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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Negotiating policy ideas: Participatory action research projects across five European countries

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Summary

Introduction. – Between 2019 and 2021, 199 adolescents collaborated with adults in 15 participatory action research projects, called Youth Alliances, to contribute to system-directed obesity prevention in five EU countries. We investigated if and how these Youth Alliances included diverse youth, enhanced engagement, generated policy proposals and changed problem perception.

Theory. – We assessed the Youth Alliances from a micro-sociological perspective of negotiated order and attended to what we call third order effects: that participatory action provides time and space to renegotiate meaning.

Methodology. – We used a case-comparative interpretive framework to attend to complexity. Based on collaborative and comparatively triangulated observations, documents and contextual data, we studied adaptations to Youth Alliances due to contextual demands and local contingencies in micro-interactions.

Results. – Youth Alliances led to the involvement of adolescents from diverse backgrounds who participated meaningfully in a form of partnership, generated a wide variety of policy proposals, and learned about obesogenic systems, policies and participation in the process.

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Discussion and conclusion. – A focus on meaning-making and interaction reveals how one participation approach can have multiple and even contradictory outcomes depending on non-linear, emergent and contingent local interactions. Some of the outcomes represent well-known second order effects (e.g., changing power relations). But we also point to what we call third order effects: specific activities generated time and space for social interactions in which novel meaning could arise and consolidate.

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Introduction participation in policy, the case of CO-CREATE

In liberal democracies, the extension of democratic rights and increasing levels of education and wealth has fuelled citizens' demands for individual freedom and autonomy. At the same time, the complexity of modern problems such as global warming, persistent poverty and obesity call for solutions on a system level [1,2], involving a growing number of stakeholders. The 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 [3]. Citizens are also called upon to participate in research and policy design, as in our case, the EU-wide project (CO-CREATE).

Between 2019 and 2021, as part of CO-CREATE, 199 adolescents from five EU countries engaged in 15 participatory action research (PAR) projects, called Youth Alliances. These Alliances were meant to include diverse adolescents, enhance engagement, generate policy proposals and trigger changes in problem perception. CO-CREATE was built on the premise that obesity is a system-dynamic issue [4–7], in which processes ranging from global food chains to a body's metabolism interact in complex ways, and should be tackled as such, and that youth participation is needed for this.

We have described the project outcomes per country elsewhere [8], showing that each of the five countries had different approaches, and that even within one country the Alliances differed and had varied outcomes [9,10]. Here, we compare across Alliances to trace how the outcomes came about. Our first analysis of the general input or 'exogenous' characteristics of the Alliances (e.g., number of participants, duration) did not reveal a pattern. Therefore we turned to 'endogenous' processes and point to the importance of interactions within Alliances.

The CO-CREATE approach

In order to include diverse adolescents, enhance engagement, generate policy proposals and trigger changes in problem perception concerning obesogenic systems, the Alliances followed a (youth-led) participatory action research (YPAR) approach [11,12]. 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 affecting all phases of the research and action are shared equitably among the partners in the collaboration [13].

Furthermore, "Participatory action is achieved through a reflective cycle, whereby participants collect and analyse data, then determine what action should follow" [11]. An essential element of PAR is the transfer of knowledge from researcher to community partners [14]. It includes a phase of empowerment, in which participants are provided with capacity building to further enable them to understand their own lived situation and make use of their situated knowledge. Increasingly, PAR is engaging young people [13–17]. According to Kohfeldt et al. [18], YPAR projects are likely to be conducive to alterations in power through shifts of knowledge, knowledge production and voice. More broadly, we assume that empowerment [19] involves power sharing and collaboration between more and less powerful actors. This is congruent with youth participation [20] as partnership [21] and shared control [22,23].

Based on the above, CO-CREATE staff developed a process of activities, plus a budget, a handbook and a collaborative support structure between all consortium partners and local partner organisations. The handbook and support could be used flexibly to promote participation. The flow of activities (Fig. 1), included group building, system mapping, interview and photovoice training, a budget to test ideas, a policy design form, reflection sessions, and testing ideas with stakeholders. These activities were connected to other activities in CO-CREATE and were supported both by local and consortium-wide staff (researchers, trained facilitators, organisation members). The Alliances were meant to create conditions under which young people could consider issues related to obesity policies and to encourage and empower them to act towards changes in the obesogenic system.

Theory: negotiating order

There are numerous variants of PAR [22,24–26]. Typologies and reviews, often based on (a set of) single cases, aim to identify general characteristics that enhance the likelihood of achieving the desired result. We look beyond typologies



Figure 1. Flow of activities.

and general characteristics to point to the importance of local dynamics for understanding outcomes.

