

## Health Promotion in a Sustainability Perspective

Guest editorial

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TES Special Issue on

# Health Promotion in a Sustainability Perspective

**Guest editorial**

Nicole Thualagant & Erling Jelsøe

The articles in this special issue of TES originate from research and scientific discussions among a group of researchers at the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Roskilde University. Working broadly with health promotion from both a social and a humanistic perspective, the researchers present essential points and discussions in their research activities and illustrate, in particular, the relevance of a sustainability perspective on the broad range of issues that exist within this research area.

There are obvious interfaces and interactions between health promotion and sustainability. As argued previously by some of the researchers from the research centre, a perspective on the duality between health and sustainability is believed to create a platform for a critical and theoretical stance (Kjærgård, Land & Pedersen, 2014). A non-sustainable development will very often have negative consequences for the people involved, but the opposite can also be the case, as is pointed out in the article by Kirsten Bransholm Pedersen, Birgit Land and Bente Kjærgård in this issue. In addition, health promotion as a concept is clearly parallel to sustainability because of its normativity and broad integrative character (Kickbusch, 2010; Kjærgård, Land & Pedersen, 2014; Pedersen & Land, 2010).

Sustainability as a concept can be characterised as a complex of environmental, social, economic, political and planning dimensions and the interactions between them. Moreover, sustainability is concerned with the satisfaction of basic needs in society and the accumulation of resources and capacities that ensure the achievement of these basic needs. Thus, sustainability places a focus on equity for present, as well as futures generations. Health promotion is understood as 'the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health' (WHO, 1986: p. 405) and focuses broadly on societal conditions, and social determinants that influence health and create possibilities for improvements or set barriers to health. The strategies targeting sustainability, as well as the strategies targeting health promotion, should be concerned with implementing policies that are durable in relation to several dimensions, such as the environmental, social and economic dimensions. In other words this special issue argues for a more holistic approach to both sustainability and health promotion.

Health promotion is clearly associated with a social dimension in a way that extends far beyond the health care sector. The process of enabling individuals can be understood as a social engagement and a concern with the social context that determines and structures the possibilities of social agency. As a consequence, it is intimately connected with social sustainability. Several of the articles in this issue focus on health promotion in a specific social context, in particular the contributions of Heidi Lene Andersen, Ditte-Marie

From and Nicole Thualagant. Social groups such as those who are functionally disabled, citizens from marginalised communities, and potentially doped members of fitness centres are all actors who, in a political perspective, are considered a target group because of a potential lack of social and economic resources. Perceiving these citizens as lacking resources contributes to setting barriers to their health promotion. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the social context in which these citizens are embedded and to create a socially sustainable environment that enables them to act in relation to their health on an equal footing with other citizens. In other words, engaging a democratic objective that strengthens a sustainable citizenship.

However, there has been a tendency to reduce sustainability conceptually to environmental sustainability (Jelsøe & Kjærgård, 2010). Not least, the social dimension has been deprioritised both conceptually and in the more practice oriented implementations of sustainability, as pointed out by several scholars (Cuthill, 2010; Dempsey et al, 2011; Parra, 2013; Sébastien & Brodhag, 2004). This has contributed to placing the relationship between health and sustainability in the shade. In this special issue we will emphasise the broad integrative character of the concept. Only in more specific contexts, such as in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR), has an emphasis on the social dimension of sustainability appeared to have gained increasing importance over the last 10 years.

Conversely, there has also been a tendency to disregard the fact that the concept of health promotion encompasses an interaction with the biophysical environment (Kickbusch, 2010). One reason for this may be the reduction of environmental sustainability to quantifiable and measurable indicators, which has made it hard to establish the connection to health promotion as an effort concerned with strengthening citizens' resources and capacity to act.

As an alternative to this, more context-specific efforts oriented towards sustainable development at a community level can provide frameworks for citizen involvement. Such efforts can lead to cross-cutting activities that integrate health promotion and sustainability, as demonstrated in the article by Heidi Lene Andersen in this issue. Health promoting initiatives should be supported by integrative policies that are oriented towards the actual conditions rather than based on general indicators. The conditions for the integration of health promotion and sustainability are thus very dependent on the approach taken. Some of the prevailing understandings of these issues stand in the way of integration and a critical approach to both health promotion and sustainable development will seek to transcend these prevailing understandings. The generalising and instrumental approach to sustainability is one example of such a conception.

With respect to health promotion, there has been a tendency to stress an orientation towards individual behaviour and campaigns that target risk behaviour, as some of the articles in this issue also stress (Andersen, From, Thualagant). Embedded in the rationale of neoliberalism is a focus on individual responsibility towards a healthy path in the numerous health promotion strategies and initiatives. This tendency can be contested through a health promotion that seeks to understand health practices as initiatives that must be directed towards peoples' possibilities for acting in connection with the structures and societal conditions in different settings, such as schools, local environments, workplaces and so on (Dybbroe & Land, 2012: p. 11). The articles in this issue are characterised by a critical approach that emphasises context specific and social conceptions of health promotion and sustainable development, as well as the involvement of citizens through supportive strategies that strengthen the citizens' possibilities for acting according to their own goals.

