

## REPORT of the THEMATIC SEMINAR

### *Indicators to Measure Socio-Economic Inequalities in Health in the Context of Sustainable Development Examples and problems in Belgium; challenges for health policies*

The sixth and last *thematic seminar "From Gothenborg to Brussels"* was held on the 10th of June in Brussels and focussed on indicators to measure socio-economic inequalities in health. After an introduction to theme given by the Platform, the seminar continued with five consecutive presentations, after which a final debate with the public followed. This report summarizes the different presentations and gives an account of the debate.

You can download the powerpoint presentations on <http://www.belspo.be/platformisd>

- **Platform Indicators for Sustainable Development**

Title of the presentation : " **Introduction: the links between Health and socio-economic inequalities and how to assess them?** "

The Platform started with a brief introduction on the links between health and socio-economic inequalities based on the working paper edited by the platform on this topic (see website). The presentation stressed the complexity and the multi-dimensionality of the relationship between both issues. For instance, in time the definition of health has progressively been broadened towards an integration of different dimensions. The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes health as « *a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity* ».

When assessing the health status of a population or an individual, it is therefore important to take into account a variety of factors (such, as cultural, economic, social, environmental, psychological,...). Figure 1 (inspired by Dr. De Spiegelaere) illustrates the numerous aspects which determine the health status of a person.

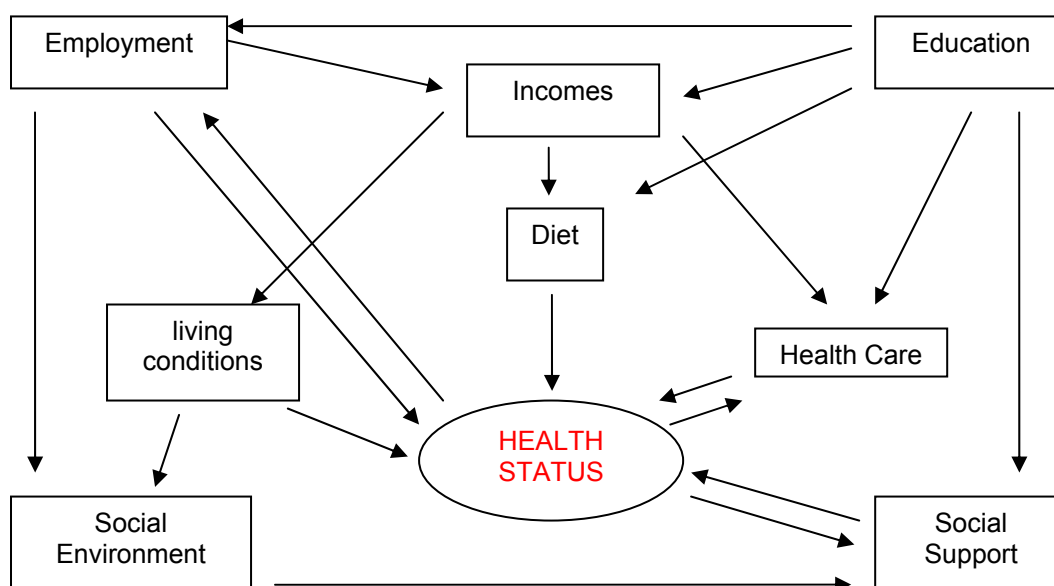


Figure 1 : Interlinkages to be taken into account for assessing the health status of a person

The assessment of socio-economic inequalities in health requires the availability of sufficient and appropriate social and economic data at the individual level, as well as methodologies and indicators which highlight the linkages between these socio-economic characteristics and the health status. Furthermore, there is also a need to assess health policies in the perspective of tackling socio-economic inequalities. As figure 2 shows, health status and health policies assessments are closely linked but are different types. In both kinds of assessments, indicators play a prominent role.