To understand differences in outcomes between the Alliances, we first attended to general characteristics or exogenous variables per Alliance, before looking at the internal dynamics or endogenous variables. To do so, we employed the perspective of symbolic interactionism (SI), which directs attention to what happened in the Alliances in a fine-grained yet structured way. SI treats adolescents and adults in the Alliances as knowledgeable actors who bring about regularities in social life through joint meaning-making [27,28]. Rather than being driven by pre-given motivations, developments are approached as originating in the meaning that actors attach to activities, objects and each other in interaction. Meaning is implied in relation to (generalised) others, is read in social responses and consolidated when people continue interacting on the basis of implied meaning [29]. People (re)create meaning with reference to an expected social situation [30]. In a school setting, for instance, adolescents might expect just another school activity, which would set them up for certain (less engaged) interaction. Another important element of participation is having a shared focus of attention, for instance the planning of a research activity. Moments of shared attention can become patterns of interaction if they are repeated and actors feel immersed [31] in the situation. Patterns are then stabilised by symbols and material resources and actors' orientation to past and present [32]. For example, when a planned research activity, such as a number of interviews, is carried out, momentary attention is repeated and focused, and the outcomes of the action serve as a symbol and source of pride.

Alliances and interactions emerge in the wider context of the organisations they are embedded in, which we study as negotiated order [33]. The concept of negotiation explains differences between organisational rules and observable practice. In our case, it helps us see how concrete activities in the Alliances deviated from the original plans. Negotiations mediate between structures, material resources and

pragmatic tasks. They offer room for change, while at the same time (re)producing structures [34]. Attending to negotiations is also necessary to understand social processes from a complexity perspective [35]. 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 [35].

In research on PAR [36,37], the term negotiation refers to fine-tuning during implementation. Negotiation is seen as a set of skills to let go of some goals while embracing others. Grant et al. go further and see negotiation as a core element in dealing with recurring tension around power and change in PAR [38,39]. In the context of school-based PAR [40], for example, the tension between structural demands or teacher roles on the one hand and student empowerment on the other have been reflected on extensively. Here, negotiation is seen as compromising [18]. Anderson, referencing implementation research [41], points to two aspects conducive of negotiation: "the extent to which a program can be modified (i.e., adaptability) and the setting's capacity to incorporate the program into the existing practice (i.e., integration of new programming)". Incidentally, the term negotiation is hinted at in a conceptual manner [39,42]. Genat states that "the way the researcher negotiates, engages and facilitates research with the participant group at the centre of the project is key to the research outcome" [43]. Negotiation is fundamental to (Y)PAR, in the sense that desired change is dependent on bottom-up practices and yet-unknown knowledge and action. More specifically, we approach PAR not only as fine-tuning or compromising, but also as structuring and producing, social order or regular-

ities bottom-up, in the more symbolic interactionist sense laid out above.

Kohfeldt conceptualises the effects of PAR with youth as first and second order effects [18], first order being changes in the object of participation and second order changes in the subjects or participants; for example, in the (power) relations between youth and adults or in adolescents' political efficacy. We add to this distinction third order changes: changes in meaning, brought about by negotiations in social interactions.

With regard to the structural context of negotiations, we are aware – and address in CO-CREATE – different and unequal positions. Youth and staff bring to their interactions a life history in which constraints and abilities, based, for example, on poverty or racism, acquire a personal form. Based on prior experience and the Alliances' organisational context, actors are likely to assume that a certain interaction order [44] is present. For example, marginalised adolescents could frame school as a coercive institution that does not serve them.

With the aim of understanding the outcomes of the Alliances, we are thus also looking for endogenous processes: how activities shape up within the Alliances; how activities are imbued with meaning through negotiations, joint focus, repetition and shared symbols. We interpret endogenous processes in relation to the Alliances' structural differences and general characteristics.

Methodology: constant collaborative comparison

CO-CREATE and the Youth Alliances had four aims: to reach out to diverse youth, to collaboratively devise policy to change obesogenic systems, to engage youth and to offer different perceptions of obesity. Fifteen Alliances were hosted in five different countries; we have described the various forms they took and the diverse outcomes for each country elsewhere (<https://www.fhi.no/globalassets/dokumenterfiler/co-create/d5.5-evaluation-reports-on-the-sustainable-alliances-for-overweight-prevention-policies.pdf>). In this article, we compare across Alliances. The analysis builds on multi-sited comparative ethnographic fieldwork [45–47], which allows us to compare across sites and do justice to local factors. We gathered structured observations in 139 fieldnotes (590,000 words), 39 feedback forms, 23 progress and contexts logs, and 100 policy forms.

