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The CO-CREATE project

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DOI

[10.1111/obr.13546](https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13546)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Obesity Reviews

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bröer, C., Ayuandini, S., Baillergeau, E., Moerman, G., Veltkamp, G., Luszczynska, A., Budin-Ljøsne, I., Rito, A. I., Stensdal, M., Lien, N., & Klepp, K.-I. (2023). Recruiting and engaging adolescents in creating overweight and obesity prevention policies: The CO-CREATE project. *Obesity Reviews*, 24(S1), Article e13546. <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13546>

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SUPPLEMENT ARTICLE

Recruiting and engaging adolescents in creating overweight and obesity prevention policies: The CO-CREATE project

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Funding information

European Union's Horizon 2020, Grant/Award Number: 774210

Summary

The CO-CREATE project aims to collaborate with adolescents across Europe in developing policy ideas that contribute to overweight and obesity prevention. In this paper, we present the theoretical basis and methodological approach to recruitment and engagement in the project. The principles of youth-led participatory action research were employed to design Youth Alliances in which adolescents and adults could collaborate. These Alliances should serve to promote and support adolescent participation and to develop policy ideas that would contribute to obesity prevention. Alliance members were recruited in two local geographical areas per country with a focus on reaching out to underrepresented youth. We started with fieldwork to assess locally relevant forms of inclusion and exclusion. The methodology entailed a handbook combining existing tools which could be used flexibly, a collaborative organization, and budgets for the alliances. Engagement started in local organizations, that is, schools and scouts, and with peers. Health- and overweight-related challenges were addressed in their immediate surroundings and supported the inclusion of experiential knowledge. Adolescents were then supported to address the wider obesogenic system when designing policy ideas. The CO-CREATE Alliances provide a concrete example of how to engage youth in public health, in a manner that strives to be participatory, transformative, and inquiry based.

KEYWORDS

engagement, obesity prevention, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

The complexity of modern problems such as global warming, persistent poverty, malnutrition, and overweight calls for solutions on a system or even planetary level.¹ At the same time, innovative approaches

for local citizen participation are called for and seen as a way forward in creating more relevant policies, improving democratic practices, and building trust.^{2–4} Related to adolescent health, the “Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing” argues that “given the opportunity, adolescents and young adults are powerful agents for

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social change, including the promotion of their own health and well-being.”⁵ However, they acknowledge that the growing complexity of political and economic systems presents barriers to the engagement of adolescents and that approaches for meaningful participation are needed.⁵

Over the last decades, addressing public issues by means of public policymaking has been democratized to some degree in many countries around the globe, particularly in liberal democracies, although this has a much longer tradition dating back at least to Swiss direct democracy and to US American townhall democracy.^{6,7} Less historic, deliberative democracy, participatory governance, or citizens' councils can be cited as examples.^{2,8} This is not to say that citizens who are formally involved in policy making actually influence the process and are heard. Research consistently points to token representation.^{9–11} More fundamentally, the promise of direct influence is at odds with the complexity of many problems and necessitates citizen-to-citizen deliberation, preference formation, and compromise rather than direct citizen-to-policy influence.¹²

But why democratize public policy making anyway and why involve adolescents? First, we argue that it is their right and ethically meaningful to involve adolescents in policies directly targeting them.¹³ Second, we assume that policies improve if they are based on diverse forms of knowledge, also including experiential knowledge of youth or any other category of citizens.^{14–16} Third, participation enhances the legitimacy of a policy plan/measure.¹⁷ Looking at obesity prevention, we see that while adolescents are recognized as an important target group for obesity prevention strategies, there are few examples of adolescents themselves being included as active agents formulating such strategies.^{18,19} An overview of systematic reviews of interventions for obesity prevention in adolescents found no effect on body mass index,²⁰ and there appears to be only one review on the value of engaging adolescents in the design of interventions.²¹

It is with these considerations in mind that we, in the “Confronting obesity—Co-creating policy with youth”—CO-CREATE project (www.co-create.eu),²² set out to design a method of participation for European adolescents that engages them in policy making while also acknowledging (a) the need for learning on the part of both adults/researchers and adolescents, (b) the need for collaboration to arrive at shared policy ideas instead of isolated one-shot opinions, and (c) to use the complexity of local knowledge and involvement to target the obesogenic system. Thus, in CO-CREATE, we aim to combine the call for (local) engagement of adolescent and a system approach and collaborate with adolescents in designing system directed obesity prevention policies.

