A summer course to connect the dots: data literacy for health managers, social communication professionals and activists involved in perinatal health

Denise Yoshie Niy¹ Eliana de Aquino Bonilha Célia Maria Castex Aly Beatriz Fioretti-Foschi Carmen Simone Grilo Diniz

¹Faculdade De Saude Publica, Universidade De Sao Paulo, Brazil

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Data literacy is the ability to read, understand and communicate data. This ability can and must be developed and improved in order to foster data-based public policies, programmes and actions. It is a relevant ability to health managers, health professionals, social movements representatives and social communication professionals, considering that these stakeholders are responsible for implementing actions (mostly health managers and health professionals) and monitoring them (the whole society, in a broader sense, but especially activists and journalists). This leads to the understanding of data literacy as a main component of democratic societies.

From a closer perspective, however, many times stakeholders face difficulties obtaining and analysing data, as they lack data literacy. This is often the case in Brazil, although there are public information systems with data on all live births and deaths and invaluable research data. In line with this, health managers from the Sao Paulo Municipality reached out to ask for help in analysing their territory’s situation, located in the city's outskirts. To address the problem, we developed a course open to health managers, health professionals, journalists and representatives of social movements.

The course was held in 2021 and 2022, and it was offered in the summer program of Faculdade de Saude Publica from Universidade de Sao Paulo. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the course was 100% online, with 20 hours of synchronous activities distributed in a week, plus an online platform with additional resources such as scientific articles, videos and links to other materials.

There were more than 100 participants, in total, between graduation and post-graduation students, researchers, activists, health professionals, health managers, social communicators, and others, from all over the country. Participants were divided in groups to perform activities with public databases, besides learning sessions regarding perinatal epidemiology, data visualization, evidence-informed policy, and others.

The course was well rated and the health managers who had come to us stated that it helped them to make sense of data. The experience was so meaningful that we are expanding our partnership, designing interventionist research to improve the neonatal mortality surveillance system in the territory.