Given the local contexts in different European regions, we investigated local interaction through collaborations with local staff and by employing trained ethnographers. Collaboratively, we came up with 'thick descriptions' of the issues adolescents encountered in the PAR. It is important to note that while the PAR itself was a collaboration between youth and staff, the analysis of this process was mainly a collaboration between staff, though youth were able to comment on intermediate interpretations.

Within the five 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 countries 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, underrepresentation, youth participation and overweight means in different contexts. Wanting to enhance diversity, all partners reflected on which youth were likely to be underrepresented and thus required dedicated recruitment; all partners identified young people stemming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition, some partners identified young people living in rural areas (Norway and Poland) or from certain educational (Netherlands) or migratory (UK, Netherlands) backgrounds. Recruitment efforts were tailored to these differences.

Before the start of the Alliances, local staff was trained in the general ideas and goals of PAR, and in qualitative methodology, to sensitise them to the relevance of context and details for the fieldnotes. Beyond data collection training, local staff was instructed in the writing of the different documentation types: logs, fieldnotes of meetings, 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 online communication between the central researchers and local staff to discuss the different documents, the level of detail, contextual information, possible blind spots, but also to pose and answer additional questions and checking interpretations. One important issue in the triangulation of different data sources is that data may contradict each other [48,49]. Therefore, seemingly relevant instances of data tension were discussed with staff.

The different documents were sequentially structured following the abovementioned four themes (diversity, policy, engagement, problem perception). 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 predefined themes. In order to expand the focus beyond these predefined themes, local staff could also 'hashtag' relevant and important information in the fieldnotes. The Fieldnote and Hashtag codes were mostly used to open up the data, to search for specific aspects, and as a heuristic device.

Given the complexity of the different local situations, a coding-based, variable or reductionist-oriented analysis would have been insufficient. Rather, we employed a complexity-informed case-comparative framework [50], which aimed to take into account a wide range of situational and locally-specific reciprocal relations. We did not oversimplify the differences between countries and Alliances to fit a qualitative comparative analysis or process tracing-like approach [40], in order to make the analysis more formalised. However, we did use the same forms of causal reasoning based on the tracing of processes in longitudinal qualitative data, in collaboration with local project staff, as a heuristic. Applying this heuristic, we found that, in line with complexity models, causal reasoning was not always supported by the data.

Due to this intense collaboration, the researchers gained in-depth knowledge of the local situation. Based on triangulation of the documents and different interactions with local staff, the researchers wrote highly detailed country reports, rich in original data excerpts, concluding with answers to the research questions per country. The reports were member-checked by local staff, shared with youth and adjusted

Table 1 Youth alliance participants.

Background questions	UK (n = 6)	Netherlands (n = 36)	Norway (n = 21)	Poland (n = 58)	Portugal (n = 21)
Gender					
Female	67% (n = 4)	78% (n = 28)	62% (n = 13)	91% (n = 53)	57% (n = 12)
Male	33% (n = 2)	19% (n = 7)	38% (n = 8)	9% (n = 5)	43% (n = 9)
Missing		3% (n = 1)			
Active member of a political or non-political organization					
No, I have never been	50% (n = 3)	81% (n = 29)	67% (n = 14)	22% (n = 13)	38% (n = 8)
No, but previously	17% (n = 1)	19% (n = 7)	5% (n = 1)	45% (n = 26)	5% (n = 1)
Yes	33% (n = 2)	0% (n = 0)	28% (n = 6)	33% (n = 19)	57% (n = 12)
Birth country					
UK/NL/POL/Port	83% (n = 5)	78% (n = 28)	86% (n = 18)	100% (n = 58)	100% (n = 21)
Country within Europe	17% (n = 1)	0% (n = 0)	5% (n = 1)	0% (n = 0)	0% (n = 0)
Country outside of Europe	0% (n = 0)	22% (n = 8)	9% (n = 2)	0% (n = 0)	0% (n = 0)
Mothers birth country					
UK/NL/POL/Port	67% (n = 4)	47% (n = 17)	48% (n = 10)	100% (n = 58)	86% (n = 18)
Country within Europe	0% (n = 0)	3% (n = 1)	38% (n = 8)	0% (n = 0)	5% (n = 1)
Country outside of Europe	33% (n = 2)	50% (n = 18)	14% (n = 3)	0% (n = 0)	9% (n = 2)
Fathers birth country					
UK/NL/POL/Port	67% (n = 4)	53% (n = 19)	48% (n = 10)	100% (n = 58)	62% (n = 13)
Country within Europe	0% (n = 0)	3% (n = 1)	38% (n = 8)	0% (n = 0)	5% (n = 1)
Country outside of Europe	33% (n = 2)	44% (n = 16)	14% (n = 3)	0% (n = 0)	28% (n = 6)
Missing					5% (n = 1)
FAS categories					
Low FAS (0–6 score)	50% (n = 3)	22% (n = 8)	10% (n = 2)	16% (n = 9)	5% (n = 1)
Medium FAS (7–9 score)	50% (n = 3)	45% (n = 16)	29% (n = 6)	36% (n = 21)	57% (n = 12)
High FAS (10–13 score)	0% (n = 0)	33% (n = 12)	57% (n = 12)	48% (n = 28)	33% (n = 7)
Missing			4% (n = 1)		5% (n = 1)

when necessary. These country reports were important in interpreting the data towards the conclusions on negotiated order.