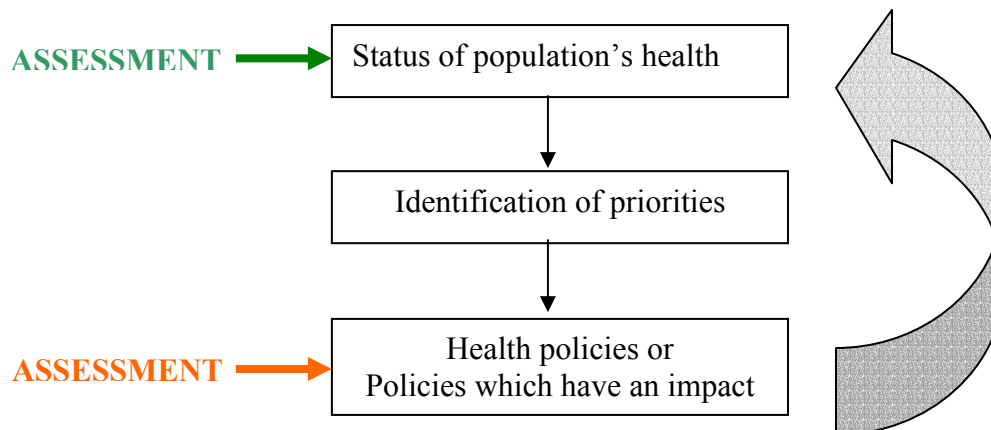


Figure 2 : Scheme of different types of assessment.

- **Dr. Myriam de Spiegelare**

*Observatoire de la Santé et du Social - Bruxelles*

*Observatorium voor Gezondheid en Welzijn - Brussel*

Title of the presentation : " **Health and Sustainable development: which integration? "**

Myriam de Spiegelare's presentation was based on her work at the « Observatoire de la Santé et du Social de Bruxelles », in which she experiences daily the difficulty of taking into account the multi-dimensional and global character of health, as well as the complexity of trying to integrate these different aspects.

She emphasised that the current tools and instruments to assess public health issues, are not adequate because they cannot take into account the complexity and transversality of the reality. They even risk to give a misrepresent reality. The different pillars or fields of sustainable development (e.g. ecological, economical, social, health,..) are merely intellectual constructs to translate the reality. The scientific world has developed and specialised itself according to these different fields (sociology, economics, public health,...) and has developed its separate languages, instruments, assessment tools, etc.

Furthermore, Myriam de Spiegelare argued that the integration of social and health dimensions has delivered in the past some important discoveries. Epidemiology, for instance, has focused on the multi-causality of diseases. The state of health is influenced by a multitude of factors. In addition, these factors interact among themselves. The impact of one or more causal factors can be changed by non-causal factors. Myriam De Spiegelare presented a number of methodologies to analyse and identify these factors and their interactions (multivariate analysis, statistical techniques and multi levels analysis).

One of the most important challenges for sustainable development research and decision-making is to construct a common language or at least to understand each other's languages in order to develop more holistic models to analyse, for instance, the state of health. At the moment it is very difficult to assess the holistic nature of the state of health with the existing indicators (especially for the social field).

- **Mr Pieter-Jan Miermans**

*Institut Scientifique de Santé Publique*

*Wetenschappelijk Instituut Volksgezondheid*

Title of the presentation : " **Socio-economic Indicators in Health Survey Research** "

Pieter-Jan Miermans presented different ways to measure on the one hand the socio-economic status, and on the other hand, the health status of a population. To measure the former, traditionally three indicators or variables at the household level are used (inspired by a study of Kunst & Machenbach): level of education; occupational status; income level. In addition, composite variables (comprising information on consumption, living conditions,...) are possible. The latter is principally measured by the variables mortality and morbidity rates. To measure the health status two questions need to be answered: (1) does one want to measure the health status at the individual or the contextual level? (2) does one want to measure the subjective or the objective health status?

Mr. Miermans continued different ways in which the link between the socio-economic and the health status has been studied in the past.

- **Dr Diana de Graeve**

*Faculteit toegepaste economische wetenschappen, departement algemene economie – Centrum voor Sociaal Beleid, Universiteit Antwerpen*

Title of the presentation : " **Socio-economic inequalities in health: methods and results from a comparative European study (ECUITY II)** "

Dr. Diana De Graeve presented a European study on socio-economic inequalities in health. She explained how to measure relative income-related health inequalities via a specific index: the health concentration index. After having described the development of this index, she discussed the scores of different European countries on this index and discussed the main sources (such as income, age, educational level, marital status, activity status, origin, region) the inequalities in health status. More information can be found on the following website: <http://www2.eur.nl/bmg/ecuity/>.

