

# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN HEALTHCARE IN BULGARIA: THE GAP BETWEEN CITIZENS, HEALTH EXPERTS, AND LOCAL OFFICIALS

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## ABSTRACT

**PURPOSE:** To investigate the views of the different stakeholders about the citizen involvement in healthcare decision-making on the local level in Bulgaria.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS:** Opinion poll in three Bulgarian municipalities with different demographic, socio-economic, geographic and ethnic profiles was carried out. Representatives from three groups (citizens, municipality officials and health experts) took part in personal interviews.

**RESULTS:** There was a significant difference ( $p < 0,0001$ ) in the opinion among the three groups about the citizen role in the healthcare decision-making in the municipalities, the availability of information and opportunities for citizen participation, and the consideration of the citizen's views by municipal decision-makers. The experts and the municipal officials would like that citizen played a more prominent role in the healthcare decision-making in contrast to citizen's opinion. More than 60% of the municipal officials thought that the citizens are informed, have possibilities for participation and views considered by the municipal decision-makers while the majority of the health experts and citizens had the opposite opinion.

**CONCLUSION:** There were significant opinion gaps between the groups about the healthcare decision-making in the three Bulgarian municipalities. Bridging the gaps required not only proper information or possibilities for participation but also motivated citizens by mutual respect, openness and better understanding of the benefits and values of citizen's involvement in public health.

**Keywords:** *citizen involvement, citizen participation, healthcare decision-making, opinion gaps, municipalities*

## INTRODUCTION

While there is a strong call and acknowledgment of citizen participation in healthcare decision-

making, there are still a lot of challenges to transform it from a trendy slogan into successful practice. With regard to this many scholars and organizations pay special attention to the need of continuous research and evaluation of the citizen involvement processes and activities (4,5,9). The better understanding of the different stakeholders' opinion about the citizen participation in public health will provide a better insight into the challenges and the potential gaps related to it.

For the purpose of this study, we limited our aim to the opinion of three stakeholders' groups (citizens, municipality officials and health experts) on the citizen role in healthcare decision-making

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in the municipality, the availability of information and opportunities for citizen participation, and the consideration of citizen's views by municipal decision makers.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study upon which this article is based involved three Bulgarian municipalities with different demographic, socio-economic, geographic and ethnic profile: Varna, Dobrich and Veliki Preslav. Varna was selected as a representative of a big municipality with a relatively well-developed economy, a good demographic profile and a low unemployment rate; Dobrich - as a medium-sized municipality with seasonal fluctuation in the unemployment rate, a centre of a big agricultural region; and Veliki Preslav - as a small municipality, with economic problems, a high unemployment rate, a high percentage of low educated people and specific ethnic profile. In every municipality an opinion poll was carried out in the period August-September 2009.

A total number of 351 representatives of citizens, municipality officials (municipal councilors in the Standing Health committees and officials from the municipal Health Departments) and health experts (outside the municipality) were personally interviewed about their opinion on the citizen participation in healthcare decision-making in the municipality they lived.

## RESULTS

There is a significant difference ( $p < 0.0001$ ) in the opinion among the three groups about the citizen's role in the healthcare decision-making in the municipalities, the availability of information and opportunities for citizen participation, and the consideration of the citizen's views by municipal decision makers.

The citizens, the municipal officials and the health experts have different views about the role that citizens have to play in the health decision-making in their municipality (Fig. 1).

The biggest percentage of the experts (60%) would like that the citizens take the responsibility for the decisions, while the citizens prefer the consultant role (48%) or non-participation (32%). On the other hand, the municipal officials are more reserved

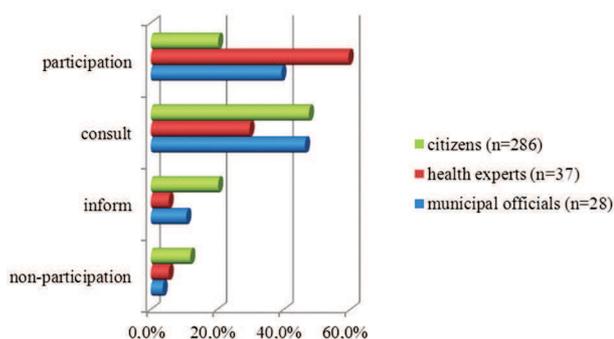


Fig. 1. Stakeholders' opinion on the wanted citizen participation level in the municipality health decision-making

than the experts about the citizen's role. However, they would like to consult with them more than the citizens themselves. Our results reveal a significant difference in the opinion of the stakeholders about the level of citizen participation in health decision-making in the municipality ( $\chi^2(6)=31,4$ ;  $p < 0,0001$ ).

There is a significant disagreement between the groups about the provision of opportunities ( $\chi^2(4)=54,8$ ;  $p < 0,0001$ ) and information ( $\chi^2(4)=67,5$ ;  $p < 0,0001$ ) for citizen participation by the local municipal authorities (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

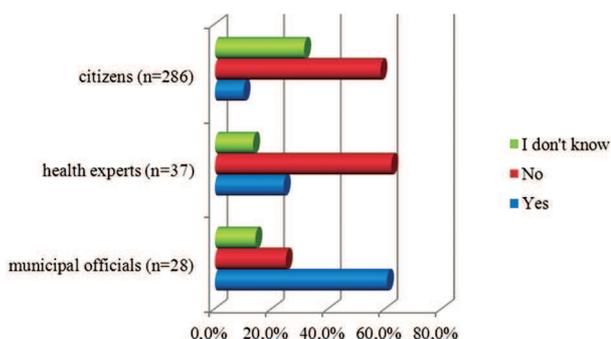


Fig. 2. Stakeholders' opinion on the provision of opportunities for citizen participation in municipality healthcare decision-making (response to the question: "Does the local municipal authority provide opportunities for citizen participation in municipality healthcare decision-making?")