In sum, the methodology was based on collaborative participant observation, semi-structured fieldnotes, collaborative documentation, semi-automated text coding and triangulation of data sources, followed by collaborative interpretation on and between Alliances within countries. The country reports were compared based on the different research questions (see [Annex 1](#); see supplementary materials associated with this article on line), to establish whether processes that were traced or findings and explanations in one country were comparable to others. We did this by comparatively analysing and describing and collaboratively interpreting the data, while going back and forth between the data and our meetings.

Results

Inclusion

Below, we first summarise the context and setting of the Alliances, before looking at the outcomes in terms of inclusion and interpreting them from the perspective of negotiated order theory.

Regarding the context and setting of the Alliances in Portugal the Alliances were built on an existing collaboration

with Scouts, whereas in Poland, the Netherlands and the UK, Alliances were part of school activities and attracted a relatively large number of participants across a whole school term. Additionally, in the UK, a collaboration with municipal organisations resulted in an additional Alliance. In Norway, two of the three Alliances were not tied to any specific organisation, although meetings were held in school buildings; the third was nested in a youth organisation belonging to the CO-CREATE consortium. Alliance members developed varying modalities of engagement: from a small number of long sessions (6–8) to a large number of shorter sessions (20+). Due to COVID-19-related restrictions starting in March 2020, Alliances had to switch temporarily from in-person meetings to online interaction. At that point, many Alliances experienced decreasing attendance and two were unable to proceed online, while in others online attendance increased.

In total, 199 young people (aged 15–19) participated in the Alliances. They came from diverse backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic position, rural-urban context and migration background ([Table 1](#)). Recruiting among adolescents from lower socioeconomic positions (FAS scores) was possible in some of the Alliances in the Netherlands and Poland, where collaboration was secured with schools known to have pupils with such a background, and also appeared to be successful in an Alliance in Norway and one in the UK. In the Netherlands and Norway, adolescents were recruited who were born outside of Europe, and in all countries except for Poland adolescents with (one of their) parents born

outside of Europe were recruited. Overall, young women were overrepresented in all Alliances, except for one mostly male-attended Portuguese Alliance. In some cases, young women's overrepresentation was due to the composition of the organisations in which Alliances were set up and partly due to personal interest. Alliances did nevertheless attract young men, and both young men and women collaborated. Most Alliances consisted of youth with no experience in voluntary participation in organisational work, while some Alliances attracted youth already acquainted with voluntary participation.

Looking at these outcomes from the perspective of negotiated order, it became clear that participation differed over time. For example, some adolescents attended one or two meetings and then skipped the next one (<https://www.fhi.no/globalassets/dokumenterfiler/created/d5.5-evaluation-reports-on-the-sustainable-alliances-for-overweight-prevention-policies.pdf>), and Alliances held between six and 20+ meetings. Participation did not necessarily correlate with smaller or larger groups or with more adolescents being acquainted with participatory action. Alliances under the umbrella of an existing organisation did, however, seem to muster more participation. Moreover, creating Alliances within organisations that already include youth from underrepresented groups facilitated their inclusion.

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, and when the organisational context was flexibly used. In the Netherlands, for example, schools were very interested in participating in the Alliances, and teachers and management facilitated the Alliances on a continuous basis. Teachers followed a co-facilitator training and offered pupils to participate. Youth were free to register or not; they were also free to choose with whom they joined an Alliance. Groups formed largely, though not completely, on the basis of classes and teachers. Students and teachers negotiated participation and the organisational structure. Second order effects emerged in the sense of adolescents' empowerment. The resultant groups symbolised students' choice and the themes they found interesting. This is what we call a third order effect: students formed groups based on the negotiated meaning of the Alliances. In this process, the role of the teachers and other adults was often under scrutiny too.

