FN28: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY
FN07: Other people present	FN29: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY: systemic
FN08: Authors of this field note	FN30: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY: shifts between individual to systemic
FN09: Content of meeting	FN31: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY: inequality
FN10: Place of the meeting	FN32: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY: stigmatisation
FN11: Duration of the meeting	FN33: TALKS ABOUT OBESITY: reference to knowledge
FN12: Number attending	FN34: OTHER RELEVANT QUOTES
FN13: Number attending first time	FN35: OWN REFLECTION
FN14: Number NOT attending	FN36: OWN REFLECTION: Learned
FN15: Recruitment efforts	FN37: ETHICAL QUESTIONS
FN16: DEMOGRAPHICS AND DIVERSITY	FN38: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: observed breaches
FN17: ACTIVITIES	FN39: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: refusing participation

FN18: RESEARCH DATA	FN40: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: negative impact of participating
FN19: DECISION MAKING	FN41: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: criticism
FN20: POLICY AND POLITICS	FN42: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: other challenges related to participation
FN21: READINESS FOR ACTION	FN43: ETHICAL QUESTIONS: issues regarding health and safety
FN22: GROUP DYNAMICS	

Appendix 2 (Hashtag-codes):

Codes-document groups per country, cells show number of quotations (fragments, occurrences) coded with that Hashtag code

	Netherlands	Norway	Poland	Portugal	UK	Totals
#Action	25	25	85	29	12	**176**
#Aspiration	1	0	3	0	0	**4**
#Causality	0	1	0	0	0	**1**
#Challenge	47	3	124	6	0	**180**
#Co-facilitation	40	34	137	34	7	**252**
#Commitment	1	0	0	39	0	**40**
#Conceptual Definition	11	8	0	6	1	**26**
#Discussion	17	4	8	30	2	**61**
#Diversity	27	8	9	1	1	**46**
#Dynamics	1	0	0	0	0	**1**
#Engagement	5	0	0	0	0	**5**
#Ethics	20	9	20	8	4	**61**
#Experiential Knowledge	19	14	53	6	1	**93**
#Fora	2	4	18	6	0	**30**
#Individual Talk	42	28	29	8	13	**120**
#Interesting	42	6	12	30	0	**90**
#Maps	17	37	23	28	17	**122**
#Online	2	9	0	27	1	**39**
#Other Knowledge	10	14	17	4	1	**46**
#Ownership	109	85	120	75	34	**423**
#PAR	57	33	1	68	34	**193**
#Photovoice	2	0	0	18	0	**20**
#Policy	73	30	310	98	38	**549**
#System Talk	71	84	87	38	32	**312**
#Vlogging	0	0	1	0	0	**1**
Total number coded quotations with # code	**641**	**436**	**1057**	**559**	**198**	**2891**

Appendix 3: Number of meetings and participants in Alliances

The Netherlands

- A1: 10 members
  - 17 face-to-face meetings; 6-10 members per meeting
  - (max) 10 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) with sub-groups; 3-8 members per meeting
- B1/ B2: 28 members in total (some youth attended both alliances and switched along the way)
  - B1: 16 members
    - 16 face-to-face meetings; 6-15 members per meeting
    - (max) 6 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) with sub-groups; 2-5 members per meeting
  - B2: 18 members
    - 16 face-to-face meetings; 13-17 members per meeting
    - (max) 9 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) with sub-groups; 1-3 members per meeting

Norway

- A1: 12 members
  - 8 face-to-face meetings; 3-8 members per meeting
  - 4 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 3 members per meeting
- B1: 13 members
  - 3 face-to-face meetings; 4-5 members per meeting
  - 0 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions)
- C1: 12 members
  - 0 face-to-face meetings
  - 3 online group meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 6-8 members per meeting
  - 2 online sub-group meeting; 3 members per meeting

Portugal

- A1: 19 members
  - 5 face-to-face meetings; 10-16 per meeting
  - 3 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) + 5 online Q&A sessions; 9-11 members per meeting
- B1: 9 members
  - 4 face-to-face meetings; 2-7 members per meeting
  - 4 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) + 5 online Q&A sessions; 3-6 members per meeting
- C1: 14 members

- 4 face-to-face meetings; 6-9 members per meeting
- 4 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions) + 5 online Q&A sessions; 2-7 members per meeting

Poland

- A1: 23 members
  - 4 face-to-face meetings; 18-23 members per meeting
  - 3 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 3-11 members per meeting
- B1:20 members
  - 4 face-to-face meetings; 16-20 per meeting
  - 2 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 8-9 members per meeting
- C1: 22 members
  - 4 face-to-face meetings; 18-21 per meeting
  - 4 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions; 3-10 members per meeting

UK

- A1: 5 members
  - 6 face-to-face meetings; 2-5 members per meeting
  - 0 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions)
- B1/ B2: 12 members in total (some youth attended both alliances and switched along the way)
  - B1: 9 members
    - 5 face-to-face meetings; 4-7 per meeting
    - 7 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 1-3 members per meeting
  - B2: 8 members
    - 5 face-to-face meetings; 5-6 members per meeting
    - 7 online meetings (after COVID-19 restrictions); 3-4 members per meeting

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CO-CREATE