- **Prof. Marie-Christine Closon**

*Ecole de Santé publique de l'Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve*

Title of the presentation : " **Evaluation des programmes de santé (?) visant la réduction des inégalités sociales de santé** "

Marie-Christine Closon made a distinction between policies that address the socio-economic inequities and policies that address the health system. To tackle socio-economic inequities in health, political action should be undertaken in several domains. These actions should therefore not be limited to health policies. A global approach in which all governmental departments are involved is desirable. These departments should define their objectives in relation to the impact on health. The different inequalities should be measured and the causal factors need to be identified and analysed. Moreover, there is a need for a social consensus on the importance and prioritisation of addressing the social inequities in policy and on the methods to address these inequities. This should be turned into a coordinated political action.

- **Mrs Ghislaine Adriaensens**

*Centre pour l'égalité des chances et la lutte contre le racisme – Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale / Centrum voor gelijkheid van kansen en racismebestrijding – Steunpunt ter bestrijding van armoede, bestaanonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting*

Title of the presentation : " **Een ander benadering van armoede indicatoren** "

Ghislaine Adriaensens presented how the different organisations that contribute to the publication of the *General Report on Poverty* have developed another approach for the creation of "poverty indicators" which takes into account the voices of the poor themselves. A summary of the report – which corresponds with the content of the presentation – as well as the full report, is available at the following websites

- In Dutch: <http://www.armoedebestrijding.be/publicatiessteunpuntindicatoren.htm>
- In French: <http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publicationsserviceindicateurs.htm>
- In English (summary only):  
[http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publications/indicateurs/P4\\_summary.pdf](http://www.luttepauvrete.be/publications/indicateurs/P4_summary.pdf)

- **Debate**

The presentations were followed by a debate. We have listed the main points of discussion.

#### The relationship between health and sustainable development

The public asked more clarification about the relationship between health and sustainable development.

- ✓ Sustainable development experts often place health within the social pillar of sustainable development. In reality however, health is a transversal issue within sustainable development.
- ✓ In addition, health is often considered by people who are working on this issue as a separate field of research.
- ✓ At the moment there is a lack of collaboration between health experts and sustainable development experts. Moreover, these experts do not share a common language. Experts need to work more in a transdisciplinary way, and have to turn themselves more towards the decision-making level.
- ✓ The audience highlighted the need for a "social consensus" on criteria for decision making (i.e. methods to reduce of health inequalities).
- ✓ On certain health or bio-medical issues, a public debate is necessary with a global vision. The question arising is : how scientists should take part in this debate?.

#### The relationship between scientists and the politic world

The roles of each actor for a better governance in health policy and social inclusion has been debated.

- ✓ The dialogue and the interaction between policy makers and scientists should be ameliorated. At the moment research results are inadequately used by policy makers, and scientists do not always address the research needs of policy makers.
- ✓ One of the measures which should be taken is to enhance the visibility of research results, in order to facilitate access for policy makers and scientists.
- ✓ In the absence of the necessary dialogue between scientists and policy makers, the former should be more active in communicating what they regard as priorities for the current policy agenda .
- ✓ In addition, the fragmentation of the administrative and political responsibilities, but also the numerous actors, inhibit a coherent and global solution for public health and social problems.

#### Recommendations on the use of indicators in the development of health policies

- ✓ In comparison to the ecological and economic aspects, the social aspects of sustainable development remain least assessed – even at the European level. There is a need to identify indicators which allow to assess this aspect.
- ✓ There is a lack of qualitative data and indicators to measure the health status of people. Qualitative indicators might be more appropriate to measure the subjective health and poverty status. During dialogue experiences with poor people, the demands concerning "les sentiments de la pauvreté" (*feelings linked to poverty*), cannot be answered because of our ignorance to measure such problems.  
The weakness of indicators in this case, is in a large part due to lack of data in this domain and their disponibility. While quantitative analysis have been improved, we have now to integrate qualitative data.
- ✓ We have to confront spirits, conceptions and also the patterns to develop methodologies with common tools for various fields.
- ✓ The participants highlighted the need to define protocols of assessments on 1) medical objectives and 2) the reduction of the socio-economic inequities in health.
- ✓ In order to increase the relevance and the coherence of health policies assessment, a more interdisciplinary organisation of indicators is needed..

#### Recommendations on research in Belgium

- ✓ Access to research results is quite difficult according to the participants. Publications are not sufficiently disseminated.
- ✓ Better acces to research results on socio-economic inequalities in health is needed.
- ✓ Scientists have to work more in a transdisciplinary way, and have to turn themselves more towards the decision-making level or administration.