Ongoing embedded collaboration between the existing host organisations and the newly-forming Alliances allowed for quicker adaptation to hiccups and negotiation of the Alliance boundaries. From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, we were able to see that the embedding of Alliances in existing organisations offered clear benefits, but also had disadvantages. Forming Alliances in the context of schools and Scouts enabled repeated interaction in a reserved time-space. It was more challenging to achieve and sustain youth engagement when this time-space was unstructured. The stability of an existing organisation meant that temporary drops in motivation or attendance had a smaller impact, and they provided access to networks and resources. Organisation members also knew each other to some degree, which eased the start of the Alliances. Finally, such organisations provided a reference point for identification. On the other hand, if activities were scheduled within

school hours, the schools' objectives could overrule objects set within the Alliances. Second, it was tricky in some cases to guarantee students' freedom to opt out if they remained bound to attend school and complete the project as part of their curriculum. This was negotiated by allowing for freedom of non-participation within the Alliance. Third, school seasons and exams provided a clear break in prolonged collaboration. Almost all participation ended with the school year.

We thus see clearly how the organisational setting was important, while other exogenous factors (e.g., number or length of meetings, kind of organisation) were less so. Crucially, the organisational setting worked through endogenous processes to shape participation: every week, attendance needed to be negotiated, using the organisations' openings and resources. Given the importance of endogenous factors and particularly negotiations, we cannot conclude that a particular design secured the inclusion of diverse youth, although embedding activities in an organisation is a good starting point.

Engagement

We suggest that positive experiences with engagement are not established immediately but require meaning-making, repetition, continuous effort, shared symbols as well the adolescents' backgrounds and past experiences. This is relevant for empowerment (as defined above) in terms of 'voice', namely the ability to speak up, have a say and be heard.

We did not identify any single intervention or breakthrough moment as achieving empowerment and engagement. Broadly speaking, the Alliance design [10] allowed for a negotiated set of activities. While we know from existing research that negotiation is part of all organisation activities, the Alliance design capitalised 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 pursued, the organisational form or the policy focus. As a facilitator from Portugal observed:

it was possible to perceive their enthusiasm while explaining and defending how their ideas were feasible and the willingness of being able to put them in action. [P_B1_FN03@FN21].

We found that most of the Alliances offered a conducive context for youth to raise concerns and opinions. This was seemingly aided by the familiar organisational setting and in most cases a degree of familiarity with other Alliance members. Staff facilitated participation while adolescents often suggested ways of working that fitted them.

Across 15 Alliances, decision-making, ownership and engagement varied significantly between and within Alliances, even within a single day or session; while in one meeting, young participants were actively engaged, the next meeting could be lifeless.

Contrary to the second meeting, when we felt the youth were more active and enthusiastic, in this meeting they were not paying much attention and not enthusiastic about the content. [P_C1_FN03:FN35].

When staff remained flexible in this regard, Alliance work continued:

since the remaining members of the group were not present at this meeting, the two adolescents joined the other group that is also working on the policy idea of the school course. [They] are also shy, so they felt more comfortable after joining a bigger group. In this group they mentioned that the unhealthy products should be less in the vending machine, but not disappear entirely. [P_A1_FN02: FN17].

Engagement thus did not depend entirely on the organisation, but even varied between groups within one organisation and within one group over time. We also found that the number of meetings was not decisive: intense engagement developed in Poland over a limited number of longer meetings, as it did in the Netherlands with several shorter meetings. It was also not significant if the design of the Alliances was followed more (Poland) or less (Norway) closely. Engagement occurred in both cases, not because of the general design itself but through the way in which the design was implemented and negotiated.

One might assume that adolescents' engagement would flourish when staff mostly supported their ideas and activities. However, we observed that more solid steering by staff did not prevent youth from actively participating. Receiving a task and feeling empowered to bring forward their own ideas often worked in tandem. An adolescent from Poland, for example, reflected on the difference between regular school tasks and tasks within the Alliance:

Of course, I have often made presentations in front of my class. However, they have always concerned strictly defined topics, it was impossible to introduce something from myself. At CO-CREATE meetings, all tasks required my own work and creativity.

Here, we clearly see second and third order effects working in tandem: by allowing pupils to influence the topic (second order), the meaning of a task changes (third order).

Significantly, letting youth take the lead more often did not always lead to more engagement. Rather, if engagement occurred or whether a task was seen as just another task depended on the quality of the interactions relative to the position of youth within the Alliances. In Poland for example, we saw how working with strict tasks and a planning made by staff was not stifling engagement [22].

