

Policy Brief

Promoting Health Equity Through Participatory Action Research: Key Findings and Policy Recommendations from the Equity Ticino Project

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Introduction

Health equity is a critical pillar of public health and quality healthcare systems. Despite legal frameworks promoting equal access, healthcare systems often face difficulties to adequately address cultural differences and the social determinants of health that contribute to disparities in care. The Equity Ticino (EquiTI) project, a collaboration between the Ente Ospedaliero Cantonale (EOC) and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), used participatory action research (PAR) to develop innovative tools aimed at reducing inequities in healthcare delivery at the Beata Vergine Regional Hospital in Mendrisio, Switzerland. The project aligns with the Swiss Health Strategy 2030 and has been funded by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH). The research project was also conducted with the interest of the Canton of Ticino, specifically by the Office of the Cantonal Physician, whose suggestions were gathered at the start of the project, followed by ongoing progress updates and to whom the final results of the project will be presented in the second half of 2025.

This policy brief highlights the project's key findings and provides recommendations for healthcare institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to promote equity through participatory and socially innovative approaches.

Key Findings

➤ **Inequities in Healthcare Remain Prevalent**

Despite existing policies, healthcare systems continue to face challenges in addressing the social vulnerabilities of patients. Issues like language barriers, social isolation, and economic hardship significantly impact patients' access to quality care. The EquiTI project identified these barriers through ethnographic research, showing that vulnerable patients often face obstacles that prevent them from receiving timely and appropriate care.

➤ **Participatory Action Research Drives Systemic Change**

By using PAR, the project engaged healthcare professionals, patients, and administrators in co-creating solutions. This collaborative approach empowered stakeholders, encouraged the development of context-sensitive solutions, and fostered a culture of equity within the institution. PAR's iterative process allowed for continuous reflection and adaptation of the solutions.

➤ **Innovative Tools for Equity**

The project developed several tools to address these inequities:

- **Vulnerability Triage System:** A tool to systematically identify vulnerable patients based on indicators such as language barriers and social isolation.
- **E-Learning Modules for Healthcare Professionals:** Designed to raise awareness of social determinants of health, the modules focused on building skills in intercultural communication and understanding the legal aspects of equity.
- **Patient-Centered Feedback Surveys:** These surveys captured the experiences of vulnerable patients, particularly regarding the clarity of communication and the respect for their cultural specificity during their hospital stay.

➤ **Challenges in Widespread Implementation**

The project faced challenges in scaling its innovations. While the tools showed significant promise, their adoption across other healthcare institutions is contingent upon further refinement and broader institutional support. These challenges included integrating the tools

into existing hospital IT infrastructures and securing ongoing buy-in from healthcare professionals.

Project Recommendations

1. Institutionalize Equity in Healthcare Practices

Healthcare institutions shall prioritize the integration of equity into their core practices. This includes developing and adopting systematic vulnerability triage tools to identify and address Health inequities during patient intake and care. Institutionalizing these tools as part of routine healthcare institutions' operations can ensure more equitable care for all patients.

2. Foster Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Empowerment

Decision makers of healthcare institutions should promote interdisciplinary collaboration within healthcare teams, as demonstrated by the EquiTI project. PAR encourages the active involvement of all stakeholders, including healthcare providers, patients, and social services. Empowering staff at all levels, from medical personnel to administrators, can facilitate more inclusive and effective healthcare delivery.

3. Expand and Scale Training Programs on Equity

To ensure healthcare professionals are equipped to address the complex social vulnerabilities of patients, it is essential to expand training initiatives. Specific training programs, e-learning modules focused on equity, cultural sensitivity, and communication should be incorporated into professional development programs, especially of doctors. Policymakers and sanitary institutions should support the development of training curricula that reflect the social determinants of health and integrate legal frameworks for equity into everyday care practices.

4. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of equity interventions are crucial. Cantonal healthcare institutions should adopt quality indicators related to equity, such as patient satisfaction, vulnerability identification, and the activation of support services (e.g., social workers, cultural mediators). The EquiTI project has demonstrated that regular feedback from vulnerable patients is vital for improving communication and overall care. Policymakers and sanitary institutions should encourage the use of patient-centered surveys as a tool for continuous improvement in care delivery.

5. Advocate for Systemic Policy Changes

At the national and cantonal levels, policymakers must advocate for systemic reforms that embed equity into healthcare policy. This includes funding and supporting systematic monitoring and research on health inequities at federal level, as well as incentivizing healthcare institutions and actors to adopt socially innovative practices that address the root causes of health disparities at cantonal level. Aligning healthcare policies with the principles of equity, as outlined in the Swiss Health Strategy 2030 and the Ticino Health Law, is a critical step toward achieving long-term systemic change.

Conclusion

The project Equity Ticino (EquiTI) - 'Patient rights, equity and quality in hospital practices' offers valuable insights into the potential of participatory action research and social innovation to address healthcare inequities. By integrating equity in healthcare practices at three levels, through systematic tools for monitoring and data analysis, professional training, and community engagement, policymakers,

healthcare system and healthcare providers can create more inclusive, fair, and effective healthcare environments.

Implementing these recommendations will ensure that healthcare systems not only provide care based on clinical needs but also address the social determinants that influence health outcomes and data production, ultimately fostering greater health equity for all.

Contact Information

To receive further information or to discuss potential collaborations please contact:

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