

France: Urban Health Networks – local action to tackle health inequalities

Supported by French national and regional policies on improving access to prevention and health care, Urban Health Networks (Ateliers Santé Ville) are set up in deprived neighborhoods to reduce socio-economic inequalities in health. The Networks develop local, small-scale projects targeted to the specific risks and needs of the most deprived population groups. At the end of 2008, about 300 Urban Health Networks were working across France. They have become a key actor in French health policy.

Why Urban Health Networks?

Since the mid 1990s, French urban policy increasingly focuses on “critical urban areas” (Zones Urbaines Sensibles), disadvantaged neighborhoods with low income and education levels and high unemployment. In total, there are 751 critical urban areas in France with about 4.5 million inhabitants (over a quarter of which live in the Parisian suburbs).

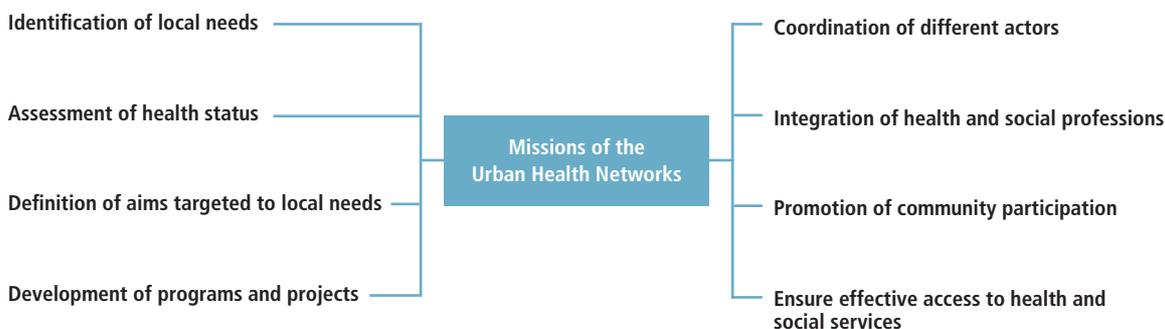
- The repeated failure of centrally-organized measures to reduce health inequalities called for a more locally-oriented approach in the late 1990s.
- Instead of introducing fixed national programs, the idea was to involve the local population affected and to target interventions to their unique needs.

Top-down support for bottom-up action

Several legal initiatives have encouraged local and regional level cooperation to improve the health of people living in deprived neighborhoods.

- In 1998, the responsibility for developing programs to increase access to prevention and care was transferred to the regions.
- In 2000, a decree between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Employment, Social Cohesion and Housing defined their overall missions and ways of working (see figure).
- After a positive evaluation of two pilot projects in 2003, another inter-ministerial decree set the goal of establishing 300 networks by 2008.

Missions of the Urban Health Networks



Urban Health Networks – a participatory approach

The Networks bring together a wide range of public and private actors at local level. Providers of health and social care, policy makers and residents of the neighborhoods set an agreement to develop targeted health interventions which improve access to health and social services. The active involvement of the local community lies at the core of the Urban Health Networks. By means of a participatory approach, the Networks identify specific problems and needs which are relevant to the most disadvantaged groups and propose solutions which are acceptable to all actors concerned.

The advantages of joint action

The local population and providers of health and social services are actively engaged in all phases of development of Urban Health Network projects, which is an important factor for the success of the Networks:

- **high satisfaction of stakeholders:** Local level groups are convinced by the contribution of these networks to improving access to health and social services.
- **high level of engagement:** the participative approach of the networks increases engagement to meet the common aims of improved community well-being.
- **a more integrated approach to health:** The fragmentation of health and social services is gradually bridged by the efforts of the Health Networks by improving awareness and information on different actors/services.
- **impact on regional health programs:** Public health programs at regional level are expected to take into account the problems and priorities set by the networks.

Future challenges

Despite the advantages of the Urban Health Networks, there are challenges which need to be overcome in the future:

- **Securing funding:** Urban Health Networks are financed jointly by municipalities and by the state, in some areas also by community groups. However, some municipalities hesitate to develop Urban Health Networks because they think that the state's financial commitment is not sufficient. Finding sustainable funding will thus become a major challenge to establishing and maintaining the Networks.
- **Improving evaluation:** Although evaluation mechanisms exist at local level, there is a lack of quantifiable data regarding the results achieved given the objectives set. Moreover, there is no framework to compare different Urban Health Networks at national level. Continuous evaluation and better dissemination of results will be necessary to identify best practice and to provide better guidance for new networks.

Full report:

Or, Z. and V. Lucas. „Urban Health Networks“. HealthPolicyMonitor, April 2009. Available at www.hpm.org/survey/fr/a13/3

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