The purpose of this paper is to present the theoretical basis and methodological approach to recruitment and engagement in CO-CREATE with its focus on participatory action, as well as the research questions to be addressed. Particularly, we focus on “Youth Alliances” which were designed with and executed by a multidisciplinary team of academics and youth organizations from five European countries, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom and the European Youth Parliament.

2 | YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined meaningful youth engagement as an “inclusive, intentional, mutually-respectful partnership between adolescents, youth, and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms, and organizations that affect their lives and their communities, countries, and world.”¹³ In CO-CREATE, we decided to work with participatory action research (PAR)²³ and youth-led participatory action research (YPAR),²⁴ where adolescents themselves learn about their environment and use this knowledge to develop policy ideas in collaboration with the academics and NGOs involved in the CO-CREATE project and other stakeholders such as local policymakers in the area of public health.

The principles of PAR include that community members are actively participating in every phase of the process, that is, researchers and community members are in mutually respectful partnership, bringing different strengths to the table.²⁵ The community members have situated knowledge and lived experience that is critical to a comprehensive understanding of the situation.^{26–28}

The principles of PAR include “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 are shared among the partners in the collaboration.”²⁹ Furthermore, “[PAR] focuses on research whose purpose is to enable action. Action is achieved through a reflective cycle, whereby participants collect and analyse data, then determine what action should follow.”²² An essential element of PAR is “the transfer of knowledge, particularly the technical skills transferred from researcher to community partners.”³⁰ PAR principles thus include a phase of empowerment in which participants are provided with capacity building through training or facilitation to further enable them to understand their own lived situation and make use of their situated knowledge.

YPAR has been systematically studied in terms of its effectiveness in producing “empowered outcomes” among young people specifically.^{29,31} Empowerment, however, does not mean that adolescents are in the lead themselves. Rather, empowerment involves sharing of power and collaboration between adolescents and adult stakeholders.³² This is congruent with youth participation³³ as “partnership”³⁴ and shared control.^{35,36}

3 | CO-CREATE YOUTH ALLIANCES

In CO-CREATE, we used the principles of PAR to design so-called Youth Alliances in which adolescents and adult researchers could collaborate. The collaboration was designed to encourage a power dynamic of adult researchers empowering and supporting adolescents' lead and decision-making. These Alliances should serve the following

goals: promote and support adolescent participation and political efficacy and develop transferable, novel, context-specific, and science- and experience-informed policy options that would contribute to complex system-informed overweight and obesity prevention. In the context of the Youth Alliances, we used a broad definition of “policy” including interventions or actions that require the introduction of a law, regulation, guideline, or action plan to achieve the stated objectives. But it may also include elements of ideas, decision-making processes, and principles.

4 | RECRUITMENT OF MEMBERS TO THE ALLIANCES

As an objective of CO-CREATE is to include diverse experiential knowledge in the development of obesity prevention policy, a broad representation of adolescents from various social backgrounds, including marginalized youth, was a clear ambition. To recruit adolescents from diverse backgrounds, we identified two geographical areas per country, where each of these geographical areas should match an administrative unit (typically a municipality in a rural area or borough in larger cities). Furthermore, fieldwork preparation activities within each site contributed to identify categories of adolescents less likely to be represented in the local public scene (e.g., from rural, low socioeconomic status [SES] areas in Poland, and low SES boroughs of a city in the United Kingdom) and appropriate organizations and/or settings seen as most suitable to reach out to and enroll targeted adolescents along predefined entry points (i.e., schools, municipalities, youth organizations, and community-based organizations).

Each Alliance was meant to attract approximately 15 adolescents, from diverse background and with extra effort to include underrepresented groups, who would volunteer to participate. Parents and adolescents were asked for consent. The Alliances were held in the local languages. Activities were to be carried out during the school year of 2019–2020, and we planned for continued recruitment of new participants both to accommodate potential attrition and to facilitate sustainability over time (as participants grew older). Recruitment was planned to be carried out through secondary schools, scout groups, and other local (youth) organizations. A purposeful sampling technique³⁷ was used to recruit adolescents between the age of 16 to 18 years, interested in engaging in a series of activities requiring participation in regular meetings, and participating in the research/information collection activities. The age range was limited to 16–18 years of age, as in most participating countries, this age group is competent to provide informed consent for participating in research activities.