Regarding the influence of group size, our data did not indicate an ideal size for engagement. Group size in general was influenced by exogenous factors: school-/Scout-based groups were larger than groups that needed to recruit every single participant. Thus while the groups in this study ranged from three to 20+ participants, it was not particularly significant how big a group was, but rather what the size meant in a particular context. For example, in one case, in response to suggestions by youth, a larger group was split up into smaller projects. For the youth, this was a sign of being listened to and they were able to tailor their interests to a particular idea. In another case, a small number of participants was interpreted as lack of interest. We did find, however, that in larger groups, some of the youth said they felt hampered by unmotivated peers (e.g., in the Netherlands). In very small groups, on the other hand, staff noted

that groups were vulnerable to attrition (e.g., in Norway). Group size thus gained meaning in interaction; if it became a sign of being listened to or having a joint focus, it had a positive effect on engagement. Yet even then, a newly-formed sub-group could still fail, since a positive dynamic depends on interactions in consecutive, repeated situations.

Engagement was enhanced when inequality and difference were renegotiated in the Alliances. For example, external validation through encounters with policy-makers and professionals motivated most of the youth. Most had never had such an experience, nor had they envisioned themselves as being heard. Validation thus countered difference and inequality in terms of age. The validation effect seemed even stronger for youth from more deprived contexts; in the Netherlands, for instance, youth were impressed and motivated when they received a budget to improve access to fresh food through joint activities. In the Portuguese Alliances, on the other hand, where youth came from more advantaged contexts, the introduction of a budget did not lead to a strong response. In terms of second order effects, this demonstrates a shift in power balance, and in terms of third order effects, a change in the meaning of politics and self-identity.

Policy ideas

One of the core activities across all Alliances was to facilitate youth to develop policy ideas into concrete policy proposals for obesity prevention. While thinking about policy was not evident or easy for young collaborators – or for us – this challenge was often also experienced as rewarding and a sign of relevance. Here, we see second order effects (youth becoming empowered to work on policies) and third order effects (policy getting a positive meaning). Several adolescents were initially reluctant to work on policies. Yet, by starting with spontaneous ideas grounded in their experience, all Alliances engaged youth in further refining their ideas collaboratively. 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 for developing policy ideas

When staff introduced participants to the task of developing policy ideas, the first thing that was negotiated was the task itself. In several Alliances, young people raised questions about what policy is and means. They asked for advocacy and presentation training or expert interviews to better understand the task and be taken seriously by others. Some young people even questioned who is authorised to change the environment and influence individuals' behaviour, and what health means and who gets to define it, as a local staff member in the Netherlands reported:

[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 the Netherlands B2 06].

Table 2 Overview of action ideas and policy proposals.

	Total number of ideas	Number of alliances with these ideas	Number of countries with these ideas	Number of policy proposals with these ideas
Environment supporting physical activity	31	10	5	7
Environment supporting healthy food	27	11	4	6
Environment supporting knowledge about health	18	12	5	8
Environment supporting learning how to cook	9	8	3	5
Environment reducing societal pressure and stress and improving mental health and social media use	15	8	4	3

While there was ample room to approach health and overweight in various ways in the Alliances, we also found that the specific frame (obesity prevention) of CO-CREATE was sometimes experienced as restricting. Through negotiating the meaning of obesity prevention, however, adolescents related to the theme and came up with ideas. Several of the participants were inclined to take their own path related to the wider theme of health and healthy environments. In the Netherlands, for instance, a small number of youth withdrew from the project, but were later found to have continued working on their own action idea – free sport for women wearing a hijab and youth having a leading/collaborative role in school sports lessons – outside of the project with their teacher(s). The teacher and staff confirmed in the feedback session that the topic of obesity prevention was not appealing to everyone and made participation difficult for some young people. Likewise, recruitment in an area in Norway with lower socioeconomic status failed as the young people did not perceive obesity prevention as a relevant topic compared to, for instance, the problem of violence in their school.

In each Alliance, members repeatedly discussed and negotiated among themselves what they defined as ‘the problem’, and what types of actions they would see as suitable outcomes of their Alliance work. This demonstrates a change in definitional power (second order change). These negotiations were different in each Alliance, influenced by the set-up (exogenous mechanisms) and interactive dynamics (endogenous mechanisms). The set-up could be influenced, for instance, by staff’s background: in the Portuguese Alliances, staff had stronger nutritionist backgrounds and thus we found that overweight and obesity were more explicitly and extensively discussed as the problem to tackle, while in other Alliances the focus was, for example, more on (un)healthy city environments.

We found that it was helpful if a joint and positive definition of the situation was connected to tangible symbols, of which we identified a range: system maps (repeatedly used as a point of reference), policy forms or a budget. These contributed to third order effects: generating (positive) meaning through interactions. The policy forms – which offered a structure to help develop policy proposals – were, for example, often experienced as ‘difficult’, though they were nevertheless returned to repeatedly as they served as a useful reference point. Moreover, working with a difficult

form on a difficult topic was sometimes in itself beneficial, since it indicated to young collaborators that they were being taken seriously and that something meaningful was at stake. It was, however, important that local staff and youth negotiated on how to deal with the forms. While in some cases, youth directly filled in and revised the forms themselves, in others 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 (the Restaurant Group). We also 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 2), three of which (themes 1, 2 and 3) are also common in dominant policy discourse across Europe (see also Moving and Nourishing, an overview of existing policies). The ideas in themes 4 and 5 – cooking lessons and societal pressure/mental health/social media – were more directly related to the experiences of the young participants and are not yet reflected much in existing policies [51].

