
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Co-creating and evaluating the potential of digital neighborhood platforms for healthcare and social professionals.

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Background: The governmental Caring Neighborhoods initiative in Flanders (Belgium) is a driver for the exploration of collaboration between informal actors (citizens, families, neighbors, informal caregivers, ...) and professional actors (healthcare, social care, housing, culture, ...). Several neighborhoods advance a digital neighbourhood platform as a means of communication, participation, and matchmaking between people who want and offer neighborly support. Healthcare and social professionals often meet people who could use neighborly support. In this project, we explore the potential to integrate digital neighbourhood platforms in daily practices together with these professionals.

Target group: Healthcare and social professionals.

Involved and engaged stakeholders: Citizens, families, neighbors, informal caregivers, housing, culture, ...

Intervention: The researchers become active partners in the development of five caring neighborhoods, co-creating and evaluating the potential of the platforms through the participation in project meetings, work groups, partner meetings, workshops, steering committees, ... Content analysis is performed to distinguish themes and patterns in the data, answering the realist evaluation question: what works for who, in which circumstances?

Results: The potential of the digital neighbourhood platforms depends on the functionality of the platform, the fit with the neighbourhood needs and context, the pre-existing collaborative dynamics in the neighbourhood, and the willingness and capability of professionals to integrate the platform into daily practices. Platforms have different goals (e.g. sharing economy vs. social community) and functions (e.g. neighborly support matchmaking and/or communication). Platforms have a limited potential for vulnerable citizens, groups and neighborhoods. 'Offline' community organizing, both informally and professionally, remains important in any case, but especially for the most vulnerable. Several caring neighbourhood projects are experimenting with hybrid combinations of 'online' and 'offline' community organizing and neighborly help, but both knowledge and skills as well as collaborative processes have to be further developed to better address the individual and community needs and for professionals to integrate the platforms in daily practices.

Lessons for international audience:

- The potential and limitations of digital neighbourhood platforms are tied to the needs and contexts of different neighborhoods, and to the pre-existing informal and professional networks and their ongoing collaborative dynamic.

- A co-creative, participative research methodology helps to shed light on the intricate differences between different neighborhoods, caring neighbourhood projects, and their respective dynamics.

Next steps: The lessons learned are translated into accessible information and services for local governments, healthcare and social care. Future research should further look into the potential of digital neighbourhood platforms in the context of caring neighborhoods from the citizen perspective.