4.1 | Alliance activities

In the Alliances, adolescents would engage in a series of activities related to capacity building, advocacy training, and policy formulation.

The series of activities were outlined in a research protocol, and all activities and tools were reflected in a handbook, further presented in this article. In particular, a policy form was developed to capture the emerging ideas of the adolescents and to guide the development and help synthesize these ideas. While the general setup was guided by team of the University of Amsterdam in collaboration with consortium partners, actual activities could be flexibly implemented, altered, and expanded in line with priorities and goals set by the youth and the staff in each Alliance. Each Alliance had a budget with which to try out elements of policy ideas.

To achieve the CO-CREATE goals, the Alliances were designed to facilitate a process of generating, refining, and finalizing policy ideas (policies here being defined as the action or intervention side of politics and policy, i.e., a set of plans or interventions) as outlined in Figure 1.

The Alliances would integrate information available from other parts of the CO-CREATE project, that is, existing obesity prevention policies and interventions in Europe^{20,38} and group models of perceived drivers of overweight and obesity.³⁹ Policy ideas developed in the Alliances were, in turn, fed into stakeholder dialogs for further refinement.²² Relevant stakeholders for these dialogs were local or national policymakers, representatives from nongovernmental organizations, or from private businesses. To facilitate the interaction between the participating adolescents and such stakeholders, the CO-CREATE Dialogue Forum was designed as an inclusive space for discussion and cocreation across generations and sectors. The tools and processes, developed for and with young people, promote youth inclusion and leadership in decision-making and can be used digitally or in a physical setting.²²

Policies were developed over time and continuously revised based on young people's research in collaboration with facilitators, cofacilitators, and other CO-CREATE partners. Within the Alliances, adolescents would actively search for and obtain information about the systemic factors that affect health-related lifestyles, engage in capacity building activities, and draw on their own local knowledge and experience to contribute to develop the policy ideas.

4.1.1 | Knowing the local context: Preparatory fieldwork

Initially, fieldwork preparation was designed to explore the local (city or neighborhood), as well as the national context in the five countries involved. The aim was to secure that important local contextual factors were captured when reaching out to eligible adolescents to engage in the policy cocreation. This included to gain an understanding of political and social opportunities and obstacles in reaching out to young people and to gatekeepers (e.g., are there existing relevant youth organizations) and of different segments of youth that needed to be recruited (e.g., ethnic diversity and social inequality). Preparatory fieldwork would furthermore increase our data interpretation capacity (both in a local and comparative perspective), by accessing existing local knowledge that is relevant to



FIGURE 1 Flowchart of alliance activities from initial to final policy idea to be discussed with other stakeholders

the research (e.g., better understand how obesity-related stigma may play in the local context).

The fieldwork preparation activities consisted of reaching out to scientists and professionals and gathering existing data and reports and contributed to identify (1) categories of adolescents likely to be less represented in the local public scene, (2) suitable local/national organizations to act as gatekeepers and to assist CO-CREATE researchers to reach out to and enroll the targeted adolescents along four entry points (i.e., schools, municipalities, existing youth organizations, and community-based organizations), and (3) suitable organizations for providing cofacilitators.

4.1.2 | Youth Alliance Activity Handbook

Based on the principles of YPAR, the stated goals of the project, and the context identified through the preparatory fieldwork, CO-CREATE research staff and members of the partner organization PRESS—a youth organization experienced in the promotion of youth participation—developed a series of potential activities adolescents and staff could implement in the Alliances. These activities were laid out in a handbook which was presented to adolescents and local staff as activities to help facilitate the policy process. Adolescents and local staff were explicitly invited to choose from the activities outlined in the handbook and to come up with other activities they deem relevant. It was also possible to focus on specific themes and problems, although this should be seen as related to overweight and obesity

TABLE 1 Overview of proposed core activities within the Youth Alliances

Getting started: Who are we? What is the problem? What are we going to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction to the alliances, group building, system maps and ideas prioritization, and defining goals of the alliance • Introducing the policy form and identifying information to be collected
Alliances in action: Where do we see the obesogenic environment? What does science say? What can we do to change the system?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photovoice training, ethics, and data management training • Photovoice analysis • Discussion on results from policy databases and research literature • Conversational interview training • Conversational interview analysis • Advocacy training, budgeting for activity • Analyzing the result of activity and finalization of policy form for dialog fora
Looking back and ahead: How did we like it? What do we propose? How do we proceed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation, continuation of alliance, and transition to dialog fora • Dialog fora • Reporting back and amending policy form

prevention. The participants were asked to consider meeting frequencies and modalities, depending on local possibilities. Thus, the actual Alliances themselves were cocreated in response to participants' needs, local opportunities, and constraints. This approach aimed to empower participants and enhance participation. The activities offered in the handbook are presented in Table 1.