On closer inspection, the ideas and proposals that seem to resemble existing policies show relevant differences. For instance, young people in all five 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 (in the Netherlands, the UK and Poland), there was a stronger emphasis on action ideas to provide free access to sport (equipment) and more youth-friendly environments (to avoid shame). Based on young people’s experiences, a picture came to the fore of barriers to attending sport and feeling uncomfortable engaging in sport in front of others. In one of the Dutch Alliances, this resulted in action ideas about free sport and swimming time slots for youth, free sport equipment provided by the municipality for youth to engage in sport at home and outdoors, especially during lockdowns, and female-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 (Norway and Portugal), access to physical activity seemed less of a focus, resulting in fewer action ideas about physical activity in total. The ideas that did come to the fore focused more on having a choice of different sports, on reward systems to provide incentives to be physically active, and on enabling financial access for all groups of youth and the inclusion of others – not necessarily themselves.

Alliance members selected action ideas to further develop into policy proposals within smaller groups or couples. The idea selection process was often organised by voting, using the Nominal Group Technique [52,53]. Our data indicates that especially when voting for ideas, 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. When choosing to develop their ideas further, however, they opted for more commonly-addressed themes, namely food prices, access to sport activities and health education. Conceptually, this means that negotiating which ideas will be further developed might depend on the methodology used; in our study, it appears that voting supported a tendency towards less original ideas. Further research is needed to see if voting procedures indeed hamper novel ideas and third order effects, and what would help develop more unusual ideas.

Problem perception

CO-CREATE was built on the premise that 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 persistence of the individual choice narrative in our societies. Hence, while many young people who signed up for the Alliances were initially interested in the topic of obesity, some were likely to regard childhood obesity as mostly a matter of individual choice [51].

Over time, many adolescents across all Alliances did come to endorse the systems perspective. In some cases they were already keen on it from the beginning (some Alliances in Norway and some in Portugal). Some adopted the system perspective rather quickly, for example after learning about and discussing systems maps. In one Portuguese Alliance, just learning the word 'obesogenic environment' led to a shift in discourse. More often, the shift in perspective entailed a range of activities and came gradually. Repeatedly focusing and working on the policy proposal and system maps offered a shared focus of attention around which the meaning of overweight and obesity could be reworked.

Nevertheless, some resistance to the systems perspective was still observed. In two Dutch Alliances, resistance resurfaced, either because reflecting on what may have an influence on the rise of overweight among youth was experienced as difficult or because system thinking appeared to be at odds with adolescents' own views on individual responsibility. Thinking in terms of a vast system was often difficult for youth. In the UK, the process of grasping a systems perspective through the maps was not experienced as easy.

Interestingly, those with experiences of stress, poverty and (welfare) state intervention could relate these experiences more readily to a system perspective than obesity.

In terms of third order effects, in all countries young collaborators, through the feedback forms and open questions in the questionnaire, reported discovering new ways of thinking and having an increased awareness of societal issues and the role young people can play. While it was rare for youth to fully attend to complex system-dynamics, they repeatedly reported being 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 Norway A1].

Discussion

Youth Alliances employing YPAR [12,14,15] in CO-CREATE led to 199 adolescents from diverse backgrounds in five countries meaningfully engaging in a partnership kind of participation to generate a wide variety of policy proposals and learn about obesogenic systems, policies and participation in the process [20,23]. While overall we might be positive about the outcomes in these areas, a closer look urges us to rethink a generic outcome-based approach.

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. This supports earlier research [18,22], while also providing evidence for the suggestion that researchers in YPAR should "critically attend to the settings in which youth and adults are embedded and to consider how these shape the empowerment process" [18]. Nesting Alliances in organisations with a larger percentage of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds made it easier to recruit such adolescents and keep them engaged in most cases. It was hard to engage young people if participation fell outside of school or Scouting hours, for example. This might be an indication that adult-initiated activities work better in a structured setting, although we did see that participation could be low in structured settings too. There was also a trade-off: participation during school or Scouting hours is not fully voluntary and earlier YPAR studies have already mapped such tensions [40].

