

## **In Europe and the U.S. do we live in a *civic* or *civil* society for promoting positive mental health?**

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This question arose as I spent 5 weeks this autumn on secondment to the Finnish Association for Mental Health in Helsinki. The secondment was part of the CRISP Public Policy Work Package, and included a focus on civic society actions on the determinants of mental health. One immediately evident issue is how to define civic society, and what we mean by various terms ...‘civil’ and ‘civic’ society are used interchangeably, but is a civic society always civil? For the area of mental health it also seems crucial to recognise the spectrum of activities involved... civic participation at an individual level can impact on mental health, whilst collective action by civic organisations on determinants might not always identify mental health as the intended outcome. Defining what we mean by civic society and mental health may be complicated.

To inform my understanding of policy and civic society in Finland I met with colleagues in the Ministry for Social Affairs and Health, Finland’s National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), and an umbrella organisation for health NGOs in Finland (SOSHTE). These conversations were hugely informative, shaping my understanding of policy in a different European context, and the extent to which actions can be taken which shape positive mental health and wellbeing in society. The role of the third sector raises interesting questions in relation to policy making. How can the policy process be inclusive and representative? Is it possible to build civic society movements around a focus on mental health? When the upstream determinants are outside the remit of health, how can civic society in the health sector influence these factors? These are questions we hope to pursue as part of the ongoing collaboration between the University of Strathclyde and FAMH.

As I have returned home, I have reflected on the learning from my time in Helsinki. The city environment is itself in many ways a physical embodiment of a civil society....world-class bike paths, user-friendly bike share scheme, excellent commuter transport, public parks and urban forests...are all evidence of a societal support for ‘the commons’. The opportunity to work at an NGO was hugely positive and offered learning on a less tangible, but no less important dimension of the commons: those organisations in society which are ‘not state and not for profit’. The role of such organisations in advocating for policies, structures and institutions which support good mental health strikes me as crucial. How we galvanise this type of action is surely a fundamental question for promoting a civic *and* civil society for positive mental health.