4.1.3 | Organization and personnel

Prior to initiating Alliances in any one country, local organizational structures had to be secured, as well as trained CO-CREATE-wide staff and local staff. This training included information regarding relevant local political and social context. Local organizations (including municipalities, schools, and youth organizations such as scouts) were identified as potential partners for collaboration. A prerequisite was that they allowed adolescents to adjust some organizational routines (e.g., change the use of rooms and time schedules).

Each Alliance had at least two adult staff members: a member of one of the CO-CREATE consortium partners (facilitator) and a younger staff member (cofacilitator) recruited from a local youth organization. The role of the cofacilitators was to serve as a “bridge” between the research consortium and the adolescents in the Alliances and to facilitate the subsequent transfer of learnings and experience to local organizations and thereby help sustain activities over time. The cofacilitators were invited to an intensive 2-day training workshop where they were introduced to the project and to specific activities such as how to assist in recruitment to the alliances, minutes taking from the meetings, vlogging, and the use of social media.

The CO-CREATE project consisted of a number of research activities that all fed into and supported the input to and running of the Alliances, that is, by identifying already implemented obesity prevention policies, state of the art in terms of the effective preventive strategies, drivers of overweight and obesity as perceived by adolescents; creating safe dialog fora interaction between participating adolescents and other stakeholders; and evaluating and modeling potential impact of proposed policies.²² This integrated, collaborative structure of the project was set up to facilitate learning across research streams, monitoring of progress, and for trouble shooting and problem solving. Collaboration took place through frequent interaction between the lead team (University of Amsterdam [UoA]) and each country research team, by online meetings, as well as face to face and with all country partners. Staff members, facilitators, and cofacilitators were trained according to the protocol in the handbook activities, as well as in running and reporting activities and collecting and analyzing data. This structure also enabled the CO-CREATE research team to pool research data, exchange first interpretations, and work towards a common analysis.

4.1.4 | Budget

To support the Alliances in their efforts to develop policy ideas, earmarked funds were set aside for the adolescents to aid their activities (approximately 5000 Euro per country). The identified costs were to be spent on running of the alliances themselves and to development and refining of developed policy ideas. Members of the Alliances were encouraged to develop budgetary plans (what is needed for a respective activity and what specific costs of the activity are foreseen?). Organizational needs of the alliance included potential costs related

to renting of venue and provision of food and drinks during the meetings. Members decided how to spend these funds in collaboration with the facilitators (e.g., what kind of food and drinks they would prefer). The second type of budgetary cost was specifically reserved for activities designed to refine their policy ideas (e.g., to buy produce for a cooking initiative, to hire a trainer for specific skills, or to host a meeting with stakeholders). This funding scheme is an important element of the Alliance design which allowed potential participants to regard CO-CREATE as a participatory project in which their contribution really matters, to the point that their ideas could be pilot-tested on a small scale, or—more frequently—that the real-life cost and logistics could be properly assessed. As such, the team budget was meant to serve as an incentive for youth to engage in the project and as a way of supporting action which more likely happens following proper preparation.

5 | RESEARCHING THE ALLIANCES

5.1 | Research questions

To investigate whether the youth engagement approach employed in the CO-CREATE project would in fact contribute to meet the overall objective of the project, several specific research questions related to the implementation and outcome of Youth Alliances were formulated by the academic researchers with input from members of the partner youth organization PRESS. These include:

- Given the recruitment strategies and the type of engagement approach chosen, how successful were the alliances in recruiting and keeping diverse youth? How, if at all, did various forms of engagement mitigate attrition?
- How did the alliances evolve during the project? What different forms of alliances appear as most suitable and sustainable for the adolescent age group?
- How did various forms of engagement affect youth's perceptions of the problem of obesity and their readiness for taking political action?
- What policy ideas did result from the alliances, and how did they come up with these ideas?
- How are experiential and scientific knowledge implied in these ideas?
- Which concrete activities might have contributed to empowerment and policy ideas?

