

## **Dilemmas in local health equity policies: can a capabilities approach to democratic equality help? (proposed for parallel session C2)**

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### **Abstract:**

The injustice of social health inequalities is widely acknowledged (e.g. Daniels, 2008). Yet it is not always clear what is ethically the best way to address these inequalities. In a study together with the public health department of the city of Utrecht, where reduction of health inequalities is a core policy objective, a series of ethical dilemmas for local policy are being identified. For instance, should fast food chains be averted out of deprived neighborhoods for the sake of healthy eating or rather be welcomed for the sake of employment? Should the municipality extend subsidies to promote healthy living at primary schools to (lower general) secondary schools if the latter have other urgent concerns such as a shortage of teachers and criminality? And how to balance urban planning ideals – highrise along motorways, lower houses towards the centre – with the ideal of equality in healthy physical living environments?

Commonly used approaches to public justification of dilemmas in public health and health care tend to move away from social justice via utilitarian/aggregative reasoning (cf. Badano, 2018). Analyzing dilemmas in terms of effects on capabilities needed for democratic equality (Anderson 1999, 2010) could be a fruitful approach towards justifying policy choices, while keeping social justice (understood as democratic equality) as a core value. The paper explores the merits of a democratic egalitarian capabilities approach further for policy practice. By building primarily on the work of Elizabeth Anderson, Norman Daniels, and Iris Young, a first step is made towards concretizing democratic egalitarian capabilities and their potential significance for public health policy practice.

Since health is an important constituent of each of these capabilities, policies to improve health generally seem laudable. However, in case of dilemmas, health may come at the cost of other goods. The point is then to discern ways and degrees in which these policies negatively affect capabilities needed for democratic equality (e.g. diminishing access to education or employment). In addition, considering the effects on these capabilities may further help to think about relevant forms of compensations for losses in specific capabilities (e.g. improve employment opportunities in other ways).

Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the approach is applied to a priority-setting dilemma. This reveals some key challenges regarding i. a. distribution patterns and the role of empirical research, for which some further directions of thought are discussed.

### **References**

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