Another important barrier to an integration of health promotion and sustainability has been the differentiation of environment and health into different political and administrative sectors each with their institutions and practices. This differentiated political and administrative management has made it difficult to cope with broad cross-cutting goals and activities, despite the fact that a need for integrative policies has often been recognised and formulated in policy papers and programmes during the last decades; in particular, since the formulation of the so-called socio-ecological model of health by the WHO and UNEP at the

beginning of the 1990s, and the subsequent inclusion of the model in the declaration of the UN Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Various aspects of the problem of sectoralisation are dealt with in this issue by Pernille Almlund and Jesper Holm as well as by Erling Jelsøe. A more general discussion of the policy integration issue is found in the article by Jesper Holm, Bente Kjærgård and Erling Jelsøe.

Finally, as mentioned above, it is important to note that health and sustainability strategies are not always mutually supportive. In their theoretical and conceptual discussion of this issue, Kirsten Bransholm Pedersen, Birgit Land and Bente Kjærgård stress that strategies directed towards sustainable development must politically be correlated with strategies for health promotion. They achieve this through the introduction of their *duality model of health and sustainability* and they illustrate the necessity of linking the two political objectives by discussing the consequences of food waste reduction strategies. Through their theoretical discussion of the interrelations between health and sustainability they provide a common framework for the articles in this special issue.

With the objective of bridging health promotion and sustainability and finding inspiration in the framework proposed by Pedersen, Kjærgård and Land, the following articles in this special issue propose different perspectives on how to grasp the two key concepts in relation to sustainable health promotion.

In the article 'Post Rio and Ottawa Policy — health promotion and sustainable development compared', Pernille Almlund and Jesper Holm illustrate how health promotion and sustainability can be approached as two complex policy fields that have framed policies internationally and nationally since the 1980s. By looking at the regimes constituted in visionary political documents and strategy papers at UN level, the authors explore the impact of these on a national level, that is, in Denmark. Inspired by system theory, and more specifically by the social theorist Niklas Luhmann, the authors conduct a policy analysis that accentuates the differences in the national implementation of the two policy regimes (health promotion) and (sustainability) and argues for a bridge between them.

In the article by Erling Jelsøe, 'Dietary guidelines: Nutritional health communication versus sustainable food policy', the interrelations between health and sustainability are elucidated through an analysis of the proposals for making dietary guidelines that integrate nutritional and sustainable considerations. Such proposals have emerged in a number of countries during the last ten years but have been met with conflicts and controversies in all cases. The article explores the development underlying these proposals and analyses the conflicts and controversies that they have faced. Through the analysis a number of different types of conflicts are identified and the article points to some ways of coping with such conflicts in order to enable the development of integrated dietary guidelines.

The article by Ditte-Marie From suggests a reading and a discussion of the current challenges to attaining sustainable health promotion with the rising implementation of welfare technologies. Entering an era of digital welfare involves challenges in relation to the social dimension of health promotion. The author escapes the traditional dichotomous stance between for and against the implementation of new technologies in relation to welfare services by arguing that technology can be applied with a sustainability objective. In the article she scrutinises the policy documents behind the emergence of digital welfare technologies and, based on a critical sociological discussion, she points to how the introduction of new health technologies as a health strategy forms a new concept of health and health promotion. She then discusses how a new concept of health and welfare leads to a strategy of governing citizens via discourses of promises and optimisation. Her conclusion is that we still have to learn the sustainable effects on human welfare of the new strategies of digital welfare technologies.

With the backdrop of her empirical work for her Ph.D. study inspired by action research, Heidi Lene Andersen underlines the necessity of thinking and planning through an intersectoral perspective in relation to a sustainable future for disabled communities. By emphasising empowerment and the concept

of community health as important tools, the author argues that citizen participation can be achieved in order to secure a sustainable health promotion. In this sense, Heidi Lene Andersen is contributing with a perspective inspired by the social dimension of sustainability in her quest for a transition towards healthy and sustainable futures.

The sixth article in this special issue is an illustration of how the concept of sustainability and its social dimension can be inspirational in regard to the making of health promotion. In the article, 'Is the regulation against potentially doped bodies in a fitness context socially sustainable, Nicole Thualagant presents a critical discussion of the current anti-doping policy and invites the reader to reconceive the ambition of a doping free environment by suggesting a policy that includes the social settings in which bodywork takes place. More precisely, this entails regarding the social settings of fitness as important tools towards a more sustainable health promotion policy in Danish 'Sport for All' clubs.

In the article, 'Politics of co-ordination in environmental health', Jesper Holm, Bente Kjærgård and Erling Jelsøe propose a review of the political attempts concerning a co-ordination of environment and health. Despite the fact that the interconnectedness between health and environment has been proclaimed over and over again, this article illustrates the difficult task of realising a coordinated environmental health policy. Moreover, the article discusses the substantiality of the efforts on coordination by shedding light on the different political attempts that have been conducted in international and national contexts.

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