The processes of recruitment, engagement, empowerment, and policy design in the Alliances were carefully documented to allow for subsequent analyses using a multi-sited comparative fieldwork approach.^{40–42} The data collected for this were fieldwork preparation interviews, structured participant observations using standardized fieldnotes, logs, survey data, and feedback forms. All these documents were contextualized in retrospect and collaboratively interpreted with the respective country staff.

The cofacilitators had an active role in the data collection from the alliances, and they—along with available adolescents—had an opportunity to provide their input and react to the reports prior to their finalization.

The following data sources were used during the lifespan of the alliances:

5.2 | Fieldnotes: Structured observations and minutes

After each meeting, the facilitator made notes of the group dynamics and so on in English (using an observation scheme in the form of regular reporting). The report from the meeting was informed by the PAR minutes taken by the cofacilitator during the meeting. The structured element of the fieldnotes was that all documents followed the same format, making developments within the groups and comparisons between the groups easier. The fieldnotes contained 43 predefined topics, such as @FN17: ACTIVITIES: Describe the activities that young people did during this meeting. The fieldnotes were checked within the alliances and by the analysis team for clarity, context, and validity. We expected approximately 10 meetings in each of the three alliances, totaling 30 observations per country.

5.3 | Evaluation and feedback forms

We asked adolescents to give qualitative feedback on the alliance building process and its outcomes by digitally responding to a list of questions with open-ended response format, after the last meeting of Youth Alliances took place. The feedback was provided anonymously and in writing. If members dropped out earlier, they received a short drop survey to elicit feedback.

5.4 | Logs

All alliances kept a log to keep track of project progress, including the dates and length of the meetings, alliance contexts (e.g., the description of the characteristics of the community where Youth Alliances took place), and relevant national and local events such as COVID-19 regulations. These logs were used to reconstruct the process of the different groups and were useful for our descriptive analysis, by giving a rough narrative structure to the data. The log was kept by the facilitators and regularly discussed with the UoA team. All Alliances kept a log, and some alliances kept extra log files after the COVID-19 pandemic containment policies were implemented in 2020.

5.5 | Alliance policy proposals

Formulating policy ideas was the main purpose of the alliances, and such ideas were generated and refined repeatedly throughout the

process. To keep track of the different proposals, an Alliance Proposal form was used. These forms constitute a key piece of research data. Only proposals that were thoroughly discussed by the alliance members and not dismissed by the group before developing it further, have been shared.

5.6 | Structured process questionnaire

To assess potential changes in readiness for action and attitudes towards obesity prevention among participating adolescents, an online questionnaire survey⁴³ was to be administered to all participating adolescents prior to starting the activities within the Alliances, then monthly until the end of the alliances when they received an exit questionnaire before a final follow-up questionnaire 3 months later. A control group of similar youth, but not participating in Alliances, were invited to respond to the questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the Alliances in each country.

6 | ETHICS

Ethical issues may arise when engaging young people in obesity prevention research. Researchers must ensure that the youth voluntary participate in the research without experiencing undue influence. Youth should not experience stigma due to their participation in an obesity project or time pressure due to stringent participation requirements. Issues of power imbalance between researchers and the youth and other stakeholders may also be encountered. Several measures were developed in the project to prevent or limit the emergence of ethical issues including a two-stage procedure for the collection of informed consent from youth, written group agreements and codes of conduct, youth and staff training in ethics and flexibility in the organization, and timing of meetings with youth.⁴⁴ Alliance members were presented a draft code of conduct in which safety, nondiscrimination, and other conduct rules were proposed.

7 | DISCUSSION

The EU project CO-CREATE has as a main objective to reach diverse youth, to empower them and to combine their knowledge with that of researchers and stakeholders in the joint development of policy ideas for system directed overweight and obesity prevention. The so-called Youth Alliances were designed to facilitate this engagement.