The majority of the citizens and the health experts outside the municipal authorities do not think that there exist any opportunities for

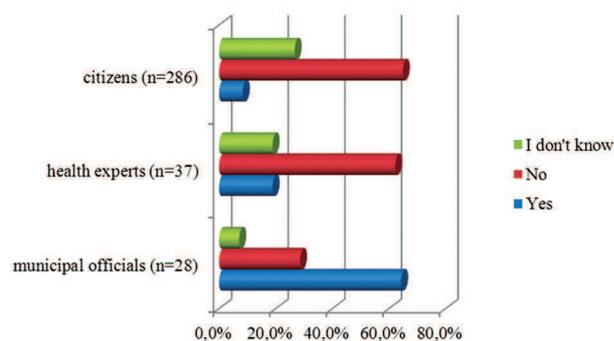


Fig. 3. Stakeholders' opinion on the availability of information on healthcare decision-making in the municipality (response to the question: "Are the citizens in your municipality informed how the healthcare decisions by the municipal authorities are made?")

participation and information about the way the healthcare decision are made, while more than 60% of the municipal officials are just on the opposite opinion.

The most significant difference ( $\chi^2(4)=90,8$ ;  $p<0,0001$ ) in the opinion of the groups is related with the consideration of the citizens' opinion and ideas (Fig. 4).

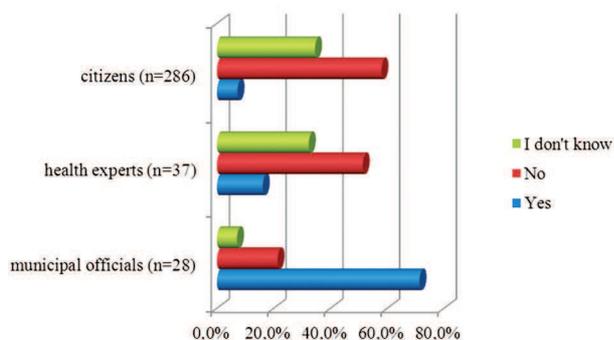


Fig. 4. Stakeholders' opinion on the consideration of the citizens' ideas and views in the healthcare decision-making in the municipality

More than half of the citizens and the health experts think that citizen suggestion and views are not taken into consideration in the healthcare decisions while more than two thirds of the municipal officials claim the opposite.

## DISCUSSION

In the present study, the majority of the citizens (47,6%) prefer the role of a consultant in the healthcare decision-making instead of a participant (20,3%) taking or sharing the responsibility for the decisions. Similar citizen's reluctance towards the participation has been observed in other studies, too (1,8). The results of a deliberative opinion poll in Canada reveal that the citizens (17%) are the group the least willing to take responsibility for overall decision-making. In some articles about patient's involvement there are results demonstrating that not all the patients want to share making the decisions (3). A literature review concerning the shared decision-making in public health suggests that some demographic differences, although there is no clear-cut evidence, are likely to influence the desire to achieve shared decision-making (10). Future studies on the effect of the different demographic factors on the desire of citizen's involvement may help in bridging the gaps about this citizen's involvement.

On the other hand, we should not ignore the fact that public is not homogenous and we should not assume that everybody wants the same level of participation. In this respect, municipal officials should learn to accommodate the different citizen's desire for autonomy in the healthcare decision-making.

The difference in the opinion between the citizens and the municipal officials in Bulgaria is revealed not only in the present study. The disagreement between the two groups that the municipal officials take under consideration the opinion and the views of the citizens in their decision is established by two other studies (2,6). The main difference is that the results of these other studies are based on the opinion about citizen's involvement in general and not specifically about the healthcare. Besides they show even a slightly bigger difference in the stakeholders' opinion. According to Alfa Research study, 60% of the citizens think that their opinion is not considered by the local municipal authorities, towards 58% of the citizens in our study. The Index of the Municipal Administration Opinion reveals that 85,7% of the municipal officials are on the opposite opinion and think that the municipal governance responds to the citizen needs, towards

71,4% of the officials in our study who think that the opinion and the views of the citizens are taken into consideration in the local health decision-making.

The provision of opportunities for participation provokes a different opinion among the stakeholders groups. More than one half of the interviewed citizens (58,4%) in our study thinks that there are no opportunities for participation in the healthcare decision-making in their municipalities, while approximately the same percentage of the officials (60,7%) consider that there are such opportunities. In a national representative study conducted in the same year in Bulgaria (7), the biggest percentage of the citizens (40%) replies negatively to the question "Does the municipal authority provide opportunities for public participation". This confirms once again the reserves that citizens have about the openness of the municipal officials towards the public participation.

### CONCLUSION

There are significant opinion gaps between the citizens, municipal officials and health experts about the healthcare decision making in the three Bulgarian municipalities. Citizens are not always willing to be directly involved in health decision-making and just the availability of information and possibilities for participation is not enough to make citizens active. Bridging the gaps requires not only proper information or possibilities for participation but also citizens motivated by mutual respect, openness and better understanding of the benefits and values of citizen's involvement in public health.

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