While we did witness a partnership [21] between adolescents and adults, and shared control [22] or empowerment – in the sense that adolescents actively constructed Alliances and policies [18,19] in several cases – this was not always the case. We therefore looked for the conditions of success or failure, such as recruitment approach, number or length of meetings, organisational setting, number of participants or specific tools, in order to produce general recommendations. Looking at these exogenous factors, we did not identify a magic bullet. Even within one organisation and with the same staff, the results from different groups were markedly different. Therefore, we looked to under-

stand how exogenous factors (input into the Alliances) and endogenous processes (interactions within the Alliances) constituted outcomes over time.

Earlier research has repeatedly mentioned that planned activities need to be adapted to local contexts [37] and power relations require negotiations in practice [38,39]. Building on these insights, we approach local interactions as (re)producing the social order, roles and power [43]. Following micro-sociology [27,29] and complexity thinking [35], we suggest that diverse groups, policy ideas, engagement and changes in perception emerge through a combination of repeated and sustained (face-to-face) interactions, the construction of joint symbols, and constant negotiations of meaning and order [27,33] in response to the ever-changing engagement of youth and staff [38,39]. Some exogenous conditions are supportive but not determining: a meeting place, dedicated time, a budget. Staff needs intimate knowledge of the local organisation and the specific social inequalities affecting participants, as well as a strong commitment to constant adaptation. Staff and youth need a framework and resources to work with which are clear enough as a starting point yet flexible enough to respond to challenges. This process is sustained by tangible symbols which emerge through participation. We saw that system maps and policy proposals might contribute to this. It also helps if members are regularly present in an Alliance, as is the case in schools or Scout groups, even if this is not completely voluntary. From a voluntarist 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 that focus on shared control [21,22], 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 one standard approach, participation requires constant adaptation. Indeed, a micro-sociological approach highlights that it is less the approach and more the situated interaction that matters [27,30]. Negotiating order means that structural inequalities or organisational 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 saw 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 were influenced by a range of interactions and exogenous and endogenous factors: youth preferences, voting on ideas, staff preferences, etc. While further research could shed more light on this, it also appears 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 (see [54] for a critical reflection on PAR in instrumental contexts).

We assumed that youth is underrepresented in politics and that this underrepresentation also means that their experience, knowledge and creativity are underrepresented in prevention policy [55]. Our analysis points to a more complex relation between positionality and knowledge. We see that the way adolescents think of obesity prevention may be similar to existing dominant policies [56,57]. Underrepresented adolescents as a category thus possess both conforming and nonconforming knowledge. We definitely heard dissonant voices [58], for instance adolescents criticising the focus on obesity or demanding attention for societal pressure on youth, mental health and social media [51]. However, future research could be more precise about where and how new knowledge emerges.

Addressing inequality through participation, likewise, cannot be achieved by following a script, for example of 'listening' or 'providing'. What is required, though alone it is not sufficient, is sensitivity to how structural inequality translates into specific experiences and needs, which are never stable or given but rather renegotiated in interactions. We did observe, however, that disadvantaged youth could perhaps especially profit from participating in Alliances, if across multiple sessions specific experiences of disenfranchisement could be countered with recognition and trust.

Conclusion

Adolescents in five countries co-created a range of policy proposals for obesity prevention, based on their experience and expert knowledge. Empowered adolescents addressed different levels of the obesogenic system in their policy proposals. Next to these second order effects [18], we saw what we call third order effects: participation generating time and space for social interactions in which novel meaning could arise and consolidate. A focus on meaning-making and interaction helps us understand how participation can have multiple and even contradictory outcomes depending on non-linear, emergent and contingent local interactions.

We suggest that tools or handbooks (like our own) should be grounded in a micro-sociologically-informed approach to order and power as arising out of situated negotiations. We propose attending to bottom-up effects through symbolisation, repetition and changing the meaning of a situation. In this process, even slight variations can have significant effects on outcomes. In this sense, negotiation is more than implementation; it is the basis for changing organisational rules.

We acknowledge that research and intervention interact in a complex system [5–7,35]. Outcomes of a participatory process are an emergent property of that process or a property of a case, rather than a causal effect of isolated factors [50,59]. The Alliances enabled us to learn this and enabled two hundred young Europeans to learn about obesity, policy and advocacy. Stories about empowerment and the concrete activities of young citizens engaging their immediate and wider social context suggest that it is worthwhile to embark on participatory action, while nuancing instrumental and output-oriented thinking on the part of adults.

Human and animal rights

The authors declare that the work described has not involved experimentation on humans or animals.

Informed consent and patient details

The authors declare that they obtained a written informed consent from the patients and/or volunteers included in the article and that this report does not contain any personal information that could lead to their identification.

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Authors’ contributions

All authors attest that they meet the current International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) criteria for Authorship.

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Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.jemep.2023.100905](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemep.2023.100905).

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