With its ambition to engage young people in addressing political issues, empower them towards that end, and regard them as equal partners at all stages of the process, YPAR resonates very strongly in the CO-CREATE project. Additionally, the ambition of YPAR to get young people to “identify root causes that create and perpetuate the manifestations of [the identified] problems”^{24,45} is very much in tune with CO-CREATE's systemic approach to childhood obesity. YPAR was however designed and often used in such a way that youth

participants start with an open-ended issue selection process. In contrast, CO-CREATE were to build on a prescribed topic, that is, childhood obesity prevention. Bearing with this constraint, the design of the Youth Alliance program has included special attention and activities meant to ensure that the views of young people were included in all aspects of the project. The CO-CREATE training of facilitators focused in particular on how to secure a good match between the given topic of childhood obesity and issues deemed important by the participating youth, therefore having to use strategies to facilitate young people's sense of "ownership despite constraints."^{24,29}

Overall and based on existing literature, the CO-CREATE Youth Alliances and YPAR appear largely to align, in particular, in their ambition to be transformative (geared at change at both individual and structural level), participatory (involving young people in all aspects of the project), and inquiry based (building on youth-led research activities as a way to contribute to knowledge for political action).⁴⁶ CO-CREATE Alliances have had a *transformative* ambition because they aimed at broadening the knowledge basis available to childhood obesity prevention by exploring the perspective of individuals exposed to obstacles to a healthy lifestyle (framed as "obesogenic environments")—thereby providing opportunities for public health policymaking to complement the epidemiological knowledge usually involved in public health policy. The CO-CREATE Alliances were meant as *participatory* because they have acknowledged participating adolescents as equal to academic researchers in their ability to generate evidence that is useful to policy and, as such, entitled (and actively encouraged) to take part in all phases of the action-oriented project. Furthermore, the CO-CREATE Alliances have been "*inquiry*" based and *training based*, as they have included a capacity building and training program, consisting of an introduction to low-threshold research methodologies, low-threshold introduction to the systems approach applied to childhood obesity, activities meant to foster critical thinking, and advocacy training.

Another component of the CO-CREATE capacity building and training program deserves special emphasis here: The participating adolescents were introduced to budgeting, combined with a team budget, which the participating adolescents could use to test their policy ideas in the local environment. This component is not standard in YPAR projects but proved a critical element for some CO-CREATE youth groups to refine their idea and turn it into a policy proposal. Another particularity of the CO-CREATE Alliances was that they were not grounded in some "local communities"—tacitly profiled as socially relevant and culturally cohesive units of experience and mobilization—but rather set in newly established groups, meant as diverse groups likely to contribute in different but complementary ways. This entailed some "ice-breaking" and group building activities at the start of the program.

Lastly, another particularity of the setting of the CO-CREATE Alliances was a special emphasis on meta-research data collection, including structured ethnographic fieldnotes designed by academic social scientists and carried out by Alliance research staff in a diversity of settings, allowing analysis of social processes of fostered engagement of adolescents.

Future data analyses will address the stated research questions related to both the process of implementation and outcomes of these alliances.

8 | CONCLUSION

Based on PAR, we have devised a methodology to engage European adolescents in the formulation of policy ideas for overweight and obesity prevention. In so-called Youth Alliances, young citizens were invited to come up with ideas and collaboratively refine these ideas using tools, budgets, and knowledge facilitated by CO-CREATE. While adolescents were locally engaged, by generally focusing on obesity challenges in their immediate surroundings, such as at school, and supported to use experiential knowledge and participatory research, they were at the same time supported to address the wider and complex obesogenic system when designing policy proposals. This tension between complex far-reaching systemic drivers of obesity and local engagement and knowledge is also acknowledged by the "Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing."⁵ In CO-CREATE, we straddle this tension by taking time to organize collaborative learning and participation and to find a balance between proposing activities and knowledge while also supporting youth to think and act differently.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The "Confronting obesity: Co-creating policy with youth" (CO-CREATE) project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant 774210 (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/774210>). The content of this document reflects only the authors' views, and the European Commission is not liable for any use that may be made of the information it contains. The authors would like to thank all youth participating in the CO-CREATE project for their time, efforts, enthusiasm, and engagement in creating policy ideas for overweight and obesity prevention. The authors would furthermore like to thank Karoline Steen Nylander and Margrete Bjørge Katanasho for their contribution to securing youth engagement in CO-CREATE on behalf of PRESS.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest statement.

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How to cite this article: Bröer C, Ayuandini S, Baillergeau E, et al. Recruiting and engaging adolescents in creating overweight and obesity prevention policies: The CO-CREATE project. *Obesity Reviews.* 2023;24(S1):e13546. doi:[10.1111/obr.13546](https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13546)