

# Researchers and policy makers – from two different planets?

In recent years several public health conferences have hosted debates with the title: *Are researchers from Venus and policy makers from Mars?* The debates have shown researchers as soft and abstract number crunchers who always need to do more research to be able to say anything; on the other hand, policy makers have been depicted as hard, practically oriented, needing one page summary of research 'yesterday'. Seldom have these visitors from two planets found a common agenda. However, in a recent debate at University of Southern Denmark (SDU), a public health PhD student, Maja Larsen, who has worked in a co-financed contract between SDU and Varde Municipality, very wisely stated:

*“I come neither from Venus nor Mars; I come from Earth, which is situated between Venus and Mars”*

In line with medical field also public health field is feeling a pressure to carry out evidence-based work. However, public health interventions, especially policies, are not carried out on individual level and are thus seldom amenable for strictly controlled studies, which are still considered the model to find evidence for decision making. In addition to research evidence, e.g. in terms of determinants of

disease or efficacy of interventions, public health decision making needs to take into account also political reality and priorities, resources, as well as values of the community. Research evidence is only one criterion in policy making. That is why nowadays in public health and health promotion the term 'evidence-informed' instead of 'evidence-based' is preferred. This also emphasizes the commonly used term participatory decision making. The challenge of integrating wisdom and values of those coming from Venus and Mars is real and can happen only in real life encounters on Earth with all its environmental, social and cultural aspects.

**New, innovative ways to carry out this kind of integration of research knowledge and real life policy making is at the moment being scientifically studied in the REPOPA project (REPOPA = Research into Policy to enhance Physical Activity), which is funded by European Commission, FP7 programme. REPOPA is a 7-country, 9 institute, 5-year study, coordinated by SDU, Denmark.**

*(Please see December 19, 2011, The Danish EU Presidency issue of Parliament Magazine for the REPOPA description.)*



Arja R Aro is the REPOPA Coordinator, Professor of Public Health, Head, Unit for Health Promotion Research